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Article

Unravelling Sense of Belonging in Higher Education: Staff and Student Perspectives at an English University

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Abstract

A sense of belonging among university students is widely perceived as critical to engagement, retention and outcomes. The aim of our research is to improve understanding of how staff and students conceptualise belonging, how sense of belonging can be enhanced, and factors which work against it in the post-COVID era. Using interviews and focus groups, we asked professional services staff, academic staff, and students ($n = 34$) at one English university for their views. Thematic analysis generated three major themes: (1) understandings of belonging; (2) connections, caring and mattering; (3) challenges to belonging. The most significant finding was that sense of belonging is mostly located within non-tangible ‘moments’ which are mainly owned by students themselves. Sense of belonging is conceptually messy and complex in practice due to these non-tangible moments. Relational pedagogy, caring, mattering and consistency are key factors in improving belonging, and these can only be established in the context of authentic and trusting relationships. Student belonging was found to be mostly reliant on both relationships with staff and peers, but also the physical environment. Recommendations are for universities to review current roles and responsibilities of staff who provide pastoral care for students, ensuring they are adequately trained and supported; to recognise that belonging is largely about authentic, trusting relationships, and to allow the necessary time for it; and to consider the threats to sense of belonging, such as high staff sickness and turnover. This qualitative study helps unravel varying understandings of sense of belonging and provides original empirical insights to further contribute to the development of sense of belonging in higher education.



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Keywords: sense of belonging; engagement; relationships of trust; caring and mattering; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The concept of higher education (HE) student sense of ‘belonging’ is increasingly important in understanding many aspects of university student behaviour as well as educational outcomes. This is particularly so in a context where attendance appears to have been changed by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and where students experience growing pressure in areas including finance, housing and mental health [1]. Vytiniorgu [2] highlights that just under 45% of students in HE feel that they belong, supporting the need for continued exploration into belonging, especially post-COVID. Belonging features prominently on the agendas of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as they acknowledge the well-reported links between belonging and increased levels of student engagement, academic perseverance, achievement, and retention [2–9].

When theorising 'belonging' there are strong links to Bourdieu's concepts of inclusive education, capital, field and habitus, particularly connected to quality of belonging [10]. Abenyega [11] (p. 7) contests the Bourdieuan meaning of belonging as being deterministic, recognising the need for "continuous adjustment in human habitus" between relationships and across practice. These adjustments of human behaviour align with non-tangible interactions between academics, teachers and students and acknowledge the continual need to adjust and readjust in response to student needs. Tangible aspects of HE measurement, for example, attendance data and IT access, sit more comfortably under the umbrella of belonging as a concept of deterministic practices in HE. Gravett and Ajjawi [12] (pp. 1, 386) "question the very boundaries of belonging" following COVID-19, asserting that normative narratives of 'belonging' exhibit exclusions; for example, some students do not need or indeed wish to belong, and thus the notion of 'belonging' as a deterministic approach is again contested. Pre-COVID the concept of belonging in HE has been mainly understood to align with extracurricular activities, societies and clubs for students to attend, although more recently there is a shift in this understanding.

When defining 'belonging', Goodenow (1993 cited in [4], p. 622) explains that this is related to "students' feelings of being accepted, included by, and connected to, their institutions." Dost and Mazzoli Smith [13] (p. 823) add that students who belong feel accepted "just the way they are, not having to conform to a particular set [or] form". Pedler et al. [8] (p. 397) recognise belonging as being deeply rooted in students' psychological wellbeing based on positive, well-established "social connections with staff and peers", and they position 'belonging' directly after basic and psychological needs in Maslow's [14] terms. Belonging matters because students who feel this are significantly more likely to fully engage with their studies (Masika and Jones, 2016 cited in [13]).

Crawford et al. [15] undertook a longitudinal study from 2013 to 2019 focusing on belonging in HE in Australia, acknowledging that belonging is a current challenge in HE globally, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as our student participants. However, this study predates COVID-19. In terms of challenges, Advance HE [3] notes that while belonging is "a priority in building back a high-quality experience post-pandemic", students face substantial problems which are unlikely to be fully resolved in the near future. Allen et al. [16] (p. 1) recognise that belonging is "more than just a buzzword; it is a critical factor that affects students' academic engagement, motivation, persistence and overall achievement". They reviewed literature from the previous 20 years aligned to belonging in HE, identifying the importance of connectedness to peers and staff, but also acknowledged the challenges created by lack of opportunity. Gilani and Thomas [17] report that studies into belonging in HE have increased by 70% in the last five years, demonstrating its growing importance, but note gaps in research focusing on students from diverse or non-traditional backgrounds. This matters because student demographic characteristics can affect belonging and wellbeing [18].

