

RAISE

Researching, Advancing &
Inspiring Student Engagement

Student Belonging Good Practice Guide



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In association with:



Edinburgh Napier
UNIVERSITY



Student Belonging Good Practice Guide

Student Foreword

Anna O'Hara, President Nottingham Trent Students' Union

Belonging is an essential aspect that students must feel when they begin their journey at university. This must start from the moment that prospective students send their confirmation to attend their given university, and not end when they graduate. The importance of belonging is highlighted by how students engage in every aspect of university life. The more they feel like they belong in a certain setting, or identify that their experience is unique to them, the bigger the sense of belonging to that community they will feel. Belonging can encourage a sense of comfortability within a learning environment, students are more comfortable asking questions and can truly engage with their studies and thus in turn, achieve success in both academic and social domains to the best of their ability. Counter to this a lack of belonging creates harmful barriers to a student's experience at university, such as a lack of engagement with their studies, extra-curricular activities and even with their peers.

This guide brings an understanding of the importance of belonging for students and how institutions can use best practice to heighten the feeling of belonging for students. It will encourage institutions to reflect on the experiences that their students face and how this can be improved for an ever-changing demographic.

Michael Adewunmi, SU President Education, Teesside University

Nevin Edwin, SU President International, Teesside University

Belonging at university is a vital and instrumental component of a student's experience especially in an environment of diversity where individual students should feel accepted and valued for who they are and socially connected to others within their university.

Staff at universities must develop a sense of belonging among students by actively engaging with them, providing academic help, and establishing inclusive settings. Encouragement of open communication, mentorship opportunities, and rapid resolution of student concerns may considerably improve student belonging, ensuring that each individual feels valued and connected within the university community. As representatives at our Students' Union, we value the ideas presented in this guide, particularly in relation to student support, collaboration and partnership working. We feel the guide will bring further opportunities for the exchange of cultures and recognition of the breadth of the student experience.

Geou Akshil, Student President, Edinburgh Napier Students' Association

The feeling of belonging starts from home, spreads through the time we spend with the people around us, and widens through the activities we do, for example: sports, arts, and cultural celebrations. This knowingly or unknowingly builds in us the feeling of belonging.

In the larger picture of university, there are many factors which create a sense of belonging leading to retention. Teaching, societies, sports, easy access to information and quick help when in need.

Teacher:

This is a powerful space where a sense of belonging builds for students. Being involved in classroom activity that connects fellow students on a personal level, from sharing of sorrow or happiness can bring about a positive impact on the student experience.

Spaces, societies, sports and socials:

A comfortable and safe space to make mistakes and learn without the fear of being judged or discriminated against is important to build trust. When there is care for each other through friendships that are built amongst people who have common interests on campuses or in other social spaces this naturally creates a sense of belonging amongst students.

Having the voice of students in decisions made at the university empowers students when they see the result of their voice making change. This ultimately builds pride and an enhanced feeling of belonging.

Lauren Hunter, Student Researcher, Edinburgh Napier University

The most fundamental element of belonging in a university setting is that students feel welcomed and accepted. Students will be more likely to embrace their role in the university when they feel valued and comfortable in their learning environment. This sense of acceptance is key in encouraging feedback and engagement from the student population. An absence of this can instead create barriers and prompt a lack of response.

In some cases, belonging is perhaps misconstrued. Too much emphasis can be placed on belonging as solely a sense of identity rather than overall acceptance and inclusion. Despite this, it is important that opportunities to embrace belonging as sense of identity do also exist. Although not of significance to all students, this is undoubtedly an aspect of university life that many students do value.

It is hoped that this guide will encourage institutions to reflect on the experience of their students, and how they can best understand what belonging means to them.

A note from the editors

Nicola Watchman Smith, Conor Naughton and Claire Garden

This Good Practice Guide offers a toolkit and a conversation starter for anyone working in higher education (HE) who is thinking about embarking on a student belonging project. As well as sharing hints and tips, it draws upon student belonging insights via case studies, an extended literature review and student voice. We aim to provide those of you working within student partnerships or with a professional interest in student engagement easy access to key definitions and debates in the field of student belonging. As this guide provides a shorthand to the contexts of student belonging, we anticipate readers may wish to use the ideas presented here during your curriculum planning or project setting phase, to ensure student voice, orientation and partnership working are at the core of your academic lifecycles and institutional activity preparations. We hope this guide will help you to facilitate communication, influence policy and encourage focus and investment in student engagement in your institution. We believe in being inclusive so much of what you read below will describe student belonging and engagement through this lens.

Through our case studies this guide will touch on key themes aligned to student belonging and engagement: student voice, student-staff collaborative working, transitions and orientation, the student journey/lifecycle. These cases are a work in progress – we don't have all the answers (yet) but we do hope it will be useful to those of you who are looking to explore methods to gain further insights into student mattering, engagement and identity. We will discuss initial findings and the next steps that the partner institutions have adopted but in the main these case studies will set the scene for others wishing to follow suit. Throughout the case studies we offer tools for colleagues in higher

education institutions (HEI) to use – these include pre-arrival survey questions, and activities to harness self-perceived student identity and attachment to the university. However, these are not prescriptive; we recognise that each institution will need – and should, in the name of good practice – use these as conversation starters or prompts for approaches that are *specific and tailored to your institution* and its unique student body.

This guide is the output of a RAISE Network-funded project, in partnership with Teesside University, Edinburgh Napier University and Nottingham Trent University. Researching Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE) is a worldwide network of staff and students in HE who work or have an interest in the research and promotion of student engagement.

About the editors



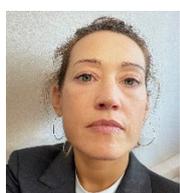
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Practical Resources for Belonging Enhancement

Christine Haddow

The list below offers a selection of resources which provide practical guidance, examples and suggestions for approaches to enhancing student sense of belonging.

- **Advance HE** (2022). [*Education for Mental Health: Enhancing Student Mental Health through Curriculum and Pedagogy*](#)

This toolkit provides guidance and ideas for curriculum enhancement to support student wellbeing as they learn. Section 3 focuses on 'Social Belonging' and provides top tips for its creation.

- **Blake, S., Capper, G. & Jackson, A.** (2022). [*Building Belonging in Higher Education Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach. WonkHE.*](#)

Drawing on findings from the WonkHE and Pearson report on belonging in HE following the COVID-19 pandemic, this report offers recommendations for universities to 'build back' belonging. Insights are provided from students, with corresponding recommendations to address the points raised.

- **Enhancement Themes** (n.d.). [*Distance and Sense of Belonging.*](#)

This webpage provides an overview of the collaborate cluster project across five Scottish HEIs to enhance the student experience for distance, online and rural learners. The page links to the toolkit resource produced as a result of the project, which contains suggestions, institutional cases studies, and guidance for evaluation and reflection.

- **Haddow, C. & Brodie, J.** (2023). [*Building Communities and Enhancing Belonging: A Route Map for Assessment Design*](#)

Drawing on findings from interviews and focus groups with staff and students about their experiences of assessment and feedback, the authors developed a route map of the assessment design process. Questions and prompts at each stage support the embedding of belonging and community building in assessments.

Imperial College London (n.d.). [*Tools for Assessing Sense of Belonging*](#)

This webpage offers a range of tools – including interviews, questionnaires and scales – for evaluating sense of belonging.

- **QAA** (2023). [*Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK*](#)

This guide outlines practical support for staff across institutions with a role in supporting international students. Section 2.6. focuses on 'Belonging, integration and inclusivity' and includes reflective questions to guide your thinking to develop a global community within your institution.

- **The Higher Education Academy Scotland** (2010). [*Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum A Framework*](#)

This framework provides principles and prompts for the involvement of students in co-creation of inclusive curricula.

- **Universities UK** (2021) [*Stepchange: Mentally Health Universities*](#)

This resource presents a call to action and suggestions for universities seeking to prioritise students' mental health. It includes the development of learning communities and social communities as key aspects of a health university, and presents questions and prompts for staff to consider.

An introduction to student belonging

Christine Haddow

Why Student Belonging?

Belonging among students has emerged as a priority in HE research, policy and practice. A sense of belonging for students has been associated with positive outcomes such as retention, engagement, and academic motivation and enjoyment (Masika & Jones, 2015; Pedler et al, 2021; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). For example, Edwards et al (2022) found that first year Chemistry students had higher course performance across the term where their sense of belonging was greater. Belonging has also been identified as a protective factor for student mental health, evidencing its wider importance in supporting wellbeing across the student experience (McBeath et al, 2018). Ultimately, as Webster (2022) notes “at the heart of the student experience, there is a sense that each student belongs and matters.”

