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Compassionate belonging: A case study investigating postgraduate international student belonging

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Supporting international postgraduates in their higher education academic journey not only involves ensuring high quality teaching and research but also their sense of belonging to academic, learning and student communities. This research discusses a case study which investigated international postgraduate student belonging at a UK university. Two workshops were carried out. The first using Soft Systems Methodology to explore the complex topic area and put forward recommendations for developing a more compassionate learning environment and community which accommodates multiple stakeholder viewpoints and provides a conducive learning environment. The second workshop was a grounded discussion on findings from the first workshop to lead onto actionable interventions to encourage student engagement and belonging.   Some of the tentative findings include the need for knowledge sharing of day-to-day tasks, recognising cultural events, a spread-out induction with a wider scope and consistency between cohorts.

Full paper

Background context

The nature in which students' study and engage in higher education has been changing at a fast rate over the last 5 to 10 years. Massification, technological advancements, the Covid pandemic, and the cost-of-living crises are all examples of factors which have contributed. Belonging to a student, learning and academic community is a complex problem but one that holds the key to successful academic outcomes.   A number of studies including Wonkhe and Pearson (2022) have shown that a sense of belonging is vitally important to the well-being and performance of students and is strongly linked to academic engagement and student retention at university. Engagement in particular has been found to have a

positive relationship with employability skills (Towl and Senior, 2010). Although this is not a new concept it has come to the forefront again since the pandemic. The UPP Foundation Student Future Commission (2023) for example have highlighted the importance of helping students to regain their sense of belonging at their university and Wonkhe and Pearson (2022) have put forward a number of recommendations for belonging.

Postgraduate international students in particular tend to encounter a number of challenges with belonging, for example acclimatising to new cultures, a new educational system, language barriers, and a new academic integrity system. Universities need to be compassionate to students needs in order to provide a supportive environment to foster thought, growth and development.

Three strands are considered in the research – belonging to the student community, belonging to the academic community, and belonging to the learning community. The research puts forward practical recommendations on ways to foster an early sense of belonging to the university.

Research questions

1. *What are the ways in which students currently effectively engage with one another, with academics and with the learning materials?*
2. *What are the current barriers to student engagement so that they feel a sense of belonging to the student community, academic community, and learning environment?*
3. *What activities and techniques will enable students to feel a sense of belonging to learning, student and academic communities?*

Methodology

This case study will use Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland and Poulter, 2006) to analyse the current situation, consider an idealised future world and recommendations based on feasibility. SSM uses a systems thinking approach to analyse complex problems and enables ambiguous situations to be understood in greater depth and recommendations put forward. Its successful application has been seen in a number of different contexts (e.g. Augustsson, et a., 2019).

Two workshops were held at a UK university with international postgraduates with a group size of 6, with a mixture of students from different cohorts – September 2024 and January 2025. There were three methods deployed in the two workshops. Method one involved raising awareness of problem solving and networking amongst participants (used in both workshops). Method two (used in workshop one) used brainstorming and empathetic discourse to understand the current and future situations using rich pictures and conceptual modelling. The conceptual models within the idealised world were compared to the real-world rich pictures, to identify feasible and desirable changes going forward. Method three (workshop two) involved peer to peer focused group analysis of the findings

from workshop one. These grounded discussions around the findings led to actionable interventions to encourage student engagement.

Findings

Tentative findings include the need for practical steps which include knowledge sharing of day-to-day tasks, recognising cultural events, a spread-out induction with a wider scope and consistency and networking between cohorts. Actual examples include the potential for how to guides using Tiktok videos produced by alumni that could be viewed before arrival, and walking tours of the campus and city to reinforce understanding from the videos. This research will enable academics to facilitate better understandings of postgraduate expectations for belonging within higher education.

References

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