

‘We Belong’: differential sense of belonging and its meaning for different ethnic groups in higher education

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Abstract

This paper covers This paper presents the results of two University of Wolverhampton studies that explore student belonging in higher education and how a sense of belonging differs between ethnic groups. The research took a mixed-methodology approach, collecting both quantitative data via a survey and qualitative data via focus groups. Study One explored the differential experiences of belonging via the Belongingness Survey (Yorke, 2016), with a group of 941 students. This was followed by Study Two, which used focus groups to generate a greater understanding of what belonging meant to the students and how belonging developed, as well as to identify barriers to developing a sense of belonging.

This work concluded that ethnicity-based differences in students’ sense of belonging are apparent and these mirror the differences witnessed at a sector level in degree outcomes. Additionally, belongingness is found to have an unstable nature, in that it waxes and wanes and can be lost or developed at any part of the student lifecycle. Some student-identified initiatives to support the development of belonging are presented. The findings are discussed in the light of the current literature on differential outcomes.

Keywords: Belonging, Belongingness, BAME, differential outcomes.

Introduction

This paper presents the results of two University of Wolverhampton studies that explore student belonging in higher education (HE) and how a sense of belonging differs between ethnic groups. The research took a mixed-methodology approach, collecting both quantitative data via a survey and qualitative data via focus groups. Study One explored the differential experiences of belonging via the Belongingness Survey (Yorke, 2016), with a group of 941 students. This was followed by Study Two, which used focus groups to generate a greater understanding of what belonging meant to the students and how belonging developed and to identify barriers to developing a sense of belonging.

Belongingness is key to both the retention and success of students in HE (Thomas, 2012; Thomas *et al.*, 2017). Thomas *et al.* (*op.cit.*) suggest that belonging begins at induction and they present a logic chain in which induction activities encourage students to make friends, to have done which has consequent positive impact upon students’ engagement and sense of belonging; this, in turn, leads to the greater likelihood of the students’ staying in HE and being successful. Whilst the *What Works? Phase 2* programme (Thomas *et al.*, *op.cit.*) focused on belonging, only two institutions considered the differential sense of belonging and outcomes of BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) students. One of these institutions

noted a distinct difference between the belongingness reported by BAME students and that of their white counterparts.

The research that explores ethnic-based differential experiences of belonging is limited. The significant literature in the area of the psychological impacts on BAME student attainment is US-focused (Singh, 2011). A review of the published and grey literature pertaining to differential degree outcomes highlights a number of authors who do discuss BAME student belonging, though much of this discussion is arrived at via the conclusions of research rather than having BAME belonging as its main focus (see Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015). The preponderance of work into BAME student belonging focuses on freshmen in the American education system. This literature proposes that BAME students struggled to adapt to the HE environment and found it difficult to balance belonging with retaining their cultural voice and identity (Vázquez-Montilla, Wilder and Triscari, 2012); however, there is no research that explores UK BAME students' definition of belonging in HE. This paper aims to provide some insight into this area.

Literature Review

The term 'belonging' is a key characteristic of human behaviour that has a long history within the psychological literature and refers to an individual's need for affiliation (McClelland, 1987), relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1991; Ryan, 1993; Vallerand, 1997), social connectivity (Vallerand, *op.cit.*), positive regard (Rogers, 1951) and affection (Murray, 1938). Given that belongingness is firmly rooted in relationships with others, it is not surprising that belonging has been explored in educational settings: first in school environments (Goodenow, 1993) and later in HE (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Lefever, 2012; Thomas, *op.cit.*; Yorke, 2016; Thomas *et al.*, *op.cit.*). In an education setting, belonging extends beyond personal relationships to include "*the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment*" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). This suggests that belonging in education is found at multiple levels (Foster *et al.*, *op.cit.*; Lefever, *op.cit.*) and includes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) relationships within the educational microsystem (with friends and peer group), mesosystem (educational relationships between the student, her/his peers and her/his teachers) and macrosystem (the student and the educational establishment).

