

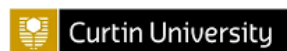
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Belonging to and beyond higher education in hybrid spaces

Final report May 2023

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This final report describes the work of the research team between 2022-3, and our progression and completion of the SRHE funded research study: 'Belonging to and beyond higher education in hybrid spaces'. In this report, we detail the initial stages of the project: ethical approval, data recruitment and collection, and then move towards detailing the findings, research outputs, and dissemination. We conclude by describing our key contributions as well as exploring our future plans for the research.

The research project commenced in May 2022 (after an internal administrative delay with finalising legal contracts). The overarching aim of the research study was to unpack the ways in which students experience and create belonging within the post-digital university. This aim arose from an awareness of the increasing role of the concept of belonging and of practices designed to build and foster belonging that have begun to dominate universities' approaches to supporting teaching and learning. At the same time the researchers noticed that such practices and discourses were rarely accompanied by a detailed awareness of the meaning of the sociological concept of belonging, by any explicit theorisation, or by any fine-grained analysis of students' lived experiences. The study therefore focused on students' day-to-day experiences of belonging and non-belonging, exploring the ways in which these experiences are negotiated through hybrid or blended approaches to learning, which have become prevalent within institutions internationally. Our objectives were to understand: How is the concept of belonging understood within contemporary higher education? How has belonging and the spaces in which students belong changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the move to online, and now hybrid learning? And how, and in what ways, should educators foster students' sense of belonging and engagement going forward?

Main report

A sense of belonging is closely related to students' well-being, and success at university but the disruption to higher education (HE) caused by the Covid-19 pandemic means that belonging needs to be considered in different ways. Without regular face to face contact or the social networking associated with on-campus study, creating a 'belonging environment' can no longer be taken-for-granted as uniform, or as located within fixed times and spaces. This research study examined the messy and diverse experiences of students' engagement and belonging to the post-digital pandemic university, by considering the ways in which students engaged with university spaces.

Specifically, the project sought to answer the following research questions:

- What assemblages of belonging do students create?
- In what ways did the boundaries of belonging shift as a result of the shift to online learning during Covid-19?
- What do students' day-to-day material interactions with the digital university look like?
- How do students actively create belonging when learning in hybrid mode?

In order to answer these questions, we adopted a video blogging method at two institutions: University of Surrey, UK and Deakin University, Australia, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with student participants. This research project built upon preliminary conceptual work that was carried out by members of the research team (Gravett and Ajjawi 2022). Taking this work forward, this empirical research, focused in particular on understanding in greater depth undergraduate students' experiences of belonging to higher education in hybrid learning environments. The two institutions have been chosen to capture a rich international focus; one is a research-intensive university while the other is part of the Australian Technology University Network and a leader in innovative digital engagement.

Vlogs have been chosen as an effective way of surfacing the lived experience of a context or situation. These short video narratives are made with the video function on a mobile device and accompanied by brief self-narration on the theme. To assist in this narration participants were provided with a series of questions or conversation starters that 'framed' the focus of the vlog. The combination of both audio and visual provided a more holistic overview of experience allowing the very personal and spatial implications

of the shift (or potential shift) from face-to-face learning to online modalities to be conveyed. We found participant-generated visual materials to be particularly helpful in exploring the taken-for-granted things in research participants' lives (Rose 2014) and in leading towards deep and personalised forms of engagement and self-representation (Gourlay 2010).

Each vlog was between 4-5 minutes in length and told in the first person, inviting the listener into areas of life that are personally significant to the story's creator. The questions/ conversation starts provided were as follows:

1. Tell us what a 'typical' day of study might look like for you?
2. Tell or show us your learning spaces? What specific objects (table, bed, screen, laptop, mug, pet etc) do you need when studying?
3. What does belonging look and feel like in these spaces?
4. Who / what helps you to belong to the course, university, etc.?

This participative, creative, method has surfaced how students' study and the role of belonging and technologies within these practices.