Belonging, and the associated concept of community, also form part of the metrics against which our students' programme level experience is measured in UK HEIs. The 2022 National Student Survey's Question 21 required students to respond positively or negatively to the statement 'I feel part of a community of staff and students'. While this question has now been discounted by the Office for Students, when included it achieved a relatively low score across HEIs in comparison with other aspects of the student experience. Efforts have been made at institutional and sector level to better understand belonging, and to develop approaches to its enhancement (Campbell, 2019; Robertson et al, 2021; Webster, 2022). More generally, belonging closely aligns with our current focus in research and practice on recognising the experiences and needs of an increasingly diverse student cohort, and a move towards learning and teaching approaches which support *inclusion* (Murdock-Perriera, 2019; Scoulas, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt move to online learning threw the importance of student belonging into sharp relief, creating further impetus for research and practical guidance in this area.

This introduction provides an overview of key literature in the area of student belonging; exploring how belonging has been understood, the factors which influence student sense of belonging, and approaches which support belonging enhancement and community building.

Defining Belonging

Extensive literature which explores belonging conceptually recognises that it exists across various domains comprising the student experience, and highlight its complexity (Ahn & Davis, 2020; De Sisto et al, 2021; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). Tinto's (1975, 1993) widely cited integration model has been influential in this area, offering a seminal account of the ways in which belonging, student

engagement and student retention are linked. The model posits that students experience integration across both academic and social contexts, with the former relating to academic performance and development, and the latter in reference to peer and staff interactions at university. Students' personal expectations of achievement or 'goal commitments', and identification with the university or 'institutional commitment', are shaped by these experiences and the subsequent integration, or lack of, which they contribute to. Tinto argues that where students experience integration their commitments will endure, and students will persevere with their studies rather than reach a dropout decision. Ultimately, the model proposes a direct relationship between belonging and retention, which has endured across this body of literature.

Building on this work, studies including Meehan and Howells (2017), Guyotte et al (2019) and Raaper (2021) have further explored the nature of student belonging and how it arises. Feeling a sense of belonging – also described as 'belongingness' – is described as the feeling of connection, importance to others, inclusion and support (Strayhorn, 2018; Jackson et al, 2022). While no single definition exists, common themes have emerged in its conceptualisation:

- Belonging is a *process*. It is acknowledged that a sense of belonging is built and developed across a students' university journey, and is dynamic and non-linear (Guyotte et al 2019; Raaper, 2021). Belonging has therefore been associated with students' ability to build social networks across the transition to and through HE (Weiss, 2021). Students may feel a strong sense of belonging at some points in their university experience and less at others.
- Belonging is *relational*. Hoffman et al (2003) comprehensive assessment of sense of belonging among college students emphasises its highly relational nature, describing belonging as predicated on the 'quality' of relationships with peers and staff as determined through perceptions of factors such as support, comfort, compassion and being valued. Similarly, Strayhorn (2018) describes belonging as a series of support-related needs to be met through interactions with others on campus.
- Belonging is linked to *identity*. Students' sense of belonging is shaped by demographic factors, and how students view their own identities during the constantly evolving experience of learning 'to be' a student who belongs in HE (Meehan & Howells, 2017; Groves & O'Shea, 2019).

Linked to the concept of belonging is the notion of *community*. While community in HE can relate to particular shared physical spaces (see Trawalter et al, 2021), the term has been defined more broadly as "the feelings of the community of students regarding their spirit, cohesion, trust, safety, interaction, interdependence, and sense of belonging" (Rovai & Wighting, 2005, p. 101). Examples of communities within the university and beyond to which students may belong include their programme communities, extra-curricular societies and staff-student forums. A key focus in the literature has been around 'learning communities', where students come together to learn through sharing their understanding and working collaboratively, and the positive influence these have been found to have on belonging and retention (Johnson et al, 2020). When considering the concept of belonging, an emergent question is the role of staff in learning communities, and whether the primary focus to support belonging should be peer-to-peer networks, or those which provide the opportunity to be supported by academic teaching staff (Producers et al, 2022).

More recently, critical perspectives have emerged that challenge the concept of belonging for students. This work argues that the notion of belonging has the potential to homogenise the student body, imposing a 'top-down' view of belonging which pushes students to conform to HE traditional

norms and values, and ignores the diversity of experiences of belonging in HE, including those who choose to belong (Graham & Moir, 2022; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Gravett and colleagues' (Gravett, 2023; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Gravett et al, 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2022) research is notable here, proposing a re-examination of the focus on belonging and foregrounding the concept of mattering. Drawing on a framework of relational pedagogy, this work foregrounds connections between students and staff, achieved through situated interaction, as pivotal to enhancing student experience and engagement in HE. Significantly, it leads us to consider a more nuanced account of belonging and to consider what might help or hinder belonging for students.

Understanding Belonging

The varied needs and experiences of students in relation to belonging are identified in existing literature (Cheng, 2004; Kahu 2013). This work notes that a sense of belonging is not uniform among students, nor is it guaranteed. While some students may choose not to belong or see this as a less important aspect of their experience in HE (see Brodie & Osowska, 2021), others may experience barriers or challenges to feeling a sense of belonging at university. A core criticism of Tinto's integration model is its neglect of non-traditional students and their more diverse experiences of adaptation to HE (Davidson & Wilson, 2013).

The lack of a sense of belonging has been described as otherness, isolation and marginality (Read et al, 2003; Strayhorn, 2018). As students navigate the "contested and complex" (O'Shea, 2021, p. 70) field of university, we can assume that feelings of belonging are neither equal nor automatic. As such, a wide range of studies have sought to examine the factors which shape student belonging and the experiences of particular student populations in relation to belonging.

Social Class

A key characteristic which has been explored in relation to belonging, both nationally and internationally, is socio-economic status and social class. As Chung et al (2017, p.77) note, "given the rising diversity in university student populations, there has been a longstanding interest in how socio-demographic factors may influence university experience and success." Research highlights the immediate practical barriers which are present for low-income student. This includes the affordability of required technology or other academic materials, the requirement to work more than higher income students to support themselves during their studies, and the increased likelihood of caring responsibilities (Nguyen & Herron, 2021; Weiss, 2021). All of these may inhibit the opportunity to engage with communities and develop a sense of belonging. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may also find adapting to university and building relationships with peers more challenging, as communities and spaces on campus have been found to feel less accessible to this population (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; O'Shea, 2021; Trawalter et al, 2021). This population's experience of a divided sense of self when straddling the middle-class university and working-class home environment, may cause some to conceal their social background for fear of a negative impact on belonging (Reay et al, 2010; Veldman et al, 2022). As such, working-class students remain a population of priority for belonging enhancement, with calls to reflect on the implications of their experience for practice (Bettencourt, 2021).

Gender and Ethnicity

Studies including Strayhorn et al (2016) and Mallman et al (2021) have examined how university experience is shaped by other intersectional characteristics such as ethnicity and gender. Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students have emerged as a population of focus here, with international research highlighting the ways in which a sense of difference and otherness is often exacerbated for marginalised groups in HE (Strayhorn et al, 2016; Mallman et al, 2021). Similarly, UK based research

has identified the barriers to adaptation and persistence in HE related to a lack of belonging for BAME students (Hammond et al, 2019). The experiences of exclusion for women, particularly in STEM disciplines, have required similar negotiation of identity across the student experience (Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021; Wong & Copsey-Blake, 2021; Edwards et al, 2022). This raises questions about how our programmes and institutions can better support an increasingly diverse student population. Belonging may offer a solution here, as Shinwoo et al (2021) identified that a sense of belonging can act as a protective factor against racist micro-aggressions for HE students. It is important to highlight the problematic nature of the term BAME with Aspinall (2020) noting how these terms reinforce racial inequality by maintaining White ethnic identity as privileged. Since 'White' is never named as an identity, it continues to be normative so that people of colour only exist in a marginalised position that is de-centred by whiteness.

Personal and Psychological Characteristics

As noted previously, belongingness is described as a feeling of connection and acceptance at university. In addition to the structural issues noted above, individual psychological factors have been demonstrated to impact students' tendency and desire to feel this way. Meehan and Howells (2019) assessed belonging among 530 students over five years and found that anxiety, feeling overwhelmed and associated low motivation were barriers to integration during the transition to university. Similarly, Spencer-Oatey et al (2017) found that a key barrier to belonging for Chinese students at UK universities was a lack of motivation or need to make friends at university in the face of cultural challenges to integration, with personal qualities such as being outgoing impacting positively on belonging. These findings support the broader focus on student mental health and resilience, with research proposing that both can be bolstered by an enhanced sense of belonging (Soria et al, 2022).