As a result of widening participation, UK higher education institutions (HEIs) now boast a diverse student body. Not unexpectedly, there are tangible differences in how students experience and engage in HE (Trowler and Trowler, 2010) and thus differences are to be expected in terms of their individual sense of belonging. Under-represented and non-traditional student groups are more likely to engage differently within the HE setting. Consequently, mature students, international students, disabled students, part-time students, commuting students and those not based at a main campus, experience such barriers to inclusion as not feeling safe, other students' behaviours, segregated spaces and lack of inclusivity in university opportunities (Lefever, *op.cit.*). Bearing in mind that belonging is linked to retention and success (Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Thomas, *op.cit.*; Thomas *et al.*, *op.cit.*), understanding how and why different student groups have varied experiences of HE is important in reducing differential degree outcomes.

One of the most worrying differentials in student retention and degree outcomes is that observed between BAME students and their white counterparts. In 2015/16, there was an overall UK attainment gap of 15.6%. A breakdown by each ethnic group indicates that:

- “72.2% of Chinese students were awarded a top degree (a degree attainment gap of 6.6 percentage points)
- 70.7% of Indian students (a gap of 8.1 percentage points)
- 61.8% of Pakistani students (a gap of 17.0 percentage points)
- 50.5% of Black Other students (a gap of 28.3 percentage points)” (ECU, 2017).

Moreover, there is a worrying non-continuation trend for black students, as it was reported that, for the 2015/16 academic year, the non-continuation rates were 1.5 times higher for black students than for white (OFFA, 2017). Differential degree outcomes must be routed in the processes of HE, given that all students have to demonstrate equitable entry qualifications when entering HE and that differences in degree outcomes are not a statistically-significant factor of students’ demography – such as prior education, entry qualification type, gender, age or socio-economic background (Broecke and Nicholls, 2006; HEFCE, 2015). Despite the fact that the quality of learning relationships and the psychosocial aspects of the learning environments can have impact on student success and are key areas responsible for ethnicity-based differences in degree outcomes (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit.*), little is known about the role of belonging within this. As there are no previous studies in the UK that explore the educational belonging of BAME students, this research provides some insights into the differential experiences of belonging.

Study One: the differential experience of belonging amongst diverse student groups

Methodology

Yorke’s (*op.cit.*) Belongingness Survey measures belongingness via three subscales: engagement; belonging to faculty or department; academic-related self-confidence. The areas of belongingness are measured via a five-point Likert scale, where 1 is ‘strongly disagree’ and 5 is ‘strongly agree’ (i.e. a higher score equates to a higher sense of belonging).

The paper-based Belongingness Survey was disseminated to students during a two-week period, either at the beginning of lectures by Faculty Graduate Interns or by representatives of the Students’ Union during their visits to various campuses of the University. The survey was completed in the presence of the person who distributed it.

The Belongingness Survey was completed by 941 students – approximately 5% of the student body – and included level 4 (43.5%), level 5 (27%) and level 6 (29.5%) students. The sample was representative of the University on a number of levels: students surveyed were from all University faculties (large fac1 = 40%; medium-sized fac2 = 20%; medium-sized fac3 = 20%; small fac4 = 14%; did not disclose = 6%) and campuses (main campus = 69%; small campus 2 = 28%; learning centres 3%). Represented were all ethnic groups within the University (white = 48%; black = 12%; Asian = 24% Chinese = 2%; other = 14%) and a broad age range (range = under 20 to 45-50, with 54% of surveyed students falling into the under-20 category). The sample was unrepresentative in two areas: the survey was completed by both full-time (94%) and part-time (6%) students, and males (30%) and

females (70%). The University student body is made up of approximately 40% mature students and 55% females.

