

Strategies for Student Belonging: The Nexus of Policy and Practice in Higher Education.

A Practice Report

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Abstract

This practice report, framed within transition pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010), seeks to offer suggestions to assist higher education educators and administrators to develop and apply policies to foster student belonging. The authors of this article are employed at an Australian university which offers alternative pathways for students to enter a mainstream university degree. The authors were part of a project sub-committee responsible for reviewing literature on the definition of, and approaches to, belonging and writing a report with suggestions to enhance student engagement and progression. The report concluded that belonging should be a “whole-of-institution” approach (TEQSA, 2020) where all aspects of a student’s journey are considered when developing and applying student success strategies. This practice report culminates past studies and offers belonging enhancing teaching advice, policy suggestions and learning tools to strengthen connections between students and the higher education institutions in which they are enrolled.

Keywords: Transition pedagogy; student belonging; connections; academic pathways.

Introduction

Student belonging as a concept can be defined as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, cited in Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 908). In the context of transition pedagogy framework (Kift et al., 2010), we can conceptualise belonging as something that students do (behaviour), feel (emotion), and think about (cognitive connection), which is in flux through various time-periods, and varies by context (Kahu et al., 2020). Simply put, belonging is a key factor for a student’s success (Strayhorn, 2018).

This practice report emanated from researching how belonging can be applied to support student retention in a first-year pathway program and successful transition to a mainstream university degree. Student success can be measured in multiple ways and retention has been a consistent measure of this. Retention can be broadly defined as a student who enrolls in a degree and remains enrolled until they complete the degree (Seidman, 2005). This practice report presents an understanding of belonging based on the notion of a “whole-of-institution” (TEQSA, 2020) approach, a summary of findings and toolkit for engagement strategies which foster student belonging in higher education. The more inclusive, respectful and caring a student’s learning experience is, the more likely they will develop a sense of belonging to an institution. Aspects of the belonging toolkit included can be applied to other education settings.



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Contexts of Belonging

The early parts of the original report were written during campus closures, isolation restrictions and online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This intensified the need to understand the meaning of student belonging and ways to achieve it. It was a testing time to see if students felt like they belonged in a new cohort, despite often having no campus experience, little contact with classmates, restricted teaching methods and instructor connections. For most students, not having to battle with public transport and having the comforts of studying at home was seen as attractive. Conversely, self-dependence, isolation, reduced confidence and motivation was a challenge, especially when students could not interact, let alone see, their classmates. The sense of disconnection from learning was particularly pronounced for students from a migrant background and international students (Weng et al., 2021). For some students, mental health triggers and fatigue were experienced. For many starting students, with idealistic expectations of their tertiary studies, negative experiences started to outweigh the positive ones of being a university student. Even though many restrictions have now been removed, the goal posts for the teaching landscape for universities and educational institutions have changed, and many are reviewing their teaching models to weigh up the pros and cons of online versus face-to-face teaching, including students' preferences and academic success, work/life balance and responsibilities, and even institutions' financial savings.

The fulfillment of the need to belong is a powerful concept in numerous areas in society outside of higher education. The common human need of belonging features strongly in humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow's concept of a hierarchy of needs (cited in Lester et al., 1983). The need for emotional relationships and acceptance drives human behaviour to reduce loneliness, isolation, depression, and anxiety. Consciously or unconsciously, we all strive to belong.

Parallels can be made between transitions from secondary to tertiary education, and migration between homelands and new countries of citizenship, although the latter is obviously more life changing. In both instances, individuals look for acceptance and belonging, and are straddled between where they come from and where they are going – part of their primary identity. This highlights that an individual can belong to a plurality of categories, thus “we must consider the intersection of variables such as gender, class, generation and ethnicity. These variables influence the individual and at the same time constitute flexible and often complex processes of belonging and experience of inclusion and exclusion” (Fangen et al., 2012, p. 9). This also indicates that it is not only the individual looking to find their place, but also that the environment/place, community and close contacts need to strive to recognise and reciprocate this and set in place deliberate practices to embrace new individuals for ‘belonging’ to begin.

