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# Belonging at academic conferences: Exploring power, identity and lived experience

**Christina Van Wingerden, Western Washington University, United States of America**

**Cynthia Korpan, University of Victoria, Canada**

**Daisy Bao, University of Edinburgh, Scotland**

**Natalie Frandsen, University of Victoria, Canada**

**Rebecca Gagan, University of Victoria, Canada**

**Tracy Galvin, Ulster University, Northern Ireland**

**Charlotte Stevens, University of Warwick, England**

**Matia Theodosakis, Unaffiliated, Canada**

**Simon Varwell, Highlands and Islands Students' Association, Scotland**

Abstract

In the post-pandemic context of higher education, the ways academics and staff experience connection through meetings, events, and conferences have undergone significant change. On December 12, 2022, the Department for Learning and Teaching Enhancement at Edinburgh Napier University hosted 'Beyond the Obvious: Exploring Online, In-Person, and Hybrid Conferences', an event designed to explore how insights from online teaching and learning might inform the design of academic gatherings. Participants reflected six key themes: language, technology, third-space professionals, belonging, costs, and learning from pedagogy, and were invited to form research collectives. This article reports on the collective that explored sense of belonging, comprising nine researchers from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Belonging was defined as the experience of being welcomed, accepted, and included within a community, characterized by opportunities to build relationships, feel valued, and participate meaningfully in shared purposes. Drawing on thematic analysis, five themes were highlighted: (1) Community: Visibly Defined and Organically Found or Sought, (2) Equity: Embedded and Integrated Inclusivity, (3) Lived Experience: Impacts of Identity, Perception, and Memory, (4) Power Relationships: Positions, Credentials, and Hierarchical Complexity, and (5) Intentional Design: Strategic Hospitality and Continuous Reflection.

Findings highlight that conferences function as both relational and performative spaces that can either foster or inhibit belonging. While belonging is recognised as a fundamental human need, some participants did not seek it as a primary motivation for conference participation. The study called for an intentional, equity-driven conference design that accommodates diverse purposes and modes of engagement. Integrating belonging as a relational and

structural practice can cultivate agency, authenticity, and inclusive community across the spectrum of academic participation.

**Keywords:** belonging and Higher Education conferences, belonging and conference accessibility, mixed-methods

## Introduction

Despite research identifying how important a feeling of belonging is within higher education spaces, it is important to note that belonging can ebb and flow, resisting the idea that belonging is a static state. Gravett and Ajiawi's (2022, p. 1387) study confirms that belonging cannot be defined as fixed or neutral; rather, belonging is "a multiplicity of experiences".

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many meetings, events, and conferences within higher education have been taking place online. Due to this shift and the increased research about belonging in higher education, issues of belonging have become highly relevant. What contributes to a sense of belonging, either in person or online, for those who work in higher education? How do relational spaces, where networking and other social opportunities occur, support inclusivity and encourage belonging? Although there is a considerable amount of research related to students' belonging in academia (e.g. Ige & Naidoo, 2022; Stebleton et al., 2010, 2014; Wilson et al., 2008), there is limited research about belonging in conferences, particularly online or hybrid ones.

To better understand how those who work within higher education participate in meetings, events, and conferences in a post-pandemic landscape, a group of academics and staff held an event on December 12, 2022, called 'Beyond the Obvious: Exploring online, in-person, and hybrid conferences'. The event, hosted by the Department for Learning and Teaching Enhancement at Edinburgh Napier University, asked participants to consider a series of prompts with the aim of creating research collectives to investigate how knowledge gained from teaching and learning online could be applied to events, meetings, and conferences in higher education. The prompts put forward at the event focused on the following themes: language, technology, third space professionals, belonging, costs, and learning from pedagogy. Following the event, participants were invited to join one of these theme-focused, community-based research collectives. The authors of this article joined a group that focused on sense of belonging.

Third space professionals are individuals who hold an academic and non-academic position, referred to as a 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2012), including university staff whose roles are at the intersection of academic and professional services, for example, academic developers, learning technologists, and librarians.

The research team consisted of nine individuals from various academic institutions or associated organisations across Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The belonging prompt asked at the December 12 event were:

- How do events contribute to a sense of belonging, who is in the in-crowd, and who decides?
- Further, can we consider conferences as relational spaces in which relationships form and thrive rather than performative stages, as offering open-minded relationality and opportunities to develop and network rather than hierarchical, performativity-reinforcing dominant narratives?
- Can we move beyond the notion of an in-crowd at conferences?

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For the purposes of this research, the team defined a sense of belonging as:

> The experience when individuals feel that they are welcomed, accepted, and included as members of a community. This means having the opportunity to develop and maintain constructive relationships with colleagues, feeling supported and valued, being acknowledged as a person, and feeling connected to the activities associated with the community's purpose.

The foundation underlying our study draws on existing research about belonging in higher education, particularly as it relates to positions, identities, accessibility, and lived experiences. The article begins with a background about belonging in higher education, followed by a methodology section. Through thematic analysis, five themes were identified from the data:

1. Community: Visibly Defined and Organically Found or Sought
2. Equity: Embedded and Integrated Inclusivity
3. Lived Experience: Impacts of Identity, Perception, and Memory
4. Power Relationships: Positions, Credentials, and Hierarchical Complexity
5. Intentional Design: Strategic Hospitality and Continuous Reflection

This research highlights the necessity to ensure that all feel included within higher education spaces, such as conferences, an important aspect of professional growth.

## Background

Conferences associated with higher education have a long history (Camic et al., 2011) that serve multiple purposes, including socialising scholars into their disciplines (Biggs et al., 2018), and providing mentorship opportunities (Johnson et al., 2017). For students, belonging has been linked to retention, academic performance, and personal resilience (Bentrim & Henning, 2022). For students, feelings of belonging are impacted by factors such as racism, systematic discrimination (Antonio, 2002; Collins, 2000; Kudlick, 2003; Sue et al., 2007; Valian, 1998), and experiences of identity and (under) representation (Dulfer et al., 2025; Gilani et al., 2024; Gravett et al., 2023a; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Handworth, 2022; Strayhorn, 2019; Watson et al., 2024).

