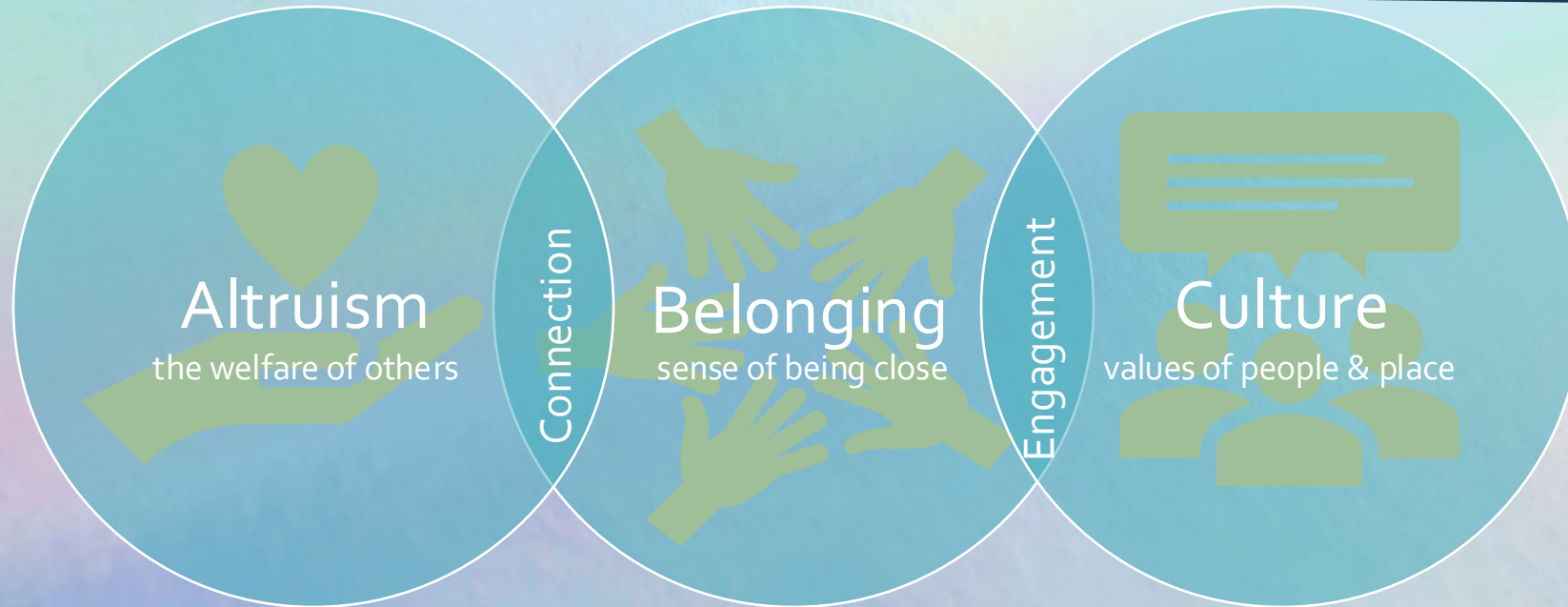


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University of Manchester Teaching and Learning Conference 2-3 July 2025  
**Raising Student Voices**



**Building Belonging and Raising Student Voices:  
Insights from the ABC Toolkit Fellowship**

# Today's session

## Why Belonging Matters

- A strong sense of belonging is essential for student success, influencing engagement, confidence, and overall well-being.
- In large, diverse cohorts, fostering connection and inclusion from day one is critical.
- Students often face barriers such as lack of community, unclear communication, and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement—issues intensified in the post-pandemic landscape.

## Our Response

- The ABC Toolkit Fellowship was developed to address these challenges through a strategic, student-partnered approach that embeds co-creation, trust, and autonomy into the student journey.
- This work was developed as part of a University of Manchester ITL Fellowship, focused on embedding belonging and student voice across disciplines.
- Co-created with a Student Partner Intern to ensure authentic student voice.

