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Belonging, Defined: A Delphi Consensus on What Matters in Higher Education

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Abstract

Belonging is increasingly positioned as central to student success, retention, equity, and mental health in higher education policy and practice. Yet the construct remains conceptually fragmented, with hundreds of different measures in use and limited agreement about what belonging fundamentally comprises. This lack of clarity constrains evaluation, comparison across studies, and institutional action. We conducted a three-round Delphi study to identify core components of belonging in higher education. Drawing on published definitions identified in a prior systematic review, an international panel of students and sector experts iteratively prioritised and refined descriptors. Twelve descriptors reached consensus, including being accepted, included, connected, valued, respected, safe, cared about, and feeling that one matters. These were organised into five interpretative domains: recognition and inclusion; community connectedness; ease and security; perceived care and support; and relational cohesion. This new consensus-derived framework provides a clearer conceptual foundation to guide measurement development and selection, as well as the design and evaluation of belonging-focused initiatives. In doing so, this framework can help researchers and policymakers identify and evaluate effective approaches to developing student belonging in practice.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Institutions should adopt a clear, shared definition of belonging to align wellbeing and inclusion initiatives across departments.
2. Educators and professional services staff can use the five-domain framework to design learning and support environments that foster belonging for all students.
3. Program and course leaders should prioritise recognition and inclusion, ensuring students feel valued for who they are rather than pressured to assimilate.
4. Policies aimed at improving belonging should focus on psychological safety, care, and authentic relationships within the academic community.
5. Researchers and practitioners should use the consensus-derived framework to guide consistent measurement and evaluation of belonging interventions.

Keywords

Belonging; Higher Education; Delphi Study; Student Experience; Conceptual Framework

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Introduction

Belonging has long been recognised as a fundamental human motivation, central to psychological health, social functioning, and personal development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to form and maintain meaningful relationships is universal, and its absence is associated with emotional distress, behavioural dysregulation, and poorer life outcomes (ibid). Whilst critiqued (Oseas, 2024), Maslow (1943) influentially positioned belonging as a core human need highlighting its essential role in healthy development and wellbeing.

Belonging is the "extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993) p80). Within higher education (HE), belonging has emerged as a critical determinant of student outcomes, including academic motivation, engagement, retention, and performance (Allen et al., 2024; Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Thomas, 2012). Students who report a strong sense of belonging are more likely to remain enrolled, experience greater satisfaction, and show psychological resilience (Crowe, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2002; Slaten et al., 2016). Conversely, low belonging is consistently linked with attrition, loneliness, and poorer mental health (Dutcher et al., 2022; Slaten et al., 2016). These effects are particularly pronounced among students from historically marginalised groups, such as first-generation students, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ students, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who often encounter cultural incongruity, social isolation, and experiences of discrimination (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Meeuwisse et al., 2010). As higher education participation becomes increasingly diverse worldwide, understanding and fostering belonging is a central priority (UNESCO, 2020).

Internationally, belonging is an institutional priority. Policy frameworks focused on retention and success have long encouraged belonging interventions that are embedded in the academic and social experience (Thomas, 2012). In the USA, sense of belonging is often used within institutional monitoring as a predictor of retention (Swiesky et al., 2024). Likewise, in Australia the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) conducts engagement-focused research to obtain data on student experience priorities, including belonging (TEQSA, 2024). The Australian universities Accord (2024), a system reform review of higher education, explicitly links belonging with future participation targets as part of the enabling environment for equity driven growth (Crawford, 2024). The NZ government tertiary education strategy emphasis supportive learning environments to enable learner success (New Zealand Ministry of Education., 2025). The Irish National Access Plan (2022) considers belonging with inclusion, participation and reducing barriers for underrepresented groups. Increasingly belonging is also being considered as a crucial component of whole institution approaches to supporting good student mental health (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, 2024; International Association of Health Promoting Universities, 2015; MacPhee et al., 2021; Orygen, 2020).

Despite its acknowledged importance, belonging in higher education remains a conceptually contested and inconsistently defined construct. Some definitions emphasise its affective dimension, describing belonging as the subjective experience of feeling accepted, respected, valued, and supported by others (Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty et al., 1992). Others conceptualise belonging as a relational and behavioural state, emphasising membership, integration, and active participation in academic and social systems (Anant, 1967; Tinto, 2012). Recent frameworks have attempted to integrate these perspectives, identifying belonging as a multidimensional construct

encompassing cognitive, emotional, relational, behavioural, and contextual elements (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Allen et al., 2024; Mahar et al., 2013). However, definitional fragmentation persists, with researchers variously emphasising peer relationships, institutional fit, identity affirmation, or structural inclusion (Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019).

