Identifying How Widening Access Students Build Their Sense of Belonging

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the 4 pillars of AdvancedHE building Belonging framework – 'connection, inclusion, support, autonomy'. The research methodologies used in this study were questionnaire, reflective logs and focus group interviews. The phrase 1 data collection were conducted through questionnaire, reflective journal, focus group interview. The result of this study is to report the outcomes for phrase 1. The early finding of this research found that connection and support are most important issues for students from a widening participation background in building their sense of belonging. The study highlighted the development of a fifth pillar of Opportunities focused on employability and skill development to be important in building a sense of belonging. The next phase of this research phase will be conducted in same using the same methodology in August 2024 and December 2024 with the same group of students on same 4 themes. Further new additions pillars may be suggested in future study.

Keywords: Building Belonging, Sense of Belonging, Widening Access, Connection, Inclusion, Support, Autonomy

Introduction

Widening participation in the UK has evolved over the years (Thompson, 2017). The initial focus of widening participation was to increase the representation of high-performing students from economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority communities. However, this evolved to include students who could benefit from higher education to include a more comprehensive vision of inclusivity and accessibility in higher education (Vignoles & Murray, 2016). Student retention is one of the major challenges faced by the higher education sector in the UK (Mckendry, Wright & Stevenson, 2013). Universities with widening participation also face many challenges including low retention, low attainment and low progression rates (Moore, Sanders & Higham, 2013).

At the heart of successful student retention and success is building a strong sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). The word 'belonging' is deeply rooted in relationships that we establish and hence explored in educational settings (Foster et al., 2011). Previous research suggests that maturity, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity all have a significant impact on student's sense of belonging (Rubin & wright, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). Therefore, it is important to understand the sense of belonging of widening participation students.

Several studies have been conducted in the UK to understand the sense of belonging of the students to universities (Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003; Thomas 2012). A study conducted by Ahn & Davis (2020) identified the complex and multidimensional construct of a sense of belonging including physical space and personal space as main contributors to establishing a sense of belonging in students. Physical space includes geographical and cultural space whereas personal space implies identity, life satisfaction and personal interests. This indicates that a sense of belonging is very personal to the student population and hence investigating how students perceive the sense of belonging in different settings is important. Another study by Masika & Jones (2016) identified that creating a community of practice aids the belonging of students to the institution. When students feel valued and connected, interested in their subject area, it is more likely that they will engage more deeply with their studies. So understanding what the sense of belonging means to the student population of each institution is important for designing interventions that support the sense of belonging in students.

Building Belonging Framework

Despite the enormous focus on belonging in the HE sector, belonging can be seen as a complex concept. Therefore, WonkHE & Pearson researched the concept of belonging and developed a framework for belonging. Connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy are the four key areas of the framework (Blake, Capper & Jackson, 2022).
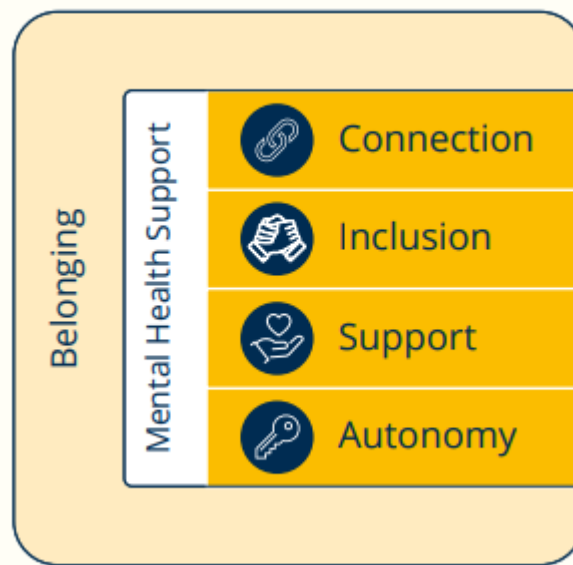
Figure 1: Building Belonging Framework
(Source: Blake, Capper & Jackson, 2022)

Establishing a strong connection at the course level or University level is key to building a sense of belonging. This has been identified in previous studies for example, the study by Hardy & Bryson (2016) identified that supportive networks with peers and staff enormously support student engagement and success. Thomas (2012), and Masika & Jones (2016) also identified the link between social connections and the sense of belonging in their studies.

The second crucial factor of the framework is inclusion which includes accessibility, neurodiversity, access to course materials, inclusive course contents and representation of staff (Blake, Capper & Jackson, 2022). Thomas (2012) affirms that an inclusive learning environment will ensure that students engage and feel like they belong to their course or institution.