The literature discussed here emphasises that belonging is deeply dependent on trusting social relationships with staff and peers and needs to continually evolve and adjust and readjust in practice for inclusive education [11,13,19,20]. The importance of this is reflected in relational pedagogy [19], which likewise prioritises respectful interactions and trustful relationships and is defined as "an intentional practice whereby classroom learning builds connections and positive relationships for learning purposes" [21] (p. 231). This is based on the "importance of relationships, of connections and of care, within learning and teaching" [12] (p. 388). Many HEI's consider relational pedagogy to be fundamental to teaching and learning.

However, building relationships was made more difficult by pandemic restrictions on mobility and personal contacts, and this difficulty lingers post-COVID due to rising mental

health problems among students [1] (also closely linked to the pandemic) and the results of the marketisation of HE [22]. In addition, many HE staff are on precarious contracts in academia [23], leading to a high turnover of staff in the sector. It is also well known that many academics are working within exploitative promotional working practices, with role creep leading to additional duties [24]. These staff working conditions present challenges to building relationships and trust with students in HE and are a direct threat to the notion of building belonging in HE. It is also well reported that redundancies in academia are currently significant, with HEI's finances under threat. Griffiths and Wheeler [25] suggest further turbulence in terms of future staffing. The literature here identifies direct challenges to trust building and relational pedagogy and thus the sense of 'belonging' for students.

Ahn and Davies [5,6] argue that the measurement of student engagement based in the academic domain needs to be separated from belonging, which is located within the social domains of the student experience [1,26–28]. This highlights the challenges with engagement metrics, as they are not able to measure the intangible moments which contribute to belonging [20,22,29]. In addition, Advance HE's podcast [30] on belonging in HE post-COVID, led by experts in the field, made a direct call for the narratives of belonging experiences to be brought to the forefront empirically, underlining the gaps in current research literature that capture voices of university staff and students themselves.

Overall, the intention of our investigation was to explore the responses of undergraduate students and academic and non-academic staff to the following broad questions:

- 1 Students: How much do you feel that you belong at university? What contributes to your sense of belonging?
- 2 Staff: How do you understand the term 'sense of belonging'? What are the most important factors to increase feelings of belonging for students?

Our paper advances understanding of belonging in HE in three key ways: by focusing on the views of non-traditional students and the staff who support them; by acknowledging the complexity, imprecision and inevitable messiness of conceptualisations of belonging; and by capturing the perspectives and insights of students themselves alongside academic and professional services staff. This study provides perspectives on belonging in HE post-pandemic from staff working across the institution, academic staff and students. We believe it to be relevant to HEIs both nationally and internationally.

2. Materials and Methods

This research was undertaken at a large modern UK HEI in England with a largely non-traditional student population, including students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME), widening participation, commuter, and first-generation categories. The participants were staff from professional services who provide services for the entire student population, academic staff from a Health and Education faculty and students from one undergraduate programme in education. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and focus groups dependent on participant preference [31,32]. For example, some students preferred to take part in a focus group with their peers, and some professional services teams found it easier to meet as a team during a focus group rather than individually. Planning for the two options provided flexibility for participants' workload, confidence and comfort. Following a purposive sampling strategy, 34 participants took part in this study, including 13 professional services staff, 10 academic staff and 11 students.

A student consultation group was appointed at the beginning of the academic year to review student interview questions and check for suitability and appropriate terminology and to pilot the quality of the data obtained. Following this process, amendments were made in line with advice and guidance from this consultation group. The investigators

found this collaborative method to be exceptionally helpful in ensuring questions were appropriate and accessible.

Our intention was to ascertain how undergraduate students and staff (academic and non-academic) responded to the research questions. These questions were underpinned by a range of other prompts designed to elicit consideration of elements of belonging. Students, for example, could be prompted in any of the following sub-topics: extent of sense that they should be at university [and/or that they belong]; their friendship networks, including close friends; the kind of relationships they have with academic staff; one-to-one contacts with tutors and personal tutors; talking to academic staff about their life in a more general sense, or personal issues; their sense that they understand how the university works beyond their immediate course; the extent to which they find staff approachable, believe staff understand ('see' them) and have time for them; the university as a welcoming, inclusive place; student feelings of alienation from university [how, why].