When we talk about belonging, Mark Leary argues we are often "dealing with a number of different, though related psychological processes," resulting in a "messy hodgepodge of concepts and research findings that look too complex to address from a single theoretical perspective" (Allen, 2025) p84). Theoretical plurality can be valuable in understanding complex human experiences, allowing multiple perspectives to illuminate different dimensions of a phenomenon (Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2021). However, concept clarity is particularly important for measurement; without precise definition and clear boundaries around what the construct includes (and excludes), researchers risk operationalising antecedents, correlates or outcomes as if they were the construct itself (Suddaby, 2010).

As the sector increasingly looks to measure belonging and evaluate interventions designed to improve belonging, we need confidence in what is being measured. This is currently lacking. Systematic reviews of measurement of belonging in higher education illustrate the problem (Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Priestley et al., 2026). Close to 200 different measures of belonging have been found in use in Higher Education alone (Priestley et al., 2026). These measures draw from different theoretical conceptualisations of belonging and yet many researchers use different measures interchangeably, as if they measured the same construct. Here theoretical plurality is not a virtue; it introduces conceptual contamination as non-equivalent constructs are used interchangeably and limits synthesis because evidence cannot be straightforwardly aligned across studies. With increasing focus on belonging as an outcome of interest in higher education practice and applied research, the sector needs consensus around understandings of belonging to support measurement in applied setting.

This study reports on a Delphi process with an international panel of students and sector experts to iteratively prioritise and refine the multitude of descriptors of belonging used across existing literature. This approach was selected as a pragmatic method for conceptual clarification to understand what matters to key stakeholders to inform the selection of appropriate measures and improve evidence synthesis for policy decisions. It does not attempt to resolve theoretical debates or impose a single authoritative definition. Drawing on Suddaby's (2010) four criteria for developing construct clarity in theoretical research – clear definitions, explicit scope conditions, articulated relationships to related constructs and internal coherence – a Delphi study can strengthen construct clarity to inform measurement development and selection by systematically refining and delimiting a concept through iterative expert consensus. Delphi is designed for contexts where evidence is dispersed and terminology inconsistent (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Jorm, 2015; Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Nasa et al., 2021). The Delphi process was used to identify a minimum shared core of belonging facets that stakeholders judge to be central in Higher Education while also distinguishing peripheral components. This approach was deliberately epistemically modest: it does not claim that belonging is reducible to a single theory or that alternative conceptualisations are invalid. Instead, it produces an intersubjectively grounded framework that can function as a shared vocabulary for measurement development to help reduce conceptual contamination and enable synthesis across studies allowing researchers and policymakers to interpret effective belonging interventions attuned to student lived experience.

The Delphi study builds from a previous systematic review of measures of belonging used in higher education (Priestley et al., 2026). The review searched all literature using quantitative measure of belonging or conceptually equivalent terms, including mixed methods studies, with undergraduate students internationally. The review found 485 relevant studies, drawing from across psychological and educational traditions, with a strong emphasis on individual level measurement. Across these studies 301 explicitly defined belonging. These definitions are used for the start point of this Delphi study (Byrom & Priestley, 2026).

Method

Participants, recruitment and retention

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from King's College London Research Ethics Committee (MRA-24/25-46485) and all participants provided informed consent. There is no fixed standard requirement for a Delphi panel size; methodological guidance emphasises expertise and panel stability over representativeness (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). Panels in health and education research commonly range from 15 to 30 participants (Keeney et al., 2001; de Villiers et al., 2005).