## Conference Theme Alignment

- This project directly supports the theme of *Building Belonging and Raising Student Voices*, offering a scalable model for inclusive, proactive student support.

Our focus is on 'building belonging through connection, inclusion, support and autonomy' (Blake et. al. 2022)

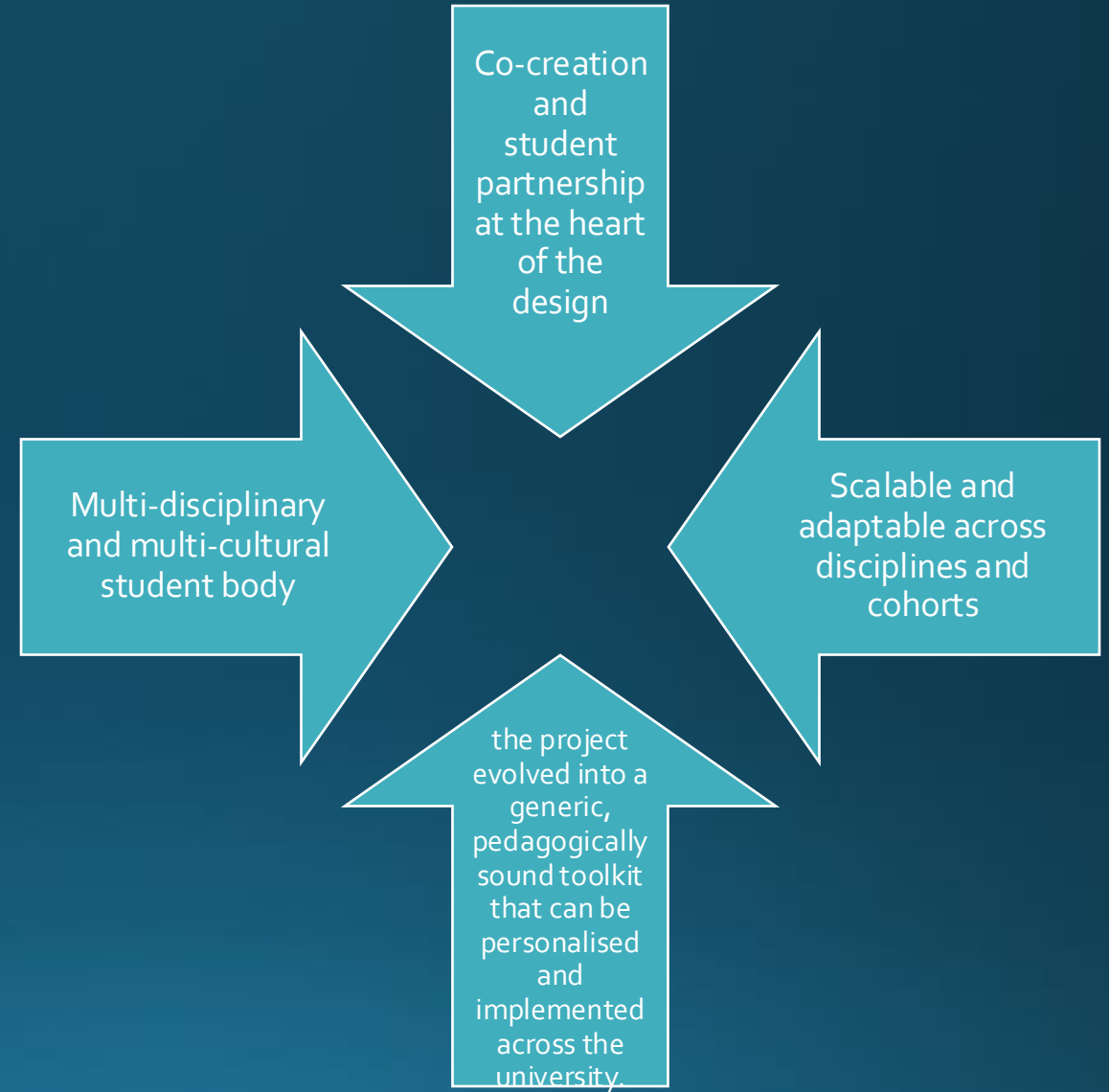
# Project Overview

## The ABC Toolkit Fellowship

A strategic initiative designed to foster belonging, inclusion, and student partnership across the student journey.

