



Higher Education Policy Institute

Student belonging and the wider context

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Introduction

Whether students feel like they belong at their chosen higher education institution is a key topic in both the academic literature and the policymaking landscape. While student loneliness has been a more long-standing feature of research to date, belonging is increasingly taking centre-stage. Since 2021, the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* has asked students 'What contributes most to your sense of belonging at your institution?', and the results for 2022 show just under half (45 per cent) of students feel they belong.²

The COVID pandemic significantly impacted students' mental health and wellbeing, with 46 per cent of students reporting by November 2021 that they felt lonely 'often or always' or 'some of the time' on campus.³ In February 2022, the UPP Foundation prioritised student belonging in their *Student Futures Manifesto*. This was based partly on earlier polling which asked students about activities that made them feel connected to their university or college community, with taking part in academic activities and social / informal events with other students securing the lead.⁴

A wide-ranging study by Pearson and Wonkhe has suggested that getting to know people better and developing closer friendships with peers would do the most to develop a sense of belonging at university.⁵ Significantly, students who did not feel as if they belonged also felt the most disempowered and less able to do those things that might increase a sense of belonging.

Belonging and loneliness are closely connected for students and can sometimes be experienced simultaneously in different areas of their lives. In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, student belonging is rightly occupying the attention of higher education institutions and policymakers.

Russell Group universities and post-1992 institutions alike have recognised that a sense of belonging is key to managing student retention and wellbeing.⁶ For example:

- the University of Edinburgh has set up a Sense of Belonging Task Group;
- the University of Portsmouth has produced a *Being, Belonging, Becoming Framework*; and
- other universities, such as the University of Bedfordshire and the Coventry University Group, have issued guidance to their staff to foster a sense of belonging in the classroom.⁷

As the *Student Futures Manifesto* puts it:

The university experience in the UK has always been about much more than sitting in lectures or taking exams – it has been about being part of a community, making new friends, learning new things about yourself, and discovering new places.⁸

Crucially, the *Manifesto* argues that developing a sense of belonging among students is important beyond its possible impact on 'employability skills and social capital':

It is vital that we rebuild links between students' communities and institutions, particularly focusing on peer networks and a sense of 'belonging' – not just for the potential positive impact it could have on student wellbeing, and building employability skills and social capital, but also as part of a wider civic agenda that further integrates students, universities and communities.⁹

It is important that any discussion of student belonging places belonging at university or college within the wider context of students' relationships and affections beyond their institution. How do students themselves envisage belonging? How do students negotiate belonging in higher education with belonging in the wider context? And which areas of university or college life are most critical for developing a sense of belonging at university?

This Policy Note explores students' thoughts about belonging in general, in higher education specifically and how different aspects of university or college can nurture students' sense of belonging. It demonstrates how discussions about student belonging might become more expansive in scope, in line with the *Student Futures Manifesto*. To that end, six students at a Russell Group residential university participated in three discussion workshops exploring different dimensions of belonging, including two first-year undergraduates, one third-year undergraduate, one international MA student and two PhD students (including one part-time, mature, distance learner).

What does it mean to belong?

When asked to define 'belonging', the students in this study resorted to other words that conjured for them a sense of belonging: security; comfort; sense of community; peace; authenticity; and feeling accepted. The sheer diversity of words students offered means that, as one of them reflected, 'you can't generalise people's sense of belonging'. It frequently means different things to different people.

However, there were some common themes. Authenticity, happiness, or 'being oneself' seems to be dependent on the extent to which one feels accepted by others. As one undergraduate student said: 'I think if we weren't in the pressure of society, we'd all be happy in ourselves because no one's telling us that we shouldn't be'. Another student used the term 'safe space' to describe the kind of environment in which she could be more authentic: 'it's comfort being myself, comfort in a sense of place as well, so that it's a safe space ... and then I think in that way, better able to accept other people for who they are'. Such a dynamic also characterised students' perceptions of 'feeling at home', where place is imbued with positive feeling and the feeling of home could also be connected to specific places, including in higher education.

For these students, belonging in oneself, belonging in one's immediate environment and belonging in society and culture were all inter-related.

1. Belonging in oneself: Belonging in oneself can be thought of as the extent to which one feels comfortable in oneself. Students spoke of this dimension of belonging in the language of love, acceptance, self-care and being authentic or true to oneself. They also commented on the need for gratitude: 'being grateful for who you are is really part of belonging and accepting yourself', said the MA student. A PhD student focused on his 'capacity to love – not myself, but other people – and by doing that, I belong in myself'.

