

# Guest editorial: Design for belonging and engagement: designing inclusive higher education futures

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The aim of the special issue, Design for Belonging and Engagement: Designing Inclusive Higher Education Futures is to publish international research, both empirical and theoretical, that examines and illustrates how we can design inclusive higher education (HE) futures that promote belonging and engagement for all students.

The call for papers was issued in March 2025. Empirical and theoretical submissions were invited that focus on inclusion and diversity across academic disciplines (STEM, Arts and Humanities, Medicine, Teacher Education, etc.); at different levels (freshman to senior to graduate student); racially or ethnically under-represented, minoritized groups; LGBTQIA+; students with disabilities, first-generation students, mature students, international students, students from recently immigrated families, formerly incarcerated.

The question framing this special issue centres on: how can we design future HE so that it supports and enhances students' belonging and engagement, (particularly in this complex post-pandemic moment, where we are presented with opportunities to do things differently but also the significant challenges facing HE)?

Futures research has assumed a central focus in contemporary learning sciences scholarship, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Tesar noted, "Educational futures have perhaps never been more debated than during the COVID-19 pandemic" (2021).

This is reflected in the emergence of flagship HE initiatives internationally, which take the concept of educational futures as an orienting theme, exploring the intersectionality of important concerns and innovations, including engagement, curriculum reform, technology, inclusion and diversity. This special issue and call for papers emerged from one such university programme, Designing Futures at the University of Galway, Ireland. The central idea of this large-scale, government funded initiative (€7.57m, 2020–2025) has been to promote student engagement and inclusion in HE, preparing students for life, both now and post-graduation, and for the future world of work.

The CfP for this special issue welcomed submissions examining and illustrating how we can design inclusive HE futures that promote belonging and engagement for all students. Articles were solicited that addressed key questions and themes, including *inter alia*:

- initiatives designed to improve student inclusion and retention;
- ameliorating *learning loss* in HE in the aftermath of COVID19;
- design innovations that promote student engagement in learning and campus life post-COVID19;
- exploring the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in HE while mitigating its risks (to academic integrity, student privacy and data exploitations by vendors for example);
- enhancing engagement with community organisations and institutions, enterprise and industry, particularly through student-led and student-centred creativity and innovation;
- transdisciplinary learning that addresses key contemporary societal challenges, e.g. climate change, economic and social exclusion, UN Sustainable Development Goals;



- research- and evidence-based instructional design and teaching in HE;
- systems and technologies to support transformational change in HE;
- innovative building and physical space designs in HE, e.g. learning commons, library makerspaces; and
- evaluation of student belonging and engagement especially as it relates to/results from design of instruction, online and physical environments, academic innovation programs, etc.

Such a special issue is timely as contemporary society is faced with challenging and complex issues, including: “climate change disasters, public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, gun violence, wars, and growing societal inequality, instability, and unrest (UNESCO, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2020) (Reynolds, 2023, p. 315).

This fraught prevailing context is having a significant impact on students’ wellbeing and mental health. Furthermore, as they enter college and HE, many are at a highly formative time in their lives, which underscores the duty of care that HE institutions and professionals have with respect to students’ holistic development and their preparation for their future personal and professional lives: “they are often emerging adults undergoing a transitional developmental stage involving significant personal-level growth of self-understanding and the stabilisation of one’s own mental health and capacity” (Reynolds, 2023, pp. 316–317). Meanwhile, and in tandem, the global challenges we now face necessitate that HEIs adapt existing and innovate new curricula, to support the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, placing students and educational institutions in a pressure cooker to prepare in altogether new ways for new challenges and crises, during vulnerable stages of students’ lives, for these sweeping changes (2023).

HE is currently situated in a challenging context. The return to campuses globally since the wholesale disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic has been complicated by the emergence of AI and its impact on learning, assessment and academic integrity (Cotton *et al.*, 2024). The pandemic has also raised foundational questions regarding the place and purpose of HE, particularly the importance of a new conceptualisation of care in education – for oneself, for others and for the planet (Lynch, 2022), with many students also managing significant caring responsibilities. The pandemic also represented a lever for change, and illustrated new possibilities, especially in terms of digital education futures and the potential of technology to mediate innovative learning, teaching and assessment (Hall *et al.*, 2020, 2022; Reynolds and Chu, 2020).

Nonetheless, there has been significant *learning loss* Gage *et al.* (2023), as a consequence of the pandemic resulting in students with new differing needs than previously existed, entering HE environments and requiring support. Furthermore, HE institutions and universities are increasingly expected to operate within a neo-liberal, globalised environment, framed by unnuanced coarse metrics and “learning analytics” (Lynch, 2015), along with pressure to address economic and fiscal objectives and austerities, while concomitantly protecting the essential notion of a HE: the holistic development of the person as an active citizen who contributes creatively and critically to civic society (Hall *et al.*, 2024). Universities and HE institutions internationally are also subject to increasing scrutiny from funding agencies and organisations (Whitten *et al.*, 2020).

Tinto’s (2003) foundational work on student belonging and engagement posits that students remain enrolled in HE if two dimensions, in particular, are effectively addressed and supported: the academic and social aspects of the student experience. As outlined by Whitten *et al.* (2020, p. 100), “Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life of the college and develop an interest in learning”.

