Can personalised support based on personal goals foster MBA student belonging?

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Belonging is a fundamental human need that motivates individual pursuits (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In higher education, it is closely tied to affective engagement, playing a critical role in sustaining student retention and participation (Strayhorn, 2019). Compared to undergraduate students' belonging, graduate students' experiences remain underexplored (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018). This gap is particularly relevant for MBA students, who often invest financially, juggle multiple commitments, and adapt to new academic environments. While belonging is increasingly recognised as multifaceted (Gravett, Ajjawi, & O'Shea, 2023), research indicates that graduate students experience this primarily in the academic domain (Briant Spratling & Valdovinos, 2022). A low sense of belonging can lead to disengagement and reduced satisfaction with the course (Lee & Anantharaman, 2015). While induction programs may foster early belonging (e.g., Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018), its dynamic nature (Allen et al., 2024) presents challenges for supporting personalised beyond initial stages.

In this poster, we describe a tailored email intervention to support MBA students' belonging by providing a schedule of timely and personalised communications, tailored to students' goals for the program. Students in the program can tailor their curricular and extra-curricular experience based on their unique career and personal goals. Given the diversity of student pathways to the program and associated aspirations, there is substantial scope to tailor the MBA experience. Accordingly, students require support to understand the scope of choices available and make appropriate choices accordingly.

This intervention was carried out over two semesters of an MBA program at the University of Technology Sydney. An initial survey was disseminated near the start of the academic year to all students in the program, to solicit their goals for enrolling in the MBA program. The survey was framed against students' general career aspirations, disciplinary specialisation interests, profession networking interests, communication development aspirations, employment goals, mentoring interests, views on contributing to positive societal outcomes, entrepreneurial interests and international exposure interests. Following this, three personalised emails were sent over each semester via the automated feedback tool, OnTask (Pardo et al., 2018), tailored to students' responses to the initial survey. 70% of the Autumn cohort (total enrolled = 449 students) and 27% of the new Spring cohort (total enrolled = 56) responded to the initial survey and therefore received the personalised emails. Students were invited to complete a short survey to provide feedback about the personalised emails, and to participate in an interview about their experience.

Students reported positive perceptions of their personalised support, which provided timely academic guidance and enhanced the feeling of being valued. An important finding was that prior educational experiences influenced students' engagement with their personalized advice: newcomers desired more structured mentorship, while returning students more effectively navigated opportunities to enhance integration and belonging. These findings highlight the nuances of belonging faced by graduate students, especially those from international backgrounds. In this poster, we present the challenges and key learnings from this pilot implementation of personalising support for belonging at the program level.

Keywords: Belonging, Higher education, Postgraduate students, Personalised support, Learning analytics

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