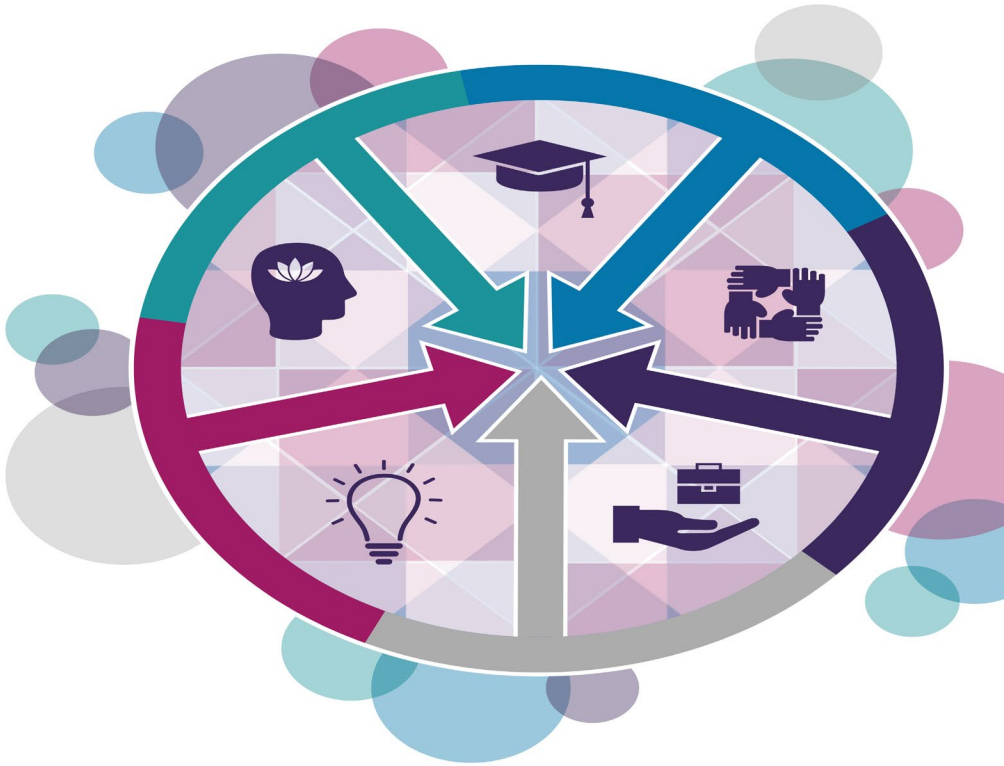
QAA Scotland

Enhancement Themes

Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

Towards 'Authentic Belonging': Exploring the Concept and Enhancing Practice



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QAA Scotland's 5th International Enhancement Conference
Shaping the Student Experience Together: 20 Years of Enhancement

Defining Community and Belonging

- Belonging has been defined as…
  - a “dynamic, relational and nonlinear process” (Raaper, 2021, p. 593)
  - a process of learning ‘to be’ (Groves & O’Shea, 2019)
  - a series of support needs to be met through interactions (Strayhorn, 2012)
  - See: Tinto’s (1993) integration model

- Community: “the most essential elements of community are spirit, trust, mutual interdependence among members, connectedness, interactivity, shared values and beliefs, and common expectation.” (Rovai & Wighting, 2005, p. 101).

- Do we need to reframe these concepts? (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022)

The Challenge of Community and Belonging

- Enhancing belonging and community in HE has emerged as an area of thematic priority (Campbell, 2019; Gopalan et al., 2021).
  - At institutional level
  - At sector level (e.g. Advance HE, QAA Scotland)
  - In research/SOLT

Year	Overall Satisfaction	Q21: Part of a community of staff and students
2017	80%	61%
2018	74%	58%
2019	79%	60%
2020	86%	68%
2021	81%	61%

Belonging and the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Distance learners may not always value a sense of belonging. (Brodie & Osowska, 2021)
- Significant challenges to student wellbeing in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the rapid shift to online learning (Nurunnabi et al., 2020; Scoulas, 2021)
- Belonging as a ‘solution’? (Knight et al., 2021; Gopalan et al., 2021)
- “As the post-pandemic academic world rebuilds itself, we will need to get serious about communicating diversity, inclusion and belonging” (Passantino, 2021, p.583).

Image Source: https://leverageedu.com/blog/online-learning/

Edinburgh Napier's Approach to Belonging Enhancement

- QAA Enhancement Themes 'Evidence for Enhancement' (2017-2020) as a catalyst to explore and innovate.
- Suite of funded 'mini projects'.
- Evaluated through semi-structured interviews with project leads in 2020.

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

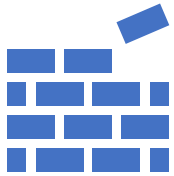
What Works in Enhancing Community and Belonging?