Analysis of the data

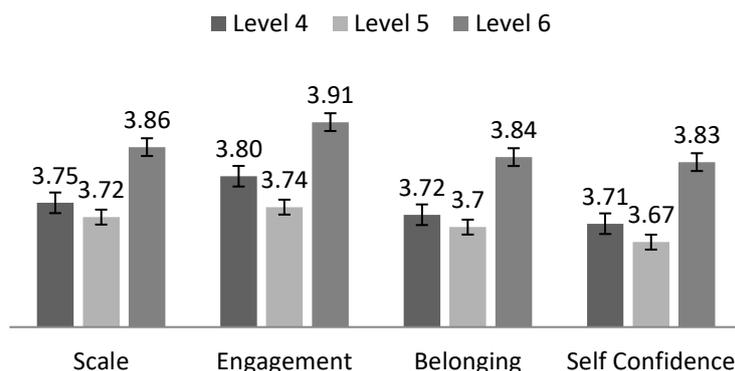
As per the definition provided by Boone and Boone (2012), the Belongingness Survey (Yorke, *op.cit.*) provides Likert scale data. Boone and Boone (*ibid.*) therefore suggest that these data are analysed using descriptive statistics and, where appropriate, t-test and ANOVA with *post hoc* analysis. The analysis deployed here is that of descriptive statistics and aims to identify significance to practice.

The data analysis has identified mean scores for the questionnaire, each of the three subscales and the individual questions. The data were cut by a number of demographic variables; however, the data presented in this paper are those that have direct relevance to ethnicity.

Presentation and discussion of the data

It is interesting to note that belongingness is affected by the level of study. A dip in students' sense of belonging is observed at level 5, but returns at a higher point in level 6 (Figure 1).

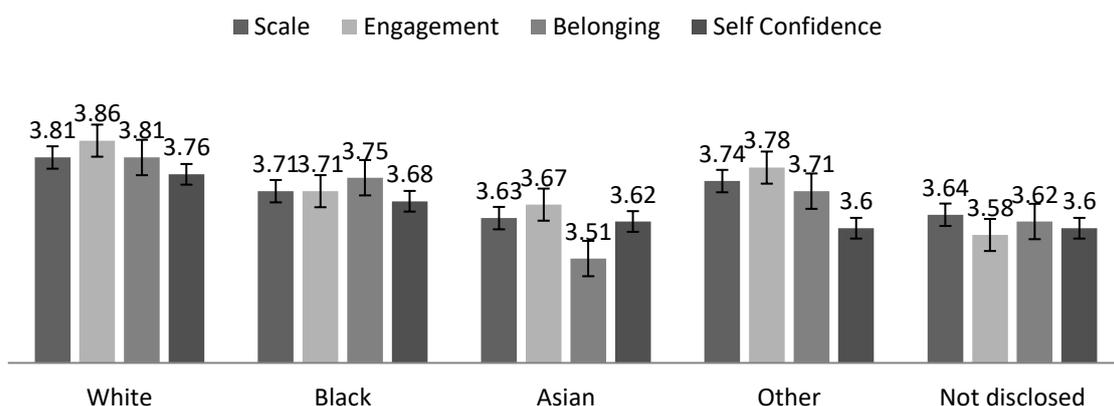
Figure 1: Level of study by scale and subscales



This may be associated with the 'second-year blues', but it is particularly important to recognise this with reference to student mental health and suicide risk (see UUK, 2002; and UUK, 2015).

Differences in belonging as a result of ethnic categorisations were also apparent (Figure 2).

