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# Harnessing innovation approaches to support community and belonging in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 Pandemic has ushered in significant challenges for supporting community and belonging in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). This paper seeks to provide key recommendations to strengthen such activity, through a critical evaluation of a set of innovative community and belonging enhancement projects undertaken in a modern Scottish University. In doing so, the paper adds deeper understanding of how community and belonging are conceptualised and facilitated within HEIs. The evaluation was qualitative in nature and involved interviews with 13 staff members and students who were leading enhancement initiatives in the institution. Through an exploration of what shaped staff and students' understandings and experiences in relation to community and belonging, several important themes emerged that are of value across the sector. These findings include a new framework of 'authentic belonging', the effectiveness of student ownership, and the current context of restricted opportunities for belonging enhancement.

## KEYWORDS

Community; belonging; authenticity; enhancement

## Introduction: The challenge of community and belonging

Despite a link between retention and a sense of belonging being identified in the salient literature (Pedler et al., 2021), results from the UK's National Student Survey still indicate a consistently low positive response rate to question 21 'I feel part of a community of staff and students' when compared to other aspects of the learning and teaching experience. This trend reflects an international body of research which has charted a 'loss of community' (see: Boyer, 1990) over time. As universities increasingly welcome more 'non-traditional' students with varied needs and experiences, communities in HE have diversified, and an idealised notion of belonging tied to arguably outdated conceptualisations of universities as the domain of the elite, proves increasingly problematic (Cheng, 2004; Graham & Moir, 2022). It follows that enhancing belonging and community in HE has emerged as both a puzzle and an area of thematic priority in research and for quality enhancement organisations such as Advance HE and QAA Scotland, pre-and post-pandemic (Campbell, 2021; Gopalan et al., 2022).

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Improvements are often hampered by a lack of institutional support, with enhancement efforts often being limited to programme level. In response to this, a modern Scottish University actively sought to build community and belonging through investment across the institution. Using the National Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Enhancement Themes as a catalyst for this work, a set of innovative projects were funded which aimed to create communities and foster a sense of belonging among staff and students. Most projects were led by staff, who coordinated activities with substantial input from students, while others were student led. The projects aimed either to explore community and belonging or implement an intervention, such as creating a shared space on campus or establishing an extracurricular activity. The diversity of the projects reflected the various ways in which students and staff can feel part of their institutions.

This paper presents an overview and a qualitative evaluation of this suite of short-term projects (the projects taking place across a 3-year period). In doing so it seeks to provide a deeper understanding of what belonging means to staff and students, how communities are formed and operate, and practical insights into how they can be better facilitated in different contexts across an institution. The key points of learning from this research demonstrate how small institutional investments in enhancement can generate impact. Before an overview of the projects can be presented and discussed, it is important to unpack the concepts of community and belonging and how this relates to HEIs.

## Community and belonging and their value in HE

Belonging in HE has been variously defined but widely acknowledged as a 'dynamic, relational and nonlinear process' (Raaper, 2021, p. 593). Students are in a constantly evolving experience of learning 'to be' someone who belongs in HE (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; Meehan & Howells, 2019). Hoffman et al.'s (2003, p. 234) assessment of belonging among college students highlighted the 'quality' of relationships with peers and staff as determined through perceptions of support, comfort, compassion and being valued. Similarly, T. L. Strayhorn (2018) theorised belonging as a series of support needs to be met through interactions with others on campus. Current models tend to agree that belonging is complex and exists across a variety of domains. These include shared interests such as students' programme of study or extra-curricular activities (De Sisto et al., 2022), as well as individual attributes such as students' geographic location and identities (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Work here has been significantly influenced by Tinto's (1993) integration model. In exploring student retention, Tinto proposed that integration at university occurs in two forms: academic and social. These are related to students' personal expectations of achievement or 'goal commitments', and identification with the university or 'institutional commitment'. The framework argues that where integration occurs and these commitments endure, there will be less likelihood of 'dropping' out.

