

# Building Belonging in Higher Education

Recommendations for developing  
an integrated institutional approach

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**WONKHE**

# Primary research

## Student survey

**No. of respondents:** 5233

**Time of activity:** November 2021

**Promotion via:** 15 partner students' unions (13 in England, 1 in Scotland, and 1 in Wales)

## Staff survey

**No. of respondents:** 430

**Time of activity:** April 2022

**Location of staff:** England 89%  
Wales 3%  
Scotland 7%

**Roles represented:** Staff engaged in teaching and learning, support services, SU staff

## Student diaries

**No. of diary entries:** 244

**Time of activity:** December 2021 - June 2022

## Student focus groups

**Number of focus groups:** 3

**Time of activity:** May 2022

# Demographics

## Student Survey

**All:** N=5,233

**Gender:** Male 34% | Female 61% | Non-binary 2% | I use another term 0% | Prefer not to say 2%

**Transgender identity:** Yes 2% | No 94% | Unsure 1% | Prefer not to say 3%

**Disability:** Disabled 14% | Non-disabled 81% | Prefer not to say 5%

**Sexuality:** Heterosexual/straight 70% | Bisexual 14% | Gay or lesbian 4% | I use another term 4% | Prefer not to say 9%

**Ethnic background:** White 64% | Mixed ethnicity 6% | Black 7% | Asian 19% | Arab 1% | Other 1% | Prefer not to say 3%

**Age:** 17-22 59% | 23-30 25% | 31-40 9% | 41-50 3% | 51+ 2% | Prefer not to say 1%

**Year of study:** First 43% | Second or middle 28% | Final year 29%

**Level of study:** Undergraduate 67% | Other qualification (postgraduate taught) 33%

**Average length of commute to campus:** Live on campus 9% | 5-10 minutes 28% | 11-30 minutes 32% | 31 minutes-an hour 16% | 1-2 hours 8% | 2+ hours 3% | Not relevant - I study fully online 5%

**Course delivery this semester:** All face to face 20% | Primarily face to face with some online 31% | Mix of face to face and online 37% | All online 11% | Started with some face to face but has moved online 1%

**Home/international:** Home 70% | International 30%

## Staff Survey

**All:** N=430

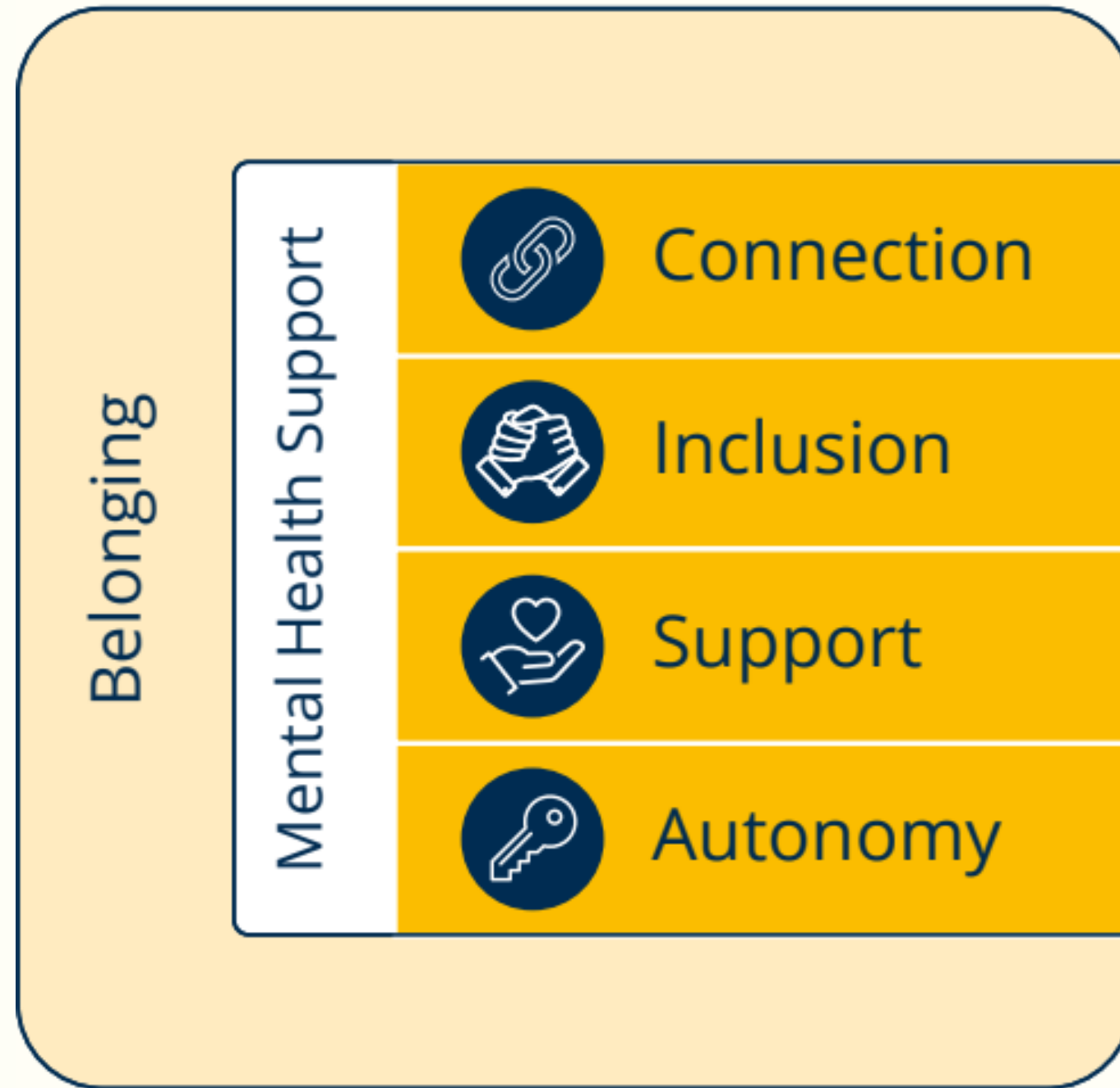
**Type of institution:** Large, multi-faculty 83% | Small or Specialist 14% | FE College 1 % | Other 1%