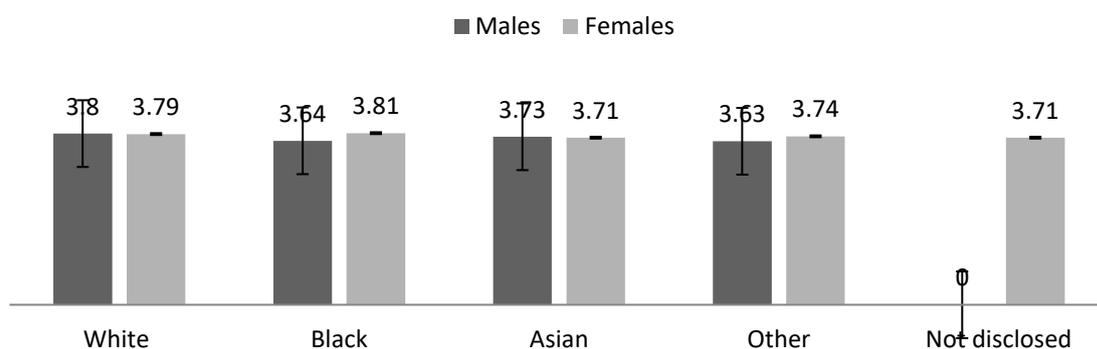
Figure 2: Ethnicity by scale and subscales



Although this analysis shows no clear pattern of belongingness, it does highlight that students who are categorised as black have a lower sense of belonging than white students or those who define themselves as 'other'. Differences are evident between white students and Asian students on the full scale, between white and Asian students on the belonging subscale and between white students and students who did not disclose their ethnicity on the engagement scale.

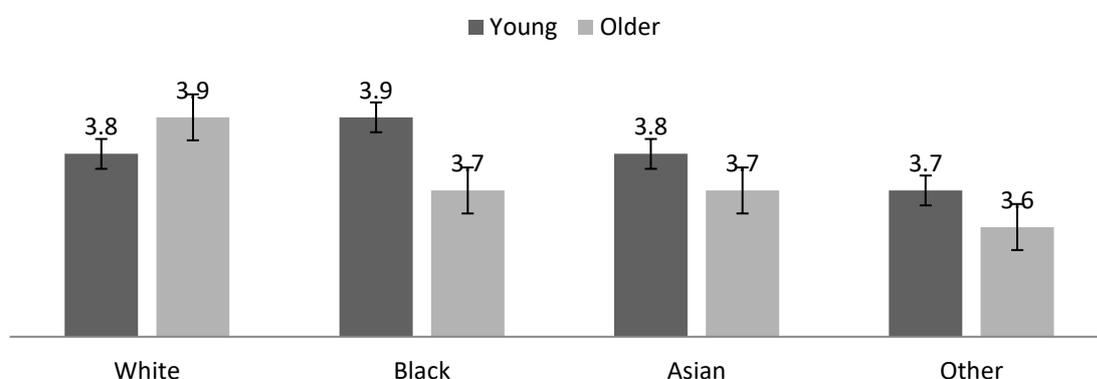
In addition, there is an interaction between gender and ethnicity, where black males, males who categorised themselves as 'other' and females who categorised themselves as 'white other', appear to have a lower sense of belonging than their counterparts (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Ethnicity and gender by scale scores



A further interaction between ethnicity and age was observed, where older students (36 and above) from minority backgrounds have a lower sense of belonging than their white counterparts and younger counterparts from the same ethnic categorisation (Figure 4). These belonging patterns are particularly interesting, especially as black males are the student group least likely to gain a first or upper-second class of degree (ECU, 2015). There is a distinct difference in student attainment as a factor of age and ethnicity, with the attainment gap being much wider between older BME students and their white counterparts than the gap observed between younger BME and white students (ECU, 2014).

Figure 4: Ethnicity and age by full scale scores



This study has provided a quantitative account of student belonging in HE: it provides a picture of differences in perception of belonging based on ethnic group and indicates that students from a BAME background have a sense of belonging different from that of their white counterparts; however, this type of research is dependent on three propositions: first, in order to measure belonging, it has to be an independent psychological construct for it to be available for measurement (Malone *et al.*, 2012); second, the tools developed to measure belonging are psychometrically-robust (Mahar *et al.*, 2014; Malone *et al.*, *op.cit.*); third, that belonging has a commonly-agreed definition (Mahar *et al.*, *op.cit.*). In response to the first point, the plethora of literature pertaining to belonging indicates its existence and recognition as a construct (Malone *et al.*, *op.cit.*). When considering the second point, a review of Yorke (*op.cit.*) indicates the development of a valid and reliable tool. The question of whether the above study provides a trustworthy picture of dynamics within belonging is therefore dependent on whether it is perceived in the same way by all groups. The next study considers how belonging is defined and thereby provides a more in-depth discussion of the numerical dynamics outlined above.

