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The RMIT belonging strategy: fostering student engagement in higher education

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Abstract
Belonging emerged in the 1990s as a conceptual framework to promote student success, retention and engagement in Higher Education (Tinto, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Belonging is the sense of mattering and interpersonal connectedness: a basic human need, it enhances motivation and drives behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Strayhorn, 2012). Generally, its application within higher education has been to discrete student cohorts, often based on ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or first-year transitioning status (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, Bie, Dorime-Williams, & Williams, 2016; Ribera, Miller & Dumford, 2017).

RMIT University, Australia’s second largest higher education provider, has a diverse student body. Student retention at RMIT University remains relatively high, however, recent evaluations have indicated that students believe the university is not doing enough to help foster a sense of belonging and friendship. In response, the university has positioned student belonging as a major strategic focus area in 2017-2018, and has developed a whole of institution RMIT Belonging Strategy. The strategy emerges from an extensive internal stakeholder consultation process and builds on the research of The Belonging Project (Clarke & Wilson, 2016). The strategy identified and tested five drivers that impact student belonging at the university, and proposed a measurement framework to form an ‘index’ of belonging that can be tracked and reported using existing university data sets. This paper focuses on the innovative and collaborative work of developing an evidence based, data driven enterprise wide strategy for inclusive belonging, and presents a roadmap of the process.

Keywords: Belonging Strategy, student experience, curriculum

Introduction
As educators and researchers in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, we developed The Belonging Project (2011-2015) to define a new approach to enhancing student engagement and graduate outcomes in our school (for further discussion, see Morieson, Carlin, Clarke, Lukas, & Wilson, 2013; Araujo, Wilson, & Clarke, 2015; Clarke, & Wilson, 2016). A longitudinal, multidisciplinary learning and teaching research study, the
project was informed by the concept of belonging and grew from collaborative work undertaken within the school to develop a common pedagogical approach and create a unified learning and teaching narrative. Belonging has previously been applied in higher education to address discrete student cohorts (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Ribera, Miller, & Dumford, 2017; Strayhorn, Bie, Dorime-Williams & Williams, 2016). Where The Belonging Project differs is in its whole-of-program, and entire student life-cycle approach to student engagement. The success of the project led to an invitation from the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education (or the Education Portfolio) to test the feasibility of scaling these initial findings into a whole of institution approach. The initiative coincided with the university’s release of a strategic plan for 2015 to 2020, Ready for life and work, which established a vision for creating transformative experiences for students in an era of complex and rapid change. Positioning students as central to the RMIT University community, the strategic plan identified “belonging and social connectedness” as vital to their experience (RMIT University, 2015). With student belonging established as a key focus area, several work streams emerged, including the RMIT Belonging Strategy, an enterprise wide approach to ensure meaningful, long-term change that can be used in a global environment, but is detailed to the specific context of RMIT University.

A dual sector, tertiary institution, RMIT University is Australia’s second largest university, with campuses in Vietnam and Spain. The university offers programs in vocational education and higher education, ranging from certificates through to postgraduate research degrees. In Melbourne, there are close to 60,000 students enrolled and the institution employs approximately 5000 academic staff. The RMIT Belonging Strategy continues the work of the Belonging Project by taking a holistic approach that encapsulates the entire student life cycle, and outlines a rationale and plan for delivering belonging interventions across the full range of student services (Clarke & Wilson, 2016). An institution wide strategy requires economic, political and global considerations; however, as grass-roots academics, our work is guided by the principles that education can affect positive communitarian and individual change, and that meaningful and authentic relations with staff and students enable genuine collaboration and growth (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Kreber, 2013). Informed by this philosophy, the RMIT Belonging Strategy has emerged from an extensive internal stakeholder consultation process that has been underway since March 2017. The strategy identified and tested five drivers that inform student belonging at RMIT, and proposed a measurement framework to form an ‘index’ of belonging that can be tracked and reported using existing university data sets. This paper focuses on the innovative and collaborative work of developing the evidence based, data driven enterprise wide strategy for inclusive belonging, and presents a roadmap of the process.

