



Student Voices

in Higher Education

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in Higher Education

International Student Voices: Exclusion and Inclusion from spaces to Belonging

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What We'll Explore Today

1. How international students experience **belonging and exclusion**
2. Why **informal spaces** matter as much as formal support
3. How **cafés, festivals, and conversations** shape confidence
4. How student voice can **inform institutional design**
5. What empowerment looks like *after* belonging is established

Exploring Belonging and Exclusion

- “The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation.”
Baumeister & Leary, 1995
- “Students’ sense of belonging is central to engagement, persistence and success in higher education.”
Thomas, 2012



What Students Told Us

From a co-designed international student survey
(N=255)

26.8% reported difficulty adapting to UK Academic Expectations

21.9% Identified Language or Cultural Barriers to Participation

Many Students Reported Hesitation speaking in class, linked to confidence rather than ability

Limited Awareness of Support Services delayed help-seeking during transition

“Language confidence affected how willing I was to participate in class discussions.”

“I didn’t know where to go for help at the beginning, so I just tried to deal with things on my own.”

“It took time to understand what support was available and when I should use it.”

“Space is not neutral”

Samura, 2016

“Human connections are the foundation of student success.”
Felten & Lambert, 2020

We can utilise campus spaces to:

- Create Relational Spaces
- Trust-Building
- Staff-Student Interaction in Informal Settings



- Case Study 1

World in Westminster Cafes and Cultural Celebrations



- Case Study 2

Conversations as Safe Dialogue spaces and Empowerment Programmes



Case Study 1: Cafes and Festivals

Creating Low-stakes, identity-affirming entry points into community

Cafes in different themes such as:
Welcoming International Students

Celebrating LGBTQ+ History Month

Nerodiversity and Brain Awareness Celebration

Global Diversity Celebrations

Cultural Festivals

Diwali, Day of the Dead, Chanukah, Lunar New Year, Iftar, Nowruz



Case Study 1: Cafes and Festivals

Cafés reduce pressure before confidence is expected

Informal

Repeated

Open-ended

Student voice

“Having a friend makes a big difference.”



Case Study 1: Cafes and Festivals

“Belonging and engagement are co-produced between students and institutions.”
Kahu & Nelson, 2018

Festivals signal recognition, not assimilation

Culture is visible

Identity is valued

Belonging feels shared

Student voice

“Celebrating Lunar New Year made me feel seen — it reminded me of home.”



Cafés and Festivals Photos



Cafés and Festivals Photos



From Voice to Design Decisions

What changed because we listened

Fear of Speaking



Informal dialogue
before formal
engagement

Uncertainty



Repeated,
predictable spaces

**Hesitation to
Approach Staff**



Flattened hierarchy in
Cafes and
conversations

Isolation



Co-designed, Peer-
led spaces

Designing for belonging means:

- Shifting from one-off interventions
- Embedding relational spaces across the year
- Treating student insight as expertise

- When Design is right, voices Follow



Case Study 2: Conversations and Empowerment Programmes

Conversations and Empowerment Programmes

From belonging → voice → agency

Why conversations mattered

Low-pressure, semi-structured dialogue

Reduced hierarchy between students and staff

Space to ask questions without judgement



Case Study 2: Conversations and Empowerment Programmes

Why empowerment programmes worked

Because students already had:

Trust

Confidence

A sense of being heard

Empowerment ≠ fixing students

Empowerment = enabling agency



Conversations and Empowerment Photos



Empowerment is a Shift

- It is permission + Opportunity + Trust
- **“Student engagement deepens when students experience agency, voice and partnership.”**
Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014



Student Sharing

THANK YOU!