

## **Influences of Belong at Brighton course activities on first year undergraduate students' transition into starting higher education: navigating structure and acting with agency to develop belonging, engagement, confidence and wellbeing.**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

“Connection, support, inclusion and autonomy” (Blake et al., 2022), as well as participation in a *community of practice*, have been identified as important in students’ development of a sense of belonging during transition into HE. Belong at Brighton, an institutional student-staff partnership project incorporating pre-entry, welcome week and extended induction activities, aims to support undergraduate student transition; to enhance student belonging, engagement and confidence; and to positively impact on student academic success. I discuss findings from participatory qualitative research comprising in-depth interviews with 9 participants across 6 schools focusing on students’ transition experiences, barriers encountered, and ways in which Belong at Brighton may be enhanced. HE structures and inequalities can adversely influence student experiences (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Thomas, 2002). However, students can develop agency and empowerment by participating in course *communities of practice* in a wider *landscape*, facilitated by programmes like Belong at Brighton (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger Trayner, 2015).

### **Full paper**

In this paper, I discuss findings from recent qualitative research (that is part of an overarching mixed methods evaluation) exploring the influences of Belong at Brighton course activities on first year undergraduate students’ transition into starting their degrees at the University of Brighton. It is anticipated that this paper will contribute to knowledge in the field of recent research into undergraduate student transition across the UK and international HE sectors.

In recent decades, a focus on building and developing student belonging, engagement and confidence has been central to Higher Education (HE) leaders’ and academic developers’ vision to enhance student transition, retention, and success in UK universities (Thomas, 2012). Since the COVID pandemic, however, there have been shifts around the reconceptualization of student belonging and how to develop this in the post-COVID context in UK HE. As Blake et al. (2022) argue in a recent WONKHE

report, “connection, support, inclusion and autonomy” were all found to be crucial aspects of building student belonging (p5-6). Building students’ sense of participation with peers in a *community of practice* was also identified as a key recommendation of the report (Blake et al., 2022), which is supported by earlier research (Wenger, 1999; Thomas, 2012; Masika and Jones, 2016). In this context, pre-entry activities and extended induction were shown to be beneficial, and the report found that students who had settled in well were “3 x more likely to feel a sense of belonging” than students who did not feel settled in (Blake et al., 2022, p26). The report also discussed correlations between student belonging and academic confidence and recommended that academic skills support activities were an important way of building student confidence in this context (Blake et al., 2022). Finally, the report found that “students appreciated a level of autonomy and input into their course contents and assessments” and recommended opportunities for “co-creation” (p.34).

Belong at Brighton, a University of Brighton institutional student-staff partnership project (2020 -2025), aims to support and enhance (foundation) and first year student transition, and has been rolled out across 7 academic schools, with the mid-term aim of enhancing first year student transition, engagement, belonging and confidence; and the longer-term objective of positively impacting on student academic success and retention (University of Brighton, 2021). Incorporating pre-entry, welcome week and first semester induction activities, the Belong at Brighton model aims that by the end of the intervention students should feel:

“Prepared: Confident to engage with studying their chosen course.

Connected: Able to navigate the systems, including both virtual and physical learning environments; and connecting with people, willing to embrace diversity.

Confident & Empowered: Able to identify sources to enable achievement, engagement, and further opportunities, fostering autonomy and independence.

Inspired: Motivated and excited about their course and the coming year and be open minded to new possibilities.

Engaged: Fully engaged with a wide range of opportunities both within the course and extra-curricular.”

(University of Brighton, 2023)

In this paper, I discuss participatory qualitative research exploring the influences of Belong at Brighton course activities on first year undergraduate students’ transition into HE and their development of a sense of belonging, engagement, confidence, and wellbeing. The findings are based on 5 individual and 2 paired in-depth interviews with 9 first year undergraduates across six academic schools and conducted by staff and student researchers. The interviews focused on students’ experiences of transition to HE, challenges, and barriers that students encountered, and ways in which Belong at Brighton interventions

may be enhanced in the future. It is envisaged that additional quantitative findings based on analysis examining correlations between student attendance at Belong at Brighton course activities, and student belonging, confidence and engagement will also be presented.

In discussing the findings, I argue that students navigate *structure and agency* during their transition into HE (Archer, 1982). Changes in HE structures and practices, and inequalities related to students' *educational and social capital* can disrupt students' *institutional habitus* when starting higher education with an adverse influence on student experiences (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Thomas, 2002). However, students can develop agency, empowerment, and ownership by actively engaging and participating in course *communities of practice* within the university, and in a wider *landscape of practice* facilitated by programmes such as Belong at Brighton (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger Trayner, 2015). Through participation in course *communities of practice* in a wider *landscape*, students can engage in social learning, negotiated co-creation, and develop of a sense of belonging, contributing to their *competence* and success (Wenger, 1999; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger Trayner, 2015).

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