Study Two: the meaning and maintenance of belonging for diverse student groups

Methodology

In addition to completing the questionnaire, thirteen students were recruited to three focus groups to discuss the trends identified in the questionnaire and to provide a more in-depth understanding of belonging at the University. The focus groups were attended by 4 males and 9 females who included representatives from levels 4, 5 and 6. The participants also included students categorised as BAME (n=5: 3 UK BAME and 2 international) and white UK students (n=8) and were therefore representative of the University's ethnic makeup. The students included two Students' Union officers who reflected on their recent experience as Students' Union officers as well as their undergraduate experiences. The sample also included students who self-identified as not feeling that they belonged at the University (n=2). The length of the focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to 70 minutes, during which time the students were asked three main questions:

- 1) When people talk about belongingness, what does that mean to you as a student at this University?
- 2) What or who impacts on your feelings of belonging or lack of belonging at the University?
- 3) What are the consequences of feeling a sense of belonging or not belonging at the University?

A number of prompts were used by the female facilitator to encourage the students to explore their responses in more depth. The facilitator had not taught any of the students, which minimised the power difference between the students and researcher. The sessions were video-recorded with the permission of the participating students.

Analysis of the data

A thematic inductive analysis from a realist perspective was performed on the collected data. Data were analysed at the semantic level. The thematic analysis followed the five stages of

analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarity with the data; 2) generating codes; 3) generating themes; 4) refining themes; 5) defining themes.

Presentation and discussion of the data

The data provided some interesting insights into students' beliefs about belonging and why it is important. In particular, they highlighted the unstable nature of belongingness and identified some of the barriers to belonging and facilitators associated with it.

For those students who participated in the focus groups, their affective attachments at the University were one of the most important factors for a successful HE experience. They described belonging as being or feeling '*part of the family*', which had many benefits. These benefits were emotional or affective and practical in nature and, as a result, provided:

"a feeling of being cared about; that you matter"
(female, international student, level 5)

The affective nature of belonging means that a sense of belonging can fluctuate. A dominant theme is how belongingness "*waxes and wanes*" (female student, level 6), which students directly attributed to how much they felt that they were cared about. This was measured by:

"the amount of attention we [students] receive from lecturers or teachers on the course and the interest the University shows"
(female student, level 5)

This has implications for BAME students on a number of levels. Where BAME students do not have a strong learning relationship with lecturers, there is a likelihood that belonging may be affected (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit*; Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, *op.cit.*). Moreover, the natural routines of HE include enhanced attention during Level 4, to support transitions into HE, and, at level 6, to support transitions out of HE – even more so now that the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) metrics draw heavily on retention and continuation rates, National Student Survey (NSS) and Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) results. BAME students at level 5 are therefore at risk of feeling uncared for. This is also evident in Study One, where Asian students and those students who did not disclose their ethnicity reported a lower sense of belonging.

In addition to waxing and waning, belongingness can be completely "*lost and can also be found*" (male, BAME student, level 6) at any point of the university journey. Central to losing and/or rediscovering belonging are themes that relate to responsibility for ensuring that students develop a sense of belonging and barriers that students encounter in relation to developing belongingness. It is important to note here that the discussions relating to barriers to the development of belonging were very emotive. When asked about this, all participants said that they were surprised by their reactions, but, on further reflection, made suggestions that related to making the unconscious more conscious.

"Hmm, this is making me think about things I sort of knew but hadn't put a lot of thought into it"
(female student, level 5)

“I hadn’t really, umm, thought about it before, but now.... [trailed off]”

(male BAME student, level 6)

In relation to the generation of belonging, extra effort from members of the University community helped students feel they were cared about, which triggered a sense of belonging.