Alternatively, if “feeling like you belong” does not occur, it can lead to social exclusion and alienation. Van Caudenberg et al., (2020) point out “experiences of exclusion and struggles to claim specific educational spaces as places where they “belong” often result in feelings of being an outsider rather than a valued member” (p.431).

Literature Review: Belonging - A Shared Understanding

The concept of belonging is often noted as being difficult to articulate precisely (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman 2020) and has been a popular topic of discussion for the last decade. The most salient definitions found in the literature refer to belonging as “students' perception of feeling valued and respected by other students and feeling like a valued part of the university context” (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020, p. 377).

A related but more nuanced definition of belonging can be found within transition pedagogy (Kift et. al., 2010). Belonging can be conceptualised as one of the four interrelated elements based on the relationship between the student and the institution (Kahu et al., 2020). These elements are “self-efficacy, emotions, belonging and wellbeing - [that] act as mediating variables, or pathways, which increase or decrease the likelihood of engagement” (Kahu et al., 2020, p. 659). This notion of belonging suggests that a student's sense of connection, motivation and achievement are shaped by the institution. More research is required to learn how institutions can more positively shape a student's sense of belonging (Kahu et. al., 2020). There is strong existing literature on the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging in higher education. However, there was a lack of comprehensive frameworks of specific, hands-on advice and practical suggestions of ‘how’ to enhance student belonging engagement, retention and progression. The customisable concepts, suggestions and toolkit listed in the report are put forth to be discussed, developed and applied both broadly within an institution and used ‘on the ground’ within a classroom environment.

Belonging in Higher Education

A number of scholars are adamant that belonging is of central importance to retaining and motivating students as it leads to higher levels of engagement (e.g., Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Weiss, 1973, cited in Pearce, 2015). Influencing a student's sense of belonging is not a simple task because of the intersecting and variable nature of education contexts. The sense of belonging can be influenced by the term week, assessments, breaks, changes in policy and procedure, and the student's own personal life and experiences (Kahu et al., 2020). This has meant that there are many suggestions of different ways that a sense of belonging can be fostered, and there is a need to consider the many outcomes (positive and negative) that might result.

There are some useful guides in the literature that help to frame the challenge of fostering student belonging in higher education. Part of this work has been the refinement of transition pedagogy, which, as TEQSA (2020) notes, provides a "whole-of-institution and whole-of-student emphasis that delivers a coordinated and integrated engagement and proactively intervenes to assure just-in-time, just-for-me support and a sense of belonging" (p. 9). The whole-of-institution and student-experience approach is key, as "in any context, it is the sum total of the pathways that determines whether a student is engaged, with one pathway able to mitigate the effect of others" (Kahu et al., 2020, p. 665). Therefore, it is important to consider the many ways particular groups, and indeed individual students' sense of belonging can be fostered, or impeded, within the many contexts and systems that are involved in being a student.

A founding interest and strong theme throughout the literature on student belonging in higher education is the decline of residential boarding and on-campus student participation (KPMG, 2015). The reasons given for this decline are numerous, from different institutional offerings (online or 'commuter/non-residential') (Fernandes et al., 2017, p. 32), to student cultural differences (low socio-economic status [SES], first-in-family, international students) (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020; Pearce 2015), and other factors of diversity in student cohorts (mature-aged or non-school-leaver, multicultural cohort/ethnically diverse students, non-traditional entry school-leaver, regional or remote students, part-time) (TEQSA, 2020). However, feelings of belonging will be individual to each student, creating a challenge as to how belonging can be broadly instituted. To deal with the diversity of the literature, it is grouped into five broad areas: challenges faced by students, institutional preparation, institutional support, student belonging through friendship and academic identity.

