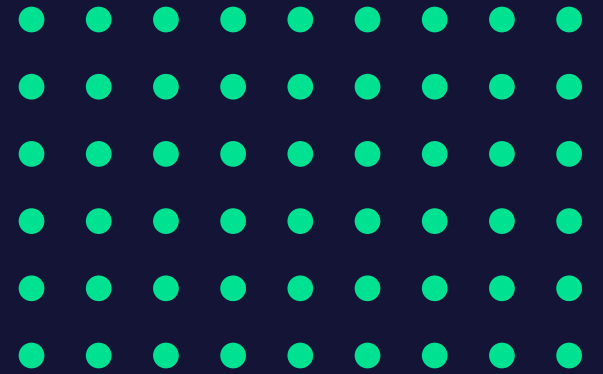


W O N K H E · S T U D E N T E X P E R I E N C E I N S I G H T

Friends have benefits.

Findings on how belonging is produced, and the structures the sector needs to build.



WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Belonging is no longer pastoral decoration.

The emerging consensus

HEPI positions belonging as nearly as vital as teaching quality. Belonging alone explains up to 17 per cent of the probability of saying the student experience was worse than expected.

It clusters tightly with value for money, comfort expressing opinions, and willingness to engage with academic staff outside timetabled sessions.



17%

of the variance in whether students say their experience was worse than expected is explained by belonging alone.

The four foundations of belonging.



Connection

Peer relationships, friendship, cohort identity.



Inclusion

Feeling welcomed regardless of identity or background.



Support

Knowing where help is and trusting it to be there.



Autonomy

Agency over learning and a voice in shaping the experience.

Wonkhe / Pearson, 2022. The first three are directly measurable in this dataset. The autonomy route is the one we cannot yet test directly.

Four questions most belonging analysis assumes away.

- 01 Is belonging one thing, or are different student populations reading the same question differently?
- 02 Which parts of the experience actually move it, once we account for the fact that they tend to move together?
- 03 Which way does the causation run – are staff and voice producing belonging, or is belonging warming up the ratings on everything else?
- 04 Is belonging produced by a single channel, or by several substitutable ones?

The causation question is the hardest – and the one with the biggest policy consequences.

WHAT THIS IS BUILT ON

Nine waves. 178 institutions. 18,590 students.

18,590

responses across nine waves

178

UK higher education institutions

14,000+

free-text answers on community

9

free-text domains coded alongside

The proxy question

“I feel part of a community of students and staff.”

5-point scale, Strongly Agree → Strongly Disagree. DK/NA opt-out rate stable at ~3% across waves. Net positive 78.9 per cent.

Quantitative and qualitative as paired tools, not parallel streams.



Correlation and regression

Belonging tested against 55 other survey questions. Controls for subject and year of study.



Free-text coding

Human coding across ten domains. Same themes tracked across questions.



Off-diagonal cross-tabs

Reading students whose answers don't line up – the only test we have for causal direction.

The regression identifies which factors carry the strongest signal. The qualitative coding identifies how the signal travels – and the cases where it doesn't.



Findings.

From how the headline question is being read, to where belonging actually comes from, to what blocks it for the students it is supposed to reach.

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.

79%

say they agree or strongly agree that they belong – broadly stable across years and demographics.

01

Belonging without close ties

More than four in ten students who say they belong also report frequent loneliness. Membership and close-tie connection are different goods.

02

Structural exclusion

A population whose academic offer works but whose community membership doesn't – commuters, distance, mature, PG.

03

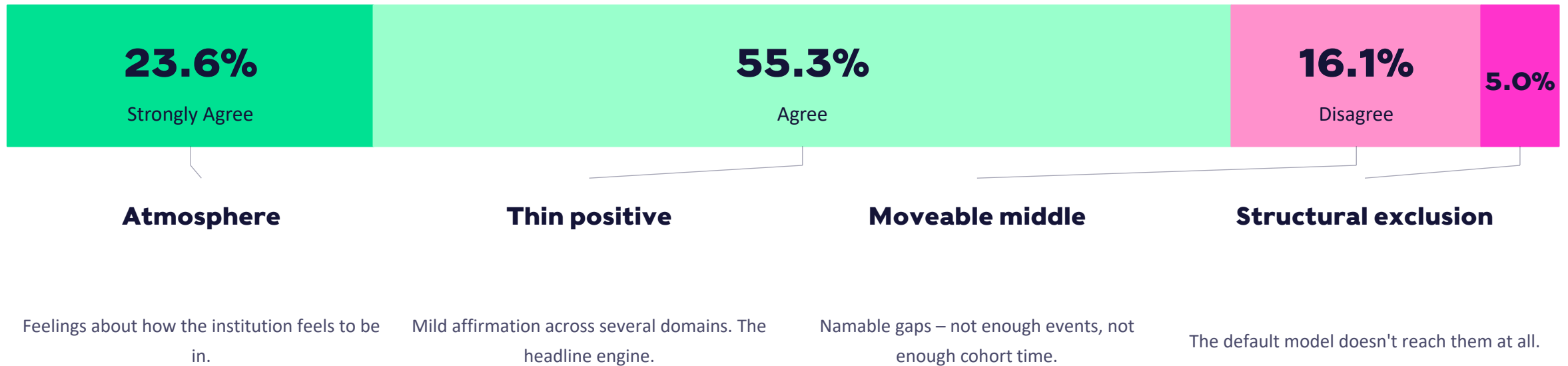
A friend-network architecture

Different kinds of friendship carry different parts of belonging – with one route delivering nothing on the academic side.

