

## **Belonging and identity – a journey of being here’ (0252)**

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### **Introduction**

This paper draws on two discrete student experience research projects at the university – the HERE research project and the longitudinal research programme attached to the Education for Sustainable Development initiative – in order to share what happens when institutional researchers from different teams choose to explore what the sum total of their discrete projects amount to in terms of institutional self-knowing. The two research projects in question span three levels of resolution: individual students, the student body and the institution, and therefore are fertile ground for exploring the difference between amassed banks of information about students, and really knowing what the data is able to tell us.

### **The HERE project**

As part of an external project focusing on student retention and engagement, in-depth interviews were undertaken with students in their second year at the university. These aimed to offer students the opportunity to reflect on their journey through their first year, and included discussion on if and how they felt they belonged and what this meant to them. Students articulated their sense of belonging in a variety of ways and in some cases described belonging through several different strands.

Often belonging had developed through interaction or identification with others. For example, to a group of students, friends or to a community or ‘family’. Students appeared to identify with those seen to be in a similar situation to themselves, be it on the same course or to other mature students, or to others with attitudes that reflected theirs – a sense of identifying with those ‘like me’. Expressions of belonging to the course, the School they were located in or to the university also appeared. Here some students expressed their sense of pride for achievements at a departmental level, or their involvement with university activity – which enabled them to feel they belonged ‘more’. In some cases there was also a sense of defiance against those outside the university who were perceived to hold negative assumptions about the city. In addition, belonging also appeared to come from within such as pride in actually being a student because they were getting out of the experience what they wanted and were able to explore their subject and push themselves.

Not, or questioning, belonging was described through feeling like an outcast or ‘alien’, or being unable to forge bonds due to cliques amongst the study body or not mixing with ‘other’ groups both inside and outside the university. In some cases being away from their particular group of friends and therefore feeling segregated caused them to doubt if they belonged. Belonging was therefore not necessarily a consistent experience as students could feel they belonged in some situations but not in others or feel they belonged to the university but not, say, to the city.

Overall, the interviews revealed various aspects and strands to students’ understanding of belonging. Through the process of reflecting on their transition, feeling that they belonged came across as something that was important to them and as part of their journey through the first year.

### **Student-led research and sustainability**

A strong aspiration of our Education for Sustainable Development project *Ecoversity StuDent* has been to engage students as researchers in their own right, rather than seeing

students as a group to be merely researched. This paper explores the positive impacts, and the challenges involved, in engaging students as a collaborative and collegiate group of paid research interns within the context of a whole organisational change project.

The paper reviews how student researchers were encouraged to step outside habitual 'staff-directing-student' norms and instead manage the progress of research planning and data capture via peer-to-peer mentoring and support. The well-established advantages of peer-to-peer learning are substantively overviewed in the literature (e.g. Ertl *et al.*, 2008) as is the practice of peer mentoring and collegiate research communities in the context of doctoral research (Devenish, 2009). By comparison, commentary on students-as-researchers and student co-researchers within evaluative, organisational research contexts is, as yet, less prolific (recent examples include Bland, 2007; Thomson and Gunter, 2007 and Leitch, 2007).

In stepping outside staff-led modes, several profitable advantages are secured. Firstly, the research activity itself was rendered more democratic with respect to research participants: they were no longer being interviewed by a member of staff, but were enjoying a conversation of equals with a fellow student, thus the data was felt to have a validity and authenticity that may not have been otherwise achieved. Secondly, in being allowed to make research design decisions, follow them through and problem solve any issues that arose, student researchers benefitted from taking control and being responsible for the project. Thirdly, in being part of a peer research community, the student researchers were able to support and mentor each other, and their own research professionalism became enhanced via this collegiate sharing. Fourthly, the student group and staff member met regularly as a reflective community, focussing on what was being experienced and learnt from various perspectives.

The paper also explores the experience of being the staff member who initiated the project and the inevitable tensions that arise when we try and giving ownership and control to students, and yet find ourselves unconsciously trying to regain the steer and sovereignty we are used to. The paper ends with the challenge that affording students the opportunity to be truly self-directed and have real ownership is easier to say than to do, and implications for institutional research practices are discussed.

## Conclusion

Wisdom in terms of our own research practices is therefore not the *received* wisdom about 'students' as category, or even what we *think* we know about them, but is rather informed by research processes that foreground authentic student voice – *their* wisdom about their experience in relation to concepts of belonging, identity and sustainable development. Students as research leaders, shaping and steering their own research with other students is also examined for its relevance to informing institutional research practice and self-knowing.

## Refs

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