## Core Purpose

To build a sense of community through structured, timely, and student-informed support that enhances engagement, confidence, and employability.



University students are experiencing higher levels of lifestyle and academic stress, and are in need of emotional support as they are categorised as an at risk group for the development of mental health problems (Laws & Fiedler 2012)

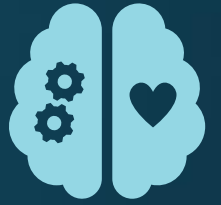
# Exploring Common Challenges



## Our Challenges

- **Building Community from Day One:** Establishing a strong sense of connections and belonging early on is essential for supporting students' transition into university life.
  - **Shared Experiences:** Recognising that many institutions face similar challenges in fostering connection and engagement.
  - **Our Reality:** We encountered these challenges too, highlighting the need for proactive and inclusive community-building efforts.
- Lack of Engagement
  - Growth in student numbers
  - Conflict of student priorities
  - Communication
  - Lack of Community
  - Meaningful engagement
  - Student attendance
  - Inclusivity & equality
  - Timetabling
  - Issues around with consistency and parity within academic community

# Theoretical Foundations



- **Belonging as a Core Construct**

Rooted in the idea that students thrive when they feel connected, valued, and supported within their academic community (Ulriksen et al., 2010; Blake et al., 2022).

- **Key Concepts**

- **Trust:** Building confidence in institutional support and communication.
- **Autonomy:** Empowering students to take ownership of their learning journey.
- **Peer Relationships:** Fostering meaningful connections to enhance engagement and resilience.
- **Culture & Altruism:** Creating a shared sense of purpose and care within the learning environment.

- **Co-Creation & Student Partnership**

Central to the ABC Toolkit is the belief that students are not just recipients of support but co-designers of their experience—ensuring relevance, responsiveness, and authenticity.

- **From Reactive to Proactive Support**

The project shifts the paradigm from traditional, reactive models of student support to a proactive, inclusive, and student-informed framework.

# Methodology



- Led by our Student Partner Intern, we used qualitative methods
- Developed in partnership with student partner to ensure relevance and inclusivity

## Data Collection Methods

- Feedback from students and staff
- Focus groups and Survey
- Sample came from 3 different departments with a mix of students from different year groups, genders and nationalities
- Ethics approval delays extended the project timeline, but allowed for deeper reflection and refinement.

# Key Findings



## 1. The Central Role of Academic Advisors

- Academic advisors are often the first point of contact for students seeking support.
- When proactive and engaged, they are highly valued—but experiences vary widely across departments.
- Lack of standardisation and accountability leads to inconsistent support.



## 2. Peer Support: Potential vs. Practice

- Peer to Peer support are widely implemented but inconsistent.
- Students value peer-led support when it's structured and programme-specific.
- There is a need for clearer expectations, and perhaps a more formal understanding of the value.



## 3. Belonging and Community Matter

- A strong sense of belonging enhances student engagement, wellbeing, and academic success.
- Departments that foster community through social events, shared spaces, and informal interactions see better outcomes.
- Students want more opportunities to connect across cohorts and feel part of their academic “home.”



## 4. Wellbeing Support: Effective but Underutilised

- Wellbeing services are appreciated when accessed, but many students are unaware of how to engage with them.
- Cultural stigma, lack of visibility, and delayed referrals are common barriers.
- Students recommend early, visible introductions to wellbeing services during induction.