FINDING ONE

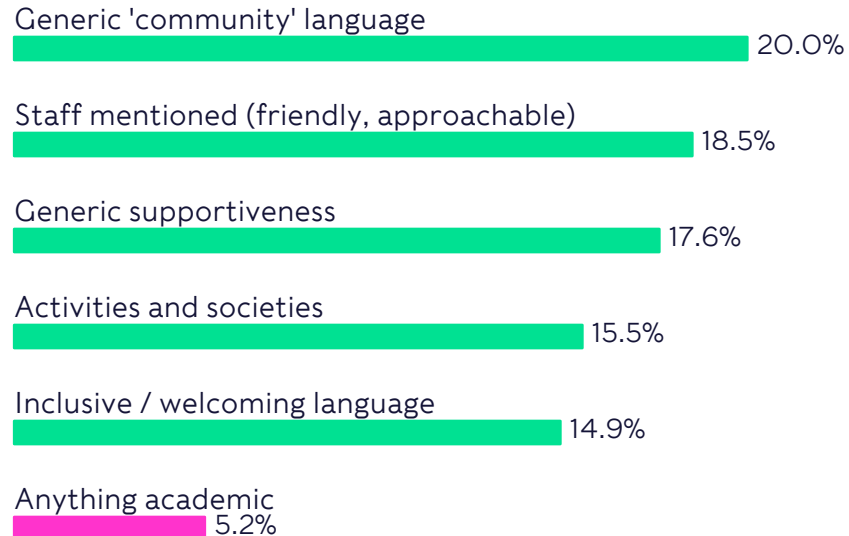
The headline conceals four different kinds of answer.

Students at the four points on the scale aren't grading the same thing. Each group is answering a qualitatively different question – about atmosphere, mild affirmation, namable gaps, or structural exclusion.



Atmosphere, not academic citizenship.

Dominant free-text themes



In their own words

“There's a great environment where I feel I could stop and talk to anyone... 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.”

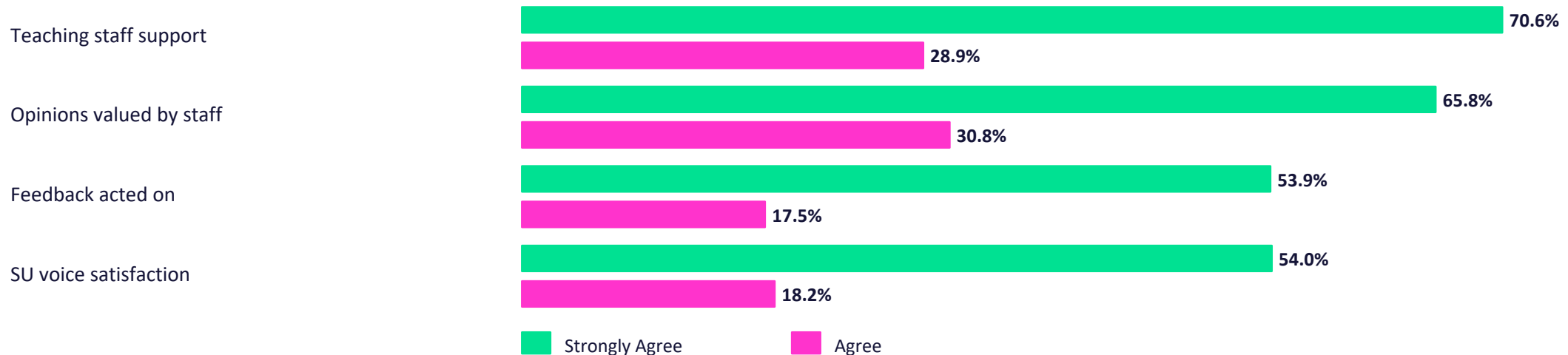
The Strongly Agree answer is mostly about how the institution feels to be in – not about being a known academic citizen of it.

FINDING 1 • AGREE – 55.3%

The thin-positive majority. The engine of the headline.

The Agree group accounts for over half of substantive respondents. They are demographically the sample. Their free-text rate is the lowest of any group (51 per cent), and 18.5 per cent give responses of three words or fewer.

Top-box ('Very well' / 'Very good') rates by group



The Agree group produces its positive belonging answer through mild affirmation across several domains – not strong attachment to any one of them. “Never lonely” rate (8%) sits closer to Disagree (7%) than to Strongly Agree (19%).

The moveable middle. The strategic prize.

14.4%

use hedging language – higher than any group, including Strongly Disagree

11.7%

mention cohort or classmates – higher than Strongly Agree

4.2%

name 'lack of opportunity / not reached' – the highest of any group

39%

feel lonely weekly or more – the highest weekly loneliness in the dataset

“Almost, not quite.”

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

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

“I feel that I could create more community vibes if I were to be present more often.”

Not the most acutely lonely. The most chronically under-connected – and the ones who can name what would close the gap.

FINDING 1 · STRONGLY DISAGREE - 5.0%

Structural exclusion. The default offer doesn't reach them.

Wellbeing profile vs Strongly Agree

Life satisfaction	7.3	→	4.6
Daily loneliness	9%	→	41%
Anxiety (vs SA)	+1 pt higher		

Who they are

Less likely to be first-year (17% vs 29%). More 25–44. More mature, distance, commuter, PG, part-time. More likely to be carers. Concentrated in subjects with looser cohort structure.

In their own words

“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.”

“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 am a single parent and have not been able to attend anything organised as it has all been in the evening.”

Four groups. Four different policy responses.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<p>WHAT THEY'RE TELLING US Atmosphere is working.</p> <p>WHAT TO DO Not where the design problem sits.</p>	<p>WHAT THEY'RE TELLING US Fragile. Could move either way.</p> <p>WHAT TO DO Protect by improving the rest of the academic experience.</p>	<p>WHAT THEY'RE TELLING US Knows what's missing. Has capacity to engage.</p> <p>WHAT TO DO The strategic prize. Structural investment will move this group most reliably.</p>	<p>WHAT THEY'RE TELLING US Default model doesn't fit them.</p> <p>WHAT TO DO Redesign the default offer – not improve its quality.</p>

One number. Four populations. Aggregate analysis misses where the work needs to land.

