Friends have benefits

How students actually understand community and belonging, what produces them, and why they matter.

Belonging has become central to higher education policy debates about student experience.

The recent HEPI Twenty Years of the Student Academic Experience report positions a strong sense of belonging and an inclusive campus as nearly as vital to students as teaching quality.

Belonging alone explains up to 17 per cent of the probability of saying that the student experience was worse than expected, and clusters tightly with perceived value for money, comfort expressing opinions, and willingness to engage with academic staff outside timetabled sessions.

The wider research runs in the same direction. Our Wonkhe/Pearson 2022 work identified four foundations of belonging – connection, inclusion, support and autonomy. A 2024 GTI/Cibyl analysis documented strong correlations between belonging, friendship and confidence in academic support.

Our 2019 loneliness research linked extracurricular engagement to better wellbeing. The 2024 UPP Foundation work made the anxiety-as-barrier argument – when students say they don't engage because they don't "have anyone to go with", the binding constraint is rarely opportunity alone.

So the consensus position is increasingly clear – belonging isn't pastoral decoration. It's bound up with academic quality, value, confidence, voice and the everyday conditions of learning.

BELONGING × TEACHING, ASSESSMENT & SUPPORT

Organisation and feedback usefulness track belonging hardest.

The split across the core academic experience. Timeliness and contactability hold up as belonging falls; course organisation and whether feedback helped fall fastest.

Net positivity (%) by belonging response →	I feel part of a community of staff and students			
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
TEACHING				
Staff explaining & engaging	97.4	90.6	75.4	55.0
Course intellectually stimulating	94.7	90.4	77.2	60.9
Course well organised	94.8	78.4	57.7	38.1
Teaching changes communicated	92.6	76.1	63.0	42.1
ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK				
Marking criteria clear	92.1	81.8	66.8	52.0
Marking & assessment fair	95.4	89.1	76.1	62.1
Feedback on time	91.2	83.5	71.7	60.8
Feedback helped me improve	92.0	78.5	61.5	41.5
ACADEMIC SUPPORT				
Easy to contact staff	97.1	91.1	80.3	67.2
Staff supporting learning	98.0	92.3	75.6	52.9

Lower net positivity — Higher

"Course well organised" falls 57 points; "feedback on time" just 30. Structural quality tracks belonging; logistics less so.

BELONGING × RESOURCES, VOICE & SERVICES

As belonging falls, voice and services collapse. Resources hold.

Net positivity on each measure, split by how students answered the belonging question. Every measure declines as belonging falls – but the gradient is far steeper for voice and services than for facilities.

Net positivity (%) by belonging response →	I feel part of a community of staff and students			
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
LEARNING RESOURCES				
IT resources	97.0	92.6	82.2	69.4
Library resources	97.3	94.3	86.9	73.9
Subject-specific resources	96.6	92.4	84.1	66.8
STUDENT VOICE				
Right feedback opportunities	95.7	87.1	74.2	54.8
Opinions valued by staff	95.1	84.7	66.8	42.0
Feedback acted on	87.6	68.7	44.6	26.6
WIDER SERVICES				
Wellbeing support communicated	93.6	85.8	68.9	51.5
Support services sufficient	93.0	86.2	64.1	42.4
SU represents academic interests	92.5	86.4	62.3	44.9

Lower net positivity — Higher

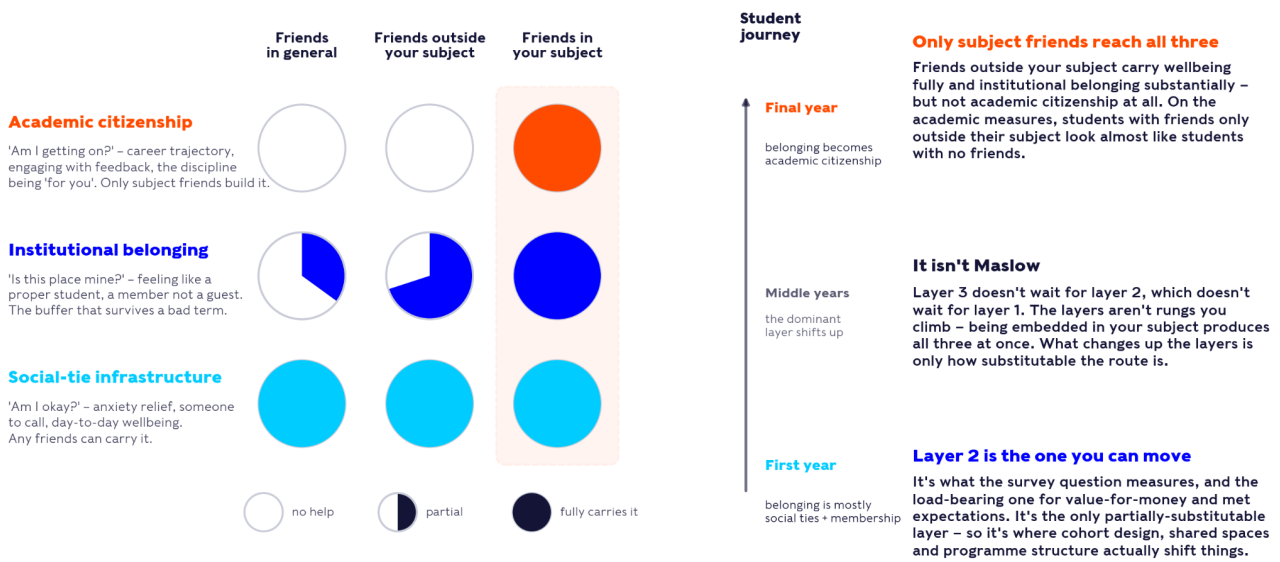
"Feedback acted on" falls 61 points across the belonging scale; library resources fall 23. Voice is belonging-sensitive; facilities are not.

But belonging isn't a single institutional mood that can be raised by more events, more messaging or a parallel pastoral strategy.

This report makes two arguments that go beyond that consensus. The first is that when students think about belonging to a community, they think about at least three different things – having close friends, feeling they have a place at the institution, and feeling they are a recognised part of academic life.

The second argument is more uncomfortable. The strongest statistical predictor of belonging is the relational quality of teaching staff. But the qualitative and friend-network evidence shows that what looks like the staff relationship mattering most is largely the most visible sign of something underneath it – the friendships and course structures that make students approach staff in the first place.

The practical implication is structural – universities and SUs need to build programme- or school-level bodies that join representation, academic community, welcome, peer support, activities and subject identity into one visible home. The case for that isn't simply tidying four separate things into one place. It's that the conditions which bring those things together are what produce belonging at all.



Subject-embeddedness is the common cause: the same structural condition produces social ties, institutional membership and academic citizenship together.
Source: Wonkhe SUs Student Experience polling, friend-network analysis. Relationships are correlational.

Open questions

Most belonging analysis assumes the concept is stable, the causal direction is obvious, and the levers are known. The data suggest none of those assumptions are safe. Five questions in particular need testing.

- Is belonging one thing, or is the single idea standing in for several different things?
- Do all students respond to questions on it in the same way, or do different groups answer about quite different things?
- Which parts of the student experience actually move belonging, once you allow for the fact that they tend to rise and fall together?
- Which way does the causation run – do good teaching, voice or SU activities produce belonging, does belonging just make students rate everything more warmly, or is something else producing both?
- And is belonging produced by a single route, or by several that can stand in for each other?

The causation question is the hardest of the five and the one with the biggest policy consequences. Standard statistical methods can't answer it.

What can is looking at students whose answers on two questions don't line up – the ones who rate teaching staff highly but say they don't belong, or the reverse – and reading what they wrote.

That's what the qualitative side of this analysis is designed to do, and it's where the idea that staff matter most starts to come apart.

Data and approach

The analysis draws on Wonkhe SUs Student Experience polling, from its first wave in February 2023 to its most recent in February/March 2026 – the first seven waves carried out in conjunction with Group GTI. The dataset contains 18,590 student responses across nine waves and 178 UK higher education institutions, weighted to UK higher education gender composition.

Our belonging proxy question – "I feel part of a community of students and staff", on a five-point scale running from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, with "Don't know" and "This does not apply to me" options – has a low and stable opt-out rate of around 3 per cent across waves. Among the students who give a substantive answer, 23.6 per cent strongly agree, 55.3 per cent agree, 16.1 per cent disagree and 5.0 per cent strongly disagree – a net positive of 78.9 per cent.

Just over 14,000 of the respondents also gave a free-text answer to "Why do you feel that way about community?" Free-text answers from nine other survey domains are available at comparable scale – learning experience, assessment and feedback, academic support, learning resources, voice, SU, career confidence, support services awareness and satisfaction, and freedom of expression. That lets us see where community and belonging language surfaces in domains other than the community question itself, which turns out to be a useful diagnostic.

The analytical strategy combines correlation and regression of belonging against 55 other survey questions, the same correlations recalculated controlling for subject and year of study, automated and human coding of free-text comments, and cross-tabulation of belonging against the strongest predictors to interrogate the cases where students' answers don't line up.

Two further pieces of analysis complement the findings. The first is a set of two-by-two cross-tabulations of belonging against loneliness and against staff support, which pull apart feeling you have a place at the institution, having close friends, and being shut out by your circumstances. The second is a re-analysis of two waves – Spring 2023 (n=415) and Autumn 2023 (n=817) – that asked students directly where their friends come from, using a tick-all-that-apply question. They're best read as the evidence that explains why the patterns the full-scale data only describe come about. Readers should note that this subsample (combined n=1,232) is substantially smaller than the main dataset and is split four ways in the analysis below; some percentage differences between groups will not be statistically stable, and the findings from this element of the analysis should be read as directional rather than precise.

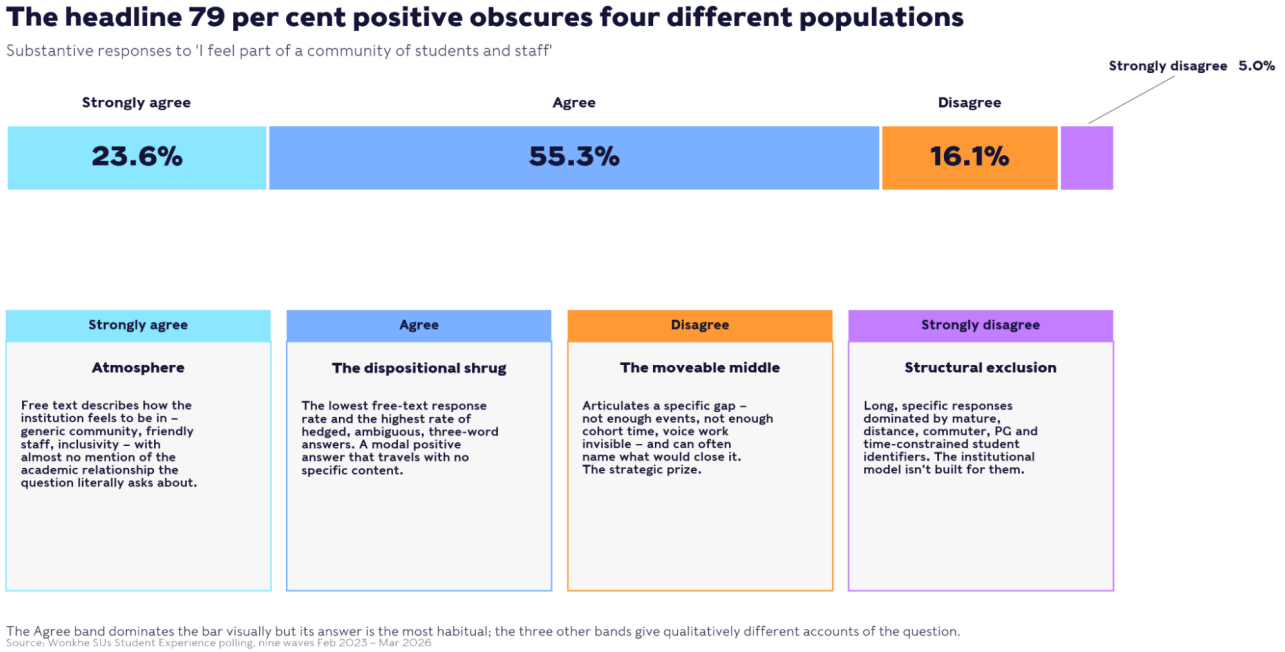
The regression and the qualitative coding are used as paired tools rather than parallel evidence streams – the regression identifies which factors carry the strongest signal, the qualitative and cross-tabulation work identifies how the signal travels, where it doesn't, and what sits underneath it. Two methodological limitations apply throughout. First, the regression treats all 18,590 responses as independent, but they are clustered within 178 institutions. Institution-level clustering would be expected to widen confidence intervals and could affect which predictors appear significant; the relationships reported here should be read as associations rather than precise effect estimates. Second, the qualitative coding is thematic and single-pass rather than formally double-coded; coding rates are reported as approximate frequencies and the codebook is available on request. In particular, low-incidence categories – those appearing in under 5 per cent of responses – should be read as indicative rather than definitive.

