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Building a Sense of Belonging in students: Using a participatory approach with staff to share academic practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines ongoing work undertaken by a university educational development team to strengthen and share colleagues' academic practice in relation to developing inclusive learning and teaching activities and interventions. The paper outlines our institutional Forum structure (coordinated by The Centre for Learning & Teaching) and, taking one of these events as a modelled example, shows how consideration of the literature , focused on linked concepts relating to academic belonging, student engagement, wellbeing and inclusive practice, informed colleagues' discussion and catalysed the sharing of written and oral best practice through a participatory action research (PAR) approach to ultimately build a staff resource guide. The specific focus is on exploring the different approaches that colleagues adopted to build their students' "sense of belonging" (both for the in-person face-to-face and online experiences). A student's perceived strong sense of belonging to their university can be a core factor in enhancing student satisfaction, engagement and retention (Pickford, 2016; Thomas, Herbert & Teras, 2014). Critique and consideration of Ahn and Davis's (2019) four domains of belonging forms the starting point for the discussion. Digital tool use and pedagogic approaches, sourced from colleagues' experience and reflections, found valuable in developing student engagement and belonging during the Covid-19 crisis are also explored.

Keywords: belonging, academic practice, participatory action research.

Background and context

A series of Developing Excellent Academic Practice (DEAP) Forums for colleagues were created to provide a research-informed opportunity for staff development as part of our University's Education Strategy. This strategy foregrounded the importance of inclusive academic practice and this also helped strengthen the generation, content and implementation of our institutional Access and Participation Plan (APP) activity which contributes to specifically addressing our Black and Minority Ethic (BAME) student award gap and supports the Office for Students' (2019) drive for wider excellent inclusive practice.

Our University's APP requirements were considered as part of the conceptualisation of the design of each of the three Forums in the series. Our event design emerged from the concept that student success is dependent upon individual student engagement and that engagement is an individually owned and personal concept (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006; Trowler, 2010). Our methodology builds on this philosophy by explicitly specifying the requirements for maximising student engagement in a course as part of inclusive course design where a student's sense of belonging can be enhanced by them engaging behaviourally, emotionally and conceptually with their course curriculum, their learning environment and the activities they undertake (Pickford , 2016). The Forum events are delivered within our wider evidence-based framework of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes model (Pickford, 2018). This holistic view for developing student excellence recognises the different ways in which different students engage.

Staff colleagues were asked at the meeting to share and discuss the practical activities and interventions they use to enhance their students' sense of belonging. They were asked to consider these in the context of Ahn and Davis' (2019) broad holistic domains. The format and process of this collaborative activity mirrored Pickford's (2016) philosophy and facilitated staff bonding, engagement and belonging as they thought, worked, acted, shared and noted comments from others.

Each Forum is a more open, inclusive and accessible approach for the discussion and sharing of academic and professional practice compared to our University's prior committee-based approach where representatives from our Schools and Services disseminated and cascaded information through their own staff structures. The current lively Forum events are just one strand of a range of our initiatives which not only support the University to fulfil its performance indicators for student continuation, satisfaction and success but also to generate impetus to improve our inclusive practice at course level to help support our diverse student groups to succeed.

Each Forum became the principal event for discussing and shaping our institutional approaches to learning and teaching excellence as the university moved away from its formal committee structure for learning and teaching issues to a more discursive, collaborative approach. This aimed to promote inclusive dialogue and support colleagues in reviewing curriculum and course design as a wider community. Wenger (1998) suggests that the joint enterprises bring community together through the collective development of shared practice. The benefits of developing collaborative activity within the Forum, would develop a learning community and offer the chance for colleagues to look for opportunities to develop both their teaching and their course practice. Engaging staff in sharing and promoting innovative learning and teaching practices fosters a positive experience by developing ways in which students themselves can engage and thereby build a sense of belonging for both staff and students. The structure of the events themselves intentionally model and openly offer a sense of inclusive belonging for the staff too. These principles are equally as valuable for staff as for students (i.e. inclusive, have clear aims, are relevant, feel friendly, supportive and social, and that feedback is valued, listened to and acted upon). Scott and Takarangi (2019) have suggested that Universities have a duty of care to their students and that educators have a responsibility to create and maintain an environment that supports students' wellbeing. Johnson, Bauman and Pociask (2019) and Strayhorn (2008) state that student time spent outside the class with peers contributes greatly to building friendships which in turn develop a sense of community and belonging, and this improves students' learning experiences and sense of wellbeing.