More than four in ten students who say they belong also feel lonely.

Crossing the belonging question with weekly+ loneliness produces four populations. The 35 per cent in the top-right – belonging without close ties – is the largest non-default group, and the one a belonging score wouldn't reach.

Top row: lonely • Right column: high belonging

Outside and alone Belong low, lonely high

12.7%

Teaching quality positive

69%

Career confidence (0–10)

5.5

OVER-REPRESENTED

LGBTQ+ (+11pp), non-binary, declared disability, White, UK-domiciled, Psychology, Computing. Specific, raw, self-diagnosing. Explicit isolation language at 11 per cent and "no community" at 6 per cent – the highest of any quadrant. "It feels very isolating." "I don't tick a box for them, so I'm forgotten."

Belonging without close ties Belong high, lonely high

35.0%

Teaching quality positive

90%

Career confidence (0–10)

7.1

OVER-REPRESENTED

Under-25s (+6pp), first years (+5pp), LGBTQ+, White, Design & Creative Arts. Anxiety high; close ties absent. The same warm themes as Both Working – friendly staff, close cohort, societies – but with quiet hedges threaded through. "I feel comfortable here, but sometimes it's difficult to connect." Mature-student voices are present alongside under-25s.

Detached but coping Belong low, lonely low

6.7%

Teaching quality positive

74%

Career confidence (0–10)

6.1

OVER-REPRESENTED

Final years (+9pp), 25–44s, men, Black students, Social Sciences. Mature, distance, commuter at 17 per cent. Mature/distance/PG/commuter identifiers at 17 per cent – three times any other quadrant. Matter-of-fact, often unemotional. "I commute, I'm an older student, I don't belong to any particular communities. I come in for lectures and go home."

Both working Belong high, lonely low

45.6%

Teaching quality positive

94%

Career confidence (0–10)

7.7

OVER-REPRESENTED

Asian (+4pp), non-UK domiciled (+4pp), straight, men, Business & Management. Best wellbeing in the sample. Warm and atmospheric, often non-specific. Activities and societies at 19 per cent, inclusive/welcoming language at 10 per cent, friendly staff at 9 per cent. "Friendly and welcoming." "Small classes, close to staff."

Improving the belonging score wouldn't move the 35 per cent. The intervention is connection, not perception.

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:

Has subject friends

66% of sample



Off-course only

29% of sample



No friends

5.5% of sample



Belonging net positive

Staff support net positive

-33pp

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.

Subject friends and off-course friends do different jobs.

Splitting friends four ways (Autumn 2023) shows that the discriminating measures separate cleanly – on some, having any friend is what matters; on others, only subject friends will do.

	Both 57% · n=466	Subject only 8% · n=68	Off-course only 29% · n=238	No friends 5.5% · n=45
Belonging (net positive)	87.6%	79.1%	78.8%	53.3%
People I can call on	90.1%	69.1%	75.6%	29.5%
Lonely daily	12.9%	20.9%	19.9%	44.4%
Career confidence (0–10)	7.42	7.39	6.64	6.57
Free to express ideas	90.6%	90.6%	84.2%	74.4%
Life satisfaction (0–10)	6.59	6.16	5.94	4.98

Career confidence and freedom of expression are binary on having subject friends (highlighted): Subject-only behaves like Both, Off-course-only like No-friends. Subject-only n=68 and No-friends n=45 are small – treat as indicative.

Three layers, three different carriers.

“Belonging” is three goods delivered by three differently-structured peer networks. They differ sharply in how substitutable the route is.

L1

Social-tie infrastructure

Loneliness, anxiety, wellbeing, someone to call on.

HIGH SUBSTITUTABILITY

Any friends carry it

On most measures off-course friends come close to what subject friends deliver on social availability. What matters is that there's someone.

L2

Institutional membership

The felt sense of being part of the community of students and staff – the belonging question itself.

PARTIALLY SUBSTITUTABLE

Off-course carry most; subject friends best

Off-course friends carry 79% to a positive answer vs 87% for subject friends. Societies, identity and accommodation networks all contribute.

L3

Academic citizenship

Being on an academic trajectory: career confidence and freedom to express ideas in academic settings.