Specifically, this detailed approach enabled us to attend to the fine-grained material practices of students' learning, and this study also engaged sociomaterial theory in order to understand belonging from a new perspective, drawing upon the work of Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk (2011) and Gourlay and Oliver (2016; 2018). Adopting these approaches, we considered how learners understood their 'belonging' to university settings and equally how the boundaries or contours of belonging may have been disrupted or redefined due to the health crisis and the ensuing move to mass online learning. The study sought to achieve a close exploration of how students actually engage, and of the boundaries between distance and face-to-face learning.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from our relevant institutional ethics committees (the University of Surrey and Deakin University). Legal agreements were also created and signed between the three partner institutions. A data management plan was completed. Ethical approval involved the design of the instruments to be used (interview schedules and vlog prompts), consent and participant information sheets, as well as discussions regarding how and where to recruit participants and how and where to store data. Participants were advised that they can withdraw from the study and that their personal details and any associated data will be deleted.

Data collection and recruitment

Following this ethical approval and contractual phase, participants were invited to attend interviews and to create their vlogs. Undergraduate students were recruited via email and Learning Management System noticeboard announcements. Participants were invited to share experiences that they felt captured practices of belonging or non-belonging within different university spaces. The recruitment phase was very successful meaning that we were able to slightly over recruit. At the University of Surrey, fifteen participants were recruited from across Faculties. This included 13 interviews and 9 vlogs. At Deakin University, 13 vlogs and 6 interviews were obtained from 15 participants.

Data Analysis

All vlogs and interviews were transcribed by the project's two research assistants (see acknowledgements). The data analysis stage involved the three co-researchers reading the transcripts carefully and meeting on two occasions to discuss and compare initial insights. Based on these generative discussions, preliminary themes were identified and these preliminary themes guided the initial data analysis. Data were imported into NVivo12 where inductive line by line coding was conducted. A process of reflexive thematic analysis was adopted (Braun and Clarke 2019). In addition, the visual data was analysed using a close sociomaterial reading to enable insight into the 'ordinary' of our students' lives. We were attentive to the material content of the video data: what is literally on show and how it is shown (Rose 2014). We holistically interpreted this alongside the text of the vlogs seeking to identify the different spaces, objects and technologies that students occupied and how they described these in relation to their belonging. We paid attention to tone of voice, affect, and materials, as students walked through their spaces and narrated their experiences of belonging or non-belonging. The Principal Investigator also met with a project mentor (Prof Sian Bayne) who offered her insights into the field and relevant literature to guide the project. Research assistants also conducted literature searches of relevant literature to inform the project.

Findings

Our research produced a number of insights that enrich our understanding of the complex concept of belonging in higher education.

Multiple belongings and fluid spaces

In both our interviews and vlogs, our data surfaced how participants experienced a sense of belonging and non-belonging in multiple, fluid, and shifting ways. These included belonging as micro level interactions, as well as belonging on a broader, macro, level. Our data depicted social space and belonging as processual and fluid, resonating with Mol and Law's ideas of fluid space and topological multiplicity (1994; 2001). Students described different experiences of belonging in different times and spaces. Similarly, students also walked through their spaces within the vlogs to show the mobility of their belonging experiences. Belonging was conceptualised on multiple levels : as both a micro and a macro experience.

Sociomaterial production of belonging

The materiality of belonging permeated our data. Students told and showed us the significance of space, objects, and the senses, specifically sound and smell, to their conception, curation and enactment of belonging. Some objects were unsurprising such as a laptop; earphones; notebook; water bottle; keyboard; mouse; or screen – while others were more idiosyncratic and variable, for example, a specific outfit; earmuffs; a pet; music; a particular type of pen; a candle; a special perfume; sweets. The belonging space was produced and curated through these objects, which acted to connect students to topographically distant spaces such as the university. Engaging in the different spaces and material settings was often described as a purposeful act of belonging. Other students described the benefits of routine and regularity in purposefully creating belonging in specific spaces and times. Often these curation practices were also connected with feelings of safety and comfort.

Belonging and identity

Belonging was often integrally connected to the embodied nature of enacting a student identity. For students, belonging was imagined multiply – as both an internal and an external experience. Typical assumptions around spaces of belonging were uncomfortable for some students, and many students spoke of the deliberate choice to not belong or recounted their experiences of experiencing belonging in some spaces and not others. For some students, focusing upon the notion of belonging was a source of

particular discomfort, that could even destabilise notions of inclusivity. For other students, a sense of belonging was something that was experienced as temporal, fleeting and flickering.

