

# UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, ACADEMIC STRUCTURES AND THE PROCESSES OF INTEGRATION

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## ABSTRACT

This special issue on *Finding a Place to Belong: University Students, Academic Structures and the Processes of Integration* contains nine articles on opportunities of belonging and highlights the cultivation of belonging as a fundamental for addressing inequality and inequity in a linguistically and culturally diverse higher education context. Here, belonging challenges the dominant university ideology, which can elude the marginalised or underserved student and staff groups of learning communities. The combination of individual/group agency and identity negotiation for developing and implementing enablers of belonging reveals the challenges and complexity of deconstructing belonging. The articles focus on the barriers and opportunities of belonging and the interaction of agency and enablers of belonging, such as equitable vision, policy, programmes and commitment, as a product of belonging.

**Keywords:** deconstructing, belonging, opportunities, barriers, transformation, multiple Identities, multiple belongings

## INTRODUCTION

A “sense of (un) belonging” among students and staff in higher education institutions (HEI) is receiving greater attention in education research. Considered a critical construct specifically about undergraduate and postgraduate student well-being, throughput and attrition, a sub-Saharan-African pivot on this topic is long overdue. (Finn and Zimmer 2012, 97–131; Araujo et al. 2014). The rationale for this, we believe, is a need for a fundamental shift to include this

“sense of (un) belonging” “with its myriad understandings” as an underpinning principle in the HEI learning culture /environment.

For many, belonging is mainly viewed through one lens as a political transformation project. Here the starting point is exclusion, and belonging becomes a political response to this feeling of exclusion. It also draws on a particular understanding of power (and race). There is an understanding that produces polarizing binaries; either you are in, or you are out. This approach often uses social justice language to explain itself. The stance is an essential view, but it is narrow. There are other approaches, and this narrow approach tends to limit (rather than expand) our analysis and understanding of belonging in universities. We propose that understanding a “sense of (un) belonging” becomes not only the natural next step in the drive for equity, inclusion, and diversity but also essential for growth and innovation in HEI. A sense of belonging is a less familiar rung on the ladder to our shared “utopian” vision of higher education being genuinely inclusive, serving the greater good and pursuing excellence. The time has arrived to add this meta-construct to the discourse on all matters related to HEI in SA.

Universities are places with diverse populations – students, academics, support staff, visitors, alumni, etc. These populations can be distinguished in terms of gender, race, generation, religion, country of origin, learning style, personality type, etc. This poses significant challenges for universities to generate a feeling of belonging. Furthermore, a feeling of belonging is important because it impacts morale, efficiency and loyalty. The subjective, multi-level, multi-relational character of (un)belonging is often reduced to a simplistic need in Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy. Due to the difficulty of empirically measuring this somewhat intangible perception, it has been relegated to the lower rungs of discourse. However, in higher education, its influence on academic excellence, creativity, innovation and positive student and staff dynamics should not be underestimated (Strayhorn 2018; Kahu, Ahley, and Picton 2022, 11).

Belonging is pivotal for academic success and staff development. It takes many forms and shapes. It can be engineered from “the top” – university management and publicity arms are charged with creating a university identity that its members can identify with. Belonging can also be created organically, from below, by groups within the university that, for various reasons, do not feel a sense of kinship with what is increasingly a corporate identity. In these latter instances, groups who feel unrepresented by official university identities and marginalised may develop a sense of belonging, which is critical of a university’s stated identity. The local-level initiatives also act as a conduit for top-down policies. However, such initiatives might be considered a form of opposition, protest or resistance.

Belonging is a relationship and relevant, especially but not exclusively to those on the

margins who find it difficult to feel/make/create (Mellor 2008, 214; Bezuidenhout et al. 2011, 146). In this special issue, we focus on South African universities and showcase a number of examples that demonstrate different approaches to the question of belonging. It will highlight diverse areas of a sense of belonging entrenched within social change and its direct interface with transformation, de colonial and the social justice agenda in HEI (Luckett 2016, 416). This special issue explores how relationships of belonging are constructed, especially by groups who, for various reasons, feel excluded from existing, dominant university offerings of how to relate to the institution.

