Sense of belonging among international students at Australian universities

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Abstract

Previous research showed that international students are vulnerable to experiences of loneliness and social isolation, which stems from a lack of a sense of belonging at Australian universities. A sense of belonging at university has been associated with improved psychological adjustment, academic performance and retention. This paper is unique for focusing on initiatives Australian universities can take to foster international students’ sense of belonging. Results of studies conducted overseas, or involving general or other student cohorts, have found that peer connections, behaviours and attitudes of student-facing university staff and in-class discussions on respecting others facilitated students’ sense of belonging. Several questions were designed to elicit feedback from the audience on which practical steps universities can take in fostering that sense of belonging among international students at Australian universities.

Introduction

More than a quarter of the students enrolled at Australian universities are classified as ‘international’ and this number is likely to grow in the next decade (Department of Education & Training, 2018; Hunter, 2019). This makes the education sector one of Australian’s largest exports (Universities Australia, 2018). Competition among universities, seeking to attract international students, places demand on institutions to ensure they provide high quality education and support services and an overall satisfactory experience. International students who come to study at an Australian university are vulnerable to experiencing loneliness because they leave their friends and family behind. Social support networks at home now need to be replaced by new social connections in a new environment. Additionally, international students often need to adapt to using a non-native language, while navigating a new culture. This transition comes with significant challenges for students and for university support services. In an ABC interview broadcast, five international students answered questions about their experiences of pursuing education in Australia. A common theme in these interviews was their experience of loneliness, social isolation (particularly their difficulty establishing new friendships in Australia), and homesickness (Mills, 2018).

There are no publicly available statistics on international students’ mental health status. However, one Australian study involving nine different universities reported that 65% of the 200 international student participants had experienced periods of loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2007). Loneliness is a topic that has received significant research attention from psychologists, with well-established detrimental effects on wellbeing (e.g., Schofield, Ohalloran, Mclean, Forrester-Knauss & Paxton, 2016). For example, loneliness has been associated with an increased incidence of depression (e.g., Matthews, Danese, Wertz, Odgers, Ambler, Moffitt & Arseneault, 2016) and suicide (Chang, Chang, Lucas, Li, Beavan, Eisner, …Hirsch, 2018). Sawir and others (2007) emphasized the importance of combating loneliness, describing a tragic case in Canberra in which the body of an international student went undiscovered for 7 months after her death in her apartment.
Literature overview on a sense of belonging

Baumeister and Leary (1995) have asserted that loneliness stems from a person’s unfulfilled “sense of belonging”. A sense of belonging is summarized as a person’s perception that they are an integral part of an environment or community, with a social support network. Furthermore, sense of belonging is related to a person’s sense that their contributions are synchronous with others’, and are valued, respected and considered important by others (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2002; Strayhorn, 2009). An unfulfilled sense of belonging, perceived as loneliness, is thus linked to a lack of social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sawir et al., 2007).

The importance of social connections for the development of a sense of belonging was confirmed by an empirical study from the United States involving 1,061 international students. Student participants reported a higher sense of belonging when they had more peer connections (Singh, 2018). It has been argued that “[...] belonging needs take on increased significance in environments or situations that individuals experience as different, unfamiliar, or foreign, as well as in contexts where certain individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 10). Because international students have typically moved from overseas into ‘different, unfamiliar, or foreign’ environments, they are particularly vulnerable to lacking a sense of belonging. Additionally, international students often are a minority on campus. Their values and norms, may be dissimilar to the majority student community, causing them to feel they do not fit in (Strayhorn, 2012). Research showed that students who report a lower sense of belonging also reported feeling unaccepted, disrespected and undervalued by their classmates, which they attributed to differences in opinion, views and interests (Zumbrunn, Mckim, Buhs & Hawley, 2014).

Many authors have associated a sense of belonging with other benefits. Students with a greater sense of belonging have been found to be better psychologically adjusted (Shochet, Dadds, Ham & Montague, 2006), more likely to persist at university (Kember, Lee & Li, 2001; Stout & Wright, 2016), and showed improved academic performance (e.g., Anderman, 2003). Although some studies focused on minority groups on campus, rather than international student cohorts specifically, their findings can provide insight into the impact of having/missing a sense of belonging.

