

Mapping Sense of Belonging ‘Moments’ on University Students’ Journey

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Abstract

It is widely established that arriving at university can be a confusing and disorientating experience; a world away from sixth form and college. Educators, researchers and policy makers within higher education, are in agreement that developing a sense of belonging is fundamental to students’ settling-in, engaging and achieving academic success. This paper examines undergraduates’ university journey and their perceptions of university belonging. Three hundred and fifty first year undergraduate students on BA (Hons) business and management at Leeds Business School, part of Leeds Beckett University, participated in a qualitative study to explore students’ sense of belonging from their unique perspective. They were asked to upload their own sense of belonging ‘moments’ through a mixed media digital noticeboard, representing their journey from pre-arrival to the middle of the second semester. It was found that there were opportunities for academic and services staff, and the students themselves, to create belonging moments during this time. The moments fell into three categories; first, moments in classrooms and lecture theatres; secondly moments ‘at home’ in student accommodation; and finally, moments on nights out, at student societies and during other social activities. In response to the findings, Sense of Belonging Moments are being promoted through fresh interventions, including a new-look induction, a video to signpost services; and student-led tours to promote awareness of campus spaces and facilities.

Keywords: University, Sense of Belonging, Student Experience, Business School, Wellbeing, Higher Education

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Introduction

To belong to a community provides individuals with a sense of purpose and affiliation. Maslow, (1962) classifies belonging as a psychological need, second only to food and water. It provides mental and physical health benefits (Pesonen et al., 2015) and its importance in higher education is widely accepted (Crawford et al., 2024). Furthermore, belonging includes feeling valued, accepted, and respected as an individual (Pedler et al., 2020). Akinbode (2022) found relationships, support, identity, listening, and respect to be the most significant factors for a sense of belonging. However, it is essential to understand student perceptions of their own belonging to support their general wellbeing (Miller et al., 2018). Evidence shows that when students have a sense of belonging at university, they achieve greater self-efficacy, contributing to academic success (Luong et al., 2022; Young Ahn & Davies, 2020). This is partly because belonging leads to the attendance, engagement, and the retention of students (Hausmann et al., 2007; Suhlmann et al., 2018).

In connection with Mann, (2001) who likened beginning university to crossing the border into a new country, this paper continues with the metaphor of belonging as a journey rather than a destination. This journey begins with pre-arrival activities such as open days and the offer of a place, through to the induction and welcome activities, continuing to the first lecture, the first assignment, and into the second semester. On transitioning from school and college to this first year at university, students embark on an exciting but often frightening and unprecedented expedition into adult life and grapple with “culture shock” as they need to learn new ways of independent living and learning (Rickard et al., 2018, p. 42). Often, students focus more on survival than academic achievement, and their attainment, progression, and graduate outcomes can be hindered by feelings of alienation (Porteous & Machin, 2018). This has led to high numbers of students dropping out in the first semester and unprecedented numbers reporting mental health concerns (Student Minds, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had an adverse effect on belonging by removing opportunities to engage face-to-face and an overnight pivot to remote learning (Luong et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). This seismic event provides ongoing challenges for universities to promote attendance and engagement as students found they could access classes and materials remotely, causing belonging to suffer since (Sutcliffe & Noble, 2022). If, as Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) argue, belonging is a situated practice dependent on physical spaces and buildings previously taken for granted, the removal of these spaces, along with the social engagement within them, presents challenges. However, simultaneously, new possibilities emerged to conceptualise belonging as intangible and as a mindset, creating it in digital space. By adopting a more fluid and intangible approach to belonging, it is possible to continuously experiment with belonging as a practice.

Gravett & Ajjawi, (2022) state that belonging is “situated, fluid and socio-materially constituted” (p. 1393), arguing that due to the massification of higher education, it is necessary to avoid lazy assumptions about the student experience. They argue that the sense of belonging should be continually reassessed by engaging in dialogue with diverse students, such as those from different cultural backgrounds and those with disabilities. “Rather than being static, the affective dimension of belonging is an active process that changes and flexes over time and situations, and in response to one’s own subjectivity” (Pesonen et al., 2015, p. 6). Additionally, students can be subtly marginalized if emphasis is placed on achieving belonging for the “typical” undergraduate (Thomas, 2015; Juvonen, 2006). Not all students are full-time, fresh out of school, resident on campus, and eager to participate in a drinking

