Belonging in Practice: Connection, Mattering, and Student Success

Editors

Natalie Oostergo, University of Southern Queensland
Caroline Rueckert, Griffith University
Laura Burge, Monash University
Priyanka Choudhury, Holmesglen Institute
Fiona Navin, Edith Cowan University

Contributors

Alice Betteridge, Rena Bokosmaty, Belinda Brear, Michelle Charlton, Nawal Cheema, Jessica Hall, Sarah K. Hattam, Alecia J. James, Anna Kasper, Tristan King, Liz Leighton, Kelly Linden, Ana Lobo, Gemma Mann, Jordan Noacco, Nazz Oldham, Heather L. Reedy, Janine M. Rix, Danielle Rock, Luciana Rodriguez, Victoria Russell, Katy Scott, Myfanwy Tilley, Kimberley Trahar, Natasha Walker, Tanya Weiler, Jaeger Wieland, Natasha Wilson

Keywords

Belonging; Connection; Mattering; Student success; Wellbeing.

Introduction

"Voices From the Field" reflects JANZSSA's ongoing commitment to advancing equity in scholarly communication and recognising the vital contributions of student services practitioners who support student engagement, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. "Voices From the Field" is grounded in Cook-Sather et al.'s (2021) model of epistemic justice in publishing, which reconceptualises the journal article as a space where diverse voices are genuinely valued. Many of the contributors to this article may not be typically represented in traditional academic publishing or have access to the necessary resources to navigate the peer review process. Nevertheless, they offer valuable insights and perspectives that are essential to understanding the lived realities of student services work and to informing practice across the sector. Extending this commitment to democratising voice, the prompt for this article was selected by the JANZSSA audience and delegates at the 2025 Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA) Conference and the wider student services community via LinkedIn. More than 100 participants engaged with five reflective prompts designed to identify the critical issues facing practitioners, voting for the one that most effectively reflected their priorities and those of the broader sector. The prompt that received the highest level of collective support forms the thematic focus of this issue: *How do we build belonging, mattering, and connection for diverse cohorts of students learning and living across digital and on-campus spaces?*

This second "Voices From the Field" article brings together perspectives on the varied and often complex manifestations of belonging, mattering, and connection. The collective support for this prompt reflects an acknowledgement across the tertiary sector that belonging is fundamental to student success, persistence, and wellbeing. Major policy initiatives, such as the Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024) and the Aotearoa New Zealand *Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021* (N.Z.), have foregrounded student belonging. These initiatives have positioned equity and the obligation to foster belonging at the centre of inclusive and culturally safe learning environments that form the future of tertiary system design. Despite this, data consistently show that many students experience

limited connection to their institutions. Only half of Australian students report a strong sense of belonging, with external and equity bearing students being disproportionately affected (Crawford, 2024; Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2025). Similarly, a survey of more than 6,000 students at a major Aotearoa New Zealand university found that only 45% of students felt a sense of belonging (University of Auckland, 2024). This underscores the urgency of understanding how belonging is, or is not, experienced in learning communities.

Belonging is a fundamental and universal human need that is crucial to a person's motivation, self-esteem, and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2023). Allen et al. (2021) conceptualise belonging as a dynamic psychosocial state that is continually mediated by an individual's interactions with their environments and the systems that govern those environments. Within each system, belonging derives from the interrelationship of four components. These include competencies, or the skills and abilities required to meaningfully connect; opportunities, referring to both the availability of enabling conditions and the absence of barriers to connection; motivation, or the degree to which individuals desire to belong; and perception, which encompasses an individual's evaluation of how well they fit within a community (Allen et al., 2021). When applied to a tertiary context, a learner's sense of belonging is not only dependent on how socially connected they feel. It is also shaped by their opportunities to connect with other students, their motivation to connect, their perception of themselves as capable and successful students, and their sense of mattering to their learning community (Allen et al., 2021).

Regardless of whether belonging is viewed as an outcome, a predictor of academic success, or a correlate of positive learner development, research demonstrates that a sense of belonging is fundamental to successful learning experiences (Crawford et al., 2023). In environments where students feel a strong sense of belonging, connection, and mattering, they are more likely to experience higher self-esteem, motivation, and self-efficacy. Likewise, a strong sense of belonging has been identified as a protective factor against mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety (Crawford, 2024). Belonging is also associated with enhanced academic performance, increased student satisfaction, and improved wellbeing (QILT, 2025; Sotardi, 2022). These benefits support students to persist in their studies, and are therefore linked with higher retention rates in physical and online environments, as well as across diverse equity groups (Crawford, 2024).

