
Exploring student and staff experiences of belonging in a UK university using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®

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ABSTRACT

This article presents preliminary findings from research that utilised the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) methodology to explore the experiences of belonging among students and staff at a UK university. The LSP method, originally developed for corporate innovation, has been adapted for educational settings to facilitate creative problem-solving and engagement. Building on Moseley's (2022) work, this study extends the application of LSP to understand the complex nature of belonging within an academic context. Through the LSP sessions, twelve Simple Guiding Principles (SGPs) were identified by staff and students, encapsulating the essence of belonging for these participants. These principles highlight the necessity of community spaces, personal growth, embracing diversity, open communication, inclusive decision-making, and collaborative efforts. The research also delineated factors that either enhanced or impeded belonging, such as the quality of social interactions, the physical environment, and institutional culture. The findings suggest actionable strategies for universities to cultivate a sense of belonging, thereby improving the university experience for all community members. This research underscores the value of LSP as an innovative tool to navigate the complexities of belonging and to foster an inclusive academic environment, and also makes a case for working directly with learning communities and giving them agency to explore their own belonging.

Introduction and review of the literature

This article provides initial findings from a project that utilised LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) to explore students and staff experiences of belonging in one UK university. The LSP method was developed by the LEGO company to stimulate innovative thinking and creative problem-solving in corporate settings (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). It has evolved over the years and is now used beyond business settings, finding applications in education (see case studies in Nerantzi & James, 2022).

The project builds on a successful approach developed by Moseley (2022) which utilised LSP to explore and understand belonging in another UK university for both students and staff.

Belonging is a complex and contextual psychological/sociological concept, and each university student and member of staff experiences it differently. Thomas, in her 2012 report for the What Works? Student retention and success project, drew on the work of Vallerand (1997) and Goodenow (1993) to define university belonging as:

'belonging' recognises students' subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness to the institution. This "involves feeling connected (or feeling that one belongs in a social milieu)" (Vallerand, 1997, p. 300). It may relate "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the [school] social environment. (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 80 in Thomas, 2012, pp12-13).

In 2022, WONKHE and Pearson surveyed over 5000 UK university students and, in common with Thomas, found belonging to be similarly complex and contextual (Blake et al, 2022). However, WONKHE and Pearson also identified some key foundations on which belonging for students could be built. These were: peer connections, inclusive and diverse learning materials, inclusive support systems, and autonomy or agency in decision making.

The project described in this article aimed to give local flavour and detail to WONKHE and Pearson's large-scale research, by encompassing the diversity of a modern post-92 university across its student and staff community, whilst seeking commonalities and agents that might increase or reduce a sense of belonging for groups. It also aimed to make positive changes to university institutional practice by identifying factors that enhanced university belonging for students and staff. The emergence of shared aspects or agents of belonging are already acknowledged in the WONKHE and Pearson research, and in other more focused belonging projects; for example, those with personal tutees in Cashmore, Scott & Cane (2012).

LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® is a methodology used principally to solve complex/wicked problems in business (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014), but more recently has been utilised in education for similarly complex or intangible problems (e.g. James & Nerantzi, 2019). A core aspect of the methodology is to 'flatten the room', in other words to ensure that, regardless of seniority, everyone in the room feels that they have equal value and can make an equally valid contribution. Furthermore, each person retains ownership of their own story, and others in the room listen when they talk. Moseley (2022) found that these values, and the various stages of the LSP methodology from the individual to the shared perspective, worked particularly well for the intangible individual and shared complexity of belonging.

Theoretical Framework

This article subscribes to a poststructuralist theoretical framework, challenging traditional notions of identity and power. Individual and group identities are understood as perpetually evolving, constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in relation to institutional, cultural and personal agents (Butler, 1990) In the context of belonging, this means that belonging is not something that is realised or achieved; it is not fixed or static; for every individual, belonging is in a constant state of flux, and influenced by the interactions and the narratives individuals and groups engage in.

This article also recognises that institutional power structures influence who belongs and who is marginalised within an institution, in this case, a university (Foucault, 1980). Belonging is not passive; individuals actively negotiate their sense of belonging by navigating complex power dynamics that exist between individuals, groups and teams.