culture, for example (Thomas, 2015). Furthermore, Gravett & Winston. (2021) argue that some students prefer not to belong, instead envisioning themselves as “outsiders.” This may be because they commute from home, are older, or prefer to keep to themselves (Baik et al., 2017). Guyotte et al. (2019) define “un-belonging” as something actively sought by some students who resist belonging because they see it as joining a club to which they do not want to belong. Belonging, therefore, fluctuates in different contexts and is subjectively experienced (Pesonen et al., 2023). Because of this, institutions should move beyond the idea that belonging can be achieved by putting procedures and strategies in place (Slaten et al., 2018). Instead, universities need to constantly listen to and evaluate students’ changing needs and adjust their approaches accordingly, which is the aim of the research.

Despite the overall consensus that a sense of belonging in students is beneficial, it is difficult to achieve in diverse and large student populations. This is because it is often experienced differently by students depending on class, race, disability, and gender (Read et al., 2003). Therefore, because of widening participation in higher education, it is necessary to approach belonging with an open mind to explore what it means to specific student cohorts. This is to design interventions that might improve student belonging and reduce attrition rates. This paper aims to address this by exploring belonging on a large and diverse course at Leeds Business School, at Leeds Beckett University (LBU). This research responds to a call by Gravett & Ajjawi (2022) to better understand the “nuanced, situated and contextualised accounts of students’ belonging” (p. 1393), both at university and in non-institutional spaces and times. The project aims to gain a deeper understanding of how students feel, think, and behave when it comes to adapting to the challenges of being at university, therefore providing new ideas for staff to facilitate a sense of belonging. The research explores how “sense of belonging” moments emerge, are encouraged, and/or facilitated at different stages of the first year, from pre-arrival to the second semester. This includes “where,” “when,” “who with,” and “how” students feel a sense of belonging, seen through the students’ own sensory contributions to a digital Padlet. In agreement with Humphrey & Lowe, (2017), who examine the “journey” to belonging, Wilson et al., (2015) describe starting at university as a process rather than a singular event. Furthermore, as Akinbode, (2022) explains, all universities have different needs depending on their unique student cohort. Therefore, despite the many papers exploring the sense of belonging in higher education, it is essential for institution-level research to be carried out to define the unique needs of their cohort and to regularly revisit this, as their idiosyncrasies evolve over time as all business and management students are not the same. This was the rationale for this study.

Leeds Beckett University Context

Leeds Beckett University (LBU) has approximately 28,000 students across two campuses. This study is concerned with Leeds Business School undergraduate core business programmes (BA Business Management and Pathways, BA International Business, and BA Business Studies), which had 1,658 students registered in 2023/24. In recent years, there have been significant changes to the nature of the student body (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2015; Morgan, 2013), and Leeds Business School is no exception. Finn & Holton (2019) reported an increased number of students staying at home while they study, therefore deciding not to join the university community. These changes include an increase in international students, greater numbers of students with reasonable adjustment plans, more first-generation university students, and increasing numbers of students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (LBU, 2024), which make creating a sense of belonging more challenging.

Progression data from 2020 revealed that only 67% of Level 4 (first year) undergraduate business students progressed to Level 5 at the first sit, with 33% of students having to undertake a resit to progress to the next level (LBU, 2024). In total, only 88% of students progressed or continued with their studies, and while there was significant disruption to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, these poor progression and continuation rates are not unique to this period (LBU, 2024).

Methodology

A master plan was compiled, stipulating methods and procedures for the collection and analysis of the information required, giving attention to every specific research question (Babin et al., 2012). Primary research was focused on a Digital Sensory Feedback Inquiry (DSFI) with a theme of inclusivity. The research team made efforts to engage with hard-to-reach, disengaged, or alienated students by implementing a range of measures to make the DSFI accessible and engaging. The inquiry was inspired by the data collection “feedback exhibitions” of Humphrey & Lowe (2017), where several activities were set up for students, requiring only a short amount of time for their contributions.