The contributions in this issue tease out the nuances of belonging, while recognising the complexities inherent in fostering connection across diverse learning environments. Although each contribution offers a distinct perspective, many operate across overlapping thematic domains, which have been grouped into four categories: relational aspects of belonging, intentional design for belonging, connection for today's students, and perceptions of mattering. These themes are interwoven through their engagement with the competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions that underpin belonging as it manifests within tertiary institutional frameworks. Collectively, the contributions reflect an ongoing shift from notions of institutional integration toward a more human-centred emphasis on mattering. They highlight how deliberate, values-aligned institutional practices can create the conditions for meaningful human interactions that affirm the identities and lived experiences of today's diverse student cohorts.

The *connection for today's students* theme emphasises this centrality of connection while pointing out that sense of belonging is not experienced equally across student cohorts. Described variously as "non-traditional", "equity bearing", and the "new majority", today's students study full or part time; attend classes on campus, online, and/or remotely; have significant adult responsibilities outside of the learning environment; and may belong to one or more equity groups (Gravett et al., 2025; Kift, 2024; Malm & Weber, 2017; QILT, 2025). For many of these learners, constructing a student identity is inherently complex as they may enter higher education without prior exposure to, or understanding of, established academic norms and tertiary learning processes (Malm & Weber,

2017). Adding further complexity is that today's students experience the tertiary environment across multiple communities and ways of learning that challenge the boundaries of what constitutes a university (Gravett et al., 2025). Therefore, contributions within this theme argue that the tertiary sector must adopt more intentional and context-responsive practices to address the unique needs of these learners to mitigate the risk of both social and academic disconnection. This is a material challenge that must be considered at a systemic level, particularly given these student groups are more likely to attrit or seek out other institutions that can provide more robust and responsive support structures (Crawford, 2024; Malm & Weber, 2017).

The section on *intentional design for belonging* highlights this need for sustained and systemic commitment within the curricular and co-curricular domains. This section views belonging not as a discrete moment, but as an ongoing process of becoming that requires continual institutional welcome, affirmation, and support (Kift, 2024). As Kift (2024) emphasises, fostering belonging is a shared responsibility between students and institutions that requires proactive management of the continuous transitions that characterise the student experience. This reflects a shift from earlier approaches, where belonging was often supported through disparate co- and extra-curricular activities or through the embedding of success strategies within curriculum design (Kift, 2024). In contrast, more contemporary approaches emphasise the alignment of universal curriculum design with intentionally designed co-curricular initiatives. Through this integrated framework, learning is the central engagement mechanism through which students are supported to develop positive learning relationships, connectedness, mattering, and a sustained sense of belonging (Kift, 2024).

One of the most critical interrelations emerging from this theme is that intentionally designed connections foster an internalised sense of mattering. The *perceptions of mattering* section demonstrates that this is fundamental to belonging. A student's subjective experience of being significant, important, and recognised within their learning community constitutes the value component of their perception of mattering (Cook-Sather et al., 2023; Sotardi, 2022). Mattering creates space for individuals to be acknowledged for their distinct identities and unique contributions, thereby providing an inclusive and resilient foundation on which positive student experiences can be built (Cook-Sather et al., 2023). Contributions within this theme emphasise that even when students do not feel a broader sense of institutional belonging, perceiving that they matter to at least one person can have a significant impact. Whether that person is a peer, an educator, or a staff member, this sense of mattering can act as a powerful catalyst for academic persistence and success (Cook-Sather et al., 2023).

Relationality is one of the vehicles through which a student's perception of mattering is constructed. It is this humanising element of belonging that shifts the focus from institutional integration back to human connection and individual significance. The contributions in the *relational aspects of belonging* theme conceptualise belonging as a dynamic and socially situated process that emerges through human interaction and connection (Allen et al., 2021; Gravett et al., 2025). They speak to the fundamental human drive to form and maintain social relationships, a need that is particularly salient for equity bearing students who may experience marginalisation or a sense of otherness within tertiary environments (Kift, 2024). The call for institutions to prioritise relationship-rich learning environments positions human connection as a driver of student success, encompassing relational dynamics across peer-to-peer engagement, teacher-to-student relational pedagogy, and broader institutional and structural influences (Kift, 2024). These insights directly inform the contributions that open this theme, illustrating the central role of relational connection in shaping students' sense of belonging.