Literature notes a clear connection between a sense of belonging and the concept of community (Trawalter et al., 2021). Community in HE has been defined as 'the feelings of ... students regarding their spirit, cohesion, trust, safety, interaction, interdependence, and sense of belonging' (Rovai & Wighting, 2005, p. 101). There are a variety of more formalised communities within a university to which students may belong, centred around a shared interest or goal, including programme/learning communities, student societies, and staff-student forums (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Araujo et al., 2014). Where

communities develop more organically, shared characteristics or experiences often still play a role. For example, research has found that Latina/o/x students in STEM disciplines often form communities within their institutions to alleviate feelings of marginalisation (Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021). Efforts to enhance belonging have as such often focused on providing opportunities for the creation and strengthening of communities by finding common ground among student groups.

Belonging to such communities has been linked to positive outcomes for students i.e. higher engagement, identity development and retention (Masika & Jones, 2015). For example, Edwards et al.'s (2022) examination of a first-year cohort on an undergraduate Chemistry programme identified a relationship between sense of belonging/'belonging uncertainty' and course performance. Belonging also plays an important role in student wellbeing, as a protective factor for student mental health, and in increasing academic motivation and enjoyment (McBeath et al., 2018; Pedler et al., 2021).

Belonging also appears to impact beyond academic outcomes and can be understood to support broader strategic aims of 'inclusion' (Collins et al., 2019). Inclusive education has evolved from a focus on supporting students with particular disabilities, to a broader embedding of the aim that all students are supported to flourish (Murdock-Perriera et al., 2019). This focus creates a direct alignment between enhancement of community and belonging and the inclusion agenda.

### *What shapes belonging?*

A common emphasis within this literature is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to enhancing community and belonging, as different groups may have varied needs and experiences (Cheng, 2004; Kahu, 2013). Acknowledging that HE, as a field, is 'contested and complex' (O'Shea, 2021, p. 70) and that feelings of belonging are therefore not automatic, nor are they equal among student sub-populations – in fact, this assumption is a key criticism of Tinto's (1993) integration model (Meharg et al., 2017) – validates a focus on the experiences of distinct student cohorts. This intersects with the social model of inclusion outlined above, whereby the importance of diverse student populations feeling valued and heard is significant.

Existing literature explores how belonging is shaped by intersectional characteristics such as ethnicity and gender (Edwards et al., 2022; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017), with a notable focus on the relationship between belonging and social class. While practical barriers for low-income students such as keeping up with technology or other academic materials are apparent, there are wider implications for relationship building, identities and belonging, leaving this group disenfranchised (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; Nguyen & Herron, 2021; O'Shea, 2021; Reay et al., 2010; Trawalter et al., 2021). This intersection is of particular relevance to our study, conducted in a post-1992 institution, with higher proportions of 'non-traditional' students (Read et al., 2003, p. 262) and a commitment to widening participation (MacFarlane, 2018).

Since 2019, the nature of community and belonging in HE has been further impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent research has identified that the shift to online learning, where challenges to belonging are already documented (Brodie & Osowska, 2021), and accompanying lack of access to full community resources, such as the physical academic library, has diminished belonging (Scoulas, 2021). Moreover, as a predictor of mental

health and buffer to anxiety, belonging has emerged as particularly important during this period (Gopalan et al., 2022). It is apparent that, as we emerge from this period of rapid change, there is a need 'to get serious about communicating diversity, inclusion and belonging' as values within our institutions (Passantino, 2021, p. 583).

### *Enhancing community and belonging*

From extant research, the nature and importance of community and belonging is apparent, yet how we achieve this remains a challenge in research and practice. Academic staff have been positioned as central to enhancing belonging, with literature highlighting their role in nurturing communities and ensuring that students feel 'known' as individuals (Hoffman et al., 2003; Meehan & Howells, 2019). As such, many interventions in this area are pitched at a programme level, devised by staff seeking to improve the experience of their student cohort. In some cases, this is linked directly to the learning and teaching approach, for example, through assessments which require students to form and reflect through communities of practice (Masika & Jones, 2015). Other initiatives have taken the form of extra-curricular activities but are often restricted to a programme cohort (De Sisto et al., 2022). At institutional level, work in this area has often focused on first year students and assisting their transition to university.

Arguably, the most inspiring innovations in this area are those which seek to change and challenge institutional culture, with the goal of positioning HEIs as places of belonging. These are defined as the 'social and learning environments that include intentional and systematic practices that reduce threats to students' sense of belonging and support students' feelings that they are valued and respected' (Murdock-Perriera et al., 2019, p. 309). A notable recent example is T. Strayhorn's (2021) implementation of a short video intervention which presented narratives from diverse students to intentionally convey messages about belonging. Interventions such as this have the potential to remove barriers to the formation or strengthening of communities at various levels.

