

Belonging and the post-pandemic university: a research-creation approach

Emma Farrell

Department of Psychology, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

Shane D. Bergin

School of Education, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, and

Robert Farrelly

Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, Central Design Team, Dublin, Ireland

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Abstract

Purpose – Belonging is an ontologically unstable concept that has resisted efforts towards definition and operationalisation. Yet, sense of belonging is associated with a range of positive outcomes in higher education. This paper aims to describe a research-creation approach to understanding belonging in the post-pandemic university.

Design/methodology/approach – This project adopted a research-creation approach that combined creative and academic research practices to develop a hermeneutic understanding (Verstehen) of belonging across one large university community in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings – Written, visual and scholarly representations of the phenomenon of belonging revealed the people, places, shared experiences and recognition that formed the essence of belonging for participants in this project.

Originality/value – This research-creation project offers a reminder that efforts to design future education so that it supports sense of belonging must begin with attending to the ways and conditions in which belonging is currently supported in higher education. In this way, any initiatives or interventions to support belonging will align with the inherently diverse and nebulous nature of belonging as a phenomenon.

Keywords Belonging, Higher education, Wellbeing, Research-creation, Creativity, Interdisciplinary

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Belonging is the need to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to experience real connectedness for who we are and what we bring to the world (Farrell, 2024; Brown, 2021). It is recognised as a fundamental psychological need driven by stable and consistent relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 2017). A sense of belonging is associated with a range of positive outcomes for students in higher education (Allen *et al.*, 2024). Over the past two decades, a growing body of literature has affirmed that a positive sense of belonging strongly



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influences students' academic engagement (Strayhorn, 2018), motivation (Pedler *et al.*, 2022), persistence (Strayhorn, 2012) and mental health outcomes (Gopalan *et al.*, 2022; Allen *et al.*, 2024). Sense of belonging has taken on a greater sense of urgency and importance in light the disconnecting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic, with its move to online teaching, learning and assessment, created new possibilities for the potential of technology to enhance higher education (Hall *et al.*, 2022), it also served to further solidify the idea of education as a commodity to be purchased, accrued and "used" for competitive advantage in a capitalist neo-liberal economy (Higgins, 2021). Moreover, it served to raise questions about the very purpose of higher education, the need for university campuses and attendance in a post-pandemic housing crisis and to demarcate new boundaries between education and care in the university (Lynch, 2022). In this context of care, competition and commodification universities are increasingly seeking to support and enhance students' sense of belonging for the very benefits outlined above. However, while the benefits of belonging are well documented, the steps, interventions and initiatives required to achieve this sense of belonging are less well-defined.

1.1 *The ontological instability of belonging*

Belonging is a nebulous term, one which evokes a sense of resonance in those who have experienced it but whose ontological instability leaves it variously defined in terms of feelings (Hurtado *et al.*, 2007) and functions (Thomas, 2012). Belonging has been understood as fitting in (Jones, 2010) and as being more than simply fitting in (Brown, 2021). It has been described in terms of connectedness (Hurtado and Carter, 1997), community (McMillan and CHAVIS, 1986), a sense of membership (Tinto, 2012) and a sense of safety (Ignatieff and GUTMANN, 2011). Indeed, in their systematic review of 33 studies on belonging in higher education, Allen *et al.* (2024) found researchers use 50 different definitions and constructs of belonging, often without strong theoretical basis or consistency. This broad but overlapping range of theories and definitions offers an initial indication of just how illusive a universal, reifiable, evidence-based belonging intervention for university students can be (Finkelstein and Young, 2024). Aspirations of a general initiative or intervention to improve student sense of belonging are further scuppered by research that highlights the potential nefarious influence of the implicit cultural assumptions that are often embedded in ideas of belonging. These assumptions, largely centring on western ideas of individual self-expression, have the potential to exclude or misrepresent those from non-western cultural traditions (Franklin and Tranter, 2021; Museus *et al.*, 2017). Given existing research highlights how international students, minority group and first-generation university students already report the lowest sense of belonging in the university community (Pedler *et al.*, 2022), the potential for university-led initiatives to widen the gap between those who feel like they belong and those who do not remain a real concern. One potential way to address this concern, and increase our knowledge of an ontologically unstable phenomenon such as belonging in a way that is context- and culturally-sensitive, is through research-creation (Loveless, 2019; McCormack, 2008).

