Student perceptions of belonging at university: a qualitative perspective

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Abstract

Belonging is multidimensional, personal and geographical in nature. Establishing a sense of belonging benefits students and institutions. This study sought to explore aspects of belonging from the student perspective. Data were collected using open text boxes within a questionnaire and an optional focus group. A total of 617 students participated of whom 85% completed the questionnaire. One focus group with 3 participants was held. Qualitative data highlighted personal and social aspects of belonging, and the benefits of belonging for successful study. The importance of belonging was not agreed universally but most students identified it as important, and felt that they personally belonged. Understanding what belonging means and what influences it is important to enhance student engagement and retention.

Introduction

Belonging in education is the perception of being accepted, valued and included in class activities (Goodenow, 1993). Associated with student persistence in their studies, it has obvious benefits for retention rates (Thomas, 2012a), and contributes to better outcomes for students (Stuart et al, 2009; Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015). Therefore it is of value for both individuals and institutions.

There is no single agreed definition of belonging in higher education (Antonsich, 2010). It has aspects of place, or belonging to (Schein, 2009), and is therefore in one sense geographical (Mee & Wright, 2009). It is also profoundly personal in nature; in the context of higher education students may belong formally to the university through their registration, but they may feel that university is a means to an end and that their real life is elsewhere (e.g. mature students). It is possible to belong simultaneously to several different groups some of which may conflict. For example, those who work as well as study will have to deal with the dilemma of managing their time and the demands of both, as will those with caring responsibilities. Students are expected to conform to the formal structures of university or college while simultaneously making the transition to higher education (Gale & Parker, 2014), which may cause tension (Fenster, 2005). Belonging includes a dimension of ownership (Mee & Wright, 2009). Perhaps in the case of students this may be imagined as gaining mastery of a subject or establishing a secure learner identity. An intrinsic part of belonging is that it is by its very nature exclusive, since not everyone will belong (Rubin & Wright, 2015).

Part of the transition to university involves settling in, making connections and developing a new learner identity (Antonsich, 2010), within the culture of academia (Read et al, 2003). Belonging is seen as a process rather than a status, as an intrinsic part of transition and the formation of a learner identity is a component of this (Antonsich, 2010). Social integration is also an important part of belonging (Rubin & Wright, 2015) and the need to form social links

and friendships appears to be very strong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Perry & Allard, 2003), although this may vary for example with age (Rubin & Wright, 2015).

Adjustment to student life requires balancing different aspects of life (Trautwein and Bosse, 2017), as a twofold integration, including social and academic aspects, is needed (Tinto, 1987). Similarly to transition which can be seen as a process of 'becoming' (Gale and Parker, 2014), belonging is affected by residence and commuting status (Trautwin & Bosse, 2017).

We have shown previously that perceptions of belonging were affected by geographical location. In students taking an extended degree, the location of the first year at a sister college meant that participants did not feel part of the university (Goldring et al, 2018). Understanding what belonging feels like, whether it is perceived as important or not and what factors influence it, is important both for students and institutions. This project sought to explore these factors.

Methods

Ethics approval for this project was given by the Health Research Ethics Committee, Kingston University. Data were collected using questionnaire and optional focus groups. This paper focuses on the qualitative data derived from the project, briefly described below.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire included demographic information as well as commuting status. Qualitative data was collected using open text boxes for a total of six questions, as follows:

- 'Do you think belonging at university is important'? (Likert rating); 'Please explain your answer' (open text).
- How much do you think you personally belong at Kingston University' (Likert rating); 'Please explain your answer' (open text) and 'Why have you given this score'? (open text).
- 'What would make you give yourself a higher score (if applicable?' (open text).
- 'Has your sense of belonging changed over your time at Kingston University? and 'In what way/s?' (both open text)

- 'What specific things make you feel that you belong to Kingston University? Related to your course and related to the university' (both open text).
- 'If the university could do ONE thing to help you feel you belong, what would this be and why?' (open text).

Data analysis

This paper focuses on the qualitative data from the project. Qualitative data were analysed using basic thematic analysis and frequency of statements made were collated.