**Location:** England 89% | Wales 3% | Scotland 7% | Northern Ireland 0% | Outside UK 0%

**Role:** Academic engaged in teaching and learning 32% | Staff engaged in supporting students' academic learning 9% | Staff engaged in supporting students' wider experience 32% | Students' union staff or representative 19% | Other - please specify 9%

**Main area of expertise:** (N= 137) Medical and health sciences 21% | Agriculture, food, and related subjects 1% | Physical, mathematical, computing, engineering, or technological sciences 12% | Social sciences 37% | Humanities 15% | Design, creative and performing arts 5% | Other 8%

# The Foundations of Belonging



# Connection

Half (55%) of students felt a sense of community with others on their **COURSE** community

A third (39%) felt a sense of community at **university level**.

**76% of staff** who responded to our survey believed that forging new connections and building peer relationships is an 'essential' part of the university learning experience

In the student survey, when asked what would help them feel a greater sense of belonging at university, **the 3 top answers were all linked to building friendships and peer connections.**

**6 out of 10** who said they belonged felt there were opportunities to interact with others on their course

**3 out of 10** who did not feel they belonged agreed there were opportunities to interact with others on their course

Just **11% of staff** said that the quality of the student's relationship with peers studying on the course makes the most significant difference to developing academic confidence.



# Connection

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*"[Belonging is] having people around me who I connect with, who I can support and who I know will support me. It is about connecting with others. When these connections are made you get a sense of security and acceptance."* **Student**

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*"The course is the one central place we know all students will interact and the one place we can definitely influence in a way which is a core part of the learning experience instead of a bolt-on."* **Staff survey respondent**

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*"I would prefer it if we had more activities, interactions, or projects that included some group work which allows all the different people in the class to work together and create something imaginative together."* **Student**

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*"Scheduled meetings with a personal tutor reassured me that I had someone to discuss issues and progress with."* **Student**

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*"Knowing that I can reach out to lectures and year tutors and get a timely, kind and helpful response has helped any insecurities or doubts a lot this semester!"* **Student**

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*"[T]he university refers to me as my preferred name and pronouns and even changed my email to fit my identity."* **Student**

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# Examples of recommendations for connection

**Recommendation:** All staff involved with delivering or designing courses should integrate initiatives for connecting students, this could form part of the course review process and the validation process for new courses.

**Recommendation:** Informal opportunities for students to connect with one another should be intentionally engineered - particularly at the beginning of each course.