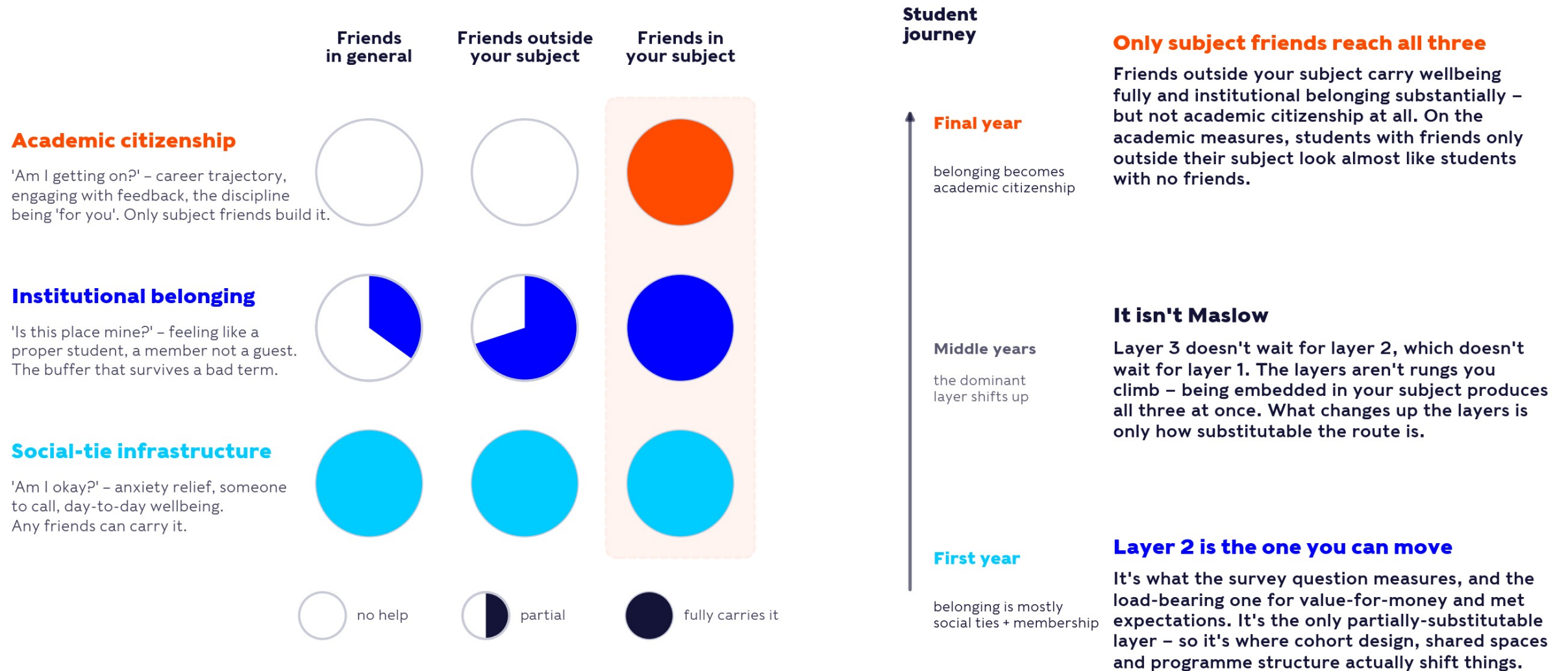
NON-SUBSTITUTABLE

Only subject friends

Subject-only matches Both (7.39 vs 7.42 career confidence). Off-course-only matches No-friends. Off-course friends cannot give an academic trajectory.

Belonging is three layers, not a ladder

Each layer is produced by a different mix of friendships – and the higher you go, the fewer friend types can build it



Subject-embeddedness is the common cause: the same structural condition produces social ties, institutional membership and academic citizenship together.

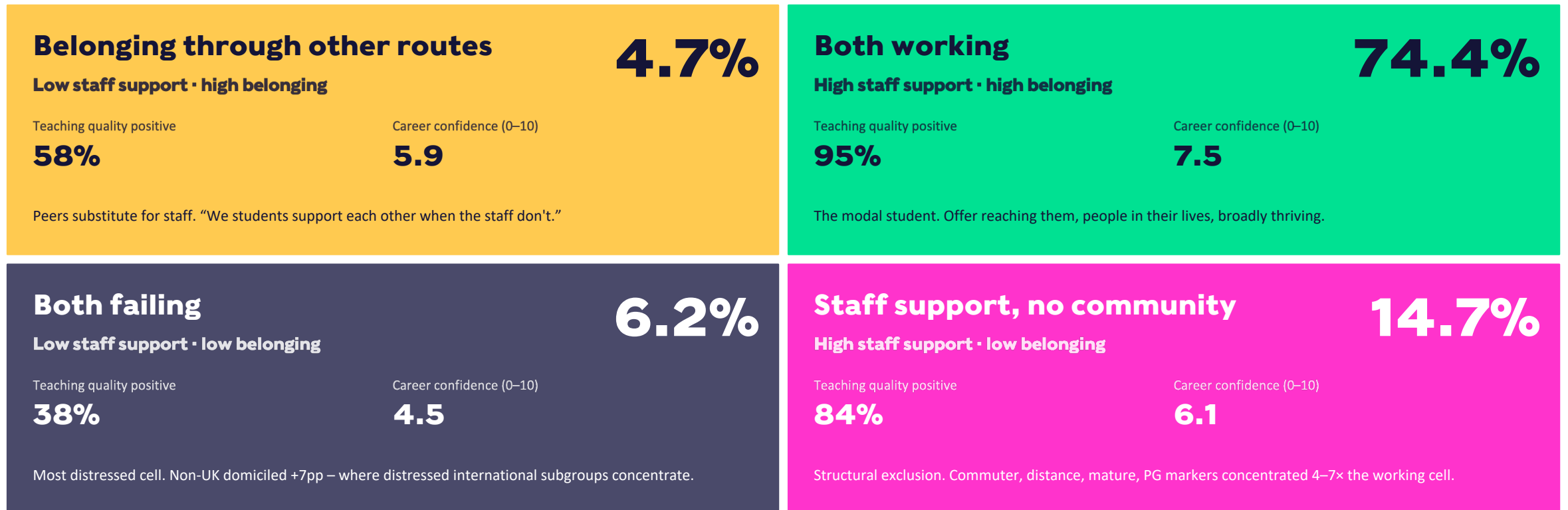
Source: Wonkhe SUs Student Experience polling, friend-network analysis. Relationships are correlational.

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.

Structure produces both. Friends make staff navigable.

Reading where students' answers don't line up, and where they describe sequence directly, three patterns emerge from the free-text responses.

Common cause

Structure produces both

Small cohorts, group work, shared space and persistent year-groups produce friends and warm staff relationships at once – neither precedes the other.

“We didn't have any group projects so I never really had any reason to interact with my classmates or teachers.”

97 small-cohort responses

The anxiety bridge

Friends → staff engagement

Where students describe a sequence, it more often runs from peers to staff. Friends provide the social scaffolding that lowers the barrier to using the staff route.