Finding 1: The belonging headline conceals four different kinds of answer

Students at the four points on the scale aren't grading the same thing. Each group answers a qualitatively different question – about atmosphere, mild affirmation, gaps they can name, or being shut out. Treating the headline as one number misses where the design problem actually sits.

The first finding is that our belonging question isn't measuring the same thing across its scale. Each of the four substantive groups – Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree – gives a qualitatively distinct account of why they answered the way they did.

They differ in how much they write, how long they write (median nine words in Strongly Agree rising through ten and 13 to 15 in Strongly Disagree), and most importantly in what they're answering the question about in the first place. This is the first of two decompositions the data support – the second, in Finding 3, cuts across the scale rather than along it.



Strongly Agree – atmosphere

The dominant themes in the Strongly Agree free-text responses are diffuse and feelings-based. Generic "community" language appears in 20 per cent of responses. Staff are mentioned in 18.5 per cent. Generic supportiveness at 17.6 per cent. Activities and societies in 15.5 per cent. Inclusive or welcoming language in 14.9 per cent.

> "There's a great environment where I feel like I could stop and talk to anyone or ask anyone a question, as everyone is so approachable and kind."
>
> "The university has been excellent at creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for me."
>
> "We are all treated equally and fairly. I feel there is a sense of togetherness."

What's notable is what isn't there. Only 5.2 per cent mention anything academic. Course reps and student voice infrastructure appear in 1.8 per cent. When staff are mentioned, they're described as friendly, approachable, kind – not as people who listened, acted on feedback or made decisions. The Strongly Agree answer is mostly about how the institution feels to be in, rather than what being a known academic citizen of it is like.

Agree – the thin-positive majority

The Agree group accounts for 55 per cent of substantive respondents and is the engine of the headline figure. The free-text response rate is the lowest of any group at 51 per cent, and 18.5 per cent give responses of three words or fewer. The signature theme is the mixed positive – "but", "however", "although", "some", "sometimes" – accounting for 18.1 per cent of substantive responses.

> "I would strongly agree but some lecturers don't know the students' names. Also I don't get involved in any extracurricular activities."
>
> "I do feel part of the community within the course, not within the wider university."
>
> "Feel more community with other students not staff."

The quantitative test is sharper than the free text. The Agree group's rate of picking the top box on every other question runs at roughly a third of the Strongly Agree rate – 28.9 versus 70.6 per cent for "Very well" on teaching staff support, 30.8 versus 65.8 per cent on opinions valued, 17.5 versus 53.9 per cent on feedback being acted on, 18.2 versus 54.0 per cent on SU voice satisfaction. The Agree group produces its positive belonging answer through mild affirmation across several domains rather than strong attachment to any one of them.

The wellbeing profile corroborates. Life satisfaction averages 7.3 in Strongly Agree and 6.4 in Agree. The "never lonely" rate is 19 per cent in Strongly Agree and only 8 per cent in Agree – closer to Disagree's 7 per cent than to Strongly Agree. Demographically the group is representative of the sample as a whole. The modal student picks the modal positive answer. As Finding 3 shows, this group is also where the lonely-but-belonging population concentrates – the thinness of the Agree positive isn't only mild affirmation, it's a positive belonging answer sitting on top of substantial unmet close-tie need.

Disagree – the moveable middle

The Disagree group – 16 per cent of substantive respondents – is the most analytically distinct of the four, and probably the most strategically important. Hedging language peaks here at 14.4 per cent – higher than in any other group, including Strongly Disagree. Cohort and classmate mentions run at 11.7 per cent, higher even than in Strongly Agree. "Lack of opportunity / not reached" mentions are the highest of any group at 4.2 per cent.

> "There aren't many events that bring students together so I don't often get to meet new people. I haven't made lots of friends so uni feels like a different and distant part of myself at times."

"There isn't much encouragement for getting to know each other."

"I don't especially feel like part of a community, I am a mature student and live in a different county so often only attend campus for seminars. Seminars usually only last 4 hours so students tend to go home after, rather than socialising. All of that being said, I feel that I could create more community vibes if I were to be present more often."

The Disagree account is different from Strongly Disagree in a specific way. These students aren't describing exclusion. They're describing a gap they can name – not enough events, not enough encouragement, not enough cohort time. Many can articulate what would close the gap. Some implicate themselves. The frame is "almost, not quite" rather than "the institution doesn't have a place for me".

Their wellbeing is intermediate – life satisfaction 5.4, anxiety 5.7, daily loneliness 26 per cent (versus 9 per cent in Strongly Agree and 41 per cent in Strongly Disagree). But weekly-or-more loneliness runs 39 per cent – the highest of any group. They're not the most acutely lonely. They are the most chronically under-connected.

The demographic profile to engage, the wellbeing capacity to engage, and an articulated diagnosis of what's missing – the strategic levers identified later move belonging primarily for this group.

Strongly Disagree – being shut out

The Strongly Disagree respondents who gave a free-text answer wrote the longest and most coded-rich responses in the dataset. 39 per cent gave answers of 20 words or more. Their dominant themes aren't the inverse of the Strongly Agree themes – they're specific and structural. 16 per cent use isolation, loneliness or outsider language.

Around one in five identify themselves as mature, distance, commuter, part-time or PG students, or describe being constrained by work or family commitments. 14 per cent mention academic substance – more than any positive group. 6 per cent describe class-based exclusion.

"I'm not sure if it's because I'm a mature student but I struggle to fit in and feel part of the community. When lecturers talk about how everyone should be living in halls and getting together, it makes me feel more secluded as I have caring responsibilities and cannot fully engage in student life."

"There is no community. We distance students are left outside looking in."

"Very hard for PhD students to integrate. Grey area where we are not considered students but also not full staff members."

"I started during the pandemic and didn't meet anyone. I am a single parent and have not been able to attend anything organised as it has all been in the evening."

These students don't blame themselves – they name structural conditions. Their wellbeing profile is markedly worse than any other group's – life satisfaction averages 4.6, daily loneliness 41 per cent, anxiety a full point higher than Strongly Agree's.

They're dramatically less likely to be first-year (17 per cent versus 29 per cent of other groups), more likely to be 25 to 44, more concentrated in subjects with looser cohort structures, and much less likely to be in cohort-organised vocational programmes.

The transactional "I'm a paying customer" frame prominent in other complaints is almost absent. The register is exclusion rather than transaction.

The four together

The four groups need four different responses.

- The Strongly Agree group isn't where the main design problem sits.
- Agree is more fragile, moving in either direction depending on what happens to the rest of the academic experience.
- Disagree is the moveable middle, and the place where structural investment will most reliably shift outcomes.
- Strongly Disagree points to a different task altogether – redesigning the default offer rather than improving its quality.

But this is only the first cut. The next finding shows that the single belonging question is running together several different things that move independently of one another, which is why even the positive groups hide students the headline can't see.

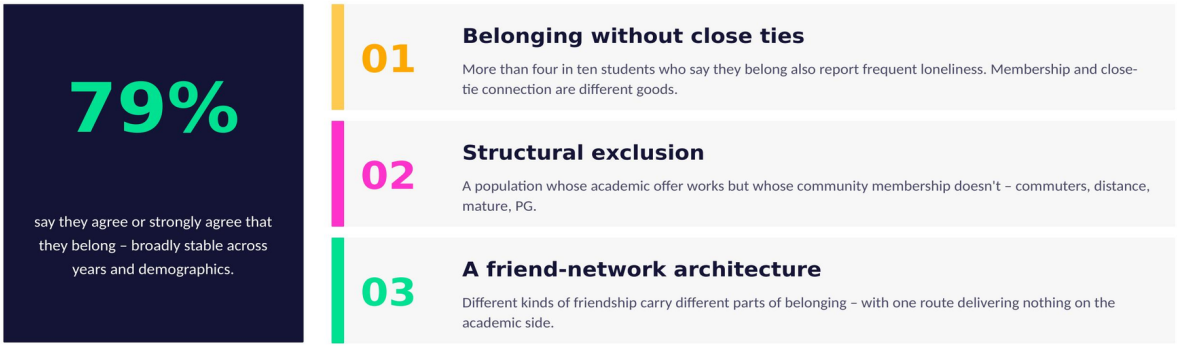
Finding 2: The belonging question runs together three different things students mean by community

Students answer the belonging question with a mix of three things – having close friends, feeling you have a place at the institution, and feeling part of academic life. These come about in different ways and don't move together. A single question that runs them together hides students who have one but not the others. And students with friends – especially on their course – depend on support services less and are more satisfied with them.

THE HEADLINE PROBLEM

79 per cent say they belong. The number hides three things.

"I feel part of a community of students and staff" returns 79 per cent positive across 178 universities and nine waves. On its face, a community problem affecting one in five. It isn't – it's a single number standing in for at least three different things.



The most important finding in this analysis is that "belonging", as the survey measures it, isn't one thing. When we look at the friend-network data – the two waves that asked students directly where their friends come from – and split students by the kind of friends they have, the single belonging answer pulls apart into at least three distinct things.

- The first is close friendship – the loneliness, anxiety, wellbeing and someone-to-call-on side of community. This is simply having people in your life.
- The second is feeling you have a place at the institution – the sense of being part of the community of students and staff that the belonging question literally asks about. This is recognition, belonging to the place, the offer being for you.
- The third is what we might call academic citizenship – the sense that what you're doing at university is preparing you for your future, and the freedom to say what you think in academic settings. This is feeling you're on a trajectory and a recognised participant in academic life, rather than a customer of it.

These three things come about differently, and the telling point is that they're carried by different kinds of friendship. The clearest evidence is a four-way split of the sample by friend type – students with both course and off-course friends, students with only course friends, students with only off-course friends, and students with no friends at all – run across the core survey measures. A note on what "course friends" means in the UK context. The survey asked about friends made on the student's course – meaning a named degree programme. In many UK institutions that is a relatively narrow cohort, sometimes of only a few dozen students, whose shared identity comes from a specific title rather than a broader discipline. In several European systems the equivalent unit is larger – specialism is expressed through module choice rather than course title, so the primary peer group is the subject or discipline rather than a single programme. The academic-citizenship benefits identified below for "course friends" are almost certainly a function of shared academic space and activity over time, not of the course title itself. They would be expected to apply equally to subject- or discipline-level peers in any system where those peers share seminars, group work and a sustained academic environment.

The practical implication is that the relevant unit for intervention in the UK is subject or discipline, not necessarily the individual course – a point the recommendations return to.

The broad pattern has two parts. The largest single step on almost every academic and service measure is from having no friends to having any friends at all – but the two single-friend groups are not interchangeable, and course friends consistently do more of the academic-side work than off-course friends.