Within this theoretical framework, play is understood as a crucial vehicle for learning and in this case, a tool for blurring boundaries and creating equal status amongst those engaging in the playful tasks. When people play, they enter a 'magic circle' where normal societal rules can be suspended and a new set of shared rules and possibilities open up (as first described in adult contexts by Huizinga, 1949). Suits (1978) describes this process as adopting a 'lusory attitude' – a willingness to take different roles, routes and approaches to that expected in 'normal life'. In the context of belonging, this allows individuals to explore social roles, relationships, and norms (the thick frames of learning or work as described by Vygotsky, 1978 and Shaffer and Resnick, 1999) but at a distance: exploring, reflecting on and reframing their roles playfully. Through play, the participants in this research engaged in shared activities, negotiated roles, and created scenarios real and imagined.

It is important to stress the voluntary nature of this approach, and the status of participants as willing participants: play should be a voluntary activity: "one plays only if and when one wishes to" (Caillois, 1961 p7). Within the LSP workshops, voluntary participation or "the freedom to enter or leave a game at will" ensures that players explore and experience even potentially stressful or challenging work as "safe and pleasurable activity" (McGonigal, 2011 p21).

By integrating poststructuralist insights with play theory, this article offers a nuanced lens to understand how play shapes belonging experiences.

Methodology

This initial phase of the belonging project consisted of two separate activities:

1. A questionnaire to gauge how staff and students perceived their own belonging at the university,
2. A suite of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) workshops to help staff and students at the university explore and describe what belonging means to them.

Phase one of the Belonging project took place from February 2023 – September 2023 in one UK university and involved a representatively diverse group of students and staff exploring individual and shared belonging. The researchers took the decision early in the project to run the workshops with students and staff together, and in stratified groups to reflect the diversity of the university. The aim of this was to create an inclusive community where everyone involved had a shared responsibility for the community created and any outputs it developed.

The LSP method involves building LEGO® models as a response to a facilitator's question. These models serve as a 3D representation of the builder's thoughts and ideas through a metaphorical 'story'. The process includes each participant sharing their model and metaphorical story with others, and encourages active listening, participation, engagement, and individual and collective learning within a learning community.

The LSP workshops were advertised on the university's intranet and social media accounts for both students and staff. 168 applications were received, 24 from academic staff (incl. 3 hourly paid associate lecturers), 36 from professional service staff, 40 from Postgraduate taught students, 8 from Postgraduate research students, 32 Undergraduate students at level 4 (first year), 14 Undergraduate students at level 5 (second year), and 7 Undergraduate students at level 6 (third year). 23 of the student applicants were part time. The applicants reflected the full diversity of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability that characterise the membership of our institution, and so we were able to create stratigraphically diverse workshops in each case. 60 of the 168 applicants were randomly chosen to fulfil our criteria and were divided into 6 workshops with 10 members in each. Of the 60 applicants chosen, 56 actually attended the workshops.

Once the participants had signed up for a workshop, they were sent a link to a short anonymous optional questionnaire to gauge their initial understanding and feelings about belonging at the university. 23 of the 60 chosen participants completed this. The questionnaire link was also sent out at the end of the workshops and a further (overlapping) 12 participants completed it then, making a total of 35 questionnaire responses.

The questionnaire asked eight questions that sought to understand what belonging meant to the respondents and what activities and spaces, both physical and virtual helped to enhance feelings of belonging at the university.

The LSP workshops lasted for at least three hours, and often up to four. Students and associate lecturers were paid for their time. In each of the workshops, the attendees were guided through five stages of work with LEGO®:

The initial stage ensured that all participants could engage with the rest of the workshop, through simple use of LEGO® to develop building and sharing skills: building a tower, a simple model from instructions, and sharing a simple emotion: "how do you feel right now about being in this workshop". Help was provided for any participants new to LEGO, or who struggled to connect bricks or ideas together.

The second stage involved building and sharing individual models in response to the following three tasks set by the LSP facilitator:

1. Build a model to tell us a story about what you like about the university.
2. Build a model to tell us a story about when you last felt worried or undervalued at the university.
3. Build a model to tell us what belonging is for you.

After each task, the participants were invited to tell the story of their LEGO® model to the rest of the workshop participants. The first two tasks aimed to scaffold the reflexive thinking of the participants so that they got used to working with LEGO® in the abstract, developed confidence in representing their models to others, and also started to clarify their personal reflection on belonging (the use of two opposing questions was found to be particularly helpful).

