

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Lessons from Beyond HE: Exploring Sense of Belonging to Redefine Inclusive Excellence

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Abstract: How Higher Education Institutions remain high quality and diversify in a competitive post-pandemic future is an area requiring serious consideration as student, staff and regulatory definitions of what is excellent continues to evolve in light of the changing HE landscape. This study ventured beyond the HE setting into other sectors with a similar focus on selectivity, competition and excellence in search of insight and strategies for achieving inclusive excellence. Senior leaders from five sectors outside of HE shared their reflections on diversifying their organisations whilst maintaining high performance, loyalty and wellbeing. Belonging emerged as key to building an inclusive and effective community through unlocking diversity. Exercised diversity empowered to align with the mission of the community was found to be the core mechanism through which excellence was achieved across the sectors studied. This study offers unique insights and recommendations to support HEIs to capitalise on the potential of inclusive excellence.

Paper: Selective higher education institutions (HEIs) have implemented a range of measures and initiatives to address calls to improve diversity and inclusion but, despite significant regulatory and market pressure, have struggled to return the impact expected for the level of investment and effort (Millward 2021). This study set out to explore inclusive excellence in other sectors to better understand what institutions outside of HE are doing to widen participation and improve Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), thereby providing a reflection on what the HE sector can learn from others.

Study approach

Leaders from organisations outside of HE where belonging or inclusive excellence was a priority were interviewed on how they promote inclusion and maintain excellence and a strong sense of identity within their organisations using a semi-structured approach. Table 1 describes the participants' positions and sectors. The interviews were thematically analysed and though the themes that emerged across the various sectors investigated were strong and well evidenced, the results must be interpreted in light of the limited sample of participants explored across a wide range of sectors.

Table 1

Participant	Role
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A	Senior leader in a Religious Organisation
B	HR Executive in a large Mining company
C	High ranking officer / academic in the British Army
D	Senior leader in the Scout Association
E	Retired Team GB Coach
F	Recruiter for a UK Premiere League Football Team
G	Staff leader in Team GB
H	People Executive for a leading online vocational education provider

Inclusion and Belonging – The Bedrock of Inclusive Excellence

A common phenomenon observed across all sectors investigated; in every context creating an environment where those recruited would feel “valued”, “accepted”, “cared for”, “known” and “listened to” (words all strongly related to belonging) was described as the key to unlocking the power of diversity while maintaining excellence and remaining competitive. Some went as far as saying that belonging was one of the most important factors determining success. Participants reflected on the importance of recognising and empowering individuality and that labels and categories used to address EDI issues can sometimes be a barrier to enabling diversity to manifest (cf Read et al 2003; Yorke 2000).

The interviews suggest that belonging is the missing piece to the puzzle of inclusion, one that can help HEIs grow past positive discrimination measures and labels to enable individuals to exercise all dimensions of their diversity. If true belonging is the ideal state of a community and leads to enhanced performance, loyalty, wellbeing and exercised diversity, as the literature supports (Kuh et al 2010; Thomas 2012; Brooman and Darwent 2014; Osterman, 2000; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pittman & Richmond, 2008), then the definition and understanding of what makes a community excellent must evolve to include it.

Dimensions of Inclusive Excellence

There were many clues as to what makes inclusive excellence through belonging shared by participants. The first dimension of inclusive excellence was a clear mission and purpose with which all activities, recruitment, culture and objectives should align. Although most communities can identify their primary goal and purpose, care is needed to prevent it leading to uni-dimensional success criteria or forcing individuals to fit into a one-dimensional success identity. Thus, the second dimension was that inclusive excellence must be authentically multidimensional. In many cases

participants suggested that softer aspects of their community such as culture and belonging had been previously under-recognised despite being integral to success and excellence, and that they are increasingly becoming the prime area of focus. The third dimension of inclusive excellence was an emphasis on collective success. In all cases the mission and purpose were greater than what could ever be achieved by an individual with individual's goals oriented towards the shared objective. The alignment between person and purpose that is driven by, and drives, belonging constituting inclusive excellence was described by Participant D: "What I do connects to what we do."

Discussion

The three dimensions of inclusive excellence found in this research, together with the finding that a strong sense of belonging among the members of the community should be the bedrock upon which inclusive excellence is built, and the external setting within which these results were found provide a helpful lens through which to reflect on HEIs. Leaders adopted language that both reflects and shapes feelings of belonging, empowering members to exercise their uniqueness while ensuring that any competition was positioned to achieve common, collaborative goals. The rhetoric was not about 'protecting' excellence from diversity but rather about realising, reframing enhancing and pursuing excellence through diversity.

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