Relational aspects of belonging

Building belonging is not about perfect knowledge—it is about creating an environment where students and staff alike can navigate uncertainty with empathy. My work around LGBTQIA+ education in both the academic and wellbeing contexts has taught me that connection happens when we embrace the messy, in-between spaces where learners actually exist (Mann, 2022).

The key? Facilitating discussions where we accept natural, human reactions. Let people stumble, react emotionally, then help them find their rational footing. Whether online or on campus, academics or support professionals can be mediators for learning—asking open-ended questions instead of simply "telling it how it is" or "lecturing". Diversity is not an abstract concept for the mainstream to understand but an embodied experience. Genuine dialogue helps students from minority cohorts feel like they belong, have a voice, and are valued. Belonging grows when we unite and navigate unfamiliar territory together.

— Gemma Mann (she/her), living on the lands of the Darumbal peoples in Rockhampton Australia, Senior Lecturer and Ally Program Coordinator at Central Queensland University

Students thrive when they feel they belong, matter, and are understood. With 70% of students studying online at the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ), building connections across digital and on-campus spaces is vital. UniSQ's iConnect team addresses this through a peer-to-peer model, enabling trained student concierges to support peers with empathy and lived experience.

To strengthen these connections, we incorporated the "Do you want fries with that?" approach into concierge training, a concept that promotes proactive, value-added support and builds meaningful, personalised peer-to-peer interactions. This shifted practice from transactional to relational, empowering concierges to introduce themselves as students, put on their "student hat", draw on shared experiences, and create authentic interactions.

As a result, students feeling stressed or uncertain felt at ease when they realised they were speaking with another student who understood their experience. This reduced barriers to seeking support, strengthening belonging and helping students feel seen throughout their study journey.

— Nawal Cheema, Quality and Development Officer (Student Enquiry Management) at the University of Southern Queensland

The pedagogy of care could be argued to be one of the most underrated "~gogies" in education. In considering how to ensure learners feel seen, heard, welcomed, and valuable—no matter their mode of engagement—it presents a neat framework to underpin and build psychosocially safe, connected diverse learning communities.

It involves placing relationships, empathy, and student wellbeing at the centre of teaching practice. It involves taking an active interest in how to help.

As a deliberate, authentic approach to create spaces intentionally focused on reciprocal respect, compassion, and other, person-centred elements (Noddings, as cited in Barek, 2021), the pedagogy of care has roots in humanistic psychology and aligns with basic human motivational theory that we all want (and need!) to have desires for safety, belonging, and esteem met in order to achieve our full potential.

It seems simplistic, but in reality, the care we show learners is the vital key for success.

— Michelle Charlton, driving professional development for VET educators through Skills Education

Intentional design for belonging

Working mainly with online students, I see how learners can feel disconnected from university. Many are first in their family to study, balancing external responsibilities or learning in a second language, so university can feel more like a website than a community. Therefore, belonging must be designed into the learning experience.

Built into my Professional Communication unit, the University Service Task asks students to explore real support services, such as learning advisers or the library, and reflect on how these connect to their learning and goals. Grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), students have choice in what they engage with, how they access information, and how they respond.

This turns support into something students genuinely experience, not just something they're told about. Students say, “I didn't even know this existed”, or “I finally feel like I'm not doing uni on my own”. That's how we build belonging into digital spaces.

— Dr Ana Lobo, Senior Teaching Fellow & Academic Coach, University College, University of Tasmania

Widening participation and cost of living pressures over the past decade have led to vast changes in the student experience and people increasingly wear many hats beyond “student”. Given the links between identity and belonging, we must harness contemporary and diverse student voices, and present many, varied opportunities for connection to match the diversity of students: one size does not fit all. Additionally, as more content is delivered online to facilitate flexibility, we can’t ignore the importance of physical space in building belonging and its importance in addressing many of the challenges faced by students (lack of local support, financial pressures, homesickness, etc.). The changing landscape of higher education means that every single interaction matters, whether in person or within digital systems, making it the responsibility of all staff to ensure students feel that they belong and matter. As resourcing becomes increasingly challenging, embedding opportunities for authentic connection into classroom activities can be a cost-effective strategy.