The research sought to evaluate a range of interventions that were put in place from 2017, in a modern Scottish University. It aimed to add deeper understanding as to what is already known about effective practices in relation to community and belonging within HEIs. The study's research questions were:

- (1) How did the project leads conceptualise and approach enhancing belonging?
- (2) How can community and belonging enhancements be effectively supported?
- (3) What were the key challenges faced in developing and implementing enhancement projects?

### **Methods**

The university's strategic focus on Community and Belonging began at the outset of QAA Scotland's 2017–2020 'Evidence for Enhancement' theme (QAA Scotland, (n.d)), and led to a funded suite of mini-projects across the university during this period. All project leaders implementing initiatives in Years 1 and 2 were interviewed, providing informed consent via a consent form, while some year 3 project leads participated until data saturation was achieved (Table 1).

A semi-structured interview approach, which involves structuring discussion around a list of core concepts and probing questions, was appropriate for a number of reasons. Practically, the number of projects undertaken presented a strong sample size for rich, qualitative research. Given the complexity of concepts such as belonging and community, semi-structured interviews allowed for a nuanced and contextualised understanding of how these issues relate to the project activities, and the meaning ascribed to them by participants (Cousin, 2008). The flexibility afforded by the semi-structured method allowed the discussions to evolve and progress organically, to capture unanticipated findings.

Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was carried out by coding the project data – both the interview transcripts and evaluation forms. The co-author and others involved in supporting the projects checked the coding framework before finalising the themes, which are presented below.

## Results

### *Theme 1: The need for authentic community and belonging*

As the mini-projects were so diverse, interviews explored how community and belonging were conceptualised by staff and students across a range of disciplines and areas of university life. Project leads highlighted a variety of contexts where students might experience belonging, including the classroom learning environment (A.); the ‘wider creative community’ (E.) associated with students’ degree subjects; or extracurricular activities:

A lot of people do say if they hadn’t found, like, a sports team or drama club, they probably would have dropped out or kind of fizzled on, got their degree and sat in the background and not really got involved in things. (B.)

In this sense, many of the projects capitalised on students’ shared interests and formed communities based on these (Araujo et al., 2014; De Sisto et al., 2020). While the purpose of the communities is simply to pursue these interests, the above quote suggests that participation took on a deeper meaning and they often proved transformative for students. Interviewees also made reference to broader, less formalised contexts of belonging:

Actually, the right context for really good learning to happen and for someone to progress individually is a social context. (F.)

This reference to the ‘social’ aspects of university life and the importance of belonging in this way was highlighted by several participants. These understandings reflect Tinto’s (1993) integration model, acknowledging that belonging exists and has effects across both academic and social domains, transcending the individual programme level.

There was agreement among participants that belonging at university is important, and this pedagogic viewpoint had often been the catalyst for the mini-projects. A paradox emerged here, in that while participants had undertaken projects which sought to

promote belonging and create communities, there was a shared understanding that these often occur more subtly and unconsciously for students:

I am not sure that they think of it constantly in that sense, 'I want to be part of this community, to belong'. It is just something that happens. (C.)

As such, participants tended to feel that communities best support belonging when their development occurs organically. It was felt that belonging emerges among students when the correct conditions are present, and within this conceptualisation, project leaders acknowledged their role in the enhancement process as a nurturing one, whereby they could 'plant the seeds' for communities:

It's a kind of gardening process ... it's about creating the right environment for that community to flourish. (F.)

Another project lead adopted a similar analogy to support this notion, and highlighting that communities cannot be created or enforced:

I don't think you can artificially make a community, like a wee greenhouse pot plant ... it needs to be something that you believe in and the students believe in, and they see as a genuine group and a genuine relationship that actually has meaning. (L.)

The highly relational nature of belonging is acknowledged here, as supported in literature (Hoffman et al., 2003; Raaper, 2021), with communities emerging through the formation of connections between students. It is the meaning and quality of these connections, we argue, that matters.