After the workshop participants had created and shared their third and final LEGO® model, they were invited to combine their third model into a single shared model (stage three), involving every member of the group. The relationship of the models to one another was negotiated through a whole group discussion facilitated by

the workshop facilitator. This negotiation phase allowed participants to suggest links between each other's models, and to identify commonalities and differences in the notion of belonging across the group.

Once the group model had been negotiated and assembled, the workshop participants were invited to identify agents or factors that affect belonging, either positively or negatively, and add these to create a landscape that surrounded the group model (stage four). A number of different factors quickly created a landscape around the shared model of belonging. Factors that had a high impact on belonging (either positively or negatively) were placed close to the shared model; factors with those less impactful on belonging were placed further away.

The fifth and final task for the workshop participants was to use their own developing stories, the shared model and surrounding landscape to each create a Simple Guiding Principle, (SGP) that they felt should be used by the university to promote greater sense of belonging for staff and students. By this point of the workshop, the participants had, through sharing their three models, identified a shared appreciation and sense of belonging. The SGPs were then, a way to distil the reflections of every member of each group into one clear statement.

Results

There were two outputs from the 6 workshops combined: the simple guiding principles SGPs and the landscapes showing positive and negative factors or agents for belonging.

A total of 56 SGPs were developed across the six workshops. The 56 were distilled into 12 by collating those that overlapped and were similar in ethos. This combined set of 12 SGPs was then sent around to all 56 attendees to check that they could still identify their SGP within the refined set: all agreed.

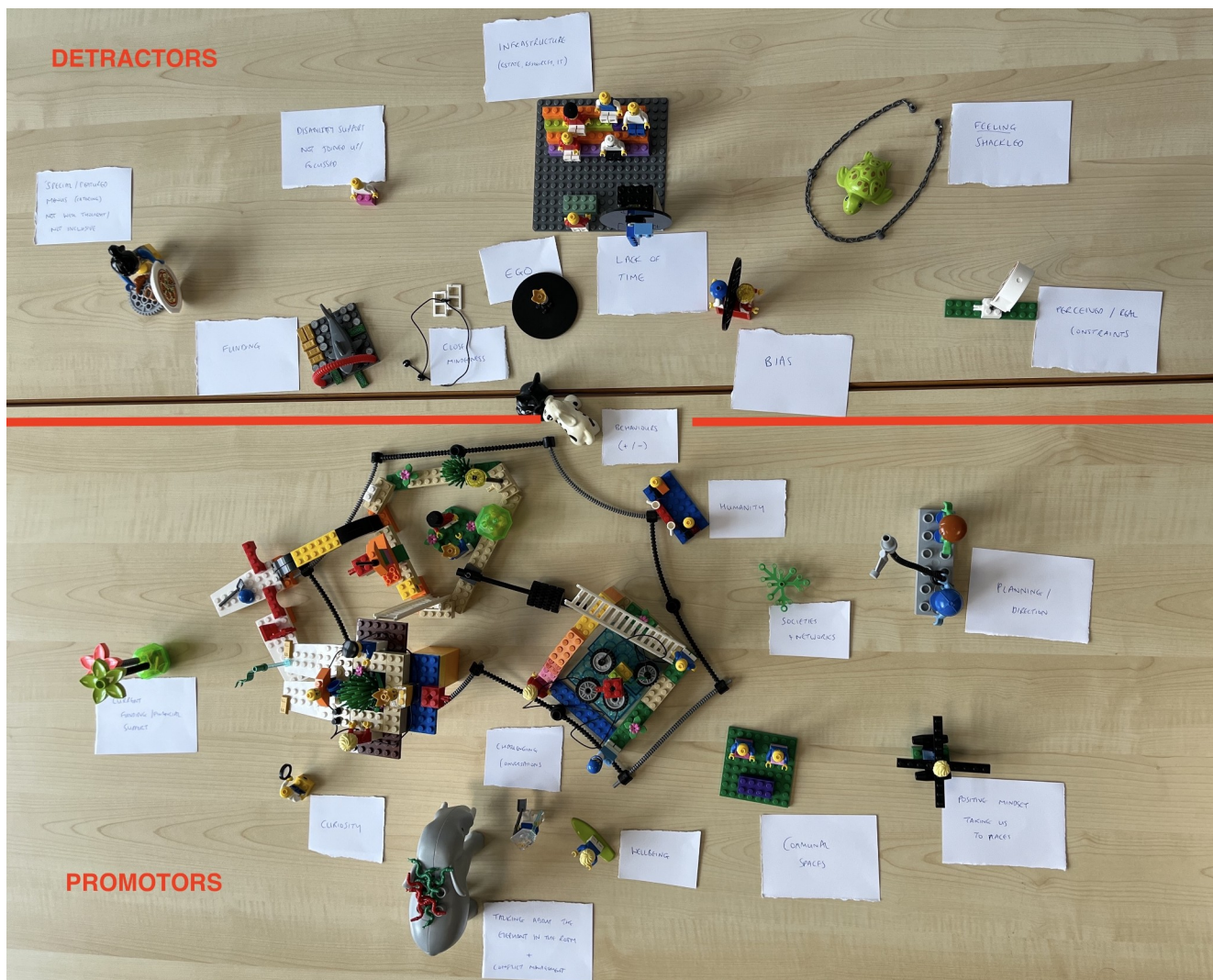
The 12 Simple Guiding Principles for university belonging agreed by the 56 workshop participants are as follows.