Situational Factors

Students' mode of study, living status and other situational factors have a bearing on their opportunities to develop a sense of belonging and participate in communities at university. For example, studies have identified that distance learners and part-time students may have less desire to socialise and build peer relationships but may feel belonging in other ways, such as through identification with their discipline or professional networks (Brodie & Osowska, 2021; Hunt & Loxley, 2021; Crawford & McKenzie, 2022). Related to online learning, it has also been identified that students who use technology to supplement their interaction with peers during their studies experience higher levels of belonging (Mohamedhosein, 2017). Meanwhile, Brooman and Darwent (2015) identified that living at home rather than in residential halls in the early years of university appears to negatively impact belonging, but this can be overcome by targeted interventions. For those who chose to be stay-at-home students the term 'stayed education' (Pokorny et al, 2017) has become commonplace. Factors including home, family and community relationships are also significant and have a bearing on the sense of belonging developed at university. This body of work highlights that our belonging enhancement approaches must reflect the diverse circumstances in which our students are learning.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

A contemporary account of student belonging would be incomplete without acknowledging the significant challenge for students posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of physical university campuses and rapid shift to online learning created a sense of isolation for students, who were unable to meet and share space with their peers (Potts, 2021; Producers et al, 2023). During this early stage of the pandemic, the experiences of lockdown, social distancing and self-isolation had

negative implications for student wellbeing, and impacts are ongoing for student mental health, financial security, and academic performance/progression (Nurunnabi et al, 2020; Ihm et al, 2021; Lee et al, 2021; Jupina et al, 2022). Research by Scoulas, (2021) and Napper et al (2022) identified the ways in which student belonging was compromised in this context, as pre-existing communities predicated on face-to-face interaction and physical campus spaces were diminished. Belonging has emerged as more important than ever during the pandemic and post-pandemic period, as a solution to the challenge posed by these circumstances to wellbeing and mental health (Gopalan et al, 2021; Haddow & Brodie, 2023). In the UK, this was evidenced through the Knight et al (2021) study, where focus groups with staff and students across HEIs regarding their experiences during the pandemic highlighted the important role played by peer networks at this time, as students navigated both practical and emotional difficulties. As we move forward, it is important to acknowledge that a new landscape of student belonging has emerged, and consider approaches which may (re)build communities in HE.

Enhancing Student Sense of Belonging: Insights for Practice

From research into the student sense of belonging (Guyotte et al 2019; Grooves and O'Shea, 2019; Hoffman et al 2003) to date, the consistent message is around its importance as an aspect of student experience. A notable piece of research conducted following the COVID-19 pandemic is WonkHE and Pearson's (2022) UK-wide survey of 5233 students about their experiences of belonging and inclusion at university. The survey concludes by asking 'What would help you feel a greater sense of belonging at university?'. The study found that friendship and peer connections were the most significant factors that students felt would enhance their sense of belonging, across all demographics and modes of study. Blake et al (2022) offer broad principles for belonging stemming from the survey findings, noting that the overarching themes of connection, inclusion, support and autonomy should underpin approaches to enhancing student belonging. A study by Haddow and Brodie (2023, p. 9) identified student ownership of belonging enhancement initiatives as key to the development of "authentic belonging", whereby students build meaningful communities through a 'bottom up' approach. Other insights for effective belonging enhancement have emerged in the following key areas:

- **Transition to University:** The move from school, college or other contexts to university study has been a focus in belonging-related research, with a focus on first year students and supporting their integration as they join HE. Induction activities are important here, with literature noting that a staggered approach to induction across the early stages of study promotes a successful transition and the development of belonging (Araujo et al, 2014). Particular approaches to utilise in this context include 'strengths based' education, whereby students identify their own strengths and discover those of their peers, resulting in enhanced bonds between new students (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Sharing perspectives across years has also proven impactful here. Murphy et al (2020) implemented an intervention which saw first-year students reading accounts from upper-year students of their experiences of belonging to help normalise these feelings. They found that this was particularly impactful for socially disadvantaged students, and resulted in increased persistence.
- **Institutional Culture and Supporting Diversity:** Other innovations have sought to recognise and support diversity across institutions by enhancing culture and positioning institutions as 'places of belonging' (Murdock-Perriera, 2019). Strayhorn's (2021) research highlighted that showing students a short video intervention which presented narratives from diverse students successfully conveyed messages of belonging. Similarly, Bettencourt (2021)

identified that recognising the contribution of working class/first in family students on campus, and promoting a culturally stimulating environment, supported a sense of belonging for a diverse student population. At individual level, Walton et al (2015) found that an affirmation-training intervention supported women in STEM to develop a sense of belonging and manage stress, and improved their GPA.

- **Belonging in the Classroom:** Connection and collaboration is a key aspect of students' learning experience in HE. Blake et al (2022) highlight the importance of groupwork building a sense of belonging, and acknowledge that although there can be challenges where students work in this way, a structured approach to managing groupwork tasks can mediate these while allowing students to develop a sense of belonging. For example, assessments which require students to form and reflect on communities of practice have been found to enhance student sense of belonging (Masika & Jones, 2016).
- **Extra-curricular Activities:** Given the significance of the social dimension of belonging identified in existing literature, it is unsurprising that studies have sought to explore how extra-curricular activities can best support belonging. De Sisto et al (2019) examined the impact of extra-curricular activities for second year undergraduate students, noting that these allow students and staff to "interact in less formal, dynamic and inclusive contexts" (De Sisto et al 2019, p. 1738). It is acknowledged that students may, for a variety of reasons, not engage in these activities, and a practical insight for institutions is the integration of recreational activities in a more holistic way with other aspects of the student experience, to support resilience (Soria et al, 2022). Crucially, Winstone et al (2022) note the need to consider the accessibility of extra-curricular activity and for the adoption of inclusive approaches to be applied, to ensure that students are not prevented from participating. Work from Kerrigan and Manktelow (2021) further evidences the value of engagement with out-of-classroom pursuits as a critical element of the student experience, that adds value to the overarching student experience, both at university and beyond.
- **Supporting Spaces of Belonging:** A key role in belonging enhancement is creating space, in a broad sense, for relationships and communities to develop, and belonging to occur. This can be physical space, with research highlighting the importance of on-campus social spaces to allow students to work and socialise, as well as the importance of the sense of ownership in these spaces (Ulriksen et al, 2017; Bettencourt, 2021). Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the importance of enhancing belonging in the online space, through implementing belonging activities which normally occurred during face-to-face settings (Tice et al, 2021). For example, Liu et al (2022) evidenced the impact of problem-based learning within the online student experience, finding that this approach improved belonging and strengthened classroom interactions.
- **Supporting Staff to Develop Belonging:** Research has highlighted the importance of interaction and relationships with academic staff to enhance student belonging in the early stages of students' university careers (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Literature highlights that they are central to creating a sense of feeling known and mattering for students (Meehan & Howells, 2019; Hoffman et al, 2003). There is therefore a need to provide time, resource and support for development to enable staff to engage in belonging enhancement activities (Jackson & Blake, 2022; Haddow & Brodie, 2023).

- **Evaluating Your Practice:** It is important when implementing interventions for belonging, or changing the learning and teaching approach for your students, to ensure that there is an approach in place to evaluate it. Several studies and resources have developed scales to measure sense of belonging and mattering, which can be adopted to assess the impact of interventions on your own student cohorts (See Karaman & Cirak, 2017; Slaten et al, 2018; Dixon, 2019).

Conclusion

Sense of belonging for students is complex and is complicated by a range of factors within and beyond the university. Nevertheless, it is a key aspect of the student experience which shapes a variety of outcomes as students progress through HE. This introduction has provided a broad overview of the key definitions of belonging, the factors which shape this for students, and identified approaches which have been found to enhance belonging and build communities. This will be followed by a series of case studies which provide detailed insights into the ways in which institutions have sought to enhance belonging for their student cohorts.

Case Studies

The case studies that follow are taken from each of our respective institutions of Teesside University, Nottingham Trent University and Edinburgh Napier University. They detail projects from across the student lifecycle that can provide inspiration and insight for your own context, from gaining insight into student belonging via pre-arrival surveys to student partnership work that reduces barriers to engagement. The case studies also explore how surveying and monitoring students through their lifecycle on topics relating to their academic experience and sense of belonging can build an understanding of the factors that influence disparities in outcomes and experiences from the perspective of the student.