Minority groups, such as students with disabilities, experience similar challenges (e.g. fitting in, being different) to international students. Students with disabilities who had more social peer connections and academic staff interactions had higher self-advocacy skills, positively associated with their academic success and sense of belonging (Vaccaro, Daly-Cano & Newman, 2015). Black students’ sense of belonging on a majority white American campus was promoted in an experimental study design. Students whose sense of belonging was enhanced, invested more time in their studies, and engaged in more email contact with their lecturers, on average (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

The research by Hoffman and colleagues (2002) used a mixed-method study design to investigate first year students’ sense of belonging at the University of Rhode Island in the United States. International- and first year students share similarities of transitioning to a new, often unfamiliar, environment. Most students (i.e., 83%) in the study lived outside their parental home, in on-campus university accommodation. The authors identified additional elements, other than establishing peer connections, which influenced students’ sense of belonging. They found that faculty staff who adopted empathetic, supportive attitudes contributed to the development of students’ sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002), a finding also identified by Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, and Cong, (2015). The importance of university staff is also highlighted in other research. For example, Zumbrunn and others (2014) explored lecturers’ experiences and undergraduate students’ perceptions of
belonging, social support, task value and self-efficacy in class. Students with a higher sense of belonging reported feeling more often academically and socially supported by their teaching staff. They described their teachers as enthusiastic, caring, socially supportive and respectful (Zumbrunn et al., 2014). The influence of staff on student perceptions is broad; another project identified that student participants with disabilities reported a higher sense of belonging when they rated library staff on campus as being empathetic, respectful, caring and accepting (Bodaghi, Cheong & Zainab, 2016). An Australian study by Sawir and colleagues (2007) confirmed the importance of creating a friendly and supportive classroom climate as a buffer against experiences of loneliness among international students.

We were unable to identify any research published, which explores the sense of belonging among international students studying at an Australian university. Existing research identified has examined experiences of loneliness of international students (Sawir and colleagues, 2007), or have focused on students’ sense of belonging among non-international student cohorts (Araújo, Carlin, Clarke, Morieson, Lukas & Wilson, 2014; Fernandes, Ford, Rayner & Pretorius, 2017; Wilson, Murray & Clarke, 2018). In an early version of the RMIT University Belonging Strategy study, first year students who had been invited to participate in a collection of on-campus and off-campus activities and initiatives (e.g., excursion, discussion in class, a creative event) were found to endorse a higher sense of belonging (Araújo et al., 2014; Fernandes et al., 2017). In the second part of the study, students were surveyed about how important they perceived on- and off-campus events, activities and spaces to their experiences (Wilson et al., 2018). The researchers found students reported that feeling valued and respected for their contributions in class was somewhat to extremely important to students’ sense of belonging. Similar to other studies’ findings, feeling of ‘fitting in’ with others and mattering to the university were elements contributing to students’ increased sense of belonging (Wilson et al., 2018).

A study at Monash University (Fernandes et al., 2017) focused specifically on the sense of belonging of commuter students. Students who were grouped into a ‘Non-Residential Colleges’ (NRC) group were invited to participate in a variety of social and competitive events, and their experiences were compared to those who were not offered this program, or opportunity of engagement. Students in the intervention group reported spending more time on campus, more interactions with peers and instructors, and also higher sense of belonging.

**Initiatives**

Given the large number of overseas students, the reliance of the Australian economy on education as export, and the specific challenges that international students face when studying in Australia, it is important for universities to explore how best to support international students to ensure that they have a positive educational experience in Australia. A sense of belonging has found to be linked to students’ improved psychological adjustment, wellbeing and overall positive experience. This paper seeks to examine how Australian universities can enhance a sense of belonging to university among international student cohorts, and explore initiatives, which universities can take.

Peer connections were identified as crucial factor influencing students’ sense of belonging. One way for universities to encourage these interactions is by creating opportunities and spaces for students to socially meet each other, by, for example, providing ample student organizations and encourage international students to join these (Strayhorn, 2012). Lecturers can be trained to encourage students to get to know other international students in the classroom. Lecturers can also discuss respect for differences in opinions in class, to nurture a respectful classroom climate in which students respect and value each other’s contributions. Besides lectures, research showed that all university staff can play an
important role in the facilitation of students’ sense of belonging. Staff can all be trained on how to adopt a friendly, welcoming and caring attitude to influence the sense of belonging.

The first initiative for us is to consult with international students, asking them if they feel a sense of belonging to our university? This should give us insight into the extent to which students feel a sense of belonging to our university and to identify factors that could help them feel that they belong. Based on these findings, our next step is piloting these and evaluating the effectiveness. We predict that peer interactions and facilitating these connections are paramount in increasing international students’ sense of belonging.

Key questions to the audience

1. What does a ‘sense of belonging’ mean to different universities?
2. International students’ sense of belonging was linked to a number of STARS’ aims, including improved psychological wellbeing, retention, academic and overall student success. What practical steps and initiatives can universities take to ensure international students’ sense of belonging is increased? For example, distribute guides to all faculty staff on attitudes, behaviours and in-class activities that fosters students’ sense of belonging.
3. Peer interactions were found to influence students’ sense of belonging. How can universities facilitate peer interactions to influence students’ sense of belonging?
4. Are we accepting too many international students and has our support ability and capacity to increase their sense of belonging reached beyond limits?

References