“I am able to contact staff should I need to and have good support from members of my cohort.”

Friends make the offer navigable

The cascade

No friends → withdrawal

The absence of peer ties is described as causing withdrawal from the academic environment – which then makes the staff route inaccessible.

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

109 withdrawal-cascade responses

FINDING TWO

Belonging is produced by several substitutable routes.

To separate cause from halo, look at students whose answers don't line up – the ones who rate a predictor high but say they don't belong, or the reverse. Read what they actually wrote.

OFFER HIGH · BELONGING LOW

Among high-staff-support students, 16% still rate belonging low. For high voice satisfaction, 14%. For high SU activities, 14%.

Free text is dominated by structural-exclusion themes. Mature, PG, distance, commuter at 4x the rate of the matching positive-positive group. Isolation language at 8x.

“There is no sense of community for older students.”

OFFER LOW · BELONGING HIGH

Among low-staff-support students, 41% still belong. For low voice satisfaction, 62%. For low SU activities, 52%.

These students give specific reasons. Another route is doing the work – peer cohort, PGR community, WhatsApp groups, committee membership.

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

Four routes a student can use. They only need one or two open.



Staff route

Teachers who know students individually. The strongest single predictor in the data.



Peer route

Cohort, classmates, WhatsApp groups, sub-discipline networks – often student-organised.



Voice route

Reps, SSCCs, feedback acted on. Citizenship and the experience of being heard.



SU / activities route

Societies and activities as belonging infrastructure – especially for international students.

Where one route is low and belonging is also low, the failure isn't any single channel – it's that structural exclusion blocks all four routes at once.

FINDING THREE

Students read the question at two different scales.

Around one in five mentions course, department, cohort, classmate, seminar or programme. Around 17% mention university, campus or wider community. When belonging works, students don't disambiguate. When it fails, they often diagnose which level it's failing at.

SUBJECT - LEVEL

“I feel part of the community within the course, not within the wider university.”

More reliable lever. Closer to the academic experience, closer to peers, closer to the place where teaching happens.

INSTITUTION - LEVEL

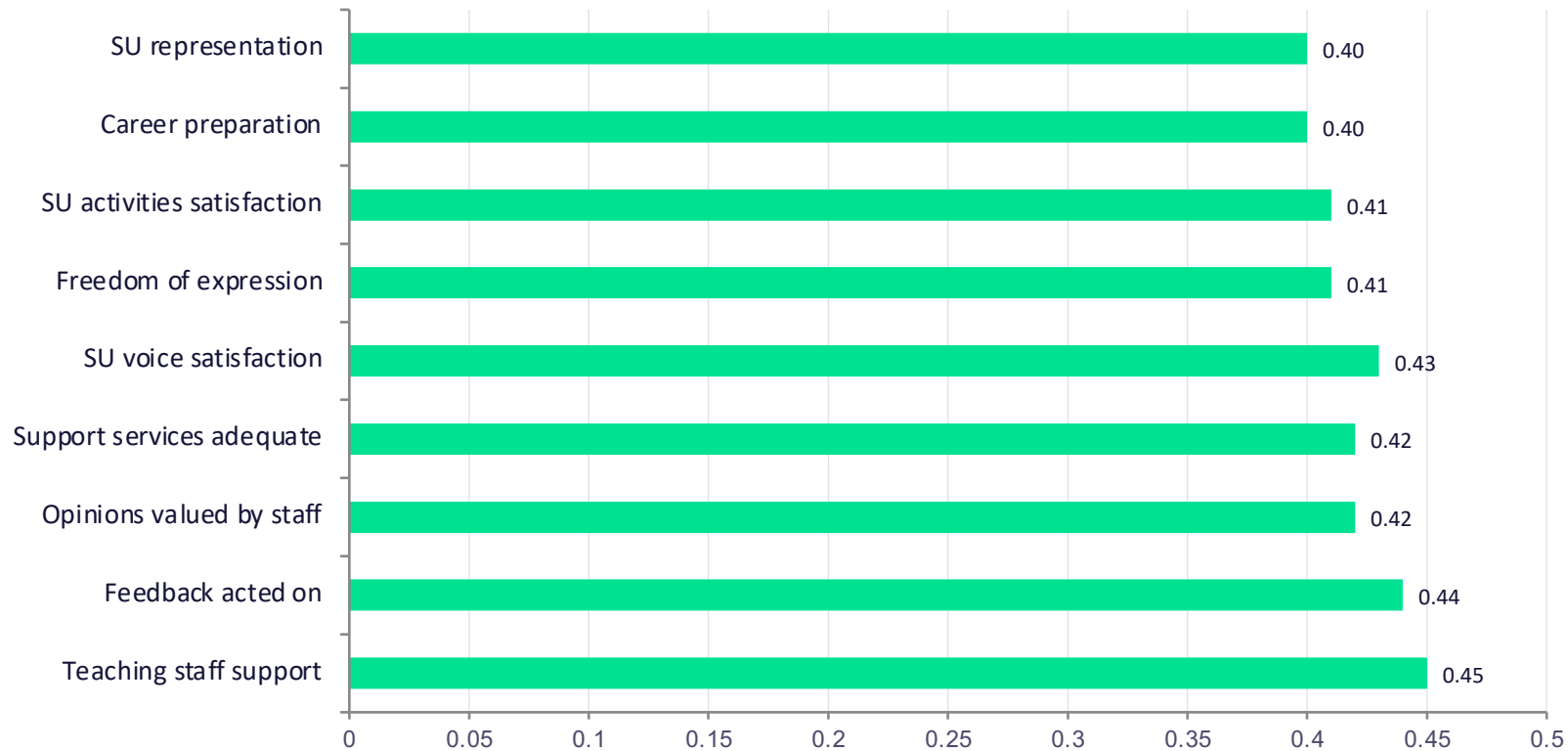
“Good student experience and small course knowing each other but often moments of isolation at university.”