Data were recorded and processed initially with transcription software, then hand-checked for accuracy. Participant names were replaced with alphanumeric codes, and potentially identifying information was removed if it could not be anonymised. Because many of our participants, particularly those in professional services, are in unique roles in relatively small teams, and because these details were not deemed crucial to our research intention, our findings and discussion explicitly omit specific roles, department names and demographic details to maintain and protect participant anonymity. Consequently, in our paper participants are referred to using a two-part code: letters represent the category of participant (PS: professional services staff; AC: academic staff; ST: students), and numbers identify individuals within a category.

All data were stored securely according to institutional protocols and handled, stored, and protected in line with the requirements of the UK's Data Protection Act (2018) [33]. Data collection took place from September 2023 to May 2024. Thematic analysis was carried out in June and July 2024. Participant responses were triangulated across all the participant groups, and the most appropriate quotes were selected for inclusion within the results section. A cycle of continuous refinement led to the final set of themes [34,35]. Weekly meetings took place across the academic year between the investigators to review plans, data, ethics, and contingencies using reflection and discussion to aid reflexivity [30,36]; Blaikie [37] (p. 54) explains that "reflexivity applies to the process of designing social research as much as the research process itself" and Opie and Brown [38] assert that consistency can contribute to validity and rigour, minimising researcher bias through transparency of methods adopted and processes planned, and any challenges encountered addressed.

Following the finalisation of research materials (informed consent documents, interview schedules, recruitment posters and participant information sheets) [32,39], institutional ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were then recruited via dissemination of these information packs, which contained details of the study. These were distributed via staff and student events and promoted during key lectures. Informed consent forms were completed by all participants who took part in this study.

The underpinning research methodology base was interpretivist and used qualitative research traditions and data collection methods [37,38,40–44]. The participants from both staff and student populations provided multiple viewpoints to unravel the sense of belonging in HE post-pandemic.

3. Results

The qualitative data collected provided a richness of perspective aligned to the research questions, and triangulation is demonstrated via participant responses across all three groups. Narrative thematic methods supported this process [34,35,45]. Although there

were minor theme overlaps at times, specifically with terms such as trust and relational pedagogy, which appear across themes, the main themes were:

- Understanding of belonging
- Connection, caring and mattering
- Challenges to creating and maintaining belonging

3.1. Understanding of Belonging

Professional Services staff reported that belonging has been a key topic in HE for several years and recognised the challenges of promoting and measuring belonging because many factors seem intangible or inherently unquantifiable. PS participants questioned whether students feel they belong within their faculty, department, or their programmes of study, although perhaps unsurprisingly some PS participants felt that students tend to have an affinity to their specific course/programmes of study and the teaching staff with whom the students have daily interactions [3]. Some student participants confirmed this perception that belonging can be department- or course-based rather than institutional, as there is a common reason for attendance, and sense of belonging is linked to positive relationships with peers and academic and personal tutor staff [16,17,46].

PS staff also referred to the idea of a 'sticky campus', meaning an environment which attracts and keeps students engaged as part of a community; in short, one which builds belonging. They also added that belonging is not necessarily about the university community being 'everything' to students, but that this requires HEIs to provide a sense of connection which enables belonging in the wider network to really happen. They reported that belonging is growing in importance, especially since COVID-19 [1].

PS staff reported that belonging means different things to different types of student demographics, such as those living in university accommodation, students from non-traditional backgrounds, commuter students, and first-generation students, again highlighting the complexities of belonging being less tangible as a homogeneous concept. However, they also recognised the pressure to measure belonging via metrics such as attendance and engagement with virtual learning platforms. Despite this, some student participants with low attendance reported that they do have a sense of belonging due to the established and supportive relationships with staff and a few key peers [12], suggesting that belonging cannot necessarily be reliably aligned to attendance data or similar metrics. The precise relationship between belonging and attendance is further confounded by the existence of institutional pressure on students to attend whether they feel a sense of belonging or not. In other words, attendance does not necessarily lead to belonging, nor belonging to attendance.