Results

A total of 617 participants took part of whom 85% completed the questionnaire in its entirety. Qualitative data was obtained from questionnaires. Descriptive statistics of participants are shown in Table 1. The majority were aged 18-21 years; two thirds were female and ethnic diversity was in line with the rich ethnic mix of Kingston University. The majority were undergraduate students studying full time, just over half (50.2%) commuted more than 4 miles a day and the most common average commute time was up to 30 minutes (44.4% of participants; data not shown). One focus group with three participants (2 female, 1 male), all undergraduates, was held.

Do you think belonging at university is important?

Seventy three percent of participants agreed that belonging to university was important to them. Qualitative data was received by 72 respondents whose comments fell within 7 broad themes. The most frequently cited theme was the personal benefits of belonging; feeling safe and comfortable helped combat loneliness, freeing students to concentrate on their studies. Study-related benefits were the second largest group of comments, and included benefits for retention, attendance and attainment. Social aspects – making friends, forming connections – were also commonly cited. Focus group participants (*n*=3) agreed.

'Because by belonging, it encourages you to do well; since you are representative of your university. Having a network of people who support you helps this as well' [Level 5 female participant].

Age				
18-21 years	*22-25 years*	*26-29 years*	*≥30 years*	*No response*
Numbers (%) 357 (58.2)	178 (28.8)	32 (5.2)	33 (5.3)	17 (2.8)
Gender				
Male		*Female*		*Other/PNS*
Numbers (%) 225 (36.5)		382 (62.0)		10 (1.6)
Ethnicity*				
White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Other
Numbers (%) 167 (27.1)	142 (23.0)	188 (30.5)	43 (7.0)	63 (10.2)

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of participants; age, gender & ethnicity. Data is expressed as numbers (%).*14 participants (2.7%) did not state their ethnicity.

Themes	*Categories*	*Examples*
Personal benefits (*n*=59)	Enjoyment /purpose/recognition (*n*=13) Feeling comfortable (*n*=12) Safe & confident (*n*=9) Helps you (*n*=8) Other (*n*=17)	*'Nice to feel part of uni, not just course'* *'Moving to new area easy to fall into depression or loneliness. Feeling like you belong can help combat this'*
Course/study-related (*n*=37)	Benefits studies (*n*=20) Improves attendance (*n*=8) Improves motivation (*n*=5) Other (*n*=4)	*'If you belong you feel more comfortable with your surroundings, enabling you to be more focused on your work instead of feeling out of place'* *'A sense of purpose & belonging can be motivating'*
Social aspects (*n*=22)	Friends/connections/community (*n*=13) Socialising/networking/being involved (*n*=9)	*'To make new friends & connections…this makes life easier'*
Not important (*n*=19)	Here to get a degree (*n*=6) Don't need to belong (*n*=9) Other (*n*=4)	*'Belonging is over-rated. Majority come to get a degree & hang out with friends'* *'Don't think you need to belong to an institution to be part of it'*
Future benefits (*n*=15)	Finding employment/opportunities (*n*=10) New skills (*n*=5)	*'Prepare you for a job'*
Don't belong (*n*=6)	Finding my feet (*n*=2) Didn't feel I belonged (*n*=4)	*'If you don't belong it feels quite lonely'*
Important (*n*=5)	Important to belong (*n*=5)	*'Not sure what it means. But it is important to feel recognised'*

Table 2 Qualitative responses for the question *'Do you think belonging at university is important?'* Responses are categorised into broad themes and categories and numbers of responses within each are shown in brackets.

Themes	Categories	Examples
Social (*n*=36)	Clubs/societies/events (*n*=15) Friends (*n*=13) Warm environment (*n*=4) Relationships with staff (*n*=4)	*'I know about things like events & societies'* *'Because of the friends I have made & the many different people there are here'*
Emotions (*n*=29)	Feel I belong/ am comfortable / at home (*n*=18) Enjoyment/ commitment (*n*=7) Independent (*n*=4)	*'I feel super comfortable here'* *'Feel right doing my course'*
Time (*n*=20)	Only come in for lectures/don't spend enough time here (*n*=16) Other (*n*=4)	*'First year so trying to get settled'* *'Don't spend more time than I need to at uni'*
Reduce belonging (*n*=13)	Commuting (*n*=7) No friends/ don't like classmates (*n*=2) Other (*n*=4)	*'Stress makes it hard to appreciate nice things'* *'Being a commuting student, not around as much'*

Table 3 Qualitative responses for the question *'How much do you feel that you personally belong at Kingston University?'* Responses for the four most frequently cited themes are shown, with categories and numbers of responses in brackets. Examples of responses from the four most frequently identified themes are shown.