“[Name] going beyond the call of duty made a big difference for me”

(female Students’ Union officer reflecting on her recent undergraduate experience)

The belongingness generated as a result of staff members’ going the extra mile during pastoral interactions was particularly important and a powerful basis for students’ decision-making when deciding whether to withdraw from study. When students questioned whether being at university was right for them or when they experienced periods of distress, it was found that positive pastoral interactions regenerated a sense of belonging, reignited a lost sense of belonging or ignited belongingness that was not there before. One student commented:

“Lecturers can generate belonging when it isn’t present by being open to students, by showing respect; it’s almost as if they are demonstrating that they see something worthwhile in you and that matters”

(female, Students’ Union officer).

This belief was further explored in relation to students who had lost their feeling of belonging or had never felt it in the first place. It is important to note here that this was more prevalent for the BAME students within this research than their white counterparts. Discussing his lack of sense of belonging throughout the majority of his degree, one student talked about how he was *“enticed into being part of the group”* by lecturers who *“reached out [to him] and made an effort to understand [him].”* The lecturer’s approach that invites interactions and attempts to see the student as an individual with potential was viewed as an example of the lecturer *“going beyond the call of duty”*, which in turn opened a door for developing trust and a facilitative learning relationship to develop or, as the student described it:

“He kicked me out of the lecture at the end of last year for coming in late. He said wait outside I’m coming to talk to you and he followed me out. He asked why I never turned up on time and if I had a job or was something stopping me getting there. I said no, I just oversleep. He laughed and said I had to be on time or I’d miss important stuff. He made an effort and no-one did that before. He told me I had to go to lectures, they were important, I didn’t know, so I started going to lectures. Ya’ know what, when I went to lecturers I started to feel I fitted in”

(male BAME student, level 5)

Although the above demonstrates that belonging can be encouraged at any point of the learning journey (even if the task becomes more difficult as time moves on), a sense of belonging can also be injured at any point in the journey. A negative critical incident can dissolve someone’s sense belonging if there are no other sources for students to anchor their belonging to.

“Lecturers can lose students by being rude, unapproachable, unavailable, destructive rather than constructive, acting like they can’t be bothered, like not answering questions and emails, or by giving generic feedback to students. And stereotyping us”
(male, BAME Student, level 6)

Also, it takes students a while to regain trust in lecturers who have ‘broken’ a sense of belonging and this can sometimes be applied to other lecturers as well. Worryingly, this can have impact upon the educational choices that students make.

“You get nervous about going to see THEM again, especially if you’re not feeling that confident about things. If you’re okay, aren’t questioning whether you belong, it bounces off you and you think oh they’re just having a bad day”
(female International student, level 5)

“You’ll only go and see that one lecturer who you can trust. Uh, I suppose that’s because of the belonging thing, they make you feel you’re one of the family, it’s alright to ask so you feel don’t feel like oh what am I doing at uni”
(female BAME student, level 4)

“But sometimes you think whatever. You don’t go and see them again, you might not choose their modules next year unless you have to, but your friends and other lecturers make up for it. They’re the reason you feel that you wanna come back each day and keep going”
(male student, level 5)

A sense of belonging is linked to student success (Thomas, *op.cit.*) and these findings are interesting, as they directly overlap with those of the Disparities in Student Attainment programme (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit.*). For these students, relationships with lecturers were an important part of their developing sense of belonging; however, BAME students were more vocal about incidents and the ramifications of broken trust. Moreover, students’ opportunities to be successful are enhanced by lecturers who invite interaction and demonstrate that they view students as individuals with potential; however, good learning relationships for BAME students are more difficult, as psychosocial factors can have an impact, such as the Pygmalion Effect, stereotype threat (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit.*), the low numbers of BAME academics in HE and the fear that white staff do not have the cultural competency to understand a BAME student perspective. For BAME students, therefore, the level of belongingness that is facilitated by their relationships with staff may be more difficult to achieve and more likely to be injured through perceived slights or brusqueness.