1.2 *Research-creation and belonging*

Research-creation has been defined as "an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation" (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2015). Early formulations by Chapman and Sawchuk (2012) position research-creation as a hybrid practice that brings together intervention, analysis and creative process, emphasising its capacity to generate knowledge through

making rather than solely through representation. In its focus on understanding through creation, research-creation stands apart from traditional research approaches which focus on understanding through accounting (in statistical, written or mixed-methods form). In a university context, research-creation, as a mode of understanding, “help[s] render daily life in the academy more pedagogically, politically, and affectively sustainable” (Loveless, 2019, p. 3). What makes research-creation unique amongst arts-driven or arts-based research, is that it generates new knowledge through or by means of artistic practice rather than using artistic practice to render public knowledge generated through research (Loveless, 2019). In this way, according to Loveless (2019), research-creation has the potential not only to produce new and unique forms of knowledge but to act “as a mode of resistance to individualist, careerist, and bibliometric university cultures” (p. 8).

Research-creation emphasises the processual, emergent and affective dimensions of research. Manning (Manning, 2016) conceptualises creative practice as a mode of thinking-in-action, foregrounding the experiential, the relational and the not-yet-formed. Similarly, Springgay and Truman (Springgay and Truman, 2017) situate research-creation within post-qualitative inquiry, where knowledge emerges through embodied experimentation and interpersonal engagement. As such, research-creation cannot be achieved alone. It calls for inter- or trans-disciplinary collaboration – a reconfiguration of standard disciplinary boundaries and norms. Its focus is not on outputs nor accreditation nor the metrics that are the currency of research in the neo-liberal university. Indeed research-creation is itself an act of resistance at what Irish President Michael D. Higgins refers to as “a perilous juncture in the long history of the academy” (Higgins, 2021). The perilous juncture Higgins refers to is one where market forces and “the inexorable drive towards a utilitarian reductionism” have compromised, indeed consumed, “universities as sites, sources and experiences of learning” (Higgins, 2021). Research-creation seeks, not to “produce” in the utilitarian sense that Higgins refers to, but to engage a more creative, sensually attuned, mode of inhabiting the university as a location in which, to paraphrase the Irish poet Paul Durcan (2012), we live and move and have our being (Furco, 1996; Israel *et al.*, 2005).

This paper presents one research-creation project which sought to bring academic and artistic tools, from diverse disciplinary traditions, together to understand the phenomenon of belonging in the context of the post-pandemic university.

2. Design

The Belonging and the Post-Pandemic University Project, or The Belonging Project for short, is a research-creation project that aimed to understand the phenomenon of belonging in higher education in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. It began in 2021, just as students and staff were beginning to emerge from more than a year of COVID-19 lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. The public discourse painted students as “snowflakes” and staff as “workshy” as we struggled with atrophied social skills in an environment of risk and uncertainty. The virus was still prevalent, and few students or staff were vaccinated. Mental health was framed both as a cause for concern and a reason to lift the public health measures introduced to keep people safe. For young people, a “tsunami” (Holland, 2021) of mental health difficulties was posited as invisible and threatening as the virus itself. At this stage the kindness and consideration of the early phases of the pandemic were replaced by a worn, stretched, paper-thin feeling of resentment and frustration – particularly for those with caring responsibilities, loss or living out the lockdowns in lonely, crowded or less than suitable situations (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). It was in this environment of frustration, disenchantment and alienation that the idea for a project that (re-)evoked the empowering potential of connection and belonging first emerged. A team of colleagues from across one

university was brought together, each with disciplinary expertise in mental health, public health, public engagement, psychology, philosophy, literature and design, to creatively consider what it means to belong in and to the university.

