



BUILDING STUDENT BELONGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Perspectives on Driving and
Developing Change

Edited by

Kate Strudwick and Kirsty A. Miller



GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BUILDING STUDENT
BELONGING IN HIGHER
EDUCATION

Given the explosion of interest in student belonging across the sector, there couldn't be a better time for an edited collection like this to help university leaders make sense of how to embed belonging within their institutional strategies. *Building Student Belonging in Higher Education: Perspectives on Driving and Developing Change* achieves a thoughtful balance between the theoretical and practical; allowing readers to quickly get to terms with the messy concepts surrounding belonging in higher education, and then knowing what they can meaningfully do about it. Chapters are filled with tangible recommendations for practice, while also not shying away from discussion on the underlying challenges and lessons learnt. It's also wonderful to see how multiple chapters in the book are drawing from collaborative sector conversations about belonging. For example, Chapter 3 from Jo Divers talks about how they learnt about the listening rooms methodology from the Advance HE Building Belonging programme, which provided them with an innovative qualitative approach to assess students' experiences of block teaching. The book from introduction to conclusion neatly captures the challenges that we're all facing together as a higher education sector and shows how collaborative work is helping us move forward.

*—Dr David Gilani, Head of Student
Engagement and Advocacy, Middlesex University*

This book draws together evidence and best practice from across the higher education sector, on how to positively influence a student's sense of belonging. This book comes at a time of significant change and turmoil for the higher education sector, and being able to draw on collective expertise on

supporting student belonging will be essential to successful student retention campaigns.

With chapter contributions from many leading academics, this book discusses a variety of strategies that can be used to support specific groups of students, many of whom are underrepresented within High Education. This book will be valuable reading for anyone looking to develop stronger belonging interventions for their students.

—*Dr Kelly Edmunds*, University of East Anglia

Great Debates in Higher Education is a series of short, accessible books addressing key challenges and issues in higher education, on a national and international level. These books are research informed but debate driven. They are intended to be relevant to a broad spectrum of researchers, students and administrators in higher education and are designed to help us unpick and assess the state of higher education systems, policies and social and economic impacts

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Developing Change

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

As editors, we would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to all the authors who collaborated with us to bring this edited collection to life. Their knowledge and experience in building belonging in higher education are showcased in their chapters. Thank you for your patience and invaluable contributions; without your input, we could not highlight the extent of good practice that currently exists.

We are also deeply grateful to the production team at Emerald, especially Kirsty Woods, for your unwavering support and confidence in our proposal.

Finally two personal notes:

Special thanks and appreciation to Andy (you are my rock), Emily, Tom and my parents for all their love and endless support during the process of this book. —Kate

A big thank you and much love to Paul, Caitlin, Callum and Rose for their patience, timely distractions and the many cups of tea that allowed this book to be finished. —Kirsty

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Hayley Sweeney is a final year social work student at the University of Sunderland. She previously had limited experience of the profession but knew she wanted to work with

children who had experienced adversities in early life. Having worked with children in a school setting, Hayley always knew she wanted to do more than a teaching assistant but found she was never able to find the courage to leave work and peruse a degree as she had two children to provide for. As they grew older and less dependent on her, she decided to take the leap and is now working for a domestic abuse charity with children who have faced adversities, following her first placement. Hayleys confidence grew, and she is now able to see herself as a social worker. Hayley is also a dedicated parent to her two boys who see their mothers strong work ethic and follow her lead, she does it all for them.

Leonie Sweeney is a teaching professional within the Applied Social Sciences faculty, with many years of experience working within the children and young people sector, and currently employed as a Higher Education Course Leader and Lecturer, delivering Children and Young People and Early Years degree courses. Additionally, Leonie is an External Examiner for University of Chichester and University of Sunderland. Research interests include: student engagement, sense of belonging, social mobility, widening participation.

Jessica Thompson is a final year social work student at the University of Sunderland. Her experience within social work was limited prior to starting the degree with her only relevant experience being an admin assistant within a local authority Cared For team. This employment and experiences within her peers' lives inspired her to pursue a career in social work. Since starting the course, Jessica has completed a placement in a charity organisation and is currently undertaking a placement within a local authority setting. Following this course, Jessica hopes to continue to work within a local authority setting and has a career within child and family social work. Within her personal life, Jessica has foster carers and young

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Chloe Wilson is a Lecturer in Law and MA Programme Leader at the University of Lincoln. Her research areas primarily focus on violent crimes and exploitation, including how vulnerable people are supported and treated in England and Wales. Currently, she is exploring links between human trafficking and the world of sport, considering international safeguards and perspectives. She is also interested more broadly in the diverse experiences of individuals within the criminal justice system. Her professional background is varied, having worked in Sport, Education, the Legal Sector, the Home Office and the Police Service (as a Special Constable).

Juliette Wilson-Thomas has a PhD in sociology, and her research particularly focuses on inequality, gender and education. As a Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, she has developed teaching and learning experiences for students which aim to support them in achieving their goals and valuing their contributions to university. Juliette was part of the team who developed the award-winning RISE programme at Manchester Met., which offers students

from across the university credit-based extracurricular projects. Juliette now leads the education foundation programme and implements critical, playful and project-based pedagogy in order to engage students and provide them with spaces for agency within their studies.

INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This introduction explores current practices aimed at fostering a sense of belonging within higher education (HE). The collection features narratives that address this theme, highlighting sector-wide work efforts focused on the role and place of belonging, integrating belonging as a key component of inclusivity and support, thereby enhancing the holistic student experience. WONKHE and Pearson (Blake et al., 2022) have shown that enhancing belonging in HE can positively influence how and where students feel connected, valued and empowered in their learning journeys. Students are increasingly viewed as partners, producers or co-creators rather than consumers. Although belonging is recognised as important in UK HE, it is complex and multifaceted, often requiring tailored approaches across institutions. The concept remains subjective and evolving, necessitating a broader understanding of its place in HE. Contributions to this edited collection illustrate where and how HE

agendas have shifted to emphasise community importance. Discussions within reassess and reflect upon the value of belonging in HE, showcasing case studies and good practice with lessons learnt on the 'How, Why and What' questions associated with developing projects and initiatives. Building belonging involves common themes of collaboration, inclusion and connection to build relationships within the community. It is linked to broader aspects of student experiences, including engagement, retention and academic motivation. This collection underscores the importance of belonging in fostering inclusive, supportive learning communities.

Keywords: Learning and teaching; sense of belonging; students as partners; co-creation; student experiences

INTRODUCTION

This edited collection presents reflections on current practices in building and developing a sense of belonging within higher education (HE). The narratives and critical evaluations focus on co-created projects and initiatives that are topical and relevant for current debates in HE. Discussions across the sector have called for inclusivity and support to enhance the wider holistic student experience, as shown in initiatives from the Office for Students, Access and Participation Plans (APP), and the [QAA \(2023\)](#). With seminal work from WONKHE and Pearson ([Blake et al., 2022](#)), key issues and drivers were highlighted, demonstrating the importance of belonging and how it should be a strategic priority in HE. As editors, this is an observation which recognises some similarity to developments and initiatives to embed student engagement practices within teaching and learning.

Addressing the prominence of a sense of belonging, the following chapters explore *why* these developments are crucial for strategic planning in institutions today and *how* they align with institutional values and principles. The discussions further reflect on the role of belonging in shaping identities within HE, ensuring that students are seen as partners, producers, or co-creators rather than consumers.

DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING SENSE OF BELONGING

Sense of belonging is arguably a current priority within HE in the United Kingdom, and there has been a sector-wide call for action to make belonging a prominent part of institutional strategies (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Blake et al., 2022; Gilani et al., 2024; Giliani, 2023; Haddow & Brodie, 2023; Morgan & O'Hara, 2023; Pedler et al., 2021). As a concept, sense of belonging is complex, but by adopting a 'no one size fits all' approach, various initiatives to build belonging have been introduced across the sector, often tailored to specific institutions. These initiatives aim to enhance student experiences, to foster connections and inclusion both within and outside the curriculum, and to positively impact on the wider learning community and all stakeholders.

The focus on belonging has intensified in response to meeting challenges which have emerged post-pandemic. Despite its relevance, the concept remains nebulous, subjective and multifaceted, with Guyotte et al. (2019) describing it as dynamic and hard to define. Belonging may mean different things to different audiences, and there is no set definition.

However, many studies (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Blake et al., 2022; Gilani et al., 2024; Haddow & Brodie, 2023; Morgan & O'Hara, 2023) identify that belonging is not fixed or static. It is an evolving concept that needs to be flexible and adaptable to address current challenges in HE. The study by WONKHE and Pearson (Blake et al., 2022) initiated the journey to define belonging, highlighting four key dimensions: connection, inclusion, support and autonomy.

Since 2022, numerous studies have focused on building a sense of belonging in HE, as evidenced by sector-wide initiatives such as the Advance HE Building Belonging Programme, the University of Portsmouth's Being, Belonging and Becoming project and various communities of practice being set up. Narratives on belonging have also been supported by multiple papers published in WONKHE (Dunbar-Morris, 2021; Giliani, 2023; Jackson & Blake, 2022; Kandiko Howson et al., 2021; Strudwick et al., 2024). Literature compiled by Naughton et al. (2024) in the RAISE Student Belonging Good Practice Guide further asserts that belonging should be the responsibility of all stakeholders.

Building a sense of belonging, therefore, involves creating an environment where students feel connected, valued and empowered, often through co-creation and collaboration in designing key initiatives. Efforts in HE are seeking to foster belonging for both staff and students and should address where and how all have a role to play in designing strategies to enhance the university experience.

Proactive institutional responses are required to build connections in HE, ensuring students feel seen and acknowledged for their contributions to the learning community. The work of UPP and the Student Futures Manifesto in 2022 exemplifies this. The UPP Foundation (2022) responded to barriers and challenges faced by students' post-pandemic,

emphasising the importance of co-producing a Student Futures Manifesto with their institutions.

