Enhancing Student Engagement and Belonging through Collaborative Partnership

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Contents

Lists of Tables and Figures

1 Executive Summary

Prepared for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) by the UCD Research Team led by Professor Barbara Dooley.

This report presents a framework and evidence-based strategies for enhancing student belonging across Irish universities. The empirical analysis, drawn from primary data (staff interviews, *N* =18; HCC survey, *N* = 11) and secondary data (reviews of Healthy Campus and NStEP case studies, *N* = 62), confirms that students' engagement and belonging is socio-economically constrained, particularly by the housing crisis, commuting, and financial precarity. The research synthesises these constraints and successful interventions into three high-consensus strategies for building belonging: Promoting Peer Relationships, which uses students' peers as the primary agents of support and authentic "safety nets" for transition (e.g., the NStEP Griffin study); Student Co-Design and Partnership, which establishes a meaningful, equitable collaboration framework that requires remuneration for student partners to ensure service relevance and foster student ownership; and finally, Creating Access through Structural Resources, which involves top-down action to remove physical and financial barriers through non-commodified social spaces, flexible timetabling and hardship resources (e.g., foodbanks like DCU's The Pantry).

The structure of this report outlines both the theoretical foundation and empirical evidence. Section 2 synthesises academic literature to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for student belonging, recognising its multidimensionality and the importance of continual interventions across the student lifecycle. Section 3 details the methodology used for the empirical analysis within the Irish university context, including surveying Healthy Campus Coordinators (*N* = 11), and interviewing staff involved in core belonging areas such as accommodation support, orientation and societies (*N* = 18). Section 4 presents the core results from the empirical interview and survey data and the secondary case studies. Section 5 synthesises the results and contextualises them with key literature. Section 6 explicitly outlines how these recommendations align with various national HEI policies, including those focused on student mental wellbeing. Finally, Section 7 provides four targeted Scalability Recommendations for embedding sustainable and effective belonging initiatives in Irish universities, focusing on implementing affordability infrastructure, strengthening remunerated peer and partnership roles, integrating belonging principles into academic design, and conducting ongoing empirical evaluation.

2 Background & Theoretical Framework

One of the main objectives of the project is to define "belonging" and identify its core components within the higher education context, using theoretical and practical lenses. As such, this section reviews the literature and theoretical framework on students belonging. This section also attends to belonging literature about marginalised students, an overarching categorisation, that incorporates students who are first generation, from ethnic minority groups and/or who face other potential inequalities (e.g., around disabilities).

2.1 Student Success and the Importance of Belonging

In the strategy for developing and enhancing an impactful teaching and learning in Irish higher education, the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2025a) advocates for universities to facilitate a broad and comprehensive student development beyond sole academic success. The Review of the Irish National Framework for Student Success understands students success as a holistic evolution of an individual, "from mental wellbeing to readiness in their career path to personal goals, all while navigating the difficulties of external pressures from the accommodation crisis to the need to take on employment additional to their studies" (HEA, 2025a, p. 10). A strong sense of belonging to one's university is a key factor influencing student success and contributing to social engagement and professional competence (Crawford et al., 2024; Pedler et al., 2022; Van Kessel et al., 2025) and is a critical intervention area that universities can meaningfully influence. Belonging was first theorised by Maslow (1968) as a core human need that shapes motivation and behaviour. In social psychology, the concept is defined as the innate psychological drive to "form and maintain a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). This fundamental drive facilitates productive psychological, social, and emotional functioning (Allen et al., 2022).

In educational contexts, this need is paramount. A recent HEA discussion paper on student success notes that success includes academic achievement, wellbeing, belonging, agency and the capacity to thrive during and after higher education (Roper, 2025). In fact, empirical evidence supports student belonging as a key marker of success (Allen et al., 2021), predicting retention, attainment, motivation, and satisfaction (Allen et al., 2024; Crawford et al., 2024; Pedler et al., 2022). It is also linked to mental and physical wellbeing (Allan et al., 2025; Allen et al., 2021; Gopalan et al., 2022; McGorry et al., 2024; Schoenmakers & ten Bruggencate, 2024). Conversely, poor belonging, particularly isolation, are common drivers of educational attrition (Mowreader, 2025) with one analysis indicating isolation predicted a third of first year student drop out (Strayhorn, 2023). While established in secondary education literature (Korpershoek et al., 2020), the larger, faster-paced, and more diverse university environment necessitates a specific focus on tertiary education to address unique institutional and systemic factors.

2.2 Three Conceptual Shifts in Student Belonging

A broadly accepted definition of belonging describes it as a "student's sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others in the school environment" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Although grounded in the secondary school context, this definition has guided a lot of work in the field of higher education. The increasing interest in student belonging has contributed to various interchangeable terms in literature, such as university attachment (France et al., 2010) and college connectedness (Farrell et al., 2018), advancing our understanding of the concept. Further, contemporary research has moved from a simplistic representation to identifying belonging as a complex, co-constructed experience influenced by social, cultural, and institutional factors (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Guyotte et al., 2021). Specifically belonging has been reconceptualised as 1) multidimensional, 2) dynamic and 3) co-constructed.

2.2.1 Belonging Conceptual Shift 1: Multidimensionality

While earlier theory underscored the relational nature of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), recent evidence shows individuals form emotional attachments with multiple diverse sources. Belonging emerges through attachments to individuals, groups, environments, and even abstract concepts like one's discipline (Allen et al., 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2016). More specifically, Ahn and Davis (2020) highlights four distinct, yet interactive, domains of belonging: social, academic, personal, and surroundings. This multidimensional nature is also supported by the concept of identity, where belonging is understood as an intersectional construct shaped by complex, nested, personal and social identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Kuttner, 2023; London et al., 2011).

2.2.2 Belonging Conceptual Shift 2: Dynamism

The second key conceptual shift is the recognition that belonging is a fundamentally dynamic and fluid process, rather than a stable state (Allen et al., 2021; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). While individuals may possess a relatively stable trait belongingness (Leary et al., 2013), they also experience daily fluctuations in their sense of acceptance, known as state belongingness (Allen et al., 2021). Belonging is not a fixed possession but a process that is continuously lived and frequently "(re-)made and (re-)constituted" (Wright, 2015, p. 400), often "flickering" across contexts (Gravett et al., 2025; p. 606).

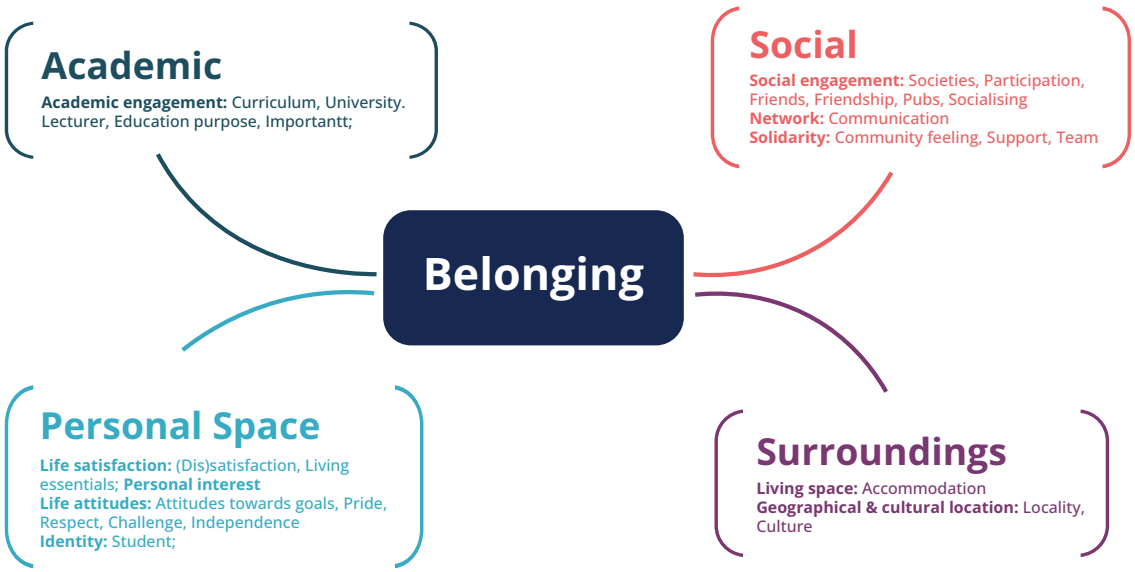
2.2.3 Belonging Conceptual Shift 3: Co-Construction

Finally, research emphasises that student belonging is co-constructed between individuals and institutions (Kuttner, 2023). Macro-level systems, including institutional policies, infrastructures, and curricula, are critical in constructing favourable belonging conditions (Taff & Clifton, 2022). In other words, institutions have a shared responsibility for promoting belonging. Although feelings of acceptance cannot be imposed, the sense of belonging is an experience where institutions play a key role in facilitating it by providing opportunities and removing systemic belonging barriers (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Thomas, 2012).

2.3 The Dynamic Ecosystem of Student Belonging

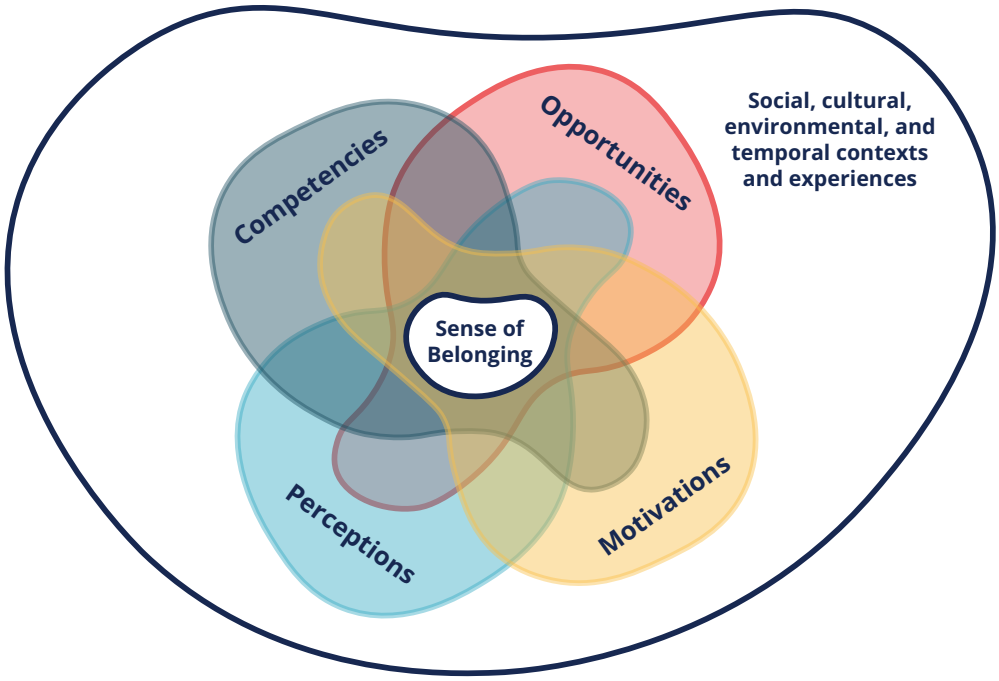
In summary, there have been significant changes in understanding and describing belonging. Moving away from exclusively social attributes, research complicates belonging emphasising its multidimensional, dynamic and co-constructed nature. To guide this project, a comprehensive definition is required to reflect the multidimensional, dynamic, and co-constructed nature of the student experience. This project adopts the definition of student belonging as: "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected and valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4). This project synthesises the Ahn and Davis (2020) four-domain model (Figure 1) and the Allen et al. (2021) integrative framework (Figure 2) into its core organising model: The Dynamic Ecosystem of Student Belonging (Figure 3). This model is grounded in the idea that belonging is a multidimensional, dynamic process continuously co-constructed between individuals and institutions (Crawford et al., 2024). It highlights that strong belonging emerges only when meaningful and diverse opportunities are available for students to engage, connect, and form emotional attachments across all four domains: social, academic, personal, and surrounding. Ultimately, student belonging is understood as an affective and social experience of feeling accepted into, valued by and important for a university community, that emerges from dynamic and continuous interaction between an individual (e.g. identity, needs, and cognitions) and their social, cultural, economic and environmental milieus.

Figure 1 *A visual representation of four domains of student belonging.*



Note. The thematic map represents 13 sub-domains clustered into four main categories. The visual is created based on "Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university," by M. Y. Ahn and H. H. Davis, 2020, *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(3), 622–634, for the purposes of the current project report. The original work does not have a thematic map.

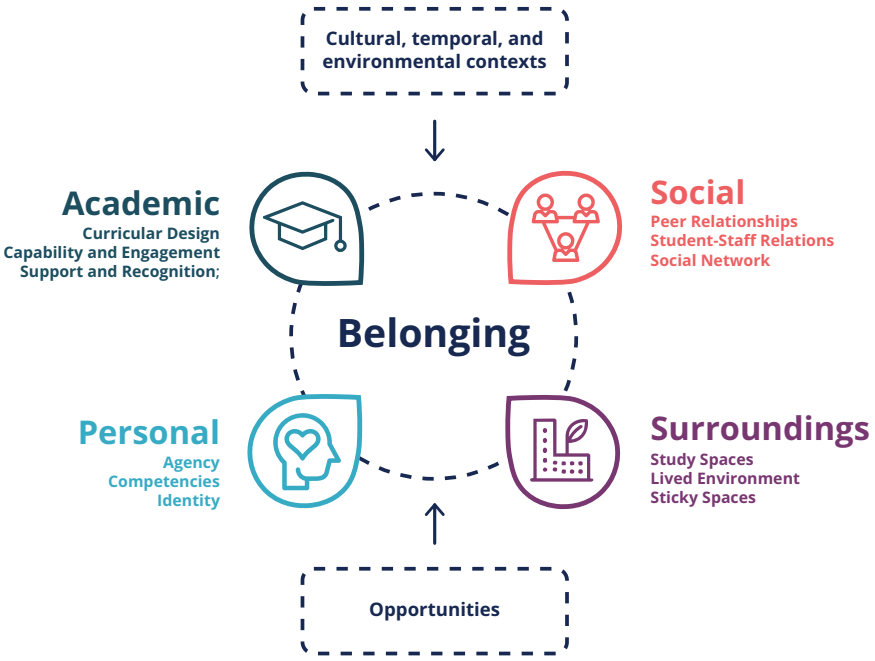
Figure 2 *An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging.*



Note. This model includes four interrelated and interacting elements, which are dynamically reshaped by individuals' context, experiences and environment. From "Belonging: a review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research," by K.-A. Allen, M. L. Kern, C. S. Rozek, D. M. McInerney, and G. M. Slavich, 2021, *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *73*(1), p. 92.

The dynamic ecosystem of student belonging (see Figure 3) is an integrative and multidimensional model where belonging is a dynamic process that is continuously co-constructed between individuals and institutions. This model highlights the idea that belonging is different for different people in different contexts and times (Gravett et al., 2025). Sense of belonging can emerge only when there are meaningful and diverse opportunities available for students to engage, connect and form emotional attachments across all domains of the university experience: social, academic, personal and physical. This model represents the complex nature of belonging as an emotional and social experience that has to be personalised, but is a universal, basic, need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The framework emphasises that belonging is influenced and co-created by individuals – their agency, skills, competencies and perceptions – and institutions through teaching, infrastructure and policy. Being guided by equity and inclusivity, the dynamic ecosystem aims to facilitate understanding of belonging that can and should be engendered for all student populations through relevant and tangible approaches.

Figure 3 *A dynamic ecosystem of student belonging, characterised by four interacting domains adapted from Ahn & Davis (2020) and Allen et al. (2021).*



Note. Student belonging is understood as a dynamic, fluid and multidimensional experience that emerges from interactions between an individual and their external systems and continuously changes and evolves with the cultural, temporal, and environmental contexts. Diverse and inclusive opportunities across the four domains (social, academic, surrounding and personal) build a foundation for belonging experiences.

The next sections use this framework to examine the domains, opportunities, and challenges.

2.4 The Four Domains of Student Belonging and Belonging Opportunities

2.4.1 Opportunities

Opportunity is a prerequisite and a foundational element of student belonging in the higher education context. Allen et al. (2021) define opportunities as "the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur" (p. 92). Belonging cannot occur in a social vacuum (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); similarly, organic student socialisation and interaction require physical spaces, time, resources, and inclusive cultures. A body of data suggests that, despite fears and uncertainties, students are eager to build friendships, connect to their university, and immerse into community (Ajjawi et al., 2025; Meehan & Howells, 2019). However, many struggle to do so due to a lack of "third spaces" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), poor institutional support, and an absence of student-interest events (Johnston & Dewhurst, 2021; Thomas, 2012). While active engagement is essential, it is critical for HEIs to provide supportive infrastructure and remove barriers to belonging (Covarrubias, 2024). The opportunities provided must represent a wide range of student life and experiences.

2.4.2 The Social Domain

Social connection is essential for belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gravett et al., 2025; Maunder, 2018). Research highlights the significance of multiple types of relationships that students form or maintain throughout their university experience. This domain suggests that belonging can be fostered through peer relationships, meaningful student-staff relations, and supported by robust social networks.

2.4.2.1 Peer Relationships

Findings consistently support the significance of friendships and peer relationships for student belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Socialising with peers in university is built on shared beliefs, interests, and experiences, as well as curiosity. Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023) suggest that social cohesion is one of the levers to a strong sense of belonging and self-identification with a group. Exploring "commonalities across differences" (Baleria, 2021, p. 282) in a diverse university community fosters empathy, understanding, and curiosity in students. Building friendships is also central to the emotional element of the belonging experience, frequently discussed in light of providing a sense of comfort, acceptance, safety, and subjective perception of individual "fit" to the university community (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023). These close relationships can be formed across contexts: in academic environments (e.g., lectures), during events from clubs and societies, in residences or accommodation, and other spaces on and off campus.

2.4.2.2 Student-Staff Relations

While friendships are central to student belonging, literature highlights the importance of the emotional relationship that students form with faculty and staff members in their HEIs (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Connection with academic and administrative staff or any campus personnel can be a link for students to feel like they are part of the community. Their support, advice, guidance, recognition, or even a "warm attitude" is seen to contribute to a positive student experience and academic success through perceived value and respect (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023, p. 845; Mattanah et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2023). For example, students with disabilities shared that friendly librarians supported their sense of belonging and facilitated an inclusive environment (Bodaghi et al., 2016). Similarly, welcoming administration (Johnston & Dewhurst, 2021) and approachable lecturers and tutors, who were open to helping with work or personal issues, made students feel heard, supported their transition, and strengthened their sense of belonging (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to understand that staff-student relations can be formative to student belonging and should be attended to with care and interest from both sides.