Case Study One: Teesside University. Student Identity, Belonging and Transitions

Nicola Watchman Smith

This case study outlines Teesside University's (TU) approach to gaining insight into student belonging via our pre-arrival student survey (STEP) and a follow-up pulse poll from 2022/23. The pulse poll explored priority domains of identity attachment amongst current HE students by asking students if they most identify with their course, department, academic school or university. These identification markers will be explored alongside insights into student motivations for study as detailed in our STEP survey, as well as our institutional response to this student voice via targeted student support interventions. For others wishing to create a pre-arrival student survey an exemplar of the questions we use can be found on the RAISE website [here](#).

Context

At TU we are keen to consider the ambitions and motivations of our students, as well as their self-perceived barriers to learning. We want to do this before students arrive at the university so we can support and celebrate the student transition into HE, alongside ensuring that our orientation and induction approach is well-suited to addressing student need and expectation.

As such, we employ a number of methods to gather transition insights and at each stage we (confidentially and anonymously) cascade those insights to key stakeholders including academic and professional and learning service staff as well as looping information back to the students themselves. We do this in a bid to benefit all new and returning learners as they begin / continue their HE journey.

This case study will provide an overview of the methods we employ to gather student transitions and belonging insight, as well as early outputs of that data. This is not the sharing of the survey outcomes data – that we treat sensitively within our university. What is being shared in this case study are the mechanisms by which we have gathered this data and our rationale for wanting to do this.

For the purpose of this guide, the focus is on the central, whole institutional approach we have adopted but, as with everything, we recognise that there are numerous other excellent school- and department- level belonging and student engagement activities taking place across Teesside University. This central case study focuses upon three key aspects of student insight:

1. The pre-arrival STEP student survey
2. The Student Identity and Belonging pulse poll
3. Nudge theory and our student journey cycle

The pre-arrival STEP survey

Given the continued sector focus on student voice, student belonging and student mattering, alongside institutional drivers to enhance student satisfaction and retention in what is a complex and changing climate (as international student numbers grow, conversations on HEI duty of care come into sharper focus and the cost-of-living crisis hits), we recognised the need for a mechanism to hear from our new students before they start their course. This was to better understand student motivations for study and their self-perceived barriers to learning. If armed with such information, we could ensure a smooth transition for our learners onto our programmes, construct induction and orientation resources that are meaningful, timely and tailored to the current study body, and instil in our students that we are listening to them and that their voice matters. We could also start to enhance our institutional understanding of the lived experience of that current body of students;

with timely, in-year information of this nature becoming increasingly relevant as recent reports on student belonging and wellbeing such as the WonkHE and Pearson's [Building Belonging](#) report, the Universities UK [Suicide-safer](#) guidance and The Sutton Trust [Cost of Living](#) piece have highlighted.

This wider sector context has undoubtedly changed the parameters on what universities and colleges can and should be doing in the student attendance monitoring and engagement enhancement space. Is attendance still a key driver? Is it still the proxy for student engagement it might have been considered before the pandemic, before the cost-of-living crisis? (For more on this see my piece for [WonkHE](#).) The conversation has shifted and with it we are seeing new parameters; no longer are we talking just about attendance but also meaningful engagement; no longer just belonging but also mattering (what our students feel about what the university offers them) and duty of care (what a university does to safeguard and connect with their students).

From these guiding principles, the Student Transition Entry Poll – known as the STEP Survey – was born. Stakeholders from central services and academic schools and the Students' Union were consulted on the format and content of the survey before its release. The survey launched in August 2022, after the UCAS embargo, running for approximately nine weeks. It was open to all new start TU students (undergraduate and postgraduate) including those students who had studied our Foundation Year in academic year 2021/22 and were progressing onto a Level 4 TU programme in 2022/23. The survey was issued during enrolment via the admissions online portal and was hosted on our surveys platform (this is the platform students will use later in their studies to submit their module evaluation feedback). Oversight of the survey data collation and any subsequent student communications, contact or interventions were delivered by a central Student Journey team.

The survey was issued again in early December 2022 to capture the pre-arrival insight of our January start students. This survey was open for approximately eight weeks noting the Christmas closure period. The September start version of the survey received 3,080 unique responses. The January start version received 1,672 unique responses.

The survey asked a series of questions relating to motivations and choice of study mode/course/programme as well as any concerns or nervousness about the step into HE. We ask demographic-based questions, for instance if the student is the first in family to study a HE programme. There is opportunity throughout the survey for students to indicate what support, if any, they anticipate needing while they study with us; this includes financial guidance (noting the cost-of-living crisis) and support with student housing (noting the accommodation shortages in some locations). The survey also enables us to tie together key student biographical information with learning and teaching confidence measures e.g., we ask students to rate their confidence regarding writing for academic purposes, their previous experience of, and preferences regarding, gaining tutor assessment feedback, and we can collate this – via STEP – with institutional relevant indicators such as age, ethnicity, care experience status, etc. which align with our support agenda positioned within our Access and Participation Plan for instance. All data are confidentially and sensitively handled, and no individualised student information is shared.

The HE sector is practiced in surveying students as they leave their course of study (the NSS being an obvious case in point here) but I would argue that a sector-level arrival survey would serve our students, and our universities, well. So, for those thinking of creating a similar pre-arrival survey to the one I've described above, I have included a copy of our questions as part of this guide, but there are other excellent resources beyond this, including Michelle Morgan's work in this space (Morgan 2013; Morgan 2020).

Belonging and identity

One of the overarching emergent themes coming from the first cycle of the STEP survey was the need for us to better understand the source of identification attachment our students have with our university. The survey confirmed that many new students are nervous about starting university, worried about that next educational level and what it might academically entail, and that they were living in varied contexts – some at home, some on campus, others in accommodation geographical at distance from their campus of study. Our new students were telling us they valued the opportunities to connect with their peers, to access academic and wellbeing support services, and the facilities on our campuses but that they were worried about travelling to campus due to the cost of petrol/public transport and that the majority of the students were balancing part-time employment alongside studying. Several of them also told us that they were unsure of which academic school they belonged to at the point they were enrolling.

What we learnt from this is that we need to explore the source of the *primary* connection our students had with the university. Was it school, department, course or university level?

So, we carried out a pulse poll on this theme.

The Student Identity and Belonging Pulse Poll

Our assumption – like many other HEIs – was that students most closely identify with their course, and attachment to the institution or their school/faculty is secondary to that course-level primary attachment. We wanted to test this, as this assumption was the basis upon which we had been positioning a lot of our student induction material and orientation approaches.

We tested this by running a series of simple identity voting polls, asking our students to physically vote (by dropping one ballot paper into the relevant voting box) if they more closely identify with their (i) course (ii) department (ii) academic school or (iv) the university. We placed these voting boxes in key student zones across campus at various points in the year and we staffed these voting zones with student journey advisors who encouraged students to vote and who answered any questions a student might have. Each ballot paper asked for the student to provide the school they belong to, whether they were a home or international student, their level of study and whether they lived in university halls, private rented accommodation or at home. Students could also choose to add their contact details if they wished to take part in future student voice/ belonging partnership projects and focus groups but this was not mandatory.

The results from this pulse poll were instructive. We were seeing an equal split across all respondents of those who identify most closely with the university (40.5%) or their course (39.9%). When split between international and home domicile students this split was more greatly defined, with the majority of home students identifying with their course (46.7%) whereas international students identified with the university (45.0%).

From this, we were beginning to see a picture of distinct use of the campus between home and international learners, and this has prompted us to further consider our support messaging as well as the accessibility of our services in both an online and on-campus format. There is further work to do here in better understanding the opportunities for student peer connections and contact, and if this is enacted in different modes depending on a students' primary attachment to the institution/course.

In the main what this student belonging insight data has given us – across both STEP and the pulse poll – is a clearer picture of how belonging may be different for different student groups. This has given us the driver to think collectively and creatively, in partnership with our students, about the moments we create for orientation throughout the full span of the learner journey, no matter the start-point, the access route or the ambition of those learners.