1. We create space (physical and temporal) for building communities.
2. Our environment is nurturing and allows people to grow.
3. We are here for others, regardless of their background.
4. We empower people to feel that their 'whole selves' are welcome.
5. We are open and inclusive: everybody has equal status.
6. We communicate, listen and are open to new perspectives.
7. We include people affected by an issue when talking about the issue.
8. We work together to develop and build. We research for the community.
9. Together, we uplift each other, have fun, and progress.
10. We are dynamic. We meet changing needs of changing people in a changing environment.

11. We value individuals and our individual journeys.
12. This environment lets people fly!

The second of the workshop outputs were the landscapes showing positive and negative factors in university belonging. Plan-view photographs were taken of the landscape models at the end of each workshop, and from these individual agents and the strength of their positive or negative effect was recorded. The image that follows shows one of the landscapes created which shows the promoters and detractors of belonging identified by one of the workshop groups.

Figure 1: One of the landscapes, showing promoters and detractors of belonging.



The agents or factors that affected belonging were identified across the six workshops. They were written onto paper, placed besides the models to show both their effect (positive or negative) and the impact of that effect (high, medium or low impact) on belonging.

Table 1 shows the promoters of belonging identified by participants across the workshops: These agents were deemed to encourage feelings of belonging at the university. Table 2 shows the detractors of belonging, the factors that participants felt frustrated attempts to facilitate belonging at the university.

Table 1: The promoters of belonging: The agents identified by the workshop participants as facilitating belonging

| Agents that promote belonging | Impact Level |
|---|---------------------|
| Connections at in-person events | High |
| Humanity: being and dreaming together Having a cuppa together; dreaming together; bridging gaps between people | High |
| Facilities (e.g., catering) | High |
| Positive behaviour | High |
| Inclusion (access, diversity) | High-Medium |
| Civic outreach: research into communities | High-Medium |
| Students who stay with us Students who stay on for further study or become staff | Medium |
| Fun and curiosity at work | Medium |
| Positive working environment | Medium |
| External factors strengthen identity | Medium |
| Opening of connections and new places | Medium |
| Societies and networks | Medium |
| Communal spaces | Medium |
| Wellbeing | Medium |
| Celebrating achievements (e.g., VC awards) | Medium |
| Having challenging conversations | Medium |
| Existing funding and support | Low |
| Differences across university sites | Low |
| Planning, direction | Low |
| Positive mindset | Low |
| Not being afraid to aim high | Low |
| Conflict management | Low |

Table 2: Detractors: The agents identified by the workshop participants as acting against belonging.

| Agents that detract from belonging | Impact Level |
|---|---------------------|
| Commuting (cost and delays) | High |
| Time, full calendar, workload marking loads | High |
| Move too quickly to build properly; Not getting to the root of a problem; Education never stops | High |
| Lack of student accommodation | High |
| Closed-mindedness amongst colleagues | High |
| Bad behaviour Ego; Hero mentality; Following the crowd | High |
| Money, funding and debt | High-Medium |
| Bias and gaps in support for diversity/access Disability support not joined up/focussed; lack of confidence in 'how to do EDI' | High-Medium |
| Negative working environment | Medium |
| Operating in a silo | Medium |
| Hitting brick wall / Feeling shackled | Medium |
| Technology replacing contact (e.g., Teams) | Medium-Low |
| Isolation and lack of human contact | Medium-Low |
| Staff and student retention | Low |
| External factors (global issues, OfS) | Low |
| Food choices not always inclusive | Low |