2.4.2.3 Social Networks

Student belonging is not linear, nor is it predictable, and any kind of social connection can give rise to the feeling of being part of a community (Guyotte et al., 2021). Housemates, friends on and off campus, and people from a wider circle of one's programme, school, department, or professional network can all support students in unexpected ways (Araújo et al., 2014). In their integrative framework of belonging, Allen et al. (2021) refer to Putnam's (2000) concepts of bonding and bridging social capital: bonding capital refers to connections within a community where people share characteristics and experiences (e.g., family, close friends); bridging capital refers to weaker ties between people from often dissimilar backgrounds (e.g., individuals met during Fresher's week or at sports events). Evidence suggests that the availability of and interaction with both types of networks in university can support academic success and belonging through 'information potential' – providing useful knowledge about how to navigate university life (Almeida et al., 2021, p. 542). Different social connections construct student belonging that "is a multidimensional experience that interweaves many aspects of our being in our social world" (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023, p. 843).

2.4.3 The Personal Domain

It is understood that the sense of belonging is engendered from an active interaction between an individual and their surrounding systems, placing a focus on its inherent personalised nature (Ajjawi et al., 2025). The personal domain describes a range of individual processes and factors that reflect one's approach to navigating a university environment to connect and form a sense of belonging. This involves the student's agency, their competencies (social, emotional, and cultural), and the integration of their evolving identity.

2.4.3.1 Agency

The sense of belonging, as an affective and relational experience, is developed by individual students when provided with relevant and diverse opportunities and supports. Agency is seen as the student's active role in shaping their social, academic, and other experiences on and off campus. In their systematic review, Mahar et al. (2013) note that self-determination and subjectivity, reflecting individual choice, control, and motivation to be part of a group or context, are among the central aspects of belonging. Further, Johnston and Dewhurst (2021) note that students' proactivity helped them connect and feel a part of the community. For example, participants shared that 'putting yourself forward' (p. 4) in different situations and "demonstrating a consistently proactive approach" (p. 7) were strategies that engendered a sense of security, consequent confidence, further agency, and feelings of being welcomed and valued in those social environments. Similarly, Ajjawi et al. (2025) report that students actively seek belonging and often find it through contributing to activities within and beyond the university context. For example, volunteering, engagement in clubs, societies, and student committees are among experiences that give rise to a sense of ownership that students can benefit from.

However, it is important to recognise that some students may choose to disengage from activities that target belonging, reflecting their needs and sense of safety (Gravett et al., 2025). Non-belonging can be both problematic and normal, as it fluctuates across the college cycle (Allen et al., 2021; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022); non-belonging can be temporary, and it can also be a choice, where students select times, places, and communities they want to connect with. This reflects the fluidity and complexity of the belonging experience. Nevertheless, personal agency is often accompanied by a degree of vulnerability and risk associated with taking the first step. Thus, institutions must foster a safe and supportive environment, accommodate opportunities, and ensure access for those who want to connect (Ajjawi et al., 2025).

2.4.3.2 Competencies

Competencies are a range of social, emotional, and cultural skills and abilities that individuals use to 'relate with others, identify with their cultural background, develop a sense of identity, and connect to place and country' (Allen et al., 2021, p. 92). They involve listening and communication skills, empathy and perspective-taking, emotional and behavioural regulation, cooperation and teamwork, and self-awareness (Agır, 2018; Arshad et al., 2025; Blackhart et al., 2011). These skills enable organic relationship-building, which is the core of the belonging experience.

Similarly, cultural capital, which encompasses knowledge of intragroup dynamics and the appropriate interaction, communication, and behaviour (Thomas, 2013), can support one's experience in developing connectedness and navigating the university (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Notably, cultural capital is intergenerational in nature, partially explaining why first-generation college students can find it more difficult to belong (Almeida et al., 2021). The lack of university-related cultural attributes can make the transition to university feel like 'travelling to a foreign country and not knowing the language and appropriate cultural practices' (Meehan & Howells, 2019, p. 1378). However, social skills learned through experience or targeted interventions can facilitate social network building and enable students to engage and connect with their university environment (Allen et al., 2021; Costello et al., 2022). Competencies can further support individuals with managing feelings of loneliness and not belonging, for example, by regulating emotions and improving the quality of relationships (Frydenberg et al., 2009; Schoenmakers & ten Bruggencate, 2024). Thus, competencies are a crucial element in understanding and building belonging.

2.4.3.3 Identity

Identity is reflected in belonging variability and in the range of places, people, objects, and times individuals connect with. The idea of nested identities (London et al., 2011) suggests that people develop at different stages of their lives and emphasises that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to engender belonging. Similarly, Kuttner (2023) suggests that belonging is intersectional, and identities based on membership of different groups co-exist and interact with belonging. Thus, finding answers to questions of 'who I am?' and "where and with whom I belong?" are often parallel. Exploring one's identity is among the key developmental processes for young adults (Galliher & Kerpelman, 2012). Emerging evidence shows that individuals who understand and accept themselves better can cope with feelings of loneliness (Schoenmakers & ten Bruggencate, 2024).

Building on the link between identity and belonging, Araújo et al. (2014) suggest that throughout their university experience, students can build an emotional and symbolic connection with three cohorts: the group at programme or discipline level; within a broader learning environment at school or faculty level; and the global network and members of their profession. To support a sense of belonging for all students, but specifically for groups who are more likely to be excluded, institutions should aim to 'reflect, integrate, and validate the ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds of students into the school' (Kuttner, 2023, p. 4) and cultivate a culture of inclusion and celebrate diversity. Ultimately, Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023) conclude that belonging appears where individuals can feel confident in their personal and social identities in a heterogeneous and supportive environment.

2.4.4 The Academic Domain

University experience and student success are largely characterised by academic engagement, teaching and learning, and building relevant skillsets for career pursuit. Similarly, student belonging is closely linked with academic experiences, which enable opportunities for students to fit into the context of higher education. Indeed, the overall quality of educational experience was the most important predictor of belonging, based on the longitudinal data from over a million students (Crawford et al., 2024). This domain can be segmented into three major subgroups: curricular design, academic support and recognition, and capability and engagement.

2.4.4.1 Curricular Design

The way courses, modules, and overall learning are planned and delivered is central to teaching and learning. Placed together, these and other aspects form curricular design, which refers to a systematic process of identifying learning needs, defining learning outcomes, and structuring teaching and learning content, activities, and assessment. Literature shows that students highlight the structure and quality of teaching, explicit workload expectations, and diverse content delivery as important elements that define their academic experience in HEI (Cohen & Viola, 2022; Meehan & Howells, 2019). Effective and inclusive curricular design can positively affect student engagement and belonging by enabling opportunities to collaborate, explore and build on personal strengths, and develop a wide range of skills (Thomas, 2013; Smith et al., 2021). As an educator and researcher, Tamer (2013) emphasises the significance of inclusive and culturally diverse practices in higher education that can reduce feelings of alienation and exclusion. University environments are heterogeneous, and a deliberate implementation of equitable curricular design that reflects student identities is essential. For instance, integrating diverse worldviews and experiences into assessment and content, as well as shaping the curricula to maximise student capability and self-efficacy through connection to professional goals, are tangible steps institutions and individual educators can take (Cohen & Viola, 2022). Notably, interactive learning with an opportunity to work in groups and interact with peers has been shown to benefit academic markers of success and belonging (Crawford et al., 2024). Similarly, students have greater educational attainments when different teaching strategies are available to them, like face-to-face tutorials, lectures which focus on real-world context and difficult concepts, and dynamic and clear content presentation on learning management systems (e.g., Brightspace) (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2021; Bull et al., 2024). Ultimately, curricular design should ensure that students feel valued, are actively engaged, and supported throughout to perceive learning as achievable.

2.4.4.2 Academic Support and Recognition

It is common for students to experience psychological barriers (Strayhorn, 2023), preventing them from their best academic engagement: first-generation and marginalised students report more belonging 'uncertainty' and perceive their capability and compatibility with the university culture or a specific course to be low (Burke et al., 2016; London et al., 2011). However, the impact of systemic pressures can further hinder academic performance and belonging (Gillen-O'Neil, 2021). To alleviate the internalisation of structural failures as students' own, institutions should foster equitable forms of academic recognition (Ajjawi et al., 2025; Richards et al., 2015). For example, a higher level of perceived positive recognition by educators is strongly linked with better course identity and performance for students in science degrees (Bottomley et al., 2023). It is crucial to promote "students' feelings of competency and recognise them for various capabilities and achievements, as well as create opportunities to prevent social alienation and isolation to improve sense of belonging" (Hazari et al., 2020, p. 1602). A system that emphasises cultivating a culture that values student input can validate and encourage students to focus on broad development and not just getting good grades, especially when more research points to significant levels of grade inflation (Karadag & Dortyol, 2024).

Furthermore, institutions should have proactive support mechanisms focusing on learning and academic development. Literature shows that many students, including first-generation students, perceive seeking help with educational challenges as a sign of failure (Gillen-O'Neil, 2021). In addition, reaching out to academic staff is often understood as a high-initiative behaviour (e.g., identifying a problem and a source of support, addressing the problem), and those with fewer resources and less cultural capital might need more support. Personalised feedback on assignments, connecting with students, showing concern and interest, and fostering a safe and inclusive environment in a class are among the scalable practices that can benefit students' engagement and sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2024).

2.4.4.3 Capability and Engagement

In their work on equity in higher education, Burke et al. (2016) conclude that a sense of belonging in university depends on students being "recognised as having the capability to belong" (p. 19). They highlight that capability is shaped by a students' internal drivers (e.g., academic ability and confidence) and external systems (e.g., curricula; Burke et al., 2016; Meehan & Howells, 2019). Importantly, capability is not fixed but is continuously developed and directly linked to feelings of fitting in. Narratives that present intellect and ability as innate are therefore harmful and reinforce structural inequalities, undermining students from diverse backgrounds with fewer resources (Burke et al., 2016). Capability can be nurtured through inclusive teaching and institutional practices that "build confidence and foster belonging" and "proactively challenge stereotypes about the 'types' of students who are capable of university study" (Burke et al., 2016, p. 8).

In addition, students who feel like they belong tend to enjoy their academic journey more, show more motivation and persistence, and perform better (Ulmanen et al., 2016). In fact, motivation can be a driver of adaptive academic behaviours, creating more opportunities for achievement, which in turn can reinforce motivation (Pedler et al., 2022). While the relationship between all the different constructs is hard to disentangle, it is clear that connecting with one's subject is crucial for student identity formation and belonging. Ultimately, Tinto (2003, p. 4) summarises that "the more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate".

2.4.5 The Surroundings Domain

Belonging in higher education is built or blocked by the physical and virtual institutional surroundings that students interact with. This spatial influence extends beyond the campus grounds to include living, study, and social environments, influencing students' behaviour, well-being, and interactions. This domain is divided into formal study spaces, sticky (communal) spaces, and the wider geo-cultural environment.

2.4.5.1 Formal Study Spaces and Social Equality

Formal study spaces (e.g., classrooms and libraries) and their architecture play a key role in building or undermining academic belonging. Wong (2024) notes that spaces are relational, meaning their influence changes based on interactions with other people, actively facilitating or hindering certain forms of relationships. For example, tiered lecture theatres may promote hierarchical relationships between staff and students more so than smaller, informal, classrooms. Spatial belonging also has temporal elements, where a space's meaning changes over time for individuals; a grand campus hall that might initially intimidate a first-year student could later become a symbol of community for a second-year student. Similarly, virtual teaching platforms such as online forums can feel daunting to students who do not know their classmates in the course. However, over time they can be valuable spaces that allow students to develop disciplinary belonging, building and evaluating upon their own and peers' module content understanding (Wong, 2024). Samura (2018) conducted interviews with American students attending her university and also asked some to photograph campus spaces and report how they hindered or helped their belonging. Her research showed students' belonging was influenced by campus surroundings in unexpected ways. For example, students regarded a campus canteen as positive for their belonging, however, they also felt the entrance walkway made them conspicuous entering and exiting the canteen. Samura's students also complained about canteen seating arrangements, which left single students too self-conscious to eat alone, ultimately undermining their belonging. More critically, campus spaces can exacerbate inequalities, undermining belonging for marginalised groups (Bridger, 2022). For instance, a physically inaccessible building limits access for students with mobility issues (Wong, 2024).

2.4.5.2 Sticky Spaces (Social & Communal Spaces) and Belonging

Sticky spaces are social and communal areas designed to actively encourage students to remain, socialise, or study, independent of scheduled lectures. Such spaces facilitate belonging through socialising, studying, and also through other elements such as providing healthy food and communal exercise opportunities, which foster belonging through improved physical health and well-being (Lake & Townshend, 2006; Samura, 2018). However, such sticky spaces can undermine belonging if they are commodified, requiring, for example, expensive gym membership or pressure to purchase food or drink (Byrnes, 2025). Students' campus accommodations should also have communal or 'sticky' spaces. Students in Samura's (2018) research rated one of the least developed accommodation residences highly for belonging because it was inherently communal. Students could, if they wished, prop their doors open, which students felt was more social.

2.4.5.3 The Geo-Cultural Environment, Living Spaces and Belonging

The most profound spatial barrier to belonging is the geo-cultural environment shaped by the housing and cost of living crises. These crises move the spatial influence far off campus, limiting students' security and stability, and creating exclusion. The high cost of accommodation forces students to prioritise part-time work and long commutes over sustained interaction in university settings. The University of Galway Students' Union (2025) revealed that 50% of students work part-time to fund accommodation, with 56% stating this necessary work negatively impacted their educational engagement. The Higher Education Authority ran a survey on student accommodation in 2023. In this survey, 63.5% of respondents ranked cost as the most important factor that influenced their choice of accommodation.

Furthermore, the housing crisis limits the quality of living spaces. The ICOS (International Council for Irish Students) Accommodation Survey (2023) found that 66% of international students indicated accommodation challenges negatively impacted their mental health. For example, nearly three-quarters of international students (74%) reported having to share bedrooms, creating a lack of privacy. Furthermore, international students felt targeted by fake-accommodation scamming, which undermined their sense of safety and security. Moreover, 46% of international students reported dissatisfaction with their accommodation, citing a lack of maintenance and overcrowding as key issues. In this survey, respondents were asked about their satisfaction with their accommodation. 12% of respondents indicated that they were 'somewhat dissatisfied', with a further 4% indicating that they were very dissatisfied with their accommodation. Of the respondents who indicated that they were not satisfied with their accommodation arrangements, 38% indicated that cost was the primary reason for their dissatisfaction. Elsewhere, the University of Limerick Student Life survey (2022) highlighted students' high rents, with 18% of students paying over €700 monthly, which they deemed unaffordable. The HEA Student Accommodation Survey found that the average rent in 2023 was €697. One sixth (14%) of the Limerick students also indicated their accommodation was not to adequate living standards. At the time of the HEA Student Accommodation Survey (October to December 2023) 13% of respondents had not yet secured term time accommodation. Almost half (43%) had not secured accommodation by the start of term, forcing them to commute and continue house searching. This further undermined their belonging, given the first few weeks of university can be critical in establishing new friendships.

Even for students who secure on-campus housing, belonging is not guaranteed. A report on UCD accommodation by Global Student Living Ltd. (2025) found 44% did not rate their accommodation support and accommodation quality as good. This fell below national accommodation averages where 69% of students rated these qualities as good. While 62% indicated their accommodation had a positive impact on their well-being, a significant 19% reported a negative impact. Students reported feeling unable to socialise with their housemates or wider peers even when residence social events were organised, feeling too nervous (43%) or unclear about what was on offer (33%). Ultimately, 53% of student residents at UCD did not feel they belonged.

The next section will review challenges and interventions in the university student belonging literature.

2.5 Challenges to Student Belonging

Scholars argue that belonging is entwined with political and value systems that determine who can belong (Ajjawi et al., 2025; Covarrubias, 2024; O'Shea, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2016). For example, an institution that prioritises the perspectives of predominantly white, middle-class people through limited curricula may infer that marginalised students and students from ethnic minority groups are unwelcome (Hussain & Jones, 2021). The transition to higher education is often stressful for all students (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Meehan & Howells, 2019). However, this transition can be disproportionately challenging for marginalised students, including first-generation, mature, and carers (O'Shea, 2021; Totonchi et al., 2023). The systemic oversight in representing these students has created a dominant cultural narrative, giving rise to an identity mismatch and belonging uncertainty (Araújo et al., 2014; Totonchi et al., 2023). An example of this systemic exclusion lies in the design of curricular and extracurricular activities that assume students have disposable income and flexible availability, catering for the "young, unencumbered student" (Ajjawi et al., 2025, p. 794) and excluding those with time constraints due to caring responsibilities, part-time work, or commuting (Park et al., 2025; Thomas, 2015; Smith et al., 2021). Further, lack of funding, resources, and diverse infrastructure are core systemic barriers that limit opportunities (Gao, 2021). An institutional culture that does not treat belonging as "everyone's business" (Kelly et al., 2024, p. 8) and does not promote belonging among its staff also blocks students' sense of belonging, as staff's ability to teach, encourage, and interact with students is crucial (Cohen & Viola, 2022; Crotty et al., 2020).

2.6 Interventions to Support Student Belonging

Research recommends a holistic approach to building student belonging, one that combines multiple interventions directed at different belonging domains, continuously throughout the student lifecycle (Allen et al., 2024; Kroeper et al., 2025; Taff & Clifton, 2022; Thomas, 2013; Smith et al., 2021). The aim of this section is to present a broad range of indicative interventions that improve belonging across the four domains (Social, Academic, Personal, and Surroundings) that constitute The Dynamic Ecosystem of Student Belonging (Figure 3). Interventions are divided into those that focus on changing structures and institutional policies versus those targeted to students directly.

2.6.1 Structural Interventions: Shaping the Institutional Context

Research indicates that fostering student belonging is most effective when approached as a core institutional responsibility, involving top-down policy, resourcing, and managerial commitments (Kroeper et al., 2025). Researchers have found that because the university functions as students' host, the institution is responsible for cultivating a welcoming atmosphere by actively removing structural barriers to belonging (Kroeper et al., 2025; Darker etal., 2023; HEA, 2022). Systematic reviews identifying successful belonging strategies have confirmed that institutional action and resourcing are central to their efficacy. For example, researchers found the most effective belonging interventions focused on universities that scaffolded positive peer relationships (52%), universities that improved educator practices (49%), and universities that built inclusive and social spaces (46%) (Allen et al., 2024).