These principles are replicated for staff through the Forum events. They provide a safe environment to share thinking, the facilitation of opportunities to step outside their own discipline, to talk with others and germinate ideas for self and student resilience.

Developing the resource guide for colleagues

The collated suggestions and experiences of different practice were used in a brief, accessible staff guide focused on how staff could build a sense of belonging in all the domains. It included examples of i) collaborative project work for summative assessment activity (Academic) ii) online and physical residentials with built-in social time iii) induction week scavenger hunts around central Leeds and online equivalent quizzes (Surroundings and Social) and iv) student peer mentoring, coaching and wellbeing programmes and workshops on mental health and confidence building (Personal). Text was edited for ease of use and a range of images to personalise the guide was used. It has proved particularly useful post Covid-19 as the need to engage students in the online space both socially and through our teaching becomes more pressing.

Background literature

Links and relationships between key literature and our thinking were mapped to help structure our reading and review. Key literature on the factors that contribute to a student's sense of belonging and sense of mattering were considered. Broader issues such as student engagement, inclusive practice, wellbeing and retention were also explored and synthesized to provide context. We used Pickford's (2016; 2018) specific work on the how student engagement can enhance belonging and informs our institutional philosophy of building robust inclusive academic practice. We also considered the value of Ahn and Davis's (2019) work to simplify and help structure and categorise the breadth of our activities which might enhance belonging.

Sense of belonging

"Belongingness" is the human emotional need to be an accepted member of a group. Whether it is family, friends, co-workers, a religion, or something else, people have an 'inherent' desire to belong and be an important part of something greater than themselves. All humans like to feel they belong in the world - it generates a sense of safety, confidence and security (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Specifically, university students want to feel they belong in their chosen new learning community. Students who have developed a sense of belonging become more empowered to become full members of a learning community whether online or face-to-face (Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2014). But what can university staff do to strengthen this feeling and what helps to keep students engaged and immersed?

Tinto (1997) describes a "sense of belonging" (from interviews with students) as …

> a generalised sense of membership that stems from a student's involvement in a variety of settings and the support they experience from those around them.

Tinto (2017) has written extensively on student engagement and belonging defining it as the moment when students come to see themselves as a member of a community of learning where staff and other students value their participation. It is regarded as a sense that they matter and feel included (whatever their nationality or background) (Stebleton, Soria, Huesman & Torres, 2014; Strayhorn, 2008). The result is a bond, often expressed as a commitment, which serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise (Tinto, 1997). These can include student groups which might help anchor the student to other students on campus, or institutional and course initiatives that help with student persistence and retention rates. (Tinto, 2017; Thomas & Jones, 2017).

Students' sense of belonging is known to be strongly associated with academic achievement and a successful life at university and the literature on individuals' sense of "mattering" is a useful lens through which to explore this.

Schlossberg (1989) considered "mattering" in the context of adult learners. She suggests that when adult students believe that they matter they feel welcome at university. Research suggests that students "connecting with faculty" and the support the university provides is directly related to their engagement in learning (Schlossberg, 1989; Schwartz & Holloway, 2014), persistence, retention and academic achievement and sense of value and belonging (Tovar, Simon & Lee, 2009). The experience of mattering can also reduce their stress (Rayle & Chung, 2008). These studies suggest that feeling welcome and connected to the institution is not just the stuff of first-year orientation, but is an important element of academic success for students in general

Most of the research on "belonging" focusses on the importance of the domains of academic and social belonging and student participation in both academic and social activities. It explores the value of students engaging with purposeful course focused academic activity and how positive relationships with likeminded friends and student peers help student integration, bonding and positive feelings of social belonging. BAME students, commuting students and disabled students face different barriers which might hamper engagement so care needs to be taken in designing institutional academic and social activity that appeal, that students can identify with and which facilitate their own sense of belonging (Haussmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007; Smith, 2017).

