

Belonging Theory into Practice:

A framework to enhance student success in Higher Education

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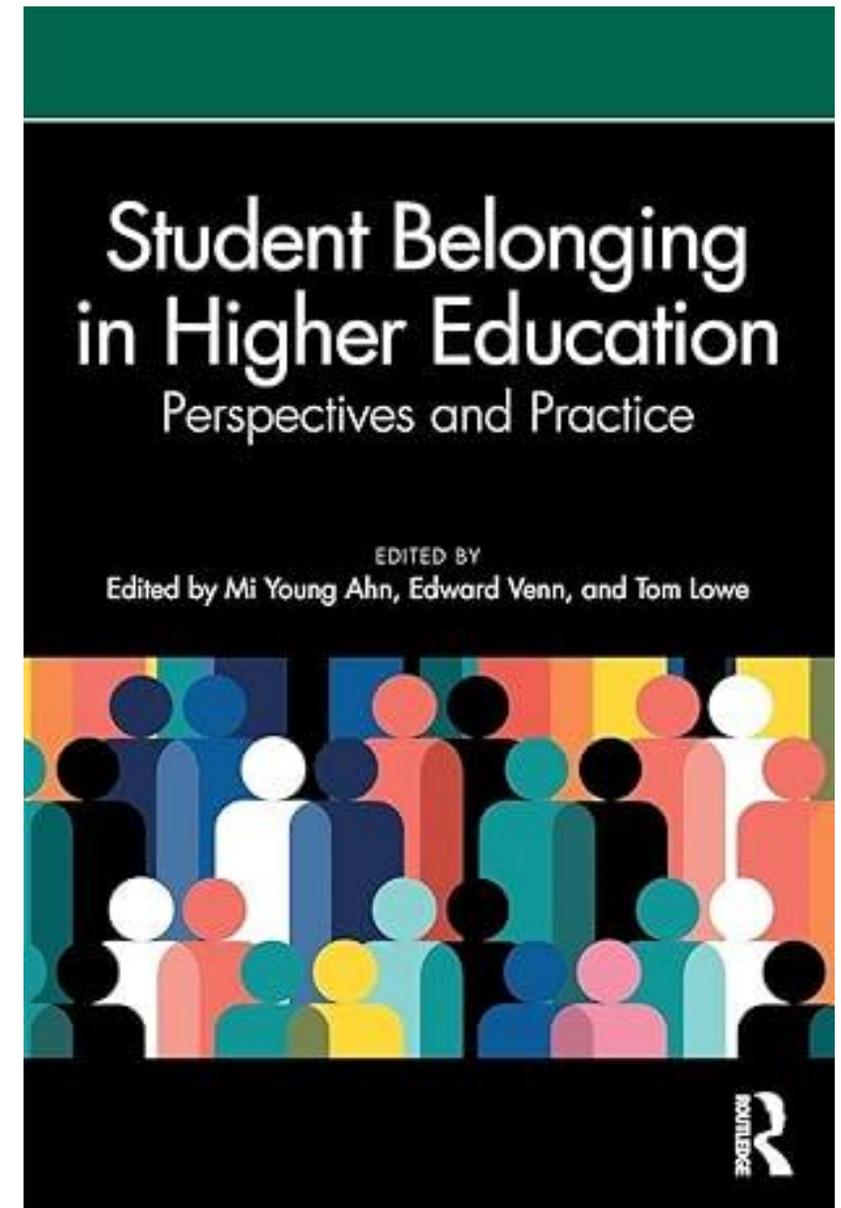
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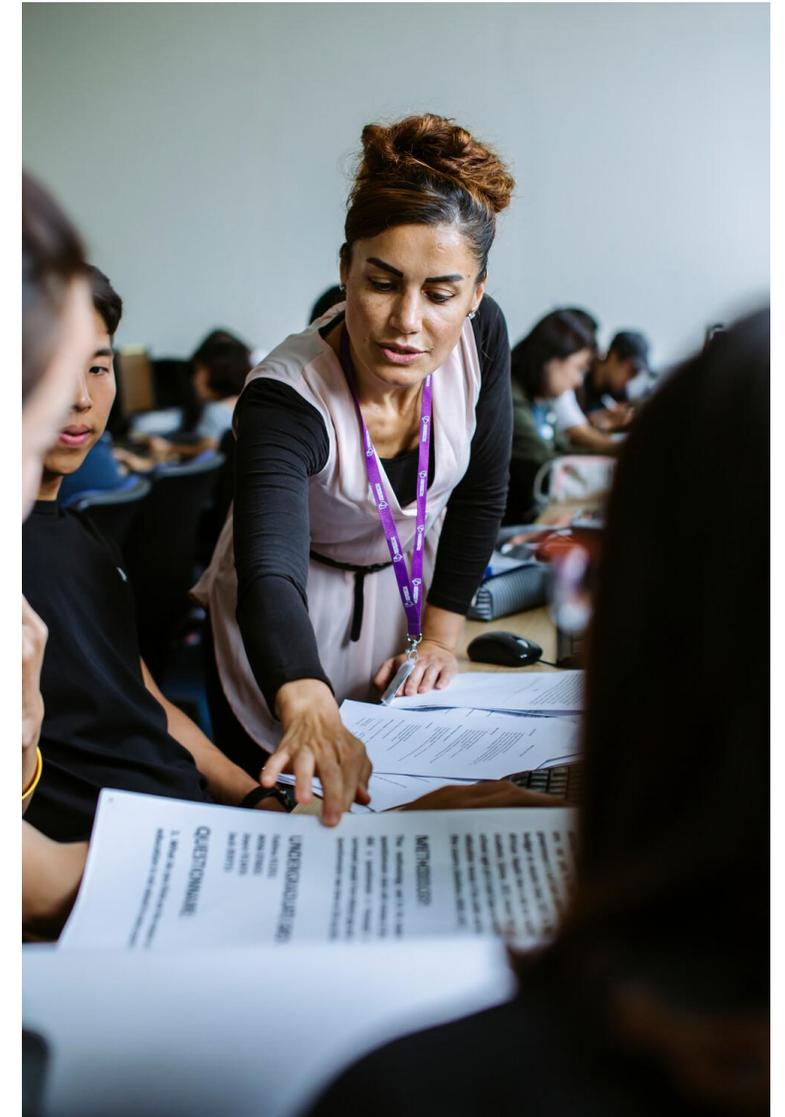
What is belonging? Defined:

‘...students’ perceived support...a feeling of **connectedness** and the experience of **matter**ing or **feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued** by, and important to the campus community such as faculty, staff, their peers’ Strayhorn (2019). It is a ‘**basic human need**, sufficient to **motivate behaviours** [Maslow] and takes on heightened importance at times and in places where individuals feel vulnerable’ (Strayhorn, 2019).

A positive sense of belonging has been correlated with **improving engagement** in the curriculum and classroom, and with **positive engagement** through **motivation** and **participation behaviours** (Osterman, 2000) including, **seeking academic support** from teachers, support staff and peers (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Braxton, 2000; Hoffman, 2002).

The wish and need to belong

- We find much of our meaning, identity, relevance and satisfaction in life through our sense of belonging to groups (Allen, 2020)
- Belonging is facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences involving the social milieu, which dynamically interact with the individual's character, experiences, culture, identity, and perceptions (Allen *et al* 2021)
- “A need to belong – to connect deeply with other people and secure places, to align with one's cultural and subcultural identities, and to feel like one is a part of the systems around them” (Allen *et al* 2021, 88)



Belonging is closely connected to:

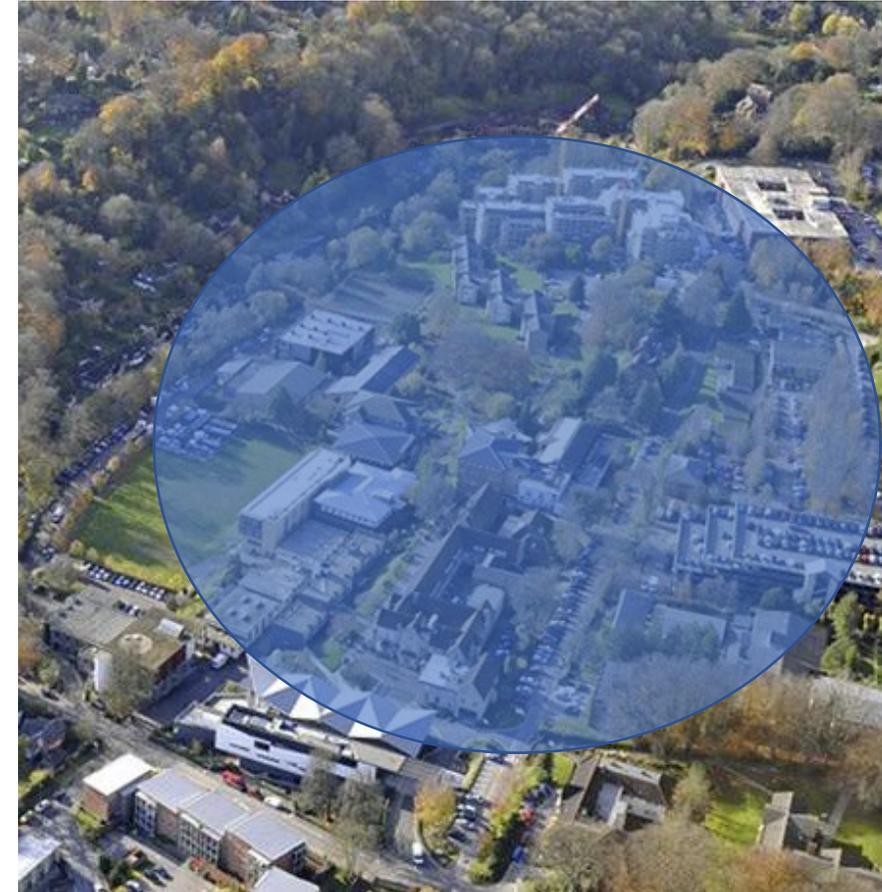
- 1) Development of psychological processes important to student success
- 2) Academic attitudes and motives
- 3) Positive social and personal attitudes
- 4) Engagement and participation (positive feedback loop)
- 5) Academic achievement

(Osterman, 2000; Thomas, 2012)



The opposite of belonging

- Enrolling into Higher Education is like passing into a new country, with new language, titles, structures and processes (Mann, 2001)
- Increase in social isolation and loneliness during the pandemic (Jackson and Blake, 2022)
- “Struggles to belong are particularly evident in minorities and other groups that have been historically marginalised by mainstream cultures” (Allen *et al* 2021 89)



Belonging Framework: Background

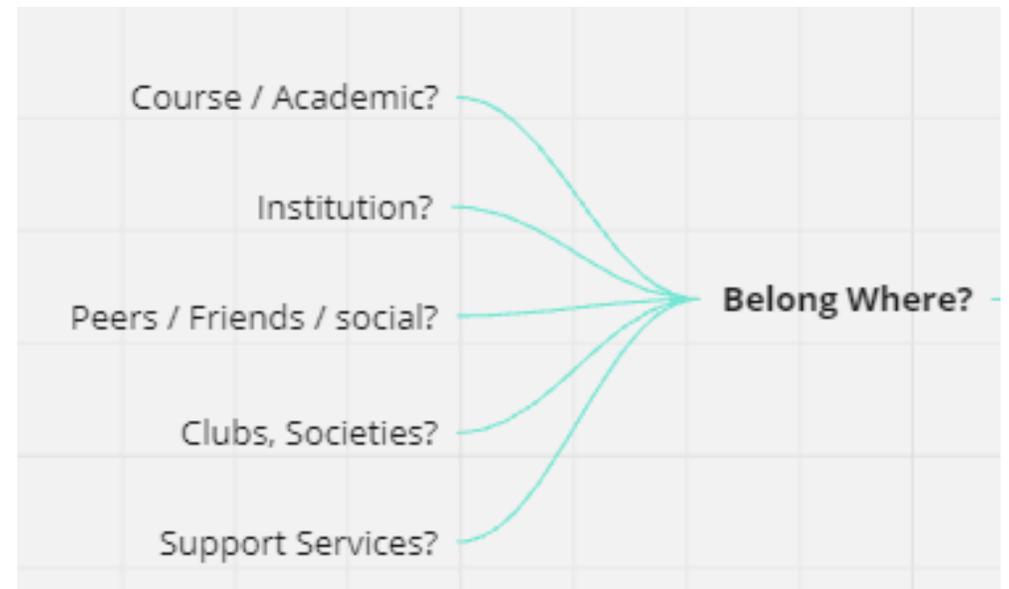
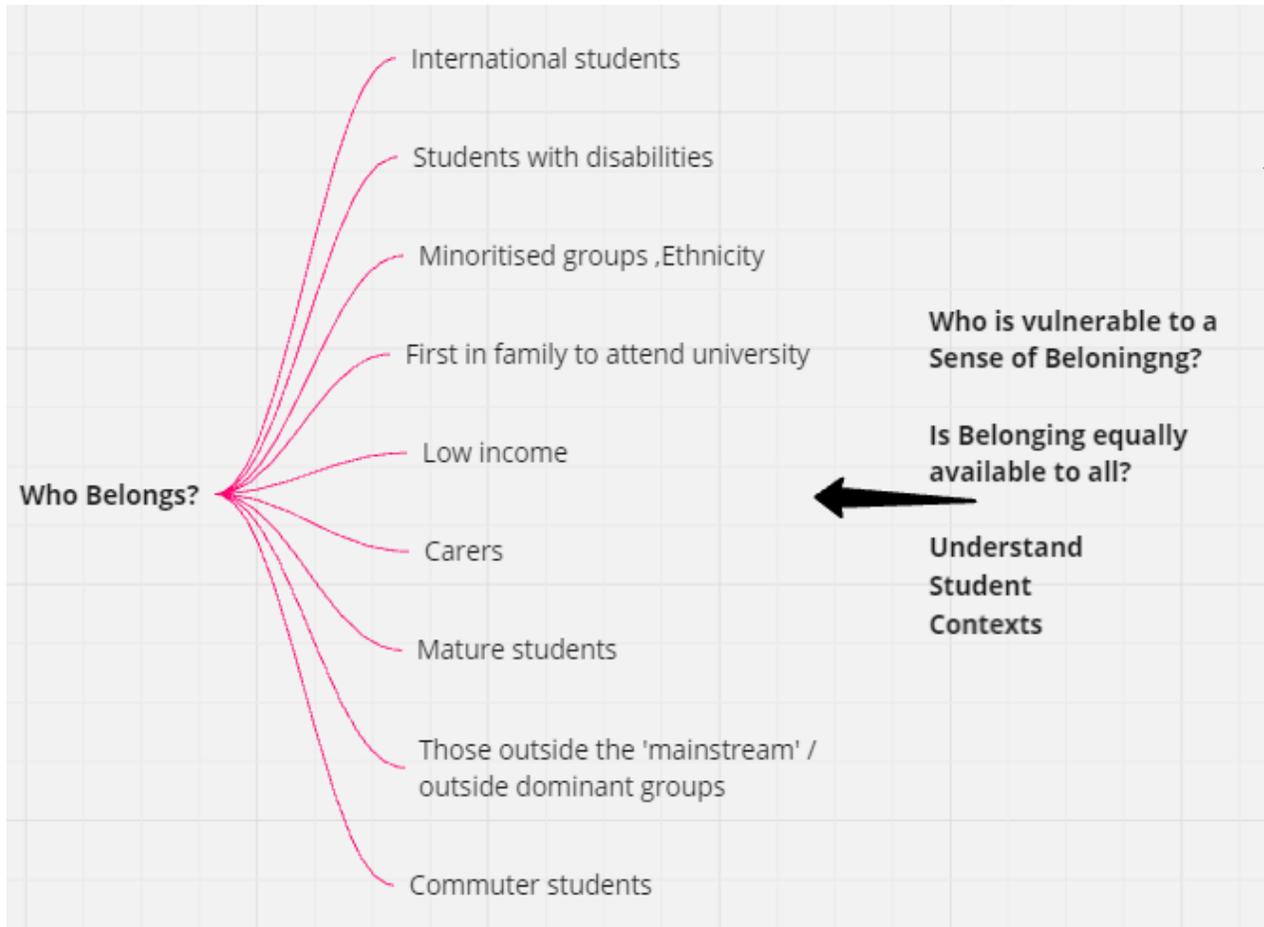
- Extensive literature review (MA) First-year student belonging through Covid-19
- Mixed methods: Quantitative surveys
- Qualitative research including focus groups; Thematic analysis
- Belonging framework emerges from data; can be adapted by Team / Service / School / Department



Who is at risk from not-belonging?

Where can belonging be created?

“who can achieve belonging...is always tied to issues of power and inequalities”
(Thomas, 2018*).



Belonging Framework: Why now?

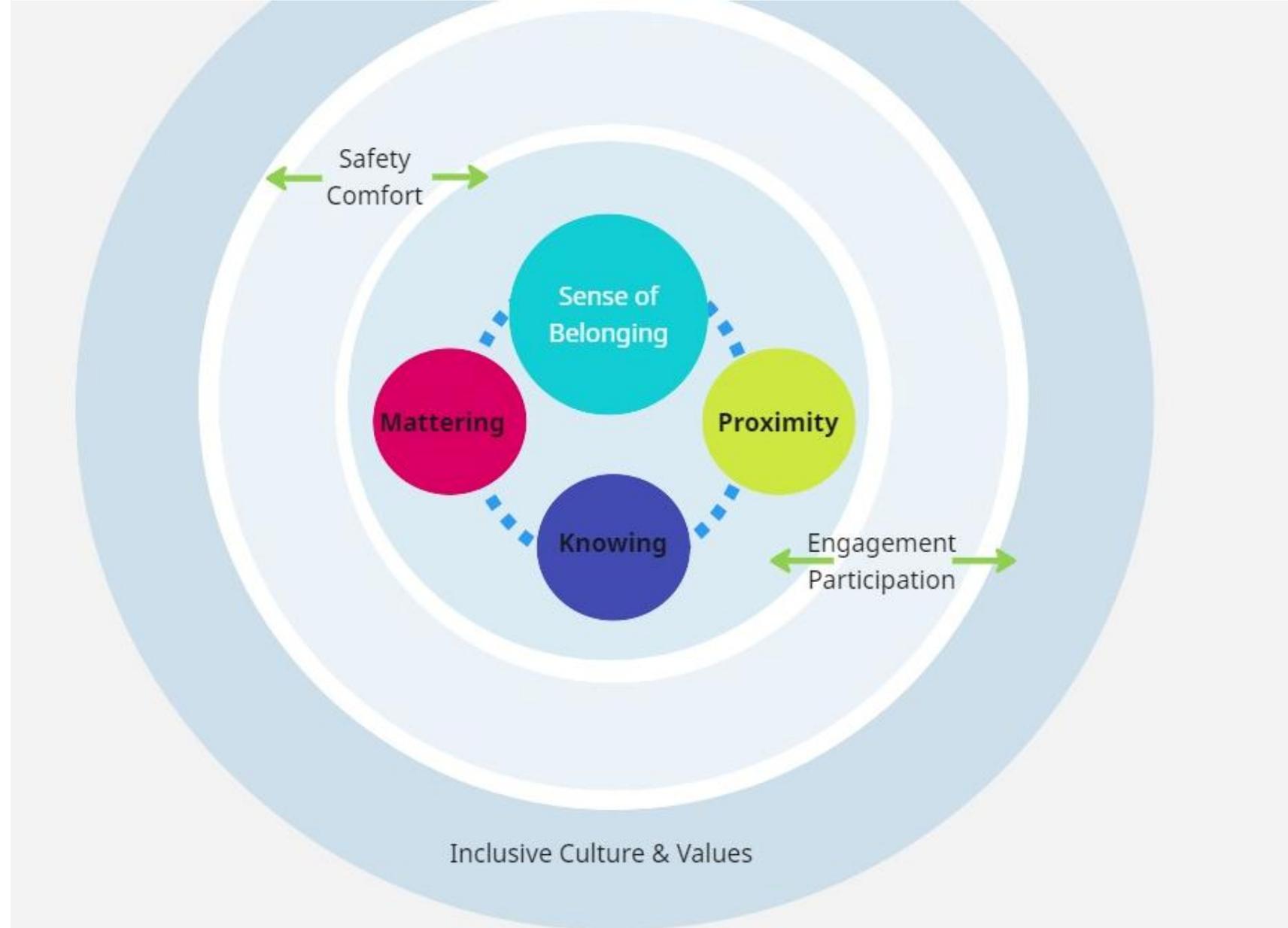
- Loneliness, loss of social confidence, reduced wellbeing, resilience, engagement...
- Financial burdens and cost of living crisis
- Universities funding pressures
- Technology disruption (such as Generative AI)
- The importance of human connection
- Equality Diversity and Inclusion priorities



Belonging 'takes on heightened importance... 'where individuals...feel isolated, alienated, lonely and invisible' (Strayhorn, 2019)

The Belonging Framework

How the elements interrelate within the University



Belonging Framework in Action

Context is important:
Aim to understand backgrounds, values & demographics.

Who may struggle to belong?

I matter to:



My peers
My study group
My lecturer
My personal tutor
My sports team
My Information Consultant (Librarian)
My Career Coach
My Peer Mentor
My Adviser - Frontline staff: Library, Culture, Professional Services



Consider

Enduring relationships; a sense of valued importance is necessary to create belonging

Proximity to:



Peers
Study group
Lecturers
Personal tutor
Sports team
Information Consultant (Librarian)
Careers Coach
Peer Mentors
Advisers



Consider

- Are support networks easy to discover?
- How can I act as a connector? ('cultural navigator', Strayhorn)
- Are groups diverse, representing people's identities, culture, background?
- Is access available to all, or do some face specific barriers? (e.g. time, cost)

Knowing:



'Cognitive mapping'

How easy is it to navigate:

academic requirements, professional services support, campus, buildings, online systems...

Links with

- Self-efficacy and Agency
- Motivation and learning goals
- Fulfilling potential and Success



Consider

- Which areas create confusion?
- Communication: is it clear and consistent across services
- Feedback: always close the loop
- How to include students in making changes, ideally as partners
- Building the framework into our continuous programme of improvement

Belonging Framework in Action – Workshop P1

Use the **Belonging Framework** to evaluate barriers to and opportunities for **Belonging** to be created:

1. Form pairs or small groups (2-4).

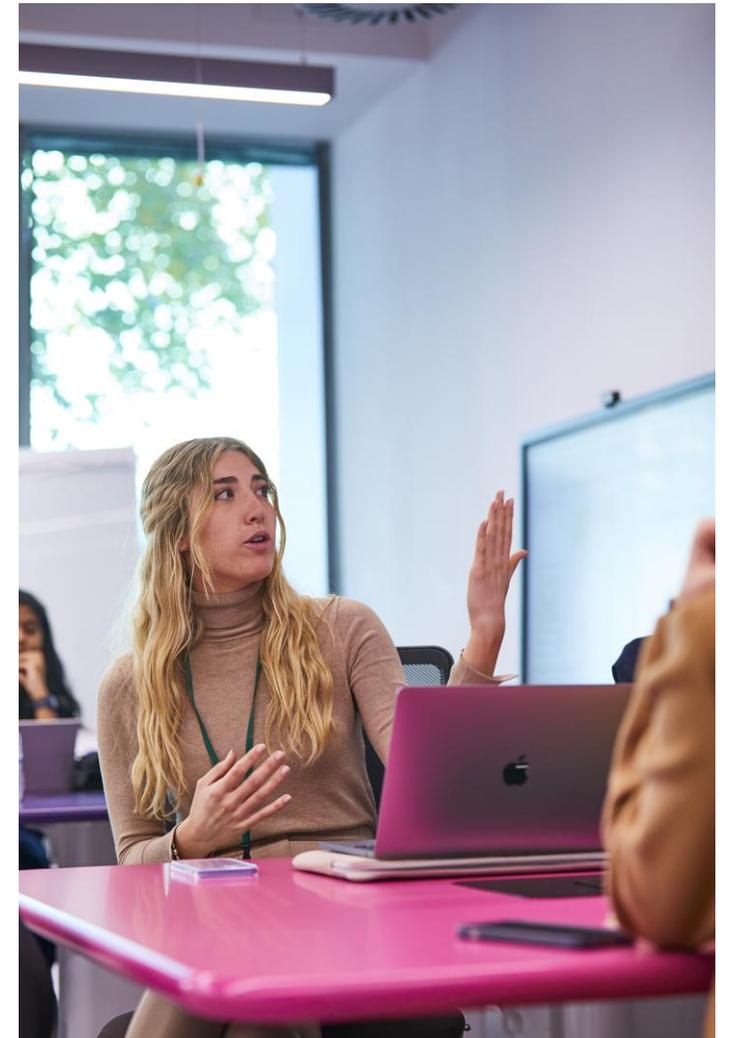
Choose *one* student group to focus on, some examples:

- International students
- Commuter students
- Mature learners
- Disabled students
- Care-experienced students
- First-generation students

2. Using the Belonging Framework handout, work through the three columns: **Mattering**, **Proximity**, **Knowing**

For each column, discuss:

- a. how easy you feel it is for your chosen group to develop a sense of belonging
- b. a barrier or opportunity you have identified.



Belonging Framework in Action – Workshop P2

3. Use the ‘Consider’ prompts to guide your thinking.

Where might this group feel overlooked or undervalued?

- Do they have regular, meaningful contact with peers/staff?
- What information or systems might be confusing or hard to navigate?
- Are there specific barriers for this group (e.g., time, cost, culture, accessibility)?

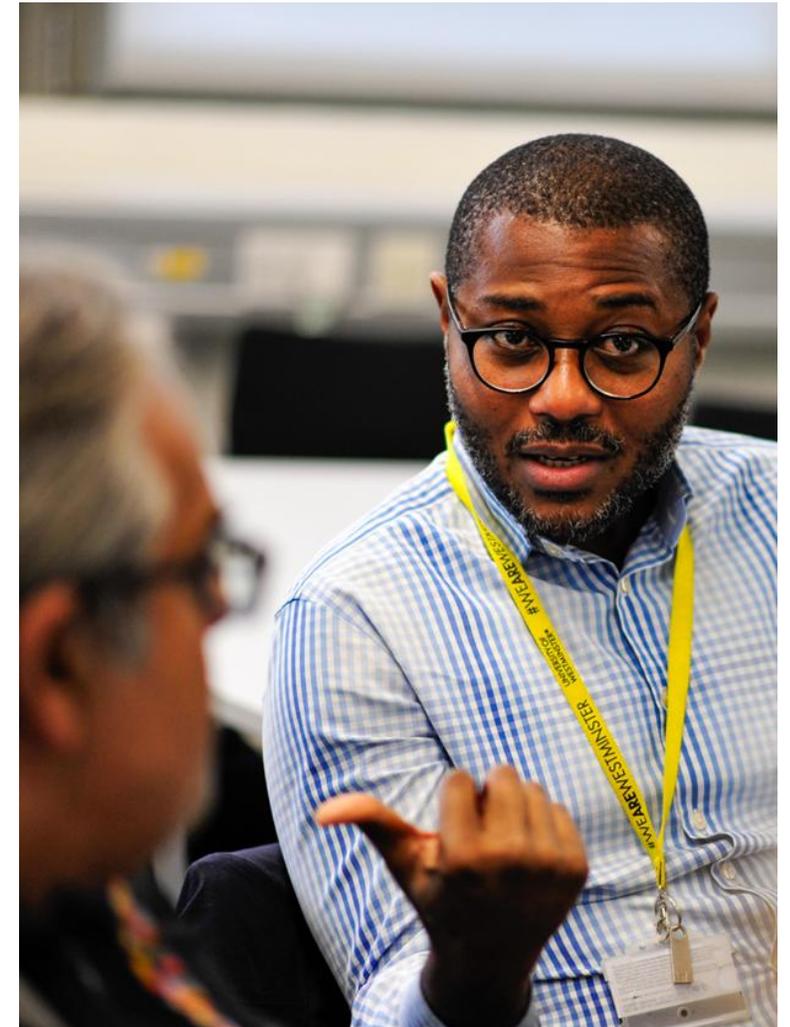
4. Capture your reflections

For each of the three columns, note:

- a. Strengths (what currently supports belonging)
- b. Gaps or barriers (what challenges belonging)

5. Please share one key insight from your discussion.

At the end of the activity, each group will briefly share one important barrier or opportunity you have identified.

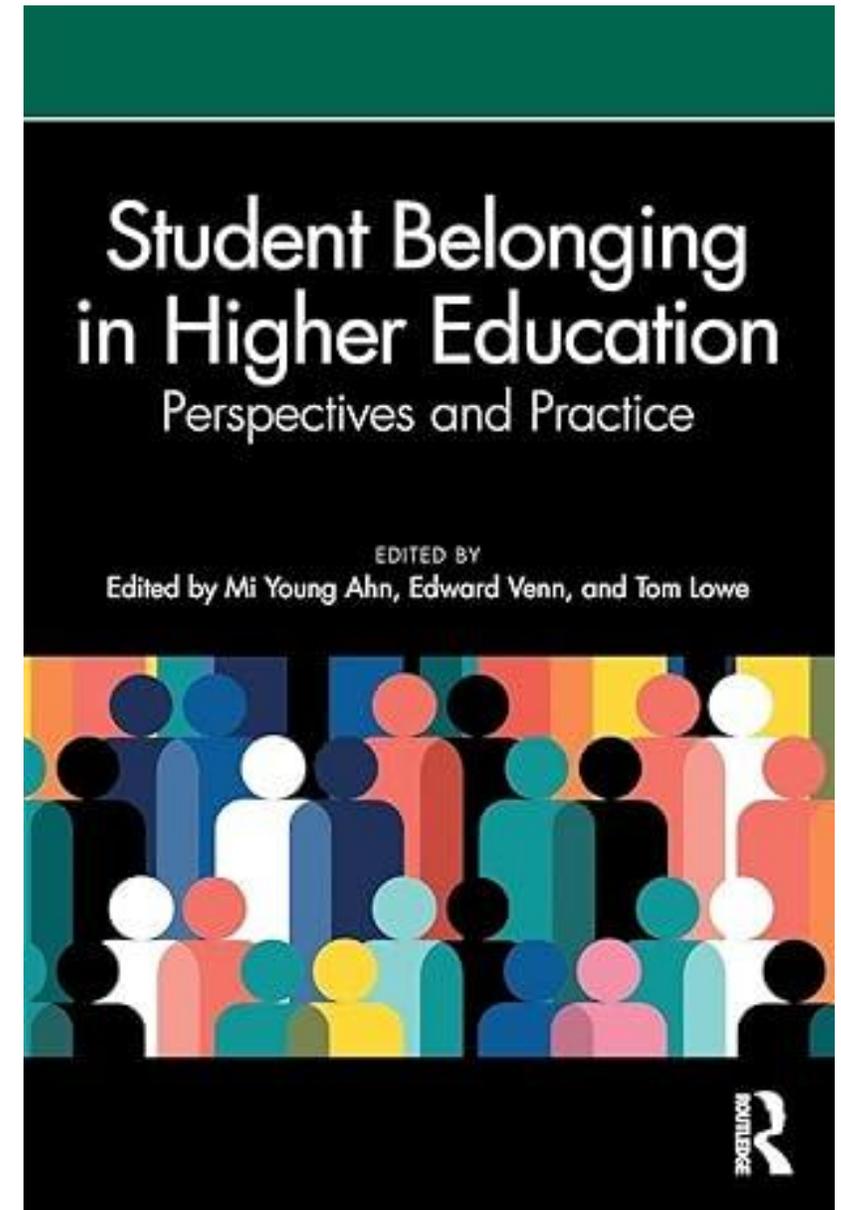


Share and Q & A

Please share key insights from your discussion.

Access the full resource here:

Cooke, C., Lowe, T. (2025). *Belonging Theory into Practice: A Framework to enhance Student Success in Higher Education*. Ahn, M. Y., Venn, E., Lowe, T. (2025). *Student Belonging in Higher Education: Perspectives and Practice*. (Routledge, London).



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