Reaches students for whom the subject route isn't working. Complement, not substitute.

Two institutions comparing themselves are partly comparing how their students are reading an ambiguous question.

FINDING FOUR

Teaching staff support is the strongest single predictor.



In the full model

42%

of variance in belonging explained by all predictors together.

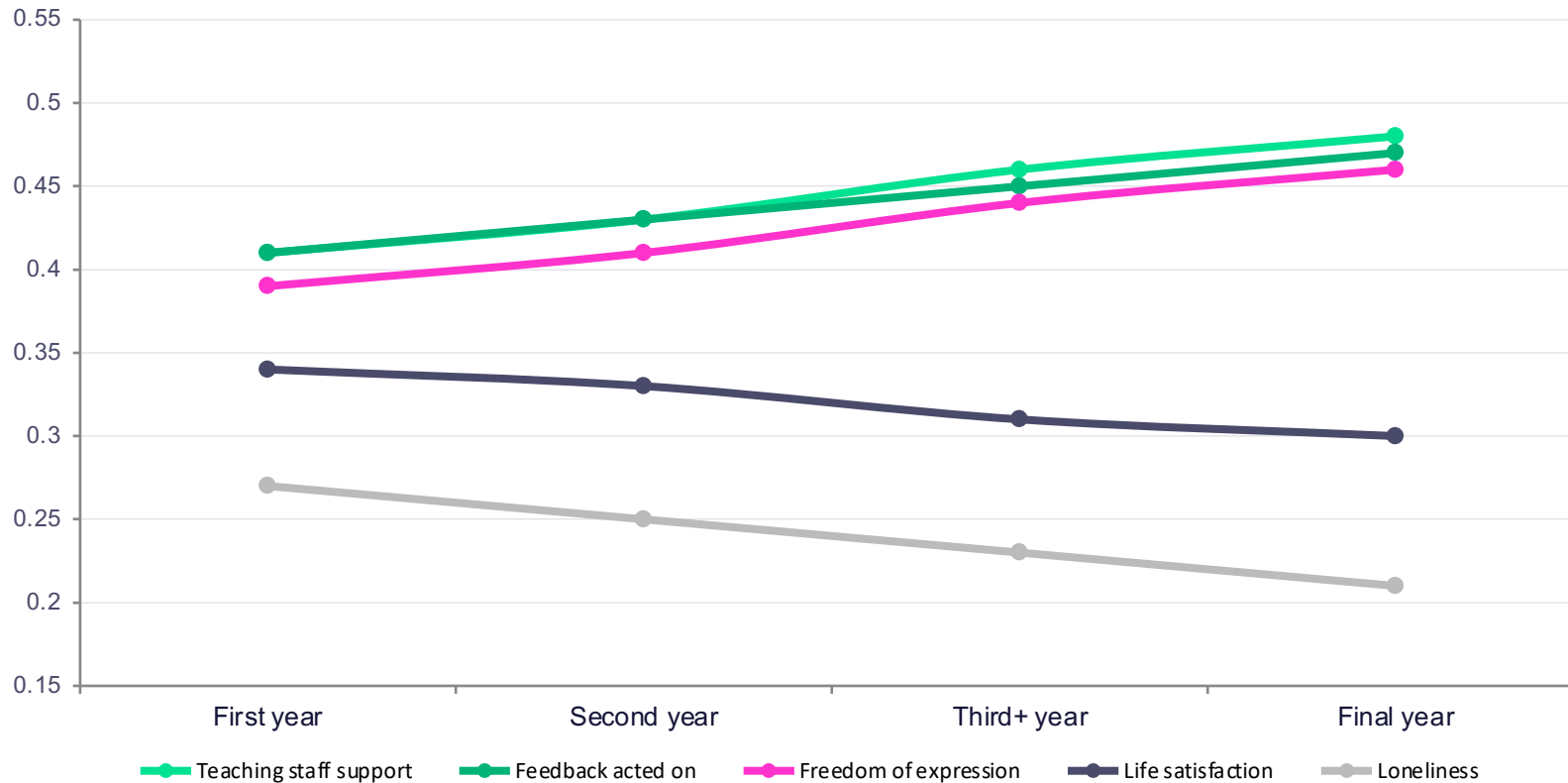
36%

from academic questions alone – 86% of what the full model gets in explanatory power (not 86% of the causal story; blocks overlap).

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.