Other AC participants felt that the main ingredients of belonging were related to attachment, pride, friendships, and good relationships with peers and staff [2]. They also felt that the physical environment needed to be considered, e.g., the layout and temperature of classrooms, accessibility, smaller seminar groups, and digital connectivity within classrooms, as contributing factors that also lend themselves to belonging for students [47]. Again, some of these points are less transparent than they might at first sight appear: presumably not all places meet all these requirements, yet some (e.g., certain places of worship) nonetheless do create a sense of belonging which can last for a lifetime. It is not entirely clear whether respondents are describing factors which create a sense of belonging or elements which are simply helpful in that creation. This ambiguity can be seen in the following comment from an academic:

I think that means that you have to like where you are to an extent. So, I think it is going to be a little bit about making students really like being at the HEI and being proud to be part of that HEI. When I think back to my old university, I

was really proud to go there, and that increased my sense of belonging, because you want to be a part of that club. But it is got to go deeper than ‘let’s all wear hoodies’. It needs to be more about winning over hearts and minds (AC0048).

This suggests a deeper recognition of desire as an element of belonging for this respondent at least; the wish to belong and pride in belonging appear to outweigh notions of comfort, and the true meaning of ‘belong’ is not found in external markers (e.g., “hoodies”).

Students recounted having feelings of belonging in terms of their pride at being at the university, explaining that it was their aspiration to attend university. They also talked about having friends during their university experience and good relationships with staff who they can go to for support if they feel upset or uncomfortable [2]. They explained that having staff who are encouraging and motivational also helps them to have a sense of belonging, and they value having time and space to talk through anxieties or worries. Students discussed the importance of having approachable and understanding staff from the start of their university studies, which has helped them develop feelings of belonging [13]: “I think for me, a big part of belonging is, like, acceptance of just me as a person.” (ST0064).

3.2. *Connections, Caring and Mattering*

Staff participants discussed the idea of caring being closely bonded to the idea of belonging, suggesting that students interpret caring as believing that “somebody [has] got eyes on me, somebody knows who I am, somebody cares about my studies here.” (PS0032).

Although they recognised that there are other ways that students can feel they belong, they felt this sense of being seen and heard—of being cared for, of mattering to the institution and its staff—was the most important factor [19,48]. PS staff also reported a perception that staff’s ability to engender a sense of belonging might vary across academic disciplines, depending on the extent to which relevant tendencies (e.g., caring about students) are embedded within those disciplines [19].

AC staff further added that relational pedagogy [17,19,49–53] and consistency in using it are important in creating student belonging. “If you genuinely care, then everything else falls into place, and so I think it is really important, the relational approach, and that. . . we are caring. What students really want is to feel that they matter” (AC0048). Believing that a philosophy of education and care based on authentic and trusting relationships [48] would help to improve belonging for students. AC staff talked about the need for the personal touch, getting to know the students, and how information gleaned during “small chats” (AC0044) and casual conversations aids communication with students by demonstrating that staff do indeed know their students, in short, that they care about them. AC staff further highlighted the importance of the personal touch in building relationships and aiding student belonging; one noted the importance in their own student days of “having somebody who I could go and knock on the door... saying ‘I’m struggling with my essay. . . I think [that] is really, really key—somebody who checks in’” (AC0044). Clearly, AC staff were aware of the complexities in both understanding student belonging and trying to develop it:

[I]t is what you feel, isn’t it? [. . .] I think it is all the relational stuff. It is like, you know, who am I? Have you taken the time to understand how to say my name or perhaps to ask, you know, “How are things? Are you OK?” (AC0048)

Student responses largely reflected these views. They reported that having small personal conversations with staff helps to lighten the moment, and they like it when staff share information about their pets or home lives, as this helps to personalise the relationship, which aids the development of belonging and trust building. Some also felt that this two-

way relationship-building impacts positively on their anxiety levels, making them feel calmer and in a safe environment, improves their work, and provides human space:

If it is casual, teachers are just talking to you naturally, like if they're talking about work and, you know, they say. Like, they make a joke or anything like that, like, the small things make you see the teacher as a human, not just someone that you need to impress. And it is like you get more work done that way. And I feel like you; you're more inclined to ask for support if you need it. Like, if you do not understand a question or anything like that. Yeah. It makes me feel like I can breathe because when you are speaking, you need to take breaths in and out, so it is just casual talk that takes me off the ledge (ST0062).

The explicit focus on the “small things”, intangible, often imperceptibly momentary acts such as making jokes and casual chat, suggests that it is human behaviours which largely fall outside the professional borders of the staff-student relationship which allow students to see staff as human and trustable, and which thus serve as the basis for belonging. And there is also an implication that we feel we can belong to a group when we see that members of that group not only accept us for what we are but at some level are like us too. If so, it seems unlikely that steps intended to enhance belonging can be entirely standardised or that they will naturally emerge from standardised approaches to staff behaviour.

