Building Belonging in Higher Education

Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach

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WONKHE

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Foreword

There has probably never been a time when there was greater need to understand how to build belonging in higher education. We have all come through a period of significant disruption with the global pandemic and we are surrounded by severe sustainability and economic challenges as well as conflicts which drive people apart around the world. With this backdrop, students entering university do so with considerable uncertainty both about the present and the future, and the same is true for staff – academic, professional, technical and support. Consequently, this report is both timely and necessary. It is also practical to its core. It does not preach or prescribe, but enables the reader to question their current practice, to understand the journey of individual students, cohorts, staff and institutions, and to make thoughtful choices about how we act towards each other. It is a report that enables learning which is at the heart of how we can manage in our complex, conflicted and challenging context.

The key to building belonging is integration and the report sets out four foundations to achieve this: connection, inclusion, support and autonomy. In order to integrate people, social, digital and physical systems we need to understand how university life and work are blended and dynamic over time. Belongingness, confidence and a sense of identity are not static but rise and fall over time and we need to recognise this in ourselves and be compassionate towards others. Compassion is, crucially, both about empathising and seeing the situation from the perspective of the other, and about taking action. The action can include role-modelling, discussing, drawing students in and allowing time and space for connectivity as well as individuality and self-expression. This is clearly a balancing act, but it is one that is worthy of our full intellectual, emotional and cultural efforts.

The recommendations in this report are purposely practical as they invite us to think through how we can make changes in a range of areas, sometimes incrementally, so that when the collective effort is accumulated, there can be institution-wide, cultural change. Areas covered include the inclusive curriculum, student group formation, assessment, feedback and feed-forward and managing transitions. Cases, illustrations and data are used throughout and this helps with the practicality of the recommendations. The data behind the report are impressive as, in addition to the case studies, there were over 5000 student responses and over 430 staff responses to the surveys.

40% of students responding to the survey scored themselves as below average mental health and a recommendation is for training to better understand neurodiversity. This point is worthy of emphasis because people who experience mental health challenges can also experience exclusion, low self-esteem and unfair bias. This is a complex area, but alongside this report, the work of bodies such as UUK with the Step Change programme and Student Minds with the University Mental Health Charter can help us undertake institution-wide and institution-deep change that will help everyone belong to our diverse communities, to help shape our communities and to have greater opportunities for success and happiness as a result.

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Introduction

Despite research into the ways in which "belongingness" is produced and sustained in various pedagogical contexts, belonging can still be seen as a vague and indefinable concept. Where exactly do feelings of belonging come from in a university setting? What factors enhance or hinder it? And what can institutions do to better facilitate feelings of belonging?

Wonkhe and Pearson began research into belonging in the autumn of 2021 as institutions were emerging from the Covid lockdown restrictions and looking to reinvigorate the student experience and student engagement. The findings come from a major survey of 5,233 students, a survey of 430 staff, a partnership with 15 students' unions across the UK (13 in England, 1 in Scotland, and 1 in Wales), over 240 monthly diary entries from anonymous student participants, multiple student focus groups and 52 projects by sector colleagues from across UK universities.

Participants for student focus groups and diaries were deliberately and specifically chosen to over select from marginalised, widening participation, and less advantaged demographics to understand the higher education experiences of diverse groups. This lens is pertinent given the growing and diversifying national sector and student body.

In this report, we break down the concept of belonging and present recommendations with the aim of helping universities extend pockets of

best practice across the sector. These recommendations are not necessarily radical. Instead, their value derives from the richness of insight and the connections made between issues, afforded through the lens of belonging. Integrating the recommendations effectively and authentically from the students' point of view (which probably involves students in the design) is as important as the initiatives themselves.

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The Foundations of Belonging

We believe that there are four areas which form the foundations of belonging. Through our rich and varied data collection, bringing together the experiences and ideas of students and university staff, we reveal a multitude of ways in which feelings of belonging are established, nurtured and hindered in universities. While the factors that promote belonging vary by person and personality, there are recurring themes within our data, which come together to form four foundational areas: connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy.

Each of these components, when facilitated well, not only enhanced feelings of belonging but existed symbiotically, with the presence of one enhancing the others. Students who were placed in groupwork tasks by educators seeking to enhance connection within the cohort also reported higher levels of autonomy and inclusion as they became active participants in their own learning and received higher levels of support from peers within a learning community. Students who received diverse and inclusive learning materials felt they were being better supported by their institution to prepare for increasingly globalised careers and/or to enter a diversifying graduate workplace.

Connection: Above everything else outlined in this report, the greatest impact that universities can have on students' sense of belonging is to improve the way they connect their students. It sounds simple, and both staff and students see it as essential, yet students did not report a strong sense of connection, either at course level or university level. Getting to know their peers has a profound effect on students' sense of belonging because it enables them to build a support network and develop confidence. The recommendations cover a wide variety of activities and initiatives which can help students build connections, and include online social spaces, communications between staff and students, personal tutors, group work and communal spaces. Wherever possible these recommendations should be integrated into course pedagogy.

Inclusion: Our primary focus in this area has been at course level, understanding how students define inclusive courses. Discussions with students naturally fell into two areas – access to and accessibility of teaching and
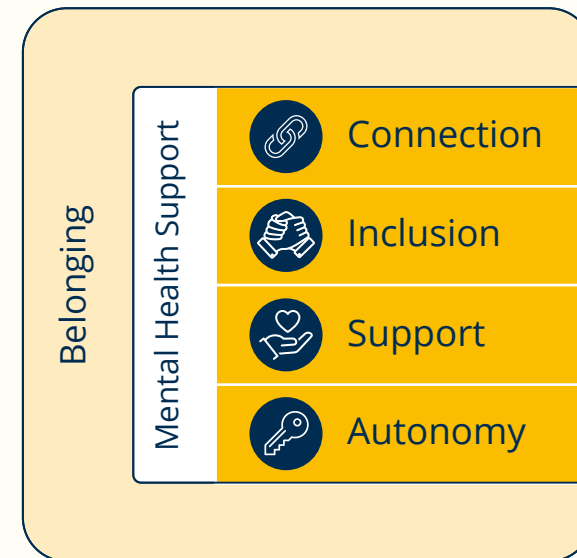
learning, and whether the course content, and those teaching it, were diverse and representative. The recommendations are largely split between these two areas and cover accessibility, neurodiversity, access to resources, inclusive content and representation of staff.

One of the standout findings is that students associate diverse inclusive content with course credibility. You might assume that their primary concern would be the way the content makes them feel personally and whether they feel included or excluded (and they certainly made comments to that effect) but their main concern was the rigour of the course and whether the absence of diverse inclusive content meant they were missing out on a rounded and often more global view of the subject.

Support: Well-defined, clearly articulated, inclusive support systems and networks are fundamental to building a sense of belonging. Transition inductions were important in delivering this from the beginning but it was clear that there were potential benefits to introducing pre-arrival sessions or surveys and yearly, departmental inductions. The greatest challenge to institutions, however, appeared to be finding the time and institutional consensus needed to understand and act on student needs. Above all other findings, eliminating a deficit model approach to support by integrating support throughout the course and across the university had the greatest potential to remove deeply engrained feelings of unbelonging, 'otherness' or 'imposter syndrome'. This was experienced by many, not only students in need of support, and was prevalent among students currently in higher education no matter what their achievements or background. Promoting the confidence of students who have already overcome barriers to be at university (such as disabilities, anxiety, dyslexia, first in family, to name a few) also enhanced this approach.

Autonomy: There is a strong link between students feeling empowered to makes choices about their learning and contributing to course content, and students developing a sense of belonging. Despite an increasing number of projects around co-creation in the sector, the practice is not widespread. One of the key recommendations in this section, particularly with reference to developing more inclusive content, is for co-creation to become standard practice. We also reference the link between mindset and belonging and discuss developing growth mindsets through a feed-forward model of student feedback.

Barriers to Belonging

Alongside these findings, there were three overarching narratives that reflect the challenges of building a sense of belonging in students and implementing the recommendations:

1) Blurring the lines between the course and 'everything else'.

One of the aggregate findings from the research is that a lack of integration between the course and curriculum and the wider experience creates a barrier to belonging. In many institutions the course is largely detached from the wider university, creating silos that frustrate students and can hinder shared responsibility across staff. The student research shows that there is a stronger connection to the community at course level than at university level (55 per cent of students felt a sense of community with others on their course compared with 39 per cent who felt a sense of community at the university level) which points to building the broader learning experience from the course out, and integrating areas such as support, skills and careers.

There was a shift towards this approach during the pandemic when some staff recognised a need to signpost support services and extra-curricular activities from the course. Students have spoken about this positively as something which aided their feelings of inclusion. There is an opportunity to build on progress made during the pandemic by embedding areas such as support into the course as opposed to simply signposting to them. This demands an integrated approach and will need focused attention and resource. There will be a key role for a head of department, or similar, to integrate it effectively, as well as including students in the core design.

Taking this approach could help to build shared responsibility across staff teams, in addition to alleviating the frustrations of students who do not understand the silos into which their university is divided.

2) Mental health.

Poor mental health creates a major barrier to belonging and inclusion. We asked students to give themselves a score out of 10 for their mental health with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent. 60 per cent of students scored themselves 6 or more out of 10 and the other 40 per cent scored themselves 5 or lower (referred to below as those with 'below average mental health').