Effective strategies often involved university policy changes that directly shaped the Surroundings Domain (the physical and temporal environment). Researchers reported that institutional interventions successfully addressed structural pressures arising from affordability, housing challenges, and administrative issues like timetabling and hidden fees (Darker et al., 2023; HEA, 2022, 2025b; Jigsaw, 2023). To mitigate financial barriers, Samura (2018) found it useful for institutions to provide non-commodified social spaces where students could socialise, study, and relax without financial cost. Regarding the physical campus, Samura (2018) also found that successful policy approaches involved considering campus space from the student's perspective, often through co-design initiatives, to better facilitate inclusive social, study, and living environments. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2021) and Samura (2018) found benefits in structural timetable amendments or the flexible offering of hybrid/online options. This adjustment to class schedules proved effective in overcoming the significant time barriers faced by students with long commutes, part-time work, or caring responsibilities.

Institutional policy was also shown to powerfully impact the Academic and Social Domains by determining educational delivery and relationship facilitation. Belonging was successfully fostered through interventions promoting inclusive curricula. Ajjawi et al. (2025) and Darby and Dowling (2020) found that ensuring that representations from diverse and underrepresented groups were visible within course content improved belonging particularly for students from ethnic minority groups. Smith et al. (2021) reported success when institutions supported educators in adopting a 'Productive Learning' approach, one that emphasises students' growth mindsets over fixed abilities. Specifically this approach addressed the feeling of inadequacy often experienced by first-generation students. Institutional belonging was also built when relationships were supported by design. Allen et al. (2024), Gao (2021), and Tinto (2003) confirmed the value of implementing group activities, particularly during the initial stages of a student's degree, to promote peer relations and combat isolation. Furthermore, Kroeper et al. (2025) and Taff and Clifton (2022) found that formal peer and staff mentorship programs served as effective institutional tools for establishing clear, structured opportunities for strong, supportive relationships. These relationships between students and staff successfully integrated the Academic and Social Domains of belonging.

2.6.2 Psychosocial Interventions: Supporting the Student Journey

Psychosocial interventions can practically equip students with the psychological/cognitive and social resources necessary to engage in belonging opportunities. This helps belonging particularly for marginalised students where worries about belonging can become cyclical and self-confirming (Kroeper et al., 2025; Totonchi et al., 2023).

For psychological interventions brief, high-impact interventions aim to normalise the transition experience and belonging fears (relating to the Personal and Academic Domains of belonging). These interventions are designed to disrupt the self-confirming cycle of 'unbelonging' (e.g., worry about belonging leads to withdrawal which further hinders belonging), particularly for first generation students and those who do not readily see themselves represented in universities (Kroeper et al., 2025; Strayhorn, 2021). For example, one effective strategy involves using older students' testimonials to normalise feelings of 'unbelonging' and transition worries in newer students. These testimonials can be paired with a writing task to allow students to reflect on and work through similar feelings (Walton et al., 2023). Similarly, brief, peer-led video testimonials of initial university belonging experiences have been found to provide cost-effective improvements to initial belonging blockers (Strayhorn, 2021).

For social interventions, positive peer relationships are a major builder of belonging (see Social Domain), predicting a significant portion of the variance in belonging scores (Maunder et al., 2018). As mentioned, institutions can formally support these relationships through structured opportunities, such as formal, academic Peer Mentorship Programmes or more informal, general peer programmes (Griffin, 2024; Olesen & Tobin, 2022; Taff & Clifton, 2022). Relationships can also be supported organically through events and accessible social spaces, such as those around campus accommodation (Samura, 2018). Furthermore, effective transition support should strengthen students' existing social connections by directing them towards clubs and societies, thereby integrating students into established peer networks (Crawford et al., 2024; Frydenberg et al., 2009).

2.6.3 Strategic Timing and Continuous Evaluation

Effective belonging support must be multi-dimensional and continuous (Allen & Rainford, 2023; Runa et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2021). Strategic timing is critical; interventions should be implemented pre-entry, moving away from fragmented, one-off initial events toward integrated and gradual inductions (Thomas, 2013). Since transition and settling-in support are key predictors of belonging (Crawford et al., 2024), interventions are vital from the outset (Maunder et al., 2018). Belonging support can also be beneficial throughout the entire student lifecycle, including key pressure points such as heavy assessment periods (Allen & Rainford, 2023; Lowney, 2022). This continuous approach ensures support is available when students need it most.

Furthermore, belonging interventions require ongoing, systemic evaluation (Runa et al., 2024). The HEA (2022) has called for an "evidence-based approach" (p. 23) where institutions must embed metrics beyond simple retention rates to specifically assess self-reported belonging (Runa et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2021). Mixed-methods, periodic surveys may be particularly useful (Smith et al., 2021). Institutions might make use of

established belonging measures, such as the University Attachment Scale (France et al., 2010), which is specific to universities. Moreover, intervention evaluations should account for potential marginalisation, where belonging may be hindered in specific student groups to allow for tailored interventions (Kroeper et al., 2025).

2.7 Literature Summary

To summarise the literature; belonging is a fundamental human need that significantly impacts social and emotional functioning and is defined as the drive to form and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. The literature review highlights the importance of belonging in higher education specifically. In particular its impact on student success, retention, and well-being. A widely accepted definition describes belonging as feeling "accepted, respected" included and supported in the university environment (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4).

The literature review moves beyond the above definition of belonging. Specifically, the review integrates recent research showing belonging is a multidimensional, dynamic, and co-constructed experience rather than a static concept. The multidimensionality of belonging includes social, academic, personal, and environmental domains; and the dynamic ecosystem model highlights that belonging is co-constructed between individuals and institutions and built on opportunities. For example, in the social domain, students are eager to connect with their peers and educators but often struggle due to a lack of supportive infrastructure and events. In the academic domain, curricular design, educational support, and commitment are vital components that influence students' sense of belonging, academic success and wellbeing in higher education.

Further evidence to taking a holistic approach to wellbeing, which is linked to a sense of belonging, is seen in a recent report; The Limerick Framework for Action: Advancing the Global Health Promoting Campuses (HPC) Agenda (2025), which highlights healthy people are central to the success and sustainability of a healthy campus. The report recommends that HPCs should extend beyond addressing health at the individual level by taking a whole-person and community approach to advancing all dimensions of well-being. They should also recognise the intersecting impact of determinants of health for example social, cultural, environmental, economic, gender, and commercial. To provide a relationship rich experience HEIs should facilitate regular, positive social interactions between students, employees, and communities, while addressing prejudice and conflict. Healthy people encompass cultivation of dignity, sense of belonging, and care among students, employees, and communities.

Looking towards what works in higher education a holistic approach combining multiple interventions across various domains is key to fostering belonging. Institutions are urged to provide diverse opportunities to facilitate broad socialisation and engagement as opportunities are foundational for student belonging. Structural interventions should focus on institutional policies and environments that promote inclusivity and support. Psychosocial interventions equip students with tools to navigate belonging challenges, particularly for marginalised groups. Finally, continuous evaluation of belonging initiatives is necessary to ensure effectiveness and address specific student needs. Figure 3 illustrates the key theoretical components required to ensure students feel they belong to their university.

2.8 Project Objectives

2.8.1 Project Background

From the literature, it is evident that student engagement is a cornerstone of a vibrant, inclusive, and effective higher education environment. The concept of belonging, central to this project, is rooted in fostering environments where students feel valued, are active participants in their education, and can thrive both socially and academically. At the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in higher education for all students (Thomas, 2013). As has been documented by the work of the HEA, student engagement is a collaborative commitment between institutions and students that values and fosters a social and educational environment, where students feel they belong; are empowered to actively participate in learning; realise their potential; and engage meaningfully with their institution and in society. Building on insights from Healthy Campus (HC) initiatives, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), and other HEA reporting mechanisms, and collecting data from key stakeholders in Irish higher education this project aims to critically evaluate and recommend innovative, scalable strategies to enhance student belonging and engagement.

2.8.2 Project Objectives

1. To define "belonging" and identify its core components within the higher education context, using theoretical and practical lenses.
   a. Objective 1 was addressed in the literature review presented in Section 2.
2. To analyse and draw insights from Healthy Campus & National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) Case Studies and related initiatives regarding student belonging and engagement.
3. To explore and document examples of both successful and unsuccessful initiatives, focusing on their approaches to student engagement, partnership, and co-creation.
4. To develop recommendations for engaging students in meaningful partnerships aimed at fostering a sense of belonging.
5. To provide a roadmap for scaling successful practices and integrating the concept of belonging as a priority within institutional strategies.

2.8.3 Data Sources

- Healthy Campus Case Studies
- HEA reporting (e.g., NSMHSPF, HC Seed Funding)
- NStEP documentation on student engagement
- Survey responses from Healthy Campus Coordinators
- Direct engagement with stakeholders (e.g., HC Coordinators, NStEP employee, other key stakeholders in higher education)

2.8.4 Overall Methodology (more details in the Method Section)

1. Literature Review: Analyse existing case studies, reports, and theoretical discussions on belonging and engagement.
2. Survey Deployment: Develop and circulate the survey to HC Coordinators, gathering data on their experiences and insights.
3. Stakeholder Interviews: Conduct interviews with key stakeholders, including HC Coordinators and the NStEP employee, to gain deeper perspectives.
4. Analysis of Success and Failure: Review examples of both successful and unsuccessful belonging projects to identify best practices and pitfalls.
5. Thematic Synthesis: Integrate findings to identify core components of belonging and recommend scalable strategies.

3 Methodology

To understand belonging within higher education institutions in Ireland both primary and secondary data collection methods were used. Primary data collection involved (i) staff involved in core belonging areas such as accommodation support, orientation and societies (*N* = 18) and (ii) surveying Healthy Campus Coordinators (*N* = 11). Secondary data sources included reviewing (i) Healthy Campus Case Studies (*N* = 39) and (ii) National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) Case Studies (*N* = 23). Finally the team reflected on their own student experiences forming a reflexivity report (*N* = 7).

To ensure the authenticity of the student voice the project proposal set out to co-create the work with students from design to report stage. This principle was delivered through the design of the team. The team of seven consisted of five students and two faculty members. Two students had completed their psychology undergraduate degrees in 2025 and are now enrolled in masters programmes. Three students were in the final stages of their masters degree in psychology. Therefore, the majority of the team were current students. In addition, the student team members came from very diverse backgrounds. More details on the team's background are provided in the Reflexivity summary Section 3. This approach ensured the authenticity of the student voice in all stages of the project.

3.1 Interviews

3.1.1 Interview Aims

Qualitative interviews were conducted to explore HEI staff's experiences and recommendations on student belonging and student participation. Specifically, the interviews aimed to gather views from a representative sample of staff (from large and smaller HEIs across Ireland) working in a capacity related to student belonging including residences, orientation, student partnership, clubs/societies and NStEP.

3.1.2 Interview Method

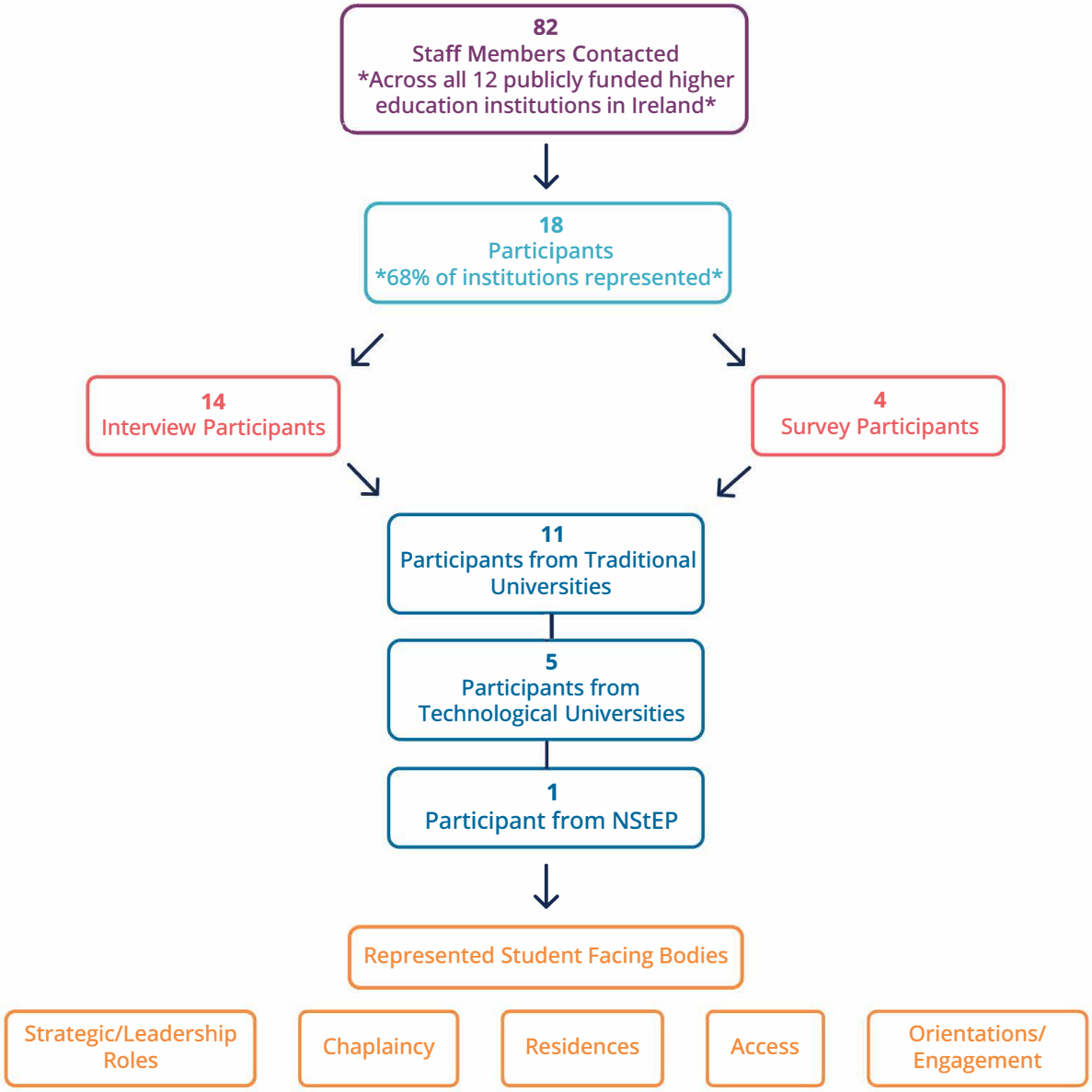
3.1.2.1 Participants

Eighteen staff members of Irish HEIs participated with two participants taking part in the same interview. The study gathered 18 participant views (14 participants interviewed via zoom and 4 responded to the interview questions via an online survey due to difficulty in scheduling interviews) from staff across Irish universities and the National Student Partnership Engagement body. The sample included views from eleven participants based in five different universities (*n* = 11; University College Dublin, Maynooth University, University of Limerick, University of Galway, and Trinity College Dublin) and views from five participants based in three Technological Universities (*n* = 5; Technological University Dublin, Atlantic Technological University, and South East Technological University), in addition to a participant from the National Student Engagement Partnership body (*n* = 1). Participants were strategically approached, drawn from key student-facing areas, with a strong focus on frontline staff: this included those from Access (*n* = 5), Residences and Chaplaincy (*n* = 4), and Orientation/Engagement (*n* = 2). These functional roles were complemented by strategic/leadership roles (*n* = 4), such as a Vice President of Student Experience and a Director of Access. Note sample subtotals are less than 18 as some participants chose not to provide specific information. Figure 4 presents an overview of participant recruitment and Figure 5 indicates the universities represented by participants.

3.1.2.2 Procedure

Participants were recruited if their role related to student belonging in some form including if they were Healthy Campus Coordinators, National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) employees, orientation leads, clubs & societies' leads, on-campus residence leads or academics specialising in belonging. Potential participants were invited to join Zoom interviews. Participant recruitment did not involve advertising. Instead, leads for the specified functions were identified through their respective institution's websites and emailed invitations with the aim to gather a sample representative of the diversity of Irish HEIs and the above roles. To optimise participation, some identified institutional leads were offered the option to complete an online survey instead of an interview if they were time-pressed. The semi-structured online interviews lasted between 27 minutes and 51 minutes (*n* = 14, *M* = 42 min). We iteratively reviewed our recruitment progress (e.g., noting who had responded) and sent up to two reminder emails to staff working in institutions or roles that were not represented in the final sample. Snowball sampling was also used where participants suggested their colleagues to be invited into the study. An information sheet, consent form and screening surveys with interview availability were sent to potential participants. If they consented, online interviews (*n* = 14) or, if unavailable, surveys (*n* = 4), were provided. Participation took place in July and August 2025. After participation, all participants were debriefed and thanked. Institutional ethical approval was granted (118-HS-LR-25-Dooley) for both primary data collection methods: stakeholder interviews and Healthy Campus Coordinators survey.

Figure 4 *Interview Participant Overview.*



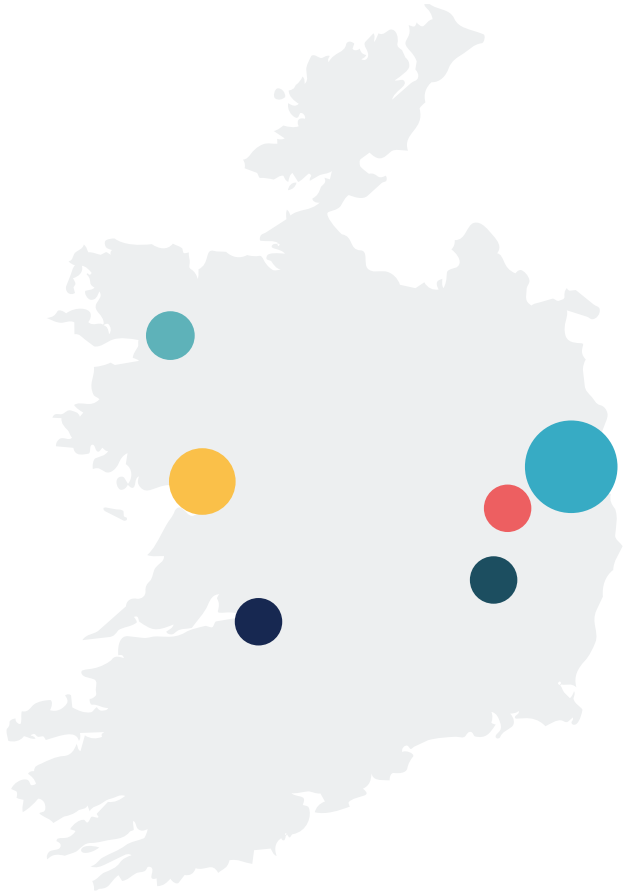
Note. NStEP = National Student Engagement Programme.

3.1.2.3 Interview questions

3.1.2.3.1 General Questions. All participants were asked about their institution's culture in fostering student belonging, how they would recommend initiatives for other institutions, and whether their existing belonging initiatives had been assessed.

The remaining interview or survey questions were selected based on their relevance to the participants role e.g., 1) residences and chaplaincy, 2) access and orientation, 3) student partnership, 4) clubs/societies, 5) NStEP.