For faculty and staff, a sense of belonging is influenced by recognition, acknowledgement, trust, open communication (Vavasseur, 2024), gender (Biggs et al., 2018; Clark, 2000; Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Karassvidou & Glaveli, 2015; Sallee, 2008; Tack & Patitu, 1992), and social hierarchies within academic environments (Yuval-Davis, 2012). These influences persist in conference settings, where hierarchies influence participants' feelings of belonging. Conference participants' experiences of belonging or "dis-belonging" (Oliver & Morris, 2019, p. 770), are influenced by values, perceptions of being seen, and experiencing marginalisation. Other influences on belonging at conferences include accessibility (Walters, 2018) and language (Garcia et al., 2020).

Oliver and Morris (2019, p.770) argue that conferences differ from other academic spaces because participants must perform shifting roles such as presenter, listener, organiser supervisor, or networker. Additionally, a sense of belonging is not static but rather, will change depending on setting characteristics and the role a participant is playing (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Feeling a sense of belonging at conferences is dynamic and shaped by individual and structural factors. It is important that research explores the

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influences of belonging at conferences to ensure future conferences can be designed to be inclusive, safe, and productive spaces for participants.

The pandemic accelerated the development of online conferences. Black et al. (2020, p.115) show how women academics used digital platforms to create relational and supportive spaces, building kinship, visibility, and scholarly community. Their study found that modes of engaging with digital platforms can create responsive gathering spaces that foster relational knowledge production, kinship, and community, while also supporting the development and visibility of scholars and their work. Their study found that modes of engaging with digital platforms can create responsive gathering spaces that foster relational knowledge production, kinship, and community, while also supporting the development and visibility of scholars and their work. Gravett et al. (2023b, p.1980) extended this work through a "social topologies" perspective, conceptualising belonging as "sticky, flickering, and mobile"; sticky "in where it is made and unmade"; flickering in "its instability"; "entangled with affect and on the move". In their study, they highlight how micro-moments, such as being acknowledged by name, can affirm belonging at academic conferences.

Massey's (2005) relational view of space, and Adam's (1998, 2008) concept of timescapes, emphasise that belonging is always lived at the intersection of time, space, materiality, and identity. For example, conferences involve navigating temporal rhythms (sessions, breaks), spatial arrangements (venues, digital platforms), material conditions (technology, fatigue), and positionalities (first-time presenters, marginalised scholars). Massey (2005) views space as open, fluid, and constantly shaped by our connections, while Adam (1998, 2004, 2008) describes *timescapes* as the patterns of time, its rhythms, sequences, and orientations to past, present, and future. This work is important for conference organisers as it shows how time, space, and material conditions are interconnected and shape the experiences of all conference participants, including presenters, marginalised identities, and first-time conference attendees.

Although higher education research has illuminated the complexities of belonging, this work has largely centered on student belonging in classrooms and institutional environments. Far less is known about how belonging is experienced in higher education conferences, leaving a critical gap in understanding how these spaces shape inclusion, participation, and community. This study addresses that gap by examining how academics and staff experienced belonging within conference spaces.

## Methodology

The methodology section includes information about the research team. The research team included five PhD researchers from the United States, Western Washington University, University of the West of Scotland; University of Victoria, British Columbia; Ulster University in Northern Ireland; University of Warwick, UK; a PhD candidate from Edinburgh Napier University in London; and a Master of Arts associate teaching professor at the University of Victoria, Canada, and a Master's in Education at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Some people on the research team had worked together in other capacities, and some were new to the research team at the beginning of this project. All centred inclusive teaching and belonging as values at their respective work sites.

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## The Study

Data collection occurred through an online survey fall of 2023 through April of 2024. Despite academic conferences and events being places of belonging for attendees, research examining the influences on belonging in these places has been limited. The purpose of this study was to address this gap by exploring the extent to which participants experienced a sense of belonging at online and in-person conferences. The research attained Human Research Ethics approval from the University of Victoria, Ethics Protocol Number 23-0557.

The overarching research question was: How do those who work in academia or affiliated organisations experience 'multiple sense of belonging' when attending conferences?

We invited participants from academic institutions and affiliated organisations who had attended conferences (online or in person) within the last seven years, to take part in a survey to share their experiences about belonging. The survey consisted of 20 questions that gathered demographic information and data about factors that fostered and hindered a sense of belonging at academic conferences. The survey was disseminated via email, using multiple education related listservs, including the Society for Teaching and Learning and Learning in Higher Education, Professional and Organisational Development, the Staff and Educational Development Association, and the Canadian Educational Developer community. The questionnaire was completed by 172 participants from various international institutions and organisations. The findings from the survey enhanced the literature review and provided data to formulate a tool that was used in the focus groups (sent to participants in advance) and used to formulate the questions for the focus group. The survey was instrumental to the findings, focus group questions, and contributed to the final themes of this study.

### Characteristics of the sample: Questionnaire participants

**Table 1** Respondents came from a wide range of professional backgrounds. Type of role by number/percentage of respondents. *Other included educational developers, independent consultants, and staff.

| Type of role | Number/percentage of respondents |
|---|---|
| Academic/teaching staff | 62 (36%) |
| Research staff | 7 (4%) |
| Professional staff and student support staff | 67 (39%) |
| Senior leadership | 13 (8%) |
| Student employee | 2 (1%) |
| Students' Union staff | 7 (4%) |
| Other* | 14 (8%) |

There was considerable variation in the number of years respondents had been in respective roles as shown in Table 2.