Only 52 per cent of students with below average mental health scores said they felt that they belonged compared with 80 per cent of those with average and above mental health. This is no surprise, but something that stood out from the research is the level to which low mental health is linked to other negative survey responses across every aspect of university life. This was consistent whether it was about connections at course or university level, confidence, how inclusive they found course content or whether they felt they could speak freely at university. Students who have lower mental health scored lower on virtually every question they were asked.

The dramatic impact of low mental health on all aspects of the university experience backs up the investment and focus that many universities are placing on this area and highlights the importance of preventative measures, as well as remedial. These findings speak to the value of weaving mental health, wellbeing support, and inclusive practice into every stage of the student lifecycle - including courses and extra-curricular activities as well as welcome and transition. It is clear that mental health must be central to any strategy that seeks to develop student belonging, and that the interrelationship between belonging and mental health should be reflected in student wellbeing and experience strategies.

3) Cultural and systemic barriers.

Our staff survey focused on staff perception of student belonging and inclusion. It did not explicitly ask staff about their own experiences of belonging and inclusion at their institution. However, responses in the open survey questions and broader discussions across the sector revealed cultural and systemic concerns. These concerns raised questions regarding the extent to which staff can be fully committed and understanding of the foundational principles of belonging if they have limited experience of it themselves.

It was clear that for many staff, there is tension – and often a lot of confusion - surrounding division of responsibility between departments as well as individual roles. Comments about over-worked and under-supported staff were common in the open survey responses. Staff admitted that "competing priorities and/or lack of time and space to develop practice" was the biggest barrier to improving inclusion in academic courses and the second most significant barrier to supporting the development of students' academic confidence. It's clear from the comments that staff concerns do not simply focus on volume of work and lack of time: compensation, casualised labour and inclusive culture were also discussed.

"Casualised and financially insecure staff do not have the mental and practical capacity to develop pedagogy".

"There is often a sense that working towards inclusive practice for students ignores staff. This is a toxic debate, and one that pits students against staff and vice versa... Staff can also feel a low sense of inclusion and lack of belonging, but inclusive academic practice should lead to benefits for staff and students."

"There needs to be more representation of the student body across not only what is taught but also the staff who teach it. We can try and make as inclusive an environment as possible but if students don't see that a university also is inclusive of their staff then what we do won't have the same sentiment."

Most of the recommendations in this report are not radical but they do require real integration between subject curricula and everything else. Implementing them in a vacuum isn't going to move the dial. Universities that are serious about building a sense of belonging for all will need to look carefully at some of the embedded structural and cultural issues driving some of these students' experiences.

Connection

Connection is seen as essential and yet this research suggest that students do not feel a strong connection at course level, or at university level. (55 per cent of students felt a sense of community with others on their course community and 39 per cent felt a sense of community at university level).

> *"[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**

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. Similarly, 76 per cent 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 for all students, no matter their circumstances. The importance of peer connections in building belonging is supported by other research such as the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme research.

In the quantitative research staff tended to overlook peer connections as a basis for confidence. Just 11 per cent of respondents to our staff survey said that the quality of the student's relationship with peers studying on the course makes the most significant difference to developing academic confidence. This contrasted with our student diaries, in which time spent with other students, in an academic context, featured most prominently of all factors given that helped or hindered students' confidence in their academic ability. Students reported that exposure to other students through academic societies, group work, or in seminars, studios, and labs increased their confidence levels. The benefit of students being able to support each other should not be overlooked.

> *"Having those bonds and those people around you to support you when you're having those moments of doubt [is the key to overcoming imposter syndrome]".* **Student**

The impact of confidence and imposter syndrome on belonging

Pearson/Wonkhe Student Survey November 2021
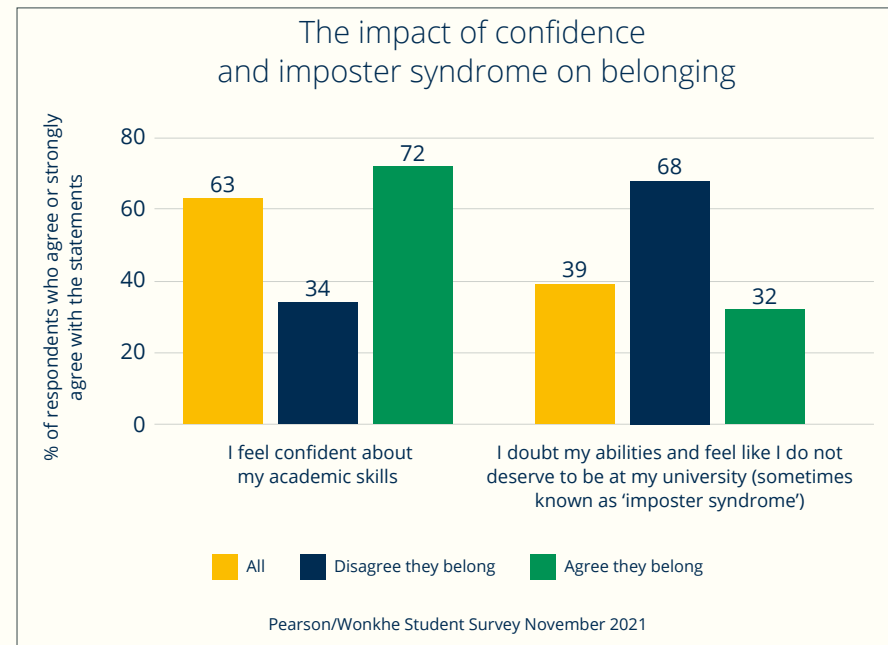
Our student survey showed a strong correlation between students' level of confidence and imposter syndrome (defined in the survey as doubting your abilities and feeling like you do not deserve to be at university) and their sense of belonging. 63 per cent of all respondents agreed they felt confident about their academic skills. However, this was much lower among those who did not feel

they belonged, with just 34 per cent agreeing compared to 72 per cent of those who felt they belonged. Overall, 39 per cent agreed they experience imposter syndrome, but this rose to 68 per cent for those who did not feel they belonged. The research suggests that more emphasis should be put on connecting students at course level, and more recognition should be given to the importance of peer connection in building confidence.

The recommendations around connection largely fall into two distinct areas: peer connections and connections with staff.

Recommendations for Peer Connections

Connecting through the course

Throughout the research students talked about the benefits of building camaraderie and shared ownership of the learning experience: "[the other students] are in the same boat as me - tired stressed, struggling to find work experience, struggling to keep up with class notes, wanting to do things without worrying about assignments."

Overall, six out of ten students agreed there are adequate opportunities to interact with other students on their course, but for students who did not feel a sense of belonging, only three in ten agreed. When we asked staff where is the most significant "space" students are likely to forge sustained peer connections and develop friendships, the most popular answer was "on their course during scheduled contact hours".

"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**

Many staff recognise that not all students want, or have the opportunity, to take part in extra curricular activities and clubs. Our student survey showed that just over half of respondents had been involved with clubs, groups, or organisations

since starting university. For those who do not take part, particularly those who cannot because of caring responsibilities, living at a distance, or working a part-time job, the course takes on a greater importance.

Staff respondents recognised the pedagogic value of course connections and many are actively creating these throughout the course structure. Others felt that this responsibility should not fall to them as they lack the resources and skills to do this effectively.

"It would muddy the waters (let alone break teaching staff) to also have the responsibility to facilitate the building of social connections."

It is not realistic to give staff responsibility for creating student friendships and is important to differentiate between friends and peer connections. In the qualitative research, the students themselves often made an important distinction between coursemates and friends:

"It's a very course specific, coursemate friendship because…there [are] one or two people that I connect with on a personal level, but apart from that, we're very much course orientated and very much only thinking about the course materials."

The emphasis should be on facilitating peer connections and a learning community, not recreational friendships.

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.

Group work

Students were positive about the benefits of group work, though it was divisive for a minority. Some students felt driven by having creative, skilled, successful peers around them. One participant reported that getting to know coursemates' academic strengths and weaknesses meant they were able to help their peers, as well as receive help. However, others felt that the achievement of others, if better than them, added to their anxiety and fear of failure.

A small number of students suggested that group work should be low stakes to avoid stress and confrontation.

"...if you compare your performance with the others, with your cohorts, or even other universities, and you find that your grades are probably falling lower, for me it seems like a motivator. It is a motivator for me. It shows that I have to raise my standards." **Student**

"For me [a care leaver], if I've tried my absolute best and I don't perform as well as I wanted to be compared to my classmates, then it's that statistic thing again. I feel like I was bound to fail, and I feel like no matter how good I am, I can't do it. So, it's a real knock on my confidence." **Student**

"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**

Recommendation: All courses should be reviewed to integrate scaffolded opportunities for social learning and academic support services could consider academic group work as an area for support and development. Staff should explain to students how group work contributes to their overall academic development. Risks around high stakes group work could be managed by establishing clear roles for the project with a clear overview at the outset of how individual and group contributions would be assessed.

IN PRACTICE:

Halfway through the first semester of the academic year 2021/22, staff at the University of East Anglia noticed that students were arriving and leaving classes on their own and did not appear to be engaging in conversations with their peers. In week 8 they asked a subset of students how many students in the room they knew the name of. The modal response was none. When they explored this further most students said they did not have a support network. Staff rapidly put in place measures to help students develop peer support networks. They developed a new practical series which was not assessed and put students in groups of 4 to develop their own experimental procedure, requiring discussion and decision-making. The process was designed to offer a safe space in which to experiment, and there were no consequences for the experiment going wrong. Staff facilitated a space in which students could experience success or low-stakes failure. They also set up weekly seminars with activities for group work such as discussing and developing an essay plan, revision plan, writing of MCQs for exam prep etc.