A small number did not think that belonging mattered, but even some of those mentioned friends and social aspects which are also relevant to belonging. Table 2 shows the themes and categories for this question.

How much do you feel that you personally belong at Kingston University?

Belonging was clearly of personal relevance to this cohort; a total of 68% of those who completed this question agreed or strongly agreed that belonging was important to them personally. A fifth of respondents were unsure and 8% felt that belonging was not important to them personally.

In terms of how much they felt that they personally felt a sense of belonging, 446 participants (78%) agreed that they personally felt a sense of belonging at university, but this was not universal. Eighty students (14%) did not feel that they belonged and 6.5% thought that belonging did not matter.

A total of 69 qualitative responses were given for this question within 6 major themes. The most common comments made related to social aspects, in particular the role of clubs and societies in facilitating belonging. Emotions were also frequently mentioned, the majority of times (55%) suggesting that respondents felt that they belonged. This was most usually described as feeling comfortable. Personal aspects of belonging also recognised the importance of spending time at the university in order to belong. Table 3 shows the 4 more frequently cited themes for this question.

Reasons for giving their scores for their personal feelings of belonging at university covered four themes; namely belonging, course-related, university-related and personal aspects. A total of 40 comments were made (data not shown).

In response to the question *'What would make you give yourself a higher score?'*, 48 comments falling into 5 themes were given. The most frequently cited themes were social (*n*=22), personal (*n*=20) followed by university-related aspects (*n*=14). The social theme included friends, extracurricular activities, clubs and societies. The importance of becoming more involved in the university and

Themes	Categories	Examples
Familiarity (*n*=42)	Increased familiarity (*n*=26) Increased over time (*n*=16)	*'Over a period of time you start to become familiar with your environment & peers'* *'More familiar with campus layout & easy to navigate around to find lecture halls & practical rooms'*
Support (*n*=23)	Friends (*n*=14) Societies (*n*=5) Welcomed/supported (*n*=3) Lecturers (*n*=1)	*'Made new friends & a support group as I progressed through the years'*
Personal (*n*=18)	Being involved (*n*=4) Felt unsuited initially (*n*=4) Spending more time on campus (*n*=3) Other (*n*=7)	*'Since I became an ambassador & student rep I feel more involved with the uni'*

Table 4 Qualitative responses for the question *'How has your sense of belonging changed over time?'* Responses for the three themes are shown, with categories and numbers of responses in brackets. Examples of responses are shown.

spending more time on campus was highlighted within the personal theme:

'If I get to study here & familiarise myself with the uni or participate in other extracurricular more'

University-related aspects included lack of facilities, crowded campus and frequency and cost of travel:

'More facilities. Faster & cheaper transport links'.

Forty eight respondents commented on how their sense of belonging had changed over time. Table 4 shows the 3 major themes for this question. The major theme was familiarity; the importance of knowing where to find things and how the university works in helping students feel that they belong. This also related to time, since over time familiarity increased, and to social aspects since friendships and connections evolved over time.

In terms of specific course-related things that helped students feel they belonged staff-related aspects were most frequently cited

(*n*=44). These included relationships with staff as well as teaching methods used:

'Very approachable lecturers/staff'

'The support on offer & how different modules are taught'

Social aspects were also highlighted (*n*=32).

'Sense of community. Relationships'

'Friends on the course'

In terms of university-related things that helped students feel that they belonged, 50 responses were received. The most commonly mentioned theme was extracurricular activities (*n*=24), including clubs and societies. Social aspects (*n*=18) and university resources (*n*=16) were also highlighted (data not shown).