Student Journey Lifecycle

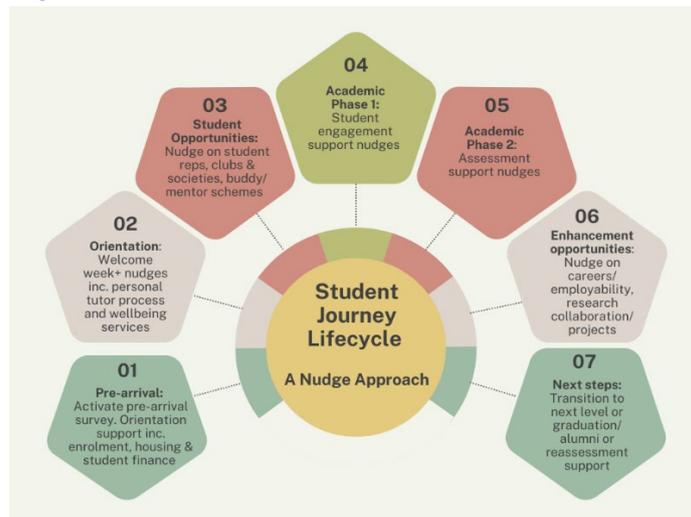


Figure 1: The Student Journey Lifecycle – a nudge approach (Source: Nicola Watchman Smith)

With the insight gained from the STEP survey and the pulse poll, we have been able to build a more robust picture of the learning and experience journey of our students based upon their lived and academic contexts. We are feeding this into our policies on student attendance and engagement, learning analytics, and assessment and feedback as well as shifting our induction approach from a one-week focus of high activity and information to a *stagger of orientation* from pre-arrival, through induction and across the student journey. This includes consideration of pressure points such as assessment or resit periods, and the ‘outro’ guidance necessary to prepare students for the move onto the next study level at the end of each academic year (or graduation).

This student journey cycle is primarily used by our Student Learning central support teams here at TU, informing our induction/ orientation approach, student voice initiatives and our calendar of events. The principles of our student journey approach are rooted in nudge theory (particularly inspired by the work of Brown et. al, 2022). In practice, this entails us knowing when wobble weeks or pressure points are typically likely to hit our students and using that information to gently remind students *at a relevant time* in their student journey of the support available. It also allows us to promote narratives of support alongside those of self-efficacy and learner autonomy.

Knowing the typical pressure point periods of our students means we can create programmes of academic and support interventions that underpin our central Student Learning support offer. Via our nudges, we are creating points of contact that mean any student needing additional academic or orientation support can easily access it.

Our nudge approach in effect staggers the information, advice and guidance offered to students throughout their student journey. Through our student belonging insights data we have been able to recognise that some information – while important – may not be relevant to students at the *start* of their course. If we only frontload this information in one induction week, students might forget this by the time they come to need it. It appears to make more sense to students if we *make mention* of, for instance, the mitigating circumstances policy during their induction but that we remind them of *the detail* of it just before the assessment window opens. This nudge approach is intended to avoid any ‘support overwhelm’ during the first few weeks of study and hopefully help our students to transition smoothly into university life. With this, we hope to continue to promote a feeling of belonging amongst our student community which, as STEP tells us, is felt by a large proportion of our students.

Case Study Two: Nottingham Trent University. Student 2025 Project

Conor Naughton, Erick Morataya, Ria Bluck and Sarah Lawther

This case study will outline Nottingham Trent University's (NTU) [Student 2025 project](#), a longitudinal study of a sample of 104 NTU students from Access and Participation Plan target groups (NTU APP targets 3, 4 and 5). The project follows students from Level Four at the start of their journey throughout the student lifecycle from 2021/22 to 2024/25. Through interviewing and surveying students once a term on topics relating to their academic experience, social experience and sense of belonging, the project aims to explore and build an understanding of the factors that influence disparities in outcomes and experiences, from the perspective of the student.

Context

Owned and sponsored by NTU's Success for All Steering Group this project is delivered by the Educational Research and Evaluation Team who are part of NTU's [Centre For Academic Development and Quality](#). NTU's aim with Student 2025 is to consider the experiences of our students with characteristics that may traditionally face barriers to success, over an extended period to generate insight into closing the gap in degree outcomes, as well as developing a better understanding of non-continuation and opportunities to enhance belonging. By addressing issues as they arise in real time, rather than at the end of the project, Student 2025 is able to build insight, opportunities and solutions into staff development workstreams, course-based experiences and wider student activity to deliver benefits directly to the cohort the research is based upon.

There are relatively few projects that have sought to explore the student experience through a longitudinal lens that prioritises the voice and perspective of the student. For more on the benefit of using a longitudinal approach see Student 2025 project team's WonkHE blog [here](#). Longitudinal research in this area includes the University of Birmingham's Transitions Study (Hewett, Keil and Douglas, 2015) which explored the experience of blind and partially-sighted students as they transition to HE. International projects have also taken place exploring longitudinal student satisfaction by means of levels of engagement, with a focus on mental health, releasing findings in 2017/18 (Shek et al, 2017; Ammigan & Jones, 2018).

Existing work (Hewett, Keil and Douglas, 2015; Shek et al, 2017; Ammigan & Jones, 2018) alongside research from Jungert (2013) who considered the influence of social identities on student progression and attainment, adds to the existing knowledge and understanding of the student experience by beginning to introduce new approaches to measure wellbeing and student experience including through short regular questionnaires and yearly quantitative measures. Where NTU's study adds further value to the discussion is through its longitudinal nature. Student 2025 revisits NTU students regularly to check whether the experience they are reporting has changed. Unlike studies that ask students once at a fixed-point Student 2025 explores the student lifecycle through their perspectives and experiences over months and years not one specific moment in time. In building a knowledge base through the triangulation of semi-structured interviews, termly questionnaires and institutional datasets, Student 2025 seeks to provide a rich understanding of the factors that influence disparities in outcomes. It also looks to detail the academic and social experience, and sense of belonging from the perspective of the student.

There is an ever-growing body of research on student belonging and the student experience in the sector, with recent research undertaken by WonkHE and Pearson (2022). Of 5,233 students, 69% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I feel like I belong at my university" (2022, p.9). Further research from the AdvanceHE and HEPI (2022) Student Academic Experience Survey reported that, of 10,142 full-time UK undergraduate students, Black students were less likely than White students to experience a sense of belonging. Yet, work from WonkHE and Pearson suggests that feelings of belonging are consistent between Black and White respondents. Finally, AdvanceHE and HEPI's (2023) recent survey of 10,163 full-time undergraduate students found that 55% of students are now in paid employment. With Student 2025's longitudinal nature

and diverse sample it can bring new knowledge to the sector showcasing the everyday experiences both positive and negative faced by students from the impact of approaches to community building and decolonisation to changes in employment and income and its impact on academic and social performance over a full lifecycle.

Given the risk of the sector having to adapt and respond to the usual challenges that arise, the need for a study like Student 2025 that takes a measured, overarching view of the student lifecycle is helpful to ensure we make decisions based on informed insight and importantly students' ongoing reflection and input, rather than those taken from a fixed point. Of course, Student 2025 is a relatively small sample that leans toward APP target groups but importantly it provides data that can influence the direction of activity on everything from induction, student support strategies and approaches to learning to be grounded in the real-world experience of NTU students and to directly impact the experience of those student cohorts participating in the research.

In Term One 2021/22 the project team recruited 104 participants across a range of subject disciplines. Initial oversampling by 25 was planned, to mitigate the risk of withdrawals, and recruitment was undertaken via a voluntary expression of interest, generated by project publicity activity. The aims and aspirations of the project were clearly articulated to assist in self-screening, and additional eligibility checks took place once potential participants had expressed interest. Each participant has been offered a financial incentive of £50 each term to encourage and maintain active engagement. As a commitment from the start of the project, the project team were keen to ensure that the students' time and engagement was valued, particularly given the costs of travel for participation and in recognition of the cost-of-living crisis. Therefore, all interviews took place on Microsoft teams. Recruited participants were of the following characteristics:

Characteristic and Qualification		Student 2025 Count	Student 2025 %
Gender	Female	62	59.6
	Male	42	40.4
Mature/Young	Mature	38	36.5
	Young	66	63.5
Black/White	Black	39	37.5
	White	65	62.5
Disability	Disabled	25	24.0
	Non-disabled	79	76.0
IMD	IMD Q1	54	51.9
	IMD Q2	36	34.6
	IMD Q3	0	0
	IMD Q4	4	3.8
	IMD Q5	10	9.6
Entry Qualifications	A-Levels	33	31.7
	BTEC	15	14.4
	Mixture of BTEC & A-Levels	10	9.6
	Other Qualification Types	46	44.2

Table 1: Overview of Student 2025 sample. IMD refers to index of multiple deprivation quintile. This is a measure of multiple deprivation of small areas.