Mixing students throughout the course

Students spoke positively about building connections through seminar and breakout discussion groups. Several students found that having the same students in their groups was an effective way to support relationship building, but others felt that the same groups across multiple modules hampered their ability to connect with other peers.

"What stops me from feeling more connected is that our university has decided that in every law seminar there will be a different group of people. As a result of this, I have made no friends and I do not socialise with anyone as there are different people in each lesson. This means that, I go home as many times as possible to do my work and exams because I feel like there is no actual value to being there in person." **Student**

Recommendation: Encourage university staff to find the right balance between strengthening the connections between students who already know each other and encouraging students to meet new people.

Structured social time

Many students appreciated the opportunity to get to know each other in a semi-formal setting. Alongside the formal, structured space of seminars and lectures, students report that having structured social time without an academic focus was important in creating a sense of community. This could be a course induction, coffee morning, time at the start of the seminar, subject-adjacent events outside the course content. Students who did not have structured shared social experiences with coursemates, repeatedly suggested that such interactions outside the classroom, and subject specific social activities would be "instrumental to restoring community now that pandemic teaching restrictions are beginning to ease."

"I believe belonging begins at these events. When there are [events] with an explicit academic focus but also a social aspect it enables students to get to know each other and members of academic staff." **Student**

"To feel more connected, I would love meet-ups or get togethers to be organised for courses for relationship building, topic- related discussion or assistance." **Student**

"[t]he university needs to take more responsibility for it [...] the university is there for academic work, and the union is there for socialisation. [The university] didn't really see the importance of socialisation that is course related." **Student**

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

Communal spaces

Students talked about the link between study space and a sense of community. Some lamented the lack of communal spaces. In some universities, the competition for desks for PhD students had created animosity. Office space can be an opportunity to build community but, in some cases, it can actively damage it. Some university staff have mentioned that even when there is communal space for the students to use, they do not always take advantage of it and suggested that more could be done to signpost the use of these spaces.

"[our study space is] somewhere we all feel comfortable during our breaks or between lectures we are all working towards the same degree instilling a sense of unification within the course and making us feel more like a community." **Student**

"Socialising in university has been very different from socialising in school as there are no spaces like a common room." **Student**

Recommendation: Consider the importance of communal course space when re-designing university buildings, particularly where hybrid or blended delivery is set to continue. Engage with students in the design of these spaces and ensure they are accessible to all.

Online social spaces

Almost every student we spoke to in the qualitative research saw a strong need for an online social space such as WhatsApp, Facebook chat, Slack or Discord and many credited these tools with playing a prominent role in integrating with their cohort. These spaces were used for both advice and solidarity, where they could discuss logistical issues of the course as well as feel connected and bond over their classes and work.

Online social spaces were particularly favoured by students who were not campus based, those who feel excluded from the wider university experience due to other responsibilities, and those mental health challenges. Where social spaces were not put in place, commuter students expressed frustration at their absence which they cited as a reason for feelings of isolation. Student loneliness has been discussed widely over the last two years, and our student survey reinforces concerns: 35 per cent of students said they felt lonely at university, with that number rising to 50 per cent for students with a disability.

Students had differing opinions about whether course leaders should set up and monitor these groups. Many talked about the benefits of informal discussions and feeling able to share feelings or concerns about the coursework. Students may be less likely to share these types of posts if module leaders are present. However, if there is no monitoring in place at all, universities run the risk that hurtful or disrespectful content will be shared, with no consequences. Students have shared examples of social channels which increased their sense of isolation because the nature of the content that was shared.

> *"This has been a space for people to share feelings and has really helped me feel less isolated in my studies, even though I haven't personally contributed yet, it helps to know I have a space to share with individuals who are in the same situation as me."* **Student**

> *"It is very nice to have a class group chat that anyone can post in. Often it is used for discussing logistical issues of our course, but we can also have a joke on it as well."* **Student**

Recommendation: Every programme should have an online social space where students can communicate with each other. Ask postgraduate students or course reps to monitor social groups and ensure they have bystander intervention training. As part of their role, they should share guidance with the students about best practice and what kinds of posts are inappropriate.

Recommendations for Connecting with Staff

Connection through communications

It is evident from a vast number of student diary entries, that communication from university staff is viewed as more than simply a method of imparting information on examination conditions or module content. Students actively look to these interactions for a familiar face and to establish a relationship, which leads to a sense of community and belonging. In our diaries, alongside approachability, students felt that regular interaction with tutors enhanced their confidence mainly through being able to talk through their projects and ideas in order to know they are "good enough."

> *"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**

Students appreciate it when digital communications are tailored, personal, and from a consistent or sole point of contact. Conversely, when communications are from a perceived impersonal service or an anonymous administrator students react critically. Students are then more likely to seek out a specific member of staff or, disquietingly, prevents them from asking for help in future at all.

"getting a default [response] rather than my question answered, and on another occasion getting no response at all. In future I would go directly through my tutor or just have to stress about a (sic) issue in my own time." **Student**

"One thing that hindered my settling in has been email communications from the university. Beyond the large number of irrelevant emails, most of the community-focused emails typically apply to on-site learners (in-person activities etc.), making it harder to feel part of the university. Perhaps a focus on virtual social extra-curricular events would be a solution (which has started to happen since the pandemic)." **Student**

Communication from academic staff was seen as "supportive", especially "when they are very fast to reply to emails [and...] set up zoom meetings outside of their office hours." Conversely, when emails were left unanswered or responses were slow, students felt like they were not respected as full members of the community. We would advocate that staff who are not already doing so, set expectations with students on arrival about when they should expect a response to communications. We acknowledge that some universities have set blanket rules about response times to student communication which in some cases staff experience as highly pressurising. We would suggest some honest discussion about the range of types of student emails staff are responding to and how to use discretion to try to direct support to the students most at risk rather than those who shout the loudest.

Qualitative student research indicates that communications from senior leaders, such as the vice chancellor or deans of colleges were appreciated as allowing students to "feel connected to the overall university and feel valued as a member of the community." Some students specifically mentioned hearing about inclusive university-wide strategies such as widening participation initiatives and said this impacted their perception of inclusivity. The positive impact of senior leaders engaging with students is supported by an interesting study in the US by Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007). They sent additional communications to students from senior staff members emphasising that students mattered, and it had a tangible difference on belonging.

Transgender students frequently praised their respective institutions when changing their pronouns, preferred name, and email address was simple and straightforward.

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

Several transgender students explained how when the university is quick to apologise over any communication errors and makes efforts to fix the issue, they still perceive the university as inclusive because the underlying intentions are good.

"Occasionally [they] use my old name instead of my preferred name within emails which is upsetting at times, but they often follow up with an apology email which does makes me feel valued and important." **Student**

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.

IN PRACTICE:

At Middlesex University they recognised that there was a dispute about what constituted timely communications. They established communications principles for both students and staff on response time, along with advice about how to communicate to receive a quick response. Setting the expectations in a shared way has had a positive impact.

Course tutors and personal tutors

In our survey, 41 per cent of students said that support from academics and tutors had helped them to settle into university and this was supported by our qualitative research. Staff also recognised the importance of the relationship between themselves and their students when it came to developing student confidence. When asked what makes the most significant difference to a student's ability to develop their academic confidence during their course of study, the most popular answer was 'the quality of the student's relationship with academics teaching on the course' (27 per cent), which came out significantly above 'the quality of the student's relationship with a personal academic tutor' (5 per cent). This discrepancy may be due to tutor roles often being less clearly defined and can mean different things at different universities.

Just 18 per cent of students reported that personal tutors were critical to their sense of belonging. This is low when compared to the emphasis on peer connections. However, it was clear from the qualitative student research that when a relationship between tutor and tutee works well, it is seen to be very valuable. In the student diaries, personal tutors were cited as providing vital extra guidance, and always on hand to help. One student reported that being able to meet with their personal tutor on a regular one to one basis allowed them to hone [their] skills] and improve their academic writing.

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

"...I think what my university could really do to help with confidence and experience would be having pastoral tutors or personal tutors, something like that, where it's someone outside of your course or even from your course but someone outside of your modules who you can be in contact with because I think I could have gone to them with certain questions with the course but also when mental health has deteriorated. You could have someone to talk to. Especially as a first year, especially in first term, don't really know anyone, it would be nice to have someone to contact." **Student**

Recommendation: Clarify the difference between course tutors and personal tutors so that students understand the role of each.

IN PRACTICE:

The University of South Wales has personal academic coaching to support students with their academic and career ambitions. The coaches are staff on the students' course, which ensures they can have rich, holistic conversations about the course. They go through a rigorous training programme, and are given support materials such as scenarios, FAQs, and referral charts for dealing with new situations. Students are referred on to mental health counsellors and other university support groups where necessary. To prompt rich conversations, coaches are equipped with student analytics such as grades and engagement data. Coaches have three mandatory meetings with students a year which are organised around pressure points that students and SUs have informed. As of June 2022, over 550 coaches had been trained, and the university had seen improved academic NSS and learning community scores. Project leader and Head of Learning, Teaching, and Student Experience, Huw Swayne, puts the success of the initiative down to the way it is embedded into the course.

