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Disrupting the convention of a sustainable higher education: belonging, or not belonging, in the contemporary Business School

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Title: Disrupting the convention of a sustainable higher education: *belonging, or not belonging, in the contemporary Business School*

Summary: Sustainability within the context of higher education systems might be defined as the successful retention and progression of students from enrolment through to graduation and into further study or the graduate workforce. Retention and progression are assumed to be largely attributable to students' sense of belonging to their university learning community. However, this paper proposes that this assumption of students' wanting to belong merely reflects the personal experiences and beliefs of senior academics and university managers.

To better understand contemporary students' expectations and preferences for belonging, we use a theoretical framework based upon a synthesis of socio-cultural perspectives of identity, specifically 'identity work', and social identity. This framework informs an emerging empirical study that is outlined for discussion that will critically examine belonging in our contemporary individualistic age and, in turn, inform policies for sustainable universities.

Track: Identity

Disrupting conventions of a sustainable higher education:

Belonging, or not belonging, in the contemporary Business School

Introduction

Sustainability within the context of a higher education system might be defined simply as the successful retention and progression of students from enrolment through to graduation and into further study or the graduate workforce, ensuring that there is no leakage or loss (attrition). Yet annually over 175,000 students (6.4%) exit without completing their studies (HESA, 2022). While considerable efforts are made within institutions to minimise attrition, actions typically assume a conventional student experience aligned with that which we, as academics and university managers expected and experienced. We propose that to better understand sustainability in this context, we need to disrupt conventional understanding of students' higher education expectations and experience/s.

Such sustainability criteria form the basis of AdvanceHE's '*What is the secret of success in higher education?*' (e.g. Thomas, 2012a/b). This study implies that educational sustainability is dependent upon engendering student engagement and developing "knowledge and confidence" as effective and successful learners primarily through nurturing a culture of belonging (Thomas, 2012a, p.7). These three over-arching factors have maintained currency in the decade since and have witnessed significant examination over this time at a general level, individually, and in relation to the 'successes' of non-traditional groups including students from socio-economically disadvantaged (Mallman, 2017) and BAME backgrounds (Ahn, 2020), and commuter (Ahn and Davies, 2022), and first-generation students (Quinlan et al., 2021; Pedlar et al., 2022).

This paper considers the lynchpin factor, 'belonging', which enables both engagement and self-confidence (e.g. Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Anh and Davis, 2020). Students who feel that they belong will more likely engage academically with their university and their course, and with their peers socially, and this engagement will then reinforce their belonging (Matheson and Sutcliffe, 2017; Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Meehan and Howells, 2018).

Student belonging has been well studied within HE, although largely outside of identity studies, and consequently, limited theoretical examination has been made of the term itself. Indeed, 'identity' is often reported, undefined and unquestioned, as a key component of this belonging (Anh and Davis, 2020).

Paper intentions and rationale

The purpose of this paper is to discern a theoretical framework based upon a synthesis of socio-cultural perspectives of identity, specifically 'identity work' (Sturdy et al., 2006; Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003), and social identity theory (e.g. Tajfel, 1979; Turner, et al., 1979). This synthesis will, we propose, provide for a better understanding of the challenge of student belonging with the learning community comprising their peers, academics, and university. This framework informs an emerging empirical study that is outlined for discussion with delegates.

The objectives that will be explored in the paper are:

1. To critically examine the concept of 'belonging' within UK higher education
2. To examine identity theorising as a vehicle for understanding student belonging

3. To overview the emerging empirical study that is guided by the theoretical framework developed

Relevance of the research

A decline in belonging has been recognised within higher education for some years (Thomas, 2012b; Sotardi, 2022), and while readily understandable during the pandemic, the declining trajectory has continued (ONS, 2022). Academics have recounted extensive student disengagement and detachment from their peers, studies, programmes, and institutions these past two years (Manika et al., 2022; McMurtRie, 2022), and despite considerable efforts by programme and institutional staff to engender a sense of community.