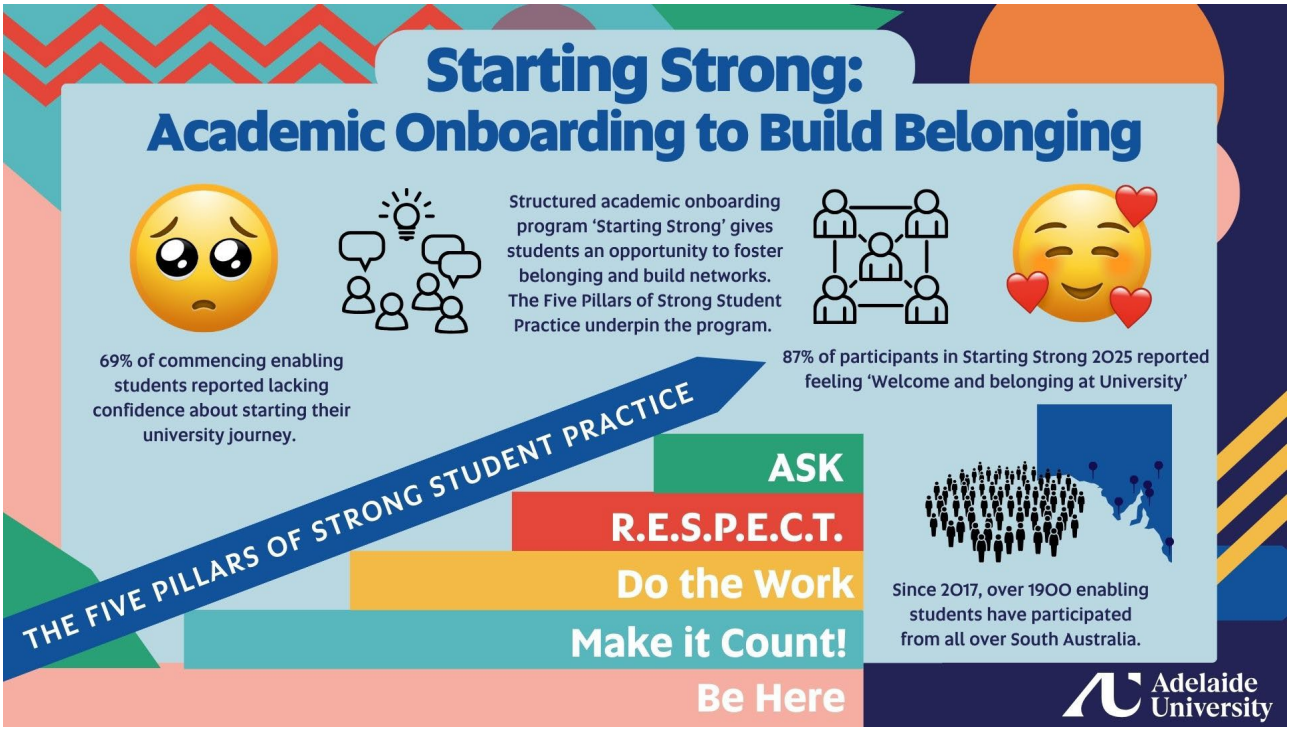
— Alecia James, Manager - Student Experience, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Behavioural Sciences, University of Queensland, & Dr Janine M Rix, Student Experience Coordinator, Faculty of Health Medicine and Behavioural Sciences

Starting Strong (see Figure 1) is an Adelaide University academic onboarding approach that treats belonging as something students learn, build, and practice through participation. Informed by leading research in student experience and underpinned by critical enabling pedagogy (Hattam et al., 2024b), the program moves beyond orientation as information delivery to instead focus on human connections and academic socialisation, modelling, and rehearsal.

Starting Strong emphasises making expectations explicit, legitimising help-seeking, and supporting students to see themselves as capable learners. By foregrounding these experiences early, students develop confidence, agency, and a sense that they matter within the institution, thereby laying a strong foundation for ongoing engagement and persistence.

Figure 1

Starting Strong: Academic Onboarding to Build Belonging



— Tanya Weiler, Nazz Oldham, and Alice Betteridge, Starting Strong Team, Adelaide University

Student voice is central to shaping a Curtin University experience that meets students' needs, and the Student Feedback Hubs provide a new, inclusive way to capture diverse perspectives.