Wilcox, Wynne and Fyvie-Gauld's (2005) qualitative research indicated that "making compatible friends" is the most important aspiration for students who start university and impacts on their sense of belonging. However, Thomas's (2012) work on student retention has concluded a student's sense of belonging is much more multifactorial and complex than just pure academic and social belonging.

O'Keefe (2013) suggests the creation of a caring, supportive and welcoming environment within the university can be achieved by the development of positive student and staff relationships, and that it is the university which must seek to create a welcoming environment where care, warmth and acceptance are promoted to achieve improved student retention.

Indeed, Cicogani, Menezes and Nata (2011) explored university students' relationships with their hometown after their transition for academic study to a university in a new city. They explain how the factors influencing student place identity and sense of community changed during their time at university, indicating that those students who chose voluntarily to move to a new city for study found exposure to the new place, and a developing sense of connection with their new locale over time, diminished their sense of place identity for their home town whilst strengthening their sense of belonging in their new city of study.

The four domains of belonging

Ahn and Davis (2019) list four domains of belonging- Surroundings, Personal, Social and Academic. These domains proved a useful starting point for thinking particularly when considering a holistic approach to addressing the issues (both online and face-to-face). For example, these all-encompassing domains were useful for curricular activity planning, institutional interventions, wider planning for social bonding and wellbeing, and for infrastructural estates provision and delivery. In this way, all elements of students' lives can be touched and their engagement, and ultimately their retention, can be improved.

Ahn and Davis (op cit) identified "Surroundings" and "Personal spaces", in addition to the original social and academic domains, as two new, important domain areas for educators and university policymakers to consider. They explain how consideration of the Surroundings domain means that a student feels comfortable and secure in a student living space (whether that is within or beyond the university) and feel a sense of attachment to the local neighborhood and natural environment. The identified domain of "Personal spaces" - relates to how an individual student might subjectively feel about belonging in a higher education institution, and whether they feel comfortable with their emergent life attitudes, values and their identity. They postulate that it is the sense of security which comes from understanding yourself, your identity and how you fit with your local area and university that is fundamental to students "belonging".

The four domains are independent of each other, but Ahn and Davis (2019) also note that there can be overlap. For example, it is important to realise that social and collaborative project work activity embedded in the curriculum can help students to learn, can benefit social and academic belonging and, in parallel, the act of building confidence in learning can help a student feel more secure in their self-identity.

A broad framework of inclusive academic practice

University action on strengthening "belonging" must be situated within a wider framework of inclusive academic practice, drawing on a holistic engagement vision (Pickford, 2016, p. 31) of infrastructural support and partnership working between students and staff. Indeed, (Pickford, 2018) explores best practice for our university for student learning and teaching excellence and identifies that the building of the student community, and emphasis on student "belonging", is key. She discusses in Pickford (2016) that to be really committed to inclusion, we must look at students as individuals and recognise that each student will engage differently, behaviourally, emotionally and conceptually with their course curriculum, their learning environment and the activities they undertake (see Table 1) and if we can get this right we have a greater chance of enhancing individual student's sense of belonging. This requires a focus on good planning, management, support and development of students, community building, and challenge.