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic variable	Round 1 (N_1 = 79)	Round 2 (N_2 = 69)	Round 3 (N_3 = 59)
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Gender			
Male	22 (28)	20 (29)	17 (29)
Female	47 (60)	39 (57)	36 (61)
Non-binary / missing	10 (13)	10 (14)	6 (10)
Nation			
UK	64 (81)	56 (81)	48 (81)
USA	1 (1)	0	1 (2)
Hong Kong	2 (3)	1 (2)	1 (2)
Canada	1 (1)	1 (2)	1 (2)
Australia	3 (4)	3 (5)	3 (6)
Missing	8	8	5
Age (years)			
Mean	32.52	33.05	34.94
SD	11.61	10.84	11.99
Median	30	31	32
Min-Max	19-67	19-58	19-67

We recruited a larger sample size to manage panel heterogeneity, given the inclusion of expertise from a range of stakeholder groups and mitigate anticipated attrition across rounds (Hasson et al., 2000; Keeney et al., 2001; Linstone & Turoff, 1975). We recruited a purposive sample to ensure a variety of expertise and experience. Participants were recruited via personal emails and research relevant mailing lists. Personal emails were sent to 60 individuals internationally who have published research on belonging or grey-literature reports. Of these, 39 responded, representing academic staff with teaching or leadership roles (N = 15), researchers (N = 13), and professional services staff, including individuals working in student services or students' unions (N = 10). The remaining respondents were UK students, recruited through the U-Belong research project mailing list, containing contact details for students who had previously expressed an interest in research into belonging. All demographic characteristics of participants across the three rounds are summarised (Table 1). Consistent with established Delphi guidance, only respondents from Round 1 were invited to participate in subsequent rounds in order to preserve panel consistency and stability of consensus across iterations (Keeney et al., 2001). To mitigate against risks of attrition the Delphi was run rapidly, with a two – three-week period between each data collection round.

Materials

A list of descriptors of belonging was generated for the Delphi study. Following a systematic review of the literature (Priestley, 2026), definitions of belonging were extracted from 301 manuscripts relating to belonging in higher education. Our list of definitions was cross-referenced against and complemented by a list of 15 concepts developed through an independent systematic review (Dias-Broens et al., 2024).

Procedure

The descriptors developed were presented to a Delphi panel via an online survey across three iterative rounds. The Delphi method was selected to enable structured consensus development among experts while preserving independent judgement and controlled feedback (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). At each round, participants were reminded of the study rationale—to develop a consensus understanding of belonging in higher education—and were provided with anonymised summary feedback from the previous round. Controlled feedback is a core feature of Delphi methodology, enabling reconsideration of views while minimising dominance effects (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004; Turoff & Linstone, 1975). Three rounds were conducted, consistent with recommendations that two to three rounds are typically sufficient to achieve stability of opinion without introducing unnecessary attrition (Keeney et al., 2001). Subsequent rounds focused only on descriptors that had not yet reached consensus, reducing participant burden and maintaining engagement.

In Round 1, participants were asked to identify their top five most important and bottom five least important descriptors of belonging from the developed descriptors. Structured prioritisation tasks are frequently used in early Delphi rounds to encourage discrimination between descriptors and to reduce acquiescence or blanket endorsement (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). Minor revisions were made following Round 1 to clarify wording based on participant feedback, consistent with iterative refinement practices in Delphi studies (Keeney et al., 2001).

In Round 2, participants indicated their level of agreement with retaining or excluding descriptors using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). A forced-choice format without a neutral midpoint was used to encourage decisional clarity and reduce central tendency bias (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Round 3 focused on resolving remaining areas of ambiguity through structured categorisation of descriptors.

Data Analysis

Definitions of belonging (Byrom & Priestley, 2026) were analysed following content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016; Krippendorff, 2018) by five independent coders (JM, MC, CL, SW, SC), with each definition being coded by two coders. Coders met to review their codes and reach an agreement on any points of divergence in the coding. Coding identified ideas which were converted into descriptors of belonging.

Data were analysed descriptively at each Delphi round, in line with established guidance (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Jorm, 2015; Nasa et al., 2021). In Round 1 the percentage of participants identifying each descriptor in their top 5 (retain) and bottom 5 (exclude) were calculated to inform initial descriptor reduction and refinement. In Round 2, Likert responses were dichotomised (agree / strongly agree vs. disagree / strongly disagree) and descriptors achieving ≥ 80% agreement for retention were considered to have reached consensus for retention. Descriptors for which ≤40% of the panel agreed with retention were excluded. Descriptors with moderate endorsement were carried forwards to Round 3 for reconsideration. In round 3 the remaining descriptors were categorised as core, peripheral or redundant. Descriptors endorsed by ≥ 60% of participants were retained. Following the final round, retained descriptors were inductively grouped into higher order domains through iterative team discussion and comparison with existing theoretical frameworks.