Inclusion

Overall, most respondents agreed that they felt safe being themselves at university (76 per cent) and were treated respectfully (84 per cent). However, for students who did not feel they belonged, only 40 per cent agreed that they felt safe to be themselves, and only 55 per cent believed that they were treated respectfully. Perceived exclusion can have a tangible impact on students' engagement. Hussain, M et al (2021), and Lewis, J. et al (2021) found that feeling excluded can cause a negative spiral effect where students disengage, which then leads to lower attainment.

Our primary focus in this area has been at course level, understanding how students define inclusive courses, and while students and staff were asked about inclusion at a course level, there was strong emphasis on the need for consistent, inclusive practice across the institution and the broader university experience. Students explicitly commented that universities should

> *"Integrate inclusivity a lot more than producing a lecture now and then on diversity and such and that it should just be integrated [sic] in seminars [and] lectures."*

There were also comments on the wider university practice. When institutions were seen to be actively inclusive in their function, work, and outreach.

> *"In addition, there are several widening participation schemes run by the university (both course and university specific) for underrepresented demographics. This comprises various outreach programmes to local, low-income areas and schools, as well as an extended version of my course, to which socially and academically disadvantaged students may apply. Personally, I find this feels very inclusive and I am comfortable knowing that the institution that develops within has made the effort to improve their inclusivity."* **Student**

An inclusive course was defined by students in our research broadly and across a wide range of variables. Inclusion at course level tended to be conceptually divided into access to and accessibility of teaching and learning and then representation (whether the course content, and those teaching it, was diverse and representative).

Access and accessibility issues were wide-ranging and included the following:

- *provision of in-person/online teaching*
- *pedagogical approaches, teaching style, and class structures*
- *facilitation of free speech and ability and comfort/confidence to question the course content*
- *staff understanding of neurodiversity*
- *accessibility of learning resources*

Content issues surrounding representation were more focused. Half of our student survey respondents thought their course content was consistently inclusive (in the survey we defined inclusive content as content that helps to create a space in which you feel comfortable and confident to be yourself). When we broke this down by demographics, some groups stood out - only 33 per cent of non-binary students, 44 per cent of trans-identified students and 42 per cent of disabled students saw course content as consistently inclusive. However, when cut by race and ethnicity the data showed little difference between the responses of students.

When it came to the qualitative findings, students moved away from how representative content impacted their feelings of belonging and focused more on its academic rigour. Students stressed that to feel confident in the credibility of their course and their educators' expertise, they needed to be confident in their readiness for an increasingly global and diverse graduate workplace, and therefore they expected their course materials to be diverse and representative.

When course content lacked diversity or representation, students voiced concerns that it would not adequately prepare them for an increasingly diverse workplace both in UK and in international careers, or that they were not getting a rounded picture of the discipline. When course content could not be diverse and representative due to a lack of diversity in the broader discipline, students wanted this to be explained as part of the teaching.

Inconsistency across courses

Students felt consistency in applying good practice to inclusion was variable across institutions. For example, students reported pockets of good practice but attributed this to "luck" being delegated an educator who took a personal interest in inclusivity, rather than perceiving their course as inclusive by design. There are overarching strategies on inclusion in nearly every university. However, this research suggests that more detailed guidance is needed at course level to clarify priorities and expectations.

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.*

"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**

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

It is important to note that most staff expressed a desire to work with inclusive practices but felt unsupported to do so at a broader institutional level.

"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**

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.

Accessibility

57 per cent of students with a disability reported accessibility issues to teaching and learning resources due to a physical or mental health condition. There was clearly an expectation among students in our research that learning resources should be accessible by default. Students condemned incidences where students with accessibility needs had to specifically request resources be made accessible for them. One student felt that their university website was not using "up-to-date software which is designed with inclusivity in mind. Another student with ADHD expressed that it already takes them longer to go through the reading materials than others without having to take an extra step to ensure they can access them.

"I really struggle with reading large chunks of text at a time. So, I usually use text-to-speech software, but when you're using an old textbook, it isn't always available. So that just gets... it takes me longer to do work with my dyslexia and being autistic and stuff and having ADHD. So, it takes me quite a long time to get through it." **Student**

Several students with ADHD expressed frustration that a lot of their learning materials were dense texts. Others praised educators who used a range of formats to convey the course content.

"Most e-learning is presented in short videos with a presenter. This makes it easy for me to engage, as I struggle to read long passages." **Student**

Students praised lecturers who automatically used fonts and colours which were accessible to students who were colour blind or had dyslexia, and lecturers who used a wide range of learning resources such as text, videos, and audio recordings. Students also noted that using subtitles in presentations and slideshows showed that the module conveyer was conscious of some neurodivergent needs.

Accessibility, or the lack of it, could have an impact on feelings of belonging according to our quantitative survey results. 17% of students said that accessibility issues as a result of a physical disability or mental health condition had affected their ability to access teaching and learning. This rose to 38% for those students who did not feel they belonged. It will surely be a challenge for universities to create feelings of belonging and inclusion if students do not feel they are providing equity in teaching and learning.

In our staff survey, we found that many staff wanted to enhance the accessibility of their teaching and learning resources but lacked the institutional support and resources to do so.

"I believe many staff wish to improve academic inclusion, but the approach is disjointed across the institution and the resources required - staff time in particular - are lacking." **Staff survey respondent**

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.

Facilitation and moderation of class discussions

Active participation in class was not only viewed positively by most students, but our findings indicate it contributes towards feelings of belonging. Students feel that active participation gives them "a voice and [they feel] included in the debate about ideas, rather than simply being taught things in a straightforward manner." One student reported that "there's a big difference in the attendance to lectures when the lecturer tries to actively involve people." And another said, "I love these seminars as they are more engaging than being talked at for an hour". We recognise that lecturers often feel disheartened by the lack of engagement in class discussions, and many report that they provide opportunities to participate, which are not taken. This research suggests that more emphasis needs to be put on building connections between students, so they feel confident to interact with familiar peers, as well as creating a conducive space in which to discuss course material.

How well an educator facilitates group discussion impacts perceived inclusivity and feelings of belonging, particularly when covering controversial topics. It was important to students that they could speak freely in a safe space, created, and moderated in real-time by the lecturer. Most respondents who felt that they belonged at university agreed that they can speak freely (75 per cent).

"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**

"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**

However, the behaviour and attitudes of classmates - mainly when they were left unchallenged by staff or not dealt with appropriately - were perceived as a barrier to inclusive courses. For example, a student from South Africa reported

that when she experienced racist and xenophobic comments about her home continent from another student, she inquired about making a complaint but found that nobody believed her, and others told her that she was overreacting.

Another student described feeling let down by the teaching staff when they did not intervene after a discussion became hostile:

"...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**

Hostile behaviour left unchallenged, could impact belonging. In our quantitative findings, only 55 per cent of students who did not feel that they belonged felt that they were treated respectfully, and only 43 per cent agreed that they were able to speak freely.

Recommendation: Ensure staff are trained and confident in facilitating and moderating class discussion, with an awareness of how to support all student needs.

Approach to neurodiversity

If academics can demonstrate support and acceptance of neurodiversity prior to a student disclosing neurodivergence then they create conditions in which students feel they can "[discuss] access needs or special considerations that may need to be put into place." One student said he knew his educators would be supportive of his condition because of their general approach to neurodiversity. One way that some universities have done this is to include the pedagogical considerations around neurodiversity in the module welcome pack.

Student participants had mixed experiences when it came to staff understanding surrounding neurodiversity. However, even students with positive experiences noted that their experience was not consistent across their institutions. Many

students agreed that whether one was met with understanding and compassion depended upon "luck."

"I think I'm quite lucky [...] our lecturer... she's head of the special communications and mental health stuff for our whole year group. So, if we have a problem, it's very easy to talk to her, and she will understand that. We're quite lucky from that point of view, but then on the flip side, it's not widespread across the whole uni." **Student**

Students agreed that where they had a negative experience with staff over their neurodiversity, this was due to staff not having enough awareness of - or training about - neurodivergent students, rather than because of intended malice. For example, neurodivergent students expressed experiencing a detrimental impact when educators randomly picked on students to answer or speak in class. Some disclosed that this approach impacted their attendance. Worryingly, some students reported feeling that they had been penalised due to the staff's lack of knowledge about neurodiversity.