Figure 5 *Institutions mapped onto regions of Ireland.*



3.1.2.3.2 On-Campus Accommodation Questions (for on-campus accommodation leads). This section focused on how campus residences supported student belonging. Questions covered the setup of residences to support belonging, strategies for creating a welcoming climate for new students, how the residential environment was designed to foster belonging, and what scalable opportunities were provided for social connection. We also inquired about strategies to help students feel "at home", efforts to develop connections with their new locale, what didn't work well in promoting belonging in accommodation, and recommendations for replicating effective initiatives. Prompts for this section included details on on-campus hubs, specific transition initiatives, opportunities for socialising, and feedback used to understand outcomes.

3.1.2.3.3 Student Partnership Questions (for staff/academics in student partnership). We explored the role of student partnerships in engendering belonging, the approaches institutions took to support partnership on belonging initiatives, and how partnerships with students influenced the implementation of initiatives. Further questions covered the frameworks or guides used for promoting student partnership and the successes achieved that other institutions could adopt. Prompts for this section included specific aspects of student engagement that promoted belonging and practical steps taken to support partnership.

3.1.2.3.4 Clubs & Societies Questions (for Clubs & Societies' leads). This section focused on the contribution of clubs and societies to student belonging. We asked how clubs and societies contributed to belonging within the wider institution, how the institution supported clubs and societies and the impact on belonging, and what specific approaches were taken to support clubs in fostering belonging. Finally, we inquired about the success or unsuccess of implemented initiatives. Prompts for this section included whether clubs were uniquely positioned to contribute to belonging and the resources made available to clubs.

3.1.2.3.5 Access & Orientation Questions (for Access & Orientation leads). Questions in this section addressed efforts made to support student transition or orientation, strategies used to promote engagement in orientation activities, and how concerns around academic and social life were addressed. We also explored how orientation experiences were ensured to be emotionally supportive and personally meaningful, how programs helped students form a sense of purpose or contribution, and the most effective ways to support student belonging during orientation. Prompts for this section included the structure of orientation initiatives and what communication strategies were used.

3.1.2.3.6 National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) Employee Questions. This section focused on NStEP's role in student belonging. We asked about the approaches NStEP used to support student partnership on belonging initiatives, how NStEP's focus on student partnerships influenced institutions' approaches, and how NStEP's frameworks ("Steps to Partnership Framework" and "Embedding the Principles of Student Engagement") guided student partnership. Finally, we inquired about the successes NStEP achieved in promoting belonging through student partnership. Prompts for this section included practical steps taken by NStEP and whether initiatives had been successful across the sector.

3.1.2.4 Interview analytical procedure

3.1.2.4.1 Epistemological Stance and Data Preparation. The qualitative data, comprising recorded interview audio and open-ended survey responses, was prepared for analysis. The interview audio was automatically transcribed using the Zoom automated transcription service and then rigorously manually checked for accuracy and full anonymisation to ensure participant confidentiality. Responses from participants who opted for the survey format were organised in a unified dataset. The analysis adopted a Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013), guided by a critical realist stance and a relativist epistemology. Specifically, as researchers, we acknowledged the existence of a material reality while recognising that our methodological approach could only provide an approximate understanding of it. This stance also informed our acknowledgement that participants' knowledge and experiences were shaped by their specific professional contexts (notably their staff roles promoting student experience), which was key for interpreting the data.

3.1.2.4.2 Pilot Analysis and AI Validation Process. A pilot analysis was conducted to inform the decision to integrate AI into the core analytical process. This pilot involved three researchers analysing the same transcript to establish a validation benchmark. Two team members independently conducted a traditional manual thematic analysis, generating foundational codes and draft themes, which they later reviewed and resolved in a joint meeting. Concurrently, a third researcher conducted an AI-assisted analysis using Google Gemini AI (Version 2.5); a service licensed by the research teams' institution. This license with Gemini AI promoted data security meaning any inputted data (i.e., prompts) is not used to train AI services unlike public AI programmes. Prompt instructions were inputted for the AI to analyse the transcript through the research teams' epistemological and theoretical lenses. A follow-up meeting was then held to directly compare the draft codes and themes, where the team also considered key ethical concerns regarding the use of AI in qualitative research, including issues of reliability, biases, and transparency (Cevik & Abu-Zidan, 2025). The comparison revealed that the manual and AI-assisted coding generated very similar codes and themes. While the manual coding team identified more illustrative quotes, the AI-assisted analysis offered greater systematic coverage. The team collectively decided to proceed with the AI-assisted analysis for the full dataset, contingent on two critical conditions to promote rigor: (1) All AI-generated codes and themes would be reviewed by a human coder, and (2) a manual analysis team would still review all transcripts, treating the AI data as a secondary, enhancing input.

3.1.2.4.3 Hybrid AI-Assisted Thematic Analytical Strategy. Following the pilot, the team developed a robust AI strategy for Google Gemini (Version 2.5) informed by the research questions, prior empirical research (Hitch, 2024; Morgan, 2023), ethical considerations (Wong, 2024), and the preliminary themes. The AI implementation followed a detailed, multi-step process (the prompts and steps involved are presented in Appendix D). This involved uploading chunked excerpts of the data alongside a detailed master prompt that outlined the thematic task, research questions, and critical realist stance. The prompts included specific instructions to promote integrity and accuracy (e.g., "do not hallucinate," "do not use any data apart from the prompts," "identify any discrepancies that need human review"). The manual codes identified by researchers were added to the prompts, and the AI was instructed to use these to inform its understanding of the data, followed by a final prompt to develop a comprehensive analysis integrating latent themes. Concurrent with the AI process, four manual coders (separate from the pilot AI coder) were given transcripts to manually code, noting relevant information and classifying codes as 'Belonging Blockers' or 'Belonging Builders'. A meeting was held mid-analysis to discuss emerging codes and key quotes. The thematic outline was generated with assistance from Gemini AI through an iterative process of detailed prompt development, integration of manual researcher codes, and continuous feedback from the team. The resulting thematic outline and coded excerpts were then manually edited and expanded upon by the researchers. The final phase involved a fully manual process of developing the analytical structure, rewriting for clarity, integration of relevant quotes not identified by AI, theme naming, and final restructuring. Any remaining ambiguities or errors, including inconsistencies within the transcripts or discrepancies between the two sets of coding, were critically reviewed and resolved via team discussion and subsequent AI prompt refinement.

In summary the following key considerations using AI for analysing the qualitative data were followed:

1. Human Expertise is Crucial
   1.1 AI should serve as a research assistant, not a replacement for the researcher. Human expertise is essential for guiding the AI and interpreting its findings.
2. Ethical Considerations
   2.1 Researchers must consider the ethical implications, including how to ensure data richness, maintain participants' privacy, and manage researcher reflexivity when using AI.
3. Methodological Validation
   3.1 Continuously validate AI outputs against traditional qualitative methods and disciplinary standards to detect potential biases or "blind spots" introduced by the AI.
4. Researcher Agency
   4.1 Recognise the shifting dynamics between the human researcher and the AI, understanding how this partnership influences the research process.

3.2 Healthy Campus Survey

3.2.1 Survey Aims

A mixed-method survey was conducted to explore the degree to which HEI staff promoting student wellbeing (e.g., primarily through healthy campus initiatives) also promoted student belonging. Specifically, the survey assessed the extent to which belonging was prioritised and gathered staff's experiences of success, challenges and scalable recommendations for belonging initiatives generally.

3.2.2 Survey Method

The HC survey was administered to gather specific insights into the definition, prioritisation, challenges, and promotion of student belonging within the context of existing Healthy Campus and wellbeing initiatives across Irish universities.

3.2.2.1 Survey Participants and Procedure

Eleven participants completed the qualitative survey (seven women and four men). Participants were invited to the study if they were involved in Healthy Campus coordination in some form in an Irish HEI or via snowball sampling, where they were recommended by a Healthy Campus coordinator as having relevant insights. Due to the small nature of the participant pool, gender was the only demographic assessed. A brief online survey was administered from June to August 2025. The Higher Education Authority sent a survey invite email on the research team's behalf to Healthy Campus coordinators. Three periodic email invitations with the survey link,

information sheet, and consent form were sent to all potential participants. The survey consisted of 7 quantitative questions and 13 qualitative questions designed to assess student belonging experiences within a healthy campus context. After reading an online information sheet and providing consent, participants completed the survey before being thanked and debriefed with researcher contacts. Institutional ethical approval was granted (Reference: 118-HS-LR-25-Dooley), and data were stored in password-protected files. All participant quotes were assigned pseudonyms and identifying information was redacted to promote anonymity. Full methodological details of this survey are provided in Appendix E.

3.2.2.2 Survey Measures

Participants provided Background Information, including their gender and the proportion of their full-time institutional role dedicated to Healthy Campus work (selecting from a numbered scale of 0% to 100%). For Defining and Prioritising Student Belonging, participants were asked to define student belonging in an open-ended response. They then indicated to what extent student belonging is an explicit and clearly communicated priority within their overall Healthy Campus and wellbeing initiatives on a Likert scale, followed by a long-answer text field to describe how this focus on student belonging influences their institution's Healthy Campus initiatives or future plans. For Belonging-Focused Initiatives: Successes, Challenges, and Impact, participants briefly described a key success, a significant challenge, and how they typically measure the initiative's impact. For Importance and Promotion of Student Belonging, participants rated how important student belonging is to their institution (scale 1 to 5, considering factors such as attainment and retention) and used open-ended responses to describe what works well in promoting student belonging and what challenges exist. Focusing on Scalability and Sustainability of Initiatives, participants detailed what is needed to ensure the long-term sustainability of initiatives, specifically considering factors like coordinator handovers and funding. When identifying Institutional Features and Areas for Improvement, participants selected all applicable options that most effectively promote student belonging (e.g., "Societies," "Wellbeing support services"), and indicated which areas at their institution they believe student belonging could be most improved (e.g., "Staff resourcing," "Funding for initiatives"). A final section allowed for Further Engagement and provided an opportunity to share anything else.

3.2.2.3 Survey Analytical Plan

Numerical responses were quantified into percentages. As participants could give multiple responses to each question, percentages do not always total 100%. To analyse the qualitative responses, a simple content analysis was conducted where responses were categorised and matched with related numerical responses. Due to the close-knit nature of the sample, where participants are quoted, no further identifying information is included.

3.3 Secondary Data Collection

3.3.1 Healthy Campus Case Studies Aims & Method

A rapid review was conducted of the Healthy Campus case study (*N* = 39) initiatives across Irish universities hosted by the HEA (2025c). Each of these case studies revealed meaningful, often innovative, and valuable efforts to improve well-being in HEIs. However, our focus in this review was to glean scalable initiatives to promote student belonging. As such, we focused on those case studies that explicitly incorporated belonging into their remit, whether by design, by their evaluation or otherwise. Further details of the Healthy Campus Case Study Review can be found in Appendix B.

3.3.2 NSTEP Case Studies (N = 23) Aims & Method

The National Student Engagement Partnership (NStEP) produces guidance on engaging students as partners in university policy and initiatives. The NStEP lists case studies of best practice which are particularly valuable because student partnership and consultation has been previously identified in empirical literature as a significant driver of student belonging and ownership. The initial screening of 23 case studies listed in 2025 focused on identifying any reference to belonging. This initial review confirmed that every case study demonstrated innovation and meaningful work in enhancing student outcomes. However, only six cases were identified as having a potential link to student belonging based on this initial screening. A more in-depth review of these six case studies was then conducted to confirm their relevance and scalability implications for student belonging. The final analysis of the six relevant cases yielded specific, evidence-based practices that inform the recommendations in this report see below.

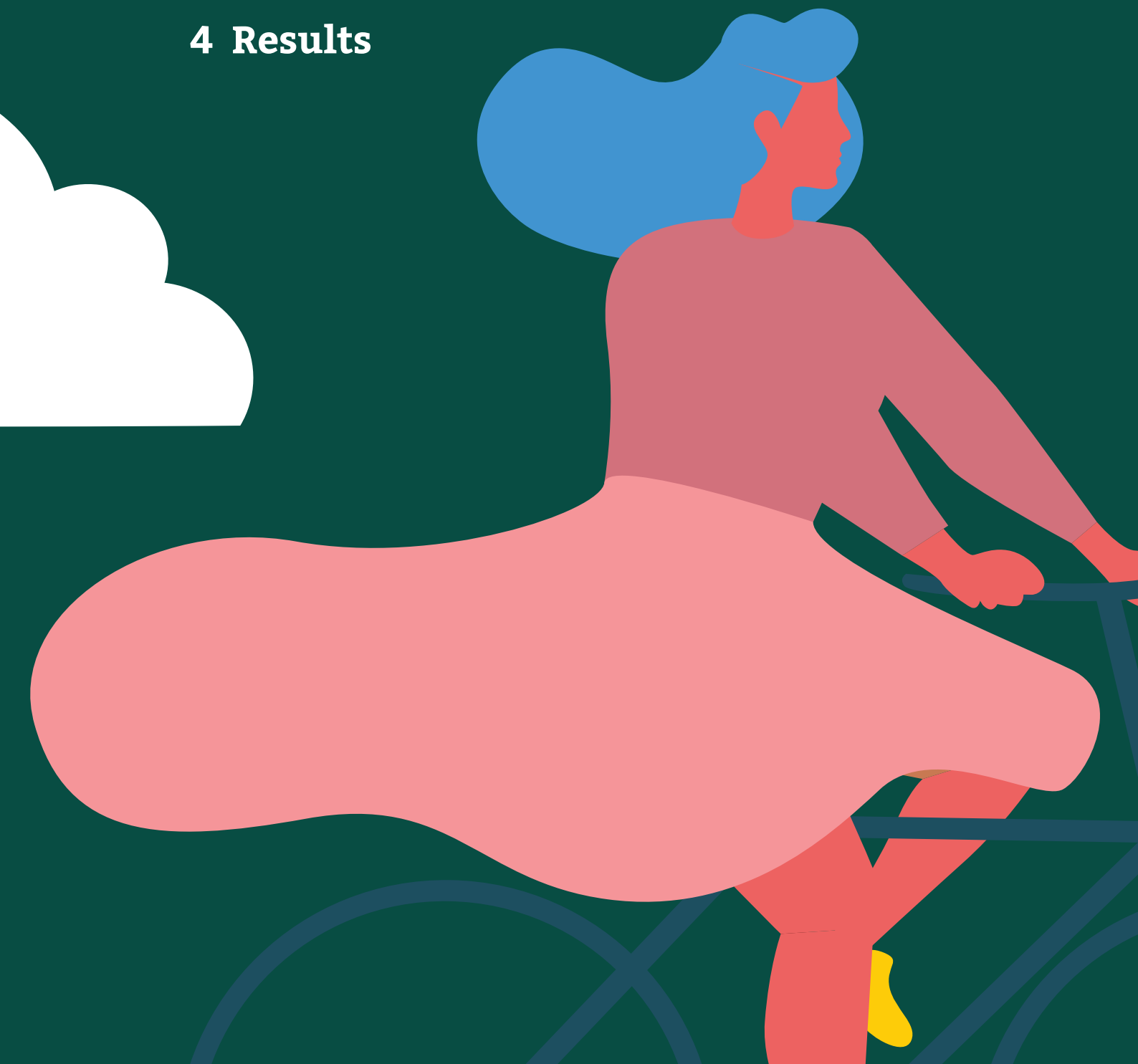
3.4 Reflexivity: How our team shaped the belonging project

This reflexivity outlines how as a research team we influenced this project by drawing on our own higher education institution (HEI) experiences. Five of our team were current students (undergraduate, masters and PhD) whilst two were academic staff working in HEIs and were former students. Our team studied predominantly in Ireland but also the UK, Ukraine and Spain mostly in larger institutions. As well as our student or staff status, members of the team were mature-students, first generation college students, refugees, LGBT, neurodivergent, former care leavers and/or international students. Two of the team were men and five were women, all were White and considered themselves to be able-bodied. Among our team we had constructive disagreements. However, our social locations and HEI experiences focused us in addressing the practical realities of students' lives, particularly those who are marginalised and impacted by the cost of living crisis. Further focuses from our reflexivity included making realistic, institutional, recommendations, developing meaningful evaluations of belonging initiatives and making sure students know about existing HEI supports. Details of our reflexivity can be found in the Appendix A.

3.5 Limitations

The authors acknowledge the limitations of the interview sample and, consequently, the constraints this places on interpreting the interview data. These limitations also affect the synthesis of the findings and the recommendations presented in the report. Our sample was strategically selected. However, the direct student perspective is somewhat absent given our primary data collection arose from staff participants. Our data collection also occurred over the summer, further restricting access to students. Nonetheless this limitation was mitigated in part through the student experience of the research team (5 of the 7 were current students) and the gathering of perspectives of staff who worked closely with students (eg., in NStEP). Nonetheless future work could benefit from directly interviewing students and assessing scalable belonging recommendations from students themselves. For further information see reflexivity.

