

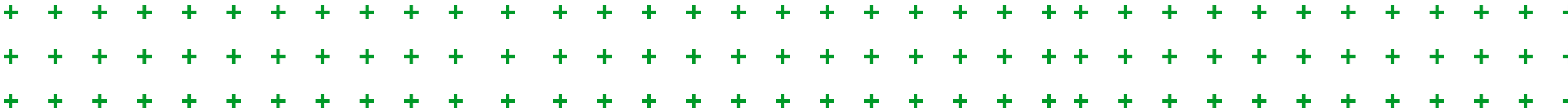
Heard and held

(aka the session after lunch)

Student voice, community and belonging, and having friends are all quality issues

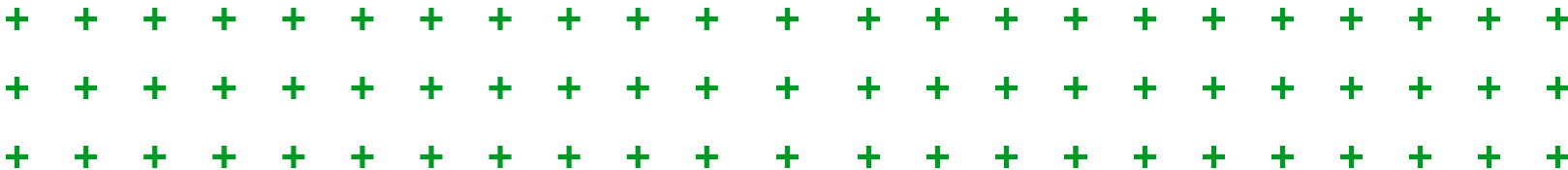


B	I	N	G	O
13	18	37	58	61
6	27	32	54	65
1	19	FREE SPACE	56	67
15	25	38	55	69
14	29	36	59	66



The background

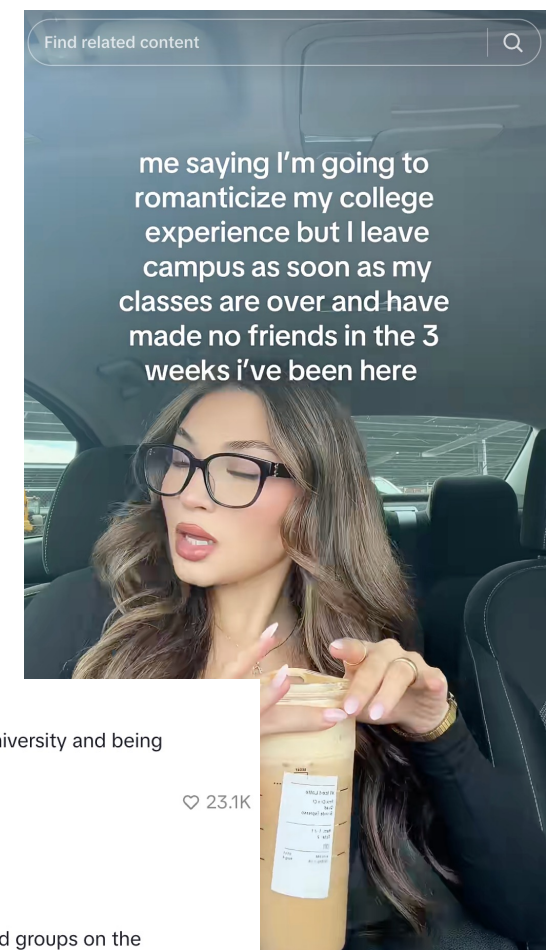
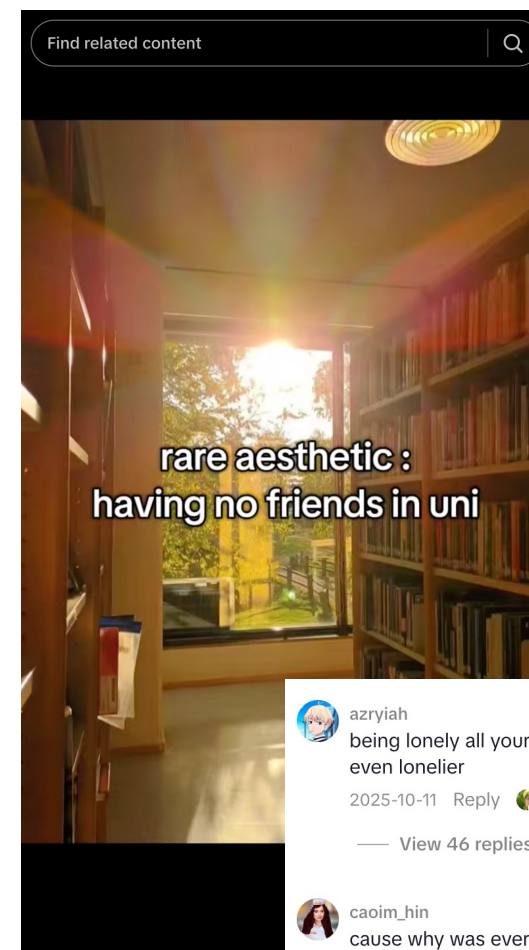
- Research in 2019, linked engaging in extracurriculars to better wellbeing (Wonkhe)
- In 2022, identified four foundations of belonging – connection, inclusion, support and autonomy (Wonkhe & Pearson)
- In 2024, anxiety was found to be the key barrier to engagement (UPP Foundation)
- In 2026, strong sense of belonging and an inclusive campus are vital to the student experience as teaching (HEPI)



