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# In search of the feeling of 'belonging' in Higher Education: Undergraduate students transition into Higher Education

## Abstract

Meehan and Howells (2017) in the evaluation of first year students' transition into university found that the values of 'being, belonging and becoming' were important in particular within the first few months and within the first year of university. From our previous work, we reported that three things matter to students: the academic staff they work with, the nature of their academic study and the feeling of belonging. This paper provides a further illumination to our work by reporting on the qualitative data collected in the same study. The study included 530 students from five cohorts over a five-year period. As part of the Student Experience Evaluation instrument, open-ended questions probed students about their early experiences of belonging and transition into university. This original research uses rich data to illuminate the scales and items from previous quantitative data analysis to explore 'belonging', triangulated with research from the field. This paper is timely due to increased emphasis placed on learning and teaching with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework. Student satisfaction is not a simplistic measure and this study articulates the complexity of student belonging in Higher Education.

## Introduction

Prior to the start of a new academic year, the media presents a view about transition to university life which encourages prospective students and parents to learn lessons from previous 'mistakes' and things to 'avoid' in order to survive the first days of university life. Although some of these articles may provide some useful and practical tips, the transition to university and the subsequent successful completion of a university degree is far more complex than the 'top ten tips to surviving university would have you believe (e.g. Good Universities Guide, 2017; Studential.com, 2017; The Independent, 2013). In order for students to 'survive' their university experience the individual student has, personal attributes such as levels of confidence, and competence in dealing with transitions, which make it more likely that they will be successful. This paper highlights an alternative view to a deficit approach to which focuses on HE practice that supports students transition through attention to being, belonging and becoming.

Universities on the other hand are increasingly concerned with metrics that measure student retention and success. The drivers are more than financial, but increasingly, they are concerned with overall completion and success rates, also, how well students achieve during their degree

programmes. The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England in the 2016-17 academic year sees the metrics evaluating the worth of a university based on three aspects of quality: teaching quality; the learning environment; student outcomes and learning gain. This paper focuses on two aspects of the TEF criteria, namely, teaching quality and the learning environment. For the purpose of TEF teaching quality is defined as:

Teaching practices which provide an appropriate level of contact, stimulation, challenge, encourage student effort and engagement, and which are effective in developing the knowledge, skills, attributes and work readiness of students (2016, p.12).

The Learning Environment in TEF is defined as:

The wider context for teaching, which includes the effectiveness of resources, designed to support learning, maximise completion, and aid the development of independent study and research skills. This may include learning spaces, use of technology, work experience, extra-curricular activities for peer-to-peer interaction (2016, p.12).

The Conservative Government introduced the TEF in England as external means of giving prospective students a standardised assessment about the quality of teaching as a mechanism by which some control for Universities to increase fees dependent on compliance with the system and level of quality. Race (2017) suggests that the TEF is measuring the wrong aspects of learning and teaching and recommends a focus on assessment and feedback practice as being a more effective means of improving teaching quality. The literature suggests that student satisfaction as measure of quality is problematic and this is closely linked to the marketization of Higher Education in England (e.g. Bates, Kaye and McCann, 2017).

A significant body of research exists about the importance of first impressions in terms of student satisfaction and engagement with their studies at university. For example, previously, Meehan and Howells (2017) investigated “what matters to Fresher’s” during their transition into higher education through to completion. Two data sets explored this question. Namely, students on an academic undergraduate Early Childhood Studies degree (n=530) over a five-year period completed a Student Experience Evaluation (SEE) in their first term. The SEE included quantitative data from Likert scales, which were analysed and qualitative data from open-ended questions. Coding of the open-ended questions used the finding from the quantitative study. The qualitative data is presented in this paper. Three things matter to students about their experience, that is, the academic staff they work with, the nature of their academic study, and engendering feelings of belonging. This paper examines the feelings of belonging for this group of students and the barriers and enabling factors. Student

confidence about their transition gives them resilience during this period and when they experience membership of learning, social and other communities, it reduces feelings of isolation and fear.