The third main factor of the framework is support. Well defined, inclusive support system is integral to building a sense of belonging in students (Blake, Capper & Jackson, 2022). This has been identified by previous studies (Means & Pyne, 2017; Ahn & Davis, 2020). The final factor of the framework is autonomy which makes students feel empowered to make choices and control their learning. A positive relationship with sense of belonging and autonomy in students was affirmed by other studies including Tian et al. (2023), and Vekkaila et al. (2024).

However, there are many barriers to establishing a sense of belonging in students. This includes a lack of integration of course, curriculum, wider experience and future goals, mental health, culture and systemic barriers, lack of connections, conflicting priorities, and personal issues a few to name (Blake, Capper & Jackson, 2022; Meehan & Howells, 2019). The study by Wonkhe & Pearson concludes that when each of the four factors was facilitated well, it improved the sense of belonging in students (Blake, Capper & Jackson, 2022). Therefore, our study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the four factors for widening participation of students. We will be identifying how our students build their sense of belonging through developing connection, accessing support, accessing an inclusive curriculum, and building their autonomy.

Methodology

This study comprises 3 phases, each designed to capture different dimensions of student belonging throughout the academic year. University of Wales Trinity Saint David ethics committee approval was obtained for this study. This study adopts a mixed methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the WonkHE framework. This approach uses both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2005). This approach enables us to gain insights into the complex sense of belonging concept and identify the crucial factors affecting students' belonging. This study is conducted in three phases each phase employing online surveys, reflective logs and focus group discussions.

Online surveys are widely used method to collect data from a broad audience and offer advantages such as ease of data collection, entry, and follow-up administration (Evans & Mathur, 2005). The reflective logs are used to capture rich qualitative data providing in-depth insights into participants' thoughts, experiences, and reflections (Ortlipp, 2008). Focus groups allow participants to convey their views, opinions, and experiences allowing them to discuss in a group that also generate data through interactions and group dynamics (Krueger, 1998). Although, each method has its own limitations, using the three methods will help to generate a rich data set for this study.

Findings and Discussion

The data for this study was collected via questionnaire, reflective logs, focus group and interviews. The aim of this study was to validate the four pillars of the Blake et all (2022) Building Belonging Framework. The 4 key pillars being Connection, Inclusion, Support and Autonomy as being essential to widening access students in building their sense of belonging. The aspect of Mental Health which runs through all aspects of the framework was not considered as part of this study.

The findings from phase 1 are shown below:

Questionnaire

Questionnaires was distributed to all new enrolled level 4 students before they joined in welcome week for the September 2023 academic year. 193 students responded the questionnaires. The questionnaire was broken down into the four pillars of the Building Belonging Framework - Connection, Inclusion, Support and Autonomy.

In relation to the Blake et al (2022) four pillars of connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy the students' perceptions one of the key areas of agreement was that building contact with other students and staff was going to crucial if they were to be successful on the course and in building their sense of belonging.

For example students commented:
- *'...actively encouraging student participation and engagement in class.'*
- *'being approachable and available...the tutor should be approachable and available for discussion or clarification if needed. This accessibility will enable me to seek guidance or ask questions that can boost my confidence in providing feedback.'*

In addition, students also agreed with the suggestion that they believed that group work and group activities were going to be important in enabling them to build a connection and build that sense of belonging.

In terms of support the students were keen to access a range of support including academic, and a range of professional services support. Furthermore, in relation to support the students did agree with the view from the Blake et al (2022) study that access to online materials was going to be important in enabling them to succeed and in doing so build their sense of belonging.

For example students commented:
- *'IT support, student engagement, Career services and other forms of support would be most welcome.'*
- *'Each new student is different and needs different care. I have a lot of problems with using a computer and naming names in English. I also need to be guided to choose a good career direction.'*
- *'Easy access to lesson recordings.'*

The questionnaire results which were clearly asking students in advance of starting at the University did not highlight any other major themes that either support of disagree with the 4 pillars and outcomes of the Blake et al (2022) study. The students had not been in a university setting before, so they did not know in terms of what they would need to build their sense of belonging. However, what they did say broadly at this stage of the study was supportive of the connection and support pillars of the framework. There was less information forthcoming on the two pillars of inclusion and autonomy.

