



Finding a place: International student voices on what it means to 'belong'

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Defining 'belonging'



- 'The subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places and individual and collective experiences' (Allen et al., 2021, p.87).
- A lack of belonging → loneliness / social isolation / psychological distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

A warm welcome?



- 'Aggressive' recruitment of international students by Scottish universities (McNulty & Morris, 2026).
→ Belonging as a crucial retention strategy (Thomas, 2012).
- At the same time...
Tighter visa restrictions; fears about exploitation of graduate routes (UK Government, 2026).

Who belongs?



- ‘Integration’: onus on international students to ‘fix themselves’ (Mittelmeier, 2025; Saharso, 2019).
- ‘Ethnic clustering’ (Ebel, 2024).
- ‘To achieve integration [...] individuals need to be able to speak English’ (Home Office, 2025).

Case studies



- Investigated English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students' identity construction.
- Humanise their experiences (Tran & Hoang, 2024).
- Illuminate key aspects of belonging at university (academic and social).
- Significance of language – sometimes overlooked in discussions on EDI (Ryder & Lazar, 2025).

'Zichen': Academic conundrums



- *I'm trying to avoid the influence of my past study experience and communicate a lot.*
- *Sometimes [English speaking classmates] will slow down and repeat for me, but I think most of time I must **try** to grab more points by myself.*
- *[In an Irish History class] You need a certain context to know what this word is and what is this people.*
- *In English I'm not quite sure how to be a professional academic writer.*

Where are you *really* from?



- Eager to befriend 'local students' but not easy.
- *Most of time [other members of a university society] have a lot of words to say, they just kind of ignore me.*
- Target of discrimination and crime (racist remarks; scamming incident).
- Remained open to meeting new people.
- *I was talking about, 'I'm from Scotland.' And they ask next, 'What's your nationality?'*

: 'Lian': Changing identity



- 'Active' in the EAP class.
- Drop in confidence in semester 1: 'many problems' with English; unable to 'react immediately' in class discussion.
- *I don't dare to speak in front of the English speakers.*
- *I'm maybe in the worst level [...] maybe in the last 30%.*
- Gaining good marks for written work and praise for a presentation boosted self-esteem.
- *I'm become more brave.*

'I want to communicate more'



- *I tried to communicate with some foreign student – they are very enthusiastic and friendly.*
- *I should push myself to the English-speaking environment.*
- Close friends: all Chinese. Yet...
- *I feel I belong to this university and I'm a part of this.*

‘Mei’: ‘I always keep in silence’



- *I tell myself, don't be afraid, don't be shy but it's also the hardest thing because you are in the totally different culture.*
- *I can understand the question, and I can express my opinion in Chinese very well, but it's hard to speak it in English.*
- Sense of academic belonging increased in semester 2 – ‘passionate’ about her subject; gained high marks.
- Stopped putting pressure on herself to give an ‘instant’ response in class.

'I am not very sociable'



- Feeling marginalised at a 'Welcome Week' event: *I'm the only one who cannot speak English very well.*
- *I still didn't make a connection with any foreign students, but I feel OK [...] maybe I got a little numb.*
- 'Participating in local life' through part-time job; feeling 'safe' in English conversation group at church.
- *I don't want to go back to China, but I also feel I don't belong to the UK [...] I think maybe for me, it's OK that I don't have any home.*

Hearing student voices



- How can we help international students to develop a sense of belonging?
- How can we avoid essentialist labels?
- What can we do in the classroom?
- Can we influence policy?
- Belonging is a collective responsibility.

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