This paper explores the ideas that being, belonging and becoming are three states of the student experiences in Higher Education. The paper uses the words of the students, which illuminate the key themes in the findings. The below figure (Figure 1) is the conceptual framework through which the data will be explored within this paper that the three foci of being, belonging and becoming are an intertwined ongoing process that the student navigates their way through as they transition into and through Higher Education. The students navigate through these questions linked to themselves and their environment and change as they develop in confidence and competence.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

### **What is 'belonging' in higher education?**

Araujo, Carlin, Clarke, Morieson, Lukas and Wilson (2014) describe the transition into Higher Education as a process rather than an 'event'. A bridge between the formal and informal with students engaging in a range of social, cultural and academic transitions (Araujo et al., 2014). In their 2014 study, Araujo et al. described a three-tiered model to support the development of belonging over the student lifecycle. They identified three types of belonging for students, belonging to the cohort at programme level, within and interdisciplinary learning environment for example at school/faculty level and the third tier linked to the global intercultural network linked to their subject or profession. The three-tiered model supports students to transition in, through and out of university (Araujo et al., 2014). Belonging and the process to belong requires the complex interaction of three factors, which include the environment, social, and cognitive attributes which when combined support students feeling of connectedness or belonging (Kift, 2004). Tinto (2002) focused on the way in which learning supports student's sense of belonging and how this relates to students staying and completing their studies. Tinto aptly suggested, "The more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate...." (Tinto, 2002, p.4). Therefore, drawing on Tinto's ideas, the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated and that student learning drives student retention. Extending on this idea, building students' competence and confidence is enabled through constructions of capability. For example, "Sensibilities of belonging are formed in relation to constructions of capability: to belong in a field such as higher education, the student must be recognised as having the capability to belong." (Burke et al 2016, p. 19)

Thomas (2012) suggests that belonging is linked to the psychological and sociological aspects of the students and where they feel a sense of purpose. This is closely linked to the subject they are studying or career aspirations. For students on an Early Childhood Studies degree, belonging can be developed by working with students to identify why they are studying ECS and their interest in children's learning, development and well-being. Soria and Stubblefield (2015) found that students who had greater awareness of their own strengths and capabilities, particularly, where these are supported by the curriculum were more likely to feel like they belonged and completed their studies successfully. For example, Burke et al (2016) suggested that:

Capability is deeply entwined with identity formation that are produced within, across and between difference social contexts and spaces. Family influences are an important factor in shaping aspirations and constructions of capability but do not determine educational aspirations, expectations and success (p.38).

Identities are complex and intersecting formations, not homogenous groupings. It is important for university teachers to understand the ways that differences might disrupt aspirations to develop inclusive practices and cultures. For many students who are first generation university attenders, they may lack the cultural capital about what University is and how one behaves at university. Thomas (2012) described the 'way of speaking, interacting, behaving are learned through family and social interactions'. For those students without this capital, coming to university is akin to travelling to a foreign country and not knowing the language and appropriate cultural practices.

### **What helps students to feel like they belong?**

Nelson and Kift (2005) reported that in order to successfully, manage the transition of students into higher education, universities need to recognise the diversity of the student population, and use a coherent approach to mediate the transition through academic, social and support structures. At the heart of the model proposed by Nelson and Kift (2005), they suggest that the 'transition pedagogy' needs to be embedded into the curriculum, that is, what is taught, how it is taught, how it is assessed and how this links to the lived experience of the students. More recently, Bates, Kaye and McCann (2017) went further than Nelson and Kift to suggest that learning environment (including people); physical environment and workload (university and paid employment) are determinants in students' development of feelings of belonging and transition into higher education.

Similarly, Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, and Southgate (2016) focussed on the individual and personalised constructions of capability that students have about themselves. This is contrary to the position that assumes that education and access to education will overcome social/cultural educational disadvantage and inequality. Burke et al (2016) argue that academic staff need to support students' capability by creating an environment that nurtures trust, belonging and inclusion. They found that only 35% of Australian students in their study agreed with the statement: "I am a capable student and expect to do well at university."