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**Table 2** This table shows the number of professional experiences in years for survey respondents.

| Number of years | Number/percentage of respondents |
|---|---|
| 1-5 | 28 (16%) |
| 6-10 | 32 (19%) |
| 11-15 | 23 (13%) |
| 16-20 | 38 (22%) |
| 21 or more | 51 (30%) |

Conference attendance by respondents varied over lengths of time as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** This table depicts the number of years survey respondents attended conferences.

| Number of years | Number/percentage of respondents |
|---|---|
| 1 – 5 | 37 (22%) |
| 6 – 10 | 31 (18%) |
| 11 – 15 | 23 (13%) |
| 16 – 20 | 37 (22%) |
| 21-more | 44 (26%) |

Respondents attended domestic and international conferences within their past seven years as well as online and in person as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4** This table details the geographic location between domestic and international and the modality of the conference between online and hybrid for survey respondents.

| Type of conference | Number/percentage of responses |
|---|---|
| International online | 94 (55%) |
| International in person | 113 (66%) |
| Domestic online | 153 (89%) |
| Domestic in person | 163 (95%) |

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## Characteristics of the sample of focus group and interview participants

Survey respondents were asked if they would consent to participate in a focus group or interview. Thirty -eight (38) participants indicated they would be willing, and thirty-five (35) actually participated. In the interview/focus group phase of the data collection participants were from institutions in Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Great Britain, Qatar, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA). The focus groups and interview sessions took place online via Zoom®, ranging from one to four participants, and lasted for approximately sixty (60) minutes. Each focus group was facilitated by members of the research team ranging from 1 to 3 facilitators for the focus groups and 1 facilitator for individual interviews. The focus group and individual interviews used the same semi-structured question format. Semi-structured interviews offer the researcher some flexibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hays & Singh, 2012; Miles et al., 2020). Focus group attendees were largely faculty, some staff, and there were some doctoral level students that made up the participants. While questions were prepared in advance of the interviews, the research team's facilitators had the autonomy to clarify answers and ask follow-up or probing questions to better understand participant's life-world experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interview questions focused on asking participants how they defined belonging in relation to higher education conferences, exploring the differences between online and in-person experiences and investigating whether and how individuals sought out a sense of belonging at conferences. An infographic (See Figure 1) was developed using the literature review and survey findings. This infographic was shared with all participants via the "Zoom-room" shared screen function and was used as a visual prompt for the discussions about the different dimensions of belonging.

Focus group data were analysed by focus group facilitators using Saldaña's (2021) coding approach. This approach involved individual analysis, then paired discussion and coding. Themes and sub-themes were then formulated by the wider research team. The five main themes developed were as follows:

- Community: Visibly defined and organically found or sought
- Equity: Embedded, integrated inclusivity, and accessibility
- Lived experience: Impacts of identity, perception and memory
- Power relationships: Positions, credentials, and hierarchical complexity
- Intentional design: Strategic hospitality and continuous reflection

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**Figure 1** The Multiple Layers of Belonging at Conferences: Participants Share their Experiences Focus Group Tool

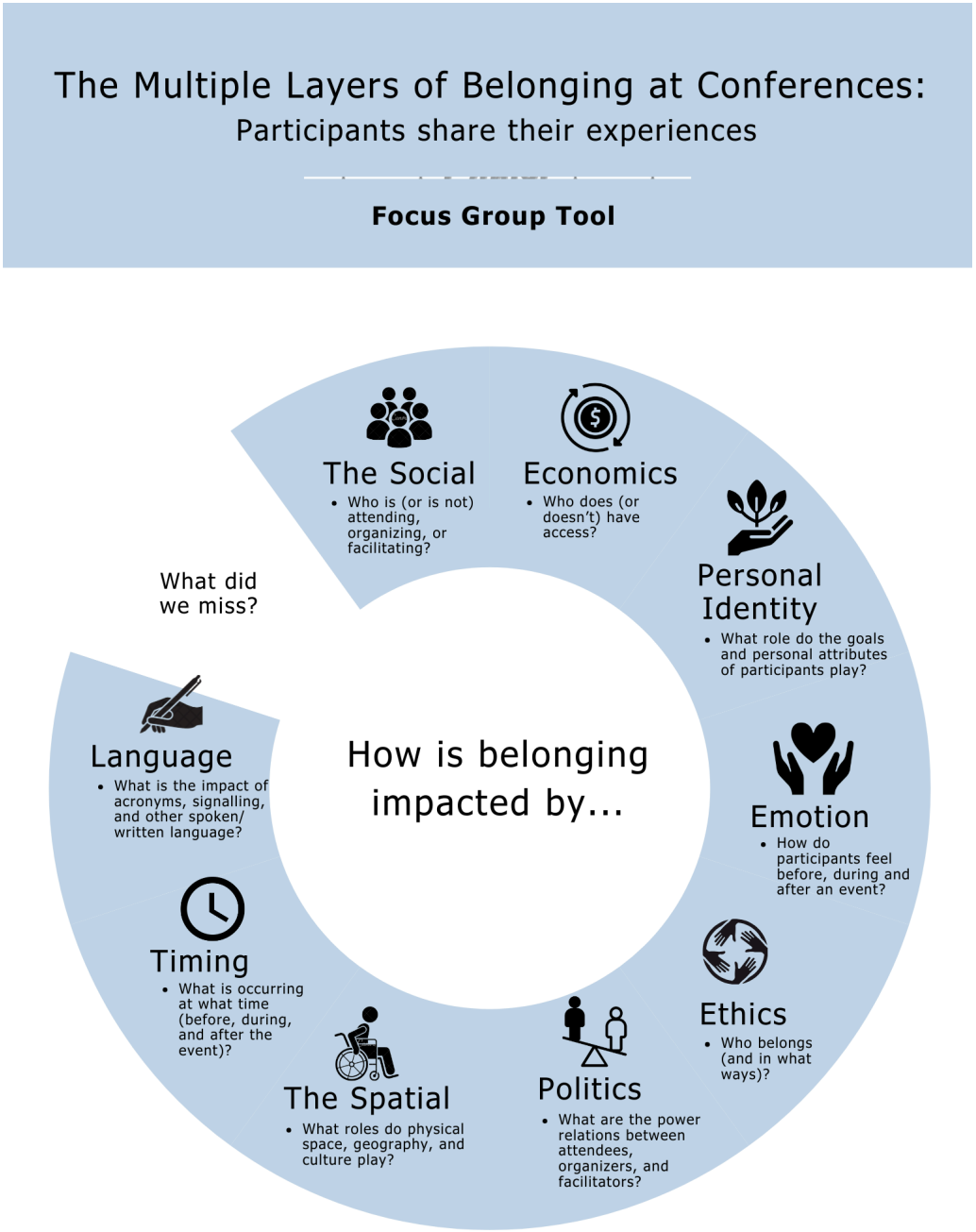



**Figure 1** From the literature review and survey analysis, the visual entitled, The Multiple Layers of Belonging at Conferences: Participants share their experiences, a focus group and interview tool was created. This was used during the focus group and interview data collection sessions.