The aim of The Belonging Project was to understand the phenomenon belonging in a university context. It began with the premise that to effectively support the return of students and staff to the university community, to nurture belonging, we must first understand the nature and meaning of the phenomenon itself. The emphasis was not on a theoretical or numerical description of the state of belonging, but rather a rich and personal evocation of the experience of belonging as it is lived co-constructed through research-creation. In this way the project adopted a relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology and, working from the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, sought to understand the phenomenon of belonging in its “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1996):

Hermeneutics is the announcement and making known of the being of a being in its being (Heidegger, 1999, p. 7).

In this focus on hermeneutically announcing and making known the being of a being, in this case the “being” of belonging, through research-creation, The Belonging Project realises Dilthey’s (2002) assertion that Understanding (*Verstehen*), with a capital U, can only be achieved hermeneutically – that is, through the interpretation of human objectifications (word, speech, art, music etc.) of lived experiences:

The human sciences form an epistemic nexus that strives to attain objectively engaged and objectively valid conceptual cognition of the interconnectedness of lived experiences in the human-historical-social world (Dilthey, 2002, p. 23).

The Belonging Project strove to create conceptual cognitions, or understandings, of the interconnectedness of the lived experience of belonging in the human-historical-social world at the unique moment in time that was the very beginning of the post-pandemic era. The objectifications it pursued were, by its research-creation nature, creative – bypassing positivist attempts to reify and attempting to hermeneutically connect with vivid and personal representations of the phenomenon itself. While it may be argued that such vivid and personal representations lack transferability beyond the individual, the university and the moment in time, their “fittingness” (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 32) into similar contexts ensures that the insights generated through this research-creation examination of belonging are applicable and “useful” beyond the individual:

A study meets the criterion of fittingness when its findings can “fit” into contexts outside the study situation and when its audience views its findings as meaningful and applicable in terms of their own experiences (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 32).

Beginning with an interdisciplinary team of scholars and designers, The Belonging Project aimed to understand the phenomenon of belonging in three ways:

- (1) *In word*. In late 2022 students, academics, administrative, technical and research staff from across the university community were invited to share written expressions of what it felt like to belong on campus. They were asked to evoke a sense of belonging, what it feels like, where it is found and the conditions in which it flourishes. This “open call to writers” (Figure 1) resulted in 78 written submissions in the form of poetry, stories, autobiographical reflections and haiku. These submissions were reviewed by the research-creation team and forty were selected for the second stage based on their evocation of the phenomenon of belonging. The 40 shortlisted pieces included the experiences of undergraduate,



Figure 1. The Belonging Project invited written submissions from every member of the university community

postgraduate and PhD students, post-doctoral and professional researchers, administrative and technical staff from across the university and academic staff from each of the university's faculties and institutes.

- (2) *In visual creation:* The National College for Art and Design's (NCAD) Bureau + programme is an internship programme for third year design, illustration and motion picture students that provides the opportunity to work with real-world commissions. Each of the 40 Bureau + students were read and engage with the written submission and select one that most deeply resonated with them. Their task was to creatively interpret the written descriptions of belonging and to creatively express the essence of belonging in visual format. A key aim of this second stage of The Belonging Project was to introduce the participating students to a human-centred design approach, placing the phenomenon as it is lived at the centre of the creative process. It sought to ensure that each creative response reflected the perspective of the original writer while remaining accessible and engaging for a wider audience. NCAD Bureau + students were issued a clear brief and exhibition format from the outset and their work was guided by the Double Diamond framework (Ball, 2019; Fallin, 2022; The British design council, 2019) moving through two cycles of divergent and convergent with the aim to "design the right thing and design things right" (Ball, 2019) while keeping the "user" at the centre of the process. In *Discover*, participants explored the meaning and context of their chosen text, researching its themes and tone. In *Define*, they were supported to set clear goals for the piece while *Develop* encouraged them to iterate, test ideas and refine concepts through feedback. Finally, in *Deliver*, the creatives prepared their finished work for exhibition and presented it to peers, staff and the wider project team, explaining their interpretation and design decisions. This structured yet flexible process encouraged collaboration, iteration and inclusive communication. By engaging closely with the brief, The Belonging Project team and their peers, the creatives produced work that connected strongly with the original submissions. At the exhibition, several writers remarked on the strength of this connection, showing how the process not only produced compelling creative outputs but also forged new links of belonging between individuals and across universities. The final 40 visual representations of belonging were exhibited alongside the written evocations across four public exhibition spaces in MoLI the Museum of Literature of Ireland in August 2023 (e.g. Figures 2–8).