Challenges Faced by Students

The diversity of a higher education institution's collective cohort is comprised of student groups with various life experiences and expectations as well as social, economic, gender and other backgrounds. This is reflected in the example of the demands on mature-age students with family and caring commitments for children or elderly parents as well as financial stress and paid work commitments (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Demands on mature-aged students means that time management is a complexity of tasks where students must adapt to "managing time that were not based on traditional linear models of time planning" (Stone & O'Shea, 2013, p. 104). These complexities of study, belonging, and life-load are also felt by students from low SES backgrounds in their responsibilities for caring (Means & Pyne, 2017), as well as remote and regional, part-time, and online students in their need for paid employment, and first-in-family students who "often lack cultural capital in regard to university processes and expectations" (TEQSA, 2020, p. 25).

Institutional Preparation

The main form of institutional preparation to combat these varied student circumstances and accustom them to the university environment, is in the form of orientation initiatives. These are hoped to encourage early connections and feelings of belonging to the institution, to assist with their career-path choices, and to engender socialisation amongst peers. However, it was noted in the literature that orientation, and the associated events, were not always well-attended, with one study finding that "64% [have] not attended any of the orientation activities offered either on or off campus" (Pearce, 2015, p. 36). Pre-orientation events that are noted in the literature tended to be skills or academic preparation workshops or bridging courses (Christensen & Evamy, 2011). One initiative that stood out in the literature is that of pre-enrolment interviews "designed to communicate course requirements to commencing students" (TEQSA, 2020, p. 11). The pre-enrolment interviews, which focus on course requirements, academic and other supports available to students and discussions with staff in the area, are not noted as an "early people-rich intervention [that] improves transition and first year retention" (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 12 cited in TEQSA, 2020, p. 11). These pre-enrolment activities are aimed at "providing ongoing academic and social support in a flexible and personalised manner [and reducing] the potential harm of underprepared students incurring a personal and or financial cost through over-enrolling or failing to withdraw before the HECS Census Date" (Christensen & Evamy, 2011, p. 37). Within regular orientation information sessions, some institutions are also administering diagnostic exercises and questionnaires to

guide student support (Christensen & Evamy, 2011). However, how the support is differentiated for each student is not clear, with all students given recommended and optional activities for support. Another approach, with the same aim, is a self-assessment questionnaire for students during orientation. It is noted that the “questionnaire is based on a literature review that identified the best predictors of success in online study” and that it uses “a strengths-based approach, feedback is phrased in terms of recognising strengths and identifying opportunities for growth and development” (TEQSA, 2020, pp. 9-10). However, how these questionnaires are administered, and whether students take up these opportunities, is not clear.

Institutional Support

In the area of institutional support, once the student is enrolled, belonging is often cited as being provided through a combination of academic support outside of classes. Online learning support is specifically mentioned as a service that has “alleviated the high stakes pressure that some students feel” contributing to feelings of stress and not belonging (KPMG, 2015, p. 68). There is a prescient reminder that “Student affairs and academic affairs personnel should consider how to integrate equity and social justice into their programs, services, and policies that enhance sense of belonging for all students, specifically low-income, first-generation college students” (Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 921).

Student Belonging Through Friendship

As previously noted, much of the concern around belonging is due to the decreasing participation of students in campus-based activities. It is emphasised in the literature that campus-based activities encourage social interaction and the development of friendships that are important in developing a sense of belonging (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Therefore, many authors stress the importance of encouraging students “to join clubs and societies” (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020, p. 386), although some authors have found that students “had chosen not to participate in university-based clubs” (Pearce, 2015, p. 36). The reasons for non-participation in traditional campus-based university clubs were found to be that “the university did not offer their favourite club (29%), they did not feel comfortable joining without a friend (57%), they disliked sport and clubs (14%), were too busy studying (10%), had to participate in paid work (5%)” (Pearce, 2015, p. 36). This raises some of the same issues that create the decline in campus culture, as well as entertainment and taste fragmentation, and importantly, simply not knowing other students.