Study Design

Student 2025 is a longitudinal mixed methods project, built around three core areas of data collection:

- Semi-structured 45-60 minute online interview data generated termly for the duration of the project.

- Online JISC survey data completed pre-interview, generated termly for the duration of the project.
- University outcome data

Year One Insight

Analysis of Year One data has been completed. Early data must be framed, not only within the context of the wider project lifecycle but alongside additional data such as university outcome data which will take place later in the project. The full survey is partly adapted each term to reflect the changing contexts within which the student experiences NTU. A summary of the key findings is outlined in the following section.

Sample characteristics

Research shows a continued increase in the number of students working in paid employment (AdvanceHE and HEPI, 2023). This undoubtedly has an impact on student decision-making when it comes to engagement with both learning and extra-curricular activity. Of the NTU sample 51% (53 students) indicated that they were working alongside their studies; working hours were typically between 10-20 hours per week. As well as taking part in paid work outside of their studies, 36.5% (38 students) gave time to extra-curricular activities in their first term at NTU. The most commonly cited activities for our sample related to Nottingham Trent Students' Union societies (55%, 22 students) and sports clubs (40%, 16 students).

Belonging, engagement and the University Experience

Within the Term One Student 2025 survey, 71% of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I feel like I belong at NTU”—this is slightly higher than the sector-wide findings generated by WonkHE. For Student 2025, the majority of respondents come from NTU APP target groups. Specifically with Black students, our project responses found there was a significant increase in belonging scores for Black students from within the survey results between Term One and Term Three in Year One. Black students’ increased sense of belonging was significantly higher when compared to White students self-reported sense of belonging across Term One and Three. Monitoring changes over time in Student 2025 offers a unique perspective that allows us to gain additional insight into how feelings of belonging change over time for specific groups of students. This is in distinction to other research where feelings of belonging are measured at one point during the academic year (Advance HEPI, 2022; WonkHE & Pearson 2022). Student 2025 continues to monitor students’ sense of belonging and will explore further qualitative responses to understand the reasons for Black students’ increase in feelings of belonging as the project progresses.

Developing support and connections

When asked “have you reached out to your support network outside university (i.e. relatives, friends)?”, analysis explored the responses of the students that completed the survey in Term Three (44 students) and found that 18.2% of the students in Term One said that they had received support from outside the university, and 71.4% had reached out to their support network outside university in Term Two. This is an important consideration when contemplating the additional challenges students face with cost of living, part-time employment and wider barriers for participation and engagement, including first-in-family participants and those with a specific reliance upon university support systems. Of the 51% who indicated they had accessed NTU support in Term One of Year One, the most common sources of support were student support services (22 students), personal tutors (21 students), libraries (20 students) and course leaders/academic staff (21 students). When asked about the spaces in which they had been able to build connections and friendships, most respondents indicated that they had made friends on their course (95 students), followed by their accommodation (40 students) and in shared lectures across core Year One modules (26 students). Importantly, the strong focus on the course as a place for connection is a key area that the institution has direct control over, and creates specific structured curriculum space for the creation of timetabled opportunities to allow for these connections to flourish.

Participants were asked whether they thought their NTU university experience had been different from their peers. Of the Student 2025 sample, 52.9% responded 'Yes' (55 students). When asked for more detail, open comments offered valuable insight including: "Being the only POC [person of colour] in my accommodation", "My parents never attended university and aren't fluent in English, so I have to figure a lot of things out on my own" and "I worry about working, uni and coping with mental health. I don't have many friends".

Analysis of semi-structured interviews provides a useful spotlight on student reflection, and the changes that emerge over time. Unsurprisingly, a focus arose around the challenge and experience of making friends, particularly during the first two weeks of university. These regular and detailed insights have been embedded into the work of NTU from welcome and induction planning, improved use of peer-to-peer mentoring to a full staff development workstream offer on student engagement and transition. Information from Student 2025 is used to ensure staff are aware that student transition is not always smooth and that the classroom is the one structured place we have control over to help our students succeed. This rich insight provides opportunities to address the challenges noted by participants through embedded curriculum activity that is designed to support both students and staff in overcoming challenges be it re-engagement activity, building of community or partnership working to deliver positive change to a student's experience while they are still with us.

Final Thoughts and Considerations for the Future

Feedback from our interviews supports very clearly the priorities outlined in NTU's Undergraduate Student Emotional Lifecycle, most notably around making friends. The Emotional Lifecycle, created through cross-NTU collaboration including with Student Support Services, the Centre for Student and Community Engagement, Academic Schools and developed in consultation with students helps colleagues across NTU to understand and bring to life the student experience, whilst identifying opportunities for proactive and preventative intervention.

Undergraduate Student emotional lifecycle

Capturing the emotions of the undergraduate student community, this lifecycle has been created following extensive work and interviews with colleagues across NTU, NTSU and student focus groups. It's aim is to help departments further understand the student mood and identify opportunities for proactive and preventative intervention.

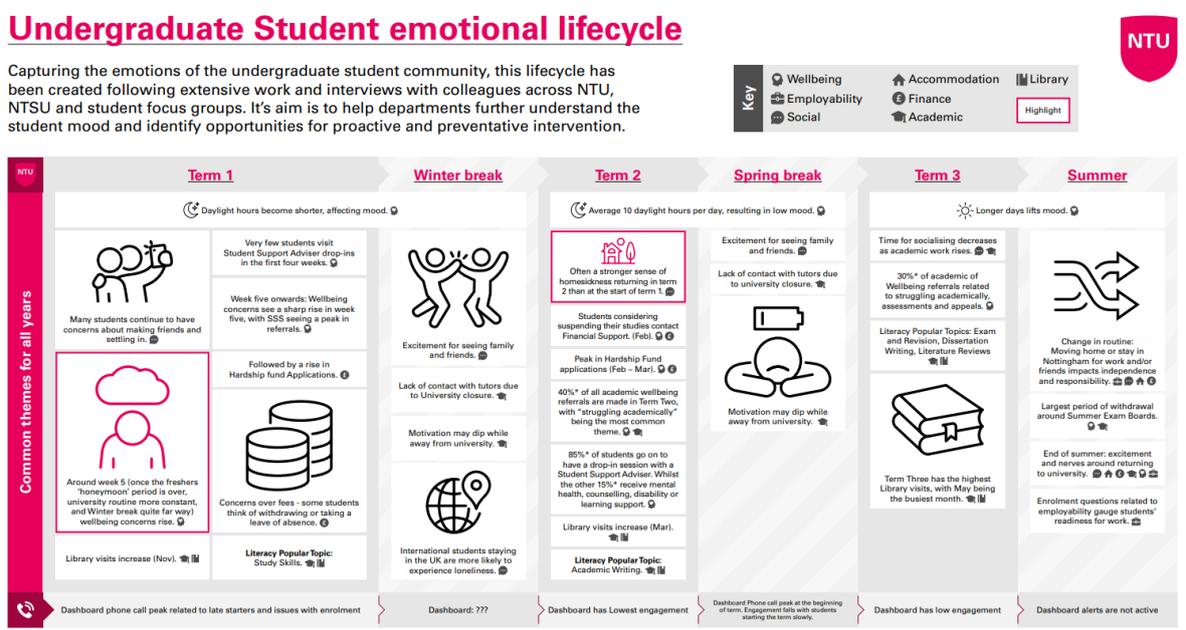


Figure 2: NTU Undergraduate Emotional Lifecycle.

Mapping findings against the Undergraduate Student Emotional Lifecycle offers an opportunity to explore not just the range and variety of ways in which these shared experiences may manifest for different students, but also to consider the ways in which students have navigated and addressed these issues as they arise. Initial findings from Student 2025 have indicated the need to:

- Provide opportunities to support the development of friendships and connections on their course

- Build in opportunities for personal growth, and the development of self-confidence
- Support students in developing their self-responsibility
- Support the development of personal and professional networks (including with staff)
- Acknowledge that students are balancing other responsibilities alongside their NTU experience.