Doomscrolling

- “I genuinely think I’m having the worst experience ever...I wanted to go to the freshers fayre and had no one to go with.”
- “I just feel so left out... i wasn’t able to move out like i wished... i feel im missing out on being with my friends and being able to have the uni experience.”
- “day 2 at uni no friends,”
- “walked 10 miles alone just to not be alone in my room,”
- “being at uni for a month having made no friends and haven’t been out once”
- “freshers please hmu my flatmates don’t leave their rooms.”

universities have built systems that produced loneliness at scale and then acted surprised by the results.

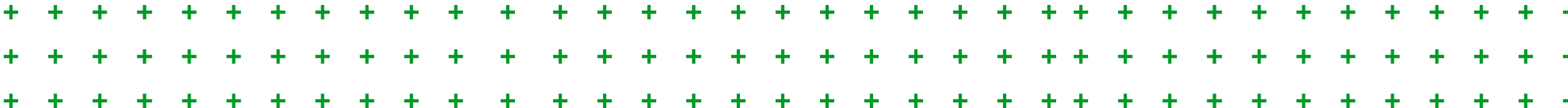


idk
guys , its really simple... when the lecture is done , ask people around you if they are down to grab a coffee or something... works wonders
2025-10-15 Reply
View 7 replies

sam.simcard
I talk to people on my course and they literally refuse to talk back😭

Belonging isn't one thing

- You can't fix belonging with a few posters, an event or someone shouting in an induction lecture "you belong here!"
- Belonging is tied up in things like academic quality, voice, and the everyday conditions of learning





Friends have benefits

- So we analysed over seven waves of data across 18,000 students and 178 UK institutions
- Main findings: friends matter
- They matter in a specific, structural, and academically consequential way that is often forgotten about

WONKHE

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.



Friends have benefits

- When students think about belonging, they're thinking about three different things:
 - Having close friends
 - Having a place at the institution
 - Feeling part of academic life
- The strongest statistical predictor of belonging is the relational quality of teaching staff
- But look closer at the data and what appears to be the staff relationship mattering most is actually a visible sign of something deeper – friendships and course structures that make students able to approach staff in the first place

Argue for a change in structures. Universities and SUs need to build programme or school-level bodies that combine representation, academic community, welcome, peer support, and subject identity into one visible home – neater and more compact, but also linking up all the factors that produce belonging in the first place.

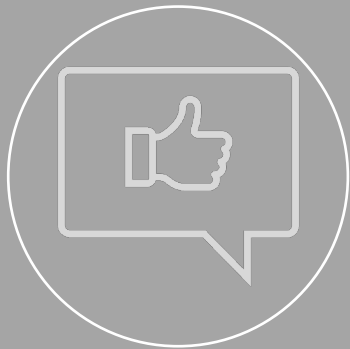
What is belonging

Whenever we looked at belonging related questions – they measure different things for each student



Strongly agree

Generic comments about community, staff, activities, societies, not much mention of course reps/academic life. About staff being nice (not feedback), how the institution feels to be in>academic citizen



Agree

mention positive things followed by a "but" – this group can be lonely but still register as belonging