Project leads' understandings of belonging and how this operates were similar, yet they acknowledged that students' attitudes in this area are not uniform. For example, reflecting on a mini-project which explored distance learners' experiences, the project lead noted that students 'were often much older and were often making deliberate choices not to be part of a community' (D.), instead seeking their sense of belonging from employers, colleagues, family or friends. Thus, while belonging has been conceptualised as a need (T. L. Strayhorn, 2018), our findings propose that this need may not be common to all students, supporting existing research which charts variations in belongingness among different student cohorts (Hunt & Loxley, 2021; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). Moreover, it was highlighted that attempts to create community which appear disingenuous and fail to consider the intended cohort's needs are likely to be unsuccessful:

If you were just to go and say 'right, lets build a community, I want you to all feel like you belong' I think you would fall flat on your face because it's a contrivance they would see right through. (L.)

In this sense, 'authenticity' was identified to be a core element of belonging, with the development of authentic communities which have meaning for students being the goal of the projects.

## ***Theme 2: Student ownership***

The project leads provided a number of practical insights into effective enhancement practices in the area. Many of these related to planning and preparation of projects, such as identifying student partners, considering type and timing of activities carefully, and

consulting with the cohort about their belonging needs. In light of the above a cross-cutting theme in this area was the importance of student ownership of the initiatives. The evaluation of one mini project, which developed a communal social space for students, reflected a sustainable impact beyond the project lifespan, noting how ‘students have really taken to the idea of “owning” the space and have been collecting and donating their own resources’ (F.). Providing opportunities for students to take the lead in crafting their communities and their belonging within them emerged as important across the suite of activity:

We had one student in 4th year and he came along to introduce the social event to the new 1st year students and that made so much difference. They wanted to come to because they saw it as the ‘done thing.’ (H.)

This natural spread of communities, as relationships form beyond the usual programme or year group boundaries, is likely to benefit students in a variety of ways. The opportunity to learn from more experienced students through such projects has positive implications for student’ academic and social integration (Olivier & Burton, 2020). A key finding here is that where the creation of communities is led and promoted by students, this can result in the establishment of shared social norms and enhance belonging among the cohort. It is evident here that while these activities have initially stemmed from students’ shared interests at course level (De Sisto et al., 2022), belonging has gone beyond these boundaries to create more lasting impacts. In this way, student ownership adds a sense of authenticity to efforts and supports to their success.

This particular suite of projects suited being student led due to their relatively small scale in terms of scope and budget. The initiatives were manageable for staff, who noted that the opportunity to work on more modest initiatives was rare but rewarding, and allowed the eventual handover to students. One project lead highlighted this:

That is why the small-scale things probably work. Because they are ... possible. (J.)

In the projects a ‘bottom-up’ approach meant that they developed few institutional constraints and were tailored to particular student cohorts. As such, the initiatives and were not hindered by the dissatisfaction of more top-down approaches to enhancing belonging, such as generic emails across the institution, which can feel homogenising and inauthentic (Brodie & Osowska, 2021). A key success of the suite of mini-projects is that they have evidenced the ability of small-scale investments in terms of time and resources to make meaningful changes for staff and students, while placing students at their centre.

### ***Theme 3: Restricted opportunities***

Interviewees provided important insights into the challenges of creating belonging, indicating that building communities at university is often constrained by other factors. A key discussion point was how the wider context of the student experience has changed, impacting on the ability of students to engage in community building:

The students’ lives are different to when we studied. They’re working more than ever, caring responsibilities ... It’s not always a priority for them. (H.)



The above quote highlights the potential of socio-economic status to limit opportunities for participation in communities. Views such as this were common, with other project leads noting that where initiatives take place on campus, attendance is challenging as students are 'with us two days, the other days they're working' (E.). Our findings reflect the circumstances of students in modern HEIs which highlight the practical and motivational barriers for low-income students in building relationships (Nguyen and Herron, 2020).

Physical space on campus itself was also noted as a barrier here. Staff cited increased student numbers impacting on the availability of classrooms as limiting the possible interventions which can be planned to enhance belonging, and a lack of designated social space inhibiting the organic development of communities. This was further complicated by the multi-campus structure of the institution:

We have three campuses, trying to get to know everyone, trying to get everyone involved in certain things out with their courses is hard. (B.)