Belonging in Higher Education

Conceptually, belonging is highly applicable to the education sector, and work within RMIT and the sector more broadly has identified that generating a sense of belonging for students has significant positive impact on transition and retention, learning outcomes, engagement, wellbeing and organizational advocacy (Tinto, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Walton, Cohen, Cwir & Spence, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Araujo, Wilson & Clarke, 2015; Ribera et al., 2017). Central to our understanding of belonging has been Baumeister and Leary’s (1995, p. 497) hypothesis that human beings are driven to form “lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships”. The failure to make human connections is associated with poor adjustment and health and a lack of well-being, consequently leading to feelings of “isolation, alienation, and loneliness” (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi & Cummins, 2008, p. 213).

In the higher education sector in Australia, belonging has been closely linked to research on the first year experience (FYE) and first year retention (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Krause, 2005; Morieson et al., 2013). Kift et al., (2010) identified belonging as one of three principles
driving Queensland University of Technology’s (QUT) innovative, whole-of-institution approach to the FYE. They argued the “first year curriculum must engage new learners in their learning and mediate support for that learning” (Kift et al., 2010, p. 4). To do this would require awareness and access to support services and the development of “a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experiences” (Kift et al., 2010, p. 4).

Pioneering work was undertaken in the USA by Tinto (1993) on college persistence and retention, and by Hurtado and Carter (1997), who studied Latino students’ experiences at college. More recently Strayhorn (2012) has made substantial contribution to the field, linking a sense of belonging to the transformative mission of higher education. Strayhorn (2012, p. 3, 17) argues that the concept’s direct relationship to cognition and “achievement motivation” makes it particularly useful in the domain of education where belonging refers to “the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group” (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers).

Extensive work on belonging took place in the UK under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, ran from 2008 to 2011, and encompassed seven discrete projects involving 22 higher education institutions (Thomas, 2012). The final report identified supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful higher education learners, and higher education experiences that are relevant to interests and future goals, as the means through which belonging could be successfully nurtured (Thomas, 2012, pp. 14-15). Confirming The Belonging Project’s findings, the report stressed that to improve engagement and success, it was necessary to embed a culture of belonging across whole institutions (Thomas, 2012; Clarke & Wilson, 2016).

Students cite a lack of a sense of belonging as one of the main reasons for attrition and poor academic performance, and it can be causally linked to low satisfaction rates among graduates (Hausmann et al., 2007). Most approaches to belonging in higher education have addressed vulnerable student cohorts, often based on ethnicity (black or Latino), gender, socio-economic status or first-year transitioning status (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Ribera et al. 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2016). The RMIT Belonging Strategy outlines a set of goals and interventions to activate an ethos of belonging across the entire student life cycle and beyond, while aligning and coordinate existing and new initiatives to ensure that changes to the organisation are sustainable.

Why belonging, why now?

Taking into account the cost of student attrition and reforms to the Australian Commonwealth Government Scheme (CGS) funding, belonging can have a real and quantifiable impact on the “performance-based element” of government success measures (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). The release in December 2017 of the Mid-year economic and fiscal outlook 2017-18 confirmed that CGS funding for bachelor courses would be frozen at 2017 levels for two years and funding would only be increased in 2020 if universities meet performance targets, the exact details of which are yet to be disclosed (Warbuton, 2017). Changes to funding such as these and shifts in higher education policy driven by explicit student satisfaction metrics have created a demand for ‘strong, practice-based evidence’ (Gibbs et al., 2016, p. 12). Due to the lag-time in the return of student evaluations and QILT (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching) data, RMIT University now also utilises “pulse” data to capture more agile and up-to-date student responses measuring levels of satisfaction and attributes that lead to promotion.
Loyalty to brand incorporates a process of recommendation and continued patronage; for higher education providers, this sentiment informs retention, satisfaction, engagement and employability. In comparison to the sector, retention at RMIT University is high; once students enroll, they generally stay at the institution (Australian Government, 2017). Conversely, students gave the university a weak ranking for “fostering a sense of belonging and friendships” (NPS data, 2016). The broader consequences of these sentiments are that students may not complete their studies, recommend the university or return as alumni.

Analysis of evaluation data has confirmed that encouraging a sense of belonging among students is an area for improvement and, as outlined in RMIT University’s Ready for work and life 2015-2020 strategic plan, belonging is now of key focus. At its core, Ready for work and life (RMIT, 2015) is the university’s response as a global institution to the challenging and often disruptive changes occurring in the sector, and in the local and global environments. In responding to these changes, Ready for work and life (RMIT, 2015) provided the ideal background for our development of an enterprise strategy for belonging that encompasses a whole of institution approach to inspire, motivate, coordinate and align goals, activities and improvements to ensure they are sustainable.