The hubs combine physical pop-up stations in high-traffic campus locations with digital check-ins via the OASIS student portal, engaging students who may not participate in traditional feedback activities. Designed as quick, low-effort interactions, pop-ups offer interactive activities and incentives, while digital check-ins use short, targeted questions.

Piloted in Semester 2, 2024, the initiative has since become business as usual due to strong participation and actionable insights. In 2025, approximately 2,000 students were engaged through pop-ups across 34 topics, and 14,260 students through OASIS check-ins. The feedback hubs enable rapid implementation of insights, with 90% of participating teams applying the data to improve services.

Closing the feedback loop through "you asked, we listened" communications, the hubs turn student voice into tangible change.

— Jaeger Wieland, Deputy Director (Engagement & Student Experience) and Katy Scott, Digital Communications Specialist, Curtin University, Australia

Imagine a space, free of staff, a haven for students to keep it low-key or kick it with peers. A haunt for gaming, crafts, or chilling between classes.

Imagine contemporary and arcade video games amongst a somewhat retro setting with bean bags, soft lighting, and an ambience unequalled anywhere on campus. Music streaming, theme setting, events like lonely hearts and speed friending to help students connect and have fun, with opportunities to win cool prizes. Can you even imagine a place that gives students such a plethora of options whilst relaxing in their downtime asking nothing of the students in return?

Now, imagine that safe, fun place also welcomes and invites all students, regardless of background, religion, race, gender, or other factors associated with systematic exclusion or underrepresentation.

Imagine no more; it's called THE ARCADE, it's free for all, staffed by paid students, and our students love it.

— Natasha Walker, Student Success Advisors, Student Life and Community, Curtin University, Australia

Belonging is fundamental to wellbeing through the lens of self-determination theory—one of three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—and the lack of such is resulting in record levels of student loneliness and disconnection. International students are particularly vulnerable to the effects of this relatedness gap, with belonging (place, identity, and the interpersonal) destabilised, through students' voluntary overseas displacement.

All activity, within and outside the classroom, is belonging "through" education. When coupled with a collective identity shift from "me" to "we", students strengthen social identity as part of this process, alongside reclaiming place and capitalising on opportunities for interpersonal engagement.

Examples include the well-trodden peer-to-peer or ambassador program, clubs, cultural events, and tailored orientations, though the informal holds just as much weight; the power of pronouncing a name, embedded workshop time for collaboration, and the curation of dedicated campus spaces for students to connect can enable belonging to blossom.

— Danielle Rock, Campus Manager, Student Experience, Kaplan Business School, situated on Whadjuk Noongar Country, Australia

Connection for today's students

As Learning Success Advisors, we are seeing an urgent need for a holistic, institutional approach that brings support services together and moves beyond siloed models of student support. Many students from equity cohorts engage incidentally, often seeking immediate assistance that spans academic, wellbeing, and administrative concerns. This highlights the importance of connected, responsive support rather than fragmented referrals.

Operating within a dedicated space for equity students allows us to build authentic relationships and create a strong sense of belonging and mattering. Through consistent, relational engagement, advisors are able to respond flexibly, coordinate support across services, and affirm students' experiences. Student feedback frequently describes the space as warm, friendly, and welcoming, reinforcing its role as a site of connection. We believe our model of engagement could change current outdated practices where services operate in siloes, failing to meet the needs and demands of students and, therefore, convince them that they matter.

— Dr. Rena Bokosmaty, Learning Success Advisor (Mathematics), Liz Leighton and Luciana Rodriguez, Learning Success Advisors (Academic Language and Learning), MySydney Program, University of Sydney

My 2025 Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) Equity Fellowship has highlighted the extent to which part-time students, who make up 35% of domestic Australian university students, are juggling competing responsibilities, such as caring and work commitments, during a cost of living crisis. In 2024, the first-year retention rate was 15 percentage points lower for part-time than full-time students. The 965 students who completed a survey from 35 Australian universities indicated that they are incredibly dedicated to their studies; however, university cannot always be their first priority. In many instances, they require flexibility and support to succeed. Part-time students identified issues with access to support, scholarships, and lecturers and lacked a connection with other students. Connections with other students, such as "the development of friendships throughout the intensive school process", were cited by many students as the most

helpful factor for successful study. This begs the question: how can we consider part-time students when developing programs to build belonging and connection?

