

Key insights on sense of belonging in Higher Education

Key Messages

- **Meaningful belonging is different from fitting in by conforming:** there can be value in students forming connections with other students whom they see as similar to themselves.
- Belonging is **multi-faceted and affective:** supporting it must go beyond expecting individuals to mould themselves to 'fit in' to the assumed 'traditional student' ideal.
- A strong sense of belonging is facilitated when individual students feel valued **as themselves** within the wider university community.
- Students' sense of belonging in university is facilitated by both **'academic fit'** and **'social fit'**, which are particularly important for rooting a sense of belonging in the **local context of their school and course**.
- Students report **valuing the improvement of existing initiatives** that can foster a sense of belonging (personal tutoring, peer mentoring) rather than the university focusing all efforts on new, individual interventions.

Background

1. The INKC has conducted an initial literature review investigating the **concepts of sense of belonging and community in higher education**, with a focus on how these concepts impact students who may experience barriers to Higher Education. Whilst the work is evolving, we can share some of our key insights gathered thus far. The higher education sector has various interpretations about what sense of belonging is, with a general consensus that **feeling a sense of belonging has an influence on how students 'get on' and succeed at university**. Greater understanding is needed to make sense of what belonging means and how it might be encouraged, which was a key focus of the project. This briefing consolidates key findings from the literature review, and early consultation work with students.

Findings

1. Sense of belonging in Higher Education comprises of **'social fit'** and **'academic/ability fit'** (Lewis and Hodges, 2014). Students gauge their own sense of belonging in terms of 'social fit' based on **how well they fit in socially** by considering social integration, engagement with peers, staff and campus activities, ability to build social networks and positive relationships with others at the university. 'Academic fit' goes beyond social interaction and considers **how a student feels they fit into the academic environment** in terms of their academic abilities, success and comparison to the perceived intellect, ability, and behaviour of their peers. It is important that

students feel they **fit in both socially and academically**, and both types of 'fit' should be regarded to be of **equal importance** to fostering a greater sense of belonging in the university. Differing perspectives and assumptions exist within the university about the causes of low participation and variable outcomes, and this results in different kinds of solutions (interventions) being proposed. These perspectives range from seeing the issue to be addressed as one of challenging the inaccessibility of university culture, to addressing deficits in knowledge, skills or experience for individual students.

2. The search for a singular definition of 'sense of belonging' found multiple interpretations, but we outline the **following components as key** to the concept of a sense of belonging:
 - a. 'Social fit'
 - i. A feeling of **fitting in** and being **part of an academic community**
 - ii. Feeling **accepted** and **valued socially**, as part of a cohort or identity group
 - iii. Connection with peers
 - iv. Connection with staff and mentors
 - v. **Positive experience of engagement with the community**, campus and university
 - vi. Low levels of concern about negative stereotypes and biases about their ability to fit in socially
 - b. 'Academic/ability fit'
 - i. A feeling of **fitting in** and being **part of an academic community**
 - ii. Feeling **accepted** and **valued academically**, as part of their course cohort
 - iii. **Positive experience of engagement with academia** (the community, facilities and university)
 - iv. Feeling **capable** and comparable in their abilities to their peers
 - v. Low levels of concern about negative stereotypes and biases about their academic abilities
3. The concept of community is closely linked to belonging, and the **academic community is viewed as a group with shared interests and attitudes within the university environment** (Good, 2012). Feeling a lack of belonging to an academic community can cause students to "opt out" and change disciplines to a community that feels more welcoming.
4. There are multiple studies that use belonging interventions – usually academic activities with messages about difficulties in the transition to university being normal and transient, rather than a deficit or problem due to their personal characteristics – to improve belonging with a range of promising findings. There are **clear links between sense of belonging and academic outcomes** (retention/continuation, grade performance and attainment). Studies have shown that interventions aimed at fostering a sense of belonging can encourage continuation (Yeager et al., 2016), produce stronger feelings of social and academic fit (Murphy, 2020) and narrow

“Social belonging is a psychological lever where targeted intervention can have broad consequences that lessen inequalities in achievement and health”

Walton and Cohen, 2011

“All interventions or activities should aim to nurture a culture of belonging through supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, developing students’ knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners and an HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals”

Thomas, 2012

“Sense of belonging is a significant predictor of positive academic outcomes, and perhaps even more so for historically marginalised and stereotyped groups”

Lewis and Hodges, 2014

attainment gaps (Walton and Cohen, 2011). It has been suggested that belonging interventions should be **mainstream and delivered in the academic sphere to entire cohorts of students** to be effective, with a focus on ‘opt-out’ methods so less confident students are still able to participate without having to nominate themselves (Thomas, 2012).

5. When consulting with students about their experiences of feeling a sense of belonging at university, they reported feeling a strong sense of belonging and community **within their academic school**. This is influenced by feelings of fitting in socially and academically and finding a **sense of identity as a student within their school**.

6. Whilst research with novel belonging interventions has seen promising findings, consultation with students also highlights the importance of **improving upon existing interventions** to strengthen feelings of belonging. Student consultation highlighted opinions that well-established initiatives (for example: personal tutoring, peer mentoring, student societies) could support students’ sense of belonging when done well, and that focus should be on improving these rather than only trialling novel interventions.

Potential next steps

1. Sense of belonging seems to be a key ingredient of success for our students. Opportunities during intervention aimed at widening participation could be found for encouraging some of the key facets of belonging,

such as:

- a. Supporting and strengthening peer relationships
 - b. Supporting and strengthening student/staff relationships
 - c. Generating a sense of community
2. Working in collaboration with students to better understand how the university can facilitate belonging is key to planning and delivering effective interventions.

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