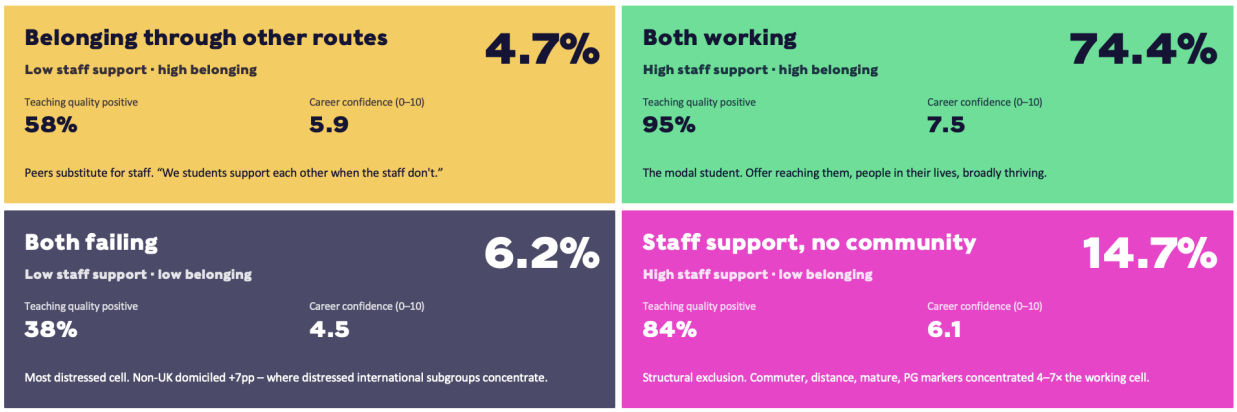
Satisfaction that staff support learning runs 92.3 per cent positive for students with both kinds of friend, 84.8 per cent for course-only students and 77.6 per cent for off-course-only students, falling to 60.0 per cent for students with no friends. On the service measures the course-only group often sits almost level with the both group while off-course-only students drop well below – ease of contacting staff runs 92.8, 92.4, 79.9 and 65.2 per cent across the four groups.

STRUCTURAL EXCLUSION

Cross belonging with staff support and the excluded appear.

Belonging and teaching staff support move together far more tightly than belonging and loneliness. Three quarters sit in the working cell. The off-diagonal cells are small but decisive – one is structural exclusion at its purest.

Top row: high belonging · Right column: high staff support



High support but failed belonging = a presence problem. Low support but intact belonging = peers substituting.

SU activities satisfaction is the one measure where the two single-friend groups look alike – 86.2, 76.5, 77.6 and 62.2 per cent across the same four groups. That exception aside, the ladder runs both, then course-only, then off-course-only, then no friends. The no-friends-to-any-friend jump fits the idea that friends work first as the thing that gets an anxious student over the threshold – but the course-versus-off-course gap shows course friends doing something further and specifically academic on top of that.

Two measures sharpen that academic gap to its maximum, and they are the ones that isolate academic citizenship. On career confidence and on freedom to say what you think in academic settings, off-course friends deliver little above the no-friends level, while course friends carry students almost as far as having both. Career confidence is 7.42 and 7.39 out of ten for the two course-friend groups, 6.64 and 6.57 for the others. Freedom of expression is 90.6 per cent for both course-friend groups, 84.2 per cent for off-course only, 74.4 per cent for no friends. These are the things that only course friends can deliver.

And a third pattern runs the other way. On social availability – "if I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on" – and on loneliness, off-course friends beat course friends. The people-to-call-on rate is 75.6 per cent for off-course only versus 69.1 per cent for course only. The course friend you see in seminars isn't the friend you call to go for a drink.

The same split runs through how students rate the institution's wellbeing offer. Satisfaction that wellbeing support is well communicated falls from 86.7 per cent for students with both kinds of friend to 82.1 per cent for course-only students and 70.6 per cent for off-course-only students, reaching just 59.8 per cent for students with no friends – and satisfaction that support services are appropriate and sufficient follows the same gradient, at 83.1, 81.7, 64.3 and 53.6 per cent. Even whether you think the wellbeing offer reaches you appears to be mediated by whether you have friends on your course to point you towards it – consistent with the pattern, discussed below, suggesting that friends put staff in view.

Put those three patterns together and the three things separate cleanly.

- Close friendship is the easiest to get from any source – on most measures off-course friends come close to what course friends deliver, and what matters first is that there's someone.
- Feeling you have a place at the institution is harder to get elsewhere but not impossible – off-course friends carry 79 per cent of students to a positive belonging answer against 87 per cent for course friends, with societies, identity-group networks and accommodation friends all helping.
- But academic citizenship is the one thing off-course friends can't supply. They can give a student company, anxiety relief and a social safety net. They can't give the felt sense of being on an academic trajectory, because they aren't in the academic setting where it forms.

This is the finding that should change how the sector thinks about belonging strategy, because it means two large groups of students are invisible to the headline.

A student with off-course friends and no course friends – 29 per cent of the friend-network sample – looks fine on most institutional measures. Their belonging score is positive, their wellbeing reasonable, their loneliness moderate.

But their career confidence sits at the no-friends level and their freedom to speak in academic settings is markedly lower. They have community alongside the academic experience rather than within it.

The reverse group – course friends but no off-course community – mirror-images it: academically integrated, institutionally fine, but with a daily loneliness rate (21 per cent) closer to no-friends (44 per cent) than to the both group (13 per cent). They are the academically-integrated lonely, and the headline hides them because it asks whether you feel part of the place, not whether you have close friends.

The cleanest single sign that these are separable is how the no-friends penalty varies across measures. No Friends is consistently the worst group on everything, but the gap to the rest is much smaller on the institutional service questions than on the felt-experience ones. It runs about 12 to 15 percentage points to the nearest friend group on contact-staff-easy and staff-explaining, and 20 to 28 points to the both group. On the felt-experience measures it is far larger – 35 points on belonging, 60 points on social availability, and 32 points on daily loneliness.

Friends appear to reduce the need for support

There's one measure where the gradient is worth noting – satisfaction that support services are appropriate and sufficient, which runs 83.1 per cent for students with both kinds of friend, 81.7 for course-only, 64.3 for off-course-only and 53.6 for no friends.

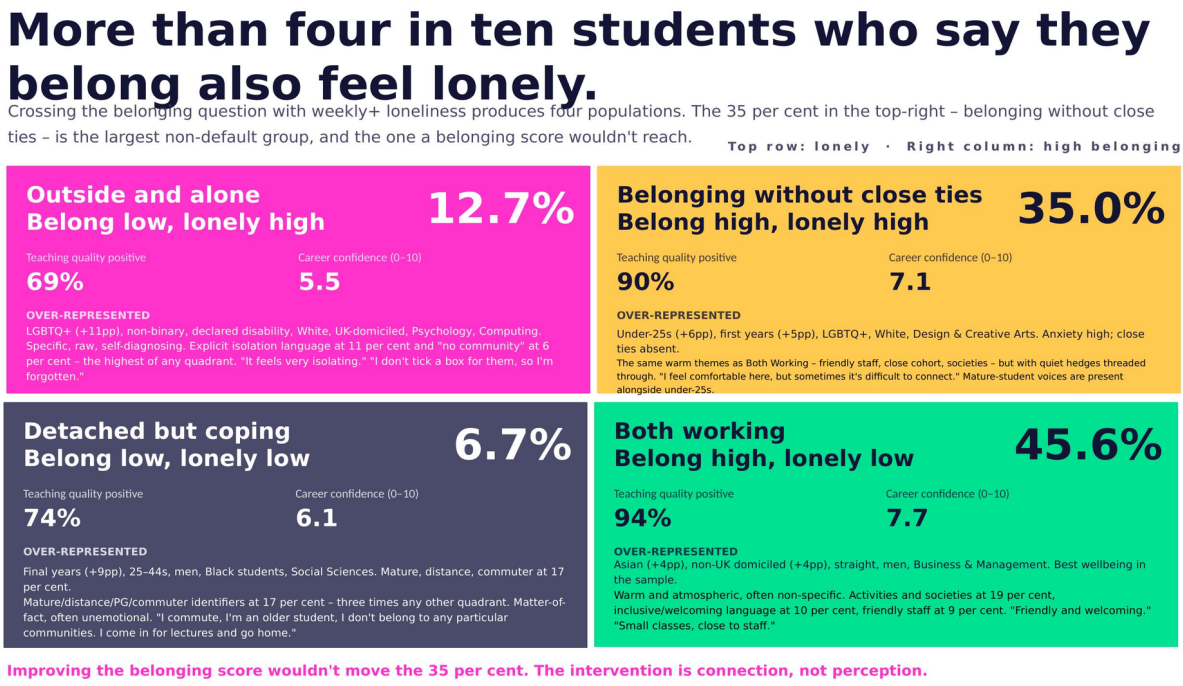
One plausible interpretation is that friends are themselves a form of support, so the more of them you have, the less the formal offer is being asked to carry – and the easier it is to judge appropriate and sufficient. On this reading, the student with no friends is leaning the full weight of their support needs on the institution's provision and finding it short, not necessarily because the provision is worse but because nothing short of having people would be enough. The service

is being rated against the size of the gap it has to fill, and friends shrink the gap. This is consistent with the cross-sectional pattern, though it cannot be confirmed from correlational data alone.

Finding 3: A third of students who say they belong are lonely

Feeling you have a place at the institution and having close friends move independently. Crossing the belonging question against loneliness turns up a large group who say they belong and are frequently lonely – students the headline reads as a success and the wellbeing data reads as a problem.

If the belonging question really is running together feeling you have a place and having close friends, the two should come apart at scale in the standard survey questions, without needing the friend-network data at all. They do. Crossing belonging against loneliness – "Over the last year, how often have you felt lonely?" – for the 9,062 students who answered both produces four groups, and the relationship between the two is weaker than we'd expect.



The Both Working cell – high belonging, low loneliness – is the modal student at 45.6 per cent. The institutional offer is reaching them, they have people in their lives, and they're broadly thriving. Their wellbeing scores are the highest in the dataset – life satisfaction 7.39, anxiety 4.20, career confidence 7.7, teaching quality 94 per cent positive. Demographically the cell is over-represented by Asian students (+3.7 percentage points against a 20.8 per cent base), non-UK domiciled students (+3.7), straight students (+5.8), and Business and Management. (All percentage-point skews in this section should be read as descriptive signals rather than precise estimates: subgroup cell sizes vary, and smaller groups carry wider margins of error.)

The Belonging Without Close Ties cell – high belonging, high loneliness – is the analytic surprise, and it's large – 35.0 per cent of the sample. These students rate the institutional offer positively, say they belong, and have experience scores essentially indistinguishable from the

Both Working group (teaching quality 90 per cent, career confidence 7.1). But 35 per cent of them feel lonely weekly or daily, their life satisfaction drops to 5.68, and their anxiety jumps to 5.86 – both worse than the sample average.

They're over-represented by under-25s (+6.2pp), first years (+5pp), White students (+4.1pp), LGBTQ+ students (+4.6pp), and students in Design, Creative and Performing Arts. Their free text reads almost identically to Both Working – the same warm references to friendly staff, close cohort, societies, inclusion – with hedges threaded through. The difference between the two cells doesn't appear in what students say about belonging. It appears in the wellbeing data sitting underneath.

This is feeling you have a place at the institution coming apart from having close friends, visible in the headline data itself. Students who answer the belonging question positively are reporting that they have a place, that they're recognised, that the offer is for them. That feeling can sit on top of real loneliness, because having a place and having close friends are different things.

A first-year design student who's enjoying their course, gets on with their tutors, sees friends in seminars, and still cries alone in their flat at night is not contradicting themselves on the survey. They're answering two different questions truthfully. And this is largely the same group as the Agree majority from Finding 1 – the thin positive is thin partly because it's a sense of having a place sitting on top of an absence of close friends.

