



The belonging and social integration of international Higher Education students: A course management perspective

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ABSTRACT

As global mobility continues to increase, a growing number of students are choosing to study abroad, including a substantial population attending UK universities. International students often seek to enrich their lives through higher education; however, many face challenges such as adapting to unfamiliar teaching methods, navigating a new cultural environment, and developing a sense of belonging within host communities. Previous research studies have framed belonging as a student-led process; however this paper argues that international students' sense of belonging can be shaped, influenced and facilitated through course management structures and academic practices. It investigates how course management processes (e.g. timetabling, course design, delivery, assessment, feedback etc) can both support and hinder inclusion for international students. The purpose of this paper is to propose course management practices that enhance international students' sense of belonging. Focus groups were conducted with undergraduate and postgraduate business students from India, Pakistan, Nepal, China, Vietnam and Chile at a university business school in the North of England, where three interconnected themes were identified: (1) social integration (2) academic practices and teaching (3) extracurricular activities and employment. The findings highlight the criticality of course management teams who play a frequently overlooked role in facilitating and supporting student integration, together with broadening institutional understanding of belonging to include pedagogical design. A range of practical and scalable approaches are therefore proposed for course leaders, these include structured pre-arrival onboarding, peer mentoring schemes to support cultural integration, development of student-led communities to encourage social and professional engagement and specific training for staff closely involved in supporting international students. This paper contributes to applied academic practice by recommending evidence informed strategies that enhance belonging through programme design and delivery.

Keywords: sense of belonging, international students, higher education, course management, pedagogy, social integration

Introduction

The total number of international higher education students in the UK was 732,285 in 2023/24 and this number has grown steadily in recent decades, despite a 4% decrease from the 2022/23 peak (HESA 2024). As the UK higher education (HE) student population diversifies, more historically underrepresented international groups are entering universities (UNESCO, 2020). Whilst there are consistently large numbers of Indian students, there has also been an increase from other South Asian countries (e.g. Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, Nepal and Pakistan). "Students from outside the UK who come to study at institutions in England" (OFS, 2022) is how this paper defines international students. These students study far from home

in environments where language, cultural norms, religion, and lifestyle may differ substantially from their home countries. The differences can create barriers to belonging, which is widely understood as the way that students develop a sense of acceptance and connection with their learning environment and institution (Thomas, 2015). It is therefore important for academic staff and student support services to listen to international students and adapt processes and procedures. At Leeds Business School this has led to various initiatives, such as: pre arrival sessions in India, enrolment of all international undergraduates on a preparatory International Student Academic Introduction module, enhanced international induction, social activities, level leaders appointed for January start international students, development of a Business, Strategy, Operations, and Enterprise (BSOE) subject group course community, buddying system and easily accessible wellbeing appointments to help students with the process of integration.

International students generate demands and challenges for higher education institutions (Zhang et al. 2016), whilst at the same time bringing multiple benefits to UK campuses. First, they contribute valuable cultural knowledge and diverse perspectives in the academic setting, enriching the learning environment for all students (HEPI, 2021). Second, they significantly improve the social environment, fostering a community that values diversity and inclusivity, bringing networks from their home countries, which can lead to collaborative opportunities and partnership opportunities (Cockayne, 2025). However, as Caligiuri et al. (2020) found, they do not always achieve social integration with home domiciled students, and this should be considered by universities to be an important goal for students' career and professional development. Findings from this research aim to inform both academic teams and support services to help embed belonging within a holistic approach to international student success. This paper has four objectives:

1. To explore the cultural, social, academic, and environmental factors influencing international students' sense of belonging at a UK business school.
2. To assess the challenges and barriers faced by international students in achieving belonging.
3. To evaluate the role of course management in fostering belonging.
4. To propose course management practices that improve wellbeing, engagement, achievement, and outcomes for international students.

By examining belonging through the perspectives of international undergraduate and postgraduate students, this paper seeks to highlight opportunities for course-level interventions that go beyond general institutional support. Understanding and addressing these issues is crucial for ensuring that international students can thrive academically, socially, and personally.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the institutional context of the research is described, including the demographic profile of international students within Leeds Business School and the challenges they face. Next, the literature on international students' sense of belonging is reviewed, highlighting gaps in understanding and the role of course management. The methodology section outlines the research design, sampling strategy, data collection, and analysis procedures. Findings are then presented and discussed thematically, based on students' own perspectives. The paper concludes with a discussion of course management interventions, practical recommendations, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Context

Leeds Business School is the largest of nine schools at Leeds Beckett University, a post-1992 institution in the North of England with approximately 28,000 students. Of the approximate 21,000 students taught on campus, 3965 are international (Leeds Beckett University, 2025). Leeds Business School hosts the highest proportion of international students across the university, predominantly from Southeast Asia, including India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Thailand, with smaller numbers from Nepal, China, Pakistan, and Nigeria. International students constitute 36% of the Leeds Business School population (Leeds Beckett University, 2026), with the majority enrolled on postgraduate programmes such as the Graduate MBA, MSc Management & International Business, MSc Supply Chain Management, and MA Human Resources Management.

The reintroduction of a January intake has resulted in cohorts composed almost entirely of international students. UK government measures aimed at reducing net migration—including restrictions on dependent visas and higher visa and immigration costs have decreased enrolments from traditional markets, prompting diversification into emerging markets. International students face multiple challenges, including cultural adjustment, language barriers, financial pressures, homesickness, social isolation, and difficulties integrating with domestic students. Academic challenges include adjusting to new teaching and learning methods, unfamiliar assessment practices, and navigating complex visa requirements (Jeduka, 2025).

Problematisation

This paper builds on previous research (Pugh et al., 2025), which explored moments of belonging among undergraduate business students. While the prior study informed targeted interventions, most respondents were home domiciled students, limiting insights into international students' experiences. Nonetheless, preliminary findings suggested differences between home domiciled and international students, particularly regarding integration opportunities.

International students account for 9% of the undergraduate population, and 54% of the postgraduate taught on campus population (excluding degree apprenticeships, franchise students, and distance learning) at Leeds Beckett University (Leeds Beckett University, 2025). Within Leeds Business School, 36% of students are international, equating to approximately 450 undergraduates and 1050 postgraduates (Leeds Beckett University, 2025). Postgraduate enrolments have been a mainstay of delivery within the BSOE subject group of Leeds Business school, with more recent significant increases in undergraduate international enrolments from 168 students in 2019/20 to 421 in 2023/24 (Leeds Beckett University, 2025), illustrating the growing importance of addressing belonging for this cohort, especially undergraduates who are relocating to the UK at the age of 18. The growing significance of international students alongside the competition for international students' tuition fees has heightened the need to provide the best possible student experience (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017).

Challenges for international students are compounded by multiple entry points, which while intended to widen participation, may polarise cohorts and reduce integration with home students (Tavares, 2021). For instance, the January 2025 undergraduate intake in the BSOE subject group was 99% international, with most students recruited from the Punjab province of northern India, leading to limited interactions with home domiciled students (Leeds Beckett University, 2025). Structural barriers, such as January cohort

timetables and restricted library hours, further affect students' ability to engage academically and socially (Gbadamosi, 2018; Hurley et al., 2022).

Leeds Beckett University provides access to general student services and specialised international support through the Global Village and Student Immigration Advice and Compliance (SIAC) teams. These services support students' arrival, orientation, and ongoing adjustment, influencing early experiences of belonging. The Global Village is made up of students and staff who help international students settle into life in their new city and make friends. The majority of UK based Universities support the aforementioned through a range of support services, however as recognised by Jackson et al., (2015), there are clear differences between what support services exist with a specific purpose, and students' perceptions of them, because they are not always the same. Whilst some literature is available on support initiatives and their benefits to the international student experience, the traditional models and initiatives of induction and support services for these students are increasingly coming under attack (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017). Therefore, this study reconceptualises how to foster belonging in international students through adopting a course management perspective, which does not exist to our knowledge. This paper addresses a significant gap, because international students' transition to university often includes a different education system and social environment which can further exacerbate their challenges, making it essential for course managers to address these students' specific needs (Gbadamosi, 2018).

Contextual literature

International student belonging: A course management perspective

A powerful sense of belonging is widely recognised as a critical factor in higher education, influencing students' wellbeing, academic engagement, and retention (Student Minds, 2023). Belonging occurs through both academic and social integration, supported and facilitated by relationships with peers and staff within the learning community (Tinto, 2015) and inclusive pedagogies with varied teaching materials and methods (Thomas, 2015). Similarly, the curriculum plays a role in influencing belonging which is often undermined by a dominance of Western perspectives (Chinyamurindi, 2018). Cross cultural interaction is strengthened with purposeful and intentional engagement opportunities between home and international students (Glass & Westmount, 2014). Conversely, Gravett and Winstone (2021) discuss 'un-belonging' where care should be taken to understanding individual students' academic backgrounds and current situations to bridge the attainment gap.

Course teams play a significant role in shaping the learning environments where belonging is enacted, from structuring learning programmes, pedagogical style, and assessment techniques (Dulfer et al., 2025). Belonging is described as a reciprocal relationship between students and their educational context (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017). This implies that course design, teaching practices, and assessment structures can either foster inclusion or contribute to marginalisation. When curricula and classroom interactions are perceived as culturally narrow or unsupportive, international students may feel excluded. Chinyamurindi (2018) emphasises that curricula dominated by Western perspectives can exacerbate this exclusion, highlighting the importance of integrating diverse voices, case studies, and epistemologies at the course level.

Early course level interventions

Early intervention at the course level is consistently identified as a key mechanism for supporting belonging (Brunsting et al., 2018; Cena et al., 2021). Structured onboarding activities, clear communication of academic expectations, and opportunities for early interaction with peers and staff are particularly important for international students (Brunsting et al., 2018; Guo & Chase, 2011). Explicit guidance on disciplinary conventions and teaching practices helps mitigate culture shock, unfamiliar assessment methods, and uncertainty about learning norms (Cena et al., 2021). Course management teams therefore occupy a strategic position in designing induction programmes that go beyond general institutional orientation and embed belonging within the programme itself.

Belonging, engagement and social integration

Belonging is intricately linked to academic engagement, wellbeing, and persistence in HE. Active participation in learning and engagement with peers and staff reduced the feelings of loneliness and enhanced emotional wellbeing (Kivelä et al., 2022), which underpin a stronger feeling of belonging. However, international students often report difficulties in forming meaningful academic and social connections, particularly with domestic students, which can contribute to isolation and disengagement (Kivelä et al., 2022). While students may form supportive in-groups with peers from similar cultural backgrounds, these groups may limit broader integration and cross-cultural learning (Rivas et al., 2019). Course leaders can influence these dynamics through the intentional design of group work, collaborative tasks, and assessment structures that promote meaningful intercultural engagement rather than superficial contact.

Belonging should be understood as a dynamic, affective process rather than a fixed outcome. Pesonen et al. (2015) emphasise that students' sense of belonging shifts across contexts and over time. Course management approaches that focus solely on the 'typical' undergraduate risk marginalising international students whose study patterns, cultural expectations, or social preferences differ from dominant norms (Thomas, 2015; Juvonen, 2006). Moreover, some students may actively resist institutional attempts to cultivate belonging. Gravett and Winstone (2021) and Guyotte et al. (2021) highlight the concept of 'un-belonging', where students choose not to engage with prescribed practices. These findings underline the need for flexible, multiple pathways to engagement rather than assuming uniform participation.

Social integration within courses

Social integration encompasses students' academic interactions with peers and teaching staff, both within and beyond formal teaching spaces (Tinto, 2015; Wolf et al., 2009). While staff–student interactions often occur in hierarchical contexts such as feedback or supervision, informal engagement—through approachability, mentoring, or pastoral care—positively influences student outcomes (Severiens & Schmidt, 2009). Peer interactions within seminars, group work, and online learning environments are equally significant. Course management decisions regarding class size, learning technologies, and interactional norms therefore shape opportunities for international students to participate fully and be recognised as legitimate members of the academic community.

Across the literature, coordinated academic, social, and pastoral support at the course level is emphasised (García et al., 2019; Kaul & Renzulli, 2022). While institutional services provide essential infrastructure,

course teams represent the most immediate and sustained point of contact for international students. Glass and Westmont (2014) argue that cross-cultural engagement is most effective when embedded within the curriculum rather than treated as optional or extracurricular, reinforcing the importance of course management in aligning teaching, assessment, and support practices to foster inclusive learning communities.

Moments of belonging in course contexts

Research indicates that belonging is often experienced through specific moments rather than as a continuous state. Pugh et al. (2025) identify moments of belonging occurring in classrooms, accommodation, and social activities. For international students, course-based moments, such as participation in seminars, group discussions, feedback sessions, and interactions with course leaders can be particularly influential. Seminars are defined as interactive classroom sessions, lasting two hours and usually following the previous lecture on a topic, allowing for discussion and activities to embed learning. Moments in seminars allow students to form friendships, understand academic norms, and develop confidence in learning, all of which impact self-efficacy and academic success. Large teaching teams must therefore ensure consistency in delivery and support to provide more opportunities to develop belonging.

A powerful sense of belonging is widely recognised as a critical factor in higher education, influencing students' wellbeing, academic engagement, and retention (Student Minds, 2023). With the increasing internationalisation of universities and the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, institutional interest in belonging has intensified (Wang & Liu, 2024). Yet much of the existing literature adopts a deficit-oriented perspective, treating international students as a homogeneous group in need of support (Mohamad & Manning, 2024). This framing risks overlooking the assets that international students contribute to academic communities, including alternative perspectives, cultural knowledge, and diverse problem-solving approaches. Furthermore, Tuuli (2025) investigates Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) international students' lower attainment outcomes in comparison to home BME home domiciled students and advocates a holistic approach should be taken to understanding individual students' academic backgrounds and current situations to bridge this attainment gap.

Implications for course management

From a course management perspective, fostering international student belonging requires intentional and sustained action. The literature identifies several key strategies:

- *Embedded onboarding and transition support:* Programme-specific induction activities, peer mentoring, and early low-stakes assessment facilitate academic and social adjustment (Cena et al., 2021).
- *Inclusive curriculum and pedagogy:* Diversifying reading lists, examples, and assessment modes validates international students' experiences and knowledge (Chinyamurindi, 2018).
- *Structured intercultural interaction:* Purposefully designed group work and collaborative tasks promote meaningful engagement between international and domestic students (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

- *Accessible academic support:* Course-level language development, writing support, and transparent assessment guidance enhance confidence and engagement (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Although the importance of belonging for international students is widely acknowledged, empirical research examining the influence of course management practices on lived experiences remains limited. Much existing work focuses on national policy or deficit perspectives (Strudwick and Miller, 2025), with less attention to programme-level design, everyday pedagogical decisions, and the strategic role of course leaders. Further research is required to explore how belonging is enacted within courses over time, how international students experience interventions, and how course teams can respond to the dynamic, individualised nature of belonging.

Methodology

This study explores the multiple realities of international students' experiences, focusing on their perceptions and the meanings they attach to their own sense of belonging. These realities are situated within individual contexts and interactions with university life, reflecting students' unique journeys. The research is exploratory and qualitative, aiming to capture diverse opinions and narratives that account for a wide range of social realities

Face-to-face interactions support intersubjectivity (Goffman, 1983), allowing participants to express themselves through direct communication and observation (Reich, 2010). The study design ensures that students' experiences are central, privileging their voices and perspectives.

A focus group approach was selected to supplement initial data collected via a Digital Padlet with undergraduate international students at Leeds Business School. The Digital Padlet mirrored a previous study conducted with mainly home domiciled students (Pugh et al., 2025). However, it became apparent that international students were less willing to engage with this digital platform, and their responses lacked the depth needed for rigorous qualitative analysis. Verbal comments alongside the digital Padlet suggested they were less willing to be critical, especially in a written or recorded format, for fear of reprisals. Consequently, data from the Padlet informed the design of the interview protocol used in focus groups, including key themes such as pre-arrival experiences, application processes, accommodation, and employment.

Morgan (1997, p. 2) notes that group interaction in focus groups generates "data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group." Threlfall (1999) highlights that unrestricted group discussions allow participants to explore their beliefs, share experiences, and stimulate conversation, making focus groups particularly suitable for understanding international students' sense of belonging. A total of six focus groups were conducted with undergraduate and postgraduate students from India, China, Vietnam, and Chile, studying business courses at Leeds Beckett University. Focus groups were approximately one hour in duration. Participants were offered a voucher in recognition of their time and contribution.

Sampling strategy

Statistical representation and theory building were not the primary aims of this study; therefore, theoretical and quota sampling were not deemed appropriate. Instead, purposive sampling was employed to select the most informative participants (Saunders et al., 2019), as it is most appropriate for qualitative research where selection criteria are established prior to data collection (Ghauri et al., 2020). Participants were

recruited using multiple communication channels, including course community pages, the Global Engagement Team, digital screens in the Business School and module pages. Those students who registered were subsequently screened to check their enrolment in BSOE undergraduate or postgraduate programmes. Demographic data was also collected, which included nationality, age, gender, cultural heritage, and socio-economic background to ensure a heterogeneous sample. Maximum variation sampling ensured the research team captured a broad range of perspectives, enhancing the richness and diversity of the data.

Data collection

Focus group discussions explored topics arising from prior research and consultations with Global Engagement Officers, who highlighted common issues encountered by international students. Key areas included pre-arrival preparation, the application process, accommodation, employment, integration with domestic students, and engagement with support services such as the Global Village and Student Immigration Advice and Compliance (SIAC). The discussions encouraged students to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of belonging, offering rich qualitative data. Participants were prompted to describe positive and negative experiences, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping their sense of belonging.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, utilising the six-phase approach by Braun and Clarke (2021) to systematically explore how students' lived experiences of belonging are shaped. This method is well-suited for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting patterns and themes within textual data. Following verbatim transcription, researchers generated initial codes using the framework presented in Figure 1 to guide the analysis, focusing on the underpinning questions. Alongside these codes, new ones were also generated highlighting additional and emerging findings. The codes were then grouped into three themes and refined for coherence and distinctiveness by revisiting the data. Finally, trustworthiness was maintained through a transparent audit trail and dialogue to challenge analytical assumptions and ensure findings remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Figure 1 Analytical framework

Contextual Literature	Questioning Themes for Focus Groups	Course Management Implications
Early course level interventions	Factors positively influencing international student Barriers to international student belonging	Embedded onboarding and transitional support (Cena et al, 2021)
Belonging, engagement and social integration		Inclusive curriculum and pedagogy (Chinyamurindi, 2018)
Social integration within courses		Structured intercultural interaction (Glass & Westmont, 2014)
Moments of belonging in course contexts		Accessible academic support (Smith & Khawaja, 2011)

Figure 1 outlines research themes across three columns: Contextual Literature, Questioning Themes for Focus Groups, and Course Management Implications. The first column, 'Contextual Literature,' lists four foundational themes: Early course level interventions; Belonging, engagement and social integration; Social integration within courses; and Moments of belonging in course contexts. The third column, 'Course Management Implications,' details four actionable strategies paired with academic citations: Embedded onboarding and transitional support (Cena et al., 2021); Inclusive curriculum and pedagogy (Chinyamurindi, 2018); Structured intercultural interaction (Glass & Westmont, 2014); and Accessible academic support (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Columns 1 and 3 feed into the central column (2) 'Questioning Themes for Focus Groups,. This contains two broader areas for research discussion: Factors positively influencing international student belonging, and Barriers to international student belonging.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Leeds Beckett University. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data was securely stored and only accessible to the research team. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty, and care was taken to ensure discussions were conducted in a supportive and respectful environment.

Rationale for methodological approach

The research design was informed by the literature review presented in this paper and prior research undertaken by the authors (Pugh et al., 2025), the majority of which is qualitative in nature. Additionally, the research questions and methodology were influenced by a desire to challenge the deficit narrative identified by Mohamad and Manning (2023), which often treats international students as a homogeneous group in need of support rather than assets with diverse perspectives. The chosen research design was also

selected for pragmatic reasons; the research team had previously attempted data collection via a Digital Padlet (see previous sections).

The use of focus groups allowed the research team to explore shared experiences and identify common themes, while also capturing differences across nationality, programme and level of study. This approach aligns with the aim of this paper to understand international students' sense of belonging within a course management context. By privileging student voices and encouraging open dialogue, the methodology supports a rich, context-sensitive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for fostering belonging. The combination of purposive sampling, heterogeneous participant selection, and thematic analysis ensures that findings are both reliable and meaningful, providing practical insights for course managers and support staff.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of focus group data revealed several key themes relating to international students' sense of belonging and social integration within Leeds Business School. These themes—social integration, teaching and academic practices, and extracurricular activities and employment—highlight areas where course management can positively influence students' experiences. Participants' own words are used extensively to illustrate findings and ensure the authenticity of their perspectives.

Theme One: Social Integration

Social integration is a crucial determinant of belonging. Feeling part of the university community reduces loneliness, fosters emotional support networks, and facilitates adjustment to a new cultural environment, enhancing engagement in academic studies. However, participants highlighted multiple challenges, including cultural differences, language barriers, loneliness, and limited interaction with domestic students.

Cultural Issues

Students reported adjusting to different classroom behaviours and expectations. One participant explained:

For me it's different. I don't always like writing, and most of my classmates are typing on laptops. But also, I consider the cultural differences like it's not just me. It's students from all around the world. You have to behave in a different way.

Another student reflected on the diversity of experiences:

I got to know people from all around the world... India, Nigeria, Jamaica, China and they all have something different to say. We bond because we are doing the same thing; we all come from other countries. We are all having similar struggles.

Loneliness

Participants described difficulties socialising due to financial constraints and cultural differences:

I have realised that the way people socialise here is by going to social events. So, you have to invest money on that too. So, for us as international students we can be lonely. It's not that easy because if I'm going to spend money on this, then next week I will not have money to buy the groceries.

Desire for more interaction with home domiciled students

Participants expressed a wish for more opportunities to meet domestic students:

So, we don't have buddies like in college. We will have fun in the class and then everyone talks, but after class everyone is so busy going to do other things.

People you tend to mingle with are from your country as most of the people on my course are from my country. There is not much chance to meet UK students in class or mixed events to understand UK culture better.

Most people in my class are from back home.

Timetabling was also highlighted as a barrier to social integration. Students living outside Leeds found scattered schedules inconvenient and costly, limiting opportunities to engage socially. Library hours (8am–10pm) were mentioned as restrictive for both individual and group study.

Theme Two: Academic Practices

Differences in study methods between students' home countries and the UK were a significant source of challenge. Many students were accustomed to lecture-based learning, with a passive approach to knowledge acquisition. Transitioning to UK higher education, which is underpinned by discussion, questioning, and collaborative learning, requires adjustment. Key areas raised were cultural differences, seminar participation, feedback, applied learning, and tutor access.

Cultural Differences

Students noted differences in the perceived status of teachers and the approachability of academic staff:

I know in certain cultures the teacher is very much a higher authority. With the professors here there's a chance to get to know each other a little bit more in a seminar.

Tutors are very supportive with every question and say, 'you never have a stupid question.' They just let us say whatever we want to ask, even if we don't understand we just ask again and again.

Here you can explain something. It's not just learning something by heart.

Seminars

Many students found seminar preparation and engagement challenging, but also valued applied learning:

Seminars are a new concept; you've got pretty much to learn everything by yourself at home. And then you come to seminar, and you apply it.

There are lectures which are held by a particular professor and then seminars are conducted by a separate tutor. If I am fine with the flow and the teaching pattern of a professor and if the same professor is not there as a tutor for me in the seminar, it creates a lot of tension, because what I'm studying in the lecture is good, but then when I apply it in the seminar, the same inspiration is not there.

When the lecturer and the seminar tutor are different, there are some differences in the information that is being provided.

Feedback

Practices of delivering formative and summative feedback were felt to be inconsistent, affecting students' confidence:

One module we were given very precise information on how to find materials and how we go about the assignment. We had help and feedback in the seminar. And there was another module where we were given a preview but no feedback before the presentation.

The feedback that people have from one seminar was very detailed, like two to three paragraphs of feedback, and the one that others in our group got was just very basic.

Applied Learning

Practical, project-based learning, such as live consultancy projects, were highly valued:

We have lots of projects, it's difficult but it's good because you have the opportunity to apply all the content you were learning during the whole semester in just one project.

You feel you are actually doing some work for real life. So, it's quite useful for this more practical approach, rather than applying theory; you read a lot about business in the UK, and you're building something when working on a case study.

Access to tutor support

Students expressed a need for greater access to teaching teams outside timetabled sessions to enhance understanding and belonging.

Theme Three: Extracurricular Activities and Employment

Students acknowledged the importance of extracurricular involvement in facilitating friendships, developing employability skills, and enhancing overall student experience. Participation in student societies, course representative roles, and Global Village events were particularly beneficial, though opportunities to interact with diverse groups were sometimes limited.

Global Village events are very interactive; they'll bring you together when we do not know the city and where to go. And the other society which I have joined is the Indian society. The good part about societies is they also give you a chance to lead them.

I made new friends, especially at the Global Village events.

I tried becoming a course representative and then I tried participating in a lot of communities. I'm finally leading a Hindu community as well, so it helps me to network.

Students recommended more sustained support beyond initial induction, including flexible fee payment options and assistance in securing student employment, which is limited in Leeds due to high competition. Participation in extracurricular activities strengthened students' sense of belonging and engagement (Thies & Falk, 2023). Peer mentoring initiatives, mixed classes with domestic students, and networking events were suggested as ways to enhance social integration and foster a supportive learning community.

Discussion

This section is structured by the three themes presented in the previous section; it discusses the research findings in relation to the literature review presented in this paper, highlighting new contributions.

Theme 1: Social Integration

The social bonds formed within and outside the formal curriculum are crucial in helping international students feel connected to their new educational experience. Former research has advocated meaningful engagement between home and international students through collaborative tasks (Glass & Westmont, 2014), which is corroborated by the findings in this paper. However, international students are increasingly seeking further opportunities for integration beyond the classroom, despite cultural differences. Additionally, timetabling was a hindrance for students who are in employment and not living in the immediate locality. Social integration is also dependent on flexible access to key support services, e.g. 24-hour access to the library.

Theme 2: Academic Practices and Teaching

Pedagogical Practices in the teaching environment are critical factors influencing belonging for international students. Building on former research by Chinyamurindi (2018) which focuses on diversifying curriculum materials, staff consistency across course teams and the continuity across lectures and seminars is highlighted as key in this paper.

Smith & Khawaja (2011) discuss the provision of accessible academic support in relation to language development and assessment and writing support. This research found international students perceive relationships with tutors as less hierarchical, in comparison to their respective countries, making them more approachable. Thus, highlighting how academic staff as well as support services are well placed to support students' sense of belonging.

Applied learning versus theory is welcomed, and international students begin to see the value of their degree which increases engagement and belonging. Formative and detailed feedback is a primary tool for teaching teams to engage with students.

Theme 3: Extracurricular activities and employment

Former research highlights how participation in extracurricular activities strengthens students' sense of belonging (Thies & Falk, 2023). However, the findings presented in this paper demonstrate the wide range of activities that can contribute to greater belonging for international students e.g. employment, societies and communities led by students, course representative roles etc.

New initiatives to foster international student belonging

To address challenges identified in focus groups, Leeds Business School has implemented several initiatives aimed at improving international students' preparedness and sense of belonging.

Pre-Arrival preparation and online induction

Undergraduate international students now complete the 'International Student Academic Introduction' online module at the start of their studies. This module comprises three units linked to assessment: Becoming an LBU Student; How We Learn and Study at LBU; and Building Your Academic and Study Skills.

The module aims to familiarise students with UK higher education practices and academic expectations, providing early scaffolding to ease transition.

Pre-departure acclimatisation sessions

Course leaders have visited key feeder institutions in India to deliver pre-departure sessions. These sessions provide students with a sense of familiarity before arrival, introduce academic activities they will encounter, and communicate expectations clearly. They also inform recruitment agencies, helping prospective students understand UK academic practices and life in Leeds.

Level Leaders

Level Leaders are specifically allocated to International January-start cohorts in order to provide attendance monitoring and personal communication, identifying 'at-risk' students and signposting to student services.

Student Business School community

A student-led business school community has been established, organising social and business-related events. This initiative enables international students to network, share experiences, and gain exposure to potential employers, fostering both social integration and professional development. These initiatives represent a strategic approach to embedding belonging within course management, addressing both academic and social dimensions of the student experience.

Conclusion

This paper examines the role of course management in fostering international students' sense of belonging at a UK post-1992 university business school. The research was underpinned by two themes, the factors which influence belonging and those which act as barriers.

Focus group discussions revealed the following three themes which are key factors in shaping international students' experiences (1) social integration (2) academic practices and teaching and (3) extracurricular engagement and employment. International students face challenges beyond those of domestic students, including language barriers, cultural differences, and financial constraints. Course management practices, including timetabling, teaching delivery, assessment feedback, and support services, significantly influence their sense of belonging. Effective interventions—such as pre-arrival induction, structured peer mentoring, mixed-class engagement, and student-led communities—can enhance social, academic, and extracurricular integration.

Importantly, international students should not be viewed solely as a group needing support. Their cultural diversity enriches the learning environment, fosters global perspectives, and enhances university research, enterprise, and reputation. Co-creating experiences with students allows their talents, knowledge, and perspectives to contribute meaningfully to university life.

Recommendations

1. **Pre-arrival induction:** All international students should complete pre-departure sessions and online induction modules in their home country to prepare for UK study. Students will be directed to key

resources, and it is their responsibility to complete the necessary modules prior to arrival and commencement of studies.

2. **Support for intercultural integration:** Initiatives should facilitate friendships with home-domiciled students and peers from other nationalities, through timetabling, peer mentoring, and networking opportunities. Course Directors should ensure students have opportunities for intercultural integration by liaising with timetabling and Global Engagement colleagues.
3. **Student-led community development:** A diverse multinational business school community should be facilitated and led by students, offering social events and networking opportunities with local and national employers. It is recommended that the student body is supported by the Students' Union whose focus is community development.
4. **Academic Advisors /Level Leader training:** Key staff involved in supporting international students undertake specific training to better understand cultural nuances, which will support and improve relationships. It is recommended that senior academics including Heads of Subject, Course Directors, and Course Leaders facilitate a training programme to underpin pastoral and academic support of international students.

These recommendations are designed to embed belonging into course management practices, improving wellbeing, engagement, and successful academic outcomes.

Limitations

International students are not a monolithic group. Focus groups included students from China, India, Vietnam, and Chile, but did not fully capture the variations in age, family responsibilities, prior education, or cultural background. The study also combined undergraduate and postgraduate students, despite potential differences in experiences and expectations. These factors may limit the generalisability of findings.

Future Research

Future studies could explore the influence of specific institutional support measures on international students' sense of belonging, including policies, processes, programmes, and services. Longitudinal research could evaluate the impact of interventions such as pre-arrival induction, integrated timetabling, and student-led communities. Additional areas for investigation include the role of teaching, learning, and assessment practices, peer networks, and social activities in fostering belonging. Moments of belonging could be analysed by students in order to discover why they were important, which would embed critical reflexivity in belonging. Research should also examine nuances among students from key markets, such as Nigeria, India, and Vietnam, to identify culturally specific needs and preferences. Findings could inform course design, pedagogical approaches, and support services, contributing to inclusive, student-centred higher education environments.

Biographies

Esther Pugh is a senior lecturer and a circular fashion researcher, ambassador, and practitioner. She is enthusiastic about fostering belonging through student-led events and on-campus popups which extend learning beyond the classroom into the world of fashion retail, marketing, and business.

Sukvinder K Jassi is an experienced academic and research professional. Her current role is Course Director for the BA (Hons) International Business programme and areas of teaching expertise include innovation, research methods, and consultancy. Sukky has a consultancy background delivering applied research projects in the public and private sectors.

Frances Bostyn is a lecturer with a foundation in employability and work integrated learning. Her teaching is rooted in practice- focused education, contributing to commercially oriented modules such as Work Placement and Industry Insight. Frances is particularly interested in designing authentic, synoptic assessments that bridge academic learning and professional practice-integrated learning.

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