Academic Identity

Another way to create belonging between students and their peers and to the institution through staff, is the humble class. Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman (2020) note that “research investigating factors contributing to part-time students’ sense of belonging again identified that relationships developed in class, via discussions and participation in joint activities, and interactions with teaching staff were particularly important” (p.379). This provides an important avenue through considered curriculum “incorporating group-building activities in teaching, learning and assessment” within the varied spaces of classes (Masters & Donnison, 2010, p. 89). There are further educational benefits to emphasising peer connections in the classroom as “friendships were central to most students’ sense of belonging in a particular class, promoting behavioral and cognitive engagement” (Kahu et al., 2020, pp. 663-4). However, many universities have limited class hours and according to one study, “Approximately 80% of students spent fewer than ten hours per week attending lectures, with all students not exceeding ten hours of contact time per week in either a tutorial or practical class setting” (Pearce, 2015, p. 37).

Connected to the classroom and motivation, but beyond the class itself, is also a student’s sense of belonging to the academic discipline or profession (Kahu et al., 2020). One way that is suggested to encourage students’ identification with their discipline is to provide videos of graduates talking about their experiences, challenges in study and work, and passion for the discipline area (TEQSA, 2020). Many aspects continue to influence a student’s sense of belonging to their academic discipline, such as a collective sense of purpose within the classroom, the academic support outside of classes, engagement with staff through course advising and guidance, and “future opportunities for global study” (Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 917). It has also been noted that “students who discussed the course content outside the classroom were found to have stronger feelings of belonging” (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman 2020), meaning that study-groups and peer-supported learning groups can facilitate greater belonging (p.378).

In all the environments that students participate in (classrooms, campuses, interactions with peers and staff), it is also important not to overlook the seemingly obvious – “that positive, welcoming and empathic relationships were most important” in creating a sense of belonging (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020, p. 384). When teaching, it is important that the student feels “respected and valued by teachers for one’s contributions in class” (Wilson et al., 2018 cited in Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020, p. 384). It is also important, as previously indicated, that students can form beneficial relationships with their peers

within classes and on campus, as “students with a low sense of belonging felt that they held different opinions, beliefs and interests” (p. 385). Therefore, Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman argue that “a class in which there is a climate of respect, acceptance and opportunities to connect with others seems to resonate with the elements students ... mentioned as helping them feel [they] belong” (p. 385). Furthermore, whether on campus or online, students are looking for an environment that facilitates a sense of belonging through respect, “communication, inclusion, equality, and affection in the form of love and kindness” (p. 382). Anything that can be done to make environments more inclusive, respectful and caring will help to facilitate belonging and its associated benefits on engagement and retention.

Belonging Toolkit: Teacher Practices

One of the key outcomes of this practice report was the compilation of a toolkit based on a ‘whole-of-institution’ approach (Kift, 2015). The belonging toolkit was produced after reviewing the literature as well as discussing the authors’ practice proven techniques which fostered belonging at their higher education institution. These are categorised into ‘teacher’ and ‘institutional’ practices. The recommendations are broad, and their application needs to be considered within the learning and teaching context in which they are applied. The authors suggest it is a generic practice guide and users consider which elements of the toolkit are relevant to their specific context and purpose.

It is important for university teaching staff to look for key indicators to see when students feel like they belong. These indicators are not exhaustive and include:

1. When students are known individually by their name, interests and personality.
2. When students know they are an integral part of group work and contribute with value.
3. When students pass initial assignments reducing imposter syndrome.
4. They have institution connections and pride.
5. They respond well in a classroom when asked to contribute to class discussions and/or give their opinion.
6. When they feel ‘seen’, cared for and respected by staff and classmates. Feeling valued and receiving praise.
7. When there is evidence of connecting with classmates; socialising, friendships, fitting in, conversing, relaxing, helping each other, having lunch as a group, saving a seat for a classmate, discussing outside interests, and walking and talking together between classes.
8. When they feel like they are made the right decision and are in the right course.
9. When students are driven and have a connection with their future career.
10. When they have increased confidence (coming out of their shell).
11. When they take pride in their assessments, especially when presenting them.
12. When they venture out of their comfort zones and feel more confident to take risks
13. When they connect with staff including one-on-one communications.
14. When they have reduced anxiety and stress – being part of a circle of trust in the classroom.
15. When they have high attendance and commitment.
16. When they take part in university events/initiatives.
17. When they have a constructive approach to solving situations.
18. When they have the motivation to deal with difficult and stressful situations.
19. When they are prepared to seek out and ask for assistance when needed.
20. When they are doing additional extended work/research out of interest and curiosity.
21. When they rise to challenges because they do not want to let the group/class down.

Overall belonging is evident when trust, relationships, and connections are formed. If students have positive feelings and experiences and feel cared for and respected by staff and classmates, then they are more willing to work hard and continue with their course. They feel like they “fit in”, are supported, and have a voice. They view themselves as an important part of a collective - they feel like they belong.

Belonging Toolkit: Institutional Practices

There is a clear need from student support groups within an institution to provide more comprehensive and tailored initiatives such as:

1. *Create a whole-of-institution strategy for belonging, encompassing administrative and institutional functions such as teaching and student-support features.*

This approach needs to go beyond the classroom and into administrative processes and policies to provide what Kift (2015) calls a “whole-of-institution and whole-of-student emphasis that delivers a coordinated and integrated engagement and proactively intervenes to assure just-in-time, just-for-me support and a sense of belonging” (p.51). This involves focusing on what students’ common experiences “rather than problematising their diversity and difference” (p. 51).

2. *Improving orientations*

Orientation could be expanded significantly, to initiate paths to belonging from the genesis of students meeting staff and students meeting each other. Having mandatory orientation (or information session) addresses the issue of many students not attending this crucial event, which was found to be an issue in some studies (Pearce, 2015), while being mandated in others (Christensen & Evamy, 2011). Sessions could include team building, games, workshops, sharing interests, career options, work options and networking opportunities. Orientation and information sessions could be scheduled with online and on-campus versions. Pre-enrolment advice can assist a student connect with their institution as “coordinating these services and support for students, taking a perspective from the student’s journey is important to creating an early and foundational sense of belong to the course and institution” (TEQSA 2020, p. 25). Another option is pre-enrolment interviews with academic staff to:

enhance student retention by providing ongoing academic and social support in a flexible and personalised manner; and to reduce the potential harm of underprepared students incurring a personal and or financial cost through over-enrolling or failing to withdraw before the HECS Census Date. (Christensen & Evamy, 2011, p. 37)

3. *Staff training: Welcoming environment*

A successful student transition experience leads to a sense of belonging and academic engagement (Pearce, 2015). This can be achieved through extra-curricular activities such as participation in clubs, networking events, cooking classes, dinners and karaoke. These events can be held during the day, weekends, public holidays and during semester breaks. Such activities can be held on campus and off campus (Pearce, 2015).

4. *Group building activities and scheduled “waiting together time”*

To build a strong sense of student belonging, higher education policy and practice should consider connections between students as peers, students and teachers, the academic disciplines, as well as the institution. Masters and Donnison (2010) note that “group-building activities in teaching, learning and assessment” can help create such connections (p. 89). There are demonstrated benefits of informal study-groups and activities and spaces that facilitate friendship-building, although the demands on student time are a major obstacle to on-campus or outside-of-class activities and socialisation. Therefore, institutions could investigate the viability of scheduled ‘waiting together time’, which might be implemented “between classes when students could work collaboratively, go to the library or computer laboratory, or just eat, relax or talk to friends” (p. 90).