### **What are the barriers to belonging?**

Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy (2011) in their Australian six-university study concluded that students who do not complete their studies withdraw for different reasons, with the majority of students leaving in the first year and fewer students leaving in the second and third year of their degrees. Their findings suggested that in the later years of study, student withdrawal maybe linked to university factors rather than personal factors. These factors may include the quality of interactions between students and academic and support staff, feedback processes, quality of advice about matters related to the course of study and the university policy and procedures. In the first year at University, the literature suggests there are many reasons why a student may withdraw from their studies. The reasons for withdrawing may include expectations for the course not meeting the reality of their experience, conflicting priorities and motivation to attend university is external. Alternatively, others have cited lack of academic confidence; time management challenges; limited social engagement as reasons for leaving university in the first year. With an increased use of technology at admission and registrations times, this reduces the capacity for human contact coupled with information overload early in the transition process are also reasons why students may not successfully transition into higher education (Nelson and Kift, 2005; Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy, 2011; Martin, Jansen and Beckmann, 2016)

Thomas (2012) reported that students are less likely to think about leaving if they had a better awareness of university processes, more engaged with peers having positive relationships, and had good relationships with tutors. In the second year and third year, lack of academic confidence and students' perceptions about their needs in terms of support for learning and well-being are cited as reasons student withdraw from their studies (Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy, 2011). In addition to lack of confidence, concern about not achieving future aspirations means that students are more likely to be less satisfied with their university experience (Nelson and Kift, 2005).

O'Keefe (2013) reported that 30 to 50% of students in the USA and 20% of students in Australia are at risk of non-completion. Students who are most at risk of withdrawing and not staying at university are usually described in the following categories- ethnic minorities, those students with academic disadvantage, students with disabilities, students with low socio-economic status, students who entered university with lower tariffs or entry qualifications, first generation students, and students with mental illness. Students with multiple of the above attributes have an increased risk of not succeeding at university without significant support. It was identified by O'Keefe's (2013) study that the relationship between the student and academic staff are crucial to the well-being of students. Thomas (2012) in the HEFCE report reported that in the UK, 8% of students leave in their first year, however some universities and programmes report a much higher rate of between 37 to 45% of students leaving, and about a third of all students think about withdrawing.

Burke et al (2016) identified that students in their study were afraid of being 'judged'. They suggested that the 'fragile' sense of self that student's exhibit during the transition into higher education makes them more vulnerable to negative feelings such as not feeling capable of studying at university. Rowley, Hartley and Larkin (2008) concur that the first year is a significant period of change, adjustment for students. Burke et al. (2016) found that academic staff play a key role in how students construct their feelings about capability, which ultimately lead to success or failure in higher education.

In order to explore students' experiences of belonging, what factors enable belonging and create barriers to belonging in the following research questions underpinned this study:

- What is 'belonging' in higher education?
- What helps students to feel like they belong?
- What are the barriers to belonging?
- What are the lessons for tutor, managers, HEIs about belonging in higher education?

## **Method**

Using qualitative research methodologies to ascertain students' views about coming to University, 530 students completed open-ended questions as part of the Student Experience Evaluation (SEE) instrument. The Student Experience Evaluation (SEE) findings reported in a separate paper (Meehan and Howells, 2017). To enable participants to respond in an unconstrained way to the research questions were open-ended. Cresswell (2008) suggests that an advantage to the use of open-ended questions allows for a range of responses, both brief and lengthy, but also very rich in content.

The data in this study elicited the students' responses to six questions asked about their experiences of coming to University. The questions included:

- What has been the best thing for you coming to university?
- What has been the most challenging thing for you about coming to university?
- What has helped you to settle into university life?
- What has helped you to 'belong' here?
- Which student services have you accessed?
- Are there issues for you that would make you consider withdrawing from your studies? If so, please tell us what some of these reasons are?

The data from the open-ended questions were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis. The analysis used the categories that validated through the development of the Student Experience Evaluation questionnaire. Glaser (2008) described the process as including four steps: (1) comparing incidents to each category, (2) integrating categories and their attributes (3) naming the new construct/theory and (4) describing the new construct/theory. Within these steps the following actions were included to make sense of the data: note-taking, coding and categorising, sorting, writing and constantly comparing data. The final presentation of results and discussion are grouped into themes, namely, used 'Belonging' in higher education, enabling belonging and barriers to belonging.

In addition, using the free software available at Wordle.net, the data mining software, to identify the most frequent words in the participants' responses and the most common 30 to 50 words were identified to be presented visually as word clouds. The larger the word, the more frequent the response and by using filters to discount most common English words (for example, and, the, but) the final visual word clouds were crosschecked. The results were verified and validated the through coding and categorising the data into the three themes of 'Belonging' in higher education, enabling belonging and barriers to belonging.