Figure 2. A Belonging Project participant with their story and its associated artwork



Figure 3. The Belonging Project Art Exhibition In the Museum of Literature of Ireland (MoLI) in August 2023 (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2022)

- (3) *In conversation*: An interdisciplinary seminar, bringing together the voices and perspectives of students and scholars representing each of the project's diverse disciplines (art, literature, philosophy, student support, public engagement and more), offered a variety of viewpoints and emphases on what it feels like and means to belong to the university. Hosted alongside the launch of the exhibition in MoLI on the 29th of August 2023, this symposium brought together authors,



Figure 4. Artwork for “Maybe I don’t need a thousand welcomes – a few true ones are enough” by Mojisola



Figure 5. The places where belonging is found on campus

artists, scholars, university leaders, family and friends to share in a relational and dynamic expression of belonging that represented research-creation at its best [1].

In line with the principles of research-creation, The Belonging Project achieved its aim of creating deeply resonant understandings of the phenomenon of belonging. It succeeded in



Figure 6. Still of the animation developed by a Bureau+ student Rob based on Cian’s written submission “DJ Basket Case”



Figure 7. Creative interpretation of Mary’s “The Wife of Bath”

producing dialogic, systemic and attitudinal shifts in how we understand and cultivate belonging in higher education. It led to belonging being named as a strategic priority in the university’s new 10-year strategy and a financial investment in belonging-related initiatives on campus. More than that, however, The Belonging project succeeded in rendering the phenomenon of belonging more pedagogically, politically and affectively available. What



Figure 8. Artwork for “A short story about a blow torch”

follows is a description of the conditions for belonging as rendered available by The Belonging Project.

3. Results – conditions for belonging

The Belonging Project, through its research-creation approach, yielded key insights into the people, places, shared experiences and recognition that form the basis of belonging on campus. Each of these “conditions” will be discussed in turn drawing on written and artistic examples from The Belonging Project.

3.1 People

Participants in The Belonging Project described the people who helped them feel like they belonged. Interpersonal relationships, particularly between young people and “one good adults” (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012; Dooley *et al.*, 2019) are recognised as critical in the development of mental health well-being in young adults. This is particularly true for those who are at risk such as Mojisola [2]. Mojisola was an undergraduate student who described her experience of higher education as an asylum seeker attending university from direct provision (a system whereby the Irish Government provides accommodation, food and a small weekly allowance to people seeking international protection while their asylum claim is being processed):

Back in my country school had been my place of refuge. So the day I decided to enrol in [university], I hoped it would offer me same protection and freedom. However, when I stepped on the campus I realised I was in a different situation, I don’t belong here. [...] My social status in Ireland was nothing to be proud of. A female Nigerian asylum seeker living in the direct provision system and oh I was pregnant and a mature student. I felt dirty, intimidated, exposed, out of place, with nothing but my need to belong and my passion for education (Mojisola).

For Mojisola, it was interaction with the university's access service and the careful support and attention of its committed staff, that generated a sense of belonging:

The environment was calming and warm. I felt like I could do anything, be whatever and whoever I wanted which at the time was a writer. I was greeted with a warm smile by a staff who ended up being a truly wonderful and helpful person. I felt a sense of connection to this place and I wanted badly to belong (Mojisola).