Finally, participants were *asked 'If the university could do ONE thing to help you feel you belong, what would this be?'*

A total of 282 comments to this question were made, and from these a total of 16 themes were identified (shown in Table 5).

Theme	Number (%)	Example of statement
Social	74 (23.1)	'Have more freshers' activities' 'More group activities & social events'
Nothing/ I don't know	37 (11.6)	'I already feel that I belong' 'Nothing' 'I honestly don't know what else it could do or change'
Course delivery	33 (10.3)	'More one-to-one time with small groups'
Tutor-related	30 (9.4)	'More tutor meetings that are scheduled' 'To have more conversation with the teacher' 'Cheerful relationships with teaching staff' 'Help us get to know our lecturers better'
Financial	22 (6.9)	'We are all students on a budget and the uni should acknowledge this in food prices. This would make us feel more welcome & at home'
Course-related	15 (4.7)	'Trips related to the course'
Record/film lectures	11 (3.4)	'Record lectures' 'Upload video lectures'
Pastoral care	9 (2.8)	'Offer more student care, more support' 'Mentally support others as students can be depressed & confused about what they want to do in the future'
Societies	9 (2.8)	'More society events to allow for more socialising' 'Societies at convenient times (not too late' 'Mature student societies'
Student voice	8 (2.5)	'Listen & action' 'Continue to encourage & facilitate students' voices to shape the university'
Employers/ employment	7 (2.2)	'Helping students after they graduate' 'If my course provided more help with internships/work experience maybe or collaboration with other courses more'
Transport	7 (2.2)	'Faster transport from places that are far'
Exams/deadlines	6 (1.9)	'More help & time for exams' 'Making extensions easier to come by'
Organisation	5 (1.6)	'Stop 9am's & let us sleep'
Social space	4 (1.3)	'Improve on spaces to relax' 'More lounge areas for studying or just waiting'
Miscellaneous	43 (13.4)	'Accommodating the amount of students on each campus. Considering new students that are new to the environment' 'Make a separate room to study in where only one person is' 'Better food in the canteen'

Table 5 'What one thing could the university do, to help you feel that you belong?'.
Responses given by 282 participants and expressed as numbers (%) of responses.

The most common theme was social aspects of university life, establishing relationships with peers; a further 10.3% identified the use of course activities like small group activities and over 9% made suggestions to build up relationships with academic staff (tutors). Interestingly more than 11% of respondents thought that the university did not need to do anything; either that it was already doing all it could, or that it was not the responsibility of the university to help students belong.

Discussion

Overall our data suggests that students recognise that belonging is important (although this was not universal). It was widely seen as conferring benefits beyond the solely social to influence university study and in particular retention, attainment and attendance. This agrees with Thomas (2012a) who suggested that belonging affects success and retention and is therefore of benefit to individuals and the institution. While most respondents felt that they belonged, the factors which enabled them to feel this broadly included extracurricular activities (clubs and societies), social aspects and university resources. There is clearly some overlap between these; extracurricular activities enable students to meet each other and make links within and between different courses:

> *'Joining the football society made me feel comfortable due to meeting new people & playing the sport I enjoy'*

However, many extracurricular activities place the onus on students to engage (Gale & Parker, 2014), which is not equally easy for all. It is likely to be those that feel most confident who find this easiest, and apart from personal characteristics, those with external commitments (e.g. caring responsibilities, jobs and/or long commutes) face barriers to joining in extracurricular activities outside of the timetable. For example, commuting is generally seen as disadvantageous to engagement (Thomas & Jones, 2017). Ideally inclusion activities like those typically organised in the first year to aid transition should be positioned within the academic framework so that they are accessible to all (Thomas, 2012b). It is not just the resources that are available that matter but who has access to them (Askins, 2015), which also links

to what is viewed as legitimate or usual (Maunder et al, 2013).

> *'Being a commuting student, not around as much'*

Aspects such as living arrangements and commuting status affect access (Read et al, 2018; Thomas & Jones, 2017); additionally social activities often organised by clubs and societies may exclude some student groups for cultural, personal or religious reasons if they include alcohol, inadvertently making them feel that they do not belong (Jacobs et al, 2018). This is of relevance in a proudly multi-cultural institution such as this.