The search for belonging in higher education in South Africa often symbolises agitation, given that the need for belonging can be viewed as a direct challenge to the status quo (Means and Pyne 2017, 907–909; Yuval-Davis 2006, 199). Seeking belonging can also include creating a community of like-minded people with whom one feels community and kinship. This need not necessarily be resistance or a call for change. The search to find a sense of belonging naturally trigger engagement, interpretation and resources towards a different outcome that can construct and foster the desired sense of belongingness. This special issue thus strives to bring together studies by scholars who work on diverse elements and/or contexts in the field of belonging. It intends to explore the interaction between a feeling of belonging and an action of belonging, to highlight the contribution to the field of study in terms of theoretical perspectives, methodological considerations or other aspects of exploring human engagement, relationship and involvement through belonging.

The articles in this special issue are interested in the outcomes and processes of finding belonging. They highlight an angle of understanding the “emotional feeling and advocacy nature” of belonging in a culturally and linguistically diverse learning environment. We approach belonging from this broad perspective, including individual and group advocacy targeted at inequality and exclusive cultural and systemic practices, as well as other higher education stressors such as the curriculum, academic and living spaces, assessment practices, and teaching and learning strategies. The special issue is divided into three parts, which draw on nature and action belonging from different universities in South Africa:

- i) cultural context of (un)belonging and institutional response;
- ii) learning to belong: shifting identity and agency;
- iii) promoting enablers of belonging.

In what follows, we delve deeper into the advocacy nature of belonging and interface with power and identity and the emotional feeling of belonging to position our view in this special

issue. The introduction is completed with a birds-eye view of the joined results of our contributions.

## **MULTIPLE BELONGINGS AN INTERCULTURAL TRANSFORMATIVE ANGLE**

The changing landscape of education is increasingly charged with research relating to equitable learning (and work) experience to promote social justice geared toward addressing economic, social and political culture in higher education. Research on student transition and progression generally positions belonging as a factor in understanding students' experiences from marginalized or underresourced backgrounds (Strayhorn 2018, 22–23; Vaccaro and Newman 2016, 926–928).

Exploring the multiple power dimension of belonging that affects a given situation can provide a deeper understanding of the different factors that interact to promote belonging and/or reinforce un-belonging. Just like hegemonic power, a transformative power (force of change) is not static but presents itself in different forms, spaces and levels. This complexity suggests that there is no one size fits all solution to transformative power relations. A collective but diverse approach that draws on all dimensions, such as personal and collective levels, could provide a lasting change.

While power can be interpreted in various ways, power exists “everywhere” in all spheres of society and constant negotiation (Foucault 1998, 63). It is a classical display of power struggle and subjectivity. Identity is subject to control or its meaning tied to another person's identity. Thus, unquestionably, belonging is a struggle against the dominant “form of power or system”. In this specific view, the search for belonging signals a form of resistance to traditional power relations in the university systems, structures, programmes (including health professional internships) and curriculum that seeks to continue to disempower and subject minority members (student and staff) of the learning communities to control of hegemonic culture that remains exclusive (Gaventa 2003, 5; Naidoo, Adhikari, and Van Wyk 2018, 50). The dominant culture in higher education shapes physical space, curriculum, relationships between groupings, communication, and narratives of what it means to belong, shaped by the dominant culture and expectation. Just as dominant power is put into action, belonging as a form of transformative force, actions and effect change.

Belonging to this view, we postulate that the SA context is mainly about power and social change in higher education. As a tool with transformative power, it can challenge the status quo and facilitate social change (Hindess 1996, 80–82; Eyben, Harris, and Petit 2006, 2–3). It can detach itself from the hegemonic and dominant culture operating in its context (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991, 75); belonging becomes the site of resistance to dominance and exclusion. By

addressing marginalised groups' feelings of isolation, lack of connection, acceptance, mattering, value, respect and importance. The transformative nature empowers individuals and groups to engage with and use the sense of belonging to shape and reshape the kind of higher education for themselves and the future generation of students and staff. Therefore, we submit that belonging is about changing things and not fitting into a box. Instead, it creates space for diversity of belonging, allowing individuals to reach their full potential. It can become a path to shape a positive student (or staff) experience through individual and group (programme, initiatives) efforts. A sense of belonging can serve as a type of resistance to university capital (Yosso 2005, 75), which challenges dominant culture and power relations but supports and affirms the presence of the individuals. Nevertheless, it is also about fostering relationships and togetherness, where all can perform and find meaning in shared collective diversity of belonging to foster resilience. It is important to note that institutional support can appear supportive and undermine a sense of belonging depending on an individual's circumstances (Means and Pyne 2017, 908; Yuval-Davis 2006, 198).