4 Results



4.1 Interview (N = 18) Results

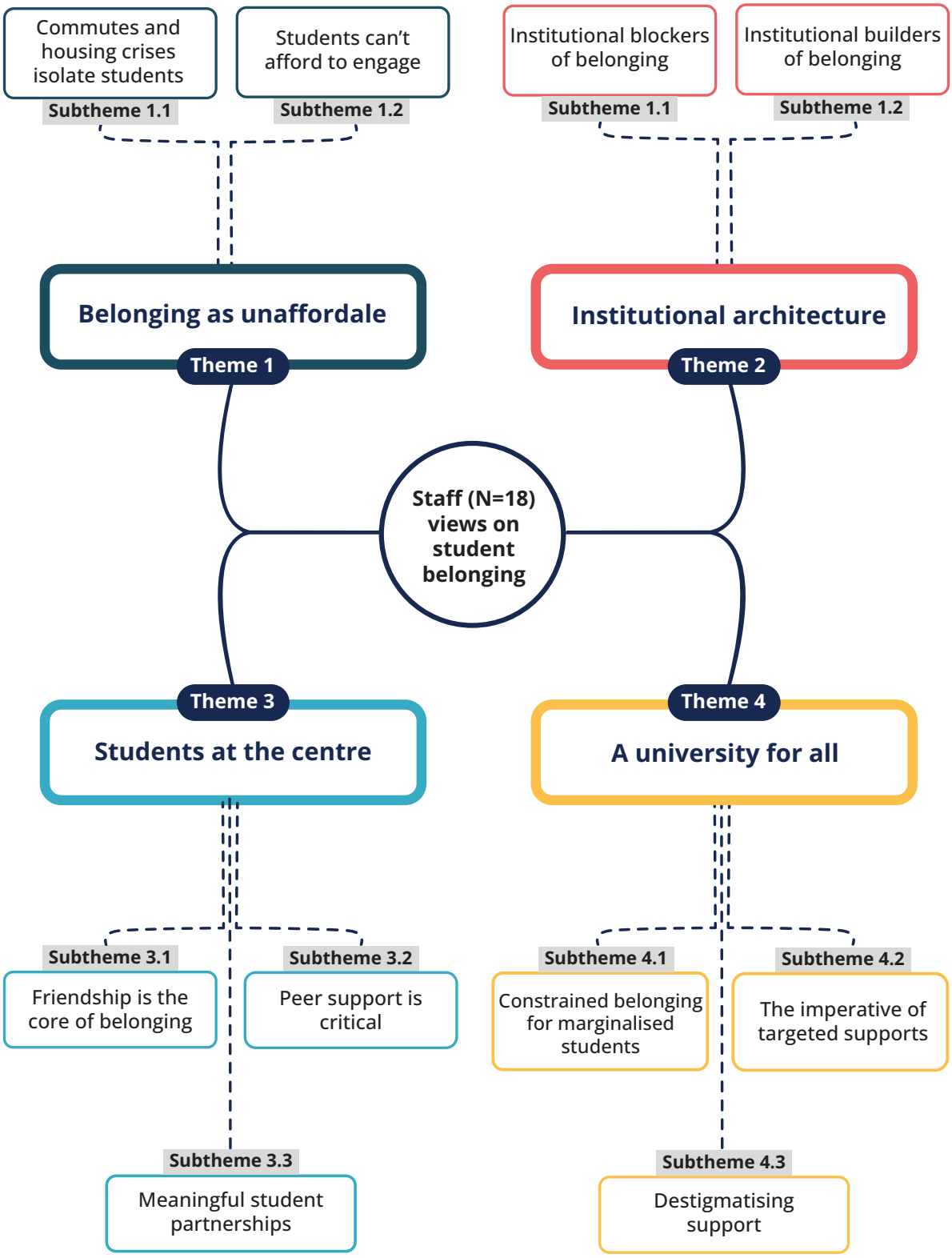
4.1.1 Theme Overview

Thematic analysis of 18 staff responses relating to student belonging revealed that belonging is severely constrained by external socio-economic pressures (Theme 1), particularly for marginalised students (Theme 4) but can be intentionally built through institutional strategy (Theme 2) and peer-centred engagement (Theme 3). Theme 1 identified belonging as unaffordable due to financial precarity, long commutes, and the housing crisis (Subtheme 1.1) which forces many students into a "transactional degree" mindset (Subtheme 1.2). Theme 2 (Institutional Architecture) examines how university structures can either block belonging (Subtheme 2.1) – through fragmentation, poor communication, and a lack of informal social spaces – act as builders of belonging (Subtheme 2.2) through committed senior leadership and well-resourced support infrastructure. This institutional capacity is best leveraged by Theme 3 ("Students at the centre of all we do"): recognising students belong through friendships (Subtheme 3.1), the value of peer support (Subtheme 3.2) and meaningful student partnerships (Subtheme 3.3). Finally, Theme 4 (A university for all) addresses the heightened challenges for marginalised students, advocating for targeted, intentional scaffolding (Subtheme 4.2) while promoting Universal Design (Subtheme 4.3) to destigmatise support and ensure an inclusive baseline for all students. A visual overview of each theme and subtheme is presented in Figure 6.

4.1.2 Theme 1: "The Level of Need is Through the Roof": Belonging as Unaffordable

The student experience is now fundamentally constrained by external socio-economic pressures. The accommodation and cost-of-living crises are not secondary concerns but primary determinants of a student's capacity to engage, connect, and ultimately belong (Subtheme 1.1). These economic pressures reshape students' purposes, forcing a pragmatic focus on survival that often overrides the social and emotional dimensions of university life (Subtheme 1.2).

Figure 6 *Abbreviated theme titles taken from university staff stakeholders responses (N = 18) about student belonging.*



4.1.2.1 Subtheme 1.1: Long Commutes and Housing Crises Isolate Students

The commuting student embodies disconnection. Long daily journeys can create concrete physical and temporal barriers that systematically exclude some students from campus community life. This reality fosters a two-tiered system of engagement. Interviewees made a clear distinction between the "'Privileged' students who live on [or near] campus and don't have to work" and the majority who commute and have "limited opportunities available to engage" (Orientation Staff 1). Hidden challenges for commuting students include the time lost when traveling, cost of the journey, and logistical issues such as finding parking and navigating traffic. These challenges are captured in poignant images of isolation, such as students "sitting in their cars … eating their breakfasts" (Access Staff 2) simply to secure a parking space on campus. The decision to make the journey to campus feels justified with packed schedules, but on many other days, commuting students have to weigh up whether a "tutorial for 1 h[our]" is worth the "travel for 5 h[ours]" (Orientation Staff 1), which forces them into a cost-benefit analysis for their own education. As one access staff member viewed it, these commuting challenges are made worse by teaching and university events that are timetabled in a way that does not consider the "time constraints that students are under" (Access Staff 2).

The need to commute means that for many students, their time at the institution is limited to attending classes and then immediately beginning the journey home. As a result, they are not able to take part in extracurricular and social activities on campus. This prevents participation in the spontaneous, informal social life that participants identified as the foundation of belonging. As for many "There is no social [life] for them attached to college … their social circle remains at home" (Access Staff 3). For those who have a long journey home, their social life is directly limited, as plans like going out with friends after classes are much more difficult to organise: "they're not going for a pint into town" (Access Staff 3). The resulting limited opportunities for socialising undermine students' belonging, as "that very first step of being together is … utterly undermined" (Academic Staff 1).

One of the key factors that drives the growth of a commuter culture within HEIs is the ongoing housing crisis, which has constrained the availability of affordable and suitably located places for students to live near campus. This reality is acknowledged by staff members who see that "accommodation has got scarcer, and what is available is too expensive" (Access Staff 4). A lack of affordable housing on and around campus forces students to commute, to share rooms and/or work part time. Those who rent often do so in areas far from the city centre or college, which might mean having to "take 2 buses … and then a half an hour wait in the middle" (Access Staff 3). For some students, this reality involves living in hotels or hostels and at the end of the week "they have to bring everything home with them and then come back" (Access Staff 4). The severity of the housing crisis leaves students vulnerable, not only by constraining their belonging, but also to financial scams in their desperation for affordable accommodation. For example, one staff member lamented housing scams where unsuspecting students could pay deposits for houses that never existed. Unaffordable housing, long commutes and part time work are all barriers that constrain belonging by keeping many students physically apart from each other, and from their campus. The isolation caused by the housing crisis and long commutes is compounded by the financial precarity (Subtheme 1.2) students face, forcing many into a pragmatic, transactional relationship with their education.

4.1.2.2 Subtheme 1.2: Transactional Degrees: Students Can't Afford to Engage

Behind the challenges of a growing commuter culture, the overall financial hardship faced by many students, impacting all aspects of their experience at university, is a key blocker of belonging. One staff member highlighted the reality for a large number of students who are struggling to get by financially: "[they] can't pay their rent, can't pay their fees, can't pay their way in the bus" (Chaplain 1). Participating in other spheres of university life, beyond academic learning, can be unavailable to students who are time-pressed and/or financially precarious. This is especially damaging when these spheres include clubs and societies, which are known to foster a sense of belonging: "But the clubs and societies thing is expensive, so if you're low income. 2 euro a pop [for attendance] is expensive" (Access Staff 1). Staff also acknowledge that the number of students who are working to support themselves during college has increased. The necessity of working long hours in part-time jobs alongside a full academic schedule leaves no time, energy, or spare money for engagement with campus activities. An access support staff member recounts reviewing student budgets and seeing that the funds allocated to their "social life [was] 0," with students stating, "'I'm working. I can't afford to go out'" (Access Staff 4). This means that for a large number of students, choosing to "loiter with friends" at a campus based cafe is not an option, "because it's too expensive to buy the meal" (Access Staff 1). Consequently, some students are limited from engaging in spheres of university life that promote a sense of belonging and connectedness, making their experience vastly different from that of others who have the time and financial resources to be involved.

Pervasive financial hardship has forced many students to be more transactional towards university. Students' relationship with their institutions are limited to getting "a degree" with little capacity for anything more (Orientation Staff 1). Several participants, particularly those who have been in their roles longer, implicitly compare the current situation to a past "golden age" of student life with less financial pressure and more on-campus community. One staff member felt that student belonging and "loyalty" was missing today because institutions were too accessible meaning "anybody can get to college now … [which means] everybody gets a medal" (Student Partnership Staff 1). It is important to consider whether third-level experiences were ever truly accessible to all students, even then. Consequently, what was once seen as an example of successful student belonging may no longer be relevant or attainable for the majority of today's student body. Some participants also emphasised a lack of institutional awareness that "all students are not the same" and that financial constraints have a real impact on students' belonging due to the "[financial] cost[s] to engagement [and] participation" (Access Staff 1).

International students must navigate these challenges without established local support systems. Their journey "nearly doubles or [triples] the transition phases for them" (Orientation Staff 1), as they grapple with cultural and academic adjustment alongside sometimes severe economic pressures. Staff who work closely with this cohort see them "questioning … the reality of being in Ireland, and how tough it is, and how expensive it is" (Chaplain 1). For these students, the need to secure basic needs in a new country can completely overshadow the social and formational aspects of their university experience, reinforcing a mindset focused on survival and, when possible, academic progression. International students may also not know or be comfortable accessing available support and were seen as particularly vulnerable to socioeconomic precarity with limited work options and family support. For example, a chaplain recalled his dismay when three French students were "conned out of all of their money" by a housing scam (Chaplain 1).

To summarise, staff perceived many students as forced to be more transactional in their interaction with their HEIs, prioritising physical attendance and academic progress, due to various socioeconomic constraints (including working part time, commuting and being financially precarious). This relates to Theme 4: Belonging For Diverse Students, reflecting the additional belonging barriers that international, commuting and less affluent students face. While socio-economic pressures (Theme 1) external to the university strongly constrain student belonging, the institution's own internal structures, policies, and environment (Theme 2) are also powerful factors in either blocking or building belonging.

4.1.3 Theme 2: Institutional Architecture: Blockers and Builders of Belonging

The institution's own structures, culture, and physical environment are powerful forces in either enabling (Subtheme 2.1) or hindering belonging (Subtheme 2.2) . Significant institutional barriers and strategic gaps coexisted with dedicated and effective strategies for building a connected community. To resolve this dilemma, a committed, holistic and top-down commitment to building student belonging is needed.

4.1.3.1 Subtheme 2.1: Institutional Blockers of Belonging

A significant barrier to belonging is a fragmented institutional strategy. Participants' views highlighted a tension between the academic versus more holistic roles universities can have in students' lives. One participant recalled a past president indicating universities needed to return to focussing on academic goals which he found contradicted the vital, holistic, responsibility institutions had for student's well-being. When these two priorities are not successfully integrated, it can lead to institutions operating with a dual, and at times contradictory, identity. Another participant, (Student Partnership Staff 1) indicated universities could be too focused on "good marketing" and "rankings … which arguably only helps a certain cohort". Participants described the negative consequences of a lack of "joined up thinking" (Student Partnership Staff 1) at a senior level, where student belonging is not always prioritised as a core institutional responsibility. Without clear top down input, the "essential message of belonging can get lost" in what was described as a culture of "managerialism and meeting machinery" (Undefined Staff). The challenge of creating a shared culture and institutional strategy is amplified in newly amalgamated, multi-campus institutions or where "[departmental] resets are going on all over the place" (Chaplain 1).

Limited resources, including financial, practical, and staffing constraints, were cited as a key challenge to delivering necessary support to students, as one participant pointed out: "There's a big drive … to get these students in, and then when they get here … There's no resources to support them" (Access Staff 4). The scale and complexity of universities were highlighted as constraining belonging initiatives: "[they have] many competing interests – commercial, research related and they operate large staff and significant budgets" (Undefined Staff). As a result, meaningful progress in supporting student belonging is often driven by the passionate efforts of dedicated individuals or teams working within resource constraints, in "pockets" (Student Partnership Staff 1) and difficult to navigate systems. This is reflected in interviews with frontline staff in Chaplaincy and access supports, whose roles are characterised as going "the extra mile," being "firemen," and running on "goodwill". This is a real challenge as reliance on the personal commitment of a few dedicated individuals poses risk not least in being unsustainable in the long term.

Importantly, an unorganised and ineffective communication of support to students was identified as another key institutional blocker for belonging. As one participant noted, limited time means that orientation can look like "trying to bake a cake in a cup … [that] is overflowing", resulting in a plethora of information around support and services, instead of a coherent and accessible welcome (Student Partnership Staff 1). This can leave students overwhelmed, as they are not able to shift through this information all at once, especially when they're already preoccupied thinking about "the bus home [or] moving into accommodation" (Orientation Staff 1). Consequently, staff recognised the struggle of when and how these supports should be communicated to students, in order for them to have a meaningful impact for their sense of belonging.

A lack of informal social infrastructure was identified as another blocker for student belonging. The absence of a "sticky campus", a welcoming environment with places to hang out, study collaboratively, or eat a packed lunch, was particularly highlighted. This physical void undermines belonging, as community on campus is formed by organic interaction within these spaces. This deficit of "third spaces" means the campus often "becomes a bit of a ghost town after 5 o'clock" (Residence Staff 2), leaving students with nowhere to connect. This further enforces the commuter culture described in Theme 1, as students do not have any reason to stay for longer than they have to. Students living in campus accommodation are further affected by this lack of third/ sticky spaces as during the evenings: "they're still living on campus [and] it's the same with the weekends". Consequently, there is a need for out of hours spaces that encourage connection where they can: "come down and hang out and get a cup of coffee" (Residence Staff 2). An accommodation officer noted that spaces are often designed around cost-effectiveness rather than "[what's] ideal for students and [what facilitates] socialis[ing]" (Access Staff 1), This further reflects a mismatch between a wider institutional strategy and the needs of students. Despite significant structural and communicative barriers, staff detailed ways in which the institution can strategically act as a builder of belonging (Subtheme 2.2).

4.1.3.2 Subtheme 2.2 Institutional Builders of Belonging

Despite these barriers, staff also outlined institutional means to build belonging. The most effective of builders was an authentic top-down commitment to valuing students. Multiple participants cited the importance of senior leadership for belonging. For example, a President who is proactively involved in the student experience and places their needs and opinions at the centre of everything they do was valued. Senior leadership, that allows the institution to be "student led … not business led", increases belonging so that students "feel like it is their campus" (Clubs Staff). This leadership also sets an institutional standard that validates the work of student-facing services. Once these services are resourced to better meet the needs of students, a positive feedback loop is created, between students, services and management. As a result, belonging becomes an intentional and tangible institutional priority that is "woven into the fabric of our daily operations and long-term strategies, ensuring that student well-being and success are always at the forefront" (Orientation Staff 2).

Relatedly, an important belonging builder is the development of a well-resourced support infrastructure that is visible, accessible, and integrated into the student lifecycle from the very beginning. That way, support is easy to find in moments of crisis or need, as one participant recognised "students don't know about things until they need them … but we can make them aware" (Orientation Staff 1). Belonging is fostered when resources are accessibly communicated to students. Often, just asking students how they would like to be informed can be

beneficial. As one participant demonstrated, from student feedback they replaced in-person workshops around exam preparation with short podcasts. This resulted in "way more take-up" (Access Staff 2).

Institutional investment into specific programmes intended to support student belonging is cited as another way to build belonging. In one HEI, this included expanding their accommodation experience program with the addition of dedicated staff roles like a Residence Life Manager and Coordinator. These staff members were responsible for organising free events across the year for students living on campus. This change was taken in response to an observation that the "demand is really there for a full kind of holistic package" (Residence Staff 2), which intentionally aims to support the formation of community as part of residences. The value of this initiative is reflected in well attended events, which are "generally … 70 to 80% full", as well as staff recognising the wider impact for wellbeing: "antisocial behavior issues, isolation … welfare in general, we can see a difference in that" (Residence Staff 2). Essentially accommodation spaces can be "a safe haven, a home away from home" for students (Orientation Staff 2).

Another essential builder for belonging was identified as a social infrastructure of dedicated physical spaces that act as community anchors, which are needed to create the conditions for student connection. For example, this includes study hubs, places to relax and event spaces. Residence spaces for game nights were seen as highly valuable for fostering connections between people who live on campus. Importantly, non-commodified spaces where students "can sit … without having to pay for a coffee" (Chaplain 2) were particularly advocated for given students ongoing economic precarity (see also Theme 1). Moving from the institutional level, staff indicated the most potent builders of belonging often bypass formal bureaucracy involving friendship, peers, and genuine student partnership (Theme 3).

4.1.4 Theme 3: "Students at the Centre of All We Do": As Friends, Peers, and Co-designers

While formal support is crucial, it is the connections students make with each other, whether through organic friendship or via structured programmes, that most profoundly shape belonging. Staff indicated that belonging is most effectively built by centering students as friends, (Subtheme 3.1), peer mentors (Subtheme 3.2) and as partners in the design and delivery of student initiatives (Subtheme 3.2).

4.1.4.1 Subtheme 3.1: Friendship is the Core of Belonging

Centering students in belonging promotion entails recognition of students' desire to make friends. This was identified as the primary driver for incoming students, a need more urgent than academic or informational support in the initial transition period: "First and foremost, they want to connect with each other before they want to connect with us [services]". (Access Staff 1). An access staff member recounted how they redesigned their entire welcome program in response to student feedback indicating that: "what they needed more than anything was to make friends" (Access Staff 1). Belonging for students can often involve the feeling of finding "your people" (Residence Staff 2) and knowing you are not alone. This can mean feeling comfortable to simply "throw a nod at somebody [on campus]" (Student Partnership Staff 1). The successful social integration into the university environment was seen as the foundation for greater wellbeing and academic success: "once students feel comfortable, or … settled in, they can learn" (Orientation Staff 1).

Participants praised their institutions for directly supporting students to develop "social capital" when they first join the institution. This can mean including tips on making friends in induction information packs and normalising the desire to form friendships. It can also include explicit initiatives such as ice breakers, group scavenger hunts to win "swag bags" (Access Staff 3) and other activities that allowed students to just "be a little silly on campus first". Orientation was seen as a particularly critical time to foster friendships. As a result, once students begin their classes, they have already had the opportunity to connect with their coursemates in an informal way, which supports belonging.