With the understanding gained from our longitudinal study, Student 2025 is now entering Year Three of data collection. The project continues to provide rich quantitative and qualitative real-time insight that explores the academic experience, social experience and sense of belonging of students from a range of backgrounds. This project's creation and on-going delivery is led by NTU's Educational Research and Evaluation Team who are part of NTU's Centre for Academic Development and Quality. For further questions regarding Student 2025 please contact erick.moratayagatica@ntu.ac.uk

Case Study Three: Edinburgh Napier University. Designing out Barriers: Student Partnership for Student Voice Research

Claire Garden, Faye Skelton, Pamela Calabrese, Fatima Azam, Lauren Hunter

This case study will give an example of a student partnership research project focused on student voice at Edinburgh Napier University. It outlines the design considerations required to reduce barriers to student engagement in student voice research and safeguard the partnership approach.

Context

Student diversity and inclusion are high on the student experience agenda at Edinburgh Napier University, a Scottish Modern University with over 17,000 students, 1/5th of whom identify as disabled. 10% of the student population are from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and over 10% come from the most deprived 20% of postcodes. We believe anyone with the talent and potential to succeed should have the opportunity to come to Edinburgh Napier University, and we are committed to creating a culture of inclusion. Recent research has added weight to the idea that in order to belong, students must first feel included, therefore belonging and inclusion go hand in hand (Taff & Clifton, 2022). Listening to and respecting the student voice are part of the culture of inclusion – to be an inclusive university we must have ways to hear every student and work to remove any barriers to sharing experiences and perspectives with us.

Traditionally we listen to student voices through feedback mechanisms e.g., surveys, by including students in some university activities such as committee membership and through a system of representation via student representatives and student associations/ unions. However, despite recent excellent overall NSS satisfaction scores in many courses run by the School of Applied Sciences, we experience limited student engagement with existing formal feedback mechanisms where module evaluation questionnaire completion rates are consistently low. Working with student representatives to benchmark their work showed that they also find it difficult to effectively engage their cohorts using existing communication platforms and mechanisms (using the [benchmarking tool](#) on the SPARQs website). We were concerned that low participation could indicate non-response bias i.e., that some groups are less likely to respond than others, and wished to design a better, more inclusive system for listening to students in the school from the outset. We began to work with students on a piece of research to identify improvements that would ensure that more, under-represented students are heard (Goos & Salomons, 2017).

Research Aim

To make recommendations to improve student engagement and feedback opportunities in the School of Applied Sciences at Edinburgh Napier University.

Approach

Inclusion was embedded as a principle at the core of the research project, as we wished to lower or remove barriers to participation for potential interns and participants (Figure 3). A student partnership approach was chosen after reflecting on how best to include students in the design of the project, and the level of control and participation we wished for our student researchers to have (models summarised in Varwell, 2021). As far as possible, we wanted students to be able to make choices and exert influence over the whole research project because we recognised as the staff members initiating the research that we could not share the full spectrum of lived experiences we wanted to incorporate so that the research would be both impactful and relevant to our context (the staff researchers are all white British females with postgraduate level education). We therefore initiated a student partner research project, with three paid interns over three years, so that each could have time to influence and execute a part of the research cycle of literature review and contribute experience-informed recommendations for methodology; designing and conducting the research and analysis with all members involved in the dissemination.

We designed a recruitment strategy for the interns to be as inclusive as possible, with the aim of encouraging all students to consider applying because they believed they would be successful and could contribute to the project. This included:

- Paid internships (including all meeting and preparation work)
- Flexible working preferences discussed at interview
- Open recruitment via known platform for student recruitment at our university, supported by student rep encouragement
- Seen experience/competency-based interview questions
- Relaxed, open interview environment
- Interviewers gave pronouns and short introduction to motivation behind research including elements of own background
- Interviewees were asked to give preferred name and encouraged to include own experiences in answers where comfortable to do so
- Interviewees offered development support and reassured that they would be working in partnership with staff and not left alone
- All interviewees were given constructive feedback after interview

We also encouraged a safe and mutually supportive working environment and a true partnership approach between members of the research team to maximise the benefit to the intern and the project:

- Each new student researcher completed an 'expectations in supervision' questionnaire in discussion with the staff researchers to set expectations
- Teams site were set up to allow for asynchronous collaborative working
- Student researchers led development of the research questions and methodology
- Student researchers encouraged to include their own experiences into research as commentary and intentionally included in decision-making
- Each student researcher made recommendations to the next, with a paid handover.

Initial Findings

The first student researcher highlighted the following barriers to engagement from their position as a female Muslim carer: religion (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), caring responsibilities (Kettell, 2020), finances (Aina et al, 2022), disability (Kohli & Atencio, 2023), home/overseas status (Page & Chahboun, 2019) and first generation in HE (Jehangir et al, 2022). As well as those individual factors, they also emphasised that students are unaware of the value of their feedback or how their feedback is used (Goodman et al, 2015; Cone et al, 2018) and a lack of awareness about unequal access to the Edinburg Napier Student Partnership Agreement (Marquis et al, 2022). The distance between some student representatives and the students they represent was also highlighted as potentially problematic (Young & Jerome, 2020). With regards to the feedback mechanisms themselves, students raised concerns about the lack of awareness of feedback opportunities due to poor

publicisation and issues around the timing of module and national surveys meaning that they are of limited benefit to participants (Cathcart et al, 2014). Following the literature review the first student researcher made these recommendations about the design of the study (Figure 3):

- Vary promotion to recruit a diverse range of participants
- Offer of an incentive to participate to acknowledge effort and time
- Activity-oriented focus group to encourage participation and experience-sharing.

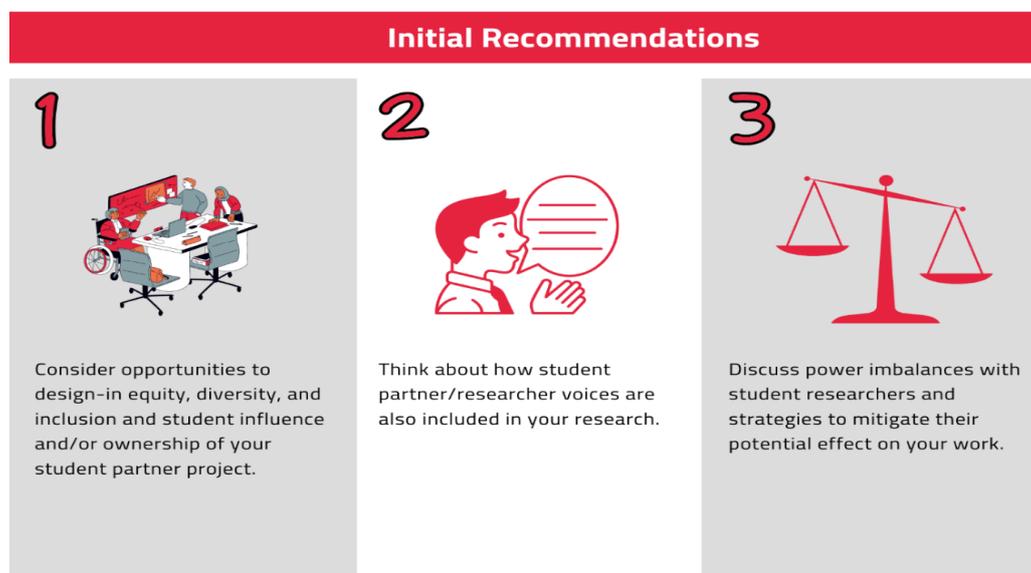


Figure 3. Initial recommendations from the first student researcher regarding design of the student voice project.

The focus group activity was recommended to be a reflect-and-share task around inhibitors of engagement and/ or a ranking activity. These recommendations were considered with the second student researcher, and the team decided to use a Q-sort-like task to gather student views about participating in feedback. This is a forced-sort task used to gather views on a series of statements which has been used to gather student opinions on a number of different issues (Zhou et al, 2019). We decided to modify the task to allow participants to add in a statement they strongly agree with and one they strongly disagree with in order to allow them some control of the task. The staff and student researchers then collaborated to produce a series of statements for sorting along themes derived from the literature review and experiences of the project researchers. These themes included:

- Barriers to engaging with feedback mechanisms e.g. 'The timing of feedback opportunities will affect whether or not I take part'
- Impact of feedback e.g. 'I understand what happens to my responses when I provide the University with feedback'
- Inclusion issues e.g. 'It is important to include minority voices in university decision-making'
- Issues relevant to specific feedback mechanisms e.g. 'The way I prefer to share my feedback with the University depends on what I have to say'
- Value (to students and institution) e.g. 'The University values my feedback and cares what I think'.