Discussion

In this section, we examine each of the 12 Simple Guiding Principles co-created by the 60 LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® participants. We consider each principle in relation to the 35 questionnaire responses and the promoters and detractors of belonging:

1. We create space (physical and temporal) for building communities.

By providing dedicated spaces and times for community-building activities, the university can ensure that everyone has opportunities to connect, collaborate, and build relationships, fostering a sense of belonging.

When asked what changes could be made to the university spaces to improve belonging for staff and students: a number of staff suggested that staff common rooms and kitchen areas where they could eat together and socialise with others would be welcomed. Suggestions from students included a desire for spaces where staff and students could meet for 1:1s. Smaller teaching spaces were also preferred by students with large

classrooms or lecture theatres, tending to make students feel more like a number than an individual.

In *Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change*, commissioned by the Higher Education Academy, Thomas (2012) emphasises the role of community-building in enhancing student engagement. Thomas highlights that providing spaces and times for students to connect and collaborate is vital for creating a sense of belonging and improving the overall student experience. Referencing physical space, Strayhorn (2012) also underscores the necessity of community-building activities. Strayhorn argues that providing dedicated spaces and times for these activities helps students feel valued and included, which is essential for their academic and social success. Spaces online and on campus were seen as important to belonging at the university. The library was mentioned by students and staff a number of times as being a place where they felt supported and safe. One student wrote of safety:

A sense of belonging is associated with a sense of safety - a physical and virtual place where you can grow and develop alongside those around you.

Outdoor social spaces were appreciated too by staff and students. A staff member observed:

The outdoor spaces like the forest pods help with finding calm when things are really busy.

The forest pods were a recent addition to the campus where students and staff could sit on loungers outside surrounded by green space in a quiet and obscured area of the campus.

For staff, it was important to some to have a designated desk where they knew they would be able to work alongside their teams. When staff sat together, they tended to socialise together over lunch or breaks.

University facilities was one of the promoters of belonging with the highest impact. Catering facilities in particular, where people could gather together and 'dream together' was important as articulated by a staff participant below who said that to them, belonging was promoted by:

Having a cuppa together; dreaming together; bridging gaps between people

Being on campus was a powerful promoter of belonging, and staff and students agreed that the commute onto campus could be a detractor from belonging due to expense and transport delays. Some of the students identified a perceived shortage of on-campus accommodation as a high detractor to belonging. Masland (2021) discuss the significance of maintaining student support services and extracurricular activities in virtual formats to promote a sense of community and the need to be on campus to feel belonging may in part at least involve being able to access support and socialise with others (see also Gannon 2020).

2. Our environment is nurturing and allows people to grow.

A nurturing environment encourages personal and professional development, making individuals feel valued and supported (Karsim et.al, 2023). This leads to a stronger connection to the university as a place where growth is prioritised. It can be argued that nurturing environments that address student expectations and provide support can significantly enhance student well-being and performance.

In the questionnaire a student wrote that:

It is vital for me to feel that I belong at the place I study at. I am more motivated to engage with activities and modules if I feel that the environment is friendly and allows me to grow.

Here, a connection is made between growth and belonging. Dwek (2006) emphasises the importance of belonging in the context of fostering a growth mindset. She argues that when individuals feel a sense of belonging, whether in educational settings or workplaces, they are more likely to embrace challenges, persist through difficulties, and be open to feedback. Dweck highlights that fostering connections and community can significantly impact belonging, motivation and success.

3. We are here for others, regardless of their background.

Embracing diversity and offering support to all, regardless of background, promotes an inclusive culture where everyone feels accepted and valued, enhancing their sense of belonging (Gilmore 2008). By selecting staff and students stratigraphically, the data represented a diverse group of university stakeholders including those with protected characteristics in the UK Education Act (2010).