Mojisola described how one university access staff member in particular went to great lengths to support her continued engagement in higher education when Mojisola was moved to a direct provision centre 100 km from the university in her first year:

I remember [access staff member] emailing me back and forth, sending letters of support, contacting people and linking me with supports. Needless to say I could have given up but I did not because people in [university name] stood by me and for me. [...] I saw that I was not crazy to want education as an asylum seeker and a mother. I found my place and my voice with [university name]. The school has not only offered me a rare opportunity to be able to study, it has supported me and kept me in (Mojisola).

The people who "keep us in" the university were represented time and again in the stories of belonging – the faculty member who made time to encourage the overwhelmed undergraduate not to drop out, the sports coach who created a sense of belonging for a student who "felt so different to others" [William], the morning coffee gatherings that enabled a staff member feel "you belong here in this special place" [Eliza]. These stories, and the artwork they evoked, remind us that belonging is an interpersonal phenomenon, one that requires the people, time and space for togetherness and connection.

3.2 Places

The physical environment of the university appeared in many of the experiences of belonging shared by students and staff. These ranged from a lake on campus to the basement of a building, long gone, where card games were played between lectures:

For me, the engineering lake represents a sense of belonging. A reminder that while I may feel homesick from time to time, that I may still long for simpler days on the beach, I have found bliss and comfort in my new home (Claudia).

One student, Seán wrote about how, as a university student, he found himself stepping into the warm glow of the university church:

I take a seat in the back to warm my hands for a while. It's a welcoming space. Small crowd. [...] I like it here. No pressure. Not sure how I feel [...] do you have to believe to come here? I'll stay a while anyway (Seán).

The Bureau + artist who selected Seán's story described how "like [Seán] in the story, I found solace in visiting my local church and sitting in silence, surrounded by the comfort of the building and the many individuals who had sought refuge there before me. In creating my final piece, I was drawn to the church's architecture and wanted to pay homage to the structure itself [...] seeking to capture the sense of community and belonging that it represents for so many" (Figure 3). Through the research-creation process, and the visual representation of the essence of belonging in Seán's piece, the places, the warmth, the welcome, that each member of the university community craves, is richly evoked.

3.3 Shared experiences

Many of the written expression of belonging submitted by participants in The Belonging Project centred on shared experiences. These ranged from sport teams to spending time in the

library; from volunteering with humanitarian groups to the experience of the Thursday morning “poster run” as student societies vied for the best spots on the newly cleared university notice boards. Cian described how:

I’m autistic. [...] Because of that, a part of myself, specifically my head, can feel about as hollow as a large chocolate egg and twice as fragile. Unable to do anything without smashing into a million, tiny messy pieces (Cian).

Cian started university in 2020:

My entire first year was spent in Zoom classes. [...] the only impression I had of the campus was of a place I couldn’t visit. Which meant I was stuck looking at my cracked magic mirror of a laptop screen, talking to people that could have just as easily been voices in my head, while the neighbourhood around me got smaller and my hopes just as much (Cian).

Then in Year 2, finally spending time at the college, I heard through the grapevine that a radio station, [university radio station name], was looking for DJs for their new term. And I put my name down because if I didn’t like the people there, I could at least share the music that I did like. A year and a half later, that one decision made me feel needed at [university name] (Cian).

Cian found that his deep interest in, and knowledge of, a very specific style of music was an asset in his new role as DJ: “*I was able to fully flaunt my music fanaticism on live air.*”

Cian reflected on how essential the university radio station, and the community he found there, was to his sense of belonging on campus:

No man, unstable as they are, is an island. And the only thing you can do to fight against it is by finding people like you to share with, those with common ground similar to yours and who can all work together to help get each through the long days that university life is known for (Cian).

Mary too described how, on returning to university in her 60’s “I had imposter syndrome. What was I doing here with these bright young people?”:

I finally entered the lecture hall and hid behind a pole at the back. Although I was mesmerised at the lecture and so happy finally to be in college, I still had a feeling of not belonging (Mary).