- 2. Belonging in the immediate environment:** Belonging in the immediate environment can refer to the ability to put down roots or feel at home where one is currently living, working or studying. It also relates to one's friendship group(s) and significant loved ones.¹⁰ For students, the question of whether a home is a physical place, a feeling or a mixture of both has a direct bearing on whether they feel a sense of belonging at university, which – unless they are distance learners – becomes their immediate environment for the duration of their enrolment. Trust was highlighted as crucial in developing a feeling of home in any location. Having beautiful surroundings did not necessarily increase this sense of trust, although they could help. A PhD student suggested that any place could 'feel like' home, because a physical space can become an 'an aesthetic visual of that feeling'.
- 3. Belonging in society and culture:** Belonging in society and culture can refer to wider forms of affiliation, association or identification but generally involves some form of group and cross-group awareness and attachment.¹¹ Students emphasised the importance of finding a social or cultural group in which one feels as if they belong, but were wary about over-emphasising identity groups based on cultural differences. One PhD student suggested that societal belonging can often occur via shared activity and purpose, even if there are different identity groups engaged in that activity: 'remind them of why they're there, and that's their common ground, that's why they're all there'. So while it seemed important to honour cultural differences, the search for 'common ground' was highlighted as important for developing societal belonging.

Belonging in higher education

Asked which of the three spheres of belonging discussed above was most critical for student belonging in higher education, the students in this study chose social and cultural belonging, closely followed by environmental belonging. This is consistent with the students' discussion of belonging in general, where the individual is seen as interdependent with other people and affected by environmental considerations. Students explored the ways in which these spheres of belonging intersected with four key spheres of higher education-specific belonging.¹²

- 1. Academic engagement:** Participants accepted that for many students, the sense of belonging increases when doing well academically, but the students in this study also agreed that this success is dependent on other people doing well too. If you are the only one doing well, this can feel lonely. One undergraduate suggested that 'sometimes there can be a solidarity in actually not doing so well, as long as you know that everyone is not doing well'. As noted above, finding common ground in a shared interest and commitment to the course one is enrolled on may be a source of belonging among students from different backgrounds. However, this seems to be qualified by the extent to which one feels academically matched by the others.
- 2. Social engagement:** Unsurprisingly, having a close friendship group, knowing people on one's course and being settled in one's accommodation was considered very important by these students for developing a sense of belonging at university. One student referred to the 'natural drive to socialise' in all of us, 'because when you're not part of something, you generally feel left out'. Another student mentioned the importance of finding a close circle of friends: 'as my Mum says, "you need to find your tribe". You need your little group of people, wherever you end up'. The same student referred to his 'little microverse'. None of this differs much from what the students said in terms of the importance of social belonging in general: being connected to others is important, whether one is a student or not. However, student

social life in higher education extends beyond student societies, one's course and even student accommodation. Students commented on the need to feel connected to the local community, but felt saddened that this sometimes seemed impossible because student social life seemed centred entirely on campus.

3. Personal space: While students noted the importance of forming friendship groups, it was also suggested that there is a balance to be made between steering these through planned activities and encouraging them 'organically': 'it is better if you find friendships organically', said one undergraduate. But equally, 'I think that's very wishful thinking, because it doesn't always work that way'. So it is useful to have spaces where people can meet each other, on or off campus. This is a different strategy to trying to create a university society for everything under the sun. As one PhD student reflected: 'Creating a society for example, for every single little thing, just seems to me more like social engineering'. There is bound to be 'one person, usually me, who doesn't fit on the 26 societies'. Personal space was conceptualised as something the university should be aware of as a factor impacting students' sense of belonging. But it was also something that, to a large extent, should be left alone and any kind of overt social engineering should be avoided.

4. Surroundings: Students' reflections on surroundings at their university were largely aligned to their broader reflections on the role of aesthetics and the environment in general to foster or hinder a sense of belonging. The undergraduate students currently in halls of residence noted the potential for residential students to be stereotyped based on the accommodation they had chosen, while a mature PhD student commented on the ageist implications of certain design choices:

I'm not particularly into modern libraries, big open spaces, communal spaces, lots of bright colours. I find that really hard to focus and I don't really feel like I belong in that environment. And it's very young, especially being a mature student, I don't feel like I belong in that environment. I feel outdated.

As William Whyte has observed in a HEPI report, students should be consulted about the design of future buildings on campus.¹³ This would ensure that they work for the students they are designed to serve. Ideally, a diverse range of students would be consulted, including mature students who might feel 'outdated' in overly contemporary designs.