New possible belongings

Our data surfaced how students conceptualise belonging in multiple and divergent ways. Our data show how belonging flows across spaces and dis/continuities. A sense of belonging is depicted as complex, fluid and as multiple micro and macro belongings. Belonging is both material and bound up with identity, it flickers and is in flux, it may stick, slip and slide in different times and spaces. Our findings challenge the stability of space for belonging, and the stability of belonging itself as a concept that can be measured in a single item at any one point in time. Belonging is not a fixed entity but instead needs to be considered in relation to the material, the temporal and the spatial.

We found that theorising belonging with the concept of social topologies (Mol and Law 1994; Law and Mol 2001) was helpful in expanding our understanding of this complex idea. For example, we might understand the topologies of belonging as multiple, fluid, and flickering in both absence and presence. Troubling belonging as a passive depiction of processes of assimilation becomes important. Students may need their own certainties of bounded space.

Our research enabled us to understand more about the complex relationship between belonging and equity. Our students told, and showed, us how they purposefully created remote spaces of belonging through curation of their desks, rooms, and resources within a connected assemblage of belonging practices. However, this was also shown to be an equity issue, as many students may need support to create these practices and spaces of security. Belonging may also be more difficult to enact remotely, and so additional attention needs to be paid to support diverse students in new ways. Understanding how students create tapestries of belonging becomes important. By reconnecting with the scholarship on space, connection and belonging from the wider social sciences, we can consider the complex topologies of belonging that institutions not only need to recognise but also productively engage with. In order to better foster multiple belongings for diverse students, we suggest that the first step is for educators to understand the nuances of belonging and to approach this multilayered concept with an awareness of its multiplicity. Pedagogical approaches need to be adopted that respond to the ways in which students understand belonging differently, that not only recognise the situated fluidity of belonging,

but equally acknowledge the discontinuities that our data has indicated. Understanding the complexity of students' experiences is work towards fostering the realisation of more equitable institutions.

This study contributes to the processual and situated understandings of belonging. The research also deeply considered the situatedness of learners who were asked to narrate their conceptions of belonging in their own lives and contexts. The results are valuable, pointing to new and more nuanced understandings of belonging, including a recognition of the micro and the macro signifiers of belonging as well as its multiplicity. Our research also highlighted the dangers of discourses of belonging leading to pressures to belong being experienced by students including belonging being understood superficially as being located through particular activities. Importantly, the student accounts pointed to the validity of non-belonging in certain times and spaces. In particular, the need to disentangle when non-belonging may be problematic – as a warning sign of an exclusionary practice – or when it may be a legitimate expression of choice by students who need or prefer to disconnect from specific communities or spaces. Our research also highlighted how some learners may wish simply to connect at different times and in different spaces. This is a critical insight as the importance of non-belonging is overlooked in much of the present practice that seeks to support students' experiences. Indeed, linguistically, the very concept of inclusivity occludes the possibility of existing 'outside', as a legitimate choice.

Our findings also highlighted how belonging is not necessarily a constant or enduring aspect of students' experiences. Participants reflected on the fleeting nature of belonging, this was a state that could come and go, a flickering state of being. This opens up discussions and reflections of the notion of discontinuities of belonging. These include questions regarding, when is non-belonging legitimate, and when is non-belonging a sign of an exclusion that warrants concern? When should educators seek to interfere with spaces of non-belonging? Our participants showed how they made active choices to belong within some spaces and communities and not others. Indeed, one student described the focus on belonging as unhelpful and as something that led her to experience guilt and a sense of exclusion. These complexities resonate with other research for example, Nieminen and Personen's work (2022) which shows that for some students withdrawing from enforced inclusivity may be an entirely appropriate decision, particularly if specific spaces or learning environments are built on ableism.

Our research leads us to propose that common assumptions around belonging belie its complex and diverse nature. In order to better foster more equitable experiences for diverse students, we suggest that the first step is for educators to understand the nuances of belonging and to approach this multilayered concept with an awareness of this multiplicity. Pedagogical approaches need to be adopted that respond to the ways in which students understand belonging differently, that not only recognise the situated fluidity of belonging, but equally acknowledge the discontinuities that our data has indicated.