A digital Padlet was utilised to collect data in a variety of formats. The data collection took place from November 2022 until June 2023. The DSFI employed the probability sampling technique to select participants, also known as simple random sampling (Nikolopoulou, 2022). The sampling frame was generated from the Business in Action module, the most well-attended Level 4 undergraduate module in Leeds Business School, providing access to a large number of students (429) and ensuring participants were from the target population (Saunders et al., 2019). Random sampling ensured every student in this module had an equal chance to contribute to the digital Padlet, reducing bias and increasing the representativeness of the sample (Cochran, 2015).

The DSFIs were designed to be fun and engaging, with the purpose and rationale communicated from the outset, outlining how the project would benefit all students. A digital Padlet was created with headings to represent the student journey. This was designed by students who had volunteered to be part of the sense of belonging research team, meaning it reflected their perspectives on what the journey was, as they were currently experiencing it. The journey began with "pre-arrival," followed by "moving-in," induction, societies, semester one, socializing, first lecture, first assignment, sports, start of semester two, and finally "miscellaneous" to capture everything else.

Under each of these headings, students were encouraged to post digital content, including videos, text, photos, GIFs, audio clips, drawings, or songs. Students were prompted to create new and original content where possible and to approach the topic of their belonging from different perspectives, rather than the most obvious. However, most of the contributions were textual, likely because this was the quickest and easiest way for students to participate.

The appointed student ambassadors, research leads, and academic experience officer were central in designing the DSFI and its communications to capture student interest. The DSFI was promoted by Level Leaders via social media and email before weekly seminars. Tutors provided the digital Padlet link and instructions for participation at the start of each seminar. Level Leaders also contacted all non-attending students to encourage engagement, offering remote participation options for those unable to attend in person.

The methodology took an inductive approach, using qualitative techniques. The DSFI drew from phenomenology, as the project team was not searching for a single truth but investigating multiple realities of students' experiences, perceptions, and the meaning behind these experiences. Phenomenology is defined as “the philosophical tradition that seeks to understand the world through directly experienced phenomena” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 558), with emphasis on participants' lived experiences.

Full information about the project was provided to participants, and they were asked to provide consent and confirm they were over the age of 18. Contributions to the research were anonymised, and participants were able to withdraw at any time. Contact information for the research team was provided throughout to ensure participants could ask questions or seek clarification about their data.

Data collection partly took place in the classroom as part of a module; however, the research team clarified that participation was voluntary. Participants were instructed not to include identifiable people without their consent in submissions to the Digital Padlet, and names or identifiable imagery were prohibited to ensure anonymity (Saunders et al., 2019). Obscene content (including imagery, video, text, or audio) was prohibited, and any content violating these rules was excluded from analysis.

The student research team manually analysed Padlet entries, searching for themes and patterns. The Padlet has been made into a video to share across the university and during presentations of the research.

Results

There were 560 entries on the Padlet, encompassing various types of data, such as photos, drawings, text, audio, video, and GIFs. These entries came from 350 students, indicating that some students submitted more than one entry.

Pre-Arrival

The majority of responses reflected nervous anticipation about fitting in, making friends, being away from home, and uncertainty regarding what to expect from university and the course. Other responses were positive, expressing excitement about new experiences and independence. Communications from accommodation providers and the availability of an app were reported to ease student concerns. Several students suggested that the university could provide a group chat prior to arrival. However, arriving late was noted as a factor that hindered integration.

Many emotions influence students even before arriving at university. There is potential to alleviate anxiety by providing consistent information before arrival. For instance, students noted that earlier access to their timetable would have been helpful. International students highlighted excitement about experiencing different weather, novel environments, and exploring new places but also mentioned difficulties with VISAs that impacted their sense of belonging. Similarly, students who accepted places via clearing expressed feelings of confusion and overwhelm. Students retaking a year also reported a nervous start.

One student shared mixed feelings about starting university:

"When I was accepted into university, I was excited for my independence and to be able to experience life outside of my hometown. The ability to do whatever I want appealed to me dearly. I'm here, I miss my mother's cooked meals every night. Providing for yourself is not as good as it seems."

Student Accommodation

Many contributions to the Padlet focused on the high cost of student accommodation. Some students expressed stress and negative emotions about moving into their accommodation. Issues included arriving to find flatmates who were in different years and had already developed relationships, which led to feelings of exclusion. Despite this, there were predominantly positive reflections on the experience of moving in, as students found it exciting, felt a sense of independence, and saw opportunities to meet new people and socialise.