Importantly, institutions can support students to build friendships by offering low-pressure opportunities for connection throughout the year, not limited to induction, especially as some students may join in the second semester/trimester (see Theme 4). As one access staff member noted, a year-long, breakfast club, had high uptake among students. The breakfast club was also beneficial because it got commuting students out of their cars, where they were sitting in isolation, and into a shared space where they could "come in and actually just eat a bit of food and talk to people" (Access Staff 2). Structured socials were seen as a valuable way to support connections among students who might find it difficult to meet people otherwise, as one participant acknowledged, "they'll make their own friends anyways … But for those who don't, they have these socials to return to" (Access Staff 3). In many cases, the most valued outcome of a structured event is the unstructured friendship that arises from it. As one staff member indicated for their first accommodation event students may attend individually and separately, but for the next event: "the same people come back, but they're coming back together now" (Residence Staff 2).

Joining clubs and societies was identified as another important way for students to make friends. These were cited as beneficial for building belonging beyond just academic courses to include lifelong interests that students might have. In general, friendships at university were seen as the type that students might be "friends forever with" (Clubs & Societies Staff). Such groups, who have institutional affiliations in common, may leave a long legacy of belonging. Recognising that friendship is the core of belonging, institutions can leverage a particularly effective resource to foster these connections and provide essential support: the use of peer mentors (Subtheme 3.2).

4.1.4.2 Subtheme 3.2: "Somebody Sitting in Their Seat": Peer Support is Critical

Participants across multiple roles identified that students are most receptive to support and connection when it comes from other students. Support initiatives that involve others in a similar position to themselves are seen as more authentic, relatable, and effective at breaking down barriers than traditional top-down, staff-led approaches. Peer roles are therefore uniquely able to "create the link" (Chaplain 2) between the student and the institution. This peer dynamic has been successfully harnessed through formal support structures like peer mentoring. Similarly, Resident Assistant programs have used students to support other students with residence issues which are a vital "safety net" (Orientation Staff 1) for new students. As one staff member viewed it, if students engage with student mentors only during orientation, that could have been "enough to just trigger something that [makes] them feel … [that they] can get on with the rest of it" (Orientation Staff 1).

Peer support programs work through the relatability of the peer supporter and their approachableness to students in comparison to staff. As one chaplain passionately stated, having "somebody that was sitting in their seat … it's just priceless" (Chaplain 2). Experienced students are best equipped to support incoming ones, as their recent experience of having "walked that kind of path in 1st year" helps them relate to both the excitement and perhaps students' "anxiety about starting something new" (Orientation Staff 1). Being supported by someone who understands their experience is especially important for students from marginalised groups, and participants described the value of carefully matching mentors and mentees e.g., from the same cohort (access students, international students, mature students).

In order for peer mentoring programs to be effective, they need to be well thought out and designed with the needs of students in mind. One example of an effective initiative is peer assisted learning, which can involve course based study groups that are facilitated by a student from the year above, creating an "instant group of people [they] have something in common with" (Student Partnership Staff 1). Importantly, a well-structured peer support system not only benefits the mentee but also deepens the mentor's own sense of institutional contribution and belonging to the university. For example, mentors can receive training and certificates upon completing their role, as well as develop key leadership skills which can enhance their confidence and support later employability, as "it looks brilliant on the CV" (Chaplain 2).

Overall, a successful peer initiative can create profound and lasting connections and help students feel like they belong in an environment that is entirely new. One participant noted how having a supportive mentor motivates students to become mentors themselves because "[they] just want to do it for somebody else" (Orientation Staff 1). Peer mentoring was thus seen as a highly effective, efficient and mutually beneficial builder of student belonging among student mentors and mentees. Building on the success of peer support, a more advanced form of student-centric engagement involves establishing meaningful student partnerships (Subtheme 3.3) in governance and design, which ensures initiatives are relevant and fosters student ownership.

4.1.4.3 Subtheme 3.3 "Valuing Their Voices": Meaningful Student Partnerships

Involving students as meaningful partners in the governance and design of supports was cited as a key institutional belonging strategy. As one staff member noted "things don't work when … the target group[s] are not involved" (Access Staff 3). Staff emphasised how co-development creates a sense of ownership and feeling that an initiative is meant for them, which increases the likelihood of student buy-in. As the interests, needs, and circumstances of students are constantly changing, it was seen as a "mistake to think that we know what students like to do" (Residence Staff 1). In addition to making support more effective and targeted, meaningful partnering with students promotes a culture where they feel that staff "really value their voice" (Access Staff 3). Participants cited numerous examples of successful co-development for initiatives, such as designing orientation, university-wide celebration and graduation events, inputting into accommodation design and curricula topics.

One model for student partnership that was highlighted by a staff member is the NStEP "Steps to Partnership Framework", which guides institutions to foster "Dialogue, Trust, Equity, Empowerment, and Co-creation" (Student Partnership Staff 4). This approach is built on the principle that students are "the experts on their learning [and] … higher education experience " (Student Partnership Staff 2) and must be treated as genuine

partners in shaping their own education. Achieving student partnership can begin with meaningful research that directly asks students about their experiences and needs. This can include assessing their socioeconomic circumstances (see Theme 1) that may constrain their experience at the institution including assessing whether students are: "working … [or are] carers?" (Student Partnership Staff 2). Similarly, one participant described a recent switch to an orientation format that aimed to "gather all that research" (Access Staff 4) on what the students are excited or nervous about, through small discussions led by student representatives. Institutions can then design initiatives with students' "lived experience" in mind (Student Partnership Staff 4).

Students should also be empowered to give meaningful feedback for any initiatives they take part in, so that their relevance can be evaluated on an ongoing basis. Any feedback collected from students should then inform clear actions that are taken by the institution. Importantly, a critical component of effective partnership is closing the feedback loop. As one participant explained, if students provide input and never see the outcome, they feel their contribution was tokenistic and are less likely to engage in the future. Institutions must actively communicate back to students how their feedback was used, for instance by "tweaking policies because of what [students have] said" (Student Partnership Staff 2). This act of closing the 'feedback loop' validates the student voice and allows them to see their own impact, reinforcing a sense of agency and ensuring they see themselves as "part of that community" (Student Partnership Staff 2).

Staff indicated recognising the work of student partners was important whether financially or through other resources such as via certificates and prizes. Indeed, volunteering awards that are added to students' transcripts provide recognition and may boost graduate employability prospects. As one Access staff member argued, this recognition is a matter of fairness, because "too often, student representatives may be the only ones who are not paid in the room" (Access Staff 1). This sentiment was echoed by the NStEP participant, who explained that "recognising students' time and effort" is essential, whether financially or otherwise, just as "Staff members are paid for their time and their effort" for the same work (Student Partnership Staff 2).

For student partnerships to be truly equitable, there is a need to "level the playing field between students and staff" (Student Partnership Staff 4), so that students can act as meaningful consultants. This can be achieved through intentional efforts, such as upskilling and removing bureaucracy that they would otherwise be impeded by. Communication training can help students provide honest, constructive, feedback that may be "both positive and negative", ensuring the institution fully centres the student perspective. In addition, communication training can help students present ideas in a way that keeps the focus on the "impact on students and [their] learning experience" (Student Partnership Staff 2) rather than on what students believe staff want to hear or need. Building trust also requires dismantling traditional hierarchies and equipping both sides for collaboration; as one survey respondent noted, "staff development in partnership and belonging is equally crucial" to student training (Student Partnership Staff 4). In particular staff need to be open to working with students as equals, with defined roles, in a given project. This may be a shift from the traditional expert to learner experience staff may work in. Facilitating student-led initiatives to be part of wider institutional events, such as having nutrition students evaluate a staff-student recipe book and musical students perform at university ceremonies. In essence, meaningful collaboration means ensuring that students are "in the fabric of every event and every activity … [that institutional events are] very much [student] led" (Clubs Staff).

Partnering with students helps deliver belonging initiatives through peer facilitation, as well as promote the relevance of the initiatives to actual student needs. This partnership should be meaningful and recognised in some form, which allows the students to feel a sense of achievement themselves in partnership roles. Collectively partnership is a key builder of belonging. Although peer networks and partnerships are universal builders of belonging, these mechanisms are often insufficient for students facing marginalisation and specific systemic barriers (Theme 4).

4.1.5 Theme 4: A University For All: Creating the Necessary Conditions for Belonging

Students can be diverse and experience various forms of marginalisation e.g., through being economically precarious. Staff recognised that for marginalised students' belonging can be particularly impaired (Subtheme 4.1). Staff also valued tailored support to mitigate this impaired belonging for specific student cohorts. However, some staff felt conflicted in being unsure about how to provide essential, targeted interventions to marginalised students, without inadvertently reinforcing a sense of "otherness" that can undermine their belonging. As such tailored (Subtheme 4.2) and universal belonging (Subtheme 4.3) initiatives that build belonging were promoted.

4.1.5.1 Subtheme 4.1: Constrained Belonging for Marginalised Students

For marginalised students – such as those who are mature, first-generation, from low-income backgrounds and/or have a disability – belonging can be constrained. This can occur in a practical sense, for example, both exchange students and commuting students may feel they do not have enough time on campus to make friends or that it's "too late to become a society/ club member" (Clubs Staff). Belonging is constrained as friendships (Subtheme 3.1), clubs and societies (Subtheme 2.1) are all key builders of belonging. Staff also indicated that students with disabilities could be blocked from belonging. Specifically, such students were at times unable to be physically present in a club or other campus events if the venue was not physically accessible (e.g., if it had no wheelchair access). Finally, for some students belonging may not be a priority or possibility. As one participant indicated (Orientation Staff 1), for students with caring responsibility ""[they] come to college to get a degree, [they] go to class. [they] go home. [they] have children".

For marginalised students, belonging can also be constrained in a more abstract manner. Specifically, students' marginalisation can be deeply intertwined with invalidation; of being an outsider. For example, marginalised students' HEI journey can begin with the message that people like them do not fit the mould of a "traditional" university student. As one participant noted, a student entering via an access route with a points reduction might "go in thinking [they] don't belong there instantly" (Access Staff 3). Marginalised students, especially those who are also first generation, may worry they do not belong and then have this belonging confirmed by concrete belonging blockers. For example, staff identified the "hidden curricula" (the unspoken norms of academic engagement e.g., referencing and textbook fees) that can turn small setbacks into major crises of

academic withdrawal and inertia. When isolated and/or academically struggling, such students can be unaware or too embarrassed to access institutional support believing that after they've "missed 2 assignments … [they'd] get in trouble" (Student Partnership Staff 1), leading them to disengage. For marginalised students, belonging requires shedding initial feelings of "otherness", this can be through the intentional institutional scaffolding of tailored, targeted support (Subtheme 4.2).

4.1.5.2 Subtheme 4.2: The imperative of targeted supports

Staff were clear that for many students from underrepresented backgrounds, belonging is not a given; it is an outcome that requires intentional institutional scaffolding. Pre-orientation programs, for example, are essential for equity, designed to "alleviate the stress" of transition and provide students with the social and informational capital to start on an equal footing (Access Staff 3). Pre-orientation and transition support can be particularly important for first generation students and may involve campus familiarisation, developing specific skills such as presentations, learning about the support services, and meeting mentors who have been in their same position in the past. As one participant noted the value of support they received at the start of their own academic journey: "They taught me how to do presentations in that 1st week … [and introduced me] to the things that would be harder" (Access Staff 3). This scaffolding is a prerequisite for equity; it ensures all students have the foundational support needed to navigate the university and feel they have a right to be there.

Targeted supports were also identified as essential for supporting students financially. One institution cites how a highly visible campus wide event addressing financial concerns among 1st year students was linked to "a direct increase in applications to student assistance fund" (Access Staff 4), reflecting the importance of making sure students are aware of the availability of support out there. Similarly, a campus based food bank system and distribution of shop vouchers have been used to directly address the challenge of food insecurity particularly among economically precarious students.

Tailoring belonging may include recognition that students' life experiences are an asset, not a deficit (for example international students can help universities create a global outlook). One staff member recalled a mature student who felt "completely out of place" until a group project was enhanced by their own personal experiences so much so that the project won a prize (Academic Staff 1). For students who may be marginalised, knowing the institution has a place for them is an important condition for belonging. As one access officer states, the core message institutions should impart is: "that seat is yours, [it] doesn't go to anybody else … It's in everyone's interest for you to be comfortable in that seat" (Access Staff 1). While tailored support is essential for marginalised students' specific needs, staff recognise that these interventions can inadvertently reinforce a sense of "otherness"; thus, they promote a complementary strategy: Universal Design (Subtheme 4.3), which destigmatises support by making it available to all.

4.1.5.3 Subtheme 4.3: Universal Design: Destigmatising Support

While essential, the mechanisms designed to build belonging among marginalised students can have limits. Some staff indicated students from underrepresented backgrounds "just want to be perceived like everybody else" (Access Staff 2). As such traditional support models, like hardship funds, can exacerbate this by requiring students to formally "declare as other" (Access Staff 1). Ironically this inadvertent stigma can erode the belonging that institutions are specifically trying to foster.

Adjunct belonging builders may therefore adopt a Universal Design approach. This involves creating resources that are universally available to all students but are designed to specifically mitigate barriers that the most marginalised students face. By establishing initiatives like a universal laptop loan scheme or a "Library of Things" (e.g., a borrowable system of DIY or audiovisual tools students may need) institutions provide essential support without requiring students to self-identify as different or in need. As one participant explained, the goal is to make support accessible "without you having to have a special chip on your student card that says you're from a special group" (Access Staff 1). Another example was institutional events, open to all students, for all students, that celebrated specific "diverse personal interests [such as] vibrant celebrations of different country national days" (Orientation Staff 2).This destigmatised model embeds equity into the university's daily operations. It does not replace the need for specific, tailored support but it creates a more inclusive baseline where seeking help is normalised for everyone. Consequently, it helps to create an environment where all students feel they belong regardless of background or identity.

Overall, students from certain cohorts may struggle particularly to feel a sense of belonging to the university, and targeted supporters have an integral role in providing the necessary scaffolding to support their experience. At the same time, universally available supports that are a normal part of the functioning of the institution can support belonging for these students without enforcing differences between students who may need them, and those who don't.

4.2 Healthy Campus Survey (N = 11) Results

As mentioned, 7 female and 4 male Healthy Campus Coordinators participated in the mixed-method survey, conducted to gather student belonging views and recommendations (see Appendix E for full survey). Participants dedicated an average of 59% of their full-time role to Healthy Campus work. They rated student belonging as highly important (M = 4.73, SD = 0.47, Range 1-5), noting that while the priority of Healthy Campus initiatives generally was "somewhat" high (M = 2.91, SD = 0.70), belonging was central to institutional success.

4.2.1 Defining Belonging and Institutional Prioritisation

Participants defined belonging as a "collective togetherness" where students feel "seen, heard, accepted and valued" for "being themselves" and their "unique contribution". They emphasised that feeling "people care I'm here" is essential for a rewarding, safe, and enjoyable student experience. Belonging was identified as a strategic and foundational principle for Healthy Campus work, fulfilling the "social dimension of health" and promoting the shared goal of creating university communities that "feel comfortable, safe and secure". This focus was actioned through meaningful student consultation, co-design, and planning events and spaces with the "bigger vision of belonging" in mind.

4.2.2 Effective Belonging Builders

When asked to identify features that effectively promote belonging, Sports Clubs and Societies were the most frequently cited features, followed closely by wellbeing support services and social spaces. Key successful initiatives included:

- Community Support: Initiatives that created physical, offline social spaces where students could "chill, meet, study," such as weekly breakfasts for postgraduate students or "free café" initiatives to foster connections without cost.
- Peer-to-Peer Engagement: Structured peer mentoring programs were highly effective, leading to students feeling "well supported and more connected socially". Participants stressed that remuneration for student mentors and partners was "critical" to ensure equity and sustain high engagement.
- Concrete Institutional Support: Achieving dedicated, visible student hubs and ensuring more accessible wellbeing services was identified as crucial institutional support.

4.2.3 Structural Belonging Blockers

Significant challenges to fostering belonging included resource limitations, particularly securing funding and adequate staff capacity for long-term project sustainability. Furthermore, institutional cultural hurdles and assumptions that prevent students from meaningfully shaping policy often resulted in tokenistic involvement. Participants heavily critiqued staff who tend to "do for' rather than [do] with' students" and the lack of time needed to "facilitate and learn" how to collaborate effectively.

Belonging was fundamentally blocked by external factors, including a pervasive "commuter culture," students being "time poor" due to part-time jobs, and financial pressures related to accommodation and food insecurity. These issues make it "difficult to reach students and get them involved". Institutional challenges such as a lack of spaces in "hollowed out campuses" and the increasing reliance on technology and "toxic social media culture" were also cited as hindrances to in-person connection.

4.2.4 Belonging Evaluation and Sustainability

Assessment of impact was typically measured through quantitative metrics (e.g., attendance counts) and participant feedback surveys exploring factors like "resilience, sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy". However, coordinators noted that current assessments were "not enough," advocating for mixed-methods assessments with a longitudinal element. For long-term sustainability, recommendations focused on securing permanent, long-term funding and staffing for belonging initiatives and creating standardised roles and training across HEIs to foster consistency in best practices.

4.2.4 Brief Summary of Primary Data Themes

It is evident that the generated themes from the interviews with key stakeholders and survey responses Healthy Campus Coordinators were consistent with regard to the importance of peer-to-peer engagement, institutional support, clubs & societies and physical spaces. In addition, there was consistency with regard to blockers of belonging, namely limited resources, commuter culture limiting student engagement, financial pressures and a lack of social spaces.

4.3 Secondary Data Results

4.3.1 Healthy Campus Case Study Results

A rapid review of Healthy Campus case study initiatives across various Irish Higher Education Institutions (*N* = 39; HEIs) hosted by the HEA (2025c) revealed some case studies were unrelated to belonging. With limited resources and a remit to specifically promote the physical and broader wellbeing on campus this was understandable. Sometimes the lack of relevance to belonging was immediately clear. For example, if a case study's remit was to assess rather than improve wellbeing and/or its target was university staff only then clearly it did not relate to student belonging. Some cases were not related to student belonging because they aimed to improve a specific wellbeing issue that would typically only directly impact a small section of the study body (e.g., menstruation and breastfeeding). Among others, a significant number of the initiatives did promote belonging, sometimes directly, more often indirectly. This was particularly via the case studies' alignment with the 'Mental Health & Wellbeing' and 'Campus Culture & Communications' categories of the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework.

This case study review reveals that belonging promotion is a holistic, multi-faceted effort driven by providing concrete resources, facilitating peer connections, offering targeted support, and promoting campus-wide well-being. Initiatives that address students' fundamental needs – such as the ATU Period Promise (installing over 190 free product dispensers to combat period poverty and stigma) and DCU's The Pantry (providing free meals and toiletries, utilised by over 2,800 students in one semester) – are foundational, as they remove basic barriers to campus participation. Belonging is also strongly fostered through peer-led social connections, demonstrated by NCAD's social workshop, themed around food, where incoming students "came into the room individually but left in groups as friends" and low-pressure community exercise challenges like the TUD Couch to 5k (€600 budget), which created a "sense of belonging, pride, and accomplishment".