Existing literature exploring the relationships between physical space and belonging often comes from the US context and centres on institutions with a single campus (e.g. Trawalter et al., 2021). Our findings propose that the UK context, where universities are often spread across multiple buildings in urban centres, poses additional challenges to the formation of meaningful communities. This may be why two mini-projects which focused on creating new physical spaces for belonging (Design Reading Room; Design Studio Redesign) were particularly impactful.

Just as the busy context of students' lives were noted, staff emphasised that current workload modelling practices in the HE sector restrict time for enhancement in this area. Staff described the initiatives as an 'over and above' (E.) activity, suggesting that this hinders project progress and deters staff engagement. In addition, in line with the suggestion that the staff role is to sow the seeds for organic community development, ongoing nurturing is required even where projects are student led:

One of the issues with student led work, of course, is that the students leave. So it is that sort of handover thing. (J.)

This suggests a need to consider and plan for the continuity of projects of this nature where possible, and to create frameworks (such as collaborations across year group cohorts) which allow initiatives to be passed on and sustained. Overall, project leads found it difficult to create lasting impact with finite resources and shrinking opportunities.

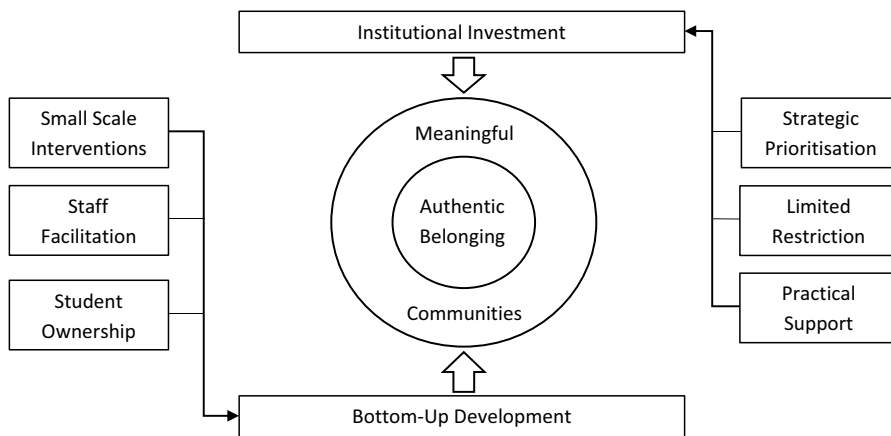
## Discussion

This study has provided insight into how belonging is understood by those who seek to facilitate it, effective means for enhancing belonging, and potential barriers. In doing so, it adds to the body of literature which advocates for a more nuanced understanding of what community and belonging mean in HE (Cheng, 2004; O'Shea, 2021), and that which provides practical insight into their enhancement (De Sisto et al., 2019; Masika & Jones, 2015).

A key finding of this study, through the lens of the mini-projects, is that effective approaches to facilitate enhancement in this area are those pursuing what we describe as 'authentic belonging'. Answering our first research question, authentic belonging is seen

to emerge organically among students, through meaningful interactions. It therefore aligns with the conceptualisation of belonging as relational in essence (Hoffman et al., 2003; Raaper, 2021), and places particular importance on the meaning and quality of these relationships for students. Our participants stressed that communities cannot be manufactured or imposed by the institution, instead, students must feel a legitimate connection through a community which matters to them and in which they matter. This is significant and, in line with other research, highlights that as we widen participation in Higher Education, the need to belong, and ways in which students approach this, become increasingly varied and complex (Brodie & Osowska, 2021; Graham & Moir, 2022; Hunt & Loxley, 2021). The study thus presents us with the insight that attempts at community building can be experienced by students as non-genuine and may fail to result in real relationships being established. Authentic belonging, then, positions students as agents of their own belonging, engaging in and developing their communities through genuine interactions which meet their needs and cement meaningful relationships (T. Strayhorn, 2021).