## Findings

Thematic analysis of the focus group data resulted in the identification of five themes (see Figure 2). For each theme and sub-theme, the extent to which conference modality (online, in-person or hybrid) was

considered. This resulted in the creation of a diagram to show these results related to the influences on feeling a sense of belonging at academic conferences. Thereby, the initial focus group tool, which reflected survey findings and literature review was morphed into Figure 2 'The influences of feeling a sense of belonging at conferences', depicted below. Findings stem from the focus group participants with the focus group tool as integrating the findings from the survey. Where appropriate, survey data has been integrated into the findings discussion.

**Figure 2** The Multiple Layers of Belonging at Conferences: Participants Share their Experiences Focus Group Tool




**Figure 2** The influences on feeling a sense of belonging at academic conferences was shared by participants in focus groups.

### Theme 1 Community: Visibly defined and organically found or sought

Feeling connected to people, places, or ideas was a defining feature of the first theme: community. Participants described diverse conceptualisations of community and shared how being a part of a community fostered a sense of belonging. Community can look like shared responsibility, an expectation of others to provide it, or the expectation of the self to engage and become part of it. Feeling genuinely welcomed and deeply cared for by others is a key feature of this theme.

This theme is important because to be fully comfortable participating in a conference, individuals need to feel that they can or will make connections to foster community. Without community, participants can feel excluded. Community can convey different meanings for participants, depending on the context, the years of experience they have in the field or with conferences, or their desire and ability to broaden their networks. Participants described how feeling connected to and a part of a community within the conference contributed to their sense of belonging. For some participants, connecting to ideas and the space fostered a sense of belonging, irrespective of feeling a part of a community, as described by this participant:

> Some [participants] have a common interest which then allows people to feel a sense of belonging because they're talking about the same thing, or you know, people have a multitude of different interests, although they might be at the same conference.

The types of and ways in which conference participants make connections varied between online and in-person conferences. In general, participants noted they were more likely to attend online conferences; those attending are often multi-tasking and may or may not have cameras on. Online, participants felt there was less or no expectation of belonging, but connecting with ideas occurred, sometimes fostering a sense of belonging. This participant explains the distinction:

> Online has to be connected with what you're there to learn, that allows you to meet people and get a sense of belonging through the content, as opposed to the connection to and with other individual people with who they are [outside of the content].

Several sub-themes relating to the overarching theme of community were identified. The first is **social opportunities,** such as networking and interpersonal connections. Participants described how important these elements are to make connections, build community, and foster a sense of belonging. Whether social opportunities emerge organically or are planned, online conferences tend towards sustaining existing relationships, whereas at in-person conferences it can be easier to create new relationships.

From the survey findings, participants differentiated between the "pre-conference" and "structured" and "unstructured" connections. Survey findings indicated that not knowing who is attending in advance as missed opportunities for establishing connections prior to the start of the conference. Additionally, survey responses indicated that a lack of structured opportunities were experienced by folks with disabilities as challenging and isolating. Whether online or in person having longer breaks is helpful for those who may need more time transitioning whether in a physical or online space in order to participate fully in any social opportunities. Additionally, signaling (clear signage for social spaces, including breakout rooms, and timetable for the amount of time for social engagement) that open social spaces whether online or in person are welcoming to all participants to avoid cliques and isolated pockets of individuals who may not know how to enter into informal social spaces.

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The next community sub-theme is **visibility.** Since online conferences are more content-focused and less about inter-personal interactions, participants described finding it easier to disengage and potentially leave the conference sessions prematurely/early. The inability to read body language, such as gestures, can make it difficult for online facilitators and participants to 'read the room'. Participants highlighted the importance of using available tools in online platforms (e.g., chat function), to foster engagement tools distracting. In addition to variability in engagement in online conferences, feeling seen or visible can be difficult in the online environment. At in-person conferences, visibility may be more achievable. However, this must be fostered by conference organizers and hosts. For a variety of reasons (e.g., discomfort in social situations, being new to the community), participants may feel invisible if they do not have the opportunity to make their presence known. This can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion. One participant offered some suggestions about how they have facilitated making participants feel visible, whether online or in-person:

> Other things we have, also on the first day of the conference, we have a new to the organization session. Where they [new conference participants] find out a little bit about the organization, but also we explain how the conference is set up; the different tracks. Kind of the landscape of the conference. And I'll say this was one of the things that I was involved with that I'm most proud of with this respect [making participants feel visible].

One aspect of the survey findings that highlight this area is for conference organisers to anticipate the needs of their participants, create opportunities for inclusive interactions by providing information and clear directions and timing and that the culture and tone of the conference is important for organisers to pay attention to in creating visibility and access and inclusion for all attendees to participate in community.

In summary, *connecting* to people, places, or ideas, are important aspects of conferences to foster a sense of belonging. The experience of *community* is shaped both internally and externally, and depends on the participants' needs, perceptions, amount of time in their field, and prior experiences with conferences. Conference organisers can foster a sense of belonging by creating opportunities for community-building through formal social gatherings and by ensuing participants feel seen.

### Theme 2 Equity: Embedded and integrated inclusivity

The previous theme of community-building and its role in fostering belonging among conference participants raises the question: 'Who is the conference community for?' Participants emphasised the importance of conferences being planned and delivered in ways that reflect their values. For some, a sense of belonging depended on whether conferences were organised and experienced as equitable spaces. Equitable conferences were described as spaces that allowed all to participate in ways that met their cognitive, social, and physical needs. One participant explained this ethos as the attendee's capacity to contribute to the conference and co-develop the conference with other participants:

> Being able to contribute or participate, regardless of where you're at with your understanding. Letting us know that all are welcome.