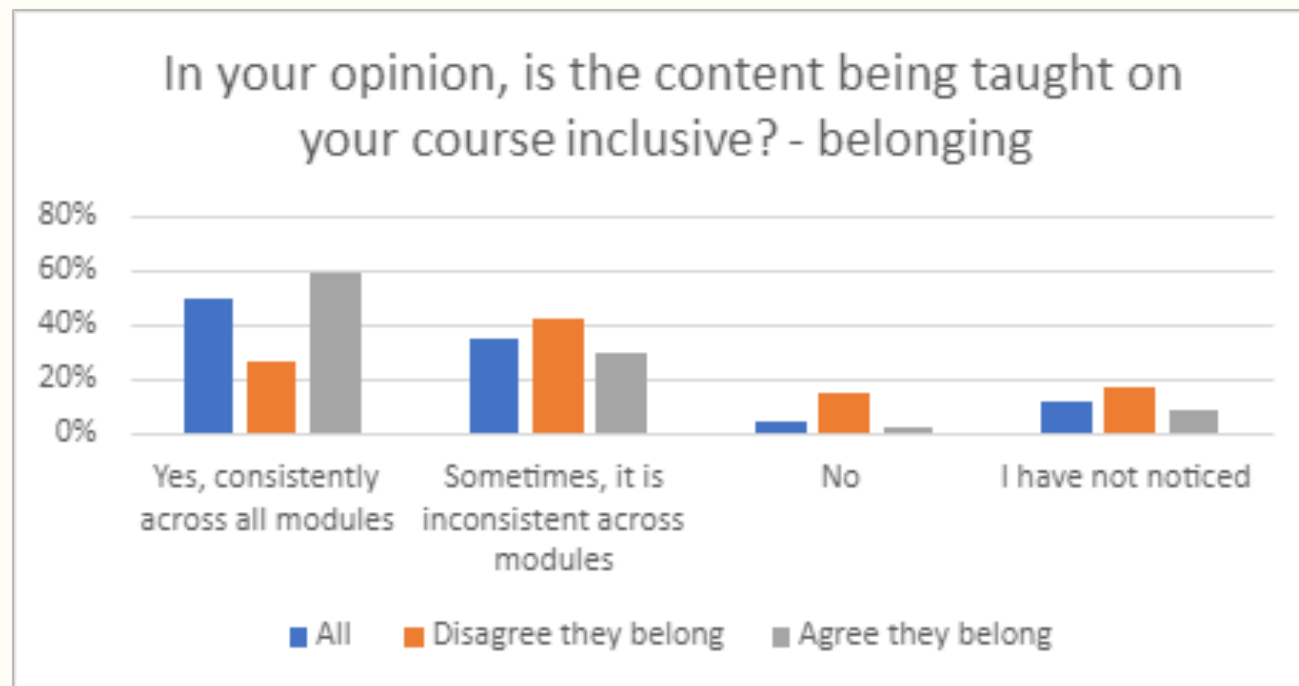
**Recommendation:** Consider all online interactions (including emails, VLE messages, messages through social platforms etc.) between staff and students as an opportunity to build a sense of belonging and inclusion. Set expectations with both students and staff about how and when to respond to messages.

# Inclusion

Inclusion at course level tended to be conceptually divided into:

- Accessibility of teaching and learning
- Representation - whether the course content, and those teaching it, was diverse and representative

## Student survey



## Staff survey

Staff were asked what they thought the top three barriers were to improving inclusion at course level.

- **54 per cent** said there is “a lack of consensus about what inclusion looks like”.
- **72 per cent** said there is “low knowledge and confidence of staff to adopt inclusive practices”.
- **13 per cent** of staff respondents believed that poorly articulated policy, or obstructive cross-institutional plans and policies, prevented improving inclusion on academic courses.



# Staff will and readiness

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*"It isn't so much a 'lack of interest or will' in improving inclusion. But rather that when faced with the reality of what genuine inclusion would look like, the concept...becomes hard to face for a lot of people who are wedded to more traditional ways of working/learning/collaborating".*

**Staff survey respondent**

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*"High level, clear leadership is essential to be able to create change in large, complex institutions and I feel that we are currently stuck in the process of talking about wanting better outcomes without the focused attention on action. Wide-ranging best practice examples for all departments would be very helpful as well as cross-institution research and evaluation which can be used to evidence interventions."* **Staff survey respondent**

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*"Academic awareness of inclusion is shockingly poor."* **Staff survey respondent**

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# Accessibility

“[T]he dyslexic support has been amazing, but the problem with that is, it’s difficult to get your foot in the door. As soon as you’ve got your foot in the door, it’s good to go.” - **Student**

“It's frustrating. You have to explain over and over and over again.” - **Student**

“You have to prove that you have a problem, but my GP is the university [so] they should already know.” - **Student**

# Inclusive content

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*"There's Japanese cinema. How are you going to ignore Bollywood? How are you going to ignore Nollywood? [The teaching staff] would be like, 'well, that's not our expertise, so we can't talk about that'..."* **Student**

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*"[T]his problem [a lack of diversity in the broader discipline] is definitely acknowledged by the lecturers at least, which definitely helps because I know they're still considering it even if there isn't the material available in the area."* **Student**