In considering our second research question, the study has found enhancement to be facilitated through a 'bottom-up' approach to developing activities which aim to build community and belonging (Figure 1). The relatively small scale of the mini-projects allowed them to develop in collaboration with students, who assumed ownership of the activities and therefore the communities they created. Extant research cites the benefits of student led initiatives in relation to sustainability (see, Murray, 2018), our study provides similar insight in the area of belonging. Authenticity is best achieved when students drive enhancement, with support from staff to create conditions which allow communities to flourish. This is not to say university leadership has no role in belonging enhancement. For example, Smith et al. (2021) propose that universities should invest in infrastructural support, i.e. physical space, for belonging. We concur that top-down support through resources such as funding, space and staff time for belonging enhancement is essential to support these student-led initiatives. The mini-projects evidenced that this can be relatively minimal: providing modest funds is sufficient to demonstrate institutional commitment and support innovation. It allowed the projects to proceed



**Figure 1.** Enhancing authentic belonging.

**Table 1.** Participant information.

Participant	Project	Participant	Project
A*	Languages Magazine	H*	Belonging in Social Sciences
B†	Student Societies video	I*	SEM Law Students
C*	Film Club	J*	Feedback Experiences
D*	Belonging Online	K†	Feedback Experiences
E*	Design Studio Redesign	L*	Improvisation in Music
F*	Design Reading Room	M*	Lab Stars
G*	Men into Nursing		

\* Staff † Student

without the restrictions and administrative hurdles which larger scale projects are likely to encounter, while reflecting the diversity of student needs to belong. This provided fertile ground for the development of meaningful activities and initiatives for organic community development, and a context for authentic belonging.

Answering our third research question, our study illustrates the particular challenges observed among students in a post-1992 institution, with participants noting the shrinking of time and space for participating in communities at university. The implications of socio-economic status and social class for belonging are well evidenced in research (Nguyen & Herron, 2021; O'Shea, 2021; Reay et al., 2010; Trawalter et al., 2021). Other literature highlights the loss of communities in HE as reflective of wider societal changes and a lack of desire to belong (Cheng, 2004; Willits & Brennan, 2016). Our participants proposed that rather than being unwilling or disinterested in belonging, their students were often limited in their capacity to engage with communities on campus, due to work and other commitments. In more modern universities, where widening access students comprise a high proportion of the student population (MacFarlane, 2018; Read et al., 2003), this challenge is likely to be more pronounced. Similarly, the research uncovered barriers for staff, which focused on the lack of time and resources for belonging enhancement work (Lynch, 2015; Shepherd, 2018). Ultimately, the study has placed the barriers for both staff and students in relation to belonging enhancement, in their wider social, political and economic context.

## Conclusions

Through a qualitative evaluation which has synthesised learning across a diverse suite of mini-projects carried out in a post-1992 institution, this paper has outlined how community and belonging is understood and enhanced in HE. Our findings offer a new conceptual understanding of 'authentic belonging' and provide insight into how this can be facilitated at various levels within an institution.

Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations:

- *Institutions* should demonstrate commitment to and investment in community and belonging. This may be through small funds or the protection of staff time to allow for the development of meaningful enhancement activities. They should avoid more generic, top-down approaches to community building. Esteem and reward should be attached to belonging enhancement work.

- *Staff* should be empowered and supported to explore belonging among their student cohorts and propose new initiatives. The need for belonging innovation in

different forms is likely to grow in importance, both in the context of an increasing shift to blended programme delivery as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, and through wider socio-economic pressures. Collaborating with students who may be limited in their ability to engage in more traditional communities on campus to identify new approaches will be essential.

- *Students* should receive opportunities for meaningful interactions with each other and staff, to nurture the relational element of belonging. Their shared interests and experiences should be explored to create hooks for belonging enhancement. They should be positioned as leaders in belonging enhancement activities, giving them ownership of communities to support authentic belonging.

While this research provides significant conceptual and practical insight, some limitations require acknowledgement. Participants were largely staff members responsible for initiating the projects and managing funding, rather than the students they aimed to affect, which has implications for what can be said about the impact of the work. Nevertheless, our study adds a new perspective by focusing on staff attitudes and experiences. Further qualitative research exploring the student experience of belonging enhancement, particularly where students have co-created or led initiatives, would be valuable. In terms of generalisability, the project evaluated activities in one HEI, and therefore does not represent a spread of experiences across the sector. However, the breath of activities and engagement in the mini-projects enabled us to identify wider findings and learning across the suite of work, and to propose the concept of authentic belonging, which warrants further conceptual and empirical development.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Notes on contributors

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## Ethical approval statement

The authors confirm that the project outlined in this paper received ethical approval from the Edinburgh Napier University Cross-University Research Integrity Committee (Application no: RIC0054) on 10 April 2019.

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