Similarly, one participant shared the importance of feeling their values aligned with the conference:

> …a sense of shared values, also a sense of safety to engage and 'be seen' in the space.

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Participants frequently used the words 'safe(ty)' and 'inclusive(ity)' together, as they described their feelings of belonging for online and in-person conferences. This participant illustrates the connection of these words:

> For me, [you] hit on the word that defines belonging, which is 'safe'. And when you feel in a safe space, regardless of it's online or in person…Then you feel like you belong and you're able to participate. You're able to listen. You're able to interact. And you have common interests with people…(So) for me, it's really about accessibility and inclusion of who's in the room, how we structured it, so that everyone can belong or participate in some way.

The common co-occurrence of 'safe(ty)' and 'inclusive(ity)' indicates that participants may need to feel safe to contribute to or engage in a conference and consequently develop a sense of belonging. For participants, safety was determined by things such as the attitudes of participants and the conference hosts' attention to inclusivity and accessibility. Within an inclusive environment, participants could achieve their own conference goals, ranging from knowledge seeking, learning, and networking to presenting their own research.

Survey findings included language and the consideration of multiple languages and interpreters to be part of embedded and integrated inclusivity. Being the only non-English or English speaking presenter has its challenges when there are no accommodations made for translation.

Participants described accessibility as a key component of equitable and inclusive conferences. Participants highlighted the necessity for accessibility and embedding universal design into all aspects of the conference, including messaging, learning materials, signage, and social interactions. For some participants, having personal needs met was a requirement for accessibility. This included having access to quiet space, time to travel between sessions, and food that met their needs. For example, one participant described how the food provided by conference hosts could influence their sense of belonging:

> You could just come up with some conferences with the food boxes, and I feel so alien and weird. Whereas somewhere the food is presented in such a way that you really feel that you belong there as they [the conference] put some thoughts behind the food.

In addition, participants noted that discussions around accessibility could start before registering for a conference. For example, one participant described how financial support and equitable access to the conference influenced their experience:

> I do think it [equity of access] is complex because one of the places where we start thinking about defining belonging is coming [to the conference] regularly and building close relationships. But that takes a lot of money…[which refers to] financial access…All universities are cutting back on the amount of money that allow people to go to conferences. Firstly, they'll say, you can only go to a conference if you're presenting, and then they'll say, you can't travel to a conference, you have to attend online, and then they'll say, if you're attending online, you can't spend 3 days at the conference. You can go to your presentation and watch the recordings [of other sessions] in your own time. And that to me is destroying the whole point of a conference [because] if you're not there and you are not participating in real time and you are not talking to people and making a contribution.

Participants praised conferences that considered equity in their design – offering discounted ticket prices for staff, students, and online participants. Conference fees can be prohibitive without access to funding

(e.g., > £300), resulting in the exclusion of people without institutional support. Such exclusion can contribute to a manager-centric discourse in conferences, marginalising or silencing alternative perspectives.

### Theme 3 – Lived Experience: Impacts of identity, perception, and memory

This theme addresses how a person is thinking and feeling about the conference they are attending, whether online or in-person, including-but not limited to-their identity and autonomy. Lived experience encompasses an individual's experiences, whether positive, negative, or traumatic. This category includes their state of mind, attitude, and feelings before, during, and after the conference, including their perception of their identity within the before, during, and after the conference, including their perception of their identity within the context of the conference. In general, how a person thinks about or feels during a conference influences their experience and can signal and/or impact on their overall sense of belonging. Further, perceptions of identity(ies) within the conference factor into an overall sense of belonging.

Within this theme, we determined three sub-themes; one's own purpose, feelings about the conference, and identity and autonomy. One's own purpose was represented by being able to find 'the nugget' (the one thing a participant thinks is amazing) and 'the extra hook' of the conference. The following participant explains:

> I think one of the key things for me is understanding your own purposes for going. Whether those purposes are fulfilled or not. So that element of, what you are hoping to get out of a conference?

How one feels about a conference was exemplified through participants' assumptions about others at the event, whether a conference felt like a safe or positive environment, if the person felt lonely, and whether they were engaged or had external distractions. If the conference was online, fatigue impacted how participants felt. Lastly, some participants described making a certain investment in conference participation, and they expected to feel like they belonged in relation to the effort they had to exert at the conference. This highlights the intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations individuals assign to conferences. For example, one participant stated:

> People turn up to things because they're invested in it. And I think there's a lot to do with being intrinsically motivated or being extrinsically motivated, as to whether or not you're going to turn up and participate, or whether you're going to turn up and you know be a little kind of token, you know you'll come for your presentation and then that's it, you'll just come in and then go away again.

Identity and autonomy were expressed through one's conference role, such as being the organiser, participant, or keynote. For example, one participant noted:

> So, if you're on the organizing committee then you're likely to have a really strong sense of belonging.

This sub-theme also impacted a participant's approach to the conference – that is, whether they were there on their or were part of a collective. Some participants expressed how they did not necessarily want to experience belonging at conferences. By contrast, for others, identity (such as their perspectives, background, or ideas) was connected to their feeling of being accepted, as exemplified by this quote: "…the sense of feeling like you can be seen…is probably at the core of belonging".

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The survey findings contributed to this theme in tying in the conference experience as being impacted and influenced by the amount of engagement that occurs for participants before, during, and after the conference. Whether they are a first-time attender and it is their first impression, which leads to a lasting impression if it was a negative experience. Conference facilitators and moderators have a responsibility to stay in tuned with participants and to ensure they are welcoming and inclusive. One recommendation was to include communication before and during the conference to access bios, images, and session outlines as well as a list of presenters and attendees to be able to connect with and get a sense of who is in the community. Following up afterwards with ways to stay networked via listserves that provide follow up relevant information for future events and conferences.