FINDING FOUR · DETAIL

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



Two stories

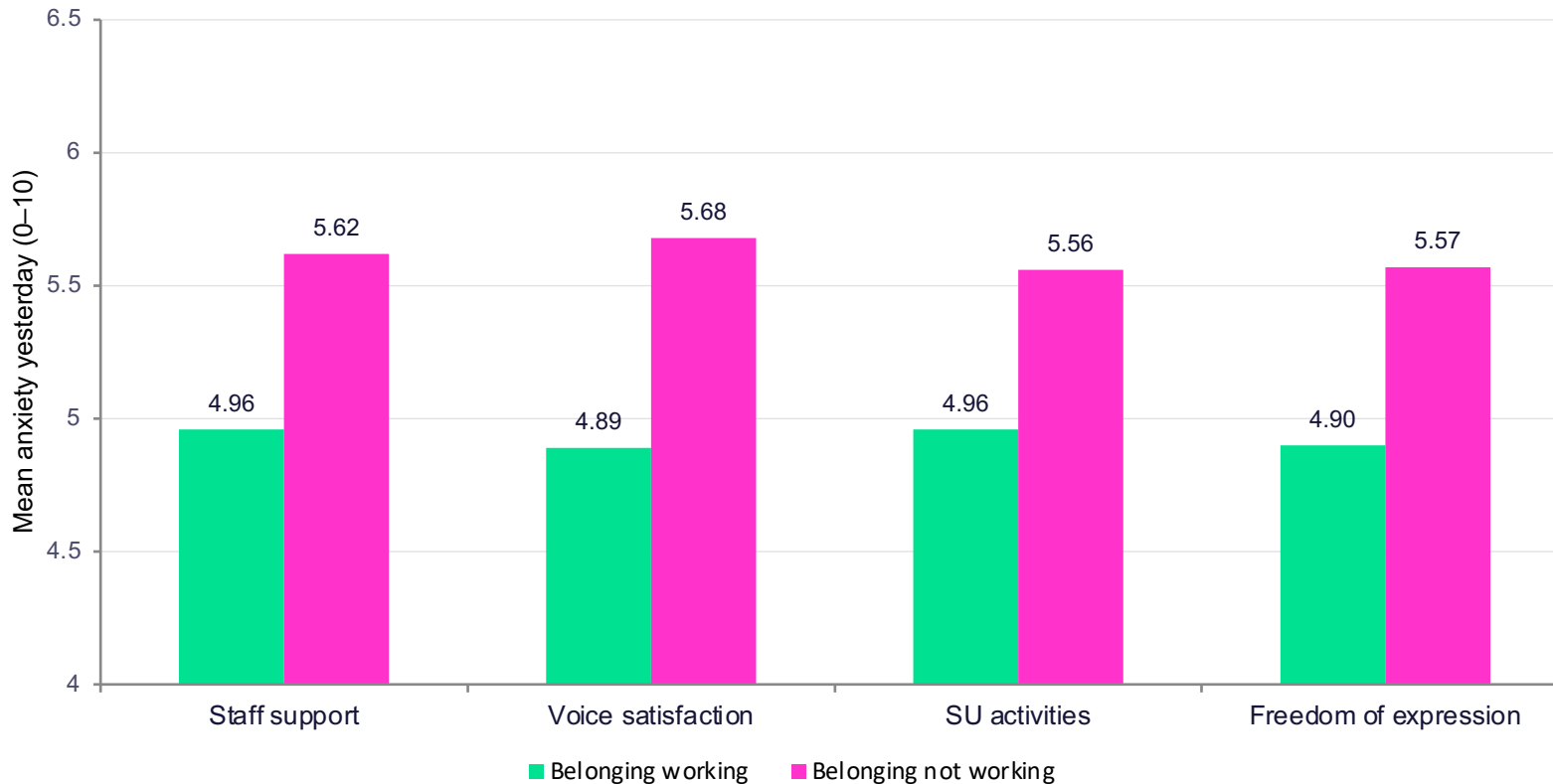
Year 1 belonging is partly a feelings state.
Loneliness and life satisfaction do real work.

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.

FINDING FIVE

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



The pattern

Across every predictor, students whose institutional offer is working but whose belonging isn't are systematically more anxious than those for whom both are working.

+15pp

on daily loneliness in the offer-working-but-belonging-not group.

Belonging-as-rated = routes provided × the student's ability to use them. Opportunity alone doesn't dissolve the anxiety bridge.

Anxiety-targeted, not opportunity-targeted.

Peer infrastructure that doesn't handle the anxiety bridge will land only for the students who would have engaged anyway. What the qualitative free text keeps asking for:



Group social mentoring schemes

That cause students to know others before they have to walk into something alone.



Subject focused induction activity

Students get to know others who share an academic identity



Anticipatory accessibility

Disabled students are 10pp more likely to cite anxiety at the same level of interest. Reasonable-adjustment duties under Equality Act apply at the level of participation design – not just venue access.

FINDING SIX

FoE is a seminar-climate question. Rep work is invisible community infrastructure.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

6.8% of FoE free text uses '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.”

FoE is a function of whether your classmates and the seminar room feel like a safe space. At the level of how students explain them, belonging and FoE are much the same question.

REP WORK

9.6%

of voice free text mentions reps, SSCCs or student-staff committees – the highest mention rate of any institutional mechanism in any free-text column.

13.4% → 6.2%

Rep mention rate from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree on belonging – it scales with belonging.

The mechanism functions. The attribution doesn't.

FINDING SEVEN

Strong subject communities can suppress dissent within them.

FoE correlates with belonging at 0.41 – on a par with the strongest predictors. But the cross-tab is asymmetric in a way that reveals what the question is measuring.

HIGH FoE · HIGH BELONGING

The expected case. Communities of disagreement built on trust.

HIGH FoE · LOW BELONGING – 16%

Atomised settings. FoE rating is high because there is little meaningful peer community in which disagreement could have consequences. Free speech as the negative space of an absent community.

LOW FoE · LOW BELONGING

The fully disconnected. Excluded from community and unable to speak inside it.

LOW FoE · HIGH BELONGING – 8%

Cohort-tight, discursively narrow. Political constraint mentions 4.5x higher than the both-positive group. Medicine, Maths, Bio, Engineering over-represented. The community has a dominant view that can't safely be challenged.

Any structure that intensifies subject identity has to scaffold disagreement inside it – not just deepen identification with it.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Design for the architecture, not the headline.



Conventional belonging strategy – more events, more societies, more wrap-around – moves the social-tie and membership layers. It won't move academic citizenship for the off-course-only population (29 per cent, over-represented among disabled, mature and commuting students). Conventional academic strategy won't reach the no-friends population whose withdrawal has already happened.

The intervention that does both: subject-level structural design that lets subject friendships and staff relationships co-emerge, deliberately combined with SU-owned off-course infrastructure. Complements, not substitutes – the students who do best get both; the worst, neither.



PART THREE

What needs building.