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*"with a lot of the stuff that's been presented, it's Western, European, industrialised founders of psychology - [the educators] have tried to say that it's not representative of where we are today."* **Student**

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*"Case studies and handout in my course have been very international in nature, reflecting the increasingly globalised world and can be applied by students in their global careers."* **Student**

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*"I know for certain that I [a medical student] will meet and look after people from all walks of life, varying in skin colour, gender orientation, social circumstance, and so I am not fully comfortable that my learning resources do not fully address this."* **Student**

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*"I would not know how to identify or diagnose certain skin conditions on people of colour because I do not know how their symptoms would present."* **Student**

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# Free speech

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*"A lot of modules encourage discussion, debate, and free expression. This is one way my course is inclusive, as it gives people a safe space to share their opinions and experiences and allows everyone to learn from it."* **Student**

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*"This type of positive interaction makes me feel that it's okay to be different but still contribute as part of the scientific community. Inclusion comes from feeling that we don't all have to be the same to succeed."* **Student**

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*"...it was making people feel like they didn't actually belong on the course because the behaviour wasn't being corrected at all [...] it was all within the space where it was meant to be moderated by the two lecturers, and it just wasn't at all."* **Student**

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*"The course did predominantly focus on white Europeans and often viewed people of colour through a European's lens rather than as agents of their own history. However, I also felt I was in an environment where I wouldn't be stifled from addressing this. So, whilst imperfect, it didn't make me feel totally excluded."* **Student**

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# Recommendation

**Recommendation:** Training on neurodiversity should be mandatory for all staff, and departments should look at different ways to outwardly convey their support for neurodivergent students.

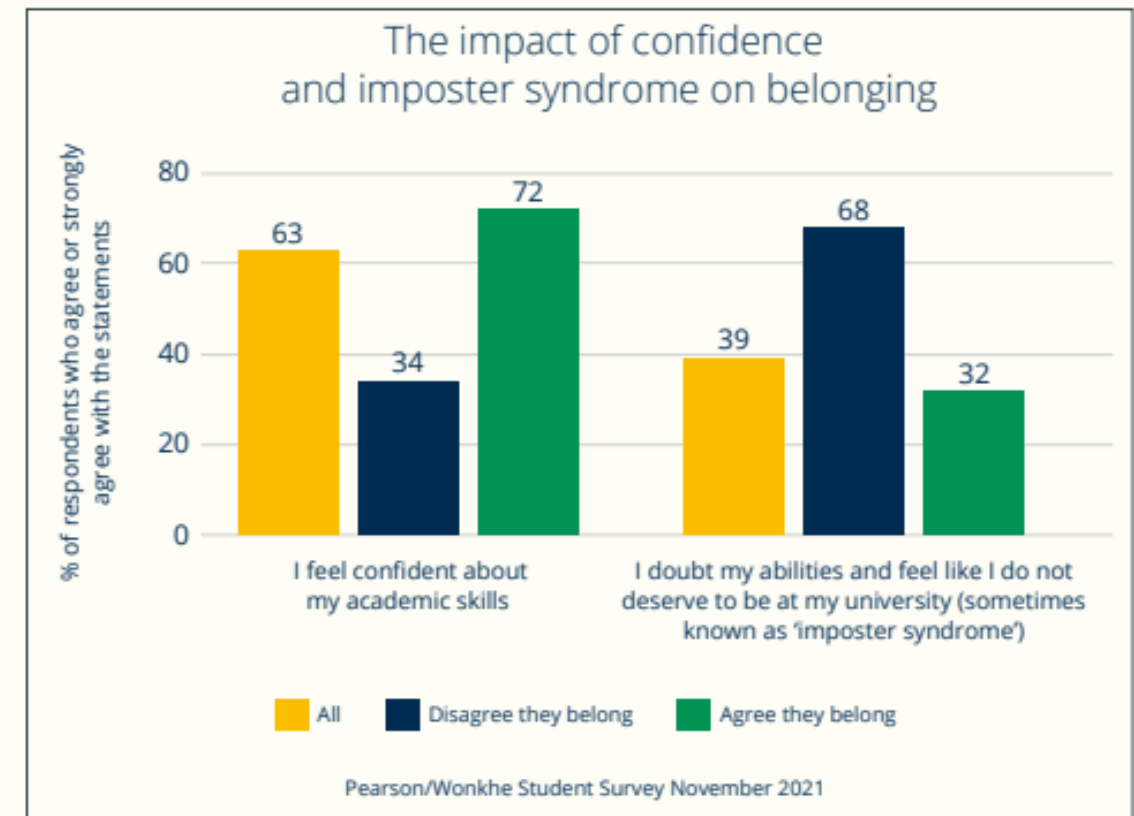
**Recommendation:** Train staff on inclusive design thinking so that all content and communications across the institution are designed to create equity by accommodating accessibility needs.