Table 1- Inclusive course level design (from Pickford 2016)

Requires opportunities for each student to engage with their course:	Can only be provided through design of a course's:	Is achieved through course-level:
Behaviourally	Curriculum	Planning
	Learning environment	Management
Emotionally		Student support
	Learning activities	Community
Conceptually		Student development
	Curriculum	Student challenge

Course activities like the co-creation of feedback as active partnership between students and staff, in-class and online learning activities which expose students to different views, cultures, values and options and support parity of access, course reading lists which reflect a lens which is representative of a diverse student population, and care with the consideration of how group work is planned and allocated can all enhance inclusion and a stronger sense of belonging.

Designing and planning a diverse curriculum (one in which students can see themselves and their values included) and course activities which consider collaborative, social activities, deep reflection on self, discussion about personal growth is fundamental to belonging. This should be complemented with partnerships and activities which encourage students to get to know their city, share experiences and help build students to enjoy where they live happily (whether that be as a commuting student or on-campus residences).

Similarly, we should consider how our policies for student engagement must consider all four of Ahn and Davis' (2019) domains to support the full range of student experiences - all students are different- some may tap into one, others into all. Whatever, we must appeal to the widest, most diverse student group possible.

For example, as well as activities which promote social engagement (clubs, events, mentoring, student ambassador roles), we need to develop initiatives which encourage student's engagement with the natural and cultural elements of their surroundings (Cicognani et al., 2011) and provide approachable and efficient student services (e.g. counselling, drop-ins) to deal with prompt and systematic responses to complaints, concerns and suggestions. Maymon, Hall and Harley (2019) report that tailored support services represent an essential component of 1st year students' success. A deeper understanding of how students utilise social support during their transition to higher education is paramount in creating a learning environment that provides adequate resources for incoming students.

It was necessary to actively consider, from the start, the needs of our BAME students who also commute. The main issue of concern, supported by Thomas and Jones's (2017) report is that many commuting BAME students will prioritise academic engagement but are unaware of the wider social and cultural capital that can be gained from participating in extra-curricular activities. Some difficulties faced by BAME commuting students are identical to those faced by all commuting students: stress, impractical timetabling assessment deadlines, and invisibility. BAME students (commuting and non-commuting) are already often disadvantaged by a poorer learning experience than that of their peers and consequently have lower degree attainment (Smith, 2018; Richardson, 2008a & b) and reduced employability (Allen, 2016), an inequality that may be compounded in the case of those disproportionately high numbers of BAME students who also commute. Our parallel work on the Inclusive Course Design Tool (Smith et al., 2020) also informed this project.

Methodology

All staff from the academic Schools and Services were invited to the Forum and 52 participants attended. A3 paper sheets pre-divided into Ahn and Davis 's (2019) four domains were provided to each of the participants at the event. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was adopted for the reflection and data gathering. This PAR approach is ideal for academic communities who wish to explore and understand an issue more deeply and simultaneously, whilst valuing their own knowledge, and to recognise the benefits of collective inquiry and experience to act to change or enhance a situation/issue. (Chambers, 2008). Baum, MacDougall and Smith (2006) also explore the idea that PAR (commonly used in health and education settings) is valuable and distinctive as a research approach and useful in these environments as it focuses on collective research whose purpose is to enable action and augment the voices and reflective thoughts of the participants. Ethical approval was not sought as the approach was regarded as non-invasive, best practice and integral to our usual approach to active, participatory staff development and normal collaborative academic practice sharing.

Both verbal and written inputs to maximise participants' contributions were sought. Individuals were initially asked to note activities they used to promote a sense of belonging at course and institutional level with their students. This was followed by a whole-room discussion where notes of the ideas and subjects raised were documented. The discussion was focused on (i) practice sharing across courses and Professional Services (ii) innovative ideas from colleagues and (iii) action points for further consideration documented verbatim.

