



REVIEW

Student belonging: a complex yet accessible issue for higher education

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I clearly remember the first time I heard mention of student belonging. At the time, I was covering maternity leave as the Head of e-Learning at a large, multi-faculty university. The Covid-19 pandemic had just started to turn the world upside down. In a meeting to determine the institution's response, someone asked, 'But if the students won't be physically here, how will we know if they really are ours and truly belong?' From that, a debate ensued about what characterised institutional belonging and its links to active engagement and—crucially—retention. This question continues to hold potency within my current institution as we contemplate expanding our programme portfolio or diversifying our modes of educational delivery.

As everybody who has worked in higher education (HE) for any length of time will know, these local institutional questions are often compounded by no shortage of regulatory requirements, agendas, or initiatives concurrently in play demanding strategic institutional responses and/or ongoing operational attention. I suspect student belonging may be for many merely the latest knotty agenda item on an ever-growing list of complex problems. Reading the book, one is made aware that student belonging has been an agenda item of rising importance for some years. However, for anyone new to it, it is both timely and

comforting to know that *Student Belonging in Higher Education: Perspectives and Practice* is the one book needed to get to grips with its theoretical underpinnings and practical operationalisation within contemporary HE. The book's structure is tripartite: introductions, perspectives, and case studies. The three editors have judiciously selected 21 well-referenced chapters. Alongside making distinctive contributions of their own, the editors have brought together an international range of professional, research, and student voices.

A tapestry of recurring themes and concepts emerges throughout the book, including exploration of connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy. As Sunday Blake explains in her insightful foreword (which frames belonging as the grounding for reimagining how 'success' is conceptualised and could be evidenced in HE), these pillars are symbiotically linked. Many other cross-cutting themes also add much substance to the tapestry: the importance of mattering, narrative, race, nationalities, marginalised, multiple or othered identities, socio-economic backgrounds, social justice and whiteness, as well as the accessibility of professional services, isolation, engagement, physical and shared spaces, and staff-student co-creation. Overall, given the breadth of student belonging as an overarching topic, the individual themes and concepts receive sufficient coverage, and the volume holds together remarkably well. The book is a testament to the editors' skill in curating the chapters into a rich, interconnected volume to create an indispensable guide for HE practitioners.

Given that several of these themes already have significant traction within the sociology of education, institutional agendas, and practice, this is a text that can be readily referenced as the basis for root-and-branch action and operationalisation—yet another leitmotif—within HE providers. The urgent message that comes through is that belonging is not something that can be adequately addressed by surface-level diversity, equality, and inclusion initiatives, although there is much here that would benefit the work of such initiatives.

If this has you feeling daunted at the prospect of engaging with student belonging conceptually or practically, then I would urge you to think differently. Within these pages, there is likely to be a concept, case study, or framework that could relate to your context and provide a way into considering student belonging if you have not actively done so before. Engaging with the issues raised in this book should empower readers to challenge prevailing thought and practices with legitimacy, agency, and a commitment to inclusivity. Indeed, challenging the status quo is itself one of the book's central themes.



A couple of chapters proved especially thought-provoking for me. In particular, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the academic context I work within—a performing arts conservatoire—I found Karen Burland’s Musical Identity Measure in Chapter 2 appealing, as it offers a practical framework for gaining agency to challenge dominant discourses when interacting with student support. In Chapter 3, it was useful to read of how professional services staff ‘mattering’ to students and proximity to those services can positively impact students’ navigation of academic life and translate conceptual theories into tangible practice. A key strength of this book, though, lies in the case studies of Part 3, which move away from theoretical understandings of belonging and towards practice-based approaches to enacting it.

It would be impossible to consider the issue of student belonging in any meaningful way without the significant presence of student voices. Fortunately, these voices are eloquently represented by students from countries including Australia, India, and the United Kingdom. The students draw upon their lived experiences to address aspects such as the shared social capital of postgraduate students of colour (Chapter 5), the failings of belonging for trans students and how these have shaped leadership (Chapter 16), and belonging as seen through the lens of intersectionality (Chapter 21).

Given my professional services background in digital education, the tangential mention of learning technologies, specifically as allied to instructional and learning design, would seem to be a missed opportunity for inclusion. The work of learning technologists does receive a couple of brief mentions, but this does not fully acknowledge the work that these or other third space professionals do to amplify belonging in online or blended educational spaces. This is particularly the case if one considers how fundamental belonging is to the conceptual framework of Universal Design for Learning, which has been widely adopted internationally.

Reading this book has served to refocus my mind not only on what I do within my institution, but more importantly on why I do it, and has prompted me to reflect on how I can collaborate effectively to contribute meaningfully to a student’s experiential journey from applicant to graduate and their sense of belonging to the institution along the way. It is a call to action because student belonging cannot be considered a passive issue within contemporary HE. This is not an issue that an academic, administrative, or professional services department can tackle in isolation if the benefits of doing so are to permeate the institution to its core. To



seriously address student belonging within a complex organisation requires continual action, focus, and collaborative effort.

Disclosure statement

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Evan Dickerson is the Learning Technologist at Guildhall School of Music & Drama. Originally a lecturer in art history, he transitioned to learning technology over 25 years ago and has since held Head of Service roles at several universities in London. During his time at Jisc (2007–2016), Evan provided technology-focused consultancy services to many UK universities. He has written two book chapters on learning technology topics and is currently working on three further chapters for other publications. A Senior Fellow of Advance HE, Evan regularly mentors applicants seeking professional recognition and also serves as a reviewer for submissions.

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