### **Attributes of participants**

The students were classified and coded according to their: age; campus attended, cohort and relocation status; degree type and first choice of degree; first person from family attending university. The SEE instrument was used over five academic years (n=530). The increase in participants in 2011/12 and 2012/13 reflects the trend of increased numbers of students enrolling on the programme 2008-9 (71), 2009-10 (97), 2010-11 (83), 2011-12 (135) and 2012-13 (144).



The age of the participants ranged between <18 and 45-54 years. The majority of participants were in the 18-24 age- group (80.2%). The majority of the participants attended the Canterbury campus (64.7%), in comparison with Medway (23.6%) and Broadstairs (11.7%). Traditionally in the UK, students move away from home to attend university. Canterbury Christ Church University is based in the County of Kent and attracts many local Kent students but also students from London and other southern counties. Seventy percent (70%) of the participants at Broadstairs and Medway campuses live within 10 miles of the campus whereas thirty percent (30%) of students in Canterbury live within 10 miles of the campus.

Combined Honours participants (54.5%) were the majority of the students responding to the SEE, when compared with Single Honours students (42.8%). Of the combined Honours students, Psychology (27.7%), Sociology and Applied Science (17.7%), Health Studies (17%), Education Studies (13.1%) and Sport Science (5.7%) were the top five subjects for the Combined Honours participants).

Those participants who were first person from the family attendees to university were 51.9% (275 students) and those who were not first person were 45.5% (241 students) and 2.6% (14 students) who did not answer this questions.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Participants' responses**

The results of this study provide some rich examples and illuminate what matters to freshers. Data is presented in tables with the themes that emerged following Glaser's (2008) process outlined previously. Secondly, the wordclouds generated showing the frequency of responses are included in the presentation of results. A discussion the three overarching themes of 'Belonging' in higher education, enabling belonging and barriers to belonging follows the presentation of results.

Below in Table 1 and Figure 2, the best thing about coming to university is illustrated.

*Insert Table 1 and Figure 2 here*

Below in Table 2 and Figure 3, the most challenging thing about coming to university is illustrated.

*Insert Table 2 and Figure 3 here*

Illustrated below in Table 3 and Figure 4, are the factors that supported students settling into university.

*Insert Table 3 and Figure 4 here*

Presented below in Table 4 and Figure 5 are the factors that supported feelings of belonging at university.

*Insert Table 4 and Figure 5 here*

Illustrated below in Table 5 and Figure 6, students use of university services.

*Insert Table 5 and Figure 6 here*

Presented below in Table 6 and Figure 7, factors that would influence students' decision to withdraw from studies.

*Insert Table 6 and Figure 7 here*

### **'Belonging' in higher education**

There are many benefits to coming to university. The students in this study cited reasons including making new friends, having new experiences, being in an environment in which they can learn, be challenged and leading to progression into a career which they aspire towards. These positive statements by students demonstrate positive and affirmative stance they have taken to enhance themselves personally and academically. With this position as a starting place, students have a readiness to 'belong' or want to belong to the academic community they are joining.

"Beginning to learn about something new and that will be a part of my future",

"Proving that I can look after myself. Meeting huge varieties of different people" and

"Having the opportunity to potentially change mine and my family's future",

The three quotes above demonstrate the benefits that students perceive about university and the course on which they are embarking on. This is consistent with what Thomas (2012) identified that belonging is at an individual level and at a sociological level. Students with a strong sense of 'connection' with people, the environment and the subject they are learning about are more likely to feel like they belong.

The transition into higher education as a process as identified by Araujo, Carlin, Clarke, Morieson, Lukas and Wilson (2014) who described the range of social, cultural and academic transitions students make in the process of 'settling in' to University life. As well as Burke et al.'s (2016) ideas who asserted that student identity during their transition into higher education was shaped by the range of social contexts they encounter are demonstrated by the following examples.

"Support from friends and people around me who are in the same situation and feeling the same way"

"Having a learning group with close friends so we can work together on tasks to understand the modules, feeling like I'm doing something worthwhile."