Students discussed how relationships of trust with staff aided their sense of belonging, particularly by encouraging difficult or challenging conversations related to their work, their views or maybe a specific teaching topic. They felt that trust being in place aids any difficult conversations and provides safe spaces to explore their own views, making them feel heard and listened to, whilst also providing scaffolding and support. Other students reported that trust was a key component to belonging, especially with staff, and that having connections to one or two ‘anchoring’ staff members enables this feeling [17,50,53]. This can be especially so for students who are quieter, nervous or anxious; one-to-one meetings were reported as being the most helpful spaces to help build trusting relationships and increase belonging [12].

AC staff highlighted the importance of relational pedagogy and getting to know the students themselves, seeing connection with students as essential to the teaching and learning process but also to belonging [19,49,52,54]. AC staff also recognise that belonging can be supported by connecting the students’ lives to the teaching materials, immersing students in their taught experiences, and including wider perspectives of differing demographics to make links between theory and practice. They also felt that embedding real-world experience adds meaning in a concrete rather than an abstract sense. AC staff also felt that students preferred to be located within a single base on campus and that students found this single location more like a home to which they felt connected.

PS staff reported that belonging can be viewed in other terms, such as making connections and feeling part of a community, and whilst specific events have been organised around these themes, attendance has been low. However, they did report that those students who attended these events found them very beneficial.

3.3. Challenges to Creating and Maintaining Belonging

AC staff know that belonging is linked significantly to institutional policy, but they expressed their concern in relation to the difficulties of embedding this specifically for students who have multiple commitments outside of university and those students who have busy lives and are juggling competing priorities [1,13]. They acknowledged that the pressures of work and family commitments affect belonging for students by making it harder for them to attend on-campus activities. Many students are choosing to attend

universities within their own communities due to the high cost of living, which means that students do not need to fully integrate into the university offerings [1].

PS staff recognise that a significant responsibility for ‘belonging work’ falls on academic staff or personal tutors. Morrish [55] (p. 9) reports that “excessive workloads and workload models which frequently undercount the time necessary for fulfilling tasks, and many tasks prove invisible to the workload assessors”. This creates many issues in terms of lines of responsibility, for example, staff not having the workload capacity to undertake belonging duties, which are not clearly defined or feasible within the time constraints when supporting large cohorts of students. These challenges dilute the potential for personal tutors or academic staff to get to know students in an authentic and supportive capacity, therefore affecting trust building. Furthermore, for staff who feel a sense of duty and complete these duties outside of their scoped hours, this could lead to burnout from excessive emotional labour [22,55–57]. In addition, PS recognised that not all staff have the specialist knowledge, skills, or abilities to fulfil personal tutor roles and meet the needs of belonging practices. This can significantly affect the student experience.

AC staff recognise the impact of belonging duties on staff wellbeing, noting that staff cannot “pour from an empty cup” (AC0044). Especially in light of the increased mental health support that staff have been providing students during and in the wake of COVID-19 [1,22]. AC participants identified that both physical space and time to meet with students who need support can impact belonging:

If a student has had a terrible day or a terrible week, there is less time for these ad hoc timeslots, and there is less time available to meet with students in need due to workload restrictions and increases with no time factored in for these events affecting belonging (AC0045).

AC staff stressed the difficulty of getting to know large numbers of students; they demonstrated concern over large tutor groups, which clearly affect their ability to spend time building relationships. Students reported that accessible staff who can also be emailed and who respond also aid relationship building, trust and belonging. This adds layers to the potential duties for staff who are responsible for personal tutoring. PS staff also strongly recognised the importance of having an accessible personal tutor but recognised that information on activities, services and events could be overwhelming for students, particularly during induction, when students do not yet know what they need.

AC staff suggested that some institutional initiatives intended to support belonging (e.g., activities that support the development of graduate attributes and future career planning) can have an overwhelming effect for students who do not yet know what they want to do post-graduation. They added that this is especially so for those students who are from COVID-19 cohorts whose futures have felt like “some sort of dark scary place” (AC0046) [1]. They go on to state that university should be a safe space where students can make mistakes and learn from failure to aid growth and development. In some cases, they also feel that student ‘failure’ is at least partly attributed to staff failures, a feeling reinforced by staff’s close involvement with student tracking and reporting systems. AC staff feel that student failures are an inevitable part of the learning and growth processes for students and aid their long-term progression. Acknowledging this with students would contribute to creating safe community spaces based on traditional, liberal HEI practices that would enable students to grow through learning and support belonging for the students [58,59].