This special issue welcomed submissions exploring how HE institutions are working to design and develop innovative learning, teaching and assessment that engages students with intellectual debate and discourse, in interesting and meaningful ways. Furthermore, Tinto also identifies the social dimension of students' experience as crucial to their belonging; therefore, how can HE institutions design and develop innovations and supports that enhance students' social integration, complementary to their formal educational engagement?

Belonging and engagement are conceptualised broadly in this special issue and include initiatives and innovations that enhance the student and educator experience, and particularly, those that emphasise students' holistic development as self-directed learners with the confidence and resilience to engage and thrive in college life, and beyond.

McCormack's article, "Active Learning in a Neuroaffirmative Classroom", addresses the concern that neurodivergent students can feel unbelonging in HE. The research outlined in this important and insightful contribution demonstrates how we can challenge neuronormative practice within our classrooms, conceptualising and creating more inclusive learning environments for all.

The second article, by Chakravarty and Satpathy, examines how we can support work-life balance, and the emotional and professional sustainability of educators in HE, positing a multi-ontological framework that focuses on enhancing the inclusion of tertiary level teachers. Importantly, based on a robust foundation and synthesis of literature and research, the paper provides a cogent conceptual model that is adoptable and adaptable across HE institutions internationally.

Burns *et al.*'s paper examines two contemporary innovations, Universal Design for Learning and Ungrading, and students' experiences of these approaches in STEM. The article highlights the potential and impact of creativity for inclusion in learning, teaching and assessment in HE settings.

Casey and Hardiman's article explores how community education outreach and campus-based programmes can foster inclusion, belonging and engagement for communities that have traditionally been under-represented in HE; in this paper, the Irish Traveller Community. Importantly, the research shows how both outreach programmes (with collaborative partners) and campus learning initiatives can significantly and positively influence engagement in HE.

The paper, by Burke *et al.*, highlights the key learning design and governance aspects of the deployment of a virtual learning environment (VLE) at a single HE institution. The article provides important insights into how VLE implementation can be systematically undertaken, to enable a student-centred digital educational infrastructure, promoting and enhancing inclusion and future skills development.

O'Brien *et al.*'s paper, "Co-creating sustainable learning communities in a transdisciplinary course", offers unique and novel insights into how universities and HEIs can foster real and reciprocal partnership. The research outlined in this article demonstrates how HE can enhance its engagement with community and the public, working together to tackle pressing challenges in collaboration that is characterised by authentic mutuality.

The article by Akahome illustrates how bespoke design of digital and physical spaces can enhance engagement and collaboration in HE. Furthermore, the paper presents design principles/sensitivities that can be used to configure inclusive learning and teaching spaces.

Tella and Oladokun's paper examines the impact of digitalisation and emotional design of textbooks on the reading habits and engagement in reading of Library and Information Science students in Nigeria. Based on data gathered from 362 undergraduate students across ten universities, the study offers interesting insights into factors that influence students' engagement, digital textbook design and emotionality, especially with respect to academic reading.

The article by Stallworth *et al.* outlined research undertaken with 34 first-generation graduate students in the US. The paper discussed the positive and negative effects of the COVID-19

pandemic on engagement and learning experiences, highlighting in particular the impact on students' sense of belonging. Of relevance to other HE researchers and teachers, the article provides important lessons for the design of online graduate education.

AI is a key contemporary development in information and learning sciences internationally, which is creating both challenges and opportunities for HE in particular. In the research paper reported by Valenzuela-Arvizu *et al.* the authors outline a validated heuristic for usability assessment of AI-augmented educational software, predicated on a conceptualisation of user experience (UX) that synthesises inclusion, pedagogy and technology. Although at an initial stage of design and validation, the SmartUsability instrument offers an approach with significant, broad application potential in terms of usability assessment in the "Age of AI".

Based in the context of Zimbabwean University Libraries, Tsekea and Chipika's article examines how inclusive supports can be designed and mediated, for a specific user group in particular: graduate teacher education students. They offer a number of conclusions and recommendations, which can enable university libraries to enhance the inclusivity of services they provide.

In their article, Farrell *et al.* adopt a novel research-creation approach to illuminating and informing our understanding of the complex phenomenon of belonging in HE, especially in the contemporary, post-pandemic moment. The paper is especially interesting in engaging with both staff and students' creative and diverse conceptions of belonging.

The research reported in this article is based on the Belonging Project, the aim of which is to contribute to promotion of belonging by better understanding what belonging entails, as we returned to campuses following the global disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper provides important methodological insights into how we can design future education to enhance and promote belonging, through collaborative forms of attending, such as research-creation.

In the article by Bozzi *et al.*, the authors explore the potential of the innovative methodology of the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) to foster engagement and belonging among PhD/doctoral students in a university setting. The paper illustrates how this novel, dialogic approach can be designed and deployed to enhance and promote cross-disciplinary engagement and intersubjectivity in HE.

The co-editors are pleased to present to readership the thirteen articles included in this special issue, and we trust the respective articles offer critical and informative insights into salient aspects of how we can design HE, innovatively and inclusively, for now and into the future, for diverse communities of learners and teachers.

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#### Further reading

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#### About the Guest Editors

Prof Tony Hall is Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Galway. He served as Director of Educational Design Research for Designing Futures, funded by the Irish Government, €7.57m from 2020 to 2025. Tony is a former second-level teacher (Physical Education, English, ICT) and School ICT Coordinator. At University of Galway he teaches at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and is Director of Doctoral Studies in the School of Education. His research interests centre on educational design research and learning sciences. A member of Ireland's Teaching Council, Tony is the incoming President of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland.

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