Student Ownership

“Students have really taken to the idea of ‘owning’ the space and have been collecting and donating their own resources.”(Design Reading Room Evaluation Form)

Staff Facilitation

“It’s a kind of gardening process… it’s about creating the right environment for that community to flourish.” (F, Staff)



Small Scale Development

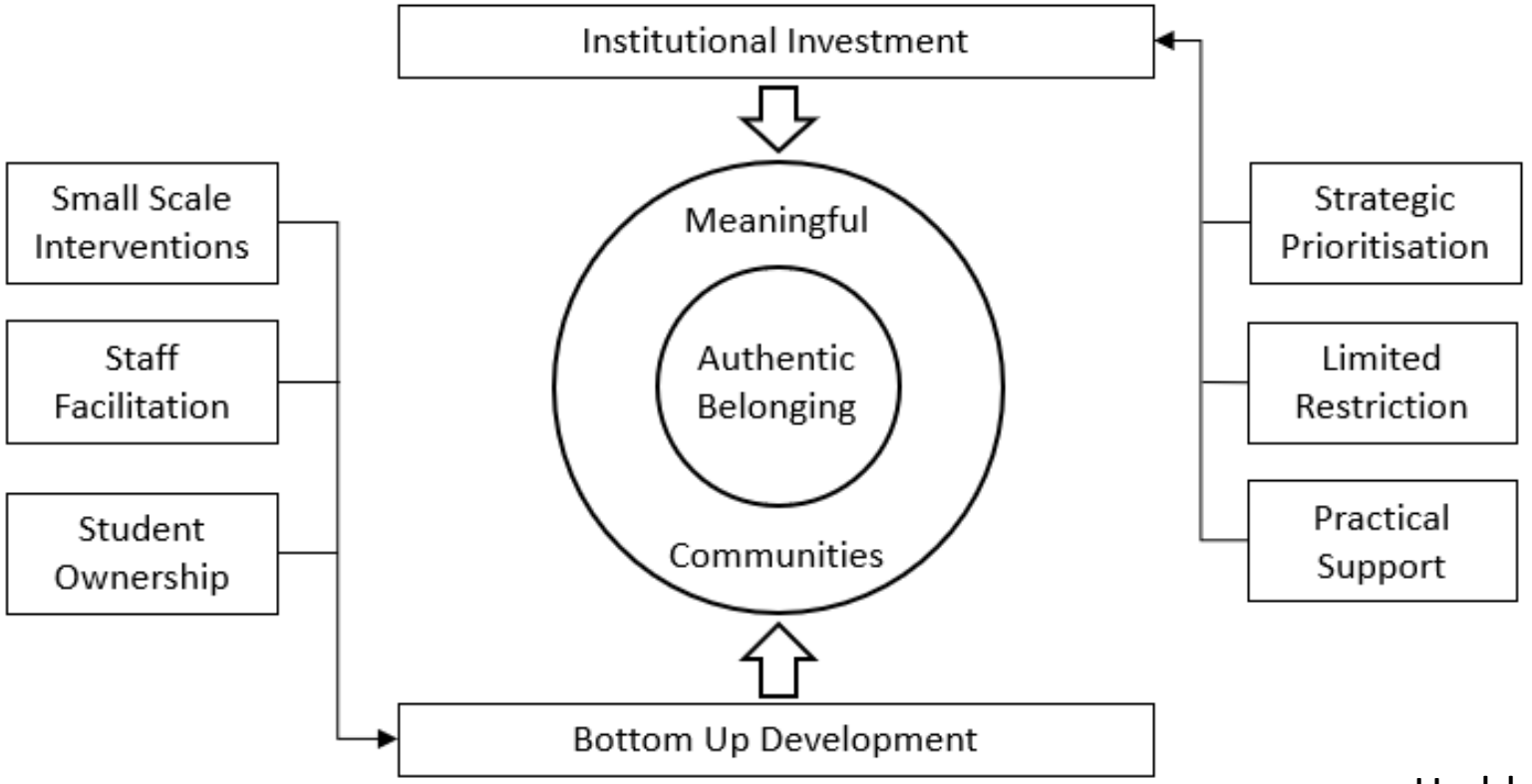
“That is why the small-scale things probably work. Because they are the possible, you don’t try and over cook it.” (Staff, J)

Authenticity

- Authentic learning: “to align university teaching and learning more substantially with the way learning is achieved in real-life settings” (Herrington & Herrington, 2006, p. 3).
- Authentic relational pedagogies (Gravett & Winstone, 2022)
- A ‘one size fits all’ approach to belonging can be tokenistic and homogenising (Graham & Moir, 2022)

“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, Staff)

Towards ‘Authentic Belonging’



Haddow & Brodie (2023)

Student Ownership	Staff Facilitation	Small Scale Development
Consult with Students Hold focus groups, workshops or coffee chats to gain a better understanding of the belonging needs of your student cohort.	*Support, Don't Lead!* Allow students to drive the direction of innovations. Avoid imposing your view or experience of communities on them.	*Start Small* Begin by establishing an enhancement project with minimal resource and time requirements, then explore how it could be expanded.
Bring Students Together When planning innovations, encourage students to form committees, identify tasks and delegate roles to drive the project forward.	*Identify Opportunities* Think about when students come together in your curriculum, and how activities can be implemented to build community at these points.	*Funding and Resources* Identify funding opportunities to support your enhancement activities, capitalise on small pots of money available within your institution.
Empower students Support students to make decisions about their communities, e.g. where and when they meet, the activities they involve.	*Get the Word Out* Support students' community development activities by publicising them via course mailing lists, social media pages, and blogs.	*Plan Timings Carefully* Factor in the rhythm of the academic year, and the availability of students across this, when setting out timescales for innovations.
Inspire Collaboration Suggest that students reach out to other cohorts, e.g. student societies, other programmes, to expand their communities.	*Share Practice* Draw on existing research and share examples of belonging enhancement with students and colleagues. Allow them to see what can be done.	*Evaluate* Take time to evaluate any initiatives you put in place. Collect student feedback and share the findings with the community.

Haddow & Brodie (Forthcoming)

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