When asked in the questionnaire, what belonging meant to the participants, the terms that were referred to most commonly were 'family' and being 'welcomed' by others. Being valued and listened to also featured in the responses as did being oneself and having someone to turn to when support was needed. The most poignant of examples of experiencing barriers to belonging came from staff and students with a disability or identifying as LGBTQ, who had perceived that the behaviour of others had not always been inclusive. The quote below is typical of several:

There are many times I feel I do not belong. I have experienced homophobia and transphobia here. I am also neurodiverse and often feel like I just don't 'fit'.

The poor behaviour of others was described as high detractor from belonging by participants assembling their LEGO® models. Staff and students who appeared to have a large ego or displayed a 'hero mentality' were perceived as particularly problematic when it came to creating an appropriate environment for belonging. Collins (2000) states that a hero mentality can occur where individuals take on the burden of a team or organisation's success or failure singularly, often leading to a culture that relies heavily on a few key figures rather than fostering teamwork and collaboration. Collins posits that successful organisations are those which foster a culture where success is a collective effort where individual contributions are recognised. Hero mentality can be divisive amongst staff in universities. When one individual creates a co-dependent relationship with their students, leading to over-reliance, this inadvertently positions other staff who are not as attentive, as somehow falling short, even if their levels of responsiveness sit well within university agreed norms (Pardee, 2007).

A related high detractor from belonging for staff was having a full calendar and a high workload. According to Clarke (2022), overworked staff often have less time to engage in social activities and informal interactions with their colleagues or students. These interactions are crucial for building relationships and fostering a sense of community and belonging.

Overwork can lead to increased stress levels and burnout, which can negatively impact an individual's emotional well-being and their ability to connect with others (Hyatt, 2022).

4. We empower people to feel that their 'whole selves' are welcome.

When people are encouraged to bring their authentic selves to the university, they feel more connected and respected (Lee, 2022). This acceptance of individual identities strengthens belonging for staff and students. Being able to be their authentic self was important to one student who wrote in the questionnaire:

[Belonging is] feeling I can be unapologetically myself, feeling supported and valued.

Similarly, a staff member made a link between belonging and personal motivation in the workplace, stating:

When I feel like I belong I give more of myself, am more likely to go the extra mile, and more likely to remain [with the university]. The moments when I have been left feeling as though I do not belong are the ones when I question how much is being asked of me and whether I want to continue to work for the university It really is that fundamental.

Lee and Burman (2024) worked with LGBTQ+ academic and professional services staff in higher education and found that being able to be authentic in the workplace was the most important factor related to satisfaction at work. They found that the visibility of LGBTQ+ staff challenges institutional heteronormative and heterosexist practices and encourages authentic participation from other minoritised staff and students in university communities. However, they caution that transformative university culture requires a collective effort and belonging is key to that cultural shift.

A staff member suggested that belonging could be achieved if the university:

Normalise[d] difference adding 'we need to bring different voices to the fore'.

Gover & Duxbury (2014), discusses the significance of staff voice in decision-making processes, arguing that inclusive practices lead to better institutional outcomes and greater staff satisfaction. Alignment with the university's values also promotes belonging for staff, which in turn increases staff motivation to contribute positively to the workplace (Lee, 2022).

5. We are open and inclusive: everybody has equal status.

This SGP, relates directly in part to the community created during the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) workshops. Ensuring equal status for all eliminates hierarchies and barriers, creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels they belong, and their contributions are valued equally. LSP was an effective tool for staff and students to discuss together what belonging meant to them as the LEGO® workshops are recognised as flattening the room (Kristiansen & Rasmussen 2014). Participants have an equal voice, regardless of their status or position and the methodology facilitates a structured process where everyone is given the same amount of time to build and describe their models to others. The hands-on engagement also encourages equal status in the room. By using LEGO® bricks to build models, participants engage physically and mentally, which helps break down barriers and encourage contributions from everyone (Trowsdale, 2022).

A staff participant wrote movingly in the questionnaire of how challenging it had been to be both gay and disabled.

As a gay disabled man feeling like you don't fit in, or don't belong is pretty much the status quo. I remember when I would have given anything to be 'normal' (straight, non-disabled) If a pill had existed to 'take away the gay' I would have taken it in a heartbeat. Belonging isn't a nice to have, it isn't an aspiration. It is a fundamental right each and every one of us deserves.