Belonging has been facilitated and nurtured across the HE sector, and this summary shows its prominence with developing inclusive and supportive learning communities. Although the concept remains broad, there are common themes of collaboration, inclusion and connection which all emerge in initiatives to build relationships within the community. At The University of Lincoln, sense of belonging was informed by our participation in the Advance HE Building Belonging Programme and the University of Portsmouth's Being, Belonging and Becoming projects. At Lincoln, staff and students can foster a sense of belonging through connections, engagement, inclusion, community and diversity. Each of these interconnected themes plays a crucial role in how individuals perceive their place within a group, community or society, and together, they form a comprehensive understanding of what it means to belong. Sense of belonging is determined to be part of a continuous journey, one that involved all stakeholders at the University.

CONNECTING BELONGING, STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND ENGAGEMENT

Belonging has been recognised as being linked to wider debates about the value of learning experiences. It connects to broader aspects of student experience, including engagement, retention, academic motivation and enjoyment (Guyotte et al., 2019; Masika & Jones, 2016; Meehan & Howells, 2017; Pedler et al., 2021).

On a conceptual level a sense of belonging has been seen as being important to the wider student experience. A 2022

survey by WONKHE and Pearson found that less than 70% of students felt they belonged at their institution, with lower levels reported among diverse groups such as students with disabilities or those identifying as LGBT+ (Capper & McVitty, 2022). The UPP Foundation has further urged HE providers to consider how they foster a sense of belonging in their students (UPP Foundation, 2021) and has made this Goal 1 in their 2025 strategy (UPP Foundation, 2021).

Scholarly work has sought to understand and capture the sense of belonging for both staff and students (Guyotte et al., 2019; Pedler et al., 2021). Organisations, like RAISE, have dedicated conference themes to belonging, emphasising its relevance and timeliness within HE learning communities.

In summary, belonging is about feeling connected and being part of a community, which is why it is prioritised at all levels within HE institutions.

THE JOURNEY OF BELONGING IN HE

Lessons learnt have driven a movement to normalise belonging in HE, embedding it within strategic values and student engagement opportunities to enhance experiences and student–staff partnerships. Results have led to the inclusion of practices to enhance student belonging as a key part of the movement. The sector-wide acknowledgement of the benefits of developing a sense of belonging within learning communities has been a response to the pandemic’s impact on both staff and students and developmental work has become a core ethos within institutional missions, values and principles (Advance HE, 2022; WonkHE & Pearson, 2022).

Like student engagement, building a sense of belonging is linked to identity. It requires a non-standardised approach, as learners are diverse, and opportunities must be adaptable to enhance experiences holistically. These developments play a significant role in ensuring students are seen valued partners, producers, or co-creators – one of the key messages from this book.

Belonging highlights the importance of student voice and the values of engagement and co-creation in HE. Various methods nurture belonging, and it has been a focal point in HE responses to build inclusive, supportive learning communities. However, there remains a need for a broader understanding of where belonging fits in HE.

The projects discussed in this collection often draw upon characteristics, which are relevant to their location and where and how the positionality of belonging sits with student satisfaction, transition, retention, attainment and success (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Guyotte et al., 2019; Masika & Jones, 2016; Meehan & Howells, 2017). These relationships highlight the timeliness of belonging as a central topic in the UK HE sector. This is especially pertinent given the challenges faced by many institutions financially, assessing value for money and the broader challenges connected to recruitment and diversification of cohorts. The importance of feeling included and connected to the learning community should be a key priority for educators, students and senior leadership in HE.

Practices that facilitate partnerships, both internal and external, are essential to valuing student voices, including the quiet and silent ones. The reflections explored in this edited collection explore how HE agendas have shifted to emphasise community importance. Despite advances and successes with building belonging, the concept continues to evolve and will continue to be flexible, adaptable and open to interpretation.

THE TIMELINESS OF THIS EDITED BOOK

This collection of experiences reflects upon recent practices and approaches, tackling some of the challenges and tensions that have arisen with building belonging. Within each chapter, the authors reflect upon what belonging means at their institution, how it is defined and the different ways it has been addressed in practice.

Narratives are presented from both a strategic and localised lens, applying knowledge learnt to address obstacles and barriers. The book is interspersed with practical recommendations, tips and appropriate methodological discussions observed within practices.

Importantly, throughout the book connections are made between themes of engagement, collectiveness, inclusivity and co-production, demonstrating where and how belonging has been embedded as a core ethos in recent practice. The book reassesses and reflects upon the value of belonging in HE, showcasing case studies and good practice with commentators reflecting upon lessons learnt, addressing the ‘How, Why and What’ questions with developing projects and initiatives. By understanding how these challenges have been overcome, educators can learn from each other to strengthen their practice and act on some of the core drivers we see in the sector.

This edited collection has three core features within its structure. Firstly, Chapters 2–5 present conceptual/theoretical reflections on building belonging. Secondly, Chapters 6–8 reflect on current practices with diverse learners, and thirdly Chapters 9–12 address varied approaches to support students with belonging.

Mossop focuses on the importance of leadership in Chapter 2, exploring how this fits with developing and building a community to support a sense of belonging