A declining belonging raises significant social concern, especially within a context of 34% of young adults reportedly facing low levels of mental health (Mind, 2021; Weale, 2021; also Chen and Lucock, 2022). However, it also raises economic concerns for institutions as student attrition and declining satisfaction levels are critical university metrics and indicators.

In existing higher education studies, belonging is specifically considered in terms of students' belonging to their institution and with their programme peers. They are also predicated upon the assumption that students want to 'belong' and that there are barriers to enabling this belonging that institutions should be looking to mitigate. Yet, do contemporary students want or need that sense of belonging with their peers and their institution? Are contemporary students more likely to identify with social groups/communities beyond their universities, or in reflecting society in general, have no desire to be a part of a community, and thereby, do not invest socially in their university learning communities? Do contemporary students have a need to study together, interacting in physical space with their tutors and/or do they seek this community and belonging elsewhere, or in other ways? Is the fixation with a learning community metric, merely a reflection of policy makers' extrovert proclivities or, worse, a reflection of their personal experiences of elitist education and Oxbridge higher education based around colleges?

We thus explore the two main bodies of literature that underpin this paper: 'belonging' and 'identity' to discern a theoretical framework that is informing the development of the current empirical study.

Identity theory and belonging

Anthropology suggests that humans are innately social with a sense of security and self-confidence deriving from connections with others. Connection, or belonging, can be especially important in periods of transition, such as to university, and a failure to belong risks negative emotions arousing anxiety and alienation (Parr et al., 2020).

Within an HE context, belonging is generally agreed to refer to the extent to which students feel individually accepted, valued by, and connected to their programme of studies and/or institutions (Goodenow 1993); where they feel a sense of purpose (Thomas, 2012a/b). It is reciprocally related to their levels of engagement with their peers and academics as part of an academic community (Kahu and Nelson, 2018), as well as with their degree of academic self-confidence (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). Belonging is therefore considered to be a fundamental psychological need for higher education engagement, enjoyment (Ulmanen et al., 2016), and success (Lawson and Lawson, 2013; Pedlar et al., 2022). That social relationships with university peers are especially important, perhaps more important than a relationship with their institution itself, has been emphasised in the recent large-scale, 5,000-student, study

(WonkHE/Pearson, 2022; also Capper and McVitty, 2022). Ahn and Davis (2020) though also demonstrated how familiarity in students' surroundings such as their accommodation, the culture of the locality, and their personal attributes such as independence are also key determinants of wanting to belong or of a feeling of belonging.

Belonging has witnessed a particular surge in interest across the higher education literatures globally over the last couple of years which is reflective of the massification of higher education and associated extended class sizes (eWatson et al., 2010; Maunder, 2018; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019), increased widening in participation (Ahn and Davies, 2020), and the recent global pandemic (Chen and Lucock, 2022). It is assumed that these changes will have weakened social connections and that this weakening is problematic. Considerable focus has therefore been upon declining levels of student wellbeing, with a weak sense-of-belonging being assumed to significantly affect students' emotional state and mental health (Baik et al., 2019; Felten and Lambert, 2020; Capper and McVitty, 2022).

Understandings of belonging are dialectically entwined with the concept of identity which is integral to the processes of student learning (Reid et al., 2008; Nygaard et al., 2013). To understand this, we draw upon a synthesis of socio-cultural perspectives of identity, notably identity work, and social identity theory. From a socio-cultural perspective, identity is understood as an inter-subjective, interactional accomplishment (Watson, 2008), re/crafted and performed discursively with others in specific contexts at specific points in time (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity is thus the "meanings that individuals attach reflexively to their selves" for themselves and/or for others (Brown, 2015, 2) and/or the meanings imposed by others (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012).