### Theme 4 – Power Relationships: Positions, credentials, and hierarchical complexity

This theme highlights how powerful relationships can influence one's experience of a conference. Power relationships and how these relationships are managed influence a sense of belonging for participants. For newer participants, these power relationships can have negative impacts. However, mentorship and other positive uses of differing power relationships can have a positive impact. In general, power reflects the hierarchical structure of academia. This emphasis on hierarchy within conference settings could be both positive and negative, as illustrated by three participant quotes:

> …you know dealing with academics there is a lot of a sense of hierarchy. I don't think they do it on purpose.

> So, the hierarchy is one that jumped out of me there. Very much based I think on some of my early conference experiences as sort of PhD student. An early postdoc…. Having somebody to introduce you. So, if you go to a conference with a colleague. You played a more senior colleague who was well known and that if they can introduce you then to people, I think that really helps with a sense of belonging.

> Being more open about the hierarchy pieces that are always going to be there because I don't think we can completely get rid of them.

Participants noted how power can be broken down by choosing opportunities to interact, network, and establish connections to build a sense of belonging:

> Some of the best conferences I've ever attended have happened to be professional meetings as part of an affinity group (for me, by gender) because it broke down other power dynamics (PhD vs. not, faculty, vs. staff) that uphold some really toxic behaviors in academic conference spaces.

Power was also related to participants perceiving there to be cliques of people, such as frequent conference participants. The perception of cliques can be seen as a large barrier to inclusion. Indeed, it can lead to a feeling of exclusion, which is detrimental for newcomers or outsiders new to the conference.

Language and how processes are communicated can have both positive and negative impacts on conference participants:

> Avoiding exclusionary language in conference literature, including session descriptions e.g., librarians and staff vs. library professionals.

> Transparency, consistency, and clarity on how conference sessions are accepted.

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> Clear messaging about conference values, code of conduct and what to do if there is an issue.

From the survey, power was mentioned additionally through cliques. Conference cliques can influence and make others feel excluded or less than. Cliques are sometimes comprised hierarchically, and other times have power as they are made up of people who have been attending the same conference for years and are not interested in meeting new people. This can lead to exclusion and others not feeling they are good enough or fit in.

This theme stresses the importance of conference organisers, presenters, and participants alike to be self-aware of their power and privilege in spaces, whether that be through academia hierarchy, knowledge and length of years, and/or social capital from networking over years with the same people. Language and acronyms were also seen as barriers when there is no explanation or interpretation available for everyone to be in the know and therefore understanding and being able to relate to conference content and people at all levels of the conference.

### Theme 5 Intentional Design: Strategic hospitality and continuous reflection

This theme is related to the work involved in organising conferences – work in which conference organisers strive for inclusive and strategic design, recognise barriers to creating inclusive experiences, and reflect on the process of inclusive conference design. This is important because decisions made by conference organising teams influence participants' experiences for conference participants. A participant shares:

> …if you are part of the organizing committee, or if you are one of the volunteers, I do think that you have a responsibility to show hospitality to people who are maybe there for the first time and you know, draw them into the group as well.

Further, this theme indicates the importance of gathering insights from organisers about planning conferences in their effort to support belonging. One participant cogently explains:

> "Tell me about [you]. Your project. Where you teach. What's your area of interest? Is this your first time here?" Something where I am not starting with "I". And that's part of that relentless welcome. But there's …that listening, I think. Listening and invitation to share. And then pulling some thread from there that makes a connection between us.

Another participant expands on this:

> So, belonging at a conference to me, I think, it's about relentlessly welcoming and being constantly welcomed by the organizers, by the people who have been coming to this conference for a long time. So, it's proactive behavior from the other people that would make someone feel it's okay. It's not only okay that I'm here, my presence is here, and whatever contributions I offer are valued. And I'm seen for who I am. To me, that's what belonging means at an academic conference.

Several respondents spoke about different ways that increased their sense of belonging:

> Welcome sessions aimed at new participants, pairing up new and seasoned participants, finding ways to break down barriers between people who already have established networks and those who are new (some conferences are very clique-y).

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> Deliberately planned small groupwork during sessions. Affinity breakfasts so you can find your people and talk with them one-on-one or in small groups. Also, I had great conversations on the bus to and from the hotel/conference venue.
>
> Opportunities for participants to be visible and known to each other-so online networking in advance works well.
>
> Having buddy programs with specific events. I felt more belonging as a grad student because there were often affinity groups or special programming for us.
>
> Smaller size conferences make it easier, or good management of opportunities within SIGs [Special Interest Groups] at large conferences to make them feel smaller.

This theme, more than the others, weighs on conference planners as they navigate their key ideals and values while tending to the logistics, design and planning of a conference.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the factors influencing a sense of belonging at academic conferences. Because conferences have such diverse purposes (e.g., mentorship, knowledge-exchange, socializing, career development), they are complex environments within which to consider belonging. Consequently, it is important to consider the broad contextual influences such as power, relationships, and the status quo in academic conferences. The findings of this research suggest that there are diverse influences on belonging and further, that participants experience multiple senses of belonging at academic conferences.

1. Community: Visibly defined and organically found or sought
2. Equity: Embedded and integrated inclusivity
3. Lived experience: Impacts of identity, perception and memory
4. Power relationships: Positions, credentials, and hierarchical complexity
5. Intentional design: Strategic hospitality and continuous reflection

These themes address what contributes to a sense of belonging, either in person or online, highlighting how relational spaces occur through networking and other social opportunities. Crawford (2022, p.11) states that the belongingness hypothesis argues that humans have a “need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships”. This belongingness was proven to be important in this study. Although this research confirmed that hierarchical performativity still exists in conference spaces, below we suggest how to break down barriers so that conferences may become more inclusive and provoke belonging.

