

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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“Why not me?” –The extent to which students’ academic identity impacts their sense of community and mental health

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**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

**Abstract:** Literature suggests that it is ‘virtually impossible’ to understand the aetiology of mental health without considering identity issues. However, mental health issues are often seen as specific to individuals. Therefore causes and solutions are often explored at the individual level. We believe that social concerns such as academic identity and sense of community may be a key underexplored factor at play.

We will present preliminary findings where we have explored the intersection between academic identity and mental health in undergraduate students. Students in both law and psychology completed measures of their sense of belonging, stress and mental wellbeing. Results supported our hypothesis in that sense of belonging was associated with reduced stress and more positive mental wellbeing. Thematic analysis of qualitative data is ongoing but preliminary analysis suggests that students see clear links between their sense of belonging and mental health and suggest ways which schools could better support this.

**Paper:**

The 2018 HEPI study of more than 14,000 students indicates that undergraduates are more likely to have lower levels of mental wellbeing than other young people between 20-24. Concerningly, only 17% of undergraduates felt that their life was ‘highly worthwhile’ and they were ‘very happy’. This was lower than the approximately 33% of young people who were the same age but not at university.

The prevailing approach has been to view mental health and wellbeing as an individual problem, whereas we argue that it is more properly seen as a community issue. The problem needs to be understood as an issue for the ‘university community’ and not simply a problem of individual students. Moreover, universities need to recognise that they have an ‘ethical imperative to act to address the high levels of psychological distress being experienced’ (Field, Duffy and Huggins, 2014: 1).

The idea of a university community is closely tied up with the idea of academic identity, which Archer (2008) defines as a sense of 'authenticity' and 'success', and which is grounded in interactions between an individual and a community (Henkel, 2005). A positive academic identity may lead students to see themselves as belonging to a community, and may lead to students more actively seeking help from others, such as peers and tutors (Student Minds, 2011). Peer support is one of the most often cited reasons that students feel able to remain in higher education (What Works, 2012). As acknowledged by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011), trying to cope with challenges without support is likely to impact negatively on mental health and wellbeing, whereas seeking and receiving support is likely to improve them. If students are able to access support – and are encouraged to communicate and share their difficulties with each other and with staff – this can bolster their resilience and wellbeing, as they feel more that they belong.

### **Study 1**

We conducted a survey with 95 students aged 17-27. Approximately 50% were from Law and 50% from Psychology. We explored the relationship between belonging, stress and mental wellbeing. Students completed the following measures:

- Mental Wellbeing WEMWBS: explores wellbeing and psychological functioning (Huppert & Johnson, 2010).
- Perceived Stress Scale PSS (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983). Measures feelings and thoughts during the past month.
- Academic belonging (Ingram, 2012).

Using multiple regression, our results show that 36% of the variance in mental wellbeing can be predicted by students' sense of belonging ( $R(1,93)=17.17, p<.001$ .  $R\text{ square} = .360$ ). In addition, 29% of students' stress levels can be predicted by their sense of belonging ( $R(1,93)=38.38, p<.001$ .  $R\text{ square} =.292$ ). We also found that students in the School of Law had lower belonging and poorer mental wellbeing than those in the School of Psychology: Wellbeing:  $t(93)=-2.98, p < .05^*$ , Stress:  $t(93)=.74, p > .05$ , Belonging:  $t(93)=-2.32, p<.05^*$ .

The results indicate that a greater sense of belonging leads to improved mental wellbeing and reduced levels of stress. Psychology students have a greater sense of belonging and more positive wellbeing than law students despite psychology and law students being equally stressed. This suggests the importance of more literature exploring different experiences in different subjects and how we can use practices and lessons in these different subjects to improve different experiences. Therefore we conducted study 2, a qualitative study, to explore in greater depth student perceptions of belonging and identity.

### **Study 2**

We hosted 5 asynchronous online focus groups. Participants included 17 psychology students and 4 law students. Sample questions were:

- What have staff in law/psychology done to support or hinder a sense of community?
- Did your academic identity or sense of community affect your response to stressful times?

Preliminary findings suggest that psychology students gain a sense of community from other students

while law students feel that they are in competition with their peers, which hinders the development of a community:

*"We do help create a sense of community - at the time of writing this our group chat is flooded with messages between people helping each other with what could be covered in essays." (Psychology)*

*"While some students are really kind and helpful, many students I have come into contact with are usually focused on themselves. It is understandable in this subject area but not everyone benefits from the 'survival of the fittest', especially those who do not wish to pursue a legal career. I feel the attitude of most students does make it very hard. It seems as though the message is that you have to disregard the feelings of others if you wish to succeed." (Law)*

Students in psychology experienced a strong peer-to-peer, horizontal community, speaking to friends and other students for support; in contrast, law students experienced a strong student-to-lecturer vertical community, and appeared to be more likely to go to their lecturers for support.

*"The lecturers do nothing but support every student they come in contact with which will obviously help with a sense of community. The students do help but clearly hold things back to prevent you knowing everything they do. Keeping their edge." (Law)*

*"I don't think staff play a major role in my experience with the 'community' of the psychology department as students often tend to talk amongst themselves and try to help each other, which I personally think is a positive thing." (Psychology)*

In addition, students did see a clear link between community and mental health

*"I think if I felt a stronger sense of community I would have dealt better with stressful times."*

*"...the knowledge that help is quite literally an email away is reassuring when stress and anxiety starts getting to me."*

*"... knowing there is people around you can really help."*

Further analysis of this data is ongoing. Taken together this research suggests a strong link between sense of community and mental health. This creates a possibility for innovative interventions at the school level which focus on creating a stronger academic identity and sense of community. This is likely to lead to a positive impact on the mental health of all students.

References:

Brown, P (2016) *The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health: HEPI Report 88*. Oxford: HEPI

Thomas, L (2011) *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change*. What Works? Student Retention and Success programme