PS staff recognise that there are challenges with trying to encourage students to attend wider events that are aimed at community building. Whilst students tend to sign up for these events, they are less likely to attend, which evidences a disconnect between what students want and what they can do. PS participants also suggested that the aftereffects of COVID-19 have interrupted wider on-campus activities for community

building. Educational lockdowns impacted mental health and social anxiety for many students and resulted in a lack of friendship-building opportunities or social development during these periods. Finally, PS staff also considered that some students do not feel the need to belong [12]:

If they belong, they engage and they stay; I get it, but not all students feel the need to belong. Do students want to belong? Some do not, and some do very much. I would say [the latter] are the ones who already engage. So the sport and the societies feel like they belong in the Union, and the university, the committees, you know, the academic committees, and the course reps are the people who somehow have made a decision to engage for everybody else who feels it is not for them. So some do belong and some do not (PS0036).

This illustrates an important point, that a sense of belonging is not something that all students will feel or need to feel, but it also reveals a crucial ambiguity in how we determine how far a sense of belonging permeates a student body. Belonging can occur in multiple ways, and not all of them are measurable: attendance, society membership and service to the university community are indicators of belonging, but they are not prerequisites of it. Presumably many students feel they belong without demonstrating those behaviours.

Mature students particularly reported that they do not necessarily feel the need to feel a sense of belonging at university, as they have existing established networks outside of the university [60]. However, they did state that a sense of belonging might be increased if they were taught in groups with other mature students or like-minded individuals. They reported a particular barrier to belonging when integrated with large groups of younger students, with whom they have little in common due to being at different stages in life. They also recognised that many of the community-building events the university puts on for students, such as freshers' fairs, are not aimed at their age groups, reducing their sense of belonging [60]. In these instances, mature students have found campus spaces such as the library and study spaces helpful, where they can focus on their work more intensely. That said, just like their younger classmates, mature students report that having varied conversations with staff contributes towards belonging, and they find supportive and encouraging pedagogy helpful. Finally, students of all ages reported that a sense of belonging takes time to establish [46].

4. Discussion

A prominent thread throughout the participant responses was the centrality of relational pedagogy embedded in authentic and trusting relationships between students and staff. Additionally, this research affirms that much of the ethos of belonging is in the non-tangible moments that students encounter in the relationships they form during their university experiences [8,17]. Belonging means different things to different students, and belonging is to an extent owned by the student themselves. This makes it difficult for HEIs to group students homogenously or to deliver 'belonging' based on Bourdieuan concepts of capital, field, and habitus deterministically [10,11]. Therefore, quantifying tangible elements of belonging in terms of measurement and metrics is unrealistic. For example, this study found that even those students who do not attend, or are struggling to attend, can still feel belonging, but that this is rooted in the supportive, authentic and trusting relationships that they have developed. Pedler et al. [8] recognise that student psychological status is linked to Maslow's [14] hierarchy of needs, affirming the importance of self in a theoretical sense. Jones [51,53] acknowledges the need to support students based on their individual psychosocial status. Both theories bring insights to the psychology of students in HE and could be integrated with the ideology of belonging. The literature on belonging provides further assertion that relational pedagogy is key in the development of belonging, acknowl-

edging changes post-pandemic [17,19,49–53]. However, there is scope to undertake further research into the relationship between belonging and authentic and trusting relationships with peers, staff and the institution. This is currently lacking in academic literature and would further contribute to unravelling the conceptual sense of belonging.

Staff also reported that finding ‘real world’ ways to connect the students’ lives to their teaching and learning experiences brings powerful links that also contribute to belonging for students. Staff felt that these pedagogical methods can bring great joy to both staff and students and have a powerful impact on belonging [8,61,62]. Examples of co-connected learning activities include personalisation of assignments, links to the local community, trips and events within the local community, and professional and career aspiration opportunities [19]. Despite this, staff felt that HEI’s needed to further improve connections with students to further enhance the importance of pedagogy and collaborative working with students to continue to improve belonging [63].

