323

'I deserve to be here': Minority ethnic students and their conditional belonging in higher education

Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu[1], Billy Wong[2], Órla Meadhbh Murray[3], Jo Horsburgh[1], Meggie Copsey-Blake[2]

[1]Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom. [2]University of Reading, Reading, United Kingdom. [3]Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

In efforts to support students' belonging in higher education, universities continue to cultivate and promote diversity and inclusion in their academic communities. Existing research has identified multiple domains of student belonging in higher education, although there has been limited qualitative analysis of how belonging is experienced by minority ethnic students, especially at elite institutions. This paper draws on 72 in-depth interviews with minority ethnic STEM university students in the UK. Drawing on the sociological concept of conditional belonging, our findings indicate that students' construction and negotiation of belonging can be 'conditional' and 'conditioned' based on their prior educational experiences, perceptions of being a minority within their institutional contexts and social and academic interaction with others. We argue that conditional belonging can shape how university students participate, engage and develop belonging. We conclude with practical implications for learning and teaching that can foster a diverse and inclusive academic community for all.

Full paper

This paper discusses minority ethnic STEM students' belonging in UK higher education, using the sociological concept of conditional belonging (Yodovich, 2021; de Waal, 2020) to unpack the complexities of belonging as multifaceted and circumstantial. For some students, belonging might be taken-for-granted or automatic, perhaps also even an unconscious or 'naturalised' concept, while for others, especially those from minority ethnic backgrounds, belonging can be a state that needs to be constantly worked and negotiated in order to connect to others, or fit in with the culture and perceived expectations of an academic community (Holmegaard et al., 2014). We argue that student belonging can be conditioned by dominant institutional discourse and perceptions by themselves and others in academic and social interactions.

This paper is based on a 2-year qualitative study on underrepresented undergraduate student experiences in STEM fields, focusing on their sense of belonging and exploring how being underrepresented may influence their identities and career aspirations at university. The study was conducted within two mid-size English universities offering a range of STEM degree programmes. Both institutions are pre-1992, with international reputations in STEM research and considered to be 'elite' universities. Students self-defined as part of one or more 'underrepresented' groups in UK higher

education and STEM, including those who are women or non-binary, an ethnic minority, working class, LGBTQ+, etc. In this paper, we focus on a subset of data from minority ethnic students (72 interviewees), examining how their sense of belonging at university develops and the conditions and circumstances that seem to impact belonging. Our data analysis was guided by a social constructionist perspective, which considers realities and experiences to be socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr, 2003). All interview transcripts were imported into NVivo for organisation and analyses.

Institutional Elitism and Competition: 'I'm not good enough to be here'

Many students experienced imposter syndrome in response to competitive discourses about being at high-achieving elite universities and STEM disciplines as elaborated by Chao-Xing (British East Asian woman): "I always felt a little bit imposter syndrome. Like, I don't know whether I should be here, my grades aren't as good as all of my friends, I'm not sure if I fit in… I was like, "Oh, everyone's so much smarter than me".

Minority students' academic interactions: 'I stick out like a sore thumb!'

Many minority ethnic students expressed negative experiences studying in their degree programmes due to their backgrounds, especially Black students like Michael (Black British man) who did not feel a sense of belonging, particularly in first year because 'there weren't many other people from where [he comes] from' and he felt 'almost as though you don't deserve to be here or you're here by fluke'. Students also discussed instances of encountering racist stereotypes and biases in lecture content and facing inappropriate jokes, which contributed to a sense of discomfort and isolation both from peers and staff.

Minority students' social interactions: 'I don't have much in common with others'

Many of our students experienced a lack of belonging in social settings due to their different educational and cultural backgrounds, making it challenging to find people 'like me, like around me' or feeling pressured to '[do] a lot to make sure that [they were] likable' (Rahma, Black British woman). Other students reported that the majority of other students shared cultural and educational backgrounds that led to their 'better sense of belonging with each other because they had that extra thing in common' (Sanaya, British South Asian woman) in classed, raced, and culturally-specific ways.

Our findings suggest that many of our minoritised students seem to have frequent imposter feelings when they compare themselves to other students' academic performance (Murray et al., 2023). Elite institutions appear to worsen this feeling when a dominant culture of high achievers with strong academic credentials raise academic expectations while students are simultaneously making sense of being (hyper)underrepresented. Our research highlights that the notions of inclusion and acceptance do not necessarily equate to a sense of belonging. In universities, students may be formally accepted or included with their registered student status, but their sense of belonging can be non-existent, conditional or even marked by a resistance to embracing dominant modes of belonging and choosing not to belong (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Murray et al., 2024). Addressing issues related to belonging requires ongoing efforts to go beyond the widening participation agenda to consider how to support underrepresented students from the moment they enter the academic community.

References

Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism*. Routledge.

De Waal, T. (2020). Conditional belonging: Evaluating integration requirements from a social equality perspective. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 41*(2), 231-247.

Gravett, K., & Ajjawi, R. (2022). Belonging as situated practice. *Studies in Higher Education, 47*(7), 1386-1396.

Holmegaard, H. T., Madsen, L. M., & Ulriksen, L. (2014). A journey of negotiation and belonging: Understanding students' transitions to science and engineering in higher education. *Cultural Studies of Science Education, 9*(3), 755-786.

Murray, Ó. M., Chiu, Y. L. T., & Horsburgh, J. (Forthcoming 2024). Is belonging always positive? Cultivating alternative and oppositional belonging at university. In C. Kandiko Howson & M. Kingsbury (Eds.), *Belonging and identity in STEM higher education*. UCL Press.

Murray, Ó. M., Chiu, Y. L. T., Wong, B., & Horsburgh, J. (2023). Deindividualising imposter syndrome: Imposter work among marginalised STEMM undergraduates in the UK. *Sociology, 57*(4), 749-766.

Yodovich, N. (2021). Defining conditional belonging: The case of female science fiction fans. *Sociology, 55*(5), 871–887.