Analysis

The team undertook some pre-analysis manual checking and coding of a small sample of written/oral data (Denscombe, 2010) to confirm reliability and understanding of how the noted activities/ideas linked to the domains (and any identified overlap). Areas of overlap across more than one domain were noted. A calibration phase was then undertaken by the analysis research team to check mutual clarity of the domains, any overlap and general reliability. Coding of the complete set of participant data (written sheets and notes of oral input) was then undertaken separately by a pair of researchers using the constant comparative method to identify possible new domains, innovative practice that covered many domains and to identify concepts, commonalities and conceptual re-occurrences. The analysis process was supported by "memoing" (Miles & Huberman, 1994), with the researchers noting their thoughts about codes and their relationships as they emerged from the data.

Findings

Eleven main findings listed and explored below are the essence of the key points emergent from discussion of practice ideas. They encapsulate the participants' written and oral views and contributions. The domain(s) (Ahn & Davis, 2019) from which the discussion emerged is indicated in parentheses at the end of each point.

Being mindful that authentic PAR must be undertaken "with" people and not "on" or "for" people (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013), the initial summary findings were shared at the event with participants and comments and ideas for action/progress sought depended on participants' community needs.

The main domains relating to each point are noted after each finding and indicate the breadth and coverage of all four of Ahn and Davis's "belonging" domains. These findings are cross referenced to the domains in Table 2 below.

a) **Tailored induction programmes which actively help support new students to prepare for and deal with the challenges they face:** The importance of carefully planned course induction to enhance belonging was discussed with an appreciation of the challenges and pressures that students face in their first weeks. There was consideration of different induction structure models with more of a drip feed approach throughout the early weeks and an emphasis on activities which forged friendships and provided opportunity for early student interaction to build self and academic learning and belonging for first years and new post graduates. Active consideration of the challenges students might need to be prepared for should be integrated into the content. [Academic, Social, Personal and Surroundings]

b) **Pre-arrival student contact for community building:** Pre-enrolment/ arrival student virtual contact was considered by all to be a way of enhancing social and academic belonging. The sending of welcome messages to personal email addresses with induction information, what to bring, correct kit for residentials, photos of staff and contact details all helped to reduce student pre-arrival nerves and clarify learning expectations. Our Prepare to Learn online pre-arrival module is available to all staff and could be tailored for different courses. Access to UCAS personal statements and the Pre-Arrival Questionnaire (Morgan, 2019) before arrival also can help course staff and academic advisors to hone their course to target and support student talent, interests and attributes. [Academic, Social]

c) **Activities to build student resilience and self-reflective skills**: Participants explored ways that they could provide activities to build student resilience and reflection both face-to-face and online to enhance their sense of personal belonging and self-confidence. They discussed ways of moving into working with students in their social and personal spaces and integrating them with academic activities. (i.e.) course teams using Microsoft Teams more for this - especially the discussion boards used for induction. They said, "It's great for international students, shy students, post-graduate students, distance learners, commuters – it reduces isolation". Choosing activities that prioritised student self-reflection, consideration of mental health issues in themselves and the wider population, exploring literature and culture that stimulated discussion. [Personal]

d) **Varied physical estates provision:** There was discussion about the need for a more diverse diet of infrastructural estates provision of physical social learning spaces and dwell space for those students who wish to interact face-to-face rather than digitally - this is especially valued by commuting students who may have limited time on campus, may want to concentrate their academic work on campus rather than in the evenings at home and may need to undertake group work/ joint projects with on-campus student peers. In addition, there was some consideration of expanding private, space for individual meetings with academic advisors where academic challenges and course issues could be discussed in depth. [Social/ Personal/Academic]

e) **Engaging students with local, regional, in-curricular, co- curricular and extra-curricular activities:** Courses can usefully consider more live briefs, curricular projects, employer assessment. Students can be encouraged to start local volunteering. Staff can plan more in-course, partnership events working with local cultural organisations and co-create more 1st year activities in the city with students in the on-campus residences [Surroundings].