Results

Content analysis identified 19 descriptors of belonging, summarised in Table 2. There was partial alignment between the descriptors identified in our analysis and those reported in a previous systematic review (Dias-Broens et al., 2024). Aggregated findings from the three rounds of the Delphi process are summarised in Table 3. The table shows all the descriptors considered and the Delphi panel's recommendation to retain or exclude the descriptor. For Round 1, Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents recommending a descriptor be retained (R) or excluded (E). In line with methodological guidance (Jorm, 2025) eight descriptors that failed to meet the pre-specified retention thresholds were excluded (12, 17 – 20; 22 – 24). These descriptors were not shown in later rounds and were excluded from analysis, indicated in the table by a dash (/).Three descriptors with low retention ratings were rephrased based on qualitative feedback from participants; (13) "Feeling a sense of cooperation and cohesion" was divided into two separate descriptors, tapping into cooperation and cohesion separately, (14) "requiring friendship or romantic relationship" was rephrased as "having social relationships with members of the group or community;" (15) "feeling like you are important for the group or community" was rephrased into three different phrasings (15b, 15c, 15d) to tap into the idea of feeling important to the group. "Being or feeling accepted, included or connected" was divided into three descriptors, to delineate the aggregated constructs.

For Round 2, Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents identifying that the descriptor should be retained. Following Round 2, 11 descriptors were identified as core components of a definition of belonging (see descriptors marked “R”; 1b., 1c., 1d., 2, 3, 4, 6 - 10) These were not presented again as there was consensus for their importance as core concepts based on their retention ratings. A further five descriptors were excluded from subsequent analysis (see descriptors marked “E”; 13b., 13c., 15c., 15d., 21). Descriptors that remained ambiguous were presented in Round 3. This included descriptors that had had a relatively high rating for exclude in Round 1 (5, 11, 13, 15, 16) and descriptors newly introduced in Round 2. For Round 3, Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents identifying that the descriptor was a core concept (R: retain) and the percentage of respondents identifying that the descriptor was redundant (E: exclude). Following this final round, one descriptor confirmed for retention (5). Five descriptors were excluded (13, 14b., 15, 15b., 16). One descriptor remained ambiguous and may be considered peripheral components of belonging.

Table 2

Descriptors developed for the Delphi Study, Round 1 and aggregated prioritisation of times from 3 rounds of Delphi Study.

Descriptors	Developed from our analysis*	Present in Dias-Broens analysis	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Core components					
1. Being or feeling accepted, included or connected	Y – 289	Y	R: 46% / E: 3%		
1b. Revised to: Being or feeling accepted				97% (R)	
1c. Revised to: Being or feeling connected				97% (R)	
1d. Revised to: Being or feeling included				94% (R)	
2. Being or feeling part of a group	Y – 286	Y	R: 28% / E: 4%	96% (R)	
3. Feeling as if you matter	Y – 109	Y	R: 27% / E: 4%	91% (R)	
4. Being or feeling cared about	Y – 90		R: 27% / E: 4%	96% (R)	
5. Being or feeling valued by the group	Y - 74	Y	R: 16% / E: 19%	83%	R: 72% / E: 7%
6. Being or feeling respected	Y - 70	Y	R: 16% / E: 0%	91% (R)	
7. Being or feeling safe, comfortable and at home	Y - 53		R: 43% / E: 13%	94% (R)	
8. Sharing values with other members of the group	Y – 7		R: 18% / E: 8%	80% (R)	
9. Being or feeling acknowledged or recognized; “feeling seen”	Y – 3		R: 41% / E: 4%	97% (R)	
10. Building meaningful relationships with peers or staff		Y	R: 43% / E: 3%	96% (R)	
Peripheral components					
11. Feeling a sense of alignment between your own identity and the identity of the group or community	Y – 12		R: 22% / E: 28%	71%	R: 62% / E: 10%
Excluded					
12. Feeling like you fit in		Y	R: 8% / E: 22%	/	
13. Feeling a sense of cooperation and cohesion	Y - 113		R: 5% / E: 14%		R: 36% / E: 7%
13b. Revised to: Feeling a sense of cooperation with the group or community				45% (E)	/
13c. Revised to: Feeling cohesion with the group or community				49% (E)	/
14. Requiring friendship or romantic relationship	Y – 34		R: 3% / E: 48%		
14b. Revised to: Having social relationships with members of the group or community				77%	R: 51% / E: 20%
15. Feeling like you are important for the group or community	Y – 32		R: 11% / E: 14%	42%	R: 36% / E: 5%