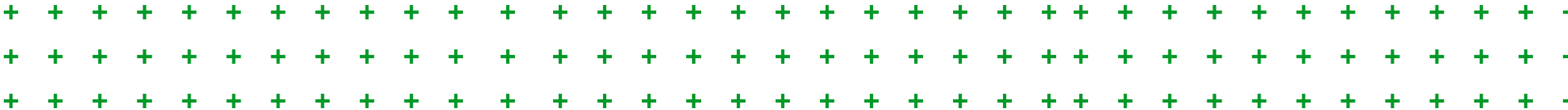
Disagree

The most important, not describing exclusion, describing gaps (not enough time, events). They know what would help and can articulate it



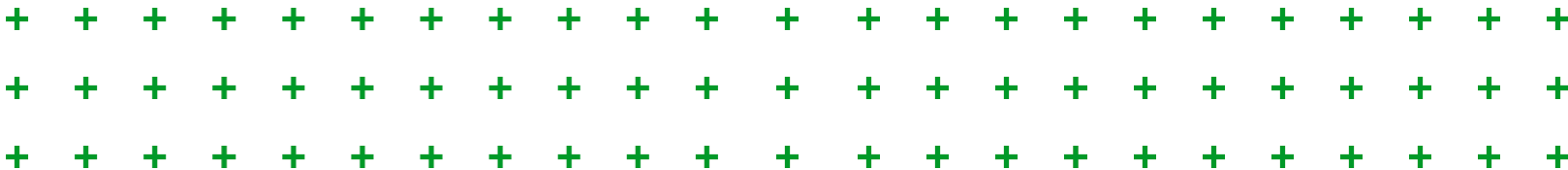
Strong disagree

They feel shut out – mature/distance/part time/postgrad. They point out structural gaps and consider themselves excluded.



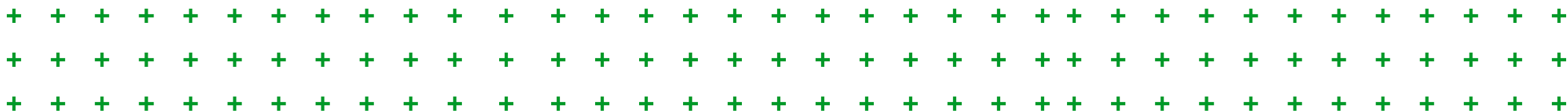
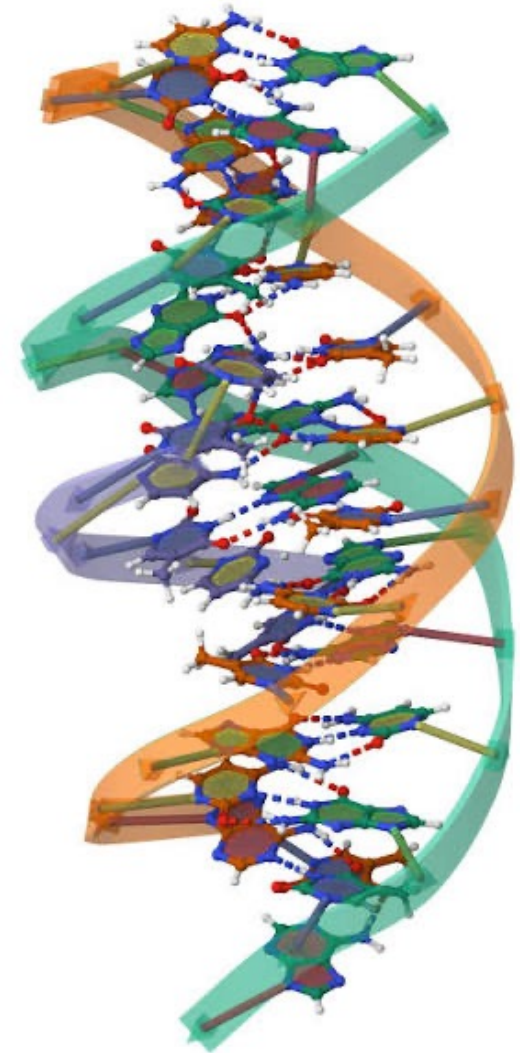
The triple helix of belonging

- Close friendships – having people to rely on, a close knit circle, your classic “friendship group”
- Feling of having a place at the institution –the sense of community between students and staff, belonging to the place and finding it works for you
- Academic citizenship – preparing for the future, freedom of expression, feeling like a participant in academic life