"New friends, friendly lecturers, general atmosphere of the university."

The examples highlight the importance of friends/peers, housemates, academic staff and the general 'welcoming' atmosphere of the university. These supportive conditions for learning and support create what Burke et al (2016) coined 'constructions of capability' that enable a student to recognise they have the capability to belong. Bates, Kaye and McCann (2017) similarly comment on the conditions that enable feelings of belonging that include interpersonal relationships, the physical and affective environment and manageable workloads.

As identified in the results, 51.9% of the students in this study are the first members of their family to attend university. As first generation university attenders, they may lack the 'cultural capital' identified by Thomas (2012) as the 'way of speaking, interacting, behaving are learned through family and social interactions' for life at University. For some students, the support from family may mean that they are not certain about their decision to go to University, for example,

"Meeting new people and feeling I made the right choice of course."

The above example highlights the importance of social contacts in students' feelings of belonging.

### **Enabling belonging**

Thomas (2012) reported that in order to nurture 'belonging', academic staff are central to this process. Academics can provide opportunities for students to develop peer relationships, engage in meaningful interactions, and link the emergent knowledge and confidence of the students to their aspirations for their future goals. The role of the academic was highly significant for the students in this study. For example:

"Tutors knowing our names-as if they know us personally."

The impact of peer-to-peer interactions is also significant to the students in this study. Whether they be friends, housemates or course-mates. For example,

“My housemates as they have been my closest to home life since I've been here”

“Housemates-all being together starting out”

“Peers-around me and having PAL leaders help with their experiences to give advice”

“Peers on the course. It makes it easier to settle in.”

These examples are consistent with Thomas (2012) and Bates, Kaye and McCann (2017) both concluded that students “feeling of relatedness or connectedness to the institution” was linked to “personal acceptance, respected, included, supported by others” as an important factor in success transition into higher education. Thomas (2012) suggested that regular contact provides stability, which is essential to support feelings of belonging. In addition to the role of academic staff, the pastoral role of the Personal Tutor, the Student Support team, Library staff, the i-zone and the Finance team provided a further opportunity to connect and learn about how to fit into the University’s systems to support learning. Students have found that tutorials with Personal Tutor has been “helpful and supportive”. Student support team provides “Extra learning classes (Study skills)” and “Meeting with support and weekly dyslexia tutoring”.

### **Barriers to belonging**

The data highlighted challenges that students faced about their decision to come to university and in addition, identified issues that would make them consider withdrawing. Burke et al (2016) and Martin, Jansen and Beckmann (2016) and other studies have consistently reported a range of reasons that create stress for students and may make full engagement and ‘belonging’ more challenging. Tinto’s seminal work in 1975 identified four factors. These included teaching/learning (instruction), academic success, anxiety and motivation. For the purpose of this discussion, Tinto’s themes provide structure to the findings.

With regard to teaching and learning (instruction), where students considered the nature of academic work and workloads, students reported that the most challenging aspect of university life was:

“The big jump in academic work.”

“Leaving home, starting over when not knowing anyone. The amount and volume of work, felt like we have been thrown in at the deep end with work.”

In particular, students reported that they would consider leaving university if:

“The workload became too much and I didn't understand it.”

The second area was part linked to academic success, in particular, 'learning, becoming organised and developing independence'. For many of the students in this study, 80.2% were aged between 18 to 24 years, who were younger, having recently completed their secondary education. The challenges identified by students included:

"Making sure I get out of bed on time so that I am on time for lectures, learning to cook for myself."

"Getting back into working / learning after a gap year, writing essays in a new way, being and independent learner."

"The lectures and style of learning as at my sixth form the largest class was 8 so we had very personalised learning."

"Learning to cope on my own away from the family."

Students also suggested that for them academic success included returning to studies after a gap and the life transition of moving out of home and away from usual support networks. Both of the examples below highlight the way in which the students take personal responsibility about the changes they are facing and have some degree of control over the change they are going through. For example:

"Going back into education after having two years out after my A-levels- I am gradually becoming more organised and conforming to a students' role."

"Leaving my parents and becoming more self-reliant and organised."