f) **Students' peer support:** Promoting activities with students to encourage them to make links and friendships with others and to start thinking beyond themselves. These activities, both pre-arrival and early in the course, included the provision of peer support in academic activities, mentoring schemes, and "parent model" buddying schemes which use more cross - level students. [Personal, Social, Academic]

g) **Building best practice and resources for Academic Advisors:** There was considerable discussion relating to how best practice for staff academic advisors (AAs) could be built and disseminated and consideration of staff approach, knowledge and consideration of all students as individuals can impact on and promote "belonging". This included expansion of the existing staff guidance specifically focusing on clearer signposting for the needs of minority student group, a "one stop", heavily promoted, visible online module for our University's AAs, clear signposting to wellbeing support and embedded timetabled AA meetings frontloaded to first year students. [Academic]

h) **Engaging assessment design:** This can also help to build a student's sense of belonging in and across all four domains of belonging. More choice for students in assessment titles and methods enhanced a more inclusive approach and a programme of well attended specific staff workshops strengthened this. Group assessments which require planning and collaboration were used to enhance social and academic skills. Reflective pieces can build student self-knowledge and awareness. Building in assessment tasks which help students explore the local area can begin to build good engagement and generate a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood. [Academic, Personal, Social and Surroundings]

i) **More targeted approaches to differentiating learning:** Addressing the challenge of dealing with diverse student cohorts with different abilities emphasized the need for a more inclusive approach with clearly articulated, tailored approaches to targeted differentiated learning. This was considered important to ensure all students felt a sense of academic belonging. Colleagues discussed a range of ways they can signpost students to reading, offer levelled homework, build in challenge and run masterclasses and journal clubs to broaden and stretch the student experience and their abilities. [Academic]

j) **The residential experience:** they provide real value for money in building community and social relationships higher achievers and encourage critical thinking, extended reading and challenge. As students became at ease with their learning, developed self-efficacy and developed autonomy their independence and self-confidence grew. Discussion took place about how the principles of collaboration, personalisation, building belonging and independence could take place post lockdown and if it were possible to even replicate the "residential experience" in an online environment [Academic, Personal, Social, Surroundings].

k) **Building an online student community**: Staff were already using online platforms for some teaching. Discussion relating to critical pedagogy and how to support your pedagogic approach with effective institutional digital tool use. In addition, tips for engaging and retaining students online, best practice with discussion boards, break out groups, online whiteboards, podcasting and film making etc. were discussed as a way to enhance engagement, social interaction and online belonging. [Academic and Social].

Table 2: Findings mapped to Ahn and Davis (2019) domains of belonging.

Domain of belonging			
Academic	**Social**	**Personal**	**Surroundings**
← Tailored induction programmes which actively help support new students to prepare for and deal with the challenges they face (Finding a) →			
← Pre-arrival student contact for community building (Finding b) →			
		Activities to build students' resilience and self-reflection (Finding c)	
← Varied physical estates provision (Finding d) →			
			Engaging students with local and regional in-curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (Finding e)
← Student peer support (Finding f) →			
Building best practice and resources for Academic Advisors (Finding g)			
← Engaging assessment design (Finding h) →			
More targeted approaches to differentiating learning (Finding i)			
← The residential experience (Finding j) →			
← Building an online student community (Finding k) →			

Discussion and reflections

Using the four domains was a useful approach to categorising the generation of data, identifying more familiar practice elements in the social and academic domains and encouraging new thinking in the areas relating to the other two domains (Surroundings and Personal) proposed by (Ahn & Davis, 2019).

There were many more ideas for academic and social belonging and much more overlap between them as colleagues were more comfortable to discuss these more familiar areas. Despite that, they expressed a desire to understanding "belonging" more deeply and to think about and share ideas for activities which reflected the breadth of all domains.

Staff were very open to sharing practice – particularly in relation to good practice which may not, yet, have been consistently implemented (even in a tailored way) across all courses. For example, the embedding of academic advisor meetings into residentials, timetabled online informal course feedback meetings and developing group projects for students (particularly in induction weeks) which cross academic and social boundaries.