Images shared on the Padlet depicted contrasting aspects of student accommodation life, such as dirty dishes on the floor, intoxicated students at parties, and well-decorated bedrooms with fairy lights, curtains, and posters. One student remarked:

"I was excited to design my own room. I was excited for a different sense of independence."

Students also shared their impressions of Leeds as a city, expressing enthusiasm for exploring it. However, students living at home noted feelings of exclusion:

"Living at home means I had a lot less interactions than other students, with other students. People already met new people although it is not a lifestyle of mine to meet new people and go out as other university students do."

Induction

The induction was considered useful and informative by half of the students, while others found it repetitive and unhelpful. Most students who contributed to this section had attended the induction, and one student commented on its value in helping them clarify their goals:

"I thought the induction was useful with helping me understand where I want to be at the end of my 3 years and also helping me understand more about what was going to be happening in the next years at university."

Conversely, students who were less positive about the induction felt it was too lengthy and noted that they disengaged after a while.

First Lecture

Fear about attending the first lecture was frequently expressed by students on the Padlet. As the *Business in Action* module is held in the university's largest lecture theatre, one student described it as "like the movies." While most students were satisfied with the lecture and found it helpful, some struggled with knowing how to take notes. A few students met new people, though others reported that it was "easy to zone out" due to the lack of interaction and the length of the session.

One student remarked:

"First lecture is scary if you haven't had your seminar yet as you may not know people but it's fine once you have your seminars."

Another student described the experience as isolating:

"A crowd can be lonely."

However, some students highlighted the positive impact of supportive lecturers. As one explained:

"The lecturers were all very welcoming at Leeds Beckett University. I know for some it can seem very daunting, but their warmth and welcomeness helped smooth over stress they might have had, allowing those who may have been a little intimidated by the whole adjustment to easily feel in place."

Start of Semester One

At the beginning of semester one, students had varied experiences regarding their sense of belonging in lectures and seminars. While many students appreciated the opportunity to make friends, they noted that teaching staff quality varied, with some fostering a sense of belonging more effectively than others. Cancellations caused by staff industrial action and poor weather were highlighted as negative experiences.

One student shared:

"Doing online seminars because of the weather and strikes has not been great because it is nice to be with people in the seminar."

Another student, who faced commuting challenges, noted:

"It's tough when you live in a different city and commute."

First Assignment

Most students reflected positively on their first assignment, with many finding it manageable. However, referencing and using digital tools like Turnitin proved confusing for some. Group work also presented challenges. Students appreciated assignment support and feedback and recognised that university work required a different approach compared to college or sixth form.

One student recounted their success:

"My first assignment went well. I used everything I was taught and included it into the presentation. Overall, my group was given good feedback, and also given recommendations on how to improve on future assessments."

Conversely, another student described a less positive experience:

"My first assessment did not go so well. I received 35%, resulting in a fail. This was an eye-opener for me and made me place more importance on my studies and again realize that it's all down to me, as in sixth form college you are chased after and guided through the whole process. On resit, I passed after I had fixed up my study routine and learnt content."

This student's experience underscores the adjustment required when transitioning from college to university.

Semester Two

The start of semester two was disrupted by industrial action and train strikes, which students reported as significant annoyances. These disruptions, coupled with poor weather, hindered some students' ability to settle back into university life.

One student commented:

"I feel more used to university life and have settled in now. I like most of the content of my modules."

Another expressed improved preparation:

"I think this was the best semester as I was more prepared for the classwork and assessment."

However, students who had not formed friendships in semester one reported difficulties in making connections as friendship groups had already become established. Students also noted an increase in workload and stress as the semester progressed.

Societies

Students who participated in societies, including sports, games, cultural, and outdoor activities, generally viewed them positively, citing their value in meeting new people and having fun. However, some students felt there were no suitable societies for them or were deterred by membership fees.

One student shared:

"Societies are a great way to enjoy and meet new people. There are different types of societies for people with all kinds of interests."

Sports

Participation in sports, especially team sports, was praised for helping students make friends and offering a break from academics. However, some students noted that sports activities held on other campuses were inconveniently located, and communication about sports teams could be improved.

One student recounted their experience:

"The social netball team was really fun, and I have made many of my uni friends there. It was lovely to take a break from academics and put my energy into playing sports for a few hours every week. The atmosphere was inviting, and everyone was lovely."