With regard to anxiety, students identified reasons that may cause them to consider leaving university. Martin, Jansen and Beckmann (2016) and Thomas (2012) both cited reasons that are consistent with the finding of this research. For example, one student said that a "Lack of confidence in chosen career, I don't know what I want to do and wouldn't want to waste my time or money learning something inappropriate" was an anxiety faced about being at university. Other anxieties cited by students related to finances and worrying about paying bills and juggling responsibilities. For example, "Managing finance and home life". Students would consider withdrawing from university if their concerns about money became too overwhelming. For instance, "The increasing debt and being unable to live normally due to a lack of money." Similarly, another student commented: "My work makes university very hard for me but I can't afford to quit my job."

A further anxiety identified by Burke et al (2016) suggested that students may experience fear and anxiety linked to feeling 'incapable' and a fear of 'being judged' (p. 49). One student in this study cited that: "I worry that I am not good enough and won't make the grade if that happens I will probably

leave from embarrassment.” This highlights the fragile sense of self that students in transition experience, and the role of peers, more experiences ‘others’ and tutors appear to be critical in students overcoming these anxieties.

Motivation to study, an opportunity to change their lives or embark on their chosen careers are all reasons why students choose to come to university. However, the reality of these choices, often means that the reality for students and their motivation to succeed are sometimes overwhelmed by personal, contextual (social, academic) and family factors (Burke et al, 2016; Martin, Jansen and Beckmann, 2016; Thomas, 2012). For some students the feeling of “Too much too soon” in relation to their workload suggests that the transition from secondary to tertiary education is one which provides significant challenges for students

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the notion that transition to university and the students’ states of being, belonging and becoming are critical to understand in order to engage students for a successful experience in higher education. As students navigate their way through the transition into university and into subsequent year levels and into the world as a graduate, the people and the environment are critical in supporting the development of their confidence and competence. Students’ words highlighted to benefits and challenges to belonging in this paper and these have implications for academics, student support services and leaders in Higher Education institutions.

Namely, McInnis (2003) suggested that:

Engagement occurs when students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning, where outside the classroom, considered as important as the timetabled and structured experience, and where students actively connect to the subject matter. (p. 9)

The results of this paper are consistent with the challenge set by Tinto (2002) and James (2002) with regard to actions for universities in response to enhancing students’ feelings of belonging. They both challenged universities to reward academic staff for innovative practices that led to a curriculum and pedagogical approaches that reflected the social realities of higher education, holding high expectations for student success, promote student involvement through authentic assessment and learning experiences that are meaningful and high impact. By embedding learning and teaching strategies into programmes that are supportive and recognise the transitions into higher education, students will develop stronger feelings of belonging (Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy, 2011). Namely, if

students understand what they are learning, why and how it fits with the bigger picture, such as guided group work, better and more personalised course advice and staff development for academic and administrative staff to identify areas for improvement to recognise and support students at risk of leaving. Consideration of class size and the manner in which communication occurs and how frequently between academics and students to form 'closer' links. In addition, Kift (2004) recommended that students' confidence and competence is support with skill building activities and close links to alumni, by promoting skills needed for graduate employment.

In conclusion, bridging the gap for students who find coming to university and staying at university is mitigated by creating a sense of 'belonging' psychologically and sociologically for students. University staff (academic, administrative and academic support) all have a significant role in support the students' feelings of 'connectedness' to the university by regular, open and clear communication, relationships that provide stability and provide genuine concern and empathy for the challenges faced by students in transition. The building of trusting and respectful relationships are key to student success and belonging (Thomas, 2012).

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**Table 1: Themes and typical responses about the best things about coming to university**

Theme	Typical response
New experiences, beginning	New experience and meeting new people  Beginning to learn about something new and that will be a part of my future

Meeting new people	Meeting new people and feeling I made the right choice of course
Making new friends	Having the experience and encouragement to learn and making friends
Gaining independence, being independent	The freedom and independence to do things how I want, when I want. Proving that I can look after myself. Meeting huge varieties of different people.
Learning, changing, improving	Learning more about something I'm enthusiastic about  Having the opportunity to potentially change mine and my family's future
New knowledge	I would say the best thing about coming to university would be the knowledge I am gaining and being able to use outside the university
Course/Subject interested in studying	The best thing about coming to uni is doing a subject that I am passionate about and living an independent life
Ability, becoming, broadening, developing	I think broadening my learning styles and making my thoughts more diverse about topics covered
Challenge	Meeting new people and feeling challenged intellectually
Achieving	Being able to feel I am capable of achieving more
Career options, aspirations	The chance to improve my career and opportunities