— A/Prof Kelly Linden, Academic, 2025 ACSES Equity Fellow

Working with the Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH), and through evaluating the Eastern Australian University Centre Partnership Program, I've seen how central these hubs are in connecting communities with higher education pathways. Through outreach and student support services, RUSH help students navigate options across universities, TAFEs, private providers, and enabling programs, and support them to study where they live. They make higher education processes understandable and locally relevant, while also advocating to institutions about the real conditions learners face—digital access challenges, work and caring responsibilities, cultural expectations, financial barriers linked to relocation, and confidence navigating academic systems.

Their partnerships with higher education providers are crucial, enabling hubs to share local insight, tailor support, and ensure programs reflect the realities of regional students.

RUSH show how belonging grows when support is trusted, relational, and embedded where students live.

— Jessica Hall, Manager, Partnerships (Student Equity), Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, working on the ancestral lands of the Gadigal, Boorooberongal (Dharug), Bidjigal and Gamaygal peoples at the University of Technology Sydney

Perceptions of mattering

As the Student Leadership and Volunteering team at Swinburne University of Technology, we strive to build belonging by creating a welcoming community for student volunteers. Whether they are studying online or on campus, our goal is for students to know they are valued and that their contributions matter, through both the impact they make on the people or communities they serve and their personal and professional growth. We do this by recognising and celebrating each student as an individual, learning their names and interests where possible, and tailoring opportunities to their strengths or the skills they aim to develop. We offer meaningful rewards for their contributions, such as development and training that supports their career readiness. We have also learned that creating opportunity for connection among students themselves is important, supported through online platforms that build community and on-campus gatherings such as workshops and appreciation events.

— Kimberley Trahar, Student Leadership & Volunteering team at Swinburne University of Technology

I just finished my masters. The research findings weren't clever or groundbreaking. They highlighted something we teach in first year and then somehow forget: humans have needs. Food, shelter, safety, belonging, then the rest can follow. Thanks, Maslow (1943). Yet we often overlook how people come to belong. They need to be seen, heard, and accepted as they are—where they come from and what they hope to achieve. They need to matter. In student achievement support, the students who need us are rarely those who lack ability. They are those who don't feel they have the right to be here. They've absorbed the message that their stories don't matter, or that their voice will only count after they achieve. Thus, learner success is not always a crisis of capability, but often a crisis of confidence. When students are met with care, time, and affirmation, they succeed in the ways that matter to them. This is success.

— Heather Reedy, Academic Advice and Information Service Leader, Student Achievement Team, at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University

As academics teaching into South Australia's largest enabling program, we have sought to actively foster student belonging, mattering, and connection through a series of targeted interventions. A Foucauldian discourse analysis of student surveys, reflections, and focus groups found that while institutional messaging and pedagogy emphasise welcome, care, and inclusion, powerful neoliberal discourses of independence and individual responsibility actively produce a discourse that defines who is considered a "capable student". Despite attempted interventions, many students internalise this good/bad student binary, interpreting struggle as personal failure and help-seeking behaviours as weakness. For students from "non-traditional" backgrounds, belonging at university can then become contingent on performing autonomy and independence, rather than developing relationships that can foster and strengthen capability. Building genuine belonging requires actively challenging narrow constructions of capability and strengthening peer-based relationships through supportive critical enabling pedagogy (Hattam et al., 2024a), so that belonging is understood as collective, supported, and equitable.

— Sarah Hattam, Myfanwy Tilley, Tristan King, Jordan Noacco, and Natasha Wilson, Adelaide University Pathways College Belonging Project Team, Adelaide University

At the Australian National University (ANU), many students arrive from far away.

By their passions for tertiary study, by their course choices from our academic colleges, our students are **mattering** to themselves. We back that.

Most first-year students live in residences across our bushland campus, building **connection**. O Week offers many orientations to our spaces—our libraries, social and sporting facilities, and clubs—and our people, in formal and informal ways.

And then, we address their **belonging**. We're offering four groups for students in Semester 1. They include preventative wellbeing actions, skills development, and support for their ANU wayfinding. We believe that the organic nature of face-to-face groups increases the potential for enduring social connections, a network of support for students: known resources. Half the battle is knowing where to look, who to ask!