Our qualitative data suggested that timing of social events around commutes, as well as start times of lectures and availability of suitable space on campus, were all important to students. This is in broad agreement with what others have found (Thomas & Jones, 2017), and is not unique to this institution; the difficulties for traditionally atypical students have been recognised in the literature (Read et al, 2018; Pokorny et al, 2017; Carruthers Thomas, 2016; Rubin & Wright, 2015; Read et al, 2003).

Social aspects of transition and integration into university life were recognised by our participants as valuable. Making friends, establishing networks of like-minded people and making connections were all highlighted. Friends were not just identified as people to have fun with, but to provide support:

> *'Made new friends & a support group as I progressed through the years'*

The importance of a social network was also identified by some of the small number of students who did not feel that they belonged:

> *'If you don't belong it feels quite lonely'*

A small number also recognised the value of this network and the social activities provided by the university for their future:

> *'Prepare you for a job'*

This is important because although our participants did not specifically mention

learning communities in relation to belonging, the impact of belonging on learning and academic achievement was frequently highlighted. Social activities and establishing supportive friendships were identified as key to feeling a sense of belonging. Social integration and the importance of friends have also been highlighted by others (Perry & Allard, 2003; Stuart, 2006; Mee, 2009; Rubin, 2012: Thomas, 2012b). Interpersonal relationships including interactions with peers have been shown to be important determinants of belonging (Johnson, 2012). Staff too, have been identified as important (Thomas, 2015). We previously showed that students rate their relationships with teaching staff as a barometer of a high quality education (Dicker et al, 2017, 2018). Relationships with staff and belonging are important components of successful transition into higher education (Thomas, 2015; Carroll-Meehan & Howells, 2018). Although in this study social activities and the establishment of supportive friendship groups were highlighted much more than the role of staff, tutor-related activities and pastoral care were acknowledged as things that the university could do to facilitate belonging among students (Table 5).

Belonging was commonly described in our study as a positive feeling; one of being comfortable and at home. This aligns with one view of belonging as personal (Antonsich, 2010), and as such the relationship many of our participants articulated between belonging and emotions (Table 3) is unsurprising. A distinction may be made between the formalities of belonging (e.g. being an enrolled student of an institution) and a personal feeling of fitting in and belonging (Antonsich, 2010). The link between home and belonging makes sense from another perspective; home is where it is possible to develop a sense of self and self-identity (Dowling & Mee, 2007), and part of a successful transition to higher education is developing a sense of oneself as an authentic learner, shifting from one identity to another (Krause & Coates, 2008; Gale & Parker, 2014). Part of the personal feeling of belonging our students articulated related to familiarity; an understanding of how things worked, where support could be found, how to navigate the campus and understanding what is required to work effectively in this new context. An aspect of the transition to higher education is successfully navigating a new environment, developing the skills to do so and the support networks required. In that sense transition could be viewed as a journey towards belonging and indeed transition is viewed as an ongoing process (Tett et al, 2017), and belonging itself is multidimensional in nature (Antonsich, 2010). It is recognised that there are active processes required to create and maintain a sense of belonging (Dowling & Mee, 2007).

Multiple aspects of belonging were articulated by our participants. The most commonly cited themes were personal, social and benefits to studies. Peers, staff and university structures all have important roles particularly for groups who may find it harder to make the transition and establish a sense of belonging (e.g. mature or commuting students). Although our study only includes data from one institution, our participant numbers were reasonably high and the themes articulated resonate with what others have found. This highlights the importance of understanding barriers to and facilitators of belonging in students.

In conclusion, our data showed that in large sample of undergraduate students, most agreed that a sense of belonging at university mattered to them. Their reasons for this were personal, social and academic. Belonging was generally associated with positive emotions. A variety of factors contributed to whether or not students felt that they belonged. However the important roles of peers and academic staff were highlighted. Helping students to establish positive peer relationships and facilitating helpful relationships with staff within the academic as well as extracurricular frameworks has the potential to benefit both students and higher education institutions.

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