**Recommendation:** Universities should have clear guidelines and staff training in place explaining what inclusion looks like for teaching and learning practice, with an awareness that this may differ by area of study.

**Recommendation:** Present course content in its global, historical, and colonial context. Where there are gaps in course content, encourage staff to be open about these and invite students to help close them.

# Support

- 72% of students who felt they belonged also said they were confident in their academic skills
- 34% of students who did not feel they belonged said they were confident in their academic skills



- 52% of staff said induction was a top priority when considering what made a difference to student confidence
- Students who felt they had settled into university well were three times more likely to feel they belonged than students who did not settle in well

Three key barriers to supporting learners and their academic confidence according to staff.

78% said understanding what support, intervention, or structural changes are needed

76% said knowing what needed to be done but lacking the time or resource to do it

58% said the practical problem of identifying students with low confidence prevented them from addressing it.

# Support

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*"[t]he survey... I think that changed my whole experience of university, just that one little thing of meeting two like-minded people who I speak to even today...that one little thing had butterfly-effected everything else in the future."* **Student**

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*"Interventions around academic confidence are often located within WP or Success departments, which reinforces a deficit model. Academic confidence should be nurtured and supported as standard, rather than re-actively when a student is considered to be struggling with course content."* **Staff survey respondent**

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*"I was trying, at the start of the semester, to get a PLSP [personal learning support plan] so that I can have longer in exams and longer on assignments because I've had a few diagnoses...but because of a failure on my GP's end, I've not been able to get that at all. So I've had no extra support even though I've been through three mental health advisors and loads of different lecturers...It's just going round in circles, trying to find who I'm meant to actually go to."* **Student**

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*"...I think all too often we wait for students to self-declare or fail/fall before academic support kicks in, when confidence is already lost. We should be able to develop it from minute 1 in the classroom [with] accessible materials, course content and seamless, intrinsic support built in."* **Staff survey respondent**

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# Support – examples of recommendations

**Recommendation:** Academic skills and their development should be integrated throughout teaching and learning, delivered as standard to all students rather than requiring students to identify as 'deficient', thereby avoiding a deficit model approach to support provision.

**Recommendation:** Signpost support, streamline access and build support networks across the institution. Ensuring regular staff training, support and inter-departmental connection is essential.

**Recommendation:** Clarify the processes involved in requesting mitigation or extensions for assessment purposes, ensuring that both physical and mental health factors are explained in sufficient detail to all students.

**Recommendation:** Evaluate the reach, delivery, and efficacy of existing pre-arrival and early induction activities. Consider ways to evaluate their impact on student confidence which is important to an overall sense of belonging.

# Autonomy

In the student survey, **67 per cent** of those who felt like they belonged agreed they feel empowered to act if they see an opportunity to change things for the better, compared with **29 per cent** of students who did not feel like they belonged.

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*“Having your suggestion accepted and to be implemented feels special and I am more confident about this course than before.”* **Student**

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*“...our professor would slightly change the way they would approach a subject to include those students’ understanding of it and may ask the student to contribute to the lecture. I always thought that was so... it was really thoughtful and also gave you the opportunity of being on the other side of the classroom [...] allowing each student to use what they know already...”* **Student**

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*"I think part of the problem with it is that some lecturers refuse to be educated by us even though we have... although they have more knowledge, obviously, on what they're teaching, sometimes we can bring them new ideas on modern problems and problems that are arising in the past few years."* **Student**

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*"I think the main aspect of inclusion in the materials is a sensitivity to the experiences and views of students. An example of this, for me, is ensuring that attitudes expressed towards mental research [...], health difficulties, disability or neurodiversity aren't deficit-centered. It can be really irritating to hear or read such attitudes because pre-prepared written or recorded materials give no opportunity for response or discussion, so you're sort of left with a perspective which is presented as fact, rather than opinion."* **Student**

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# Recommendations around autonomy

**Recommendation:** Increase opportunities for student co-creation so it becomes standard practice.

**Recommendation:** Encourage academics to take a 'feed-forward' model to student feedback, encouraging a growth mindset throughout individual and groupwork activities to promote student confidence.

**Recommendation:** Where possible offer a variety of assessment styles across the curriculum.

# Barriers to Belonging

- Blurring the lines between the course and 'everything else'.
- Mental health
- Cultural and systemic barriers



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Belong from the  
beginning



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