# Key Findings



## 5. Communication and Access Gaps

- Students struggle with fragmented communication across platforms (email, Teams, Blackboard).
- Important networking information is often missed due to poor timing or limited promotion.
- There is a strong call for centralised, accessible, and timely communication systems.



## 6. Feedback and Co-Creation

- Students want to be heard and see their feedback acted upon.
- When feedback loops are closed (“you said, we did”), trust and engagement increase.
- Student reps and partners need clearer roles, better support, and more visibility.



## 7. Proactive vs. Reactive Support

- Proactive support—such as mid-semester check-ins, diagnostic tools, and early interventions—is more effective than reactive models.
- Students appreciate when support is aligned with academic milestones and personal needs.
- Departments with structured, anticipatory approaches see stronger engagement.

Demonstrated a shift from ‘support’ as a mainly reactive response to perceived student problems, to a ‘**supportive**’ (and proactive) environment (Jacklin & Le Riche 2009).



# ABC Toolkit Design



- **Strategic and Scalable**

The ABC Toolkit is a structured yet flexible framework designed to support students at key points in their academic journey—adaptable across disciplines and student cohorts.

- **Core Design Principles**

- **Timeliness:** Delivering support “at the right time, in the right place, and in the right way.”
- **Personalisation:** Responsive to diverse student needs, learning styles, and lived experiences.
- **Consistency:** A coherent structure that scaffolds belonging, skills, and confidence over time.

- **Key Components**

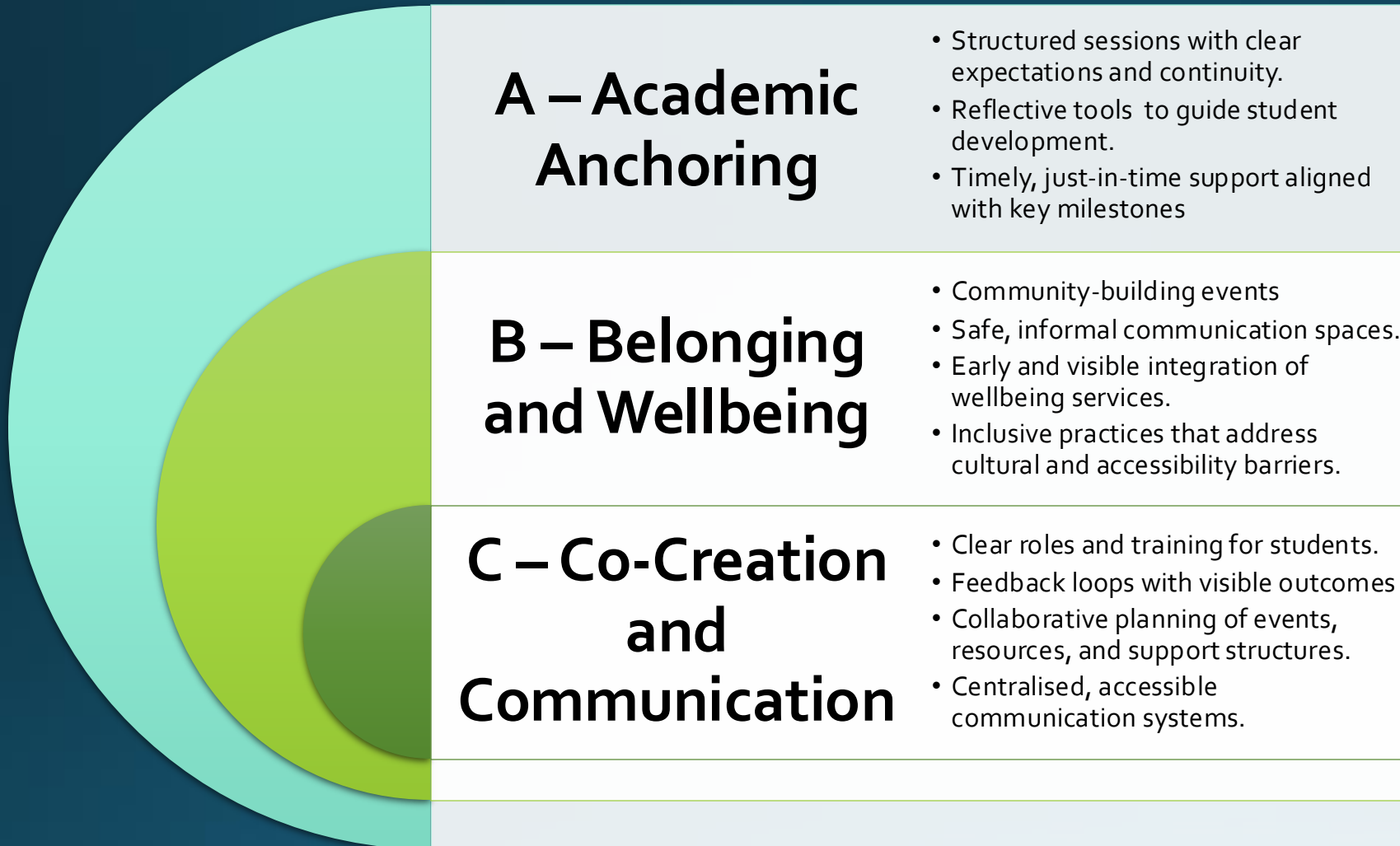
- Co-designed with students to ensure relevance and engagement