Reflective Journal

There were 20 students who completed reflective journals from the 1st term. The sample of students are selected from 3 CERTHE disciplines in Health & Social Care, Business skills for the workplace and Computing skills for the workplace. This journal was broken down into 4 sections and asked students to write their thoughts in their own time in terms of how they felt during their first few weeks with the University in terms of the Blake et al (2022) four pillars of belonging namely connection, inclusion, support and autonomy. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to generate themes from the reflective journal. There are 4 themes are found from the finding.

In terms of the connection theme the students' views strongly supported the key finding of the Blake et al (2022) study that being able to develop relationships with fellow students and staff through induction and group activities arranged by the University was vital to building their senses of belonging.

For example students commented:
- *'I feel connected and included...on campus.'*
- *'I feel part of UWTSD.'*

Less evident from the journal in the first term was students discussing the importance of online spaces or personal tutors. Plus, a strong factor for students in building their connectedness was developing connections with academic staff.

For example students commented:
- *'I feel supported when access online learning materials on Moodles.'*
- *'Online session and 1-1 face-to-face support are supportive.'*

In terms of the other 3 pillars of inclusion, support and autonomy the key areas that these students commented on in their journals that agreed with the Blake et al (2022) study was in relation to the importance of building an inclusive learning community.

For example students commented:
- *'Giving me advice and explaining what i did wrong so i can learn from my mistakes...'*
- *'Feedback is important and opportunities for us to practice is also important.'*

In terms of support the students felt they were being well supported across a range of academic and non-academic areas and that they found the support accessible and useful in building their confidence and sense of belonging, The support included support from key service areas such as disability and other areas. There was unambiguous evidence that students felt the services offered were inclusive and accessible.

For example students commented:
- *'....Digital skills and library sessions are helpful.'*
- *'Disability team is very helpful when I had 1-1 session with staff...other support services too.'*

Where our findings differ from the Blake et al (2022) four pillars of connection, inclusion, support and autonomy in relation to the students journal submissions is that students identified what we are calling a range of Opportunities that would enhance their sense of belonging that including the opportunity to enhance their employability skills both with and outside the University in roles such as student representatives and student ambassadors as well as developing their digital and academic skills.

For example students commented:
- *'Career services, I am looking for support.'*
- *'Looking for opportunities to practice my skills.'*

Focus Groups

In the focus groups students were asked questions in their first term about the Blake et al (2022) 4 pillars of connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy. The findings of the focus groups broadly validate the importance of the 4 pillars in building a sense of belonging.

There were a range of student comments across the 4 themes that provide evidence of this namely:

Connection
- *'Feel comfortable being in university.'*
- *'Easy access with Hwb, online resources.'*
- *'I know where to go and find the teams when I need supports, like IT, career team, wellbeing team.'*

Inclusion
- *'I like the learning space, lounge area in Lousia House.'*
- *'I feel welcomed...diversity at the university, different culture.'*

Support
- *'Digital skills support helps me to settle into the course.'*

Autonomy
- *'We created WhatsApp group when we start the course...we help each other when we have questions....'*
- *'Being student rep help us to feedback...'*

What came through strongly from students is the importance of building their skills to access the range of support services to enable them to build their sense of belonging. The focus here was on the ability to build their digital and English language and academic skills and in doing so get feedback on their progress. Students felt this support and feedback would build their confidence and sense of belonging.

Implications & Future Research

Overall, this study to date validates the findings of the Blake et al (2022) Building Belonging study and the importance of the 4 pillars of the framework in building student sense of belonging namely connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy.

One of the key differences of this study in terms of the findings from this study in relation to the Blake et al (2022) Building Belonging framework and four pillars of connection, inclusion, support and autonomy is that of adding a fifth pillar of Opportunities. This could be opportunities in to build skills in relation to employment and volunteering opportunities inside or outside the University and both paid and unpaid roles. These Opportunities the students spoke of in building their confidence and sense of belonging related to digital and academic skills. Many of these opportunities exist for students in the sector but are usually offered later in the student journey and not from the first term. Our findings suggest that offering these additional opportunities from the outset of the student journey could be useful in developing student sense of belonging.

This study is ongoing, and students will continue to add to their reflective logs on the four pillars in next term and will also take part in further focus groups on the same four themes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study to date has broadly validated the Blake et al (2022) Building Belonging framework and its four pillars of connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy in enabling students from a widening access background to build their sense of belonging. The two pillars of connection and support were felt to be the most important to widening access students in building their sense of belonging.

This study suggests that adding a fifth pillar of Opportunities for skills development including formal and informal opportunities particularly in relation to employability skills was going to be important in building students' sense of belonging. These opportunities also

related to student building digital and academic skills to enhance their confidence and build their sense of belonging.

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