5. *Learning and teaching: Student mentoring*

Another technique to create belonging between students and academic staff is to build-in consultation time, particularly as a form of mentoring. Consultation and mentoring strengthen the bonds between teacher and student, as well as those of the student to the academic discipline, and sometimes to the institution (Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 918). It enhances connections between academics and students and can be wide-ranging in the approach. It could include asking “questions about additional ideas, to seek advice about majors, internships, and other opportunities, as well as simply to receive academic aid” (p. 918).

6. *Facilitate further student collaboration through campus cohort gatherings through institution's social media*

Targeting campus cohorts for activities through an institution's social media may be a strategy to gain more traction in student interaction with campus/university services and clubs. Social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and other platforms have been used outside of class hours to engage students with class material (Novak, 2021).

7. *A welcoming environment and engaging with international students*

Belonging is particularly important for international students who are typically dislocated physically from their support systems and usual sources of socialisation and entertainment, compounded by the challenges of a different language. Examples of activities for international students could include a club or society for karaoke, events with icebreaker games, and a preference for events to be "alcohol free" (Pearce, 2015, p. 37). Additionally, international students were interested in celebrating and sharing their cultural events such as international food sharing events, and other major celebrations, such as "Chinese New Year or Lantern Festival celebrations" (p. 38). It would be a bonus for students to match with a mentor "from their own country when they arrived; someone who understood their cultural norms and could tell them where to buy comfort foods" (p. 38).

Develop your own 'toolkit', an A-to-Z guide which considers how:

- a) All teaching staff can foster belonging.
- b) All administration and support staff can foster belonging.
- c) To reach out early to students in their learning journey.
- d) To and when to deliberately reach out to all students during their learning journey.
- e) To aim for a positive relationship with students from their first class.
- f) To start with welcome videos with a friendly, positive and approachable tone.
- g) Teaching staff communicate to students their achievable and beneficial expectations.
- h) To use well-considered icebreakers, including teachers sharing their life experience, to initiate academic and social connections.
- i) Staff can share their stories of how they got to where they are now indicating relatable opportunities and barriers that their students may also experience or encounter.
- j) To explore and discuss student aspirations, expectations, motivations and interests.
- k) To explore and discuss student hesitations, challenges and frustrations.
- l) To help students navigate the learning educational/institutional/tertiary system.
- m) To walk students through assessment instructions, information and 'get help' options.
- n) Teaching staff to ensure all students equally can share information, experiences or opinions within a classroom.
- o) To ensure students know who to contact for various support services.
- p) To demonstrate equal respect to all members of the class (lead and demonstrated by Teaching staff).
- q) To use collective titles with digital announcements to foster future professional aspirations and pride e.g., 'emerging scientists' rather than just being addressed as 'students'
- r) To find commonalities and interests between students to help foster connection.
- s) To address new student worries such as 'I shouldn't be here' or 'I'm a fake'.
- t) To encourage students to offer assistance to other students (particularly when completing practical tasks).
- u) To assist students in pursuing their goals, initiatives and interests.
- v) To and when to send individualised and 'we missed you in class, are you doing ok?' emails if students don't attend.
- w) To give study, employment and career advice, information, direction, referrals and support.
- x) To give enthusiastic, positive and specific feedback and praise students for their efforts.
- y) To facilitate ongoing engagement with the course, advancement and future connections.
- z) Mentorship with partnership in a student's journey.

Conclusion

Belonging is a generic term with multiple dimensions and manifestations. The understanding of student belonging within the context of higher education which has been advocated in this practice report can be summarised based on three perceptions. Firstly, for student belonging to be successful, it requires both policy and practice which must have a nexus and be measured, monitored and adjusted. Secondly, it must also include a whole of institution understanding approach, inclusive of academic staff, administration staff and management. Finally, there is not a single policy or practice which can independently foster student belonging. Policies and practices ought to be constructed based upon the specific context of the institution and its diverse cohorts. The aim of this practice report has been to offer a practice-based framework for higher education institutions engaged in such endeavors, with the hope of more students to complete their studies, and benefit from a strong sense of belonging and positive connections in their higher education learning years.

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