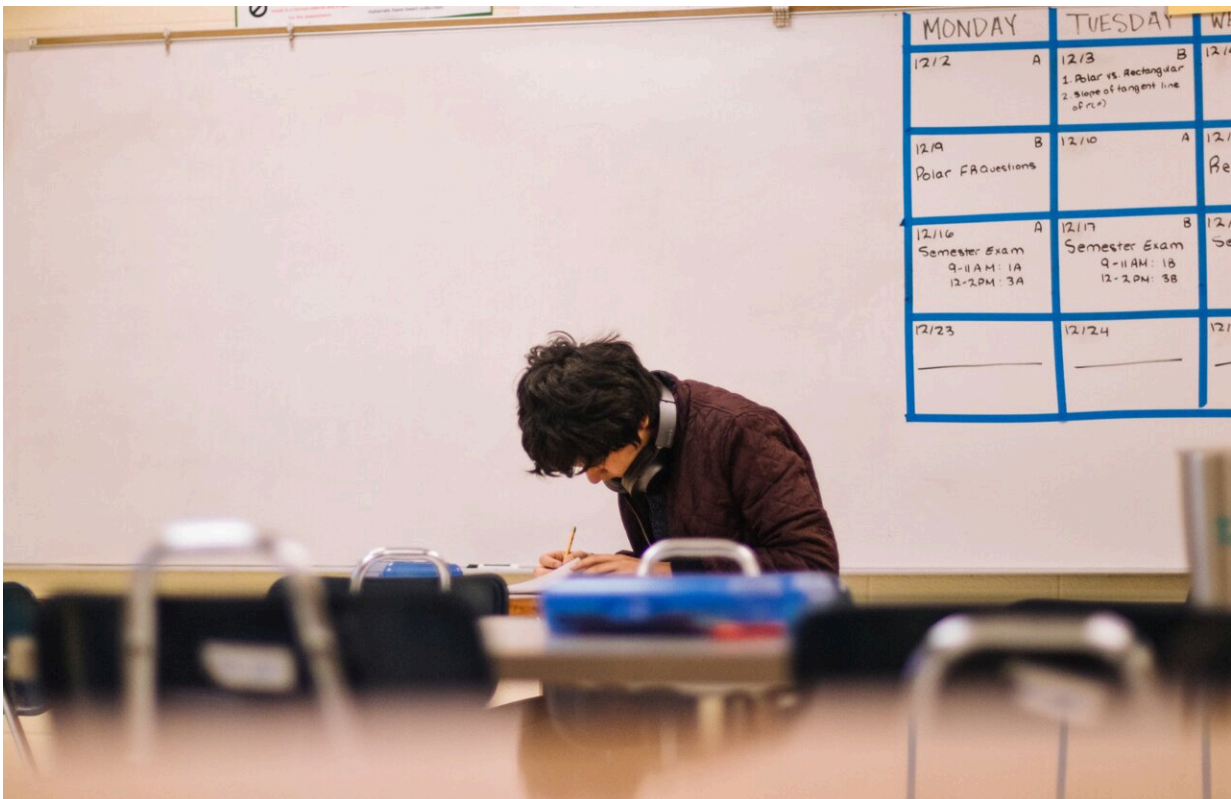


# Increased engagement with local communities could encourage a better sense of belonging among students

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The forging of deeper connections between students and local communities could be one of the ways that universities seek to improve

the sense of belonging felt by their students.

Emphasizing the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of belonging, and recognizing the cultural messages that are implicit within physical surrounding have also been highlighted as recommendations to consider by a new Policy Note published by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI).

Student belonging and the wider context (Policy Note 39), written by Dr. Richard Vytنيورгу, a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Wellcome Center for Cultures and Environments of Health, is based on structured interviews with [students](#) that explored their sense of belonging.

The Policy Note shows that students' sense of belonging in their [higher education](#) institution is best situated in the context of their sense of place in the wider world—and that too often, it is evaluated as an isolated phenomenon, specific to being a student.

This correlation was borne out in two notable areas:

- While students welcome diversity of staff and students, they caution more generally against excessive emphasis on identity differences among people at the expense of finding common ground that can bring people with different backgrounds together.
- Residential students can often be frustrated at the lack of opportunity to connect with [local communities](#) beyond their institution or campus. They recognize that the experience of home can be found anywhere, but that it can be important to form a robust social life that might extend beyond institutional affiliation, extending into the wider community.

"While student belonging is increasingly prominent in [policy](#), too often it

is considered as an isolated phenomenon without any reference to students' broader ideas about what it means to belong in the wider world," said Dr. Vytņiorgu. "This report suggests some ways in which belonging in higher education might be viewed in relation to belonging more generally. I hope it will encourage higher education policymakers to consider how pro-belonging policies can impact and promote students' sense of belonging in the wider world."

The report, which is partly a response to recent events where student mental health and well-being do not seem to have had the priority they deserve, includes five [policy recommendations](#). These are aimed at helping higher education professionals consider how to foster a deeper sense of belonging among their students:

1. Avoid reducing student belonging to a quirk of individual students and recognize instead that students emphasize the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of belonging.
2. Work with students and staff to identify areas of common ground—Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion policies should be wary of highlighting divisions among students at the expense of student cohesion in academic and co-curricular activities.
3. Facilitate deeper connections between students and local communities to help students feel more "at home" where they live and to encourage them to contribute to a larger community beyond their institution.
4. Identify the cultural messages of the physical environment because students know that physical surroundings communicate ideas about who spaces are for and how much institutions value different people.
5. Co-create pro-belonging policies at a local rather than centralized level—for example, within departments or, if working with university-wide services (such as student [mental health](#) and well-being), in tandem with a departmental lead for student

experience.

"There are few things in life as important for personal well-being as feeling like you belong," Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI, said. "This is already much more widely recognized than it used to be, but we still need to do more work to understand how to inculcate a sense of belonging, including among students.

"At the moment, [young people](#) in particular often feel squeezed out by society, which tends to look and feel like it is often more interested in the needs of older people than those on the cusp of independent adulthood. This is not an easy thing for [educational institutions](#) to tackle, given constrained resources and the welcome increase in diversity among the student body, yet the payoffs in terms of student satisfaction, lower drop-out rates and improved learning could be enormous."

Mary Curnock Cook CBE, Chair of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission and a HEPI Trustee, added, "The UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission's work laid bare the unseen ravages of the pandemic which diminished students' confidence in their academic studies and their personal and professional relationships. The powerful benefits experienced by students working closely with university leaders during COVID led to our central recommendation of a Student Futures Manifesto, co-created and co-produced by students and staff.

"Students told us that a more affiliative, networked and social approach to relationships between staff and students was key to feeling they were valued which in turn enhanced their feelings of belonging."

**More information:** Student belonging and the wider context.  
[www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/11/17/to-e ... h-local-communities/](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/11/17/to-e...h-local-communities/)

Provided by University of Exeter

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