Higher education providers stand to benefit commercially and strategically when students feel engaged with and part of their institution. The RMIT Belonging Strategy will drive a range of commercial benefits, linked to engagement, academic success, and retention. A range of other outcomes sought by RMIT is also dependent on the strategy, including uplift of teaching capability, student employability, and access and equity initiatives. By building enterprise-wide belonging capabilities, we will equip our students to value and respect diversity; when students leave RMIT they will take with them a belonging mind-set into their post-study pathways. Along with economic benefits such as improved retention, belonging will become a key part of RMIT’s value proposition to students. Furthermore, as grass-roots academics we have an obligation to contribute to an ethos of belonging within our culture, and use this as a lever for cultural and societal change.

Collaboration through a holistic, grassroots and iterative approach

Following on from the methodology we established in The Belonging Project, the RMIT Belonging Strategy is informed by techniques of co-creation to promote staff ownership through identified ‘champions’, and to ensure we have commitment to sustained and continuous engagement by staff at a grassroots level. Between March and June 2017, we facilitated a rolling series of workshops and face-to-face meetings with grassroots academics, professional staff and executives to ascertain what a sense of belonging would look and feel like at RMIT for our students. Wary of tokenism, we developed a deeply consultative and iterative approach, where we regularly meet face-to-face with stakeholders and kept them informed of the process. We had easy access to academic and teaching staff and solicited the opinions of Heads of Schools and Program Managers, seeking their advice about disciplinary belonging. Our champions helped to negotiate meetings with executives, resulting in consultations with the ARG (Academic Register Group), Academic Support, who are responsible for industry and student mentoring, Communications, Governance, Marketing, HR (Human Resources), the Library, including the Study and Learning Centre, and Student Life, who deal with co and extracurricular activities. Through this process, we also developed a cohesive working relationship with the staff at the Ngarara Willim Centre, which was particularly helpful in conceptualising the importance of place within an ethos of belonging, and informed our thinking about how we could improve the student experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Although we consider our work to be rigorous, consultative and grounded in strong evidence, as academics we felt ill-equipped to produce the crucial business plan for an institution wide
strategy and earmarked funds to employ an external strategy consultant from the firm SPP Consulting, who are familiar with the higher education sector. Meeting with Kade Brown from SPP has been a fortuitous synergy, and we have worked closely with him in writing the business plan and developing the strategy. The process was a learning one as we went about codifying a definition and a rationale for the organisation to prioritise belonging.

Further to our consultation process, we designed a Qualtrics online survey of three questions, which was emailed to all RMIT academic, executive and professional staff. The survey confirmed our perception that there was broad agreement among staff that belonging should be a focus for the organisation. An overwhelming majority of respondents (n=642) who took part in the survey indicated that they believe RMIT has a significant role to play in proactivity driving belonging for students. There was also broad consensus amongst staff with 94% confirming they “agree” or “strongly agree” RMIT should be proactive in striving for a sense of belonging among students.

Our previous research and the consultations we undertook revealed that the tacit knowledge of staff is an essential tool in understanding the student experience within the university, and that interrogating and understanding the staff experience can assist to enhance the student experience. Perhaps not surprisingly, we learnt that a sense of belonging matters to staff, and their perceptions of the experience can positively affect student’s sense of belonging. We also discovered that sustained continuous engagement with staff at a grass-root level is essential if organisational change is to be achieved. This critical insight has proven common to all phases of our research, and affirms the recurring theme of the importance of harnessing the knowledge, expertise and resources of academic and professional staff, addressing their professional development needs and importantly, providing the support and requirement to sustain their commitment and participation (Clarke & Wilson, 2016).

The Belonging survey

A series of ‘pop ups’ were run across RMIT’s Brunswick, Bundoora and Melbourne campuses to test some of our hypotheses about belonging at RMIT through our Belonging Survey (2017). An online communications campaign was also deployed to communicate RMIT’s commitment to belonging through the strategy and to gain insights from staff and students about what drives their sense of belonging, what role RMIT University should play in fostering a sense of belonging, and to identify opportunities for improvement.