How should higher education institutions build belonging?

Students were able to identify specific aspects of higher education that have a critical impact on belonging and through which institutions can develop pro-belonging policies that may also enhance students' sense of belonging more generally.

These include:

- academic departments;
- childcare;
- wellbeing; and
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

Areas for belonging at university



Consistent with the Pearson and Wonkhe report findings, academic departments were envisioned as playing a key role in facilitating day-to-day belonging for students across multiple levels, including by:

- adopting teaching methods which enable students to contribute meaningfully to discussions;
- ensuring there is a sufficiently diverse range of staff and students on the course;
- using study groups to facilitate student-student interactions outside class;
- instigating 'open forums' where members of the public are invited to talks given by academics ('it might be a panel or a person like a guest speaker, but then it's a dialogue'); and
- recognising the importance of emails, particularly in keeping distance-learning students in the loop.

Academic departments can also play a role in facilitating better childcare provision for staff and students. One PhD student suggested that students themselves might take on the role of facilitating a half-term kids' club, 'because university dates do not match state school dates'. Not only would this provide students with valuable work experience and a sense of belonging, working towards a larger cause, especially those interested in education or social care careers, but it would also send a signal from the institution to its community that they care about decent in-house childcare provision.

While the students recognised that not everyone has had a positive experience of wellbeing support, they suggested that a key way to improve experiences would be to hire staff who reflect the university demographics better:

Like making sure they have lots of staff of colour, bilingual staff and staff who understand what it's like to live with disability or even I guess like childcare came up, understanding that that's a barrier and that's a stressor that needs to be addressed.

An undergraduate phrased this intervention as a way for students to feel reassured that there are staff who can resonate with their experiences: 'having someone that speaks the same language as you is just really really important in explaining how you feel'.

While Equality, Diversity and Inclusion was mentioned as a key area for students to co-create policy interventions, students were cautious about over-reach. Differences between students should not be overemphasised at the expense of highlighting common ground. Students' interests in connecting better with diverse local communities beyond the university might also form part of an institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Recommendations

While it is useful to envisage how different areas of university life can impact on students' sense of belonging, it is important not to lose sight of the wider context, recognising that belonging in higher education is part and parcel of an intricate and expansive experience of belonging in the world. To that end, the following recommendations may provide useful prompts for developing the conversation about student belonging in its wider context.

1. Student belonging cannot be reduced to a quirk of the individual student; it is social and cultural.

Students emphasise the social, cultural and environmental dimensions of belonging, whether at university or in the wider world. Deficiencies in students' sense of belonging cannot therefore automatically be ascribed to students' personality idiosyncrasies or worse, supposed psychological defects.

2. Institutions should work with students and staff to identify areas of common ground.

What is it that brings students and staff together in higher education? Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies should be wary of highlighting divisions among students at the expense of departments and academic staff being able to emphasise student cohesion and togetherness in students' academic and co-curricular activities. Identifying common ground extends to finding ways to emphasise and celebrate shared use of the physical space.

3. Institutions should promote and facilitate greater connections between students and local communities.

While students seek to belong in higher education, they also typically wish to feel more 'at home' where they live, to feel part of a larger community beyond the institution. Institutions should help promote and facilitate opportunities for students to connect with their local communities beyond the institution.

4. Identify and assess the cultural messages of the physical environment.

Students, no less so than other people, are sensitive to their physical surroundings, on or off campus. The students repeatedly emphasised the way in which physical surroundings communicate ideas about who spaces are intended for, or how much institutions value people based on how they design and arrange their environments.

5. Co-creation of pro-belonging policies should occur at a local rather than centralised level.

Students should be invited to work with higher education staff to develop pro-belonging policies. This is likely to be more successful if students and staff work at local levels, within departments or, if working with university-wide services such as student mental health and wellbeing, in tandem with a departmental lead for student experience.

Conclusion

The COVID pandemic has reminded us that students are whole persons, who are seeking to belong on multiple levels while in higher education. While much recent debate about equality and inclusion in higher education is devoted to issues of student identities, this must also be kept in perspective. What is it that ultimately unites students and staff in an institution? And how can the institution as a whole seek to belong better within its immediate local community? As a counter to ongoing rhetoric about the global university, institutions must not forget their responsibilities and duties towards their local and regional communities, as the *Student Futures Manifesto* highlights. If belonging starts at home, whether this be a place, a feeling or both, then further connecting with the local would be a great start in building a deeper sense of belonging.

Endnotes

- 1 This research was sponsored by a Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund grant.
- 2 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents>
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