15b. Added rephrasing: Being or feeling trusted by the group or community				49%	R: 44% / E: 8%
15c. Added rephrasing: Feeling that the group or community needs you				38% (E)	/
15d. Added rephrasing: Being integral to the running, coherence, operation of the group or community				28% (E)	/
16. Feeling a sense of commitment to the group or community	Y – 27		R: 8% / E: 9%	45%	R: 52% / E: 0%
17. Social interaction with the group	Y - 24		R: 4% / E: 8%	/	/
18. Identifying as part of the group	Y – 16		R: 14% / E: 10%	/	/
19. Cooperating with others	Y – 5		R: 1% / E: 13%	/	/
20. Adhering to common rules	Y – 5		R: 4% / E: 54%	/	/
21. Feeling that this group or community aligns with your academic path or future career	Y – 1		R: 24% / E: 33%	30% (E)	/
22. Feeling a sense of affiliation		Y	R: 6% / E: 30%	/	/
23. Feeling a sense of membership		Y	R: 3% / E: 38%	/	/
24. Being or feeling integrated with the group		Y	R: 4 % / E: 11%	/	/
25. Being or feeling supported		Y	R: 11% / E: 0%	/	/

* Count shows number of mentions in the analysed definitions

Discussion

This Delphi study identified 12 descriptors as core components of a definition of belonging, as summarised in Table 2. Notably, most of these descriptors are well represented in the existing literature, appearing frequently in definitions of belonging. Interesting exceptions here are "sharing values with the other group members," and "feeling seen."

Excluded Descriptors

A key contribution of this Delphi is not only what was retained from the definition of belonging but also what was systematically excluded by key stakeholders. Classic integrative accounts position belonging as aligning with institutional norms and becoming "integrated" into existing academic and social systems, often implying behavioural conformity or fit (Tinto, 2012). Our panel rejected "fitting in", cooperation and cohesion, alignment with academic path, cooperation with others and social integration with the group. The importance of alignment between your own identity and the identity of the group or community in the experience of belonging remained ambiguous. This pattern aligns with critiques that "fit" and "integration" framings can carry assimilationist pressures, particularly for students navigating racialized, classed, gendered and other power-laden institutional contexts (Covarrubias, 2024; Yuval-Davis, 2006). By contrast, the strong endorsement of being accepted or included, feeling safe, mattering and feeling "seen", indicates a normative tilt towards identity -affirming belonging: belonging as being recognised and valued without needing to become like the dominant group (Allen et al., 2024; Covarrubias, 2024).

The relative redundancy of "membership," "affiliation," and "identification" descriptors, alongside the retained "feeling part of a group," points to an important conceptual distinction. In some traditions belonging is tightly coupled with social identity processes, shaped by boundary making (us / them), group status and who is recognised as legitimately "in" (Antonsich, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In higher education this is evident in work linking belonging to campus racial climate and the institutions which students come to identify with (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Our panel's preferences suggest that, as a definitional minimum, sense of belonging is experienced less as a formal status ("I am a member") and more as an experiential relational state: being included, safe, seen and mattering. This echo's Wehmeyer's comments, lamenting the conflation of belonging with participation and reminding us of the conceptualisation of relatedness in Self-Determination Theory; relationships with mutual benefit and the perception that one is valued and cared for (Allen, 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The exclusion of descriptors implying that belonging requires friendship or romantic attachment also helps delimit the construct. Baumeister & Leary's (1995) account emphasises a basic need for enduring interpersonal bonds, but it does not imply that belonging is reducible to any specific relationship form. In higher education belonging often operates at multiple levels – dyadic, group and institutional – and may be experienced through recognition, safety and mattering (Allen et al., 2024). This is consistent with the panel's prioritisation of acceptance and inclusion rather than the mere presence of social ties. This interpretation aligns with recent critiques arguing that belonging is not always best conceptualised as simply social connection, but rather it is shaped by how institutional cultures enable (or constrain) students' ability to inhibit spaces authentically (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Belonging has not always been conceptualised in terms of acceptance and inclusion; Mark Leary notes that for school children "acceptance by peers is much more important

than belonging per se," implying simultaneously that acceptance may not be seen as a crucial component of belonging, but is important (Allen, 2025).