The sense of belonging at conferences is related not only to external factors. Many participants indicated that their agency and motivation in attending a conference could influence their sense of belonging (choice of how, when, and whether to attend/leave a conference). They suggested that people had agency to engage or not engage socially, and that agency was either removed or increased in online spaces where people had different experiences and a choice in how and whether they engaged. There is greater freedom to not engage in online spaces, whereas it is harder to disengage at in-person events. A person’s mindset impacts their attitudes, actions, how they perceive experiences, and what they do with those experiences. Research has identified two different mindsets, fixed and growth (Dweck, 2006), meaning that each person brings with them their own self, who they perceive themselves to be, and what they intend to experience

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when attending conferences. Individuals will have expectations of themselves and others and will determine how to connect, engage, and do based on internal and external factors. Reflections on conference organisation are important as well to ensure it is inclusive and diverse (Walters, 2019) discusses the importance of academic conferences for networking, fostering a sense of belonging to an academic/disciplinary community, for generating new ideas or ways to look at ideas. Walters (2019) further indicates that conferences are important for future collaborations, improved productivity and satisfaction in positions; presenting at academic conferences can lead to career advancements and other benefits, which may be especially important for women.

Hierarchical structures that provide power and privilege still exist – and provide, along with power and privilege, the action of othering. Othering is "the act of treating someone as though they are not part of a group and are different in some way" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Othering is based on power that comes through gender, class, wealth, status, race, and more. Only by disengaging from othering can belonging be widened. Participants acknowledged that through inclusive efforts, othering is diminished or completely removed. It is interesting to note about inclusion, and exclusion is McMillan and Chavis' (1986, p.9) work, that specified that a sense of belonging creates boundaries that there "are people who belong and people who do not. The boundaries provide members with emotional safety necessary for needs and feelings to be exposed and for intimacy to develop". Rovai (2022, p.199) similarly believed that community members "recognise boundaries that define who belongs and who does not". Which does emphasise it takes inclusive efforts on the part of all to accomplish a setting or culture where belonging can be realised for those who are seeking belonging.

Lived experiences within higher education have been explored through numerous studies to understand how identities, such as race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality influence experiences in higher education settings (Antonio, 2002; Collins, 2000; Kudlick, 2003; Sue, et al., 2007; Valian, 1998). These studies mirror research participants' experiences. However, when it comes to belonging, participants confirmed that the decision to belong or not to belong in an academic space is dependent on choosing to use one's voice and power. The findings support West and Williams' (2017, p.1571) work on defining communities as needing to include, "access (who is present?), "Relationships (who feels connected and accepted?), Vision (who shares the same vision or purpose?), and function (what has been organized to achieve the same goal?) as important facets of one's belonging.

Based on our findings, we have developed the following recommendations.

## Recommendations

As a result of this study, we make the following five recommendations: (1) build community; (2) plan for equity; (3) address power relations; (4) consider lived experiences; and (5) design for belonging. For both online and in-person conferences, this study has shown the importance of participants' feeling welcomed and genuinely cared about.

### Build community

Community and connections were identified as important elements to create a sense of belonging. Whether an organiser or participant, aim to create opportunities for or seek connection to materials, organisers, ideas, the field, and participants. Those who are tasked with organising conferences will want to

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create opportunities for connection, belonging, and participant engagement. These can be overt, visible behaviors that signal to individuals they are seen for who they are in an academic conference setting. For online conferences, organisers can aim to design spaces for connection in both structured and unstructured ways.

Whether online or in person, facilitators and presenters can actively engage in proactive behaviours towards others to signal that participants' presence and contributions are valuable. Since COVID-19, the increased use of technology and online platforms has provided the opportunity for conference organisers to use these platforms. Due to their flexibility, such technologies allow participants to build purposeful, meaningful relationships to support their academic and professional development. Conferences that have moved to having an online component make attendance affordable and attainable due to reduced costs, time commitment, and impact on academic responsibilities.

Felten and Lambert (2020) identify the need to foster relationship building to create an atmosphere of *relentless welcome.* This means consistent and repeatable community building through both formal and informal ways for people to connect to other people, places, and ideas. Felten and Lambert (2020) advocate that, at every point during a conference, participants need to feel that they are welcomed, are heard, feel comfortable, and can get help, if required. Our research highlighted the importance of creating safe spaces for interactions, both informal and formal.

### Plan for equity

The use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to ensure equity is essential. Evidence of UDL should be seen in the conference space and use, learning design, and conference communications. When planning, consider who the conference is for and intentionally plan and create inclusive spaces and content that participants can easily access, UDL fosters participants' ability to participate in ways they choose, such as social opportunities. In this research, it was noted how first impressions are lasting impressions: a bad experience can lead to someone never returning, whereas a good experience can lead to future engagement. Planning intentionally for participant belonging can lead to improved experiences for conference participants and planners, as well as retention of conference goers in future years.

### Address power relations

Hierarchy exists in higher education institutions and is reflected in conferences. Power (or the perception of power) can be rendered in multiple ways: instructors who are in contract or staff positions versus instructors who have tenured positions as professors; the room one is given (perceived as better or not) for a session; the time slot of a session compared to others; the amount of time given for breaks (consider those with disabilities); or how others are acknowledged. Power is revealed through positions, time, spaces, and cliques.

Conference planners must consider addressing power relations or perceived power relations. Be conscious and aware of these dynamics when planning. For example, think about conference participants, such as the newcomer who is a first-timer; the individuals who have been coming for years, those who volunteer, and those who may stay on the sidelines. Through an orientation at the beginning, and creating mentorship opportunities (for example, pairing experienced conference participants with new conference participants), participants can be integrated intentionally to offset cliques and to encourage connection.

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Additionally, power can be used to integrate experiences and belonging through horizontal connections, such as pre-assigned discussion groups, breakout rooms (online), and mentor/mentee relationships. Through strategies such as these, power shifts to a horizontal plane, providing opportunities for shared power in knowledge, community creation, and network building. By addressing power relations, power can shift from thwarting belonging to a tool used to dissipate cliques and foster belonging in conference spaces.

Finally, power can be visible through privileged participation in hybrid conferences for those that are physically present (versus online participants) and often unintentionally forgetting those online during question-and-answer sessions. Therefore, appoint someone in hybrid conferences to communicate with participants in the chat, monitor how people are doing, and act as co-facilitators to ensure that shared power flows between online and physical participants in hybrid conference spaces.

