Designing, Delivering and Developing the mutually beneficial relationship between belonging and self-esteem within an interdisciplinary blended unit.

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Overview of session

- Belonging: its meaning and importance

- Context: Introducing UCIL '*Communicating with Confidence*'

- Embedding belonging in practice
  - o Designing
  - o Delivering
  - o Developing

- Key takeaways

"What does 'belonging' mean to you?"

"... *a space that I feel comfortable to be myself, and grow, in.*" (Course survey, 2025)

"...students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of **connectedness**, and the experience of mattering, of feeling **cared about**, **accepted**, **respected**, **valued** by and important to the campus community"

(Strayhorn, 2012, p.4)

The Role of Belonging

- In terms of Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), belonging precedes attainment.

- Enhanced academic outcomes – student motivation, retention and achievement (Pedler et al., 2020; Veldman, Meeussen and van Laar., 2022).

- Positive impact on mental well-being, confidence and self-esteem (Kahu, Thomas & Heinrich., 2022; Lister, 2021).

- For many students, societies, social events and even living/physical spaces contribute to their sense of belonging at university (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2019).

- Whilst there is a growing literature/evidence base on the importance of belonging, there is a relative lack of evidence about how this can be developed in practice within Universities (Allen et. al., 2021, 2024; Giliani & Thomas, 2025).

UCIL: Communicating with Confidence

- 10 (20) credit Interdisciplinary unit

- Students from Psychology, Economics, Computer Science, Music, Geography, Chemistry, Mathematics, Business and Management, Materials

- Goals: To enable students to feel confident in communicating with impact in a number of settings.

- Always significantly over subscribed

- Recipient of an ITL Fellowship 2023-25 to extend accessibility through developing into a blended unit

How could the sense of belonging be retained, and developed, within a blended unit?

Designing for belonging...

Designing for diversity

- Cultural humility (Forondo et al., 2008)
  - Building in opportunities to teach each other about inter-cultural communication preferences
  - Diversity within the team
  - Constant focus upon self-reflection, and awareness, as educators

- Neurodiversity:
  - Careful selection of workshop teaching room to avoid cognitive overload
  - Designing online material to provide a very structured learning journey, with recurrent periods of learning reinforcement through quizzes and activities.
  - Reminders of ongoing assessment tasks
  - Early introduction of skills/techniques in managing anxiety and supporting self-regulation

Designing Assessment for belonging...

Co-creation...

Design: Student interns, paid to attend workshops and team meetings and feed in to process of design. One had special focus on exploring how to scaffold equity in reflection.

Conversations with students from face-to-face course.

Delivery: Student videos part of online course material – demonstrating skills in practice.

Development: Surveys at end of each section of module to create ongoing feedback channels.

Regular conversations in module workshops..

Delivery: Embedding Belonging

1. (re)introductions

Exercises to support learning of names, interests, experiences…

"The set up of the in person event to facilitate discussion and feedback"

"Having a group of people which I see every other week who are consistently the same, and then doing the more practical sort of exercises with everyone has been really great in feeling more relaxed and connected with peers and course leaders."

"…ability to open up about personal experiences helped to curate a sense of belonging"

Delivery: Embedding belonging

2. Interaction is formalised, scaffolded and ongoing

"Ensuring that we talked amongst ourselves a lot and being with different people with the vibe of open communication was ideal for this."

"The way everyone was putting in time to respond to each other and write meaningful responses where they clearly have put effort in."

"targeting the self– expressive side to a person which I think this course has not only tackled through the type of content, but also through the more intimate, smaller groups within the workshops, and the practical activities and exercises which, in turn, have allowed me to form more closer connections and feel more welcome and involved."

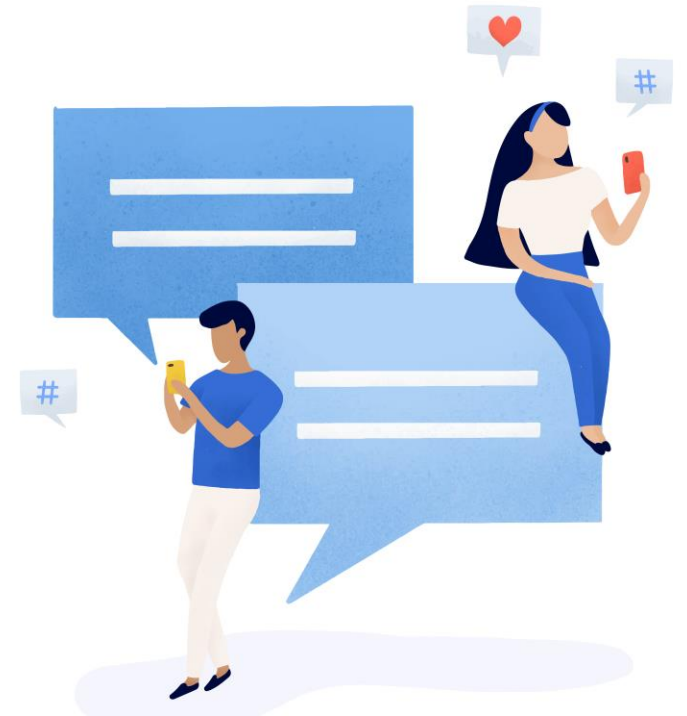# Delivery: Embedding belonging

3. Regular feedback

- Feedback from course team in workshops and online
- Empowering students to peer assess and provide feedback.

"Being encouraged to give feedback and the fact that feedback always included something positive as well as constructive."