Importantly, our ANU Counselling team reflects the diversity of our student cohort, so barriers are immediately reduced.

— Anna Kasper, Counsellor, ANU Counselling and Wellbeing Unit

As the National Coordinator of Student Voice Australasia (SVA), my role is all about supporting authentic and safe connections for diverse cohorts of students.

The 2025 SVA Student Summit, held in October, was a perfect demonstration of the impact that hybrid communities of practice can have on strengthening student belonging, agency, and connection. The event provided a space where diverse students from a range of higher education and vocational education and training (VET) institutions came together online and in person with a shared purpose: to understand and influence the systems that shape their student experience.

The discussions and presentations explored the idea that belonging is not about students being included in existing structures, rather seeing themselves reflected in leadership and decision-making.

While as practitioners we understand the established scholarly links between belonging and student success, for me to witness this in practice through my work at SVA makes the evidence feel real and truly meaningful.

— Belinda Brear (she/her), Coordinator | Student Voice Australasia (SVA)

Attrition rates in enabling programs like UQ College's Tertiary Preparation Program are high for reasons which encompass complex social, educational, economic, and cultural factors. A key role of enabling programs is to overcome past circumstances and develop students' self-belief in their future success (National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, 2023). To facilitate this, I run an "I'm worried that…" activity to promote a sense of belonging, connection, and safety from day one. During orientation, students write their biggest concern on a slip of paper and drop it in a box. These are then typed up, grouped by topic, and the results shared with students in a subsequent workshop. Students see their own worry alongside similar concerns, without having to voice it publicly. They feel part of a group with the same doubts and fears. Once their worries are normalised, we can move on to overcoming them.

— Victoria Russell, Learning Adviser at UQ College, Brisbane, Australia

Conclusion

The contributions gathered in this "Voices From the Field" article collectively demonstrate that belonging in the tertiary sector is underpinned by four interconnected pillars: relationality, intentional design, connection for today's students, and perceptions of mattering. Across all four thematic pillars, a consistent narrative has emerged. Belonging is enacted through everyday interactions, curriculum, and institutional strategies that affirm students' identities, reduce barriers to participation, and cultivate opportunities for meaningful connection. This reflects a critical shift away from expecting learners to assimilate into pre-existing institutional norms and toward the co-creation of environments in which students' diverse backgrounds, responsibilities, and aspirations shape the conditions of learning.

The contributions in this article demonstrate how belonging is enacted through institutional practices that build student capability, expand opportunities for connection, sustain motivation, and shape students' sense of value and recognition. This article foregrounds practitioner-led insights that position belonging as a lived, relational practice rather than an abstract institutional aim. These perspectives extend existing understandings of belonging by illustrating how mattering, relationality, and intentionally designed learning and support environments operate in real contexts.

The contributions also emphasise that sustained and compassionate belonging requires more than isolated programs or touchpoints; it depends on systematic, whole-of-institution approaches that address structural inequities while embedding care, connection, mattering, and relationality across curriculum and student support. Such approaches build the conditions that enable belonging, ensuring that students encounter opportunities to connect across both physical and digital environments. Within this framing, belonging is understood as a fundamentally relational process that is shaped through human connection, staff empathy, student motivation, and the continual creation of opportunities for meaningful engagement.

A central insight across the contributions is that mattering functions as the affective anchor of belonging. When students feel recognised as capable, valued, and legitimate members of the tertiary community, they internalise a sense of agency that strengthens their persistence, self-efficacy, and wellbeing. This directly influences motivational and perceptual dimensions of belonging. However, many of the contributions also reveal the fragility of mattering for students navigating competing responsibilities, financial pressures, or systemic disadvantage. Belonging must therefore be situated within the complexities of students' lives and experiences, requiring a shift towards flexible and holistic institutional support that expands opportunities for connection and reduces barriers to participation. These reflections underscore the need for institutional cultures that elevate student partnership and shared responsibility for belonging as drivers of pedagogical and structural reform.

The voices represented in this issue reaffirm that fostering belonging is a pedagogical priority that requires coordinated, relationally oriented practice across each institution and the sector. By foregrounding human connection, designing for inclusive participation, responding to the realities of today's student cohorts, and positioning mattering as a core dimension of the student experience, institutions can create environments that foster genuine belonging. In these environments, learners develop the competencies, opportunities, motivation, and positive perceptions that enable them not merely to persist, but to flourish. This collective dialogue establishes a foundation for continued exploration of belonging as a shared, relational, and socially responsive practice.