Students' academic success is dependent upon them crafting a positive sense of learner/student identity (Briggs, et al., 2012; Ding and Curtis, 2021), and this assumed identity affects their behaviours which in turn determine the meanings that they take from their experiences and from the opportunities potentially open to them (MacFarlane, 2018). In other words, a student whose sense-of-self aligns to some extent with the discipline will learn effectively. During a period of transition so individuals necessarily engage in significant identity crafting, that is 'identity work' (Sturdy et al., 2016), to establish a sense-of-self within this new context. While on the one hand, individuals like to craft a unique identity, concurrently, a sense of security and self-confidence is derived from being connected with, and feeling a belonging to, others (Brown, 2019; 2022), that is, of crafting a social identity that will help them to feel that they 'belong' (e.g. Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016).

Students' identity work in their transition to university is thus typically, for conventional undergraduates, directed towards crafting their uniqueness at a critical personal developmental stage where responsibility is shifting to themselves from their parents or carers (Chung and Hudziak, 2017; Pennington et al., 2018). Yet concurrently, students aspire to a student identity (Worsley et al., 2021) enabling them to belong to the associated and desired social community. Social identity theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding this aspiration. Tajfel and Turner's seminal works (e.g Tajfel, 1979; Turner, et al., 1979) proposed that the groups to which individuals self-categorise and thus feel they belong, are significant to their self-image, self-esteem and their sense-of-being within their social world. In self-categorising, and emotionally self-identifying, within a student learning community so an individual will adopt the (often stereotyped) behaviours and norms of this ('in')-group, drawing comparisons with others ('out'-groups) they believe have not assumed that identity (Allan 2022, 2020). For some students though, their aspirations for such self-categorisation and self-identification might conflict with other identities they hold and consequently their identity might be regulated (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002) whether by

social structures or by others who consequentially assign them an ‘out-group’ identity - for example, for students identifying as BAME and working class, while a primary aim of higher education is social mobility and the formation, albeit informally, of a more middle-class identity. A failure of individuals’ identity-work to achieve an aspired social identity may provoke an ‘identity crisis’ (Delanty, 2008) with negative emotional consequences (Baumeister and Lear, 1995; Kahu et al., 2022) including anxiety, depression, separation, and alienation (Parr et al., 2020). Concurrently, though students might choose to take on an alternative identity, opting to ‘not belong’ to their learning community, and this might, for example, be the case where an identity grounded in a student’s background is strong by contrast to the weak identity resources provided by business and management education.

Post-pandemic evidence raises questions as to whether a sustainable higher education is one in which students need to feel a sense-of-belonging to a learning community, or whether their identity work as a student might be directed towards another area of identification, or even to not identify with others at all. While the sense of wanting to belong might, for many, remain, there are now multiple avenues to fulfil this desire especially via social media. Virtual communities might be much stronger and certainly more precisely aligned with the individual’s desired sense-of-self than their university course community.

Therefore, while conventionally, it has been assumed that students actively seek to belong, identity theorising can help us to recognise that this might well not always be the case, offering new avenues to explore empirically and we would like to examine these further through discussion with the delegates. That ‘belonging’, or ‘no-belonging’ matters, is central for us, as academic leaders, to better understand students’ university/programme engagement and their ultimate success.

Empirical study and paper development

The emerging empirical inquiry informed by this literature review aims to better understand:

1. The extent to which students identify with their university, programme of study, and/or peers
2. The effects of this identification, or non-identification. for students’ sense-of-belonging with their university/programme/peers learning community
3. The implications of students’ belonging, or not-belonging for university managers and academic leaders to better support student outcomes and success, informing policies for more sustainable universities

The study initially comprises focus-groups with different student cohorts including commuter, first generation, year/level cohorts. To reduce the risk of a student-academic power imbalance influencing the data generated, the focus-groups are being led by two current students. These focus-groups are examining what students consider to be a university learning community, whether students feel that these communities are important, develop and if they do, how important these are for them and why. Inductive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2021) and Saldana’s (2021) methods is used on this initial data. These initial focus groups will inform a further empirical study.

We look forward to discussing with other participants the viability of applying the identity lenses we are proposing to these findings to better understand sustainability within the context of a higher education system and the challenge of student belonging, or not, to their expected learning community.

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