**Table 2: Themes and typical responses about most challenging thing about coming to university**

Theme	Typical response
Work, workloads	The big jump in academic work  Leaving home, starting over when not knowing anyone. The amount and volume of work, felt like we have been thrown in at the deep end with work
Learning	Making sure I get out of bed on time so that I am on time for lectures, learning to cook for myself  Getting back into working / learning after a gap year, writing essays in a new way, being an independent learner  the lectures and style of learning as at my sixth form the largest class was 8 so we had very personalised learning

	Learning to cope on my own away from the family
Getting organised	Going back into education after having two years out after my A-levels- I am gradually becoming more organised and conforming to a students' role  Leaving my parents and becoming more self-reliant and organised
Time, time management	Settling in and disciplining myself with time management
Adjusting	adjusting to the different style of writing and learning  Adjusting to living on my own  Adjusting to the change from school to university style essays
Management of self and workload	Managing finance and home life  The workload is a bit overwhelming. Writing an assignment and knowing exactly how to do so is really challenging
Reading	Doing the reading without being told to  Keeping up with reading and organising my workload  Coping with a combined degree. I feel like have twice amount of reading and assessments. Two programmes do not work together
New, unfamiliar experiences	Meeting and becoming close to new people. The work and self-studying is quite different to how I've worked before so it has taken some getting used to -Blackboard  New way of learning- bigger groups and not having someone telling me to work and making me do it  Making new friends, fitting in

**Table 3: Themes and typical responses about what helped students to settle into university life**

Theme	Typical response
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Friends	<p>Support from friends and people around me who are in the same situation and feeling the same way</p> <p>Making friends has helped. Also getting into a routine</p>
Lecturers/staff/tutors	<p>the friends that I have met and the lecturers being supportive</p> <p>Lecturers approachable about work and personal issues, my housemates</p> <p>New friends, friendly lecturers, general atmosphere of the university</p>
Housemates	<p>My housemates as they have been my closest to home life since I've been here</p> <p>Housemates-all being together starting out</p>
Course	<p>People in my course who I have become close to as well as people I live with. Staff also approachable.</p>
Peers	<p>Peers-around me and having PAL leaders help with their experiences to give advice</p> <p>Peers on the course. It makes it easier to settle in.</p>
Learning	<p>Having a learning group with close friends so we can work together on tasks to understand the modules, feeling like I'm doing something worthwhile</p> <p>The course, so far it is interesting so I am seeking more time for learning. It is interesting and confusing</p>
Environment	<p>A comfortable environment and friendly staff and students</p> <p>I-zone, induction days. The teaching staff have made me feel more comfortable in lesson environment</p>
Not settled in yet	<p>I still have not settled in.</p>

**Table 4: Themes and typical responses about what helped students to 'belong'**

Theme	Typical response
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Friends	Understanding the course fully and making a good close group of friends
People	Comfortable surroundings and welcoming people
Groups	Expressing myself freely and knowing that I feel part of a group
Course	Being involved within groups of my course
Living arrangements	Studying and living in Canterbury rather than going home has made me feel like I belong at university
Lecturers/staff	Tutors knowing our names-as if they know us personally

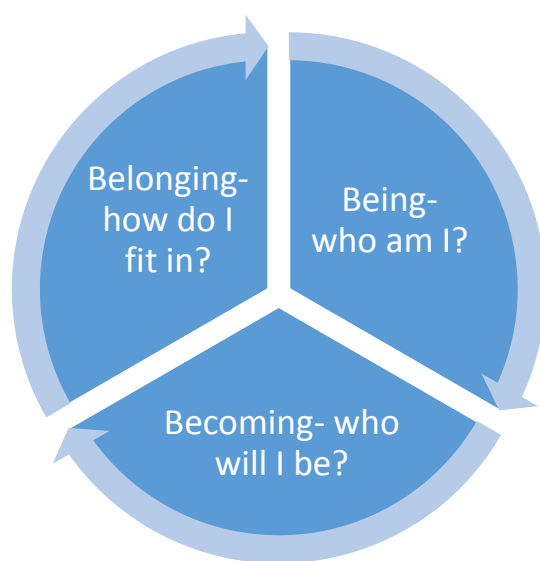
**Table 5: Themes and typical responses about what university services accessed**