References

Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInereney, D., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *73*(1), 87–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409

Barek, H. (2021, August 23). Pedagogies of care in precarity. *SAGE Research Methods Community*. https://researchmethodscommunity.sagepub.com/blog/pedagogies-of-care-in-precarity

Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Piper Stewart, K., & Weston, H. (2023). Reviving the construct of "mattering" in pursuit of equity and justice in higher education. In E. Rueda & C. Lowe Swift (Eds.), *Academic belonging in higher education* (pp. 198–214). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003443735-18

Cook-Sather, A., Slates, S., Acai, A., Baxter, J., Bond, R., Lowe, T., Zurcher, H., O'Brien, J., Tavares, V., Lewe, M.-T., Khan, A., Poole, H., Smith, A. C., Iqbal, M. Z., Arm, K., Escobar Lema, J. E., Groening, J., Garg, K., Bello Rinaudo, N. L., … Lewis, R. (2021). Diversifying students-as-partners participants and practices. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *5*(1), 146–159. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v5i1.4627

Crawford, J. (2024). *Belonging during university* (Accord Report). Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/literature-review-belonging

Crawford, J., Allen, K.-A., Sanders, T., Baumeister, R., Parker, P., Saunders, C., & Tice, D. (2023). Sense of belonging in higher education students: An Australian longitudinal study from 2013 to 2019. *Studies in Higher Education*, *49*(3), 395–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2238006

Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021 (N.Z.).

Gravett, K., Ajjawi, R., & O Shea, S. (2025). Topologies of belonging in the digital university. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *33*(2), 597–611. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2023.2256342

Hattam, S., Hattam, R., Weiler, T., & King, S. (Eds.). (2024a). *Enabling pedagogy and action research in higher education*. DIO Press.

Hattam, S., Weiler, T., Hattam, R., & King, S. (2024b). Working on enabling pedagogies at UniSA College: Hopeful ideas. In S. Hattam, R. Hattam, T. Weiler, & S. King (Eds.), *Enabling pedagogy and action research in higher education* (pp. 1–40). DIO Press.

Kift, S. (2024). The quest for the holy grail of student engagement: Curriculum as the engagement integrator. In C. Stone & S. O'Shea (Eds.), *Research handbook on student engagement in higher education* (pp. 7–27). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035314294.00011

Malm, E., & Weber, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Academic transformation: A design approach for the new majority*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Mann, G. (2022). Allies as guides in the borderlands: The development of an online Ally Program to foster belonging for LGBTIQ+ students and staff at a regional university. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, *19*(4). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.53761/1.19.4.9

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370–396. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0054346

National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia. (2023). *Submission to the Australian Universities Accord discussion paper* [Submission]. Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/system/files/documents/submission-file/2023-04/AUA_tranche1_National%20Association%20of%20Enabling%20Educators%20of%20Australia.pdf

Department of Education. (2024). *Australian Universities Accord final report.* https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report

Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT). (2025). *2024 Student Experience Survey national report.* https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2024-ses-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=87f4ab8b_8

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Sotardi, V. A. (2022). On institutional belongingness and academic performance: Mediating effects of social self-efficacy and metacognitive strategies. *Studies in Higher Education*, *47*(12), 2444–2459. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2081678

University of Auckland. (2024). *Learning and Teaching Survey: 2024 highlights.* https://www.auckland.ac.nz/assets/staff/learning-teaching/Student_Feedback/2024_Learning_and_Teaching_Survey_Highlights.pdf

The authors may be contacted via:

JANZSSA — janzssa@anzssa.com

Please cite this paper as:

Oostergo, N., Rueckert, C., Burge, L., Choudhury, P., Navin, F., Betteridge, A., Bokosmaty, R., Brear, B., Charlton, M., Cheema, N., Hall, J., Hattam, S. K., James, A. J., Kasper, A., King, T., Leighton, L., Linden, K., Lobo, A., Mann, G., … Wilson, N. (2026). Voices from the field: Belonging in practice: Connection, mattering, and student success. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, *34*(2), 204–216. https://doi.org/10.30688/janzssa.2026-2-06



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.