"Definitely along the neurodivergent side of things, especially from an ADHD and autism point of view, they need a lot better understanding on how our minds work and where we come from on all aspects when it comes to academic work and even group work and stuff. We're going to have different approaches, and it doesn't always fit into how lecturers and professors see how academia works." **Student**

"I've had rather hardish times mainly with staff and them not actually understanding neurodivergency - especially ADHD - within classes and how I go about doing things and then being sent to student support and disciplinary committee on a number of times for being disrespectful and disruptive." **Student**

"My friend [...] was in the library, and she was completely silent, but she had to keep flicking her hands and things because that's just part of having tics. The librarian came and got really angry at her, and she was like, 'I'm not even in the quiet space.' You need to be aware of these things." **Student**

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.
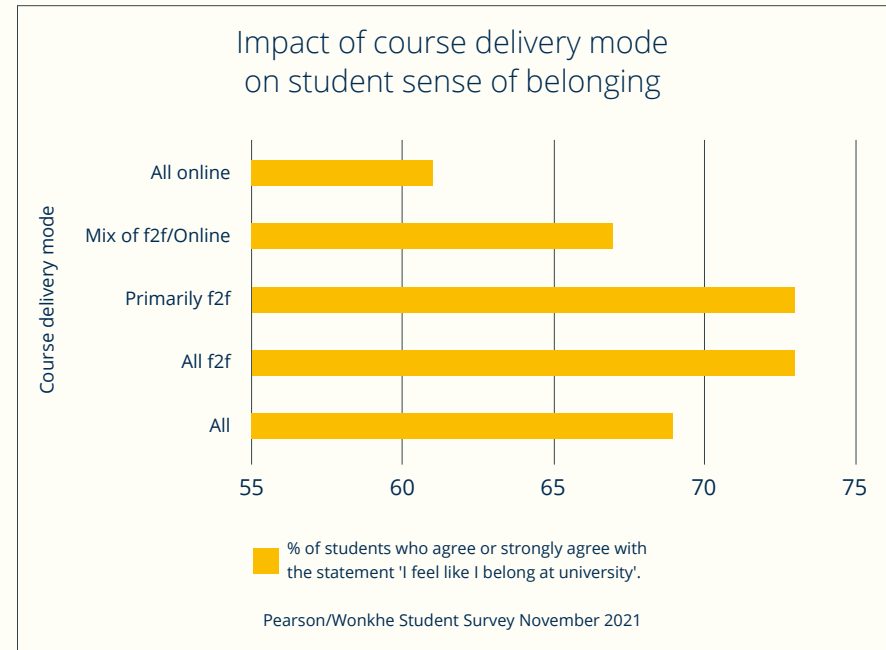
Access

Providing delivery modes which enable inclusive learning was important to the students in this research. Different delivery modes impacted on levels of belonging for students, with face-to-face and hybrid (a mixture of face-to-face and online) clearly surpassing the sense of belonging created by online delivery alone.

While wholly or primarily face-to-face learning facilitated better belonging overall, students felt strongly that hybrid models allowed for those with health concerns or who were nervous about returning to campus after Covid restrictions lifted, to access their learning.

"...there are people on my course who have got things which prevent them from going to in-person lectures - anxiety, depression, things of that group - the university have almost struck a balance between in-person lectures which are still recorded and put online and pure online lectures to make almost everyone happy in that situation." **Student**

By supporting a sense of belonging from the start, access to teaching, learning and digital resources play a part in how well students settle in at university. 53 per cent of students who said they had settled in 'okay' or 'well' said that they didn't have any challenges with accessing teaching and learning. This is compared with 27 per cent of students who had not settled in well.

Impact of course delivery mode on student sense of belonging

% of students who agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I feel like I belong at university'.

Pearson/Wonkhe Student Survey November 2021

The timeliness with which lectures and seminars are available online after the in-person class is valuable to all students. However, it was particularly emphasised by students with paid employment hours, disabilities, or care responsibilities. Some students also reported benefiting from being provided with transcripts of presentations and lectures. Others felt having access to the lecture slides before the class further aided inclusivity. This was particularly so for students with anxiety or those who had come to higher education through a non-traditional route as it meant they were able to familiarise themselves with the content beforehand.

Affordability and costs associated with accessing resources were mentioned several times as a barrier to inclusion by students. Less financially secure students felt that they were at a disadvantage. One student wrote that their lecturer insisted they buy a specific textbook that they felt they could not afford. They suggested universities should make resources available "for free" where students are facing financial hardship.

Another student said that "the cheapest [student] accommodation" had very poor WIFI and so they were prevented from accessing online course materials. The criticism was aimed at the university as an accommodation provider. Another student said that their poor internet connection had excluded them from attending online live lectures.

> **Recommendation:** Consider the value of hybrid delivery modes to students with health issues and the access needs of students who have learning disabilities or are in financial hardship.

Inclusive content:

When focusing on course materials, the need for diverse representation within them was by far the most recurring common theme that emerged in both diary entries and focus group discussions. Many students focused explicitly on course content above any other aspect of inclusivity, noting where there had been efforts to make it inclusive.

We asked respondents whether they agreed that the content on their course included varied, diverse voices in their field, and 69 per cent agreed. 78 per cent of those who felt they belonged agreed with this statement, compared to 48 per cent of those who did not feel that they belonged. Women, non-binary, and trans-identified students were less likely to agree, as well as disabled students and students who identify their sexuality a different way. However, in our qualitative findings, there were rarely comments from students about how diverse content related to "seeing themselves" in the course material. Instead, students saw diverse content as an opportunity to receive a more rounded perspective of the discipline:

> *"Reading work by indigenous authors and minorities is really important from an inclusion perspective, but I also think it is more enriching for my course as well."* **Student**

A lack of diversity (or a lack of any acknowledgement of, or any didactic explanation for, its absence) leads students to question the credibility of the course, the credibility of their educators, and whether they would be adequately prepared for the workplace. It also led students to question the academic credibility of the teaching staff. A larger proportion of students felt that if the content could not be inclusive due to a lack of diversity in the broader discipline, then it should be explicitly acknowledged as part of the teaching.

> *"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**

> *"[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**

> *"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**

This was with particular concern towards global knowledge, for example, an art course looking at art from a variety of cultures outside the western canon, or a science course considering science projects and discoveries in different countries.

Notably, students saw inclusion and discussions about exclusion as appropriate academic rigour. One student reported that their art history course emphasised the theft and appropriation of the cultural artefacts they were studying in a museum, rather than looking at objects in isolation. The students felt this deepened their learning experience. A psychology student praised that their lecturer encouraged them to challenge racism within the field and take note of how certain groups were, and still are, pathologised or misdiagnosed due to racial stereotypes.

Some students felt that their course could not be inclusive due to historic issues of exclusion within the discipline and that this was, at least, comprehensible.

> *"I am a STEM subject student, so I don't care where resources come from, only if they are academic, reliable and accurate. I don't mind if there isn't a single source that comes from a gay man, as I understand that historic discrimination and a small population mean there won't be many gay men writing sources."* **Student**

Students also praised educators who were open to the students themselves highlighting gaps in the module content by facilitating an environment where students could speak freely and challenge the course content.

> *"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**

Conversely, educators who did not allow such free expression and discussion were criticised:

> *"One of my lecturers was less enthusiastic with group opinions and questioning of the course. I understand that they are the experts but isn't it important for us as students to question the syllabus and topics we study?"* **Student**

Diversity, or a lack of, also impacted how students perceived the ability of their course to prepare them for the graduate workplace for better or worse. Medical and psychology students, in particular, reported being concerned that the lack of diversity would impact their performance in clinical settings. Medical students also praised the use of mannequins with different skin tones on their course.

> *"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**

> *"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**

> *"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**

Interestingly, there was little discussion around the impact of a lack of diversity on diverse students themselves. However, one student in a focus group disclosed that they were trans and said there was no mention of transgender people in a module called 'Gender and Society.'

An interesting point that arose several times throughout the research was the facility for students to remedy any lack of diverse content. Students felt positively about courses which lacked an inclusive curriculum if they were given the opportunity to rectify this as partners by developing the curriculum or as co-producers of knowledge.

The receptiveness of educators to student queries made them feel the course was more inclusive. Collaboration on the curriculum generally seemed to boost confidence and interest in the subject matter and strengthen relationships between students and educators (which previous findings from this research project suggest can lead to higher levels of academic confidence). Students felt generally positive about courses which lacked an inclusive curriculum if they were given the opportunity to rectify this as partners in developing the curriculum or as co-producers of knowledge. It appeared to depend largely on whether specific educators were open to students identifying those representative gaps in the module content.

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

"...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**

Students' were keen to express the value they felt they could bring to remedying a lack of diverse content. One student argued that students often try to make lectures better, not easier. As previously reported, students often see their input in improving the inclusivity of their courses as a form of inclusivity in and of itself.

"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**

"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**

Other students reported that having the freedom to focus their assignment on a topic of their choosing meant they could improve the inclusivity of the

course as collaborators. One student gave the example of researching the impact of minority stress on LGBT individuals, and the link between autism and transgender people, when they felt LGBT healthcare was underrepresented in the module.

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.

IN PRACTICE

Dr Julie Hulme at Keele University uses curricular opportunities, including undergraduate and masters dissertations, to work with psychology students from widening participation backgrounds and groups known to be disadvantaged within higher education (e.g., ethnicity, disability, gender, socioeconomic status) in terms of course completion, attainment, and graduate outcomes.

These students work as a community of researchers, learning from each other about research methods and aspects of diversity. By identifying with marginalised identities, themselves, student researchers not only establish participants' trust as members of the same community they are researching but enhance insight and inclusion within research practice. The supportive environment serves to empower the student researchers, to identify their strengths, develop their employability skills, and enable them to speak out about issues facing them and their communities. The outcomes benefit individual students as researchers and as participants but also support inclusive practice across the sector.

IN PRACTICE:

The Connector Programme at the University of Sussex brings students and staff together to work in equal partnership to enhance the student experience through improvements to curriculum, events, communications, inductions

and pedagogy. The programme proportionally overrepresents students who are underrepresented in their APP, namely, BAME students, students with disability, mature students, and care leavers. Students are hired on a part-time basis to work with other students and staff on specific projects.

Representation among staff

Representation in teaching staff was also important to students with students specifically commenting on a hegemonic staff body:

"I haven't had a single non-white person come to talk to us." **Student**

"I've noticed there's only one person of colour in the entire section of my university." **Student**

A student of colour expressed frustration that all their lecturers were white while a non-binary student wrote that their non-binary PhD teaching assistant "makes [them] feel very comfortable" to be themselves.

