

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

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Students' Sense of Belonging and Community

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

**Abstract:** Our paper will explore 'being' a higher education (HE) student through the lens of 'belonging' in HE. We are in the second of a three-year mixed methods study which has so far captured the experiences of around 400 undergraduate and postgraduate students from Imperial College London, a highly selective institution specialising in science, engineering, medicine and business. Our survey combines Ahn and Davis' (2019) innovative open-ended '10 Words' question with a Sense of Belonging scale adapted from belonging items in validated student experience questionnaires (Gehlbach, 2015; Yorke, 2016). We are also conducting in depth longitudinal interviews (~70 to date) which probe what students perceive as important components of and barriers to their sense of belonging, as well as how belonging in higher education settings relates to belonging in other areas of their lives.

### **Paper: Introduction**

In England, the goal to increase both the number and the range of students entering 'top' universities has brought into focus the extent to which these institutions' structures and practices had for so long been geared towards students with a relatively narrow and predictable range of backgrounds and identities. Research has explored how ethnic minority students experience being stereotyped and othered (Cameron & Greenland, 2019; Chaudry, 2020; Domingue, 2016), while students from 'non-traditional' or widening participation backgrounds are more likely to experience barriers to fitting in and adjusting to life at elite universities (Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016; Warikoo, 2016). Such findings highlight ongoing challenges to constructing inclusive communities and a sense of belonging across all students. Quinn (2005) critiques the 'symbolic' assumption within universities that students unproblematically constitute a 'community', arguing that this assumption constitutes 'an idealisation that tends to prevent any exploration of their tensions and absences, including their gender or race [or other] tensions" (pp. 5-8). The call for critical inquiry into how a 'student community' is constructed marks a point of departure for this paper. With this in mind, this paper has two main guiding research questions.

1. What are the main sources for students' sense of belonging and community?
2. Are certain student characteristics associated with different levels or understandings of 'belonging' and 'community'?

We assume that there is no one way to promote a sense of community and belonging and it is therefore worth exploring potential patterns in different kinds of students having different, or even competing, needs or preferences when it comes to feeling that they 'belong'.

This paper presents emerging findings based on two years of data from a three-year study.

## **Methods**

This mixed-methods study is ongoing and has so far collected data from more than 400 students all based at one research-intensive university in London. Data collection methods include:

- an open-ended survey question (adapted from Ahn & Davis, 2019)
- a Sense of Belonging Scale (adapted from Gehlbach, 2015; Yorke, 2016).
- in-depth qualitative interviews which probe what students perceive as important components of and barriers to their sense of belonging
- 'Walking Interviews', in which students guided the interviewer on a walk around campus (and the surrounding area)

## **Interim findings**

### **Course level**

Key components of belonging vary most notably by students' course level. Undergraduates prioritise social participation, particularly in clubs and societies, while postgraduates associate a positive sense of belonging with the professional networks and career opportunities that they are starting to enter into.

## **Gender**

Understandings of and experiences of belonging to a student community are also found to be gendered, in nuanced and complex ways. Women and men on the whole report similar, relatively high levels of 'belonging' within their university. However, the barriers to and challenges associated with belonging differ between men and women. A larger minority of women than men report a very low sense of belonging, and one reason for this appears to be the experiences of sexism that a large minority of women reported in interviews. Interestingly, men report that their pride in being at a prestigious institution is one of the most important aspects of what it means to belong to their university. But this also had a negative effect, since men were more likely than women to discuss feeling the competitive pressure as a barrier to fostering a sense of community and belonging.

## **Nationality**

Students with home (UK/EU) fee status report a higher sense of belonging than students with international fee status. But this hides a more complicated picture. Students from most regions of continental Europe and Asia report a higher sense of belonging than UK students. By contrast, students from the Middle East, the Americas and especially Africa and the Caribbean, report a lower sense of belonging. Interestingly, some UK students perceive the close-knit communities of international students as a barrier to their own belonging. But in general, one of our strongest findings is that students greatly value the university's nationally and culturally diverse student body.

## **Emerging conclusions/implications**

Students at the studied institution feel a strong sense of 'academic belonging'. Although 'social/interpersonal belonging' is a major aspect of students' sense of belonging, it also emerged as a source of significant barriers to belonging. Significant barriers to belonging exist, particularly for certain groups of students. Ongoing work is starting to explore potential best practices which can capitalise on the strong sense of 'academic belonging' in order to enhance 'social belonging', with a particular focus on 'social pedagogies' and increased interaction between students of different course levels.

## **References:**