Our consideration institutionally of our curricula and the cultural, and social elements of our teaching and wider student support practice has used all four of Ahn and Davis's (2019) four domains to really dig deep in the exploration of "belonging" and what it means to us.

Food for thought and points for future institutional action

The domains helped us frame our activities and initiatives for a truly holistic and comprehensive approach to student engagement. That said, our discussions illuminated the gaps and the need for more work to be done. The following issues encapsulate our future plans.

- There may be some mileage in forming a working group to consider separating out our current University freshers and course induction programmes or, if not, more consideration of whether course induction could be shorter, more relevant, more socially interactive and more threaded through the early weeks of the course, to avoid knowledge overload and facilitate the foregrounding of key academic expectations, and social bonding through more academic group projects and relevant short, fun tasks. Practical ideas to build academic and social belonging and engagement online are in the resource.

- The staff resource was designed to be appealing to staff, used carefully curated inclusive images and acknowledged participants' ideas and involvement. It was simply designed just for internal use initially, using institution specific language and structured with a focus on the familiar domains. Again, these were generated from the raw data from the participants' input and collated concisely for the guide. Student Union representatives were invited to the Forum but didn't attend. We do not necessarily regard this as a substantial limitation as the exercise was designed to focus on providing a brief resource which focused initially on staff participatory approaches and give them an opportunity to discuss and showcase their ideas. Future guides might usefully be created for students working collaboratively with the SU and the focus on the student voice and their perceptions of belonging.

- There should be activity undertaken to ensure Course Directors can access student contact data pre-arrival/enrolment and using UCAS personal statement data to build pre-enrolment engagement through online platforms and social media. This would require a full review and clarification of sector best practice and data constraints.

- Consideration of a greater focus on resilience training for students embedded in modular curricular activity or in wellbeing classes run through our university to help their sense of self identity and personal confidence. The four domains of student belonging could be a useful framework for student discussion, and students could be helped by course and university staff to develop their own strategies in all the domains. These might include accessing information on local activities, volunteering, advice on integrating with social groups and advice on how to enhance students' sense of belonging academically on their course through pre-planned module individual and group activities.

- BAME and commuting students have often been found to have a reduced sense of belonging to their university (Thomas, 2012; Thomas & Jones, 2017; Smith 2018) and this has been considered as one of the issues which may influence the complex multifactorial BAME student award gap. BAME students commute from their parental and/or family home in much higher numbers compared to non-BAME students who more commonly live in private residential accommodation near to campus or in university accommodation and residences where social activities are more easily accessible. Our findings supported by the literature (Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2012; Thomas & Jones, 2017) suggest more could still be done with sourcing on-campus dwell space, social learning spaces, multicultural curricular activities and reading lists, more explicit recognition of commuting students and BAME students in our prospectus and institutional marketing material and care with timetabling to allow students to access masterclasses and clubs at lunchtime rather than, say, in the evening. These issues would all enhance a greater sense of student belonging for all and more integration between commuting and on campus students.

- Whilst recognising the activities we have captured and noted above are not definitive, reviewing students' NSS qualitative comments and measuring local School and course retention progression and continuation data as part of our Office for Students requirements will measure the extent to which the work on building elements of students' sense of belonging might contribute to an improvement in their course and university experience. As a department we seek feedback on our resources, review them on a cycle and monitor our resource click rates to assess uptake.

- Our Forum event took place just before the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and the discussion and supplementary technical training helped staff feel more prepared for the new learning environment. Post Covid-19, the university community needs to plan to further consider how we use our online learning platforms to enhance students' sense of belonging and course community effectively. Consideration of the pedagogical approaches required, how this influences staff choice of tool or function (e.g. course discussion tools, break out room group work, messaging etc.) and how this, in turn, best suits and supports the building of a fun, safe and supportive learning community.

As we build a sense of belonging in our institution we hope for a burgeoning number of students who feel they belong socially, locally and academically and are attuned to their own personalities and evolving lives.

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