For Mary, it was the shared experiences of a class project based on Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath* that provided an opportunity to overcome her feeling of not belonging:

I simply got into the spirit of the thing. I was one of the guys. We decided to do a radio podcast [...] I played the nun who berates the wife as a scarlet woman. I mimicked her voice in a Margaret Thatcher arrogant and judgemental voice [...] I felt an enormous amount of camaraderie (Mary).

The group were awarded a prize for their work together and Mary described how the shared experience of making the podcast helped forge new friendship with her younger classmates:

As I sat in the lecture hall with my now, buddies, I felt an enormous amount of camaraderie. After that I joined the students at coffee breaks and outside of campus. I joined them if they sat on a bus I was on. I felt, I really belonged thanks to *The Wife of Bath* (Mary).

Shared experiences, be they inside or outside the classroom, provide an opportunity for each individual to bring their unique skills and attributes. For Cian, the radio station offered him an opportunity to “bring” his deep knowledge of a music sub-culture and Mary’s rich life experience and maturity added enormously to her group project on a text they were studying. Shared experiences take the focus away from the individual and offer an external *locus* into which individuals can collectively contribute. In this way they provide the conditions for belonging – an opportunity to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to experience real connectedness for who we are and what we bring to the world (Farrell, 2024; Brown, 2021).

Indeed, such experiences embody Wilhelm von Humboldt's very definition of education as a process that "can be fulfilled only by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay". In this way, the shared experiences offered and supported by the unique educational environment of the university have the potential to nurture a deep and lasting sense of belonging.

3.4 Recognition

In light of the opening definition of belonging as the need to be recognised for who we are and what we bring to the world, it was unsurprising that recognition emerged in subtle yet important ways in student and staff written expressions of belonging. A university technician shared the following account of a time he felt he belonged on campus:

I received the following email from one of our school admins recently: >>Hi [Tim].

A student has just dropped a blow torch into the office.

They found it in room 129 under the desk and think it might belong to you?.

Regards and thanks, <<<.

I appreciate this is a somewhat dubious reputation to have among my students and colleagues but I was nonetheless filled with a sense of finally having found my place in [university name]!- Tim.

While Tim's written entry is short and witty, it contains an essential insight into the phenomenon of belonging – when we feel like we are recognised and appreciated for who we are and what we bring to a community, we feel like we belong. Efforts to recognise and acknowledge staff contributions often focus on achievements or contributions to financial or strategic goals. Belonging requires a kind of recognition that transcends recognising what people do and instead focuses on what they, by being their authentic self, being to a group or community.

Sarah described how she found her sense of belonging in the university dance class:

I don't feel like I must pretend to be someone I'm not when I'm there. Everyone is supportive, and when I perform with them, I feel like I'm an essential part of something special (Sarah).

Being recognised for who she truly is, and not who she feels she has to pretend to be, was central to Sarah's sense of belonging and enabled her to feel "an essential part of something special". Brown (2021) describes how "belonging is being accepted for you, fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else" (p. 163). This recognition was a recurring theme at every stage of the research-creation process – in the written expressions of belonging, such as those shared above; in the creative interpretations and the many discussions between Bureau + students and The Belonging Project team; in the scholarly engagement with the written and visual representations at the project seminar, and; in the project itself as it brought together students, colleagues, friends and family to recognise the importance of belonging in and to the university community.

4. Discussion

This research-creation examination of the phenomenon of belonging has provided rich insights into the conditions for belonging in the post-pandemic university. It has illuminated the people, places, shared experiences and recognition at the heart of a sense of belonging for students and staff alike in the university context, and provided illustrative first-hand written and visual representations of each. This discussion section considers these insights in relation to the question framing this special issue: how can we design future higher education so that

it supports and enhances students' belonging and engagement, particularly in this complex post-pandemic moment when we are presented with opportunities to do things differently amidst significant challenges? In doing so, it focuses on the interpersonal, pedagogical and institutional aspects of [Finkelstein et al.'s \(2025\)](#) operational framework of belonging for college and university success.