In addition to a lecturers’ role in belonging, both BAME and white students agreed that students also play a large part in this process. One of the most important sources of belonging is from friends and peers.

“Your friends might not be on your course; they could be friends from halls”
(female student, level 6)

“They could be mates from school”
(male student, level 5)

“People I have met along the way, some here, some on my course, some not”
(female student, level 5)

Friends and peers provide the strongest and most durable affective ties that support students, normalise situations and provide comfort and understanding during the difficult patches.

“I feel most at home here because of my friends”
(male student, level 5)

“It’s your friends you go to when things are difficult”
(female International student, level 5)

“It’s the connections with your friends, and what that brings, that sees you through”
(female student, level 6)

Students can help each other feel a sense of belonging by *“being open, friendly”* (male student, level 6) and by *“just talking to you, not just talking to their friends”* (female student, level 4). Again, inviting interaction with students or *‘reaching out’* was returned to within this theme.

“I suppose being aware is important, being aware that others might be lonely and think they don’t fit it”
(female student, level 5)

“Then you’ve got to be confident enough and reach out to include other people you don’t normally speak to. That’s hard some times”
(female student, level 5)

On the reverse side, a lack of awareness about the impact of behaviours – and how these are perceived by other students – has a negative effect upon belonging.

“Other students can alienate some students through being in cliques”
(female student, level 4)

“[or] through not sharing space”
(male student, level 5)

“not realising that high action and loud vocals when they’re having fun can be viewed as aggressive or confrontational situations by others”
(female, Students’ Union Officer)

Again, these ideas raise concerns about belonging for BAME students, particularly on courses or in universities that are predominantly white. Dhanda (2010) identified that students tended to gravitate towards peers who are like them and, consequently, integration between ethnicities inside and outside the classroom can be limited. If groups of students

are not welcoming, it is inevitable that some students will feel left out. This is encapsulated by one student when he said:

“...to begin with I didn’t have belonging here, I felt I belonged at the uni my mates were at. I just came here and did the minimum to get by to get my degree”
(male BAME student, level 5)

In all three focus groups, the students raised the point that they felt institutions could become more supportive environments for the development of inclusive belonging and small changes could be made to induction, the continuation of and maintenance of belonging during levels 4 and 5 and the development of cross-institutional activities to support the generation of belonging for BAME and white students alike. Induction activities are very important in building the foundations for belongingness to develop.

“...Activities that encourage people to mix, breakdown barriers between students [peers] and students and staff can help too”
(female student, level 6)

Challenging students’ natural timidity and nervousness during induction and pushing them outside their comfort zones are both crucial to belonging. Getting to know others is as much a part of induction as it is part of developing a sense of belonging (Thomas et al., *op.cit.*).

“Students are important in this process; they have a responsibility to mix during induction so they get to know people”
(male student, level 6)

In considering the structure of induction, most faculty-based activities are academically-focused, whereas social activities are offered by the Students’ Union. These activities may, or may not, be inclusive.

“The Faculty offers the academic induction and the Union the social side of things, but not everyone engages with the Union. Mature students have other responsibilities so won’t go to club nights, parties etc. Also some BAME students might not want these activities either. So not everyone does the social side of induction”
(female, Students’ Union officer)

This could be rectified by encouraging faculties to consider both academic induction and social induction as part of their processes.

“Induction could be made into two days’ social activities; you know where you get to know people at the university and three days’ academic induction”
(female student, level 5)

This would provide a more inclusive approach and offer the opportunity for all student groups to integrate socially; however, the activities need to be considered carefully.