The impact on staff wellbeing of supporting belonging without adequate time and support is profound, especially considering the increased effects on student mental health post-COVID [1]. Academic and personal tutor staff roles and responsibilities for belonging are unclear, especially for staff with responsibility for pastoral care. Those need to be defined and supported by protected workloaded time and space for relationship building and getting to know students to promote belonging [50,51,53]. In addition, there is a lack of consistency in the delivery of these duties; for example, some staff absorb the emotional labour, with the potential that this could lead to staff burnout as many undertake relational pedagogical tasks beyond the remit of working hours [59–61].

Significant challenges and constraints are present for tutors with responsibility for large student groups and cohort sizes. These limit opportunities for relational pedagogy, affecting trust-building and authentic relationships [19,49]. The challenges of neoliberal practices are affecting students’ abilities to embrace liberal learning cultures, as the focus is very much on graduate attributes and graduate outcomes, which is affecting belonging [58,59]. In addition, staff found induction activities related to belonging, services and events can also feel overwhelming for students who do not yet know what they need. There can also be a disconnect between what students want to attend and what they can commit time to. There was a general perception that the COVID-19 cohorts and those who encountered educational and social development interruptions are most affected by social anxiety and mental health, which creates an additional barrier to attending on-campus events aligned to belonging.

It could be argued that universities are not set up for belonging. Like other institutions which, whatever their original purpose and ethos, now find themselves largely led by regulatory bodies promoting a reductive view of students as customers in a transactional relationship against a market-led background. Universities find themselves caught in the “paradoxical” [64] (p. 14) relationship between the free market and intense scrutiny from regulators. But we believe that belonging is not just an optional extra, something to make the day brighter—if students leave, or fail, or express their unhappiness in feedback, that is direct evidence that students need to feel they belong to achieve the very metrics that the university values most.

The fundamental problem with ‘belonging’ in the terms in which HEIs understand it is that it does not fit neatly into the audit culture nor deterministically: something as nebulous as a feeling that one is meant to be somewhere, a feeling of acceptance and contentment, does not lend itself to being measured. And from a teacher’s perspective, supporting belonging contradicts current models of HEI. Watermeyer et al. [64] (p. 446) note the “low reward and recognition for tasks with limited or non-obvious positional return(s)” in modern academia. Creating space for belonging to develop—that is, taking

time for the largely invisible type of human contact our participants felt was central to belonging—is the very definition of low-reward activity, at least from the perspective of an institution trying to maintain or increase its place in the rankings. In other words, belonging might be the key element of student satisfaction, yet it remains stubbornly immeasurable and hard to deliver under the frugal regimes found in many universities. The origins of belonging appear to be in relationships of trust, which create an intrinsic motivation and a powerful counter to the pressures that students are under [1]. Universities discuss it, but action seems hard when the objective appears to run precisely counter to the dominant ideology. So rather than viewing student belonging as worthwhile only insofar as it works against attrition, HEIs would do well to view it as many of our academic participants do, as a good in its own right, as well as a creator of good outcomes.

5. Conclusions

This research has concentrated on the following research questions:

- 1 Students: How much do you feel that you belong at university? What contributes to your sense of belonging?
- 2 Staff: How do you understand the term ‘sense of belonging’? What are the most important factors to increase feelings of belonging for students?

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

Our data has found that the sense of ‘belonging’ is conceptually messy and complex in practice. Most elements of belonging reported are intangible; others are likely to mean different things to different people depending on student needs, and one-size-fits-all, HEI-wide policies aimed at enhancing belonging may not succeed if they do not recognise this. It appears that students experience belonging more prominently at the course/programme level. In addition, belonging measures through attendance metrics can be unreliable. A sense of belonging is heavily reliant on relationships with peers, staff and the physical environment, which lead to feelings of pride and belonging towards the HEI itself [47]. Characteristics of caring are closely attached to belonging for students and are established when staff demonstrate these qualities/traits beyond their academic remit [19]. A philosophy of ‘care with education’ helps students to improve academic work and thus belonging [51], but this must be built on authentic and trusting relationships, with mattering at their heart, between staff and students [48,50,51,53]. It was found that both staff and students value the importance of the personal touch when establishing relationships to aid trust-building and authenticity. They equally reported that relational pedagogy and consistency were key factors in belonging [17,19,49,52]. In addition, students particularly find trusting relationships with staff have a positive effect on anxiety levels [50,51,53]. Staff recognise the need for “continuous adjustment in human habitus” between relationships and across practice [10,11] (p. 7). Threats to trust building based on relational pedagogy directly link to the challenges of HEI staff employment contracts and negative working culture, leading to high turnover of staff and increased staff sickness interrupting relationship building [23–25].