- **From Discipline-Specific to Generic**

Originally developed in Fashion Business & Technology, the toolkit has been refined into a transferable model for wider institutional use.

A sense of belonging—encompassing social and academic engagement, physical and emotional safety, and personal space—is a critical factor in student retention and well-being (Ahn & Davis, 2019).

# ABC Toolkit Framework: Anchoring Belonging and Co-Creation



## Toolkit Delivery Principles

- **Timeliness:** Support should be aligned with academic and emotional rhythms
- **Flexibility:** Adaptable to different programmes, cohorts, and delivery modes.
- **Visibility:** Services and opportunities must be clearly and consistently communicated.
- **Inclusivity:** Designed to meet the needs of diverse student populations.

# Broader Implications



The ABC Toolkit aligns with the University's 'Our Futures' strategy and the Student Charter's core principles.



It contributes to sector-wide conversations on inclusive education and student partnership.



## **Strategic Alignment**

Supports institutional goals around student voice, inclusion, and transition, while aligning with the UN SDGs on quality education and reduced inequalities.

# Conclusion



THIS IS NOT A FIXED SOLUTION—IT'S A FLEXIBLE, EVOLVING MODEL THAT MUST ADAPT TO CHANGING STUDENT NEEDS.



OUR NEXT STEPS INCLUDE WIDER DISSEMINATION, FURTHER CO-CREATION, AND LONGITUDINAL EVALUATION



CALL TO ACTION: EMBEDDING BELONGING AND CO-CREATION IN HE

Final Thoughts .....

**Student Partnership , Co – creation and Reflection is key !**

# Questions and Comments

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Rachel Studd is a Reader in Design. Rachel is a Teaching and Scholarship academic so as well as her research on the pedagogy of transition into HEI's she looks at building a sense of belonging through student community and inclusion. Building relationships with peers, the culture of their degree programme and institution throughout the entirety of their educational journey and beyond.



## Thomas Pierce-Jones

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Thomas Pierce-Jones is a PGR student in the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, studying ocean island volcanoes. His experiences as an undergraduate student led him to work as a student partner to examine methods of student support in different departments within the University of Manchester.



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Rachel Parker-Strak is a Reader in Fashion Buying and Merchandising. Rachel's scholarship activity revolves around developing pedagogy that fosters a sense of belonging and community within the higher education environment, as well as teaching and learning practice. Focusing on embedding belonging and measuring the impact this has on the student journey.