Outputs

We have shared the insights from our research project in multiple ways. The first is via two research publications. These include: 'No one size fits all': Topologies of belonging in the digital university', by Karen Gravett, Rola Ajjawi, Sarah O'Shea (under review). This article focuses on how we can engage the concept of social topologies to think about both space and belonging, and we can consider more nuanced perspectives about how belonging is both understood and also enacted at an individual lived level. Our second paper: 'The politic of belonging: Belonging, agency and purpose in higher education', by Rola Ajjawi, Karen Gravett and Sarah O'Shea, examines the agentic nature of belonging and how individual learners often enact belonging in ways that disrupt or challenge institutional assumptions and expectations of the essential nature of belonging.

Both articles argue that challenging dominant discourses around belonging is particularly important at this pivotal moment in higher education. As we emerge from a global health crisis, the very purpose of higher education is being critically reframed in a number of countries. Expectations about the relational and communal reciprocation expected of the higher education sector forces us to question and examine taken for granted assumptions about how student identity is both enacted and performed. In both articles, we examine how calls for integrated, best practice, approaches to 'building' belonging in universities are unhelpful. Instead, we foreground the situated and mobile ways in which students make and create connections. We advocate for discussions with staff and students surrounding the affordances of embracing the multiple ways students choose to belong, at different times and in different spaces. We propose the need for complex conversations regarding the intersections of equity, inclusivity and belonging.

Early findings of our research have been presented at an event for Edinburgh University Centre for Digital Education in November 2022. This event was well attended and our findings were well received by other researchers working in this area. We will also be

sharing our findings at an online workshop held by the Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE) in 2023 (November 2023). We will also shortly be submitting and plan to present a paper for the SRHE Annual Research Conference in December 2023. The research will also be presented via a paper, 'Topologies of Belonging in the Digital University' at the European Conference for Educational Research (ECER) in August 2023.

We have also written and published a piece for the Australian news publication Campus Morning Mail (published May 2023). In future months, we plan to write and submit a piece for the SRHE newsletter.

Another important method of dissemination will be the creation of an online resource for educators. Since the completion of the research study, the research team have had the opportunity to apply for a further small grant from internal ESRC Impact Acceleration Award funding. This follow on project seeks to work with a website designer and a visual artist to create illustrations that can depict our data into a series of images. These images and possible case studies can then be compiled into an online web resource for educators' use. This resource: provisionally titled Making Connections, will include thinking points for generating a sense of belonging in online and face to face environments, drawn from the findings from our research. It will also include visualisations of our findings in order to generate more nuanced conceptions of how student belonging is understood. These illustrations and case studies will likely include resources that encourage educators to think about:

How might we understand and foster belonging in ways that are?

- Flexible
- Situated (including legitimate non-belonging)
- Multiple
- Evolving
- Micro
- Macro
- Purposeful

We hope to begin working on this online resource, should the funding be successful, in Summer 2023.

Conclusions

Despite early delays, this project has been a successful and enjoyable one. Recruitment went well and our data was rich, comprising a diversity of vlogs and interviews that enabled us to learn more about student's experiences in contemporary universities. We have also enjoyed analysing these data as well as engaging with new theories to understand the concept of belonging differently, as well as with the growing literature on this key topic of higher education studies.

Ultimately, our research findings prompt us to invite the higher education sector to think innovatively about belonging. We invite educators to reframe conceptions of belonging in universities, to resist the lure of the metricisation of the complexity of human experience, and to be cognisant of the dangers of such oversimplification in terms of fostering further exclusions. Our study surfaced that belonging is conceptualised and understood in multiple ways by different students, and that educators need to think in more nuanced ways about the concept of belonging, and how it is experienced. We suggest that these are approaches that are urgently needed if we are to understand diversity and connection in education in more meaningful and more ethical ways. Our next steps will be to further disseminate our findings via the creation of online resources and media publications, and via presentations, for example at the ECER conference in August 2023 and at the SRHE conference in December 2023.

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