The notion of mattering is challenging, as this could mean different things to different staff/students and is not something that can be given or applied; it must be felt by those who are part of that exchange [36]. It was found again that trust building based on authentic relationships aids students’ feelings of mattering [43].

5.2. Contribution

Our paper provides perspectives from three types of participant: students, academic staff, and non-academic staff delivering professional services across the institution. The last group in particular are rarely included in similar research, despite the importance of non-academic staff in policy design and implementation. Our research additionally provides much-needed perspectives from students from non-traditional backgrounds, including first-generation students and those from low-income or under-represented groups. Finally, the paper proposes that belonging is most effectively conceptualised as largely based on interpersonal trust between students and staff, and that this trust is developed through ‘small moments’ of contact—often intangible and beyond quantification.

5.3. Limitations

We recognise the limitations of this research being undertaken at one HEI, albeit one with a large student population. Our sample is relatively small, and it is possible that our student participants were more likely to be those who themselves felt they belonged, although we tried to obtain as diverse a range of students as possible. However, our data are strengthened by its contributions from professional service staff, academic staff and students, and the results provide insightful contributions to the conundrum of belonging in the post-pandemic context. Advance HE [3] recognises that HE needs to evolve to meet the changing effects of political, economic, and social demands and issues, with academic contributions aiding this development of understanding.

Our findings lead us to make the following recommendations to aid authentic relationship building with students at the heart of HE practice.

5.4. Recommendations

1 Review current roles and responsibilities

HEIs need to review current roles and responsibilities for staff providing personal tutoring for students, clearly defining these roles and allocating adequate time in staff workloads to support students and to focus on relational pedagogy and authentic trusting relationships. Effectively, this recognises that the work undertaken by personal tutors is essential in helping build the relationships of trust that underpin belonging and improve the outcomes, attendance, engagement, and progression that are improved by a strong sense of belonging. These outcomes are the measurables that the audit culture requires. Universities need to provide academic staff or pastoral staff with suitable and appropriate training aligned with relational pedagogy, authentic trusting relationship building, and support networks to enable staff to develop appropriate skills.

2 Allow time and space to create authentic, trusting relationships built on human interaction

HEIs should ensure there is sufficient space and time for impromptu, sometimes fleeting interactions between staff and students to build connections, trust, and relationships. This implies a less frugal attitude towards time in general and a more generous response to the often unseen and frequently unremarked work that staff do in building relationships of trust. This ‘space and time’ requirement does not necessarily imply a specific workload allocation, because relationships cannot be built or measured according to a strict timetable. We can see that this recommendation flies in the face of university preoccupations with ‘efficiency’ and so-called SMART targets and a move away from what Scott [65] (pp. 17–18) terms “the increasing definition of academic success in terms of reductionist metrics focused on outputs and production, and the parallel redefinition of student learning in terms of satisfaction (experience, grades, jobs) rather than self-realisation”.

3 Review staff sickness and turnover data to strengthen consistency of care for students

Whilst not a direct outcome of our data, this is a clear threat to SoB, particularly building authentic trusting relationships and relational pedagogy, as this is heavily reliant on a stable workforce. As such, universities need to consider and review staff sickness and turnover data to identify where relationship building for students is being interrupted and devise strategic plans for a stable workforce to provide consistency for students as they move throughout their academic journeys, but also to provide suitable support for staff wellbeing.

These recommendations are unlikely to work effectively unless universities put student belonging first on the list of priorities. Students who feel they belong are students who feel secure, supported and truly seen; they are the students who can gain the most out of their university experience. Students who do not feel they belong at university cannot be expected to do the same.

We acknowledge that belonging needs may vary for different institutions nationally or internationally. It is also likely that belonging is not understood by students in a single way and that not all students have the same needs: Advance HE [3] notes that belonging inevitably “mean[s] something different depending on the type of institution and its culture and values, and [...] there is no one size fits all solution”. However, this supports rather than contradicts our claim for the centrality of uncounsed space and time in making relationship-building genuinely viable and productive. Our paper provides powerful insights that can be shared and could aid future HEI strategic development and planning, staff development, staff wellbeing, student engagement and, of course, student sense of belonging. Therefore, the contribution of this empirical research to the field of HE is three-fold: first, it interprets belonging based on connection, caring and mattering; second, it identifies that relational pedagogy based on authentic trusting relationships is key to developing a sense of belonging; and finally, it provides recommendations for strategic practice to support the development of belonging.

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