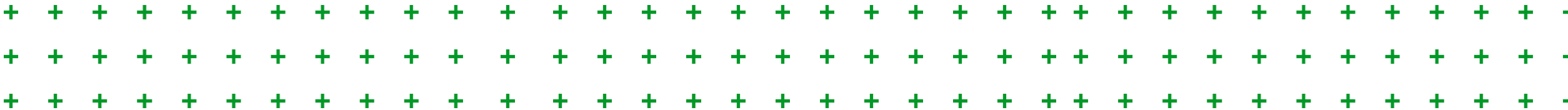
The triple helix of belonging

- Close friendships – easy to get from any source, friends who aren't from your course still deliver 4/5s of what on-course friends do
- Academic citizenship is where off-course friends can't help, they can't help you with your assignment or how to approach a seminar because they're studying marine biology
- Why does this matter though?
- A student with off-course friends won't flag as having belonging issues but their career confidence is much lower
- For them, community sits alongside their studies, not within it
- Vice versa is also true – on-course friends have academic integration but are more lonely



Four routes in

- Belonging can be produced by four different routes – problem is if you’re shut out of one, you’re shut out of them all
- Do they know staff? Do they have connections with classmates? Do they feel heard through reps? Do they use SU activities as their belonging infrastructure?
- Where one route is low and belonging is low, what’s shutting students out isn’t a single channel – it’s structural exclusion
- Sometimes the offer is there, but students can’t reach it



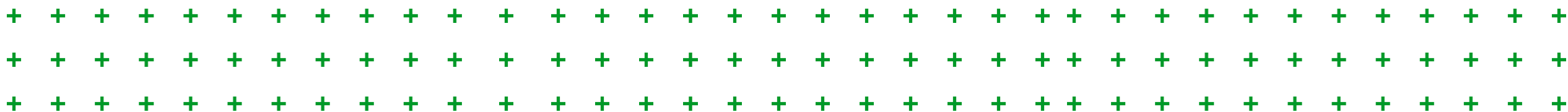
Staff as symptom

- Across all 55 survey questions, the one that moves most closely with belonging is teaching staff support
- The reason it scores so highly is what sits beneath it: friendships and course structures
- Having friends on your course makes staff approachable. Small cohorts, group work, and shared spaces mean heavier interaction with staff; friends provide the social scaffolding that lowers the barrier to using the staff route
- Without that scaffolding, students don't connect with each other or with staff – they need to be working together in the same room for belonging to form



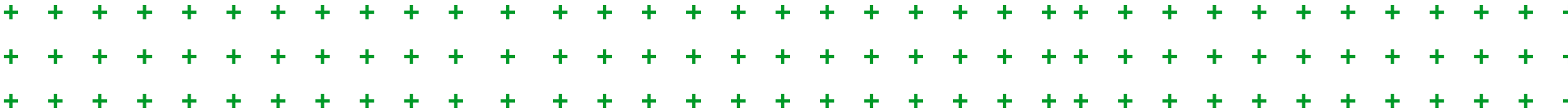
Anxiety

- You can build all the scaffolding in the world but it doesn't produce belonging: build it and they will come doesn't work
- Students can have access to multiple routes to belonging but still not come and that's anxiety that's the blocker
- Many students will describe not having someone to go to an event with, but what they're really describing is anxiety that opportunity alone won't dissolve
- Social mentoring models, where students don't walk into events alone and don't have to introduce themselves, tackle anxiety rather than just opportunity



It's a joint initiative to make belonging work

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



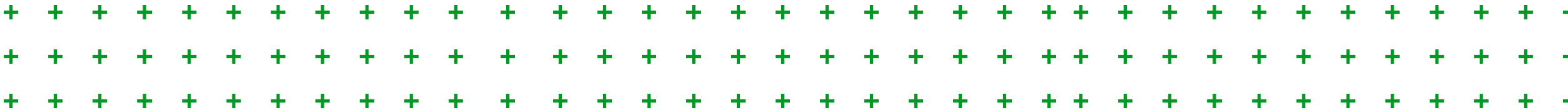
Three things worth arguing about.

- 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?