Membership or affiliation does not equate to belonging. It is possible to remain a peripheral member for the lifetime of Membership without deep connection or meaning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Experience is more profound than Membership because it combines the workings of emotion and effect. Individuals' or groups' experiences of connection and stratification propel and influence performance and success. In HEI, experience and performance are intricately intertwined. An experience (favourable or not) would influence performance and vice versa. Understandably, some phrases used when expressing belonging, including "being part of or being at home", are centred on an experience. These phrases relate to individual or group encounters of a place and their role as participants in a particular space in time. The impact of the feeling of un-belonging on performance in HEI is particularly damaging. Given that learning, HEI's business, is a social activity (Vygotsky 1978), students and staff want to see and be seen, to recognise and be recognised, to accept and be accepted, to matter and be mattered etc.. Just as past experiences shape us, new experiences help construct, deconstruct, construct and reconstruct a new sense of self in a given space and time ( Ige 2010, 3048).

Belonging is as complex as identity and dynamic. In many respect belonging is shaped by identity. Conversely, identity resides in belonging, highlighting the discursive, multiple and contested nature of belonging. As HEI widen access and mirrors the broader society, there is increased tension between identity experience and performance in the spaces. An intercultural lense to (intercultural belonging) offers sensitivity to diversity. Understanding multiple identities and university communities foster recognition and respect for multiple cultural

capitals in the same space. Thus, eliminating feelings of alienation and isolation. The intercultural contextual lens facilitates community actors' multiple identities to have agency and shared responsibility for their community (Kastoryano 2018).

An increase in the sense of belonging impacts student transition, progression, retention and achievement (Strayhorn 2018, 23). The implications of this special issue span practice, policy, and research. While scholars generally describe sense of belonging as a need that can be fostered (Vaccaro and Newman, 2016; Strayhorn 2018; Yosso 2005; Means and Pyne 2017). We have positioned it here as a feeling and action-driven experience that advocates for change. Thus, promoting a university culture that values a sense of belonging is a fundamental pillar housing its culture. We hope this compilation will inspire further research in this critical field.

## **BIRDS' EYE VIEW AND OUTLOOK**

The nine articles in this special issue show several recurrent themes that showcase a fruitful interplay of belonging in the dominant aspect concerning group identity and how individuals develop their trajectory to belong irrespective of any group membership. In both, the idea is that belonging can result in cohesion, work satisfaction, and informality and benefit individuals in their learning or formal work and their social roles as employees or students. The nine research articles can be discussed in three sets. The first set contains three articles on the power of belonging and institutional cultural practices by Morrell et al. (2022), Rudman (2022), and Joubert and Sibanda (2022). The second set of articles focuses on identity, power and belonging by Sithaldeen et al. (2022), Benvenuti et al. (2022); Horner (2022); and Donda (2022). The final set centres on enablers of belonging (De Klerk (2022) and Blignaut et al. (2022).

## **Cultural context of (un) belonging and institutional response**

In the first article on institutional responses, Morrell et al. (2022) argue that belonging is central to questions of academic staff support, especially when, on the grounds of race and gender, many do not feel at home. They reflect on an innovative programme to mentor staff – the “New Generation Professoriate (NGP)” programme. They show that staff may feel alienated, demotivated and excluded and may have been propelled to seek greener pastures. Active institutional engagement can make a difference. The experiences shared in this article expound the challenge HEI faces to combine a focus on the individual with the group's interests. To address the demand for transformation at scale and individual levels. The importance of belonging is seen to unlock transformation's full potential and shape how it is pursued. Trust, and friendship are crucial elements that, together with various planned collective events, foster a new sense of belonging, which in turn finds expression in successful applications for academic

promotion.

Rudman (2022) deliberates on the “unconscious space management” on all our campuses, where students seem inclined to avoid those of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Consequently, authentic interactions that could lead to mutual understandings and meaningful relationships are evaded, and these unaddressed biases not only create a “stereotype threat” felt by many of being discriminated against and this interferes with the process of identification performance and wellbeing. The authors use Heidegger’s description of “everyday discourse” to unpack this aberration on our campuses where students (and staff) settle for socially “dictated” understandings of the world rather than seeking authentic experiences and knowledge, and few feel the need to “tarry alongside” or reflect on this. The study provides data on how alternate interactions can be purposefully planned and set up to create opportunities for undergraduate students to gain meaningful understandings of one another.