The responses from the online and face-to-face consultation process confirmed the importance of belonging to RMIT for students and staff. Insights from the Belonging Survey included that 84% of students (n=2780; 428 online, 2352 face to face) surveyed believe that feeling respected and valued for their class contribution is either “somewhat important” or “extremely important” to driving their own sense of belonging. More than half of all student respondents also said that feeling like they “fit in” with others in their discipline is “extremely important” to their sense of belonging at RMIT University. Analysis of the data from the survey further supported the research undertaken on The Belonging Project (Clarke & Wilson, 2016): students need to feel like they matter to the organisation in general, and to their discipline in particular. With its deep roots in technical education, RMIT University students also expect that through their education, they will be initiated into professional and private practice.

Five drivers of student belonging

Our consultative and data-driven methodology confirmed the importance of our work to students and staff and supported our contention that a holistic approach was required to embed an overarching strategy for delivering belonging interventions. Informed by our data, we
developed a belonging vision, aligned with *Ready for Life and Work* (RMIT, 2015), to guide the process of creating a strategy. Our vision is informed by five goals created through the consultative process with all our stakeholders; the first three goals drive belonging to the organisation and the last two goals drive belonging within the curriculum: belonging to RMIT’s mission and values, belonging with like-minded people, belonging in the learning environment and belonging with the profession.

Interestingly, it has become apparent through our analysis of the data that, for students, a sense of belonging is quite different to a sense of satisfaction, although both sentiments are required to drive a sense of engagement amongst students. Within RMIT the concepts of ‘belonging’, ‘engagement’, and ‘satisfaction’ are often used interchangeable. As presented in Figure 1, our research has shown that belonging and satisfaction are two quite different sentiments that, when combined, contribute to engagement. In some way, a sense of belonging can compensate satisfaction sentiments in the short term. Ultimately, what the survey data reveals is that student engagement is underpinned by emotional factors, such as a need to feel like they matter and ‘fit in’, and transaction factors more generally relate to customer satisfaction.

The student consultation process enabled us to identify five drivers that impact student belonging, as shown in Figure 2. The drivers are: learning experiences, social networks, physical and digital spaces, extra-curricular activities and student services. The RMIT Belonging Strategy seeks to measure and affect these drivers at different stages of the student journey, with the drivers informing our understanding of what a ‘good’ student experience at RMIT University should look and feel like. These drivers are all factors over which the university can have some degree of influence, and it is through the lens of these drivers that we seek to measure and affect student belonging.
Student responses to our Belonging Survey were further used to determine driver weightings for a measurement framework to form an ‘index’ of belonging. In response to the question: “How important are the following experiences in making you feel like you belong at RMIT?” (n=2780), the driver which was identified as having the highest weighting and therefore the greatest potential for impact around student engagement was “learning experiences” (25.5%), with “extracurricular activities” and “social networks” following closely with a weighting each of 23.5%. Both “learning experiences” and “social networks” are related to curriculum, whereas “extracurricular activities”, “physical and digital spaces” (17.5%), covered by Student Services (10%), drive organisational belonging. Through interventions in these areas we expect to see a direct impact on attrition numbers, improvements in evaluations of the student experience, greater graduate satisfaction and an expansion of alumni numbers and participation.

The student life cycle

A model for measuring and tracking student belonging at RMIT – affectionately known as the ‘B-Score’ model – was developed as part of the strategy. The model harnesses survey responses, garnered through the existing range of student experience surveys, and ‘pulse’ data (with future iterations to include International Student Barometer data). The model maps belonging-related insights to the five drivers, before weighting these driver scores to a single aggregate B-Score. Responses from specific questions within the student surveys were extracted and weighted to form a view of RMIT’s performance in delivering a sense of belonging across three stages of the student journey. Given that the need for a sense of belonging takes on heightened importance for certain cohorts, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, lower socioeconomic, first in family, and at times of transition, we are particularly interested in measuring and affecting belonging as students transition in and out of RMIT. We identified three stages of the student journey where we could make significant interventions:
Stage 1. Transition to RMIT: Students are just beginning their journey and are adapting, both academically and socially, to university lifestyle. This stage of their journey is critical to establishing a sense of belonging and is likely to shape their student experience into the future.