“It can’t be just sitting in the pub or something”
(female student, level 4)

“Yes, the activities should be suitable to everyone. Not everyone likes noisy, busy environments and what about mature students with kids? They might not have the money to splash on drinks”

(female international student, level 5)

“The activities will have to be compulsory or people won’t do it”

(male BAME student, level 6)

“Things like team building; fun but with a purpose”

(female Students’ Union officer)

In addition to the importance of induction (Thomas *et al.*, *op.cit.*), both BAME and white students agreed that a few interventions during induction are not enough to ensure that belongingness is developed and maintained. Given that belongingness waxes and wanes and can be lost and found, opportunities to develop, reignite or renew belonging could be scattered throughout the student lifecycle. At level 4, developing belonging mainly resided at the inter-personal or micro level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

“Peers are important, mixing with people from your course group”

(male student’ level 5)

Pedagogic approaches that encourage this are important.

“Interactive classroom activities that make people mix and get to know each other are important throughout the year”

(male student, level 5)

At level 5 macro level (Bronfenbrenner, *op.cit.*), such forces as the institution itself could play a part in maintaining belongingness.

“[The University] communicating with us through the holidays, like a personalised congratulations letter on passing the first year and information on what happens next”

(female student, level 6)

“Not only [including] information on what happens if you haven’t passed everything – although this is important – information on what is expected of level 5 students, how to do well at level 5 would be great”

(male student, level 5)

Continued contact though the holidays could be achieved through “paid placement with the University projects etc.” (female international student, level 5), which would provide “another level of belonging” (female student, level 5).

Level 5 pedagogical approaches again focused on integration, but, this time, considered a mixture of academic, socially-oriented academic and social activities.

“A continuation of interactive classroom activities should be maintained through level 5 to continue making students mix”

(male student, level 5)

“Full class events, inside the classroom, like Christmas parties, Dragons’ Den”

(female student, level 6)

Both BAME and white students proposed that cross-intuitional events are also important to the development of belongingness, as these are both social and educational ways for students to develop their networks and meet lecturers in social situations. These activities allow lecturers to mix with students on a different level, which could reduce students’ tensions around stereotype threat and not being seen as an individual (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit.*).

“Events, university-wide events, like the international festival are important, you meet people and make friends; it helps you mix outside your class”

(female international student, level 5)

“Things like Balls, outside the classroom”

(male Student, level 6)

Conclusions

This research suggests that both BAME and white students have a similar conception of belonging in HE settings; however, ethnic-based difference occurs in how belonging is experienced. In particular, differences in belongingness hinge on the quality of relationships that BAME students are involved in with other students and with their lecturers. Within this sample, BAME students were more likely to indicate that there were points in their HE experience where they did not feel that they belonged at the University.

For this sample of students, belongingness not only has multiple levels (Foster *et al.*, *op.cit.*; Lefever, *op.cit.*), but also has multiple facets and is unstable in nature. The educational and affective aspects of belonging that influence academic and social engagement were discussed both by students who felt that they belonged and also by those who did not. Belonging fluctuates over time and is associated with respect, perception of potential and evidence that students matter. Significant overlaps are found between these findings and the areas that have impact on student success (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit.*). Not only does belonging play a major part in whether students engage within HE, it also has an impact on whether students succeed. The research presented here provides additional information about how, for the group of students, belonging relates to student success and, in particular, that of BAME students. Belonging is linked to the quality and the type of learning relationships that students develop with their peers, their lecturers, the departments in which they study and the university; however, the barriers to BAME students’ belonging doubly reinforces the barriers to success indicated in the research relating to ethnicity-based degree differentials.

Universities provide an arena where multiple-level learning relationships can be developed and multi-level emotional and academic support is on offer (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit.*,

Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, *op.cit.*). Akin to this, belonging, for this group of students, also has multi-levels that align to the micro, meso and macro levels of the educational setting (Bronfenbrenner, *op.cit.*) that are discussed within the attainment gap literature (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, *op.cit.*).

The groups of students whose developing sense of belonging is most vulnerable should now include BAME students; furthermore, BAME students should be considered when developing activities to encourage student belonging. Inclusive activities to encourage engagement are not exclusive to induction activities and are beneficial throughout the student lifecycle. Particular attention needs to be paid to the times when belonging may wane or be damaged and factored into interventions to encourage belonging.

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