Many of the excluded descriptors could be considered antecedents of belonging, rather than definitional constructs. For example, relational quality is treated as an antecedent rather than definitional (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Gilani & Thomas, 2025). One retained descriptor may be framed as an antecedent of belonging: building meaningful relationships with peers or staff. Peer and teacher-student interactions are explicitly treated as predictors of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2025) and perceived faculty support is conceptualised as a predictor of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). In contrast, the present Delphi suggest that participants conceptualise meaningful relationships not merely as upstream predictors but as intrinsic components of the lived experience, indeed, this was one of the most unequivocally endorsed descriptors of belonging.

Retained Descriptors: What Matters

The retained descriptors were mapped onto an interpretative framework of belonging, connecting the retained descriptors with existing theory. Five domains were identified; recognition and inclusion, community connectedness, ease and security within the community, perceived care and support within the community, and relational cohesion. These are summarised in Table 3. Mapping retained descriptors into domains clarifies the multidimensional architecture of belonging and establishes a theoretically grounded framework to guide future scale development and empirical testing.

Table 3

Delphi Descriptors mapped against domains of belonging

Domain	Related theory	Related measures	Corresponding Descriptors
Recognition and Inclusion	Ajjawi et al., (2025) Allen et al., (2024) Covarrubias (2024)	Goodenow (1993) Hoffman et al., (2002) Malone et al., (2012) Meeuwisse et al., (2010) Slaten et al., (2018) Walton & Cohen, (2011)	Being or feeling accepted, Being or feeling included, Feeling seen, Being or feeling respected Being or feeling valued by the group
Community connectedness	Goodenow (1993) Hagerty et al., (1992)	Lee & Robbins (1995) Levett-Jones et al., (2009) Rovai et al., (2004) Chavis et al., (1986)	Being or feeling connected, Building meaningful relationships with peers or staff, Being or feeling part of a group, Sharing values with other members of the group
Ease and Security within the Community	Antonsich (2010) Covarrubias (2024) Lee & Robbins (1995) Scannell & Gifford (2010)	Beatty & Brew (2005) Bolliger & Inan (2012)	Being or feeling safe, comfortable and at home
Perceived Care and Support within the Community	Baumeister & Leary (1995)	Chavis et al., (1986) Hagerty et al., (1996) Slaten et al., (2018) Strayhorn (2018) Hoffman et al., (2002-2003)	Being or feeling cared about Feeling as if you matter
Relational Cohesion	Baumeister & Leary (1995) Gravett & Ajjawi (2022)	Bollen & Hoyle (1990) Lounsbury & DeNeui (1996) Hoffman et al., (2002)	Being or feeling connected, Building meaningful relationships with staff, Feeling as if you matter, Sharing values with other members of the group

Relational cohesion is foundational to Baumeister & Leary's account of belonging, in which belonging is fundamentally relational (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Relational cohesion here sits as a latent theme, cutting across other domains. This is about social cohesion and togetherness, the collective spirit that holds a community together. It reflects on mutual trust, interdependence and the sense that one can contribute and benefit from a community. Cohesion, togetherness and collective spirit were seminal to the conceptualisation of belonging in the Perceived Cohesion Scale (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) and group cohesion was captured in the Collegiate Psychological Sense of Community Scale (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996). The Sense of Belonging Scale is heavily relationship-structured (Hoffman et al., 2002). Importantly, cohesion should not be mistaken for conformity; conceptualisations of belonging should consider how cohesion can allow space for plurality (Allen et al., 2024; Covarrubias, 2024). Belonging is processual, produced through ongoing sociometerial relations across time and space (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022).

'Recognition and Inclusion' is central to Ajjawi's conceptualisation of belonging, where belonging requires being accepted as oneself (Ajjawi et al., 2025). This is about feeling noticed, understood, valued, accepted and respected for who you are as a unique individual. It means knowing that who you are, including your identity, contributions and presence are recognised, accepted and valued. The domain combines Allen's themes of "being valued and accepted" and "embracing diversity and inclusion" (Allen et al., 2024), emphasising a need to be included, valued and accepted as you are. This aligns with formulations of belonging as acceptance, respect, inclusion and support (Covarrubias, 2024). This concept appears in current measures of belonging, as acceptance and inclusion (Goodenow, 1993; Hoffman et al., 2002; Malone et al., 2012; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Slaten et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2011)

'Community connectedness' is about identifying with the group and feeling like a genuine member. It means aligning and identifying with the group's values and participation or engagement in shared activities. This is a prominent construct in both the Goodenow and Hagerty et al., models of belonging in education (Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty et al., 1992). This aligns with Slaten's domain of University Affiliation; articulated as identification with the institution and a institutional pride (Slaten et al., 2023; Slaten et al., 2018). Connectedness is operationalised in several measures of belonging (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Levett-Jones et al., 2009; Rovai et al., 2004) and shared belief is a prominent concept in the Sense of Community Index (Chavis et al., 1986).