Another shared their pride in representing the university:

"Joining the cheerleading team was a great way for me to make friends from different courses and to unwind from university work. Competing with my university also gave me a lot of pride in representing them and gave me a sense of belonging."

Many students explained that they found it hard to make friends because the only people they meet are in the seminar group. Students who commuted to university found this especially hard. Those staying in university accommodation seemed to find socialising occurred more easily. The World Cup, Pride, and a student union concert were cited as occasions when students socialised a lot and made friends. The university was found to be quite empty when teaching finishes, and this would affect students not living in halls. The student union bar was cited as a good place to socialise, as were sports and societies.

"I am a mature student and find it very difficult to meet people with similar interests, seminar groups can be shockingly small and to make it worse you are stuck in the same group all year! For instance, my group in some seminars had 3 people attending some days and on average was less than 7. I have heard talks that lectures will be online next year; I doubt that will help my sense of belonging."

In summary, the Padlet presented a mixture of feelings related to belonging. First, moments in classrooms and lecture theatres; second, moments "at home" in student accommodation; and finally, moments on nights out, at student societies, and during other social activities. The Padlet highlights the journey of students starting at university, amidst a cocktail of excitement and anxiety. Themes that stand out are making friends, adapting to a new environment, and absorbing new ways of doing things. Like other journeys, there are factors that improve the journey, like getting support and having friends. Other things occur unexpectedly to knock the journey off course, like weather and industrial action. Students' maturity and resilience are decisive factors in whether they will survive the journey.

New Interventions

From the findings of the study, several new interventions are being actioned. These include a more fun and social induction for making friends, condensed timetables, level leaders to be students' main pastoral support, a workshop and digital resource for staff development, getting students study-ready in their home country, providing access to laptops, and English language support. We continue to talk to and listen to students to get their input on belonging, including as a consultancy project at Level 6. These activities are in their early stages and will be measured to assess their success.

Conclusion

The current project aimed to investigate students' sense of belonging at Leeds Business School in order to design interventions that might improve student belonging and therefore reduce attrition rates. The research was successful in achieving this aim, and as a result,

several new initiatives have been created, such as a new-look induction, a video to signpost services, and student-led tours to promote awareness of campus spaces and facilities. It was important for the research to provide a practical output, and with this in mind, six "Moments of Belonging" have been developed and disseminated in a practical workshop to academic staff and student services to encourage an institution-wide belongingness mindset.

In agreement with van Herpen et al., (2020), it was found that on coming to university, students embarked on a "journey." From pre-arrival to the middle of the second semester, and encapsulating study, socialising, university, "home," and "out," there were opportunities for academic and services staff, and the students themselves, to create sense-of-belonging moments. These fell into three categories: first, moments in classrooms and lecture theatres; second, moments "at home" in student accommodation; and finally, moments on nights out, at student societies, and during other social activities.

The findings have been disseminated at the University's Developing Excellent Academic Practice (DEAP) Conference and the Sense of Belonging Moments delivered as a workshop to LBU School of Built Environment and Computer Science. This could have a wide-reaching benefit on the university's overall attainment, progression, and outcomes. The initial exploration described in this paper just begins to scratch the surface as the UK HE sector investigates students' "sense of belonging" as a means to tackle retention and enhance the student experience. Although small-scale, this study has illuminated some factors that will support the university in understanding influences on students and the times at which a "sense of belonging" is most likely to be developed or is of most importance.

Limitations

The limitations to the research include that it is qualitative and focuses on one particular course at one university. Whilst it identifies aspects of students' sense of belonging, it was not possible to grasp the statistics of particular issues such as commuting, caring, or disability. Entries on the Padlet were anonymous, so it was also impossible to make connections to particular circumstances or demographics, such as any link between commuting and ethnicity, unless explicitly mentioned. It is impossible to measure if there is an improvement to student outcomes since our interventions, but this will be measured in time. A future study will involve longitudinal research with the same group through second and third years to identify how belonging evolves. Despite encouraging all students to contribute, the students who are disengaged were less likely to take part, so we were only able to capture the feedback of students who were engaged, which may skew the results. Echoing Gravett & Ajjawi (2022), some students don't want to belong and may prefer alternative connections outside the university. It is yet to be ascertained how these students can be supported.

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