One member of staff commented that

"[w]ho is teaching matters (alongside teaching style). My students have responded very positively to guest lecturers who can speak to a topic in a different (more authentic) way to me because of their lived experience."

Recommendation: Many universities are already driving to diversify their staff. Given the timelines necessary for this change to happen in a noticeable way, we encourage the use of diverse guest speakers on modules which lack diverse teaching staff.

Support

Support is embedded throughout higher education institutions and this research clearly shows how intrinsic it is to academic confidence and wellbeing in students, both of which are integral to a sense of belonging. However, according to university staff there are three key barriers to supporting learners and their academic confidence. These barriers detrimentally impact on the ability to deliver student support across the HE sector, throughout the student journey.

- *78% of respondents to our staff survey said that being able to understand exactly what support, intervention, or structural changes are needed was a significant barrier to developing student confidence.*

- *76% stated that knowing what needed to be done but lacking the time or resource to do it was a barrier.*

- *58% felt that the practical problem of identifying those students with low confidence prevented them from addressing it.*

This research also highlighted the willingness of university staff to deliver improved support to their students, if only the barriers could be removed.

"...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**

Our recommendations are intended for institutional and departmental-level implementation. That said, those which can be implemented at a departmental level are likely to be the quickest to change. These recommendations restate the importance of what is already being done by many and go on to examine practical ways to improve support so that it contributes to a sense of belonging.

Pre-arrival & initial support

Students who felt they had settled into university well were three times more likely to feel they belonged there than students who did not settle in well. Initial experiences are critical to belonging. Research by Checkoway (2018) argues that alienation is a negative spiral which can be set in motion by a negative beginning. In diaries and focus groups, a number of students specifically mentioned the pre-arrival survey as having had a positive impact on their initial sense of belonging upon arrival at university, for example, when their university used the data to match them with their housemates.

"[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**

"One of them did the same course as me. Another one was doing a foundation year, so they weren't technically even in our year. And we just got on straight away I recall filling in a survey before I joined halls to say that sort of music I was into, what sort of activities I like. And that's how they matched us up. So, all of us said that we don't drink, and we don't go on nights out and that it wasn't of interest to us, that we liked other things basically. And that's why we were grouped together, and it really worked." **Student**

By facilitating the initial meeting of like-minded people in social and academic spaces, for example by deliberately placing students together in accommodation via survey results, it is possible to construct belonging from the beginning.

Value of transition inductions and yearly inductions

Induction was appreciated and valued by the staff we surveyed. Staff support the time and investment universities put into transition inductions. In our staff survey, 52% said that the quality of initial inductions was one of their top priorities when considering what makes the most significant difference to learners' confidence in their academic skills.

To further improve the value of induction offerings, departments might consider evaluating the impact of their inductions. A timely post-induction student survey to gather insight about how students have settled to date would offer a further chance to close gaps in knowledge or understanding, thereby creating a level playing field for all students. In our focus group, one participant re-iterated how important it was not to assume knowledge.

"... I feel like being transparent about information and not assuming that everybody doing the course knows exactly all these elements of the education system, that would create a more equal playing ground. For me, I would have absolutely loved a better induction that doesn't just make assumptions that I know...everything." **Student**

A survey would provide opportunities for staff to decide on pro-active interventions for their students, for example signposting support services, extra-curricular or Student Union activities.

Beyond transition to university, each university year brings with it changes in expectations, organisation or gravitas. Preparing students for what lies ahead in the form of an induction and building on the knowledge or success from prior years, means departments can ensure there is a shared knowledge and preparedness amongst all students. The opportunity to identify gaps in knowledge and concerns from the outset means that the support available

is re-iterated for all students. Ensuring this is integrated at a departmental level means that while best practice is shared across the university, Heads of Departments are equipped with the understanding to deliver exactly what is needed for their own students.

One of our focus groups participants reflected on the benefits of having a yearly induction available at their institution. They were able to articulate that whilst their university had already done a good job of "...not assuming you know this or that" they felt "it was beneficial to have a yearly induction because ...maybe some people need it" even if others might consider it "obvious" or "time consuming" to complete.

They went on to explain the benefit of yearly provision which extended to new areas, relevant for the next stage in their academic and learning journey:

"...even with careers and employability, there's optional sessions where we can sign up and actually get help with interview CV checks or even just checking a personal statement or application in general. There's a lot of these sessions where we can just sign up and it's for free... So, I feel like in terms of these resources, my uni or at least my department have done a very good job in terms of advertising it and offering it to students. So, I've had a very positive experience from that." **Student**

It is worth considering too, how valuable yearly inductions could be for student connections and wellbeing. One survey respondent told us "I've felt so lonely that it's affected my ability to concentrate on uni work." There are many reasons why students might benefit from additional inductions which build peer networks and confidence in the year ahead, including: significant absence periods; poor mental health; joining from other universities; transferring to new courses; repeating a year; joining via qualification pathways such as HND or losing immediate support networks due to friends on placements, or who have graduated.

"Next year I'm not going to have them [friends] there anymore. So, I'm going to feel alone and...I also thrive on working in groups. Some of my friends I've met in the course this year... they're all going off to do placements and it's just going to feel like I'm back at square one. The people I've met I'm just going to lose and I'm going to struggle to do any work because I'm going to feel quite alone." **Student**

Recommendation:
(i) Enhance transition inductions by including a mid-point survey designed to identify where signposting or re-signposting relevant support would be beneficial
(ii) Students in all year groups would benefit from yearly induction programmes to offer consistent support at a departmental level, designed to build upon previous years' knowledge, experience and success as well as focusing students on what is required for the year ahead

Building confidence in academic skills from the beginning

Students who reported high levels of belonging also reported higher levels of confidence at university. Whilst causality is not clear - whether low confidence or low levels of belonging come first – overall, 63% of students said that they were confident in their academic skills. This percentage reads very differently if we divide students who felt they did belong, and students who felt they did not belong at their institution:

- *72 per cent of students who felt they belonged also agreed that they were confident in their skills*

- *34 per cent of students who did not feel they belonged also agreed that they were confident in their skills*

Activities which support student confidence should therefore be considered as one way to enhance a sense of belonging.

To direct some of these activities, and enhance the impact they could potentially have, our research found that there were groups of students who were less likely to agree that they felt confident in their academic skills:

- *Students with below average mental health (self-reported): 48 per cent agreed they were confident about their academic skills*

- *Students with disabilities: 53 per cent agreed they were confident in their skills*

- *Students identifying as non-binary: 53 per cent agreed they were confident in their skills.*

Whilst targeting support in this way is helpful to some extent, we must emphasise the mindful way in which it should be delivered. Identifying students as 'in need' suggests a deficit or 'otherness' to the grouping and could increase feelings of alienation. Checkoway's (2018) research makes it clear that activities should encourage selected students to see themselves as highly motivated people who have already overcome barriers. For this reason, the impact of any pre-arrival activities must be evaluated regularly and over time to ensure the support is efficacious.

"...students who are first in family to enter HE have often done well compared to their peers at secondary school and enter uni with high academic confidence that is then damaged by the lack of 'scaffolding' supporting their transition to university. A 'one size fits all' approach to new students, modelled on a self-sufficient learner who is a university cultural insider, persists and is damaging to students who don't fit this profile. At my institution, students from more deprived backgrounds talk about not having identified themselves as 'poor' or 'deprived' before they arrive at uni and realised that that was how they were perceived by others." **Staff survey respondent**

In addition, research by Strayhorn (2019) has suggested that the benefits of pre-arrival activities can be temporary when it comes to feelings of belonging. Therefore, activities should regularly evaluated and be one part of ongoing

efforts to sustain a sense of belonging through connection, inclusion and autonomy. Staff survey participants also agreed with this:

> *"The structure and accessibility of on-going support for students. Where students enter with a deficit in skills or low confidence, they are likely to need more than just a great induction. They will need some on-going support to help them build confidence and skills. The visibility and fit of this ongoing support (either within the curriculum or co/extra-curricular) are critical to enabling students to effectively improve."*
> **Staff survey respondent**

Throughout the student survey, students with disabilities showed lower levels of belonging and generally scored lower in every area we asked about. In the qualitative data disabled students talked about their challenges on arrival, everything from navigating financial support to accessing teaching and course materials. A recent UCAS/Pearson report (2022) recommends that universities engage with disabled students earlier so they can progress into HE at the same pace as other students.

When considering how to design pre-arrival or induction activities and who they should cater for, it is worth noting some differences between the levels of academic confidence felt by broader groupings in our student survey. We found lower levels of academic confidence in three places - women (60% confidence compared to 69% for men), home students (60% confidence compared to 70% in international students) and undergraduates (59% compared to postgraduates at 70%).

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. Consider whether a focus on supporting those student groups most likely to present with low levels of academic confidence would be beneficial. If so, systems should be put in place to identify prospective beneficiaries as soon as possible through self-referral or medical referral.

IN PRACTICE:

The University of Plymouth run pre-induction experience days for new students who disclose anxiety conditions. These are run twice in August as a one-day programmes for up to 15 students. The programme allows students to familiarise themselves with new environments, encourages confidence, aids transition, and reduces anxiety triggers. Small groups of students have in-depth campus tours, meet external speakers and speakers from across university support functions such as wellbeing, student union, faculties, and non-medical helpers. Student Wellbeing Champions, Student Ambassadors and previous pre-induction attendees support the day.