Role models were crucial to staff and students from minoritised groups. Staff in particular, called for greater emphasis on line-manager training on diversity and inclusion and they felt that there were too few examples of people with protected characteristics amongst the university's executive management team.

There are now several leadership development programmes in higher education that seek to diversify university leadership (Lee, 2021). Mentorship was also acknowledged by staff as being instrumental to the participants' career progression and personal development. They inspired the participants and helped them navigate their career paths.

6. We communicate, listen and are open to new perspectives.

Effective communication and receptiveness to diverse viewpoints fosters mutual understanding and respect (Slater, 2008). Active listening also helps build a community where everyone feels heard and included (Nicholls, 2008). Describing their experiences in another university, one staff member who was neurodiverse stated:

I shared concerns in regard to a harassment situation and two members of the staff did not even stop to listen to my concerns and were silent. During that time, I felt that I [did] not belong to the place.

This quotation demonstrates the link between being heard and belonging and the way in which belonging is contingent upon feeling safe. Edmondson (2018) discusses how leaders can create a psychologically safe environment. She highlights that active listening is crucial for understanding employees' concerns and creating a culture of inclusion and belonging.

7. We include people affected by an issue when talking about the issue.

This SGP has echoes of the slogan, 'Nothing about us, without us'. The term has its origins in disability activism during the 1990s (Charlton, 1998). Involving those directly impacted by issues in discussions and decision-making processes, ensures that their voices are heard and considered, making them feel integral to the community (Jurgens, 2010). A student with a disability wrote in the questionnaire that to them belonging was:

Feeling included regardless of any characteristics and not being judged for being different. Also, a feeling of being welcomed into conversations, where my opinion matters and where it's easy to make friends.

The WONKHE / Pearson report (2022) discusses how universities can improve the way they connect their students, both at the course level and across the entire institution. Building connections and creating inclusive educational experiences are seen as essential steps to foster a sense of belonging. Student voice has long been an important part of both internal and external student questionnaires, such as the UK's National Student

Survey (NSS). Fielding (2004) posits that student voice initiatives create a more inclusive and democratic educational environment. When students feel that their opinions matter, they are more likely to feel connected and committed to their institution, fostering a sense of belonging.

8. We work together to develop and build. We research for the community.

Collaborative efforts in development and research for the benefit of the community create a sense of shared purpose and collective achievement, reinforcing bonds among members (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). A student participant wrote of the importance of community in the university stating:

A sense of belonging is all about community too and feeling that you are part of a larger group.

Research into different communities within and beyond the university was seen as a high to medium promoter of belonging. Through, research and knowledge exchange, a university's role extends beyond the university campus out into the communities that they serve and is part of their civic responsibilities (Jongbloed & Enders 2005). The civic role of universities can help foster belonging for students. Wilson (2019) investigates the positive effects of student volunteering programmes and community placements on student development and community well-being. These activities enhance students' civic awareness, promote their leadership abilities, and offer a sense of social responsibility. Holdsworth (2010) similarly extol the benefits of student volunteering in highlighting real-world issues and providing practical experiential learning opportunities.

9. Together, we uplift each other, have fun, and progress.

Celebrating successes, having fun, and supporting one another fosters a positive and joyful community spirit, enhancing feelings of belonging and camaraderie. University activities and events were cited as being important to staff and student belonging. A number of questionnaire respondents valued the way in which the university celebrated a diverse range of cultural events and holidays, such as Eid and Black History Month; and the staff inclusivity networks were noted by several as a strength of the university. Students appreciated the work that the Students' Union did to promote Ramadan and appreciated inclusive sporting events such as rounders tournaments. The university bulletins and weekly emails from the Vice Chancellor were also recognised as a way in which events and activities were communicated and celebrated to promote belonging. The notion of fun and celebration loomed large in the questionnaire responses. Staff in particular valued opportunities to engage in playful activities together. One colleague wrote:

There was a yearly rounders tournament organised in the summer, for all staff. It was a nice activity promoting exercise and cooperation. This is an example of campus wide initiatives to engage with staff. More of these are needed.

Celebration also fostered belonging for staff and students with award ceremonies cited by several as important to feeling recognised and valued by the university community. There was an appreciation by participants for the visits to the campus by the therapy dogs as this quote from a member of staff shows

The best therapy is the puppy visits though. As a team we will take 10 minutes, go and connect with the dogs and breathe.