'Ease and Security' within the community captures the single descriptor of being or feeling safe, comfortable and at home. It explores feelings of safety (both physical and psychological), familiarity, trust and comfort within the environment itself. This domain is about feeling at home and engaging without fear of judgement or exclusion. Feeling safe, comfortable and at home, and is central to influential theories of belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Covarrubias, 2024; Lee & Robbins, 1995; Scannell & Gifford, 2010) and core to several prominent measures of belonging (Beatty & Brew, 2005; Bolliger & Inan, 2012). The idea of this is central to Walton and Cohen's model of belonging, with their interventions focused on building belonging to reduce threat perception (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Walton et al., 2023). Psychological safety features in both the Goodenow and Hagerty et al., frameworks (Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty et al., 1992) and is one of the four core themes in Allen et al.'s (2024) model. Ideas of comfort and security (Hoffman et al., 2002) and feeling safe to share ideas (Rovai, 2002), appear across other models.

‘Perceived Care and Support within the Community’ is about knowing that others will step in with care, encouragement, and resources when help is needed. It means being able to rely on peers, staff, and the wider system for help and genuine concern. This is a core mechanism is Baumeister & Leary’s account of belonging; need to belong is satisfied by supportive relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Feeling cared about, valued and mattering are all concepts picked up in a number of commonly used measures of belonging (Chavis et al., 1986; Hagerty et al., 1996; Slaten et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2018). Hoffman et al., explicitly capture perceived peer support and perceived faculty support (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003) and the University Belonging Scale looked to operationalise the idea of institutional and interpersonal support and encouragement (Slaten et al., 2018).

Implications

These domains are interpretative and theory-informed, derived from mapping the Delphi-retained descriptors onto existing conceptual and measurement traditions in the belonging literature. They are not intended to represent a definitive latent structure, but rather to clarify conceptual boundaries and organise the construct’s multidimensional architecture. Taken together, these findings echo suggestions that belonging in higher education is best understood as a multidimensional experience (Allen et al., 2024; Dias-Broens et al., 2024). This synthesis offers a pragmatic framework to support researchers working with belonging as an outcome in higher education research. By clarifying conceptual domains, it may assist researchers in both the development of new measures and the selection or interpretation of existing instruments when designing or evaluating interventions. Over time, clearer conceptual mapping may also support more coherent evidence synthesis across studies and contribute to policy discussions about how belonging is defined, measured and fostered in higher education settings. The framework should be understood as a heuristic, rather than a universal theory of belonging. The present mapping provides a theoretically grounded foundation for subsequent empirical research to formally test the factor structure and psychometric properties of belonging in higher education contexts.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

This Delphi study builds upon a comprehensive review of the literature, drawing from hundreds of definitions of belonging in higher education (Priestley et al., 2026). Triangulating this synthesis with a Delphi process provides structure and prioritisation around the existing literature. The Delphi study included students and individuals with professional expertise, adding depth and diversity of perspectives. However, working in the UK, the panel were predominantly British, injecting a specific socio-cultural perspective that may not be universally applicable. As is common in Delphi studies, the use of a pre-defined descriptor set may have constrained the extent to which novel or divergent ideas could be introduced (Franklin & Hart, 2007). Some descriptors that did not reach consensus may have been excluded due to perceived redundancy rather than lack of importance (Niederberger & Spranger, 2020), underscoring the need for careful operationalisation and validation when developing measurement tools based on this framework. Future research should test this framework across diverse institutional and cultural contexts, examine its predictive validity for student outcomes, and explore how institutions can operationalise these domains to create environments where all students can thrive.

Conclusion

This study advances the conceptualisation of belonging in higher education by synthesising the literature and integrating expert–student consensus on its most central facets. The resulting five-domain framework offers a concise, multidimensional understanding of belonging that acknowledges the importance of individual recognition, relational connections, psychological safety, care and support, and collective cohesion. Grounded in student and wider stakeholder consensus, this framework provides a foundation for developing robust, content-valid measures of belonging and for designing interventions that target specific domains.

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