IN PRACTICE:

The University of Warwick runs a 'Sprint' programmes aimed at female and non-binary students who lack self-confidence. It runs seven half day sessions, four times a year, for 80 students: https://warwick.ac.uk/services/skills/sprint/

The University of Plymouth embeds 'Welcome Planning' throughout student induction to mitigate against loneliness, poor mental health, and feelings of isolation by empowering students to seize opportunities. Welcome plans have a core message of 'supporting you to seize opportunities', with activities such as:

- *Pre-sessional ambassadors reaching out to build intra-cohort relationships before arrival*

- *Specific communications targeted to students with mental health issues, empowering them to seek early support*

- *A cross-university arrivals helpdesk to smooth new joiners' first hours on campus and orient them*

- *A Freshers programme designed to create intimate spaces to enable friendship-building*

- *Goodies and give-aways promoting the opportunities that everyone at Plymouth can enjoy*

Academic skills support should not be structured around a deficit discourse

"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**

"We really need to move away from a deficit remedial model to something which is more genuinely person- and student-centred and inclusive of diverse perspectives, learning from students. There is a strong theoretical basis for this, but little overlap with practice." **Staff survey respondent**

"There's a real deficit discourse in HE that worries me - it's the students who are the problem, who have the gaps - rather than recognising that we have a responsibility to provide equality of opportunity, and as such we need to teach all our students how to learn at university. See [Winstone & Hulme (2019)]". **Staff survey respondent**

A deficit model, as described by these quotes, can prevent students from taking advantage of the support on offer - hindered by the negative connotations that they need to be 'fixed' or are 'less than' others who do not access this support. Large numbers of students who responded to the student survey agreed that they felt like imposters at university. It was clearly of greater concern for those who did not feel that they belonged, but importantly, it was evident in all students including those who felt they belonged.

- *Overall, over a third (38%) of all students said that they doubted their abilities and felt they did not deserve to be at university*

- *When looking at students who did not feel a sense of belonging, we found that two thirds of students (68%) felt this way*

- *Even among students who did feel a sense of belonging, a third (32%) of students said they doubted their abilities and did not deserve to be at university.*

Our findings suggest that students will not be adequately served through pockets of support provision for those identified as 'in need'. It must be served as an integral part of university life.

Low confidence and uncertainty can be a normal part of approaching new experiences or demands of course. However, normalising this and encouraging a growth mindset by delivering the appropriate amount of challenge is key. Arguably, the issue of low confidence or imposter syndrome is not that they have it, but that students then consider themselves to be weak or 'deficient' for having it. This strengthens the deficit model and prevents them from taking the risks or even the first steps they need to in order to rise to challenges.

The inherent problem in waiting for a student to ask for help is that it assumes a high level of self-confidence and places a burden on students to identify as deficient in their knowledge or skill levels. 47% of our academic and staff respondents said that the 'student's personal self-efficacy e.g. ability to manage time; ask for help' was something that would make a significant difference to student confidence in their academic skills. However, this approach means that a student has to feel that they have a problem to be 'fixed' instead of being enabled by consistent opportunities to learn, improve or grow throughout their time at university.

"I'm the first of my family to go to university, do A-levels even. So, I don't have a background knowledge... I don't know what a thesis looks like. I don't know what sort of work experience I need in order to do a post-doc. I don't know what a post-doc is." **Student**

"..when I was asking questions, it was as if I was very stupid... And I feel like being transparent about information and not assuming that everybody doing the course knows exactly all these elements of the education system, that would create a more equal playing ground." **Student**

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.

IN PRACTICE:

One student in our focus group suggested skills should be a greater part of the general education experience in Year 1:

"I think first year should be more focused on building all sorts of skills at university... Because there's not actually any... For my course in particular, nothing [counts in the] first year grade-wise. You just have to pass. I think that it's such a wasted opportunity in the sense of, there should be some embedding in modules with mental health and resilience and maybe related to the workplace as well."

IN PRACTICE:

University Centre South Devon uses an integrated tutorial model, all students are allocated a personal tutor who they meet once a week for a group tutorial with others on their course. Group tutorials follow a curriculum of study skills, personal development and employability, with tutors aiming for inclusion and belonging within the group. They also have 121 tutorials for pastoral and academic support, and can refer students to the central support hub. The care given wraps around the student from their peers, tutor, teaching and Hub teams, and can be responsive to their needs, as well as proactive to help develop skills in a scaffolded manner throughout the course.

Accessing support at the point of need

University staff survey respondents felt strongly that supporting students should be a shared responsibility across the institution, enabling students to access appropriate support at the point of need. Arguably, one could say that signposting support is even more important for students who do not have a personal support learning plan (PSLP) in place. It was generally true to say that once students obtained these, support became easier to understand and access.

"Students seem to be given wrong or just strange advice on where and how to seek additional support. This is top down. Vital help pages are hidden on the university intranet. Academic staff themselves do not know what support departments do. Students are often left to sort things out for themselves." **Staff survey respondent**

An important point here is that with an ever-diversifying student body - and that is a testament to our sector - the varying student needs are also diversifying. This complexity can mean that tutors are unsure or unconfident about the 'right' support to offer and where it is within the institution. It means that individual educators are playing a continuous game of guesswork as to what needs students will have - with students feeling the impact of not getting it right. Training and support for staff is critical to making sure students are able to benefit from the provision in place, as and when they need it.

Students were overwhelmed by the administrative task, confusing processes and poorly joined up networks. A large proportion of students who were entitled to support found that accessing that support was a complex administrative burden – keeping in mind that these students are the ones already dealing with additional challenges such as disabilities, care responsibilities or poor health. It effectively prevented them from accessing the right support at the right time.

"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**

Students often reported having to take on the role of messenger, communicating between departments. Poorly 'joined up' departmental strategies make this task especially overwhelming and confusing. It can also be upsetting for students. Students can find themselves having to repeat and disclose sensitive information multiple times and then being unable to access support because communication between department fails to materialise. In addition, teaching staff can be unclear about what next steps to take or where to direct students for support.

"It's frustrating. You have to explain over and over and over again." **Student**

"...on paper I'm not doing anything to help myself, but I am helping myself, just not through the uni because through the uni is rubbish. I've talked to [lecturers] and they've said, yes, the health service is rubbish here...but they can't do anything about it because they have to tell me to go to them. Something is a bit broken there." **Student**

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

Assessment support

Students in focus groups, and those who were diarists, highlighted the value they attached to understanding how university staff were able to support them with assessments. It was particularly important that students felt able to raise any issues with their assessments. They felt that by discussing any issues, they were more likely to be able to perform to the best of their abilities.

In our diary entries and focus groups, students were particularly keen to discuss the process and ease with which they could request mitigation or extensions for coursework or exams. Students clearly reported that mitigation and extensions were more straightforward where they had medical certification, physical injury or PLSP's and, once in place, students often reported positive experiences with the support they received:

"I'm really lucky where I have a personal learning support plan in place where it's really easy for me to get extensions... if I'm struggling, I just say, hey, I'm going to put in an extension in about half an hour...which is just absolutely amazing." **Student**

"[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**

However, students reported that the application for requesting a mitigation/extension was more difficult for mental, rather than physical, health:

"[The application asks] 'how is this injury affecting your work?' I was like, this is a mental health problem. I haven't got a physical injury," which means that the student self-regulates their condition and cannot access the support they need....if I have a problem with my mental health, say I had a big depression wave or something, I wouldn't have any proof for it. So, I just have to not have an extension even though I would need it."* **Student**

At a practical level, students appreciated it when genuine issues such as the timing of submissions were resolved without delay or difficulty. One distance student with difficult travel arrangements reflected positively on how assessment times were altered following their feedback.

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.

IN PRACTICE:

Regular communication was important to engaging students with their support and their direction of travel. One student reported that "Weekly emails from the course leader helped me feel included and valued. The emails outlined upcoming lectures, recordings of previous lectures, but also highlighted the importance of mental health and wellbeing and directions for support with this."

Autonomy

'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.' Benjamin Franklin

Throughout the research there was a strong connection between student autonomy and a sense of belonging and inclusion. In the student survey, 67 per cent of those who felt like they belonged agreed that they felt empowered to act if they saw an opportunity to change things for the better, compared with 29 per cent of students who did not feel that they belonged.

Autonomy manifests in different ways across the university experience:

- *Giving students choice, whether that be a choice of modules or assignment briefs or a choice of assessment types*

- *Co-creation of the curriculum, particularly when it comes to building inclusive content*

- *Offering constructive feedback so they feel empowered and confident to develop their work*

Feedback

Feedback is critical for building resilience and academic confidence – which we have already seen to be connected to a stronger sense of belonging.

Through the qualitative research we saw that mindset played a part in the feedback students received – students displaying growth or fixed mindsets among our diarists appeared to respond differently when receiving poor grades. Sector research supports the link between mindset and sense of belonging: Good et al. (2012) found that students are more likely to feel they belong when academic environments communicate growth mindsets. It's also important for staff to have growth mindsets when it comes to their students' abilities. If they have low expectations of a student because they are not performing at a high

level to begin with there is a risk of a belonging Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal, 2010) where low staff expectations of belonging could be inadvertently passed down onto students and become self-fulfilling.

Among the diarists, the key to instilling confidence via feedback from academic tutors seemed to be generally agreed upon:

- *faith in a student's ability despite potentially poor grades or misunderstanding*

- *productively pointing out where things went 'wrong' to build understanding of the topic and of the grade*

- *suggesting ways to improve on future assessments*

Four students mentioned that their confidence had decreased when interacting with academic staff who were "unfairly critical," unapproachable, or showed a lack of interest in the student and their ideas, or in teaching the course in general. In contrast, many entries described feeling more confident in their academic abilities when lecturers and tutors were "supportive and understanding."