Joubert and Sibanda (2022) tackle HEI’s most contentious issues by deepening our understanding of the relationship between using English as their only means of instruction (EMI) and students’ sense of belonging, identity and epistemological access. They identify how using EMI does have an adverse effect on identity. An identity shift is created for many students, where constant self-editing seems to constrain the enactment of student identity, creating a need to adopt different identities and acting as a conscious recurrent reminder of the fragile and fluid nature of (un) belonging. In exploring epistemic access and epistemic belonging, the language debate is enriched. The authors also note the enabling nature of EMI to support belonging in providing greater opportunities to make connections with a host of fellow students from different backgrounds. They postulate that a differentiated view of multilingualism is a possible way forward to dissipate EMI’s hegemony and the perception that SA’s indigenous languages are not appreciated for the teaching and learning space.

### **Learning to belong: Shifting identity and agency**

Sithaldeen et al. (2022) investigate student agency using student academic help-seeking, a form of self-regulated learning, as a vehicle to determine relationships with belonging. Students are noted to feel more comfortable seeking help from those they have a connection with, hence the use of social networks over professional services and the impact of the trust in university faculty on help-seeking. Most students in SA lack the “social capital” that provides networks of trust, group membership and relationships that confer an advantage, making HEI often alienating environments and difficult to negotiate. In this climate and with the forced switch to online training, the authors identify increased isolation and a lack of trust in support structures that contribute to a poor sense of belonging and a lack of adequate agency to ask for help despite

needing it. Various recommendations are provided to address this dichotomy.

In exploring the critical position of identity formation, Benvenuti et al. (2022) describe the sense of discomfort and dissonance (liminality) that professional staff from various specialist fields traverse to find a sense of belonging in becoming a teacher through a formal professional learning qualification. They contend that the process of discomfort and alienation is necessary as the new identity forms so that they have acquired a sense of belonging in a new disciplinary space as a scholarly teacher.

Horner (2022) further expounds on “belonging” by contrasting it with “becoming”. Belonging is positioned as attachment and rootedness based on a connection to people and place, whilst becoming is viewed as a movement or growth from a place. Students’ negotiation with informal spaces is used as a template to identify dynamic and enabling as well as oppressive or exclusionary practices and relations. Students’ views on these intertwined processes are explored through this alternate lens by viewing “becoming” as a process of epistemic and personal growth. In the article, various examples, including the large class sizes in the first year that promote invisibility and fuel loneliness, especially in first-generation students, are shown to impact the processes of belonging and becoming. Supporting the careful pairing of roommates with similar self-drive and ambitions is another example that can practically support epistemic growth and ensure students make meaningful connections (people and places) to fit into university life.

Donda et al. (2022) evaluate the Nelson Mandela-Fidel Castro Collaboration programme for training medical students and identifies challenges resulting from difficulties in assimilation as a consequence of divergent/incongruent identities. This incongruence with professional socialisation that South African students who train in Cuba experience is viewed as a violation of the obligations set for oneself by others resulting in fear, anxiety apprehension, resentment and social anxiety. This identity incongruence that students develop within the training environment is unpacked, and its resonance with (un) belonging is explored. Medical education’s ramifications are spelt out, steeped with hierarchy and often working in silos.

### **Promoting enablers of belonging**

Focusing on belonging within HEI, De Klerk’s (2022) article evaluates academic advisors through the nuanced lens of “care” as a framework. He argues that whilst incorporating care (“or love”) within HEI contexts potentially subverts established separation of private and public life, transformative educational practices, including academic advising, should be alerted to the potential benefits this could bring. In the study, the link of belonging with its social dimension and especially with “care” can be intentionally and systematically integrated into how academic



advising is practised and academic advisor professional learning is practised.

Blignaut et al. (2022) and her colleagues acknowledge that the neoliberal higher education space “has little patience for the social and non-measurable and (un) wittingly devalues attempts” to expend energy on the aspect of student belonging. Despite this, teaching programmes that focus on active social–emotional interventions’ can provide the “scaffolding pedagogy”, which has the potential to focus on belonging consciously. They evaluate the rapid move to online teaching and evaluate student perceptions both of lecturer competencies, “platform pedagogies” and student agency with important outcomes in this uncharted territory

As our discussion of these three areas shows, they are not mutually exclusive and can also be combined. The current research on the interface of belonging, power and the individual provided in this special issue shows the many different data sources and innovative and broad base research currently being undertaken on the topic. Belonging is unpacked through its various “avatars”, and new insights are added, some specific to the SA context but many that can resonate across HEI elsewhere. All these articles empower “belonging” as a framework to transform, reform and hopefully improve educational practices.

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