Joint, programme-anchored, multi-functional. The missing structural layer that makes the seven findings add up.

The UK has the routes – atomised. Several European systems bundle them.

UK – ATOMISED

- Four routes owned by different actors – course teams, central SU, academic societies, careers services.
- No joining structure at programme level.
- SSLCs often function as feedback ritual.
- Zero student responses can be treated as tacit agreement.
- Activities, voice, welcome and academic identity run on separate tracks.

ELSEWHERE – BUNDLED

- Dutch educational officers hold scheduled meetings with programme directors.
- Dutch thuisbasis: recognisable physical space close to the academic department, funded as a default.
- Estonian institute associations supply a fifth of council membership.
- Rep, society, social and welcome under one programme-anchored body.
- Students experience one community – not four channels.

The joining structure is what the evidence points to as the missing layer – and where every finding starts to add up.

Every finding above runs through it.



Staff route

— Sits inside the programme, close to teaching teams.



Voice route

— Reps live inside it. Attribution is built in.



Peer route

— Welcome and social activity are part of its remit.



Activities route

— Subject identity is what the body is for.



Anxiety bridge

— Trusted peers are already part of the community.



Bi-scaled belonging

— Course-anchored but visible – a subject home.

THE CONTEXT

The staff route is the one massification erodes most directly.

Larger classes, fewer staff per student, less individual contact time, less responsive feedback at scale. The mechanism the model says does most of the work is the one under most pressure.

The cheaper, structural levers

Seeded peer-organised digital cohort infrastructure

WhatsApp groups, Teams channels, asynchronous study spaces. Close to zero marginal cost. Already happens bottom-up – just not for late arrivers, transfers, part-timers.

Stable sub-cohort structure

Persistent seminar groups across modules. Subject- rather than module-level identity. Sustained co-teaching by the same staff teams across years.

Visible voice work

“Your SU course rep raised X, here's what the department has agreed to.” Communication, not new provision. Uses existing labour and existing infrastructure.

Caveat: the worst use of constrained funding is to treat scaffolding as a budget-neutral substitute for the staff route.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Five things follow. All rest on one organising point.

The thing the evidence points to isn't an SU initiative or a university initiative. It's a joint structure. Neither partner can deliver it alone.

The university brings

Programme structure

Staff time

Physical estate

Academic governance roles

The SU brings

The rep system

Activities infrastructure

Community-building tradition

Democratic legitimacy

What the evidence points to building.

- 01** | Universities and SUs should jointly build subject-level bodies rather than running parallel belonging initiatives.
- 02** | Those bodies should combine representation, society and activity, welcome, peer support and academic governance under one roof.
- 03** | The default offer should be redesigned through these bodies for commuters, mature, distance, PG, disabled and time-constrained students – without branding it as remedial.
- 04** | Those bodies should stage belonging across the journey: peer connection first, academic citizenship later, both through the same body.
- 05** | Those bodies should deliberately scaffold disagreement where strong cohort identity risks becoming conformity.

Four levers that sit inside university authority.



Subject- and discipline-level organisation is the primary belonging lever

Persistence of sub-cohorts, continuity of teaching teams, relational quality between staff and identifiable students. In the UK, the relevant unit is subject or discipline rather than individual course title. Subject-level structure is the policy variable – not strategy documents.



Governance rights matter as much as governance roles

Subject- and school-level rep bodies need written rights in programme review, module change consultation, and QA processes. The rep system being inside academic governance is what gives reps something meaningful to do at the level students actually study at.



Space, time and recognition need to be made available

A recognisable physical space close to the department. Time allowance for serious involvement. Credit-bearing recognition where the framework allows. Portable digital credentials.



Welcome is a joint, subject-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. The single biggest lever on first-year belonging.

Four levers that sit inside SU authority.



Reframe rep coordination as community convening

Train reps in groups, present feedback to groups, give budgets to groups, ask groups to develop year-long agendas. A group with a name, a logo, a shared identity and a remit beyond representation is a fundamentally different proposition.



Treat the academic society and the rep system as one subject-level community

The attribution gap is solved by community, not by communications. “You said, we did” only works when there is a recognisable, continuous “we” doing the saying.



Treat anxiety-mediated peer scaffolding as core SU work

Named-buddy schemes, peer-led welcome-back at the start of each academic year, social infrastructure that doesn't require introducing yourself to strangers. Operated inside the subject-level body.



Recognise activities as one strand of subject-level community

Activities don't independently predict belonging much once satisfaction is controlled. But they are the channel through which the SU becomes visible. International students are the clearest case.

Three implications for the wider policy debate.

Don't recommend 'designing belonging in' without naming the structural form

Sector framing that prescribes the direction but not the form risks each institution building partial solutions that the data say won't hold up.

Stop reporting belonging as a single number

The headline conceals at least three distinct populations. The policy direction is different for each. Measure and model the question separately by year of study, and at both subject and institution scale. Model freedom of expression and belonging together – in a sizable sub-population they are inversely related.

Add autonomy to survey instruments as a direct item

Co-creation, agency over learning, structured participation in shaping the academic environment. Surveys often capture the other three Pearson foundations but proxy autonomy through voice and consultation – which isn't the same thing.

Three things worth arguing about.

Q1

Where in your institution does a subject-level body of this kind already exist in embryonic form? What's stopping it being built out?

Q2

Which of the four routes – staff, peer, voice, activities – is most fragile in your setting right now, and is anxiety-mediated scaffolding doing any of the bridging work?

Q3

If you reported belonging separately by year of study and by subject-vs-institution scale, which numbers would you stop trusting?

Thank you.

Questions, pushback, requests for follow-up analysis – all welcome.

Wonke SUs Student Experience Survey

2023–2026 · 178 institutions · 18,590 responses