Here, the puppies aimed primarily at ameliorating student stress during assessment season as also benefitted teams of staff who took time out together to visit the puppies on campus. Peel, Nguyen, & Tannous (2023), found that therapy dogs on campus were primarily for improving student mood and reducing stress but also had a positive impact on university staff too.

10. We are dynamic. We meet changing needs of changing people in a changing environment.

Being adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of individuals ensures that everyone feels supported and valued, regardless of changes, which sustains a sense of belonging. When participants were asked in the questionnaire whether there had been a time that they didn't feel they belonged at the university, a number of cited periods of organisational change and uncertainty as being common factors. The WONKHE / Pearson report explores the impact of change on belonging in higher education. They found that successful change requires a cultural shift within institutions to prioritise inclusivity and community. Involving both students and staff in any change process helps ensure that initiatives are relevant and effective. Clear, open communication is vital for managing expectations and building trust during transitions (Nicholls 2021).

For staff, the pace of change was a high detractor from belonging at the university. Some felt that the institution moved too quickly to build properly and often in doing so, did not get to the root of the original problem. Bridges (2009), discusses the impact of organisational change on individuals, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and addressing people's emotional responses to transition to ensure successful adaptation. Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2010), concur and advocate for involving all stakeholders in the institutional change process through positive dialogue and collaboration, fostering a sense of ownership and agency.

11. We value individuals and our individual journeys.

Whilst student success at university is generally measured in assessment scores and ultimately the award of their degree, for staff, success is more differentiated. Staff participants in both academic and professional services roles, were keen to stress that success in the university workplace took on different meanings for different people, depending on their role and their outlook on work. According to Bolman and Deal (2018), differentiating staff success in the university education workplace is crucial for fostering belonging in a positive and productive environment. Amabile and Kramer (2011) concur similarly suggesting that acknowledging successes at a variety of different levels can boost staff performance and enhance belonging to an organisation.

12. This environment lets people fly!

Creating an environment that encourages people to reach their full potential and succeed ensures that individuals feel empowered and supported, solidifying their connection to the university community. Pink (2009) discusses the concept of letting people fly in his book *Drive*. Pink argues that motivation in the workplace is significantly enhanced when employees are given autonomy. He posits that when people have the freedom to make choices about their work, pursue mastery in their skills, and connect their tasks to a larger purpose, they are more engaged and innovative. According to Pink, creativity allows individuals to reach their full potential, ultimately leading to better outcomes for both employees and organisations. A staff member reflected on the link between belonging and thriving in their university workplace. They stated:

When you feel a sense of belonging you can contribute more and be more innovative. it is hard to be autonomous and innovative if you are feeling unsure and new.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the concept of belonging within a UK university context, using the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® methodology. The research highlights the complexity and individuality of the experience of belonging, underlining its importance for both students and staff. The study identifies 12 Simple Guiding Principles (SGPs) which encapsulate the essence of belonging for participants. These principles emphasise the importance of creating spaces for community building, nurturing personal growth, embracing diversity, fostering open communication, involving those affected by issues in discussions, and promoting collaborative efforts. They also underscore the need for adaptability in meeting changing needs and creating an environment that encourages individuals to reach their full potential.

The research also identifies various factors that promote or detract from a sense of belonging. Positive factors include connections at in-person events, social spaces, positive behaviour, inclusion, civic outreach, and a dynamic environment that lets people fly. Detractors include commuting issues, workload, pace of change, lack of student accommodation, closed-mindedness among colleagues, and poor behaviour. The study's findings have significant implications for enhancing the sense of belonging within the university community. By implementing the SGPs and addressing the identified detractors, the university can foster an inclusive, supportive, and dynamic environment where everyone feels they belong.

In essence, this study underscores the importance of belonging in a university setting and provides a roadmap for creating an inclusive and supportive environment that fosters a strong sense of belonging for all members of the university community. Two elements were found to be important for this roadmap:

i) The power of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY® as an innovative methodology to explore the complex and subjective concept of belonging, providing a platform for diverse voices to be heard, and facilitating meaningful conversations that can drive positive change.

ii) The importance of recognising, including and developing outputs with the university community at ground level: fully representing the diversity of its members.

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