The review highlighted that effective promotion and dedicated resources are essential, as are targeted efforts for marginalised students, such as the TCD Ethnic Minorities Support Group and the ATU I-SWAP program (for students with ADHD), which led to a reduction in depression and an increase in self-esteem. However, a significant challenge is the lack of explicit empirical belonging assessment, as most initiatives currently track engagement rather than clear belonging outcomes. Furthermore, success is often hampered by finite resources and practical barriers like long commutes, necessitating innovative, cost-effective solutions like the TUD Healthy Campus Cookbook (costing just €1,400) which created a shared resource through community collaboration.

4.3.1.1 HC Case Study Scalability recommendations

- Strategic Planning: Integrating initiatives into broader university strategies and calendars can prevent duplication and increase participation. This may also lessen the idiosyncratic/ individualised approach to some initiatives. For example, UCD's commuter nutritious breakfast programme in a campus café recognised the systematic barriers some students faced around commuting, food costs and isolation. The breakfasts were designed to occur on the busiest day of the week for students before lectures typically commenced. The breakfasts also featured multiple options to cater for those with additional needs (e.g., a higher protein option). This maximised the potential students who could benefit. Another initiative encouraged some society and campus activities to shift from the evening time to the daytime so that students who commute or who have other commitments in the evening (e.g., childcare) could still attend.
- Evaluation: Assessment of belonging impact, whether qualitative, quantitative or mixed, will help ensure effectiveness, minimise unexpected harms and share good practice.
- Collaboration: Strengthening relationships between academic departments, student support services, and external organisations can lead to more comprehensive initiatives, potentially pooled resources and wider, more effective, promotion.
- Communication: Properly resourcing promotion and marketing can help students be aware of- and thus participate in- belonging initiatives. It's important that students know about the belonging initiatives that exist.

Further details of the Healthy Campus Case Study Review can be found in Appendix B.

4.3.2 National Student Engagement Programme Case Study Results

As mentioned, the rapid review of 23 NStEP case studies listed in 2025 revealed six with discernible links to belonging in evaluation or initiative content. These six NStEP case studies can be grouped into themes of Student Partnership & Consultation, Peer Support & Transition, and Co-Design & Pedagogy.

4.3.2.1 Student Partnership & Consultation

Three case studies highlight the profound impact of student-staff collaboration on belonging, particularly for marginalised groups, by addressing systemic barriers and validating student experiences (Crotty et al., 2020; Keogh et al., 2022; Darby & Dowling, 2020). For example, a student-led training session for staff on disability reasonable adjustments directly fostered belonging. This session, which included pre-training for students and information about attending staff, gave staff "insight into the 'why' of reasonable accommodation in an authentic manner" (Crotty et al., 2020, p. 4). Specifically, students noted they felt "secure" and "valid" and 'cared' for after sharing their learning experiences (Crotty et al., 2020, p. 2). A separate student co-designed survey revealed that commuting was a significant barrier (Keogh et al., 2022), with 64% of commuter students reporting that academic staff were not understanding of these prevalent barriers. Commuting was shown to negatively affect engagement and "identifying with their university" (Keogh et al., 2022, p. 2), with students engaging in "mental distancing" and associating campus activities with residential students. A third project, which involved 46 students as co-creators to diversify a business module, enhanced student self-worth and belonging, as one co-creator stated: "I am proud of being part of diverse projects like this one, and I will present my learnings to an employer as being open-minded and belonging to a generation that accepts everyone, from everywhere" (Darby & Dowling, 2020, p. 2). These cases collectively demonstrate that meaningful consultation improves staff awareness of student barriers and generates students' ownership, investment and belonging through university initiatives.

4.3.2.2 Peer Support & Transition

Two case studies underscore the effectiveness of peer-to-peer relationships in easing the transition to university and building community (Griffin, 2024; Olesen & Tobin, 2022). The Griffin study involved six 45-minute wellbeing workshops delivered by 4th-year students to 1st-year students, which was integrated into both cohorts' modules. Belonging was explicitly evaluated and identified as the most common benefit, with one participant noting, "It was good meeting people that have done the same course as me and I felt understood" (Griffin, 2024). This success was attributed to the use of interactive, problem-based learning and digital badges to remunerate the peer mentors for their work. The Olesen and Tobin (2022) case similarly focused on peer support through a weekly, year-long academic mentor program for 1st-year students, specifically aiming to improve belonging during orientation and critical transition phases, though empirical evaluation data was not reported (Olesen & Tobin, 2022).

4.3.2.3 Co-Design & Pedagogy

Lowney (2022) provided empirical evidence for the link between student co-design in assessment and feelings of voice and belonging. This project trialled different levels of student involvement in assessment co-design across various modules. The results indicated a positive impact on student voice. For example, 60% of students agreed that they "Felt [they] had input or voice" (Lowney, 2022; p. 3) serving as a proxy for belonging. Key insights were that the involvement needs to be carefully managed to ensure the workload is manageable and that students are experienced before fully engaging in co-design. This suggests that integrating students as partners in core academic processes is a viable way to promote a sense of ownership and connection to their learning environment (Lowney, 2022).

4.3.2.4 NStEP Case Study Summary

The synthesis of these case studies points to three scalable insights for promoting student belonging across different institutional contexts: Authentic Student Partnership is crucial, as co-designing services (Darby & Dowling, 2020) and providing student-led staff training (Crotty et al., 2020) validates student experiences and fosters ownership and pride. Structured Peer Support offers a cost-effective, high-impact mechanism for transition and community building, with programs like the Griffin study's student-led workshops explicitly demonstrating an improved sense of belonging and is particularly effective when integrated into core curricula. Finally, Addressing Foundational Needs must be prioritised; while not always directly scalable by the university, initiatives that remove basic barriers like long commutes are necessary preconditions for students' belonging.

5 Discussion: Results and Literature Synthesis

5.1 The Four Domains of Belonging

The concept of student belonging has evolved from a core human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) into a complex, multidimensional, dynamic, and co-constructed experience (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Allen et al., 2021; Kuttner, 2023). This affective and social experience, defined as feeling "accepted, respected … and valued by" the campus community (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4), is a critical predictor of student success, retention, and well-being (Crawford et al., 2024; Allen et al., 2024). Our project utilised the four-domain belonging model (Social, Personal, Academic, and Surroundings; Figure 3) to organise a robust synthesis of primary data (interviews, Healthy Campus survey responses) and secondary data (NStEP and Healthy Campus case studies). For strategic analysis, the results were collapsed into two macro-categories 1) Structural and 2) Psychosocial to clearly distinguish between systemic and interpersonal belonging strategies, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 *Results mapped to four belonging domains.*

1. Structural	**2. Psychosocial**
1a. Surroundings ■ Non-commodified Spaces to Chill & Study ■ Pride in Campus Environment ■ Support to Counter Commuting Barriers ■ Holistic Campus Accommodation Experiences	**2a.** Social ■ Connection ■ College and Home Life Social Networks ■ Access and Availability of Facilities ■ Informal Spaces to ConnectInclusion for All Students
1b. Academic ■ Non-transactional Degree ■ Targeted Supports ■ Collaboration ■ Disciplinary Identification	**2b.** Personal ■ Co-design ■ Meaningful Partners in Co-development ■ Voices Valued ■ Students as Experts ■ Empowerment ■ De-stigmatisation of Supports

5.1.1 Structural Belonging Factors (Academic & Surroundings)

This category reflects the core institutional responsibility (Kroeper et al., 2025) to provide supportive infrastructure and remove systemic barriers that limit belonging opportunities (Allen et al., 2021).

5.1.1.1 The Surroundings Domain (1a): Geo-Cultural and Physical Barriers

The synthesis revealed that students' surroundings and geo-cultural environment are the most profound barriers to belonging. This spatial influence extends beyond the campus grounds to include living, study, and social environments. Housing and cost-of-living crises limit security and stability, forcing students to prioritise part-time work and long commutes over sustained campus interaction (University of Galway SU, 2025). Interview data confirmed this, noting that the lack of affordable housing forced many into long daily commutes, creating temporal and physical barriers (Interview, Theme 1.1). For instance, 43% of University of Limerick students had not secured accommodation by the start of term, undermining this formative period for establishing friendships. Furthermore, housing pressures often limit the quality of Living Spaces, with data showing international students often sharing rooms (74%), which undermines their sense of privacy, safety, and well-being (ICOS, 2023; Interview, Theme 1.1). Staff recognised the need for accommodation spaces to be "a home away from home" for students, supporting the need for Holistic Campus Accommodation Experiences (Interview, Theme 2.2).

The synthesis found high utility for Non-commodified Spaces to Chill & Study, where students can socialise without financial pressure (Samura, 2018). The lack of these "sticky spaces" contributes to "hollowed out campuses" (HC Survey) and the campus becoming a "ghost town after 5 o'clock" as students had no reason to stay longer than their lectures (Interview, Theme 2.1 and 2.2). Previous research also highlighted how the design of university activities (e.g., without hybrid or flexible options) often assumes the "young, unencumbered student" (Ajjawi et al., 2025, p. 794). Interventions like the UCD commuter breakfast program (Appendix B) created a weekly social hub with free breakfasts for commuting students, recognising the systematic nature of these structural failures. HC Case Studies highlighted that on-campus initiatives face challenges such as students' long commutes, housing issues, limited free time and incomes etc. while noting that off-campus or virtual programs struggle with barriers like limited technology access, time pressures, and the lack of authentic social connection that online formats can create (see Appendix B). To help address these challenges, some HC case studies suggested moving certain society and campus activities from the evening time to the daytime, making it easier for students with long commutes or evening commitments, like childcare, to take part (Appendix B). Finally, HC Case Studies created opportunities for student belonging using varied methods including community-building events and activities. The UL: BioBlitz HC Case Study, an environmental initiative involving nature walks and documentation of campus species, also created physical belonging opportunities between staff and students. Specifically, this initiative fostered Pride in Campus Environment, social connections between staff and students and belonging (see Appendix B).

5.1.1.2 The Academic Domain (1b): Curriculum and Support Structures

In the Academic Domain, the emphasis is on the overall quality of the educational experience. Indeed, educational experience was the most important predictor of belonging, based on the longitudinal data from over a million students (Crawford et al., 2024). More specifically, belonging can be built through positive academic engagement and learning experiences as well as building relevant skillsets for graduate pursuits. However, staff cited the cost of living crises as forcing students to view university as a "Non-transactional Degree" (Interviews: Theme 1.1. and 1.2), attending solely for the qualification and missing out on the social life. Students could miss the experience of connecting with other students, e.g., through clubs and societies particularly. Targeted Supports like peer-assisted learning (Interview: Theme 4; 4.2) and Student Co-Design of Curricula (NStEP case study) may foster disciplinary belonging directly. By having targeted academic support for students, this can free up their time and space to engage in other belonging building activities across campus. The inclusion of the student voice in improving educational practices reinforces the view that students are the experts of their own learning (Interview: Theme 3; 3.3).

5.1.2 Psychosocial Belonging Factors (Social & Personal)

This category focuses on the interpersonal processes and individual resources required for students to engage and feel accepted, a process often made challenging by identity mismatch and belonging uncertainty (Totonchi et al., 2023).

5.1.2.1 The Personal Domain (2b): Agency, Co-design, and Identity

The Personal Domain describes a range of individual processes and factors that reflect one's approach to navigating a university environment to connect and form a sense of belonging and includes agency, competencies, and identity. The data synthesis strongly supported Co-design (e.g., Interview, Theme 3; 3.3). This partnership validates the student voice and reinforces their sense of agency; helping students see themselves as integral, influential, members of the university community (Interview, Theme 3.3). Involving students as Meaningful Partners in Co-development addresses the co-constructed nature of belonging and increasing student-buy-in for university activities (Kuttner, 2023; Interview, Theme 3; 3.3). For example, participants discussed how upskilling opportunities for students, such as communication training, helps students act as meaningful university consultants (Interview, Theme 3.3). While an NStEP co-design & pedagogy project that trialled different levels of student involvement in assessment co-design across various modules reported having a positive impact on student voice (a proxy for belonging; Lowney, 2022; p. 3). Critically, the Healthy Campus Survey noted that institutional barriers to belonging were linked to students' tokenistic involvement in university decision making.

As feeling confident in one's personal and social identities gives rise to student belonging (Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023), the synthesis revealed the need for De-stigmation of Supports. Specifically, universal design is necessary to ensure marginalised students can access help without needing to self-identify as 'other' (Interviews, 4.3). These resources (e.g., hardship funds) are critical but selective access can make them indirectly stigmatise certain students, undermining their belonging (Interviews, 4.3). Creating universal access to these supports allows for Inclusion for All Students and self-acceptance (Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023). The data also showcased the importance of institutional events, open to all students that celebrated diversity e.g., different countries' national days (e.g., Interviews, 4.3).

5.1.2.2 The Social Domain (2a): Connection and Relationships by Design

The synthesised data specifically showed that Sports Clubs, Societies and structured peer mentoring programs were highly effective in promoting College and Home Life Social Networks (Allen et al., 2024). Thus, in the Social Domain, Connection is vital (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gravett et al., 2025; Maunder, 2018). This domain includes social capital, student-faculty relationships and peer relationships. Connecting with peers and social networks outside of class time was difficult for several students such as commuting students and those struggling financially (Interview: Theme 1; 1.2). Staff participants indicated that social belonging can be improved through inclusive facilities and sticky spaces. Specifically, flexible timetabling was recommended to help students who do not live near campus and those who are struggling financially improve belonging relationships (HC Case Study Scalability Recommendations). Survey data also highlighted that structured mentoring made students feel "well supported and more connected socially" and interviews noted that positive staff interactions with students were also vital (Interview: Theme 3; 3.1; Kroeper et al., 2025). Institutions also build belonging by supporting relationships by design. For example, implementing group activities early in the degree to combat isolation (Allen et al., 2024; Tinto, 2003). Healthy Campus Case Studies confirmed the utility of initiatives focused on community engagement, such as the national student volunteering project (see Appendix B). Critically, the data confirmed the utility of remuneration for student partners as "critical" to sustain engagement and equity in these programs.

5.2 Take Home Messages: Results Synthesis Summary

The empirical analysis, drawing from primary data (staff interviews, N=18; and a survey of Healthy Campus Coordinators, N=11) and secondary data (reviews of Healthy Campus case studies, N=39; and NStEP case studies, N=23), reveals three high-consensus strategies for building student belonging. These strategies, outlined below, reflect that the external socio-economic pressures (Interview Theme 1, primarily housing barriers and cost of living) serve as the primary constraint on student belonging.

5.2.1 Structural Strategy: Creating Access Through Environmental Resources

This strategy emphasises the institution's core responsibility (Kroeper et al., 2025) to remove the physical and financial barriers imposed by the Surroundings Domain. This is a necessary precondition for any relational intervention to succeed, as it directly mitigates the challenge of the "transactional degree" mindset (Interview Theme 1.2). A key finding is the need for intentional top-down commitment (Interview Theme 2.2) to embed resources that specifically counter financial strain and isolation, particularly by providing non-commodified, informal social spaces (Interview Theme 2.1). Furthermore, institutions must provide hardship resources (e.g., foodbanks like DCU's The Pantry) and implement flexible timetabling amendments (HC survey response, HC Case Study Scalability Recommendations) to directly support students with commuting, caring responsibilities, and part-time work commitments.

5.2.2 Psychosocial Strategy: Promoting Peer Relationships

This strategy utilises the Social Domain, recognising that students' peers are the primary agents of support, friendship, and belonging (Interview Theme 3.1; Mowreader, 2025). Peer networks offer relatable, authentic "safety nets" for transition (Interview Theme 3.2). Structured peer mentoring programs and Sports Clubs and Societies were cited as highly effective features in the Healthy Campus survey. Case studies explicitly demonstrated the success of student-led initiatives, such as the NStEP Griffin study, where wellbeing workshops improved belonging and NCAD's food-based peer workshop.

5.2.3 Psychosocial Strategy: Ensuring Student Co-Design and Partnership

This strategy targets the Personal Domain and reflects the co-constructed nature of belonging (Kuttner, 2023). Partnering with students as meaningful co-creators of interventions and broader university design fosters student ownership, investment, and relevance (Interview Theme 3.3). This mechanism promotes belonging by giving students a "voice" as shown by the Lowney (2022) study on assessment co-design. It also helps achieve De-stigmation of Supports by ensuring universal design meets the needs of students across various identities (Interviews, 4.3). Institutions can ensure equity by closing the feedback loop and offering recognition for student partners (e.g., upskilling and financial means).

6 Policy Alignment

The National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (NSMHSP) and the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (HCCF).

Evaluating the extent to which institutional initiatives map onto national strategies and frameworks was not within the remit of this project, however, our findings indicate that, at a national level, the majority of recommended actions that support student belonging included in the NSMHSP and HCCF are reflected in institutional policies and practices (see Appendix C).

For example, institutions were committed to:

- Developing partnerships on campus and in the community with health services to support student mental health (*NSMHSP action point 2).*
- Creating campuses that were connected, safe, nurturing, inclusive, and compassionate (*NSMHSP action point 4)* as well as empowered, thriving, connected campus communities that foster an ethic of care, compassion, equality and inclusion *(HCCF action point 2).*
- Identifying and acting on opportunities to support the health and wellbeing of students, staff and the wider community through the built, natural, social, economic, cultural, academic, organisational and learning environments in a sustainable way *(HCCF action point 3).*
- Establishing student support throughout the higher education journey (*NSMHSP action point 8).*
- Engaging in the National Healthy Campus Network to share our learning and work in partnership, as appropriate, to build evidence of effective approaches to developing a healthy campus *(HCCF action point 7).*

This suggests a strong foundational commitment to student wellbeing.

However, some gaps remain, such as:

- Collecting and analysing data to inform measures to improve student mental health *NSMHSP action point 9).*

This suggests that while institutions are taking the recommendations onboard, full implementation is still a work in progress.

6.1 Policy Recommendations

Institutions should prioritise the collection and analysis of student mental health data to inform and refine wellbeing strategies and develop clear frameworks to assess progress on implementing wellbeing policies, including regular reviews and reporting structures that can be benchmarked across national policies.

6.2 Policy Alignment Summary

Improving a sense of belonging in higher education institutions (HEIs) aligns directly with several national policies in Ireland HEIs, each of which recognises student belonging relates to their wellbeing, progress and inclusion. To aid readability, policy excerpts most explicitly related to belonging are abbreviated below around two themes: 5.2.1) Caring Communities and 5.2.2) Inclusion.