4.1 *Belonging can be nurtured (but not forced)*

The opening definition of belonging as the need to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to experience real connectedness for who we are and what we bring to the world ([Farrell, 2024](#); [Brown, 2021](#)) offers the first indication of the individual and organic nature of belonging. No two written, visual or scholarly representations of belonging generated through the research-creation process were alike. They required timing, happenstance, the right people in the right place at the right time and the general good luck that many participants named directly. From Mojisola's encounter with a staff member who went above and beyond to "keep her in" to the existence and opportunity of a university radio station that catered to, and supported, Cian's interest in music meant that he "could finally express myself for who I am". Participants described and represented books, people, nightclubs, corners of the library, projects, clubs, societies, rites of passage and even the bus shared on the long commute to and from university as central to their sense of belonging. The challenge in designing future higher education is that belonging cannot be reduced to one initiative or institution within the university. It cannot be controlled, "rolled out", nor instigated. Nurturing a sense of belonging requires investing in the health of the university eco-system. In creating the people, the time, the resources, the opportunities for each individual student and staff member to find a way being part of something bigger than themselves and enables them to experience meaningful connectedness for who they are and their unique contribution to the world.

4.2 *Belonging happens inside the classroom (as well as outside)*

Efforts to improve students' sense of belonging often centre on the extra-curricular initiatives ([de Sisto et al., 2022](#); [Thies and Falk, 2023](#)). The Belonging Project too provides examples of the societies, social networks and campus rituals that fostered belonging. Alongside these aspects of university life, the work of teaching and learning – at the very heart of higher education – offers one of the richest wells for belonging. Mary's "Wife of Bath" experience above is a good example of this: "I simply got into the spirit of the thing [...] I felt an enormous amount of camaraderie". In this regard, [Finkelstein and Young \(2024\)](#) argue that belonging is not just a by-product of learning; it is a mechanism that drives it. Students' persistence and success are shaped less by performance metrics than by the extent to which they feel recognised, included and are valued within academic spaces ([Seymour and Hunter, 2019](#)). The lecture hall, seminar or lab is where academic belonging takes root ([Beard et al., 2014](#)). They are places where identity, agency and participation are practiced every day. Classrooms that welcome heterogeneous perspectives and inclusive identities not only broaden intellectual horizons but also affirm that all voices matter in the co-construction of knowledge ([Smith, 2024](#)). Recognising students, and indeed staff, for who they are and what they bring matters as much in the classroom, be it digital or physical, as it does outside in the social sphere.

4.3 *Belonging requires an all-institution approach*

While the classroom provides one of the richest wells for belonging, care might be given to the sum of the parts (the university), as well as to the parts alone (the classroom and the club).

Belonging can be the product of isolated initiatives, but these are each more likely when they are part of an ecosystem in which teaching, policy, infrastructure, research and culture value belonging as a mechanism and as an organising principle. Finkelstein and Young (2024) show that belonging must be understood across interconnected layers: the student experience, the capacity and wellbeing of staff and the culture of the institution itself. Each of these layers feeds the others. Students are more likely to persist and thrive when they encounter inclusive pedagogies and supportive communities; staff maybe better able to create those environments when they themselves feel recognised, secure and connected to the institution; and the university, as a whole, stands to grow public trust and standing when its constituent “parts” are engaged and proud to be part of, and represent, the institution as a whole.

5. Conclusion

The findings and insights shared above are neither radical nor groundbreaking. They are well substantiated in both literature and practice. But they, and the research-creation process by which they were generated, serve as a reminder that designing future education so that it supports and enhances students’ belonging and engagement calls, not for the radical or the new, but for careful attention to the ways, places, experiences and conditions in which belonging and engagement can already be found on campus. Such careful attention, be it in the form of research-creation or another creative mode of collaborative attending, offers the greatest opportunity for responsive and sustainable (re)design in higher education.

Notes

- [1.] More information on The Belonging Project can be found on www.belonging.ie
- [2.] All participant names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

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Corresponding author

Emma Farrell can be contacted at: emma.farrell@mu.ie