Theme	Typical response
Personal tutor	I have had a tutorial with my personal tutor which has been helpful and supportive
Student support	Extra learning classes (Study skills)  Meeting with support and weekly dyslexia tutoring
Library and library skills	Access and understanding of how to use the library
i-zone	ICT people-help services
Finance	Financial support

**Table 6: Themes and typical responses about what issues would lead to withdrawing from university**

Theme	Typical response
Money/financial reasons	Money worries- the increasing debt and being unable to live normally due to a lack of money. I worry that I am not good enough and won't make the grade if that happens I will probably leave from embarrassment
Family	Being too far from friends and family
Work commitments	My work makes university very hard for me but I can't afford to quit my job. In addition, the workload has been too much too soon, as I feel I could have used more time to get used to the teaching style of university.
Time	Finding the lack of time and heavy workload draining, making me tired, emotional and unable to sleep. Dropping out would be the easy option.
Workload	If the workload became too much and I didn't understand it.

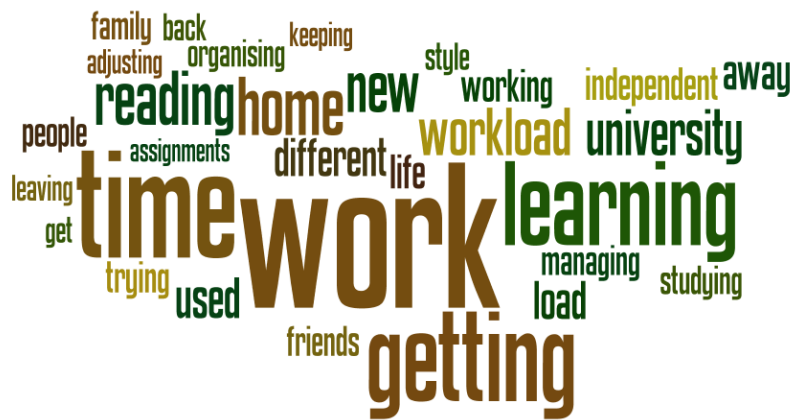
Feelings/ confidence/lack of	Lack of confidence in chosen career, I don't know what I want to do and wouldn't want to waste my time or money learning something inappropriate
University work/assignments	Not doing well with assignments, feeling like I wasn't getting on at university
Travel	If I cannot manage my studies around my job home and kids I would consider open university- it's cheaper, no travel, not as time consuming



**Figure 1 Conceptual Frame of Being, Becoming and Belonging.**



**Figure 2: Word Cloud- 30 most frequent words about the best things about coming to university**



**Figure 3: Word Cloud- 30 most frequent words about most challenging thing about coming to university**



**Figure 4: Word Cloud- 30 most frequent words about what helped students settle into university life**



**Figure 5: Word Cloud- 30 most frequent**

### words about what helped students to 'belong'



**Figure 6: Word Cloud- 30 most frequent words about what university services accessed**



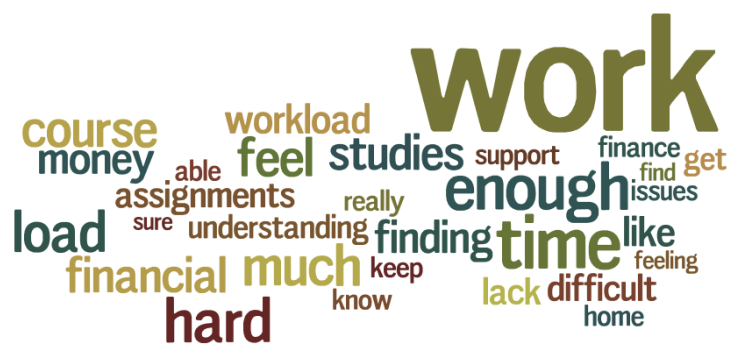


Figure 7: Word Cloud- 30 most frequent words about what issues would lead to withdrawing from university