We also collaborated to design a linked-anonymous pre-sort questionnaire to gather participant identity information and a post-sort questionnaire to probe sorting choices on Qualtrics. We decided to include a short post-sort focus group to the methodology in order to explore the sorting choices in more detail with participants. A staff researcher led the ethical approval and data management work due to the requirement for institutional knowledge, experience and access to staff IT systems.

However, the student researcher learned from their involvement in discussions about the process, informing their honours project preparation.

Conducting Research

We designed a recruitment strategy to encourage as many students from the full spectrum of identities to participate, involving peer and ambassador networks and student researcher designed recruitment materials. The data gathering sessions were also designed to be led by the student researcher to remove power imbalances as far as possible, with academic staff researchers absenting themselves from any sessions including students known to them.

Student Experience of Partnership

“This project has been a collaborative experience between university staff and student partners. During this process my contributions have been embraced and my voice valued. Both my professional and academic development have been supported, where I have acquired skills applicable to my own academic work. Furthermore, this project has enhanced my understanding of student feedback mechanisms within the university and allowed me to reflect on the experience of other students.”

Initial Conclusions

An inclusive approach to recruiting our student researchers led to the appointment of student partners able to contribute their valuable insights and lived experience to the project. Their influence on study design was transformational, resulting in a research methodology that none of the staff researchers anticipated at the outset. This taught staff researchers much about the value of student insights and strengths (Figure 4). Although it is acknowledged that no student’s experience could be positioned as typical, indeed we did not set out to cover the full spectrum of identities in our student researchers, together with recruiting a wide spectrum of participants to the study, their involvement in every aspect of study design will ensure that the results are appropriate to our context and should result in actionable student-centred results. Student researchers in turn benefitted from working in partnership with staff researchers, in both cases so far helping their research skill development and positively impacting on their honours project preparation.

Initial Recommendations

1. Consider opportunities to design-in inclusion and student influence and/or ownership of your student partner project
2. Think about how student partner/ researcher voices are also included in your research
3. Discuss power imbalances with student researchers and strategies to mitigate their potential effect on your work.

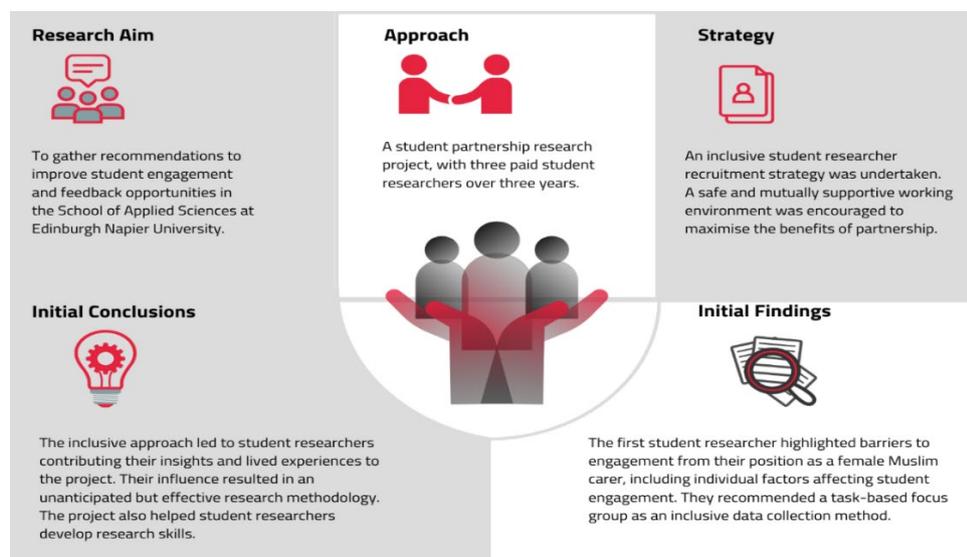


Figure 4. Summary of the approach and learning from co-designing the student voice research project with student researchers.

Hints and Tips: A checklist for Student Belonging considerations.

Nicola Watchman Smith

Students are telling us – as the foreword to this guide is testament to – that the concept of belonging is not merely about a person adopting or accepting the identity of being a student. It is imbued with feelings of being accepted, valued and comfortable. Without this, students may feel less equipped, less able and arguably less willing to take part in university activities, both in and outside of our teaching spaces.

Another clear signal coming from our students is that not all of them *want* to engage in ambassadorial, extra-curricular and student voice activity but there appears to be a shared understanding amongst the student body that this is (i) important to some students and therefore (ii) an aspect of university life and so (iii) HE providers should work to ensure care and time is taken to create and advertise these opportunities to students and that (iv) student integration and transition support is a central consideration in strategic planning from the point of enrolment to academic completion.

The checklist below can be used for that purpose; to provide a gentle reminder of how, where, when and why we might consider student belonging:

1. Pre-arrival surveys: can be used to overlay other data to grant a HEI a better understanding of student belonging and its pinch-points.
2. Consider adopting an “orientation” narrative, rather than an “induction” one. Transition into HE activity should run beyond the initial welcome week and should be used to scaffold/reinforce key milestones in the student journey including the start of assessment, the move from first year to second, second to third, undergraduate to postgraduate.
3. Measure engagement not just attendance, and do it at key points in the academic cycle if your learner analytics systems allow.
4. Consider if you are making the most of your student representatives. Are they suitably supported and trained on themes of belonging? Are they part of the conversation and part of any solutions you are aiming to achieve?
5. Tinto (1975; 1993) told us that goal setting is linked to belonging and achievement but do your students have sufficient opportunity to set goals on behalf of your university? Is this made possible by your institutional approaches?
6. Dialogues matter: whether this be in response to goal setting in academic contexts, closing the loop on student feedback or providing a platform for staff-student debate. Create space to hear student voice in all of its forms.
7. Belonging is a dual concept – academic and social: consider how current contexts and climates might be impacting the balance of this duality. For instance, have you moved a certain course to online delivery following post-pandemic feedback but now students have less opportunity to connect with each other? How are you mitigating for this?
8. Consider adopting a nudge approach to ease student overwhelm at the start of their course. Creating a student journey lifecycle to map the points at which a nudge would help your

students can be a good place to start (see the Teesside University example noted in the case study above).

9. Ask *your* students and keep asking: this guide provides case studies on belonging that work at a particular university but there is not one-size-fits-all when it comes to student belonging. Have you got a mechanism to hear your students' opinion about belonging and can you hear it early enough to act upon this feedback? Just as one size does not fit all HEIs, this also applies to different years of study in any particular university/ college – each intake of students will have a context specific to them. Keep talking to your students to know this (new) context.
10. Senior leaders, be encouraged to create space for academic and student support services to measure and reflect upon the impact they are having on student belonging enhancement.
11. Recognise diversity: whatever you do, make sure it's accessible to all.

Reflections from a student perspective

Lauren Hunter, Student Partner, Edinburgh Napier University

It is hoped this guide can be a useful tool for institutions who seek to develop their understanding of student belonging. By hearing directly from university students, potential barriers to belonging can be identified and addressed. This can improve both student experience and engagement across the university. Crucial to any research in this area is that students feel included, and their contribution valued. Furthermore, this guide can encourage the involvement of student partners across university research. It is hoped this can provide invaluable insight and be a powerful tool in shaping the understanding of student experience.

Anna O'Hara, President Nottingham Trent Students' Union

This guide has the potential to offer a resource to institutions looking to explore and better understand the sense of belonging experienced by their students. It can encourage opportunities for new and continued collaboration across institutions and provide a helpful starting point for gaining a deeper insight into approaches to understanding the student experience and ultimately improving it. Having the opportunity to hear directly about the experiences of students will allow for a greater understanding of the many barriers faced by students and provide solutions to enhance belonging for all. The guide can improve student engagement in multiple ways from studying, extra-curricular and peer-based activities to the way in which institutions approach collaboration and projects. As these approaches are taken forward the ultimate goal is for enhanced student experience across the full array of University life. For students, this will mean a better experience and allow them to feel they have a personalised experience leading to an enhanced sense of belonging and community.

Oluwafemi Abolade, SU President Wellbeing (Teesside University)

This guide has revealed in many ways how essential belonging is to students and how institutions can develop tools to further develop the understanding of student belonging. If properly followed and implemented, the guide will improve student experience and further encourage wider engagement while in the university. More importantly, this guide will engender bonds among students during their transition to university, promote institutional culture, support diversity while helping to form and reflect on community of practice in the classroom. Students and staff will enjoy better experience in an atmosphere that brings them fulfilment when a sense of belonging is attained. We welcome the guide and look forward to applying more of the ideas mentioned in it here at Teesside.

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