Stage 2. Embedded in the student experience: At this point, students have adapted to academic and social aspects of university life, and are beginning to settle into the rhythm of university life. Students are looking to enrich their university experience, for example, through engaging with clubs and societies, (informal curriculum) and developing relationships beyond just the classroom.

Stage 3. Transitioning to work or further study: Students at this stage have well and truly integrated with the University. These students are not only enriching their own experience through engagement with the University, but are envisioning themselves as future RMIT alumni and members of their chosen profession.

Pilot innovations: Belonging program workshops and Curriculum specific belonging initiatives (CSBIs)

Insights from our student data revealed that the greatest potential RMIT University could have to impact on student engagement was through the learning experiences driver. Therefore, we piloted several curricula based initiatives in 2017, including Belonging Program Workshops and Curriculum Specific Belonging Initiatives (CSBIs). These initiatives are examples of our top-down, bottom up approach. The trial of a new quality review process in 2017 gave us the opportunity to work closely with seventeen programs piloting the review system and another five programs through our Belonging Program Workshop. Facilitating workshops with Program Managers, academics and teaching staff allowed us to discuss with staff the importance of belonging for their programs and develop an accurate understanding of changing student cohorts using a data lead methodology. Together we mapped current offerings for students and identified further opportunities to enhance disciplinary belonging. We pinpointed best practice within the student space and helped ascertain where there might be gaps. We also informed programs of targeted resources they could access across student services in order to enhance the student experience.

The evaluations of our workshops were conclusively positive with one of the unexpected responses from staff being how much they relished the rare opportunity to come together as a program to discuss their classroom practice, share their ideas and successes and gain insights for new initiatives. These outcomes further supported our decision to create a Belonging in the Curriculum website. The resource currently houses over fifty documented CSBIs, which may be used by staff as a model or inspiration to enhance their own discipline based belonging activities. The broad range of initiatives include urban camps and cohort day outs, student centric timetabling and graduate Facebook pages. The Belonging in the Curriculum website, launched February 6th 2018, supports staff with their endeavours to improve students’ sense of belonging to their cohort, their discipline and their community. Across the university, the five drivers of student belonging are being used to determine work streams and a range of interventions and projects have been identified and prioritised.

Conclusion

The RMIT Belonging Strategy articulates a vision of an organisation known for its culture of belonging, where all students feel accepted, respected and valued. It outlines a set of goals and initiatives to help students feel a sense of engagement with the institution, to their chosen
discipline while they are enrolled as students, and to take with them a ‘belonging mindset’ into their future pathways. Whereas belonging has previously been applied to discrete cohorts in higher education (Hausmann et al, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kift et al., 2010; Ribera et al, 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2016), the RMIT Belonging Strategy takes a whole of institution approach informed by five drivers of student belonging: learning experiences, social networks, physical and digital spaces, extra-curricular activities and student services. The ‘B-Score’ proposes a measurement framework to form an ‘index’ of belonging that can be tracked and reported using existing university data sets including NPS and SES. Strong institutional buy-in for the strategy has resulted in “belonging” being added as a reportable item to the formal 7-year Quality Review process for all programs. Furthermore, the university’s three Colleges and the schools within them are now required to have a ‘Belonging Plan’, which outlines their vision and approach for improving student experience.

As grass roots academics, we took an innovative approach to developing the strategy, informed by principles of co-creation, consultation and iteration. Our approach has enabled us to hone a range of guiding principles that we encourage others to use when developing their own strategies for improving student engagement. We recognise that a sense of belonging is not achieved automatically, it must be cultivated and supported. Each of us has a part to play in improving the sense of belonging among others and ourselves; and belonging is a mindset that we can develop within our students, equipping them for work and life beyond our universities.

By improving student belonging, we are seeding future communities out of which a suite of benefits flow. The most effective approach to driving alumni engagement is providing a positive, connected student experience in the first place. Alumni who belong can play an active role in helping current students improve their sense of belonging to the organisation and to the discipline. A student who belongs is more likely to seek a lifelong relationship with their higher education provider. Alumni affinity is driven by a range of factors, the strongest of which is their sense of connection to RMIT, and to the networks and pathways we helped them create at RMIT University, and into their chosen industry and profession.

References


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