Positive, productive feedback on assessment gave students a straw to clutch at when feeling anxious about upcoming assessment. It ensured students felt able to progress as not knowing where they went wrong was a key reason for feeling disappointed but also anxious about improving for future assessment.

Students did report that comparing themselves to other students could lead to anxiety. Competition and collaboration both engendered this comparison be it of marks or perceived accomplishments and knowledge. Other students, however, found the competition or collaboration to be inspiring and aspirational.

"The feedback on exams has been minimal and inconsistent at times, with incredibly different feedback offered for very similar answers." **Student**

"The main source of my confidence is the positive feedback I receive from my in class work and assignments." **Student**

"We barely get feedback opportunities for written work, which is unfortunate since most of my grade comes from one end of the year exam for each of my modules and having no written examples I can refer to, does not help my confidence level to go in an exam and perform well." **Student**

"Through the course of my degree, the quality of feedback has massively varied, and I have noticed that this influences my confidence in certain modules. When feedback offers constructive criticism that is well explained and achievable, I feel motivated and confident in my ability to continue through my course. At times, feedback has been very vague or felt unachievable for the level that I am at, which knocks my confidence as I struggle to figure out how to move forward and improve." **Student**

IN PRACTICE:

In the school of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University, Dr. Marion Coderch has made changes to the assessment systems on her programmes, based on the principles of assessment for learning and assessment as learning. The new model combines holism, flexibility, and choice to give all students the opportunity to showcase their learning at the best of their ability. The boundaries between formative and summative assessment have been blurred to present every assessment task as an opportunity to learn. She has put strong emphasis on dialogue between academics and students around feedback. These conversations on personalised feedback have been instrumental in helping students act on the comments received.

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.

Co-creation

Students appreciated a level of autonomy and input into their course content and assessments. They were erudite and passionate when telling us how they felt about being able to influence course content, or how it felt when a lecturer listened to them and made a change to the content. This was evident in both our diary entries and our focus group discussions. This supports sector research which indicates that co-creation benefits both students and institutions (Lubicz-Narocka & Bovill 2021).

The impact of feeling valued on sense of belonging

Pearson/Wonkhe Student Survey November 2021
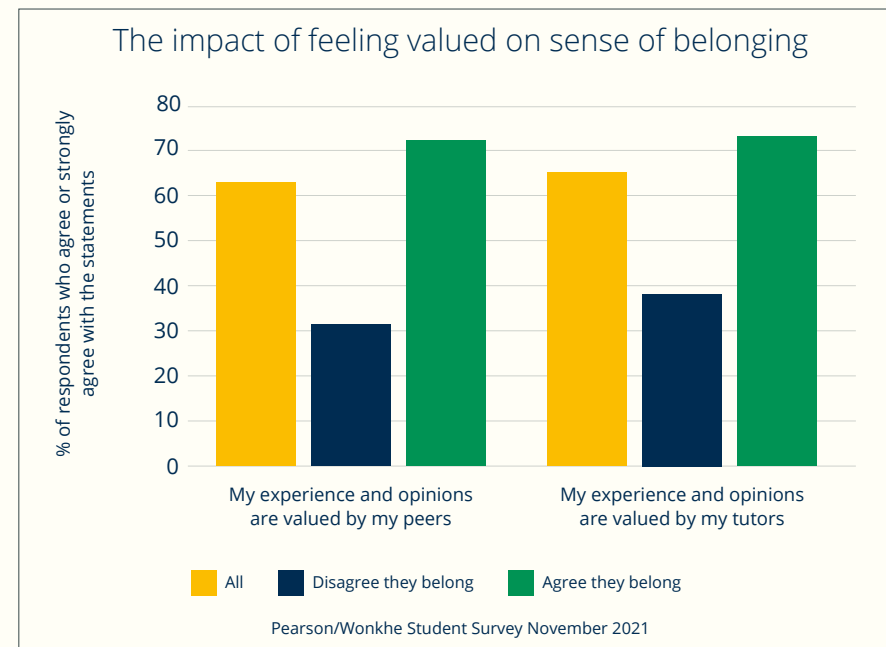
There are many examples of co-creation across UK universities but it is rarely built into development as standard and is often driven by individual academics. According

to the staff survey only 29 per cent of total participants agreed that their institution engages with students when accessing and improving inclusion on courses and a further 47 per cent agreed that this happens "to some extent". Students who felt their voice was valued by peers and by tutors reported higher levels of belonging:

"We're always invited to conferences and discussions about the university's future and how it aligns with the city's values. When Ofsted came in, apprentices were invited to join the discussion and send any comments to be considered. This helps me feel like I can contribute to the community and remain engaged with my peers." **Student**

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

IN PRACTICE:

The Inclusive Curriculum Consultants Programme at Kingston allows staff to partner with student consultants to co-create their curriculum or curriculum-related activities to ensure that they are relevant, meaningful and culturally responsive to the diverse student body. It acts as a mechanism through which the institution can not only legitimate students' knowledge and experiences, but also actively endorse and encourage co-creation as a strategy to create more inclusive curricula. The programme has been incredibly successful in attracting students who traditionally have been more marginalised in and disenfranchised from universities, partly because of the inclusive recruitment process. Students go through extensive 2-month training programme covering topics such as student engagement, technology enhanced learning, diverse student experiences, decolonising the curriculum, and principles of learning and teaching. Consultants sit on every panel and take part in supporting Validating and Revalidating courses.

Assessment

Students saw autonomy and ownership over their learning and assessment as highly indicative of an inclusive course. Being able to select a mode of

assessment that suited their needs meant that students often did not have to manage the extra burden of requesting mitigation.

"Due to my anxiety I was allowed to do presentations to only one person instead of the whole group." **Student**

"We had to do a group presentation for an assignment which caused a lot of anxiety [...] others found it impossible to present due mental health struggles, but no support offered as an alternative." **Student**

Students were keen to be involved in discussions about alternative exam and assessment options. They explained that having different assessment modes presented to them, perhaps at module selection or even within one module, really enabled them to deliver their best possible performance. Students said that their academic confidence increased when they could select modules based both on their academic interests and on their preferred assessment style.

Amongst our diarists, presentations were commonly cited as anxiety-inducing, whereas coursework was seen to be more inclusive of different needs. One student reported that they had selected only coursework-based modules as they knew this style of assessment allowed them to reflect their academic ability most accurately. Another wrote that their academic confidence was low due to a compulsory presentation-based assessment, with no flexibility, which they felt would not reflect their ability. A distance learner noted that a weekly assessment time was not suited for students who also needed to commute. After discussing assessment timings with the module cohort, the module lead agreed to change assessments to a time which allowed for commutes. The student wrote that "having your suggestion accepted and implemented feels special and I am more confident about this course than before."

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

Looking forward

Throughout this report we offer a series of recommendations based on the experience of students and staff, which we believe will contribute to building a stronger sense of belonging. Our aim is not to prescribe what should be done in individual institutions or departments but to encourage staff to question current practices in the light of these recommendations.

Most of the recommendations here are not radical. However, they do require genuine integration between subject curricula and everything else. We hope that the practical way students and staff describe the journey of belonging – all the ways it can be improved or damaged – means that you are able to see the stage of the journey which your own institution, department, students and staff are on. We hope that the examples spark conversations, helping you evaluate current practice and ideate future initiatives.

Our hope is that this report will prompt departments and institutions to consider their approach to inclusive practice and belonging work. As we have worked on this research, we have heard about fantastic initiatives happening across the sector which are making tangible and, in some cases, life-changing differences, to student experiences. Institutions looking to use this report to establish or grow their own belonging initiatives need to ensure they are connected across the institution and build on the four foundational areas of belonging.

We must also emphasise that removing the barriers to success which were so evident from staff and students alike are critical to success. There needs to be a clear, consistent consensus about what belonging looks like from the top-down, across an institution and within departments, which staff are enabled to act upon. This requires greater clarity on how to deliver initiatives across academic faculty, professional services, and support staff. Staff require access to the training, time, resources, and networks which support them, and their students, on this journey.

Despite the challenges and the size of the task ahead, we are optimistic that change is possible in the foundational areas we've discussed. The passion of staff and students is clear but top-down support and guidance is needed to align expectations and ensure an integrated approach.

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Appendix 1: Student Survey Methodology and Demographics

Methodology:

The survey was open during November 2021. Our 15 partner students' unions promoted the survey to their students. Of the students' unions who were involved, 13 are in England, one in Scotland, and one in Wales. Nine are located in research intensive institutions and the remaining six in modern institutions. The overall response rate was 5,233 students, self-selecting. We did not weight the responses.

Demographics:

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%

The research is summarised on the Wonkhe site, where you can also find the slide overview of the quantitative data.

Appendix 2: Staff Survey Methodology and Demographics

Methodology

The survey was open from Monday 11 April to Friday 6 May. It was promoted via Wonkhe's free weekly briefing – Wonkhe Mondays. Of the university staff and students' union staff who were involved, 89 per cent work for providers in England, 7 per cent work for providers in Scotland and 3 per cent work for providers in Wales. The overall response rate was 430 and these respondents were self-selecting. We did not weight the responses.

Demographics

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 research is summarised on the Wonkhe site, where you can also find the slide overview of the quantitative data.