6.2.1 Caring Communities

The National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (NSMHSP) emphasises a holistic approach to student well-being by prioritising the creation of a supportive environment. One of its key themes is to "*Create campus communities that are connected, safe, nurturing, inclusive and compassionate*". This sentiment is echoed in the National Mental Health Promotion Plan, *Stronger Together* (2022-2027), which includes a specific action to "*Develop, implement, and evaluate mental health promotion initiatives focused on promoting student connectedness and belonging in further and higher education settings*". Both frameworks explicitly link belonging with positive mental health outcomes. The Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (HCCF) Ireland highlights the need for empowered and connected communities. The framework states: "*We will: Act to create empowered, thriving, connected campus communities that foster an ethic of care, compassion, equality and inclusion*". This focus on a compassionate community is also reflected in the HEA's Healthy Campus Self-Evaluation Tool, which asks institutions to consider: *"How does your institutions' practices and culture create a sense of belonging, respect and safety for staff and students?*" The HSE's National Mental Health Promotion Plan also recognises the need to "*address the impact of loneliness and social isolation across the life cycle*".

6.2.2 Inclusion

The National Access Plan 2022-2028 sets out six goals to achieve the ambition for a more inclusive and diverse student population in higher education. The emphasis of the plan extends beyond the point of access to higher education to a greater focus on the participation and success of the student. The plan stresses flexibility to best support students' individual needs and coherence to ensure a unified approach throughout the education system and across government. The plan's inclusivity goal explicitly underpins all its objectives, with the framework noting that this goal focuses on "creating an inclusive education experience and a sense of belonging". Recognition that some students can be "*socially excluded*" and thus disadvantaged in their belonging, is also addressed by the HSE's National Mental Health Promotion Plan. This plan supports initiatives to "*Facilitate access to mainstream mental health promotion programmes for socially excluded groups*".

A visual overview of policy alignment mapping can be found in an expanded Policy Alignment Table (see Appendix C).

7 Scalability Recommendations

The following are four scalability recommendations to scale effective belonging strategies institution-wide. They are provided below based on findings from four primary and secondary data sources: Staff Interviews/ Survey Responses (*n* = 18), HCC Survey (*n* = 11), Healthy Campus Case Studies (*n* = 39), and NStEP Case Studies (*n* = 23) along with academic belonging literature. The recommendations are about embedding sustainable and effective belonging initiatives in Irish Higher Education Institutions.

7.1 Implement Affordability and Accessibility Infrastructure

7.1.1 Recommendation

University leadership could champion a top-down commitment (Darker et al., 2023; HEA, 2022) to audit and adjust institutional schedules, fees, and physical infrastructure to directly mitigate the primary external barriers posed by the Cost-of-Living Crisis.

7.1.2 Background and Detail

This commitment is vital for students forced to engage with universities in a limited, transactional, manner (Interview Theme 1.2). Implementing a Universal Design approach (Theme 4.3) means prioritising the provision of non-commodified social spaces (Interview Theme 2.1) where students can meet without cost (Ahn & Davis, 2020), directly counteracting the "hollowed out campus" feeling cited by HCC coordinators. Institutions must adjust timetabling to mitigate the exclusion caused by long commutes, as empirical NStEP data showed commuting negatively affects student participation and "identifying with their university" (Keogh et al., 2022, p. 2). Furthermore, replicating proven solutions from the HC Case Studies, such as the ATU's Period Promise and UCD's Commuter Breakfasts, ensures essential support is easily accessible without requiring students to "declare as other" (Theme 4.3) and helps alleviate the financial pressures that hinder belonging.

7.2 Resource Peer & Partnership Roles

7.2.1 Recommendation

Institutions could establish a resourced peer support framework that formalises roles (mentors, PAL facilitators, student reps) and commit to meaningful student partnership in governance.

7.2.2 Background and Detail

Scalability improves significantly when peer support moves from being driven by "goodwill" (Staff Interviews, Theme 2.1) to becoming a budgeted line item (Theme 2.2). Remuneration (stipends or official certification, such as digital badges used in the Griffin study) helps ensure equity in representation (Theme 4), making roles accessible to economically constrained students (Theme 1.2) and validating their contribution as experts (Interview Theme 3.3; NStEP, 2022). Peers, friendships, and social support can be particularly significant in driving positive educational experiences and smoothing transitions, thus fostering belonging (Crawford et al., 2024). This formal framework enables the replication of successful models shown in the NStEP Case Studies, where peer support programs explicitly improved belonging and transition (Griffin, 2024; Olesen & Tobin, 2022). Meaningful student consultation also directly addresses systemic discrimination, as seen when students with disabilities felt "secure" and "valid" after leading staff CPD on reasonable adjustments (Crotty et al., 2020, p. 2), demonstrating the value of student input in fixing institutional processes.

7.3 Integrate Belonging Principles into Academic Design

7.3.1 Recommendation

HEIs can systematically integrate evidence-based belonging principles, such as small-group activities and co-design, into first-year curricula and assessment design across all disciplines.

7.3.2 Background and Detail

Belonging can become an academic priority through a pedagogical shift supported by staff training (CPD). This involves peer-facilitated learning and small-group work (Gao, 2021; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Taylor Bunce, 2022), which addresses the finding that students' academic experience is a key belonging driver. The NStEP Case Studies demonstrated that even minor student involvement in assessment co-design (Lowney, 2022) significantly increases students' feeling of "input or voice" (60% agreement), making core academic processes a belonging builder. Integrating these principles is a key strategy for addressing the Eurocentric biases and curriculum content that can disproportionately undermine belonging for minority ethnic- and marginalised- students (Ajjawi et al., 2025; Amisi et al., 2024). Through co-creation, students gain a sense of pride and self-worth, such as the student who felt "proud of being part of diverse projects" (Darby & Dowling, 2020, p. 2).

7.4 Conduct Ongoing Evaluation of Belonging Initiatives

7.4.1 Recommendation

Universities should formalise and resource an institutional process for the strategic planning, empirical evaluation, and sustained promotion of all belonging initiatives across the HEI lifecycle.

7.4.2 Background

Addressing the current lack of empirical belonging assessment (Crawford et al., 2024; HCC Survey, HC Case Review; HEA, 2022) supports sustainability. Some belonging research has relied on single-item questions to assess belonging levels and its predictors (Crawford et al., 2024). Universities benefit from embedding evaluation metrics that go beyond retention and grades, focusing on students' self-reported belonging and related factors (e.g., accommodation issues), using mixed-methods assessments with a longitudinal element. This formal process, supported by clear top-down commitment (Theme 2.1), helps ensure that initiatives are not hampered by "idiosyncratic/individualised approaches" and guarantees that successful, evidence-based models are clearly identified, promoted, and replicated across the sector.

In conclusion, strengthening students' sense of belonging within higher education institutions is widely recognised as essential to creating effective, compassionate, and inclusive educational environments – fostering caring communities, supporting mental wellbeing, and promoting genuine inclusion and partnership.

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9 Appendices

Appendix A – Reflexivity Further Details

Our personal belonging experiences in HEIs

Student belonging can be a complex and highly personal experience, influenced by social locations and other personal circumstances. Its value was understood by the team: "*If you feel valued & respected you will feel you belong*" including its significant consequences "*it can really impact your time, your trajectory as a student and your success*". One team member recalled starting university at only 17 and the "*shock*" of the college environment which hindered their sense of belonging. Institutional factors that impaired their belonging included a lack of accessible student societies, distant lecturers and impersonal processes (referring to students by their numbers). Another team member reflected on being an international, commuting, student meaning social campus-based opportunities could be inaccessible. Another team member identified the institutional environment as blocking belonging as there were no "*sports facilities, no residences etc. No 'sticky spaces'*" to socialise with other students. This team member also recalled a lecturer announcing, on the first day, that only half of their cohort would progress to the next year: "*Not a great start to transitioning to university!*". Other team members highlighted socioeconomic barriers. One mentioned that working part-time out of "*necessity impacted their ability to socialise and engage in extracurricular activities*". Another team member began their degree during the COVID-19 lockdown, where despite their best efforts: "*developing a sense of belongingness was difficult … Getting to know classmates was challenging in the online environment*". One team member spoke about how students created their own sense of community by "*sharing struggles of looking for relevant work experience*" and by helping "*each other out with interview tips and sharing opportunities*". Another team member shared that, after spending their first year in college in two different countries, they knew they had to take responsibility for building a new social network at their university in Ireland: *"showing proactivity in socialising with others [and] stepping out of my comfort zone".* Additionally, personal identities shaped belonging. For example, a team member who identified as neurodivergent found a strong sense of community by openly discussing their ADHD diagnosis with others, another found their refugee status inspired compassion and curiosity in other students. Personal identities could also make belonging challenging as another team member noted they were non-religious and LGBT but felt "*isolat[ed]*" by the dominance of religion in their institution, noting in particularly they would not feel comfortable seeking from chaplaincy supports potentially due to their own misconceptions about religions being: "*pushy or silently judgemental, or just feeling like they are not meant for me*". In contrast another team member noted that they looked forward to availing of the chaplaincy services as they know: "*it is a welcoming space for all students*". Finally, the team spoke about a range of experiences that made them feel like they belonged such as academic achievement; social and academic confidence; having the opportunity to engage in late-night socialising; having opportunities to socialise/chat with other students after lectures in "*designated area with tea and snacks*"; lecturers having a "*sense of warmth and understanding towards students*"; the campus environment such as "*a space to relax and recharge*'; small group teaching including group assignments and "*psych labs*"; free sports classes at the student gym, and karaoke.

Our experiences in relation to the belonging literature and project data

Among our team, we reflected on the contrast between the broad spectrum of student focused initiatives that existed versus the sometimes minimal access of this support by many students ("*It has surprised me how many colleges have so many niche supports*"). Essentially students, particularly during orientation, may be unaware of support that exists. As such "*[there is a need for] more transparency or promotion [of belonging initiatives]*". Larger, richer, institutions were contrasted against some of the smaller institutions that some team members had studied in, noting the latter were more constrained in their student service provision and community / belonging fostering. Whilst our team accepted belonging was critical in shaping students' experiences and outcomes, it was not something we actively considered in our own educational journeys including its relation to academic success. We more often saw belonging as separate or even unrelated as something that "*remains hidden*". This partially reflected the fluctuating nature of belonging experiences (our own and others) and the way in which our belonging experiences were fostered in less formal, organic, manners. Our experiences added to the belonging literature which tended to see belonging beginning at orientation. In contrast, one team member's belonging journey in HEI was hampered before orientation, in an admissions interview, by a staff member who implied they: "*had no right to even apply … and [that] people like [them] did not belong in university at all*".

How we shaped the belonging project

Our team highlighted several key areas for the project to focus on, emphasising the need to capture a wider range of student experiences. We specifically noted that initiatives tend to attract a "*specific type of student*" and we stressed the importance of including those who are less outgoing or have significant personal responsibilities. One team member noted their concern that "*belonging initiatives may fail to reach the students who need it most*". One team member felt their smaller institution had less resources, which hindered belonging:"*the bigger the college, the more a student feels like they belong*". In contrast another team member felt belonging could and should be fostered regardless; and did not change according to institutional size. We also stressed the importance of moving beyond traditional metrics like grades to empirically assess the impact of belonging initiatives. One team member noted that very few of the initiatives they had encountered tracked outcomes related to belonging, and that staff recommendations, while valuable, would be "*more useful as a starting point*". The consensus was that our findings should be used to inform a pilot study assessing belonging among students, allowing for a more in-depth, data-driven approach. Finally, we emphasised that any proposed solutions must be realistic given the financial constraints and heavy workloads many staff and institutions face, acknowledging how hard staff already work and that "*funding in HEIs is sometimes squeezed*".

Team recommendations for building student belonging

1. Center student voices: Initiatives, activities, programmes, and events should have student voices at the heart of it. This includes specifically hearing the needs of students who are not often represented, such as those who "*have to commute*", "*don't participate in college events*" or "*have trouble in their own home/personal lives*". Centering such students may also help avoid the limits of belonging initiatives that do not cater to all students, by reinforcing a "*sense of belonging with 'in-groups' while alienating students who already feel they don't belong*". Centering student voices can also unpack what belonging means to different students whether this means academically belonging, belonging with many friends or a more intimate circle, and belonging despite or against specific institutional features.

2. Create structured connection opportunities: Institutions should provide formal and informal structured opportunities to connect and interact with one another, as many students may not do this on their own (in-class ice breakers, team work, free sports classes, spaces for coffee mornings). These should be accessibly scheduled and located and not just be centered around alcohol but cater to "*a wide range of interest-based events*".

3. Mitigate structural belonging blockers: Universities should focus on mitigating belonging barriers structurally as for some students: "*belonging is a luxury which is not high on their list of priorities until their basic needs are met*". Institutions can consider making "*hidden course fees transparent*", providing "*hardship funds*", allowing "*online engagement in class*" and "*amending timetables*" to support marginalised students who may commute or have other responsibilities. Reasonable adjustments and tailored resources may be important but some resources may be best provided for all. For example, all students benefit from clear assignment guides, slides beforehand, transcripts etc. When these are done "*on a general level for everyone and don't need to be requested*" it "*definitely increases belonging*".

4. Showcase a welcoming culture: Institutions with a "*welcoming and respectful culture and atmosphere for all students*" will foster belonging. This could entail strong, visible, and approachable student support services. Additionally, "*opportunities to meet and engage with academic staff*" who "*genuinely car[e] for students*" can meaningfully contribute to a sense of academic belonging. Finally, clearly and consistently communicating the university's diverse values can help show campus care.

Gaps in our reflexive understanding

We had experiences, relating to belonging, that were positive, neutral and negative in HEIs. We also experienced forms of marginalisation and advantage relative to other students. We drew on these experiences to shape the belonging project. However, we were mindful we had gaps in our belonging experiences particularly related to some forms of student marginalisation.

- All team members were White. We did not have any lived experience of racism, nor did we face discrimination on the basis of being a Traveller or Roma. However, we tried to be mindful that belonging among students from ethnic minority groups could be particularly constrained (e.g., because an institution's curricula was dominated by White and Western perspectives). We were also aware of the severe inequalities that Traveller and Roma students face in Irish society including higher education though this was not an explicit consideration in our interview or survey design. These are gaps in the project that future work should address.
- We did not have any lived experience of ableism. Students with disabilities' belonging can be constrained in a concrete and abstract sense. As one staff member indicated to us in our interviews, students can be blocked from physically attending campus events if they do not have wheelchair access. We wish to acknowledge this as a priority aspect for future work on belonging.

Appendix B – Healthy Campus Case Study Further Details

Case study context: The case studies' predominant focus was on health and wellbeing. Each case study amply demonstrated the hard work, innovation and dedication of its coordinators and partners in assessing and promoting wellbeing on campuses. The case studies were inspiring, impressive in their reach (often with limited resources) and can be templates for others to review and adopt.

Case study insights on belonging. Understandably with limited resources and a different remit, some case studies were unrelated to student belonging. Sometimes this was immediately clear. For example, if a case study's remit was to assess rather than improve wellbeing and/or its target was university staff only then clearly it did not relate to student belonging. Some cases were not related to student belonging because they aimed to improve a specific wellbeing issue that would typically only directly impact a small section of the study body (e.g., menstruation and breastfeeding). Among others, a significant number of the initiatives did promote belonging, sometimes directly, more often indirectly. This was particularly via the case studies' alignment with the 'Mental Health & Wellbeing' and 'Campus Culture & Communications' categories of the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework.

Methods HC Case Studies Used to Promote Belonging

The cases fostered belonging using varied methods including:

- Community-Building Events and Activities: For example, "Student Wellbeing Week" (Technological University Dublin) involved a series of student taster activities to promote wellbeing (e.g., meditation, smoothie-cycling). The direct goal was to reduce stress, combat anxiety and indirectly enhance students' campus community (and thus their belonging). Another example was the "Healthy Campus Cookbook" (Technological University Dublin) designed to solicit nutritious and sustainable recipe contributions from students and staff. Recipes were solicited, analysed by nutrition students and curated into a cookbook, which itself was disseminated through multiple channels including a cooking demonstration launch event on campus and a prize scheme. This shared resource may have indirectly promoted a sense of community through collective effort. Finally, the Peer-to-Peer "Be MindfUL" program (University of Limerick) involved a series of evening workshops and dinners aiming to "foster a supportive community" through wellbeing based- awareness training (e.g., reducing alcohol harm).
- Volunteering Promotion: *Student Volunteer Ireland's* was a case that primarily created a platform to recognise, streamline and promote student volunteering across Ireland. This may have fostered belonging by encouraging meaningful engagement between students and wider communities within and outside of the university.
- Wellbeing Promotion Campaigns: Initiatives like Couch to 5K & Fun Runs (Technological University Dublin) and Period Promise/Nail The Stigma (ATU) aimed to create a campus environment that fostered greater wellbeing. For the former, students who avail of this healthier environment and healthier behaviours (e.g., smoking cessation) may have improved wellbeing and ability to participate in other campus activities thus indirectly improving student belonging. The latter initiative can directly improve belonging by removing a common barrier to lecture and campus participation – period stigma and period poverty.

Challenges from HC Case Study Review

Lack of empirical belonging assessment: Currently there is a lack of explicit empirical evidence demonstrating *improved* belonging. However, some analyses are ongoing (e.g., UL's MindFul programme was robustly assessed with a pre-, post- and follow up set of surveys). Robust evaluation of specific belonging impacts may be a key area for future development. This might involve assessing self-reported belonging, sense of community and connection or analysing existing data connected to belonging such as student retention and participation rates.

Promotion and engagement challenges: Some case studies (e.g., TUD's Cookbook) highlighted how essential promotion was to student attendance and engagement. Despite extensive planning and resourcing, if promotion and marketing of initiatives is not strong then students will not be able to engage. Effective marketing, promotion and accessibility for initiatives to reach a wide study audience may be important.

Finite resources: Some case studies provide a potential demonstration of cost effectiveness where for relatively minimal funding, wellbeing could be meaningfully impacted in innovative ways (e.g., through the cost of prizes in a community-based exercise competition or the cost of printing a cookbook). However more usually funding and staff labour is required, particularly to roll out initiatives, to the general student body. Without these resources in place from the institution, belonging initiatives may be hampered.

Practical barriers / idiosyncratic/ individualised strategies: Fostering belonging can be hindered without the infrastructure in place to bring people together. On campus, in person, initiatives must contend with students' long commutes, housing issues, limited free time and incomes etc. Off campus initiatives also face barriers including students' limited time, limited technology access whilst at home and the inauthenticity that virtuality can sometimes engender in building social connections etc.

Recommendations from HC Case Studies

These initiatives revealed four ways for promoting student belonging, including resources to meet students' fundamental needs, peer-to-peer advocacy, targeted support for marginalised students and community wide wellbeing programmes. By assessing the resources required and the reach of the initiatives, below we highlight possible case studies that demonstrate each of these four ways to promote belonging and wellbeing.

1. Concrete Resources for Students Fundamental Needs

Institutions promoted belonging by demