
Fostering a Sense of Belonging at our University

A Guide for Schools





“We all want the same thing: for this to be a people-focused university driven by a strong sense of values, championing inclusiveness, friendship, mutual support, pride in our community, and committed to maintaining it here in Edinburgh and also further afield for those who have left us geographically but not in spirit. We are Edinburgh!”

**Professor Peter Mathieson
Principal and Vice-Chancellor**

Ampersand Project
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Purpose

This short guide has been produced by the Sense of Belonging Task Group.

The Sense of Belonging Task Group was set up as part of the Student Experience Action Plan with the aim of exploring and advising how to develop a strong sense of belonging among our students. This work began before the Covid-19 pandemic, but it has become more important than ever to ensure students feel connected to the University community and show we care about them.

The guide provides a framework and practical suggestions for promoting a sense of belonging among students in your school or unit. It is based on an extensive review of the literature, research among our students, and benchmarking the practices of other universities.

We all have a role to play in fostering belonging (staff and students), including sharing and celebrating good practice. We encourage colleagues to share practice via the [Edinburgh Hybrid Teaching Exchange](#).

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Introduction

Our University community benefits from its diversity, and we are committed to ensuring inclusivity and promoting equality. As a strong civic University we strive to be open and accessible. Yet, over time, our students' feelings of what it means to belong and to be a 'University of Edinburgh student' have changed. It is not enough to expect that students feel they belong, simply because they have been granted a place to study here.

We must do more to ensure our students feel a strong sense of belonging to a caring and supportive university community and to ensure they can achieve their full potential. **Achieving a sense of belonging requires deliberate attention and effort, not merely the absence of alienation or exclusion.**

"Belonging is like a trampoline. It is having the awareness that no matter how high you jump, there is a place down there that will absorb the force of your fall should you ever come crashing down. Belonging will propel you back up from such a fall. Higher." Ratia Rafik (Khan, 2019)

Belonging is key to developing a sense of community. Many young people define community "not only as a geographical or spatial entity but as an emotive, knowledge-based and imagined understanding that is grounded in shared knowledge, social learning and shared experience." (Moran et al., 2017: 288).

Belonging is a sense of feeling accepted,

valued, included, connected and feeling that one matters. It has a positive impact on student engagement, academic achievement and wellbeing (Strayhorn, 2019).

Our aim is to ensure:

1. Our University is recognised as a welcoming inclusive community that promotes belonging, values students and treats them with respect and empathy.
2. Students are supported to achieve their potential in a caring and supportive community that promotes good health and wellbeing.
3. Former and current students remain engaged and are positive advocates of the University community and what it stands for.

We must embed and integrate our aims to enhance belonging, within a broader offer of an outstanding student experience. This will result in students being fully engaged in an inspiring curriculum, with access to excellent facilities and resources, taught by excellent teachers with outstanding support.

This requires the development and implementation of an integrated approach to all aspects of our students' time with us, from pre-application to life after graduation.

Creating a University community which is recognised by current and prospective students as a welcoming, inclusive community that promotes belonging, values students and treats them with empathy and respect, is the responsibility of all of us.

Belonging framework

Our framework for fostering a sense of belonging has four key domains:

1. Belonging at the University
2. Belonging in the 'Classroom'
3. Belonging in our Social Networks
4. Belonging within our Places

Belonging at the University

Core to this goal is the removal of obstacles which students face that make them feel removed from or on the periphery of our University.

Key to fostering a sense of belonging at the University is that students feel:

- valued as people
- welcomed in all aspects of their University experience
- their culture, beliefs and values are respected in University life

And:

- we celebrate the diversity of our University community
- students and staff have authentic relationships



UoE staff and students, the Edinburgh Winter Run (February 2020), #WeBelong events.

Belonging in the 'Classroom'

Creating a sense of belonging within teaching activities is vital. All students engage with us primarily through their academic programme. For some students, it might be the only opportunity we have to engage with them.

The 'classroom' is shorthand for anywhere where learning and teaching take place - in physical classrooms, labs, studios, field trips and online. Key to developing teaching that fosters a strong sense of belonging is that:

Students have the opportunity to learn:

- through group methods that help build collaboration and community
- in a caring learning environment that supports resilience
- that failure is normal and can lead to a different path to success

To achieve this we need to:

- practice student centred learning in which students help shape class culture
- support students to flourish and achieve on their own terms
- reduce student feelings of isolation

Practical Suggestions

The suggestions below have been found to foster a sense of belonging and enhance engagement and outcomes in learning.

Explore and acknowledge the **confidence** (or lack of) that individual students have as learners when they arrive at the University of Edinburgh at all levels of study.

Consider **'the arithmetic of engagement'** (Bovill, 2020):

"At any particular moment, there are a limited number of great opportunities for students to become engaged. Fortunately, however, even a small number of engaging people and events, properly located, can have a disproportionately positive impact...out of perhaps twenty-five teachers a student has during college, she needs only one or two 'great' ones to feel that she has had an excellent academic experience. In a small college, a tiny number (say, five or ten) of excellent large courses can positively affect large numbers of students. Conversely, a single poor professor, teaching a large introductory course can easily destroy scores of students' interest in a discipline." (Chambliss and Takacs, 2014: 68).

Use **students' names**. In large classes, 'name tents' will help students see that staff are making an effort to know who they are, and it has a positive benefit on peer-peer interactions too (Bovill, 2020).

"When a lecturer knows my name it's very supportive. It inspires confidence in your ability to achieve more because I'm no longer one of 200. I'm an individual with my own goals. If this member of staff has given me the time of day, I must be worth enough to strive towards these things." Interview Participant

Employ **High-Impact Educational Practices** (e.g. Collaborative assignments and projects, e-portfolios, community-based learning). These are typically collaborative and experiential, and when done well have six student behaviours in common (Evans et al., 2015):

- students invest time and effort
- they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters
- they experience diversity
- they respond to more frequent feedback
- they reflect and integrate learning, and
- they discover relevance of learning through real-world applications.

Create opportunities for **informal student-staff interactions outside of the classroom**. Interactions between staff and students and their peers can be enhanced through extra- and co-curricular activities. These may be staff- or student-led.

Consider the role that **assessment** can play in helping an entire class come together as a learning community through, for example, **'class blogging'**.

Belonging in our Social Networks

The task group found that students feel they are missing out on the opportunities to create peer networks, and some students are especially disadvantaged and we need to help them develop social capital. We know that friendship is one of the most important reasons why students, who are thinking about withdrawing, decide to stay in higher education, but it goes beyond this.

Friendship:

- promotes academic integration and belonging
- develops students' confidence as learners in higher education
- improves students' motivation to study and succeed
- offers a source of academic help and enables students to cope with studies (Thomas, 2012:49).

To build a sense of belonging in our social networks we need to ensure that students have:

- the skills to develop lasting friendships and support networks
- access to welcoming sports, leisure, hobbies, societies and groups
- access to volunteering, internships and work within the University

To support this, we need to:

- recognise and celebrate student achievements and contributions of all kinds of work
- provide more equitable opportunities, leading to more equitable outcomes

"I found that there were little to no opportunities to mix with other people on my course during first and second year due to the small amount of contact hours. When making friends at university, it was through extracurricular activities." NSS Comment, 2019.

We encourage colleagues to consider how social networks can be created without reliance on extra-curricular activities.

Research suggests that commuter students, students with family commitments, mature students and, part-time students may engage less in social networks (Thomas, 2012).

Belonging within our Places

Space matters. Our research highlighted the impact the University's physical and digital estate has on students' sense of belonging.

There are opportunities to consider how both physical and digital spaces can be used to bring more students together, to discuss shared experiences and find support networks.

Key to fostering a sense of belonging through our physical and digital spaces is that students feel:

- at home and safe in our spaces and the wider city
- that the University's physical and digital space supports community building

To enable this, we need to provide:

- students with spaces that respect their needs as individuals and groups
- study and living spaces that enable students to socialise and thrive



Attendees at the 'Welcome to the Roaring 20s' We Belong Welcome Event, January 2020

Practical suggestions

On campus ensure that:

Buildings are **accessible and inclusive** (e.g. providing gender neutral toilets)

Images, portraits and public art reflect the present and future whilst also acknowledging our historic past. Continue decolonisation of artwork on display.

Consider how current campus and digital space can be better used to help **connect students, support them and build social networks**, giving consideration to those students who may face additional challenges (e.g. commuter students, mature students and students with children).

Consider **outdoor spaces** for teaching.

In a hybrid teaching context, consider how we can foster a sense of belonging and build communities between students and staff in **constantly changing patterns** of meeting online, face-to-face, in socially distanced groups, and through newly imagined ways of experiencing university.



**We
Belong**

Enablers

For us to achieve our goal of fostering a strong sense of belonging, the following four enablers are key to a coordinated approach.

Enabler 1: Leadership

Belonging is implicit in the values of Strategy 2030, but to make this a reality requires commitment and leadership at every level of the University including Heads of Schools, Programme and Course leaders, and our student leaders. Student leaders especially need to know they are instrumental in this and we must support them to be effective.

Enabler 2: Partnerships

If we are going to be effective, this will mean working in partnership with areas of our University community that we've previously been in less frequent contact with. However, we believe greater collaboration will lead to more innovation in the delivery of this plan. A key partnership is with our students.

Enabler 3: Data and dialogue

Measurement is key to evaluating impact of our efforts to foster a sense of belonging. We encourage colleagues to evaluate the impact of their belonging interventions. We encourage colleagues to share research and insight on successful interventions and activities.

Enabler 4: Alignment

We believe that every project will be enhanced by thinking about belonging. Our University is currently working on a huge number of change projects, and so there could be concern that 'belonging' is just another project which takes time away from other vital work. This is not the case. Belonging must not be seen as its own unique project, but rather the connective piece amongst all our activities.

"Edinburgh has ended up being, and has been, a massive adventure. I came with an address on a post-it and now I have friends. I met my partner here. I have like a whole community of people. I have my career, my work, my work pals and I've built a life here and it's all been a massive adventure and it's been a really, really amazing story for me." MSc Electronics Student, 2020

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#TeamUoE at Edinburgh Winter Run, February 2020



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Get in touch

To request a full copy of the report or get in touch, you can email us at:

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"I really appreciated the (informal) learning community on linguistics that was created by staff and students, who came from all over the world. Until today I have used this community to exchange ideas about teaching English as a foreign language... Edinburgh is a place where I instantly felt at home and even today I consider it as my second city."

**MSc in Applied Linguistics
Class of 1994**

"Meeting my [University of Edinburgh] cohort was an enriching experience. Whether it was cramming all of us into a single room to watch a sci-fi movie, going out for a pub crawl, or even traveling to Oslo, I knew I could always count on them to make me feel like I was part of a family."

**MSc Creative Writing
Class of 2012**



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