"Reading others discussion posts was very informative. It helped me to compare my progress with others journey"

"Feeling supported and encouraged!"

Delivery: Embedding belonging

4. Space and inclusion (physical and psychological)

"The circle style group gathering feels so much more fun and inclusive"

"Feel understood and safe to speak up and share experiences"

"The way everyone is very non-judgemental, and vulnerable, when sharing their answers. It makes it feel like a comfortable space where I can give my input and know that what I'm sharing will be taken seriously"

4. Provision of space to 'fail'

".., being comfortable and able to fail in a safe environment, knowing everyone's in the same boat"

- Explicit discussion of a 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006) within online material

- Modelled through inclusion of 'outtakes' in recorded material

- Developed through practical exercises in workshop, supplemented through prompts to practice in private within online material

- Reinforced in assessment – presentation marks moderated by consideration of student journey, not just attainment but achievement
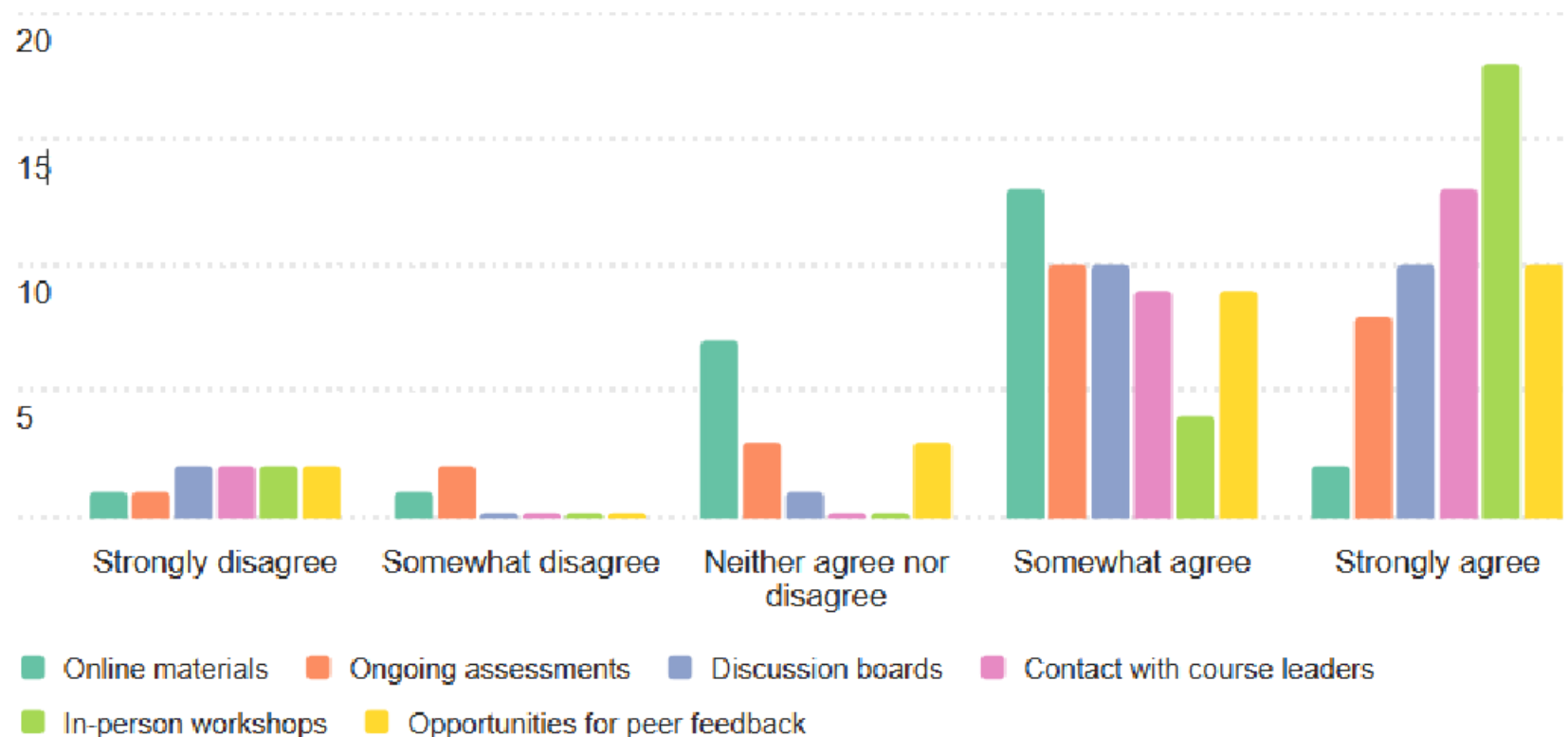
Delivery: Embedding belonging

Figure 1. To what extent do you agree that the following aspects of the course contributed to your sense of belonging? (Course survey, 2025)

Key takeaways and sharing best practice

Online connections	Importance of scaffolding online connections to support interaction
Feedback opportunities	Embedding more opportunities for personalised feedback from course leaders and peers, both in-person and online
Peer learning	Importance and value of formalised and scaffolded peer support
Encouraging reflections	Supporting students to see how learning links to wider skills (capabilities) and using reflection to support self-compassion
Physical space	Using the physical space (where possible) to reduce potential barriers

Ongoing challenges: Development needs

5 workshops   Group size   Personal discussions
Promoting 'contextually flexible communication'

Providing an 'end of course celebration'

Balancing compassionate assessment with 'rigour'

Questions

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