The Outside and Alone cell – low belonging, high loneliness, 12.7 per cent – is the most concentrated group of students shut out altogether – worst wellbeing in the sample, worst experience scores (teaching quality 69 per cent, career confidence 5.5), and a striking demographic skew. LGBTQ+ students are over-represented by 11.4 percentage points, the single largest demographic skew across any cut in this analysis.

Non-binary students, declared disabilities, White and UK-domiciled students are all over-represented, with Psychology and Computing leading on the subject side. This is the Strongly Disagree population from Finding 1, seen through a different lens.

The Detached but Coping cell – low belonging, low loneliness, 6.7 per cent – is the smallest and most conceptually distinct. These students don't feel they belong, but they aren't lonely either. Their anxiety is low (4.38, on a par with Both Working), their life satisfaction close to average, and their free text is dominated by mature, distance, PG and commuter identifiers at three times the rate of any other cell.

They've built community elsewhere – work, family, hometown, faith, online networks – and don't need the institution to provide it. Their staff support and feedback scores are poor, but their wellbeing isn't tracking institutional failure. They are not in distress. They are simply detached.

The two surprising groups – belonging-but-lonely, and detached-but-coping – are mirror images, and together they make the point the friend-network data made and the headline can't – feeling you have a place and having close friends move independently.

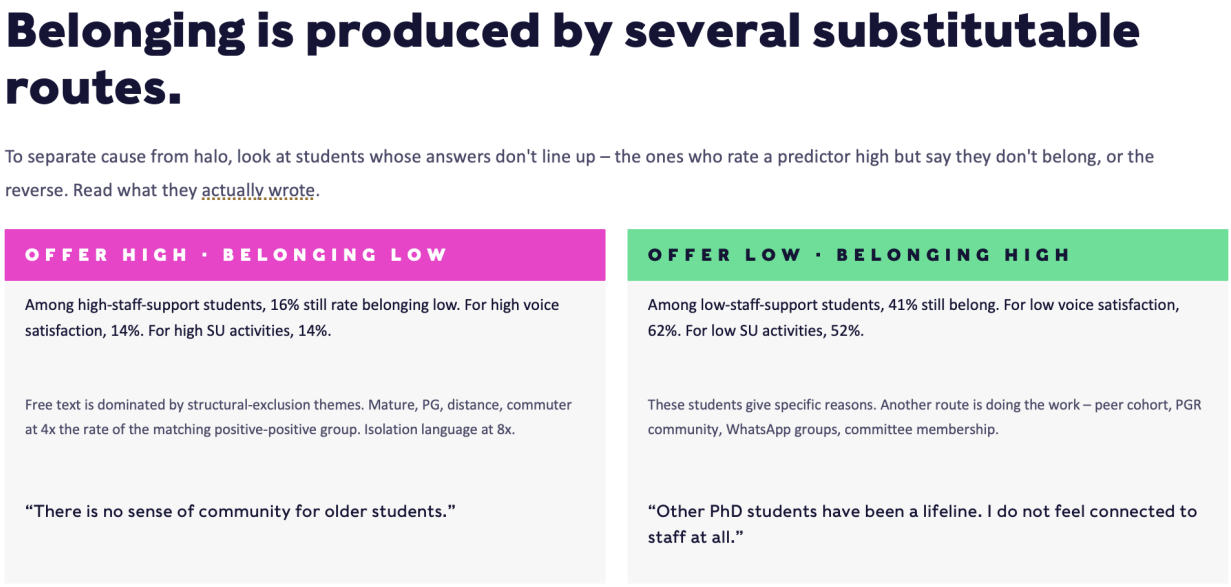
Some students have the first without the second – others have the second without the first. The belonging question picks up the first, the loneliness question picks up the second, neither

stands in for the other. The mistake would be to treat a positive belonging score as if it meant the absence of loneliness, when 35 per cent of the sample is living proof that it doesn't.

Finding 4: Belonging is produced by several routes that can stand in for each other, and being shut out blocks all of them at once

Students can feel they belong through staff relationships, peer connection, voice work, or SU activities. Most students need only one or two of these routes open. Where belonging fails despite a working offer, the cause is usually that the student's circumstances have shut them out, not that one channel is missing – and the same circumstances tend to block every route at once.

The last finding described what belonging is. This one describes how it's produced – through several routes that can stand in for each other, where being shut out by your circumstances can block all of them at once. The four-group split in Finding 1 already hints at this. The students whose answers don't line up confirm it.



To separate "the predictor produces belonging" from "belonging makes students rate everything more positively" from "both are produced by a third factor", we've looked at students whose answers don't line up and read what they actually wrote.

Across staff support, voice acted on, SU activities satisfaction and SU voice satisfaction, the pattern is consistent.

Start with students who rate the predictor positively but say they don't belong. In every case, the free text from these students is dominated by structural-exclusion themes. Mature, PG, distance, commuter and time-constrained student identifiers appear at four times the rate found in the matching positive-positive group. Isolation language appears at eight times the rate.

"There is no sense of community for older students."

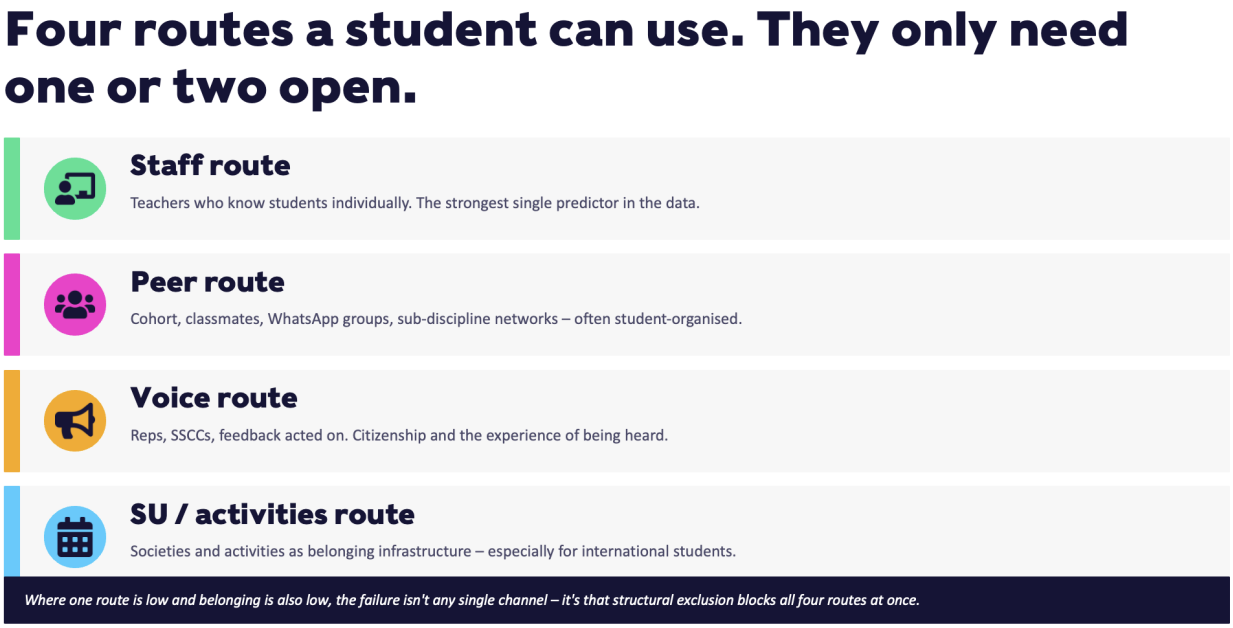
"Not much social activity for postgraduate researchers."

"I am a commuter and live at home. Lectures are at times of the day where I need to only be in for two hours where travel time ends up being around 50 per cent of lecture times anyway. So I just don't end up going."

These students explicitly exclude the institutional offer from their explanation. The teachers are nice, the support is fine, the activities exist. What's missing is a community model designed for them.

The belonging-against-staff-support cross-tab sharpens this to its clearest form. Three-quarters of students sit in the Both Working group (good staff support, high belonging – 74.4 per cent, teaching quality 95 per cent, career confidence 7.5).

The two groups whose answers don't line up are small but crucial. The Staff Support No Community group – 14.7 per cent – is the clearest case of students shut out by their circumstances – they rate staff support and teaching quality positively but say they don't feel part of a community.



Commuter, live-at-home or travel mentions appear at 4.3 per cent (versus 0.6 per cent in Both Working), online or distance language at 3.7 per cent (versus 0.6 per cent), mature identifiers at 3.8 per cent (versus 0.9 per cent), PG and PhD at 2.5 per cent (versus 1.2 per cent). The circumstances that block belonging are four to seven times more common in this group than in the working one. The pattern suggests the offer works – but the student's circumstances mean they can't reach it.

Now run it the other way. The Belonging Through Other Routes group in the staff-support cross-tab (4.7 per cent, teaching quality positivity just 58 per cent) names what's standing in directly.

"Through the SU not through my course."

"Other PhD students have been a lifeline to me. I do not feel connected to staff at all."

"We students support each other when the staff don't."

"I feel a community with my peers, this is mainly due to the peer mentoring programme but not with the staff."

"As a student, I sat on several staff/student committees which made me feel like an integrated member of a wider community."

If positive belonging were just a warm glow spread across every answer, these students would barely exist. They're not just numerous – their explanations are specific. Belonging isn't a single-route thing. There are at least four routes the free text keeps pointing to – staff, voice, peers, and SU activities. A student needs only one or two of them open to feel they belong.

The more routes the institution/SU provides, the more robust belonging is across different kinds of student. Where one route is closed and belonging fails too, the problem usually isn't that one channel – it's that the student's circumstances have closed all the routes at once.

The Both Failing group deserves a flag. At 6.2 per cent it's the smallest, but it's the most distressed on every measure – 38 per cent positive on teaching quality, career confidence 4.5. Non-UK domiciled students are over-represented by 7 percentage points, the largest international skew across either cross-tab. This is the group the international-positivity headline tends to mask – earlier work made the point that international student satisfaction is heavily compositional, varying enormously within the group, and this is where the most distressed international students concentrate.

A caveat on the four-route mapping. The Wonkhe/Pearson 2022 framework names four foundations of belonging – connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy. The first three are directly measurable in this dataset – the four routes above broadly map onto them. Autonomy as that work defines it – co-creation of curriculum, agency over learning, structured participation in shaping the academic environment – isn't directly measured.

The closest proxy is "opinions valued by staff", which correlates with belonging at 0.42 on a scale that runs from 0 to 1, but this captures consultation rather than agency. The absence of direct autonomy measures is a real limitation, and one the survey-design section returns to.

Finding 5: Students belonging at two different scales – subject and institution

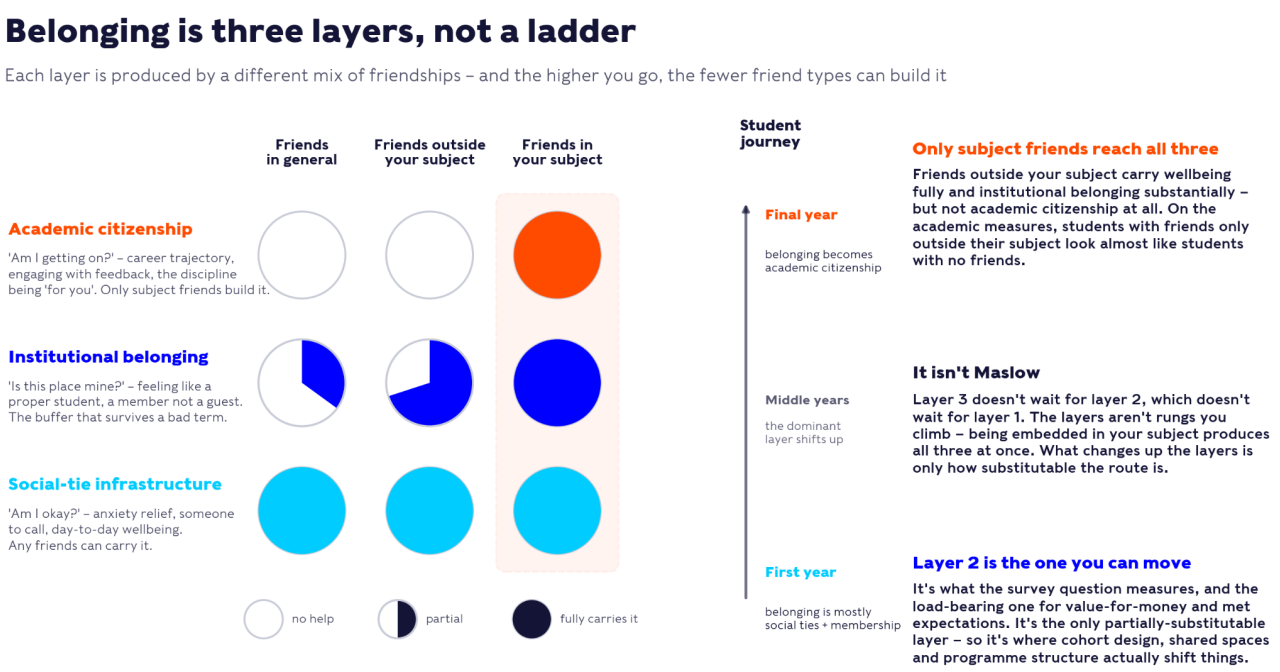
Some students answer about their course, others about the university. Working belonging blurs the distinction; failing belonging exposes which scale is failing. Comparing institutional scores partly compares how students are reading an ambiguous question.