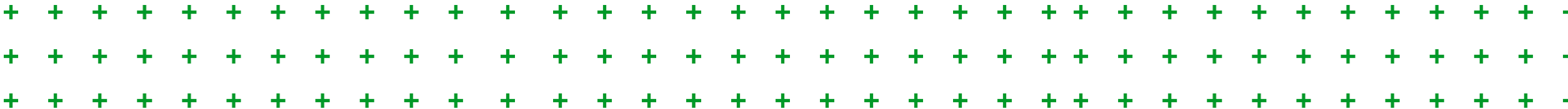


How to address the student voice bit of the NSS

Getting past the feeling of “nothing
ever changes”



*"We have been repeatedly asked
to fill in surveys and
questionnaires, and it feels like
nothing ever changes"*



Being asked

- Being asked for
thing – you find

Opinions valued by staff →

15%

Asked, not heard

26%

Asked & heard

39%

The lukewarm middle

10%

Neither

10%

Heard, not asked

Opportunities to give feedback →

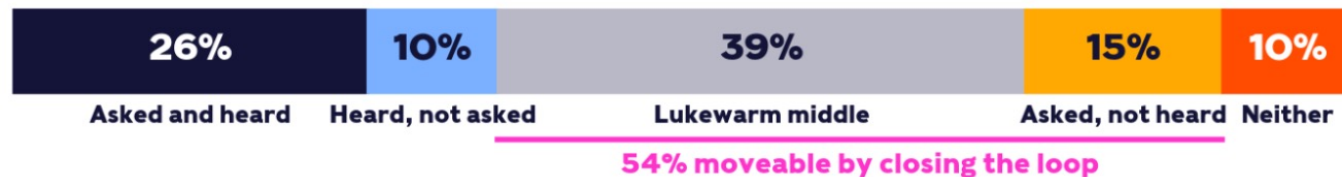


Asked not heard

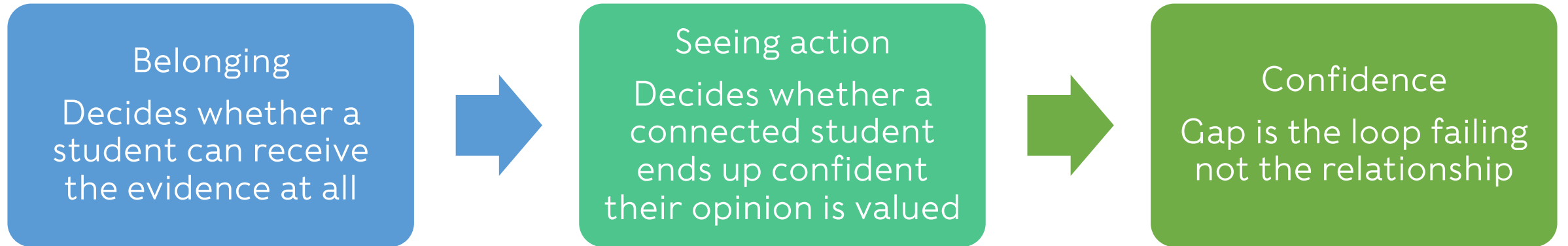
- Lukewarm middle (39%) — not unhappy, unconvinced. Missing evidence, not machinery.
- Asked, not heard (15%) — consulted to the max and it isn't landing. The cheapest group to move.
- Asked & heard (26%) — voice works, but usually rests on one good course team.
- Heard, not asked (10%) — small cohorts, relationship over process. Doesn't scale.
- Neither (10%) — angry and disconnected. Lonely students, PGRs and disabled students over-represented.

The five kinds of student

Five clusters of student voice



What's driving it?





You said, we did (I guess)

- This works when it's done in a specific way and really only for the students who already feel like they belong
- When it works:
 - Chosen and run by reps who get full access to the feedback data — analysing it, sitting on committees, writing the report-back themselves
 - Specific to the course or module, and honest when the answer was no

When it doesn't work:

- Sent from the centre as generic messaging — celebrating new microwaves while the module is still chaos
- Aimed at the disengaged tenth, who read a glossy campaign as provocation, not evidence

When it's done by the uni, it feels like marketing

When it's done by student, it feels like representation



What to do

1. Making the response compulsory before the asking
 - In Estonia at the University of Tartu – completing module feedback is required (feedback is reciprocal) and staff must explain what's changed with summaries – no need for amazon vouchers. Compulsory collection without visible response doesn't help though
2. Bring the two together at subject level
 - Build in belonging though social mentoring/academic societies – these groups can make things happen and pass on what students say (particularly where may be disengaged in formal structures)
3. Know whose job is whose
 - Response is the uni's obligation, SU's lead on the student voice stuff but belonging is a partnership



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Okay go to lunch!



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