### Consider lived experiences

Conference participants, whether attending their first conference or their tenth conference, bring their own wisdom, knowledge, career, and life experiences. How a participant engages in conferences and their needs during a conference vary. Therefore, encourage participants to engage in the conference in ways that support their individual goals and to be aware of the various opportunities provided to facilitate community building. After the conference, when gathering feedback, invite participants to share their stories to ensure all conference participants have a voice. This invitation will highlight to participants that their lived experiences matter, will be heard, and will be attended to in current and future settings.

### Design for belonging

With a conference pedagogy that fosters connection and community even before the conference begins, whether online or in person, coupled with Felten and Lambert's (2020) notion of 'relentless welcome' and intentional practices that embody UDL, will help participants feel a sense of belonging. One of the research participants, who used to be a conference convenor, suggested that universal design could be integrated throughout all messaging, learning materials, signage, and opportunities for interactions. For example, one participant attributed their sense of belonging at a conference to its multiple modalities for accessing conference content and materials (e.g., recordings, slides).

Setting the tone, the environment, and the inclusionary criteria and factors begins when planners first reach out to potential participants. Use UDL for all materials, conference set-ups, and participation experience. Such designing for belonging is achieved through communication and building relationships with conference participants even before the conference starts and continues after the conference. During the conference, feedback can be gathered and addressed immediately by making changes based on participants' recommendations.

The contribution of this study explores an area of belonging that impacts communities and individuals across class, position, ethnicity, and power in community spaces of gatherings of belonging. In a post-COVID era, this information and the focus group tool and visual from the completed research project that depicts concepts and processes of belonging is useful to conference planners, presenters, and facilitators alike. Further, the figures, both the focus group tool and the figure that shows the concept and processes can be utilised for assessments of conference experiences, continuing to build on the concepts and pragmatic design of belonging in hybrid and online conferences.

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## Limitations

While this study had a significant number of survey respondents and focus group/interview respondents, most of our participants identified as either academic faculty or academic staff, with a few who identified as students. A follow-up study focusing on the student experience would bring in a strong student voice and additional insights regarding inclusive conference planning and design.

## Future research

Conferences remain a significant way for faculty, staff, and students in higher education to learn and network. This article has shared experiences of those who work in academia or associated organisations and their feelings of belonging at conferences.

Though there is increasing research being conducted on sense of belonging in higher education, there is limited literature on faculty experiences and/or student experiences of belonging at conferences within higher education. As noted in the literature, a sense of belonging is a basic human need and is foundational for all in higher education.

However, some participants indicated that they did not attend conferences for belonging, and there is a lack of studies addressing those who are not seeking belonging. For example, one participant stated:

> There is an assumption that I wish to have a sense of belonging. If it is not important [to me] it is difficult to answer these questions.

Further research into other ways of engaging with conferences that do not have the expectation of a sense of belonging would add to this research area. In addition, further research could address these questions: When do social and structural barriers override the power of individuals to set their purpose? Does a feeling of acceptance change how conference participants interact with different aspects of the conference? Another question posed is the question of choosing unbelonging or not having the need to belong, digging deeper into participants who expressed this – though minimal would be interesting to explore. Another question would be the impact of COVID-19 and how that has changed or informed the individual experience of belonging and/or need to belong.

Building on our findings through further questions and intentional research, conference planners, institutions, professional organisations, and participants themselves can identify best practices for inclusive and accessible spaces where belonging is planned for. This intentionally could lead to participant agency and choice for diverse levels of engagement to meet participant's own belonging needs. Therefore, through intentional planning and participation, a belonging environment would be integrated into all aspects from pre-conference to post-conference structure and participation (Bao, et al., 2025).

## Biographies

*Christina Van Wingerden, PhD* research focused on sense of belonging, inclusion in pedagogical design and student engagement. Christina teaches mainly applied research methods courses among others and works with students and community agencies to facilitate internships and the field studies portion of their bachelors degree. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7996-0179

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*Dr Cynthia Korpan,* is an adjunct professor in Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria, Canada, and former Director of Teaching Excellence. Cynthia's research is focussed on emerging and early career academics learning to teach in the academic workplace, as well as students' perceptions of teaching.

*Dr Daisy Bao, re*ceived her PhD in Higher Education at the University of Edinburgh, exploring how equity, diversity, and inclusion can shape fairer universities. Before starting her PhD, she worked as a higher education researcher at the Municipal Teacher Professional Education Centre and served on the committee for the municipal supervisor training scheme. She's passionate about building learning environments where students and staff can thrive together.

*Dr Natalie Frandsen*, is an Associate Professor, Teaching, at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Her research focuses on student mental health, accessibility, and health-promoting learning design.

*Rebecca Gagan,* M.A. (McMaster)*,* is an associate teaching professor at the University of Victoria, Canada, a researcher in the fields of pedagogy and romanticism with a focus on the pedagogy of teaching first-year students and student mental health and wellness. Rebecca also teaches and researches in the field of community-engaged learning.

*Dr Tracy Galvin,* SFHEA and SFSEDA, is a lecturer in higher education practice (HEP) at the Ulster University, Northern Ireland. She lectures on the PgCert of HEP and the First Steps to Teaching. Tracy leads several projects across the university, with research interests in social justice pedagogies, groupwork, assessment, belonging, and Universal Design for Learning. Contact on: t.galvin@ulster.ac.uk, ORCHID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0854-3088

*Dr Charlotte Stevens,* is Assistant Professor (Digital Education) in the Academic Development Centre at the University of Warwick, UK. Her research is focused on evaluating and evidencing the impact of professional development, digital learning experiences, and creative approaches to reflective practice. Charlotte.h.stevens@warwick.ac.uk.

*Simon Varwell,* M.Ed*,* is Director of Student Engagement and Representation at the students' association of the University of the Highlands and Islands, and has widely researched, written and presented on student engagement and partnership. He is a graduate of the University of Winchester's Masters in Student Engagement in Higher Education and a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He is on Bluesky and LinkedIn.

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