Our belonging question asks about “a community of students and staff” without specifying scale, and a substantial minority of respondents pull the question apart along subject-versus-institution lines as they answer.

Around one in five mentions course, department, cohort, classmate, seminar or programme-level language. 17 per cent mention university, campus or wider community language. Some explicitly mention both, often in contrast.

> "I do feel part of the community within the course, not within the wider university."
>
> "Good student experience and small course knowing each other but often moments of isolation at university."
>
> "I feel community with my cohort, but not so much the wider university as I am a mature student and not so interested in the social activities available."

When belonging is working, students don't tend to spell out which scale they mean. When it's failing, they more often say which level is failing. This fits the three things cleanly – feeling you have a place is the one that's ambiguous between subject and university, having close friends doesn't really have a scale, and academic citizenship is subject-scaled almost by definition. The policy implication is that an institution comparing itself with another is partly comparing how its students happen to be reading an ambiguous question.



Subject-embeddedness is the common cause: the same structural condition produces social ties, institutional membership and academic citizenship together.
Source: Wonkhe SUs Student Experience polling, friend-network analysis. Relationships are correlational.

Subject- or discipline-level investment will likely have the most reliable effect on belonging, while institution-level investment reaches students for whom the subject route isn't working. The two are complements, and recognising that the question is being read at two scales at once is the first step in not picking the wrong lever.

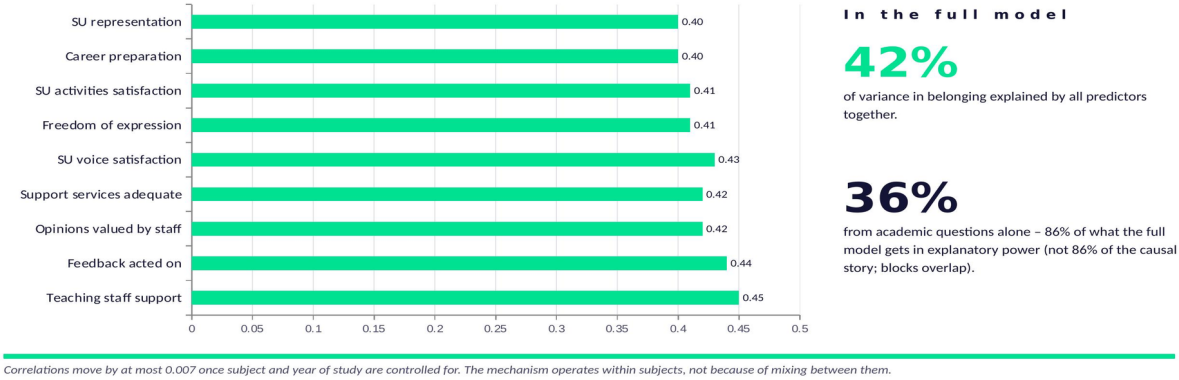
Finding 6: Teaching staff support is the strongest single predictor – but it's the visible tip of something underneath

The relational quality of teaching staff carries the strongest statistical signal of any single factor. But the qualitative and friend-network evidence shows why – friendships and course

structures are what make students approach staff in the first place. What looks like the staff relationship mattering most is largely the most visible sign of the conditions that produce both the friendships and the staff relationships at once.

FINDING FOUR

Teaching staff support is the strongest single predictor.



Correlations move by at most 0.007 once subject and year of study are controlled for. The mechanism operates within subjects, not because of mixing between them.

Of the 55 other survey questions, the ones that move most closely with belonging are concentrated in the academic experience and voice infrastructure – teaching staff support, feedback being acted on, opinions valued by staff, support services adequacy, SU voice and activities satisfaction, the SU's representation of academic interests, career preparation, and freedom of expression. (Correlations are on a 0-to-1 scale; the strongest sit between 0.40 and 0.45.) The single strongest factor is the relational quality of teaching staff.

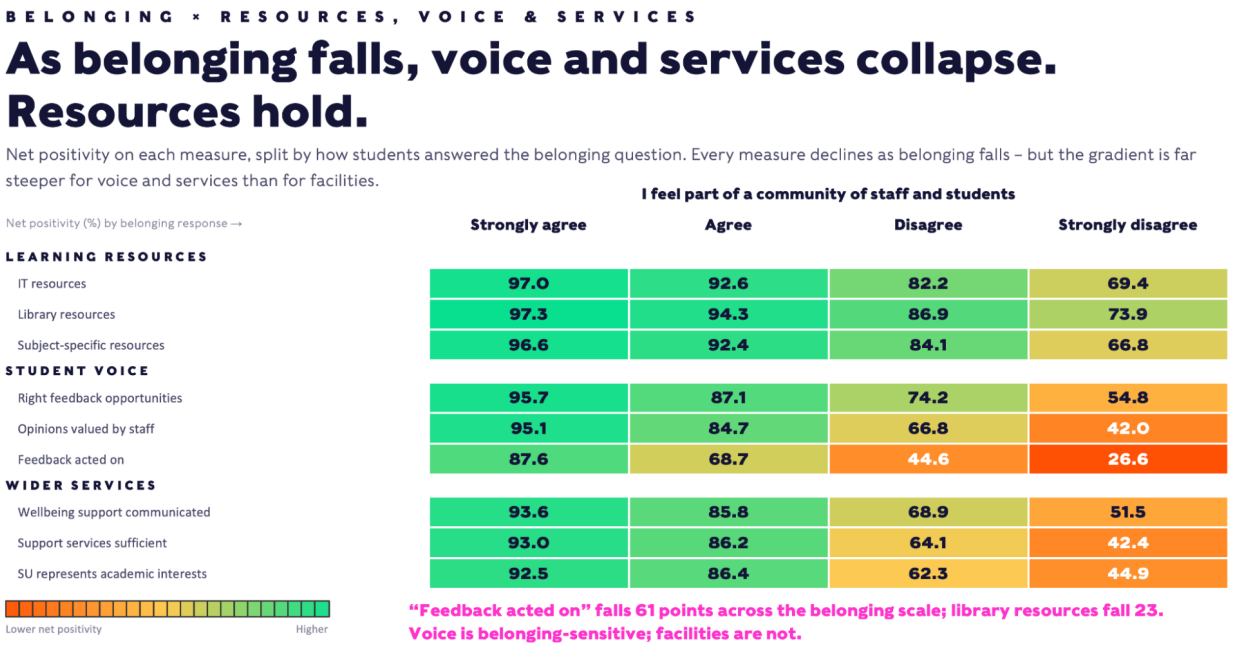
Run all the predictors together in a single statistical model and the model explains 42 per cent of the variation in belonging answers. Academic experience measures alone explain 36 per cent – roughly 86 per cent of what the full model gets in terms of explanatory power under this specification (not 86 per cent of the causal story, since the blocks overlap). SU questions alone reach 25 per cent; wellbeing and career alone reach 27 per cent.

Once everything is controlled together, teaching staff support is the largest single contributor by some margin, followed by SU activities satisfaction, career preparation, and feedback being acted on. SU voice satisfaction's strong raw correlation almost vanishes once you control for the other SU questions, which means it shares its variance with the rest of the SU cluster rather than doing independent work.

These relationships are remarkably stable across subjects. Once you control for subject and year of study, the correlations move by at most 0.007 for every predictor. Differences in belonging rates between disciplines do exist – Medicine and Dentistry runs 84 per cent positive, Historical/Philosophical/Religious Studies 72 per cent – but those differences aren't inflating or deflating the relationships above. The mechanism operates within subjects, not produced by mixing of subjects.

Read at face value, this is the case for "belonging is academic" – the staff relationship does the most belonging work, so invest in it. But the friend-network and qualitative evidence shows that reading is too quick. Staff support is the strongest predictor partly because it's the most visible

academic sign of something the model can't see directly – the friendships and course structures underneath it.



Three pieces of evidence point that way. The first is the substitution group in Finding 4 – 4.7 per cent of students rate staff support poorly and still belong, and they name peers as the reason. Staff support isn't necessary for belonging – peers can carry it alone.

The second is the way friendship leads to staff contact. Where students describe a sequence in the free text, the more common direction runs from having friends to approaching staff, not the other way round.

> "I am able to contact staff should I need to and have a good support from members of my cohort."

> "Not only my professors but also my classmates are really good at supporting each other. I think I am able to ask help or give it without fear."

The third, and the strongest single piece of evidence, is the reverse case – the no-friends-then-withdrawal pattern, which appears across the free-text responses. Several spell out the staff connection directly.

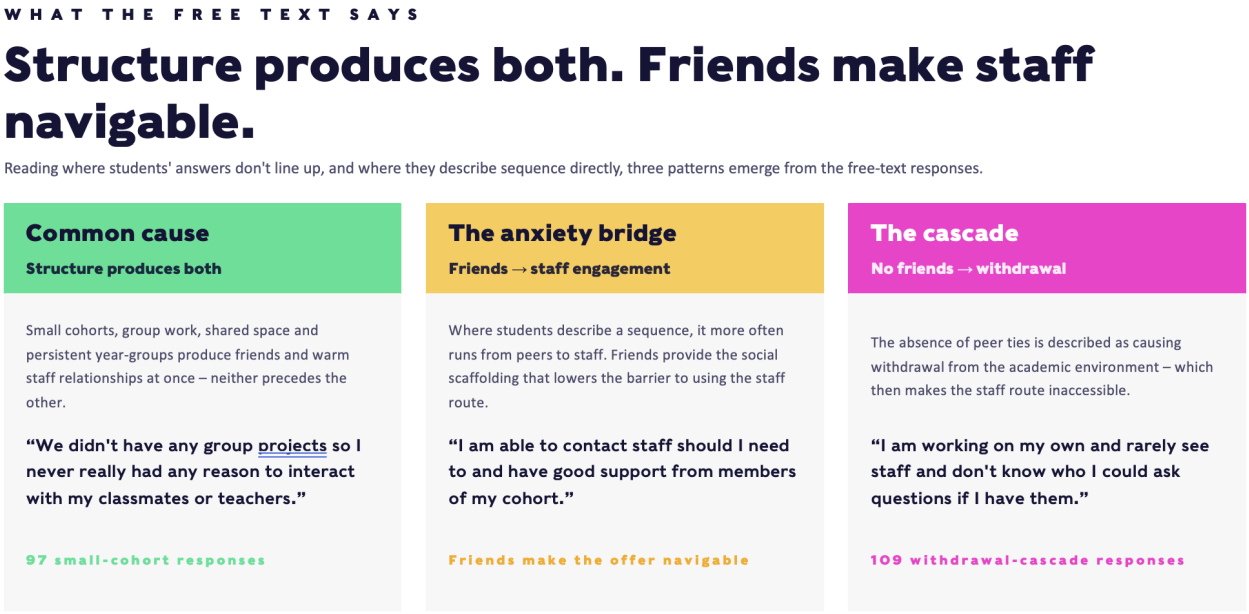
> "I am working on my own and rarely see staff and don't know who I could ask questions if I have them."

> "I joined uni during lockdown so first year was all online and I made no friends. This meant when I started second year I knew no one and felt isolated."

> "London is lonely and no one in my course (teachers included) makes that extra effort."

The first quote is the clearest statement of how it works in the dataset – working alone leads to not seeing staff, which leads to not knowing who to ask. The friend network is what puts the staff in view in the first place. The friend-network data backs the pattern up – the "no friends"

rate roughly triples between students who rate staff support negatively and those who rate it positively (10 to 12.5 per cent at the bottom of the scale, 3 to 4 per cent at the top). The two are tightly coupled, and the direction the free text implies – no friends, then withdrawal from staff – is the more plausible reading.



Underneath all of this sits the most common pattern in the free text of all – students describing small cohorts, group work, seminars, persistent year-groups or shared physical space tend to credit their friendships and their warm staff relationships to the same source, with neither coming first.

> "Due to the small size of uni I feel connected to the students and staff."
>
> "Being a natural scientist means my cohort is small, this allows student and professor communication to be less formal and less intimidating. In lectures with more people this is not the same."

The proof of this comes from one student in particular:

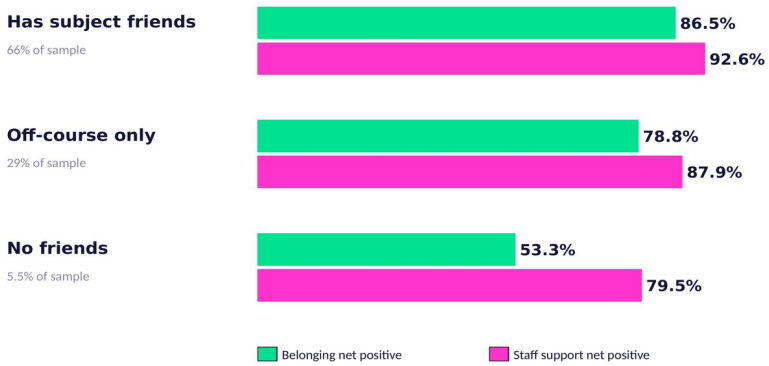
> "We didn't have any group projects so I never really had any reason to interact with my classmates or teachers. It was a very independent course."

Without a scaffolded reason to interact, neither the friendships nor the staff relationships form. They come about together, out of being in the same room and doing something together.

WHERE BELONGING COMES FROM

Friends drive belonging far more than staff support.

Two waves asked students where their friends come from. Aggregated three ways against belonging and staff support:



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belonging fall from subject friends to no friends. Staff support falls just 13 points across the same range.

3–4% → 12.5%

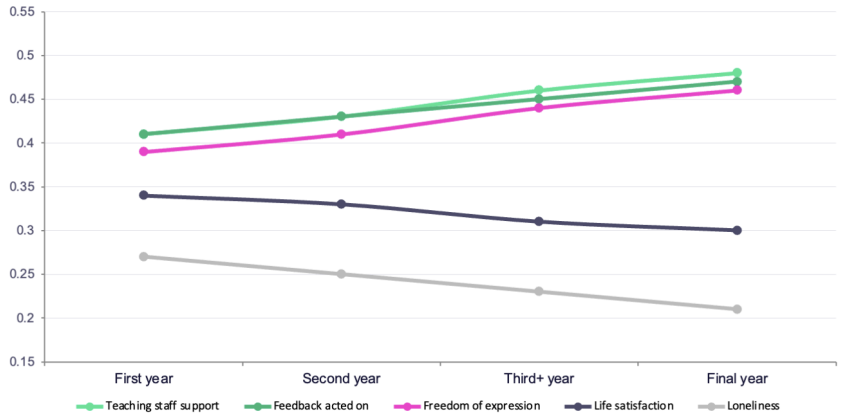
the no-friends rate roughly triples between students who rate staff support positively and those who rate it "not very well."

The institutional offer barely cares whether you have friends. The felt experience of being a student cares enormously.

It isn't that the staff relationship doesn't matter – it's that what makes it matter sits underneath it. In the model, staff support is still the strongest single predictor. Staff support carries the strongest signal because it's the most visible academic sign of something built from friendships and course structure. The thing to invest in isn't the staff relationship on its own so much as the conditions under which both the friendships and the staff relationships form together – which is exactly where the recommendations land.

What does change cleanly across the data is the year of study. The correlations between predictors and belonging move steadily as students progress. Teaching staff support shifts from 0.41 in first year to 0.48 in final year. Feedback acted on shifts from 0.41 to 0.47. Freedom to express ideas shifts from 0.39 to 0.46. Loneliness, by contrast, weakens – from 0.27 in first year to 0.21 in final year. Life satisfaction shifts from 0.34 to 0.30.

The question isn't measuring the same thing across the journey.



Two stories

Year 1 belonging is partly a feelings state. Loneliness and life satisfaction do real work.

By final year it has become an academic-citizenship judgement. Teaching support and feedback acted on do most of the work.

Treating belonging as a single thing addressed by a single approach across all years will systematically miss what students are actually telling the question.

The question isn't changing its meaning so much as which of the three things students lean on is changing. For undergraduates, first-year belonging leans on close friends and on feeling you have a place – by final year it leans on academic citizenship, which is the one that takes sustained time with the same peers and staff to build.

Treating belonging as a single thing addressed by a single approach across all years will systematically miss what students are telling the question at each point.

Finding 7: When the offer works but belonging doesn't, anxiety appears to be doing the blocking

The students who get a high-quality offer but still don't feel they belong are systematically more anxious than those for whom both work. The pattern suggests more opportunity alone doesn't reach them. The interventions that appear most effective are anxiety-targeted – named buddies, seeded peer groups, social mentoring that pairs students before they walk into something alone.

Sitting underneath the route picture is one more finding that explains why scaffolding alone doesn't reliably produce belonging. The students who get a high-quality offer but still don't feel they belong are systematically more anxious than the students for whom belonging is working, by margins that show up consistently across every predictor.

Mean anxiety yesterday on a 0–10 scale runs 4.96 in the high-staff-support / high-belonging group and 5.62 in the high-staff-support / low-belonging group. The pattern repeats almost exactly for voice (4.89 versus 5.68), for SU activities (4.96 versus 5.56), and for freedom of expression (4.90 versus 5.57).

In every case the students whose institutional offer is working but whose belonging isn't are more anxious than the students for whom both are working. The daily loneliness rate jumps 15 percentage points in the offer-working-but-belonging-not group. Weekly-or-more loneliness runs 20 percentage points higher.

The interpretation is consistent with the argument the 2024 UPP Foundation work made directly – that anxiety functions as a binding constraint on engagement for a meaningful share of the student body. When students say in comments that they didn't engage because they "didn't have anyone to go with", they're describing an anxiety barrier that opportunity alone doesn't dissolve. This data cannot confirm the causal direction, but the pattern is consistent with it.

So belonging isn't simply a matter of the routes the institution provides. It's the routes provided multiplied by the student's ability to use them. What presents as an opportunity problem is closer to one of perceived control – work on participation consistently finds that students drop out of activity not at the point of attraction or sign-up but at socialisation, the stage where they work out whether they are welcome, who they are in the group, and whether they matter.

Anxiety widens the gap between intending to take part and actually doing so, and more or better opportunity at the front door does nothing to close it. It gets in the way of all three things students mean by community, but most sharply close friendship – which is also the one

the friend-network data shows any friend can supply, if the student can get over the hump of forming them.

The implication for peer support is sharp. Events or initiatives that don't deal with anxiety will only reach the students who would have turned up anyway. Compulsory social mentoring, named-buddy schemes that pair students before they have to walk into an event alone, seeded groups that mean a student doesn't have to be the one to introduce themselves – these tackle anxiety rather than just opportunity, and the free text repeatedly asks for them.

This also matters for disabled students. The 2024 Wonkhe analysis of the UPP Foundation data showed that disabled students are 10 percentage points more likely to cite anxiety as a reason for not taking part than their non-disabled peers, at the same level of interest in the activity.

Our data show that the Strongly Disagree group is more disabled than the sample overall, and the Outside and Alone group in Finding 3 over-represents declared disabilities. For disabled students this also intersects with anticipatory reasonable-adjustment duties under the Equality Act 2010, where the barrier is the design of participation itself rather than only the accessibility of individual events – and the practical lever, anxiety-aware peer support, is the same one the data identify for everyone else.

Finding 8: Freedom of expression is a seminar-climate question, and rep work is invisible community infrastructure

Students answer the freedom-of-expression question about how their seminar room feels and whether their classmates would judge them, not about university policy. And the rep system does real belonging work that students don't attribute to the SU – the mechanism functions, but the credit doesn't follow.

If you scan the rest of the free text for community, belonging, isolation, peer and inclusion language, two patterns matter.

Freedom of expression is overwhelmingly experienced as a seminar-climate and non-judgement-by-peers question rather than a policy question. 20 per cent of FoE free text contains "welcomed, included, accepted, safe space" language – higher than any other non-community question, and higher than the same theme rate in the community question itself.

> "Seminars are safe spaces to express beliefs, ideas, and opinions."
>
> "My fellow course mates are all very accepting."
>
> "I am a shy person but I think if I did decide to people would be understanding and not judgemental."

Whether you can say what you think is a function of whether your classmates and the seminar room feel like a safe space. This is academic citizenship and feeling you have a place working together – and it's why the friend-network data shows freedom of expression collapsing for students with only off-course friends. Belonging and freedom of expression are, in how

students explain them, much the same question, and both depend on having peers in the room with you.

Meanwhile, those with a “position” benefit significantly. Mentions of course rep, student-staff committee or other coordination positions related to subject or course appear in almost 15 per cent of voice free text – the highest mention rate of any specific institutional mechanism in any free-text column.

> "As a course rep, I see first hand how staff respond to and ask for student feedback. It is clear that they care."
>
> "I'm a student rep, and so have seen the course of action that comes from bringing issues to staff's attention, resulting in visible change."

A note on support services. The support services free text is where loneliness language surfaces most outside the community question itself – "they are not sufficient, if a student is lonely or anxious they will rarely go to look for help from strangers."

Students think about support services partly through the lens of loneliness, as something that exists in response to it but doesn't substitute for community.

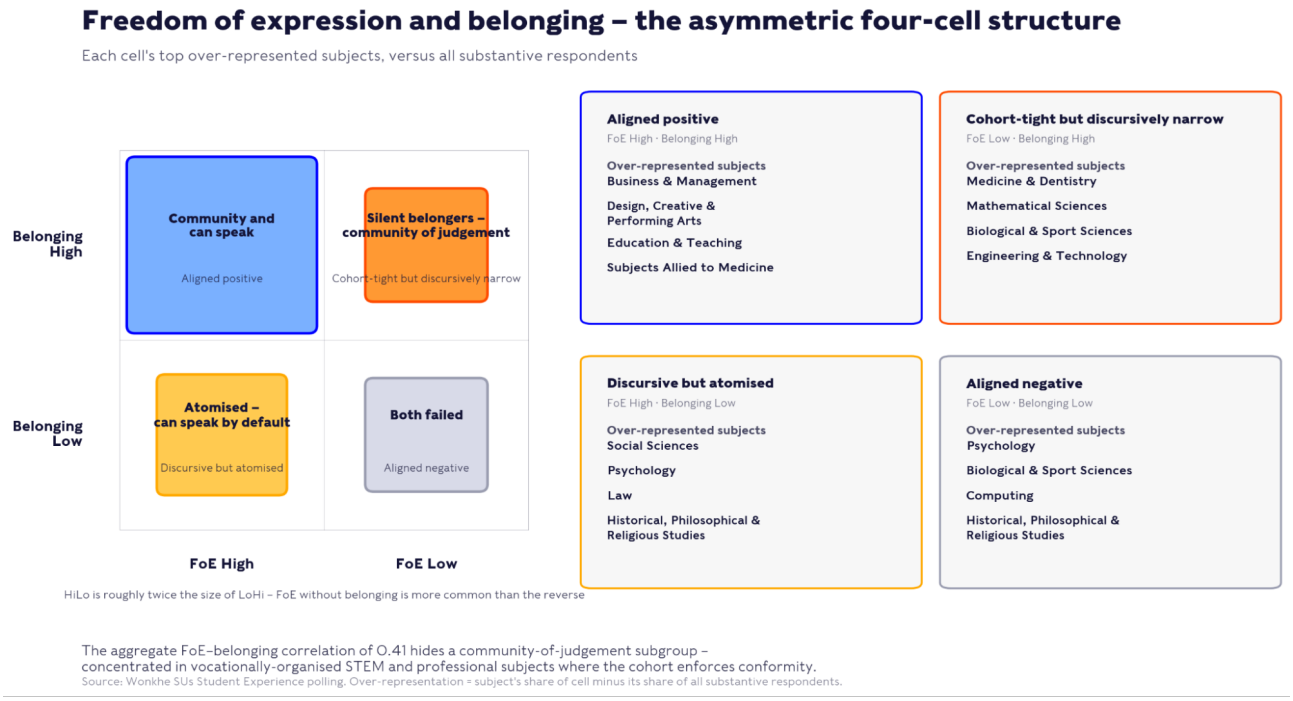
Finding 9: Strong subject communities can produce belonging while suppressing dissent within them

The same community structures that produce belonging can also enforce conformity. Some students rate freedom of expression high because there is no peer community in which disagreement could matter; others rate it low because their cohort has a dominant view that can't be safely challenged. Any structure that deepens cohort identity has to scaffold disagreement inside it.

The overall correlation between FoE and belonging is 0.41 – on a par with the strongest predictors. But the cross-tab structure is asymmetric in a way that reveals what the question is measuring. Of students with high FoE, 16 per cent rate belonging low. Of students with low FoE, only 8 per cent rate belonging high. FoE is much easier to have without community than community is to have without FoE.

The students with high freedom of expression but low belonging are mostly isolated people. Social Sciences is over-represented by 3.9 percentage points, Psychology by 2.7, Law by 2.3. Online and distance language appears at four times the rate in the both-positive group.

Their freedom-of-expression rating is high not because their institution has a thriving culture of disagreement but because there's little real peer community around for disagreement to have any consequences in. Freedom of expression here is the empty space left by an absent community – the same isolation the off-course-only friends group shows on academic citizenship.



The students with low FoE but high belonging are the more conceptually interesting group. Their community free text describes positive belonging – friends, societies, cohort connection. But their FoE free text describes communities whose dominant views they can't safely contest.

> "I feel only a certain type of opinion is allowed at university (extreme left wing), any other part of the political spectrum is condemned by students."
>
> "University culture tends to coalesce around certain opinions on particular topics. Whilst I agree with most, if you don't you can feel cast out or shunned very quickly."
>
> "I'm the only visibly Muslim person in my modules, that's scary."
>
> "With medicine you have to have a degree of caution here."
>
> "Maths is right or wrong."

Political or ideological constraint mentions run at 6.8 per cent of FoE free text in this group, against 1.5 per cent in the both-positive group. The subject pattern is Medicine, Mathematical Sciences, Biological Sciences and Engineering over-represented.

The two groups whose answers don't line up are mirror images. The high-expression, low-belonging students are in talkative but isolated settings; the low-expression, high-belonging students are in tight-knit but narrow settings, where the very community that produces belonging also enforces conformity within it.

The political dimension in the second group is bimodal – most political mentions describe perceived left-wing dominance among peers, a sizable minority describe institutional suppression of pro-Palestine speech, others describe being silenced after raising disability discrimination complaints. The unifying feature isn't a particular politics. It's that the community has a dominant view that can't be safely challenged.

This matters directly for the recommendation that follows. Strong subject communities can generate belonging. But if those communities become norm-enforcing they can suppress dissent. Any structure designed to intensify subject identity – which is exactly what the recommendations propose – has to scaffold disagreement inside it, not just deepen identification with it.

The missing programme-level layer

The UK has the belonging routes scattered across different owners. Several European systems bundle them into one programme- or subject-level body. That missing structure is what every finding above points to – and the friend-network evidence shows it's not just a way of tidying the routes into one place, it's the thing that produces them together.

The route findings point at something the UK has structurally missing. In several European systems the routes aren't parallel things students assemble independently. They're functions bundled into one programme- or subject-level body. The rep is also part of the welcome team, the academic society, the peer support network and the subject identity work. Students experience the routes as one community, not several channels.

The UK has the routes scattered across different owners – course teams, central SUs, academic societies, careers services – with nothing joining them at programme level. It would be easy to read a joint structure as merely a way of tidying those routes into one place. The friend-network evidence makes a stronger case.

The common-cause pattern in Finding 6 – small cohorts, group work, shared space producing both friendships and staff relationships at once – means that scattering them isn't just an inconvenience that leaves the routes unjoined. It's the reason the conditions that produce all three things students mean by community never come together. The student who had no group projects and so never interacted with classmates or teachers wasn't missing a joining layer. They were missing the conditions under which any of it could form.

The striking thing, looking across Europe, is that this isn't an exotic model to be invented – it is closer to the norm, and the UK's scattered version is the outlier. In Germany every enrolled student automatically belongs to the Fachschaft for their degree programme – the subject body is not something to join but the default unit of student life.

Portuguese núcleos run tutoring, peer mentoring, careers events, a course journal and social activity for a single course at once, with one for every programme in a faculty. Across the Nordics and the Baltics the primary unit of representation is the faculty- or programme-based association that owns social events, the welcome of new students, mentoring and academic representation together, feeding upward into the central union; the Lithuanian starosta, or group elder, is the most granular rep of all, sitting beneath both faculty and central tiers.

The Dutch thuisbasis concept makes the physical side of this concrete – a recognisable space combining work and relaxation, close to the academic department and identifiable as belonging to the discipline, funded as a default rather than as an extra. It matters most, in the Dutch accounts, for first-years, who need teaching scheduled near it or lose their attachment to the programme early; by later years students have found their own footing. The Estonian institute

association supplies one-fifth of council membership. The common thread across all of these is that the rep system, the academic society, the social provision and the welcome programme are owned by the same body, recognisable to the student as a single institution rather than a set of separate channels.

By comparison, the English position – where SSLCs often function as feedback ritual and zero student responses to programme modifications can be treated as tacit agreement – looks unusually scattered and piecemeal.

The joining structure is what the evidence points to as the missing piece, and it's where every other finding starts to add up.

The staff route runs through it because the body sits inside the programme. The voice route runs through it because reps live inside it. The peer route runs through it because welcome and social activity are part of its remit. The activities route runs through it because subject identity is what the body is for. The anxiety problem eases through it because trusted peers are already part of the community.

The three things students mean by community come together in it because one body can carry close friendship, a sense of place, and academic citizenship at once rather than leaving the third orphaned. And the course-versus-university tension resolves through it because the body is course-anchored but visible enough that students who can't reach the wider institution still have a subject home.

Massification and what's underneath the staff relationship

The staff relationship – the strongest single predictor – is under pressure from larger classes and fewer staff per student. But the evidence turns peer-side investment from a fallback for that erosion into the thing the staff relationship was always resting on.

The context that should frame all of this is that the staff relationship is under pressure. Larger classes, fewer staff per student, less individual contact time, less responsive feedback at scale. The thing the model says does most of the work is the one massification erodes most directly. The seminar that builds belonging in students' accounts depends on staff knowing students individually, and these conditions aren't getting easier.

There is a wider context still. The decline in the staff relationship sits inside a broader fall in associational life – volunteering and membership of everyday clubs and groups have been dropping for years. That raises rather than lowers the stakes: it makes the subject-level body one of the few remaining places where students learn to belong to something, organise with others and act collectively. The case for it is not only a better belonging score but the civic one – it is infrastructure for collective life, not a wellbeing add-on.

The instinctive response is to treat peer support as partial compensation for the eroding staff relationship. The friend-network evidence suggests a different framing. If friendships are what put staff in view in the first place – as the pattern in Finding 6 shows – then investing in them isn't a fallback for staff erosion. It's investing in the thing the staff relationship has always rested on. That changes the sums. The worst use of constrained funding is still to treat peer support as a cost-free substitute for staff contact. But the strongest case isn't "the staff relationship is

failing, so prop it up with peers". It's "friendships are what make the staff relationship work, so that's where building belonging actually begins".

Seeded peer-organised digital cohort infrastructure for every taught programme – WhatsApp groups, departmental Teams channels, asynchronous study spaces – is close to zero marginal cost, addresses one of the most consistently credited belonging routes in the qualitative data, and reaches students for whom staff contact is being compressed. The free text shows these tools already being built bottom-up by students who arrive at the right time and find the right peers.

Students who arrive late, change cohort, switch programmes or study part-time can't tap in. Seeding them deliberately at the start of each programme year, with handover at year transitions and inclusion of late-arriving and non-traditional students built in, costs almost nothing and unlocks a route the data say is doing serious community work – and, because friendships put staff in view, props up the staff relationship at the same time.

But the friend-network evidence puts a sharp limit on what digital cohort tools do on their own. The Course Only group – students with course friends but no off-course community – is the warning. These students are academically integrated and institutionally fine, but their daily loneliness rate (21 per cent) sits closer to the no-friends group (44 per cent) than to students with both kinds of friend (13 per cent), and their someone-to-call-on score is the lowest of any group except no friends. A WhatsApp group for assignments produces exactly this student – a working study network that delivers academic citizenship but not close friendship. The friend you message about a deadline isn't the friend you call to go for a coffee.

So seeded digital tools are necessary but not sufficient. To build close friendship they have to be paired with time spent together for reasons that aren't work – cohort social events run by the department, shared physical space used for both study and socialising, subject-level activity that goes beyond seminars. The cheap digital lever opens up academic citizenship and a sense of place – close friendship needs the students in the same room for reasons that aren't work.

Stable sub-cohort structure within large programmes and across related courses is the next-strongest case. The small-cohort theme appears across multiple free-text columns in a way no other structural feature does. In the UK context, where a single department may run several closely related degree titles, the relevant unit is the subject or discipline rather than the individual course – the intervention isn't literally smaller cohorts but persistent seminar groups across modules, subject-level rather than course-title-level identity, and sustained co-teaching of the same students by the same staff teams across years.

These are course-organisation decisions more than budget lines, and they show up in learning experience, academic support, freedom of expression and belonging free text all at once – precisely because they're the shared cause that produces both the friendships and the staff relationships.

Making voice and rep infrastructure visible as associative belonging infrastructure is the cheapest high-return lever in the dataset. The rep system functions, and the mention rate scales tightly with belonging. The intervention unlocks a route the model identifies as one of the strongest predictors of belonging.

What needs building, jointly

Five recommendations the analysis points to, all built on one organising point – the structure has to be jointly owned by universities and SUs. Neither partner can deliver it alone.

The recommendations that follow all rest on a single organising point. The thing the evidence points to isn't an SU initiative or a university initiative. It's a joint structure.

The university has the programme structure, the staff time, the physical estate and the academic governance roles. The SU has the rep system, the activities infrastructure, the community-building tradition and the democratic legitimacy.

A subject level associative body needs all of those inputs to function. Neither partner can deliver it alone. And the three things students mean by community tell you why neither can – SUs can deliver close friendship and most of a sense of place, but academic citizenship can only form inside the academic setting, which the university controls.

Seven things follow.

Universities and SUs should jointly build subject-level bodies rather than running parallel belonging initiatives. The starting point isn't new infrastructure. It's reorganising the considerable infrastructure that already exists. Most universities and SUs already have programme teams, course reps, academic societies, personal tutors, learning developers, careers consultants and SU activities staff working at the same subject level without ever being convened as a single structure. The first practical move is to identify one programme or school where the building blocks are present and reorganise them around a subject-level body with a name, an identity, a remit and a budget.

Those bodies should combine representation, society and activity, welcome, peer support and academic governance under one roof. The body itself needs to be a real organisation, not a committee – a name, a logo, a physical home, a budget devolved from both partners, persistent membership of all students on the programme, leadership elected from within it, recognised standing in programme-level academic governance, and a remit that is genuinely multi-functional. The operating principle is that work happens at the level of the group, not the level of the individual coordinated from somewhere else. The group has continuity, identity and capacity that no individual rep can sustain.

There is a real risk to manage. A body with a budget, written governance rights and a remit can tip into exactly the over-organisation that hollows out student activity – formalised, staff-authored, audited and measured to the point where students experience it as something run for them rather than by them. The conditions the data say produce belonging – ownership, peer connection, the sense of shaping something – are precisely the ones a heavily processed structure erodes.

The corrective isn't amateurism. It's sequencing and positioning: let the group socialise before it formalises, let it form its own identity before it inherits duties, and keep professional staff backstage as scaffolding rather than on stage as authors. More staff support does not have to mean less student ownership, but it usually does unless the structure is built to keep control

with the members. The aim is a body students recognise as theirs, with professional capability available to it – not a well-run programme that happens to involve students.

The default offer should be redesigned through these bodies for commuters, mature students, distance learners, PGs, disabled students and time-constrained students, without branding it as remedial provision. The framing matters. "Provision for marginalised groups" is the deficit-model intervention recent critiques of belonging strategies warn against.

The substance is the same – daytime timetabling, online cohort infrastructure, asynchronous voice channels, accessibility-first activity design – but the framing should be universal-as-default rather than parallel-provision-for-the-different. The subject-level body is the natural site for this redesign because it sits close enough to students' academic lives to make the default offer actually fit them.

This is the direct lever on the Staff Support No Community and Detached but Coping groups, who have the academic offer but can't reach the community model built around it.

Those bodies should stage belonging across the student journey. First-year belonging is largely about close friends and feeling you have a place – affective and peer-driven. Final-year belonging is about academic citizenship. A single structure carrying both functions across the journey lets the institution invest in different things at different stages without building separate vehicles for each. Peer connection first, academic citizenship later, both through the same body.

Those bodies should deliberately scaffold disagreement where strong cohort identity risks becoming conformity. The community-of-judgement finding means belonging-as-cohort can suppress dissent within it. The response isn't less community-building. It's structured opportunities to argue with the consensus on questions where consensus exists, and seminar-level norms for productive dissent, built into the body's remit alongside its identity work.

What universities specifically control

What sits inside university authority – programme organisation, governance rights, space and recognition, and the design of welcome.

Subject- and discipline-level organisation is the primary belonging lever. The persistence of sub-cohorts, the continuity of teaching teams, the relational quality between staff and students they know – these are doing more belonging work than any pastoral or wellbeing investment, and the friend-network evidence shows why – they're the shared cause that produces both the friendships and the staff relationships. In the UK, where proliferation of course titles can fragment what are functionally the same peer groups, the relevant unit for this work is the subject or discipline rather than the individual programme. Subject-level structure is the policy variable, not strategy documents.

Governance rights matter as much as governance roles. Subject- or school-level rep bodies need written rights in programme review, in module change consultation, and in QA processes. The rep system being inside the subject-level body and inside academic governance is what gives representation something meaningful to do at the level students actually study at.

Space, time and recognition need to be made available. A recognisable physical space combining work and relaxation, close to the academic department, identifiable as belonging to the discipline, costs less than a building project and more than nothing. Time allowance for serious student involvement, credit-bearing recognition where the qualification framework allows, and portable digital credentials for governance work are the levers other systems use.

Welcome is a joint, programme-anchored design, not a central week-one event. Peer-led mentor groups of five to fifteen students, fused with academic and administrative content, trained leaders, often spanning weeks not days, run by or with the programme-based association – this is the design the evidence points to, and it is the single biggest lever on first-year belonging because it builds close friends and a sense of place at the very moment the chain of connection either starts or fails to.

The most developed versions abroad show what this looks like in practice. They split an incoming cohort into small groups, each held by one or two trained student tutors; they integrate the social, the academic and the administrative in the same activities rather than running them as separate streams; and they keep the mentor attached to the group across the first term, not just the first week, so socialisation has time to turn into commitment. The principle that travels is that orientation becomes the start of a continuing community rather than a front-loaded burst of information – the welcome that works is the one that is still running in November.

What SUs specifically control

What sits inside SU authority – running reps as community convening, joining up societies and reps, anxiety-aware peer support, and activities as subject community.

Reframe rep coordination as community convening. The data say individual-level effort won't work – it works at the level of the group. Train reps in groups, present feedback to groups, give budgets to groups, ask groups to develop year-long agendas with their school. Stop referring to rep roles in the singular: a student joining a named team with a shared identity is a different proposition from a student taking on a solitary role whose responsibility rests on them alone, and it answers a problem rep coordinators know well – that reps are often lonely and only get to meet others doing the same thing too late in the year. A group with a name, a logo, a shared identity and a remit beyond representation is also what gives a department trying to change something a standing body of students with the capacity to push for it, which a single rep per year cannot supply.

Treat the academic society and the rep system as facets of one subject-level community, not parallel systems. The attribution gap is solved by community, not by communications: the "you said, we did" formula works only when there is a recognisable, continuous "we" doing the saying. Branding existing rep work as SU work is necessary but insufficient. What the evidence points to is rep work that happens inside a body students can see and identify with.

Treat anxiety-aware peer support as core SU work, run inside the subject-level body. Named-buddy schemes, social mentoring that pairs students before they walk into something alone, peer-led welcome-back moments at the start of each academic year, social activity that doesn't require introducing yourself to strangers to take part. SUs have the operational capacity to run

these schemes – the subject-level body is the trusted community that makes them stick. This is the lever on anxiety, and through it on the chain that determines whether a student ever approaches staff at all.

Recognise activities as one strand of subject-level community rather than as a free-standing offer. Activities awareness doesn't independently predict belonging much once satisfaction is controlled for – staff support, voice satisfaction, peer connection and subject identity are doing the work. But activities are the channel through which the SU becomes visible and the setting in which belonging is built.

International students are the clearest case – they rate SUs highly because the SU has become their community in a new country. SUs are already the organisation best placed to convene the off-course communities – societies, identity-based groups, accommodation networks, faith and sport societies – that the friend-network data shows carry close friendship and a sense of place for students whose course rhythm doesn't deliver a tight cohort.

The 75.6 per cent someone-to-call-on rate among off-course-only students is substantially an SU achievement. Embedding activities in the subject-level body rather than running them centrally is what makes that reach academic citizenship too.

What sector bodies should stop measuring badly

Four implications for the wider policy debate, and for what the sector's surveys measure – the strongest of which is that the single belonging question can't see the different things it's running together.

The dominant policy framing – belonging as something universities should design into the academic experience – is right in direction but underdetermined in form. Sector framing that recommends "designing belonging in" without naming the structural form risks each institution building partial solutions that the data say won't hold up. There is a deeper framing point underneath it.

Treating belonging as a satisfaction score to be raised is the consumerist reading of students – students as customers whose experience is to be improved for them. What the data actually describe is communitarian: belonging forms when students are co-producers and members of a community, doing things with each other and with staff, not recipients of a better-designed offer. The two readings point to different measures and different interventions, and a metric that asks only whether students are satisfied that they belong is measuring the wrong one.

A single belonging question runs together three different things and hides three different groups, and should be split up. Belonging mixes close friendship, feeling you have a place, and academic citizenship, and the data show these move independently – 35 per cent of students who say they belong are frequently lonely.

Three things follow for survey design. Close friendship needs its own question that doesn't double up with the sense-of-place reading – the "If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on" is the cleanest version, opening a 46-percentage-point gap between off-course friends and no friends on its own. Academic citizenship – career confidence, freedom to speak in academic settings, the sense of being on a trajectory – should be analysed alongside

belonging rather than as a separate outcome. And the question should be measured separately by year of study and at both subject and university scale.

Friend-network composition should be a standard measure, not a one-time experiment. At minimum, a distinction between subject or discipline friends (peers encountered in shared academic settings), off-course friends and no friends – with a note that in the UK context "course friends" may be too narrow a category where related degree titles fragment what is functionally the same peer group. The two waves that asked it produced the clearest single piece of evidence in the dataset on how belonging comes about.

Autonomy should be added as a direct question, and freedom of expression analysed alongside belonging. Surveys often capture connection, inclusion and support but stand in for autonomy through voice and consultation, which isn't the same thing. The subject-level body is the obvious home for autonomy in practice, and future work would benefit from being able to test it directly. Freedom of expression and belonging should be looked at together rather than as separate things – in a sizable group of students they pull in opposite directions, and the policy implications of treating them as aligned versus opposed are themselves opposite.

IMPLICATIONS

Two strategies, deliberately combined.

Programme teams	SUs and voice teams	Survey design
Recover the structural features that produce friends and staff relationships at once: small cohorts, persistent seminar groups, real group work, shared physical space.	Convene the off-course communities – societies, identity, accommodation, sport, faith – that carry the social-tie and membership layers.	Reinstate "people I can call on" as a standard close-tie item – it alone produces a 46-point gap by friend type.
For the course-only lonely, build more than functional study groups – produce the friends a student would call for a drink, not just a WhatsApp group for assignments.	Close the academic-citizenship gap through reps, peer mentoring and discipline societies, co-owned with the department. Brand rep work as academic-peer infrastructure.	Make friend-network composition a standard measure, and model academic citizenship jointly with belonging rather than as separate outcomes.

Conclusion: Friends have benefits

It's tempting to read all this as confirmation that belonging is academic – that the academic experience, and staff relationships above all, do the most belonging work. That's not wrong, but it's not the whole story, and the friend-network evidence shows where it bends.

The strongest statistical predictor, the staff relationship, is the most visible sign of something underneath it – the friendships and course structures that produce both the friendships and the staff relationships at once. And academic citizenship, the part staff most directly produce, is only one of the three things, the other two of which are carried substantially by friends the institution doesn't control and a survey question that can't see them.

This is why the two conventional strategies are complements, not substitutes, and neither alone is enough.

The conventional belonging strategy – more events, more societies, more pastoral wrap-around, more campus activity – will build close friends and a sense of place. It won't build academic citizenship for the students with only off-course friends, who are roughly 29 per cent of respondents and over-represented among disabled, mature and commuting students.

The conventional academic-experience strategy – better teaching, better feedback, more contact time – will build academic citizenship for students already in the cohort. It won't reach the no-friends students whose lack of any peer connection has already pushed them out of the academic environment.

The students who do well on every measure are the ones who get both. The students who do worst are the ones who get neither. And the two surprising groups – belonging without close friends, and detached but coping – are the ones the sector has been comfortable calling fine because the headline figures don't pick them out. They aren't fine.

The point isn't to chase a belonging score. It is to build the missing part of student life that makes belonging plausible – a subject-level home where academic relationships, peer connection, student voice, social activity and support are not separate systems with separate owners, but parts of the same structure. Not because that tidies four routes into one place, but because it restores the conditions under which all three things students mean by community can come about together in the first place.

Where that structure exists, students have more than one route into community, and the routes reinforce each other rather than standing alone. Where it does not, the students who already fit the traditional model will go on finding belonging, the students with off-course friends will look fine on the headline while never quite becoming part of academic life, the students who say they belong will go on being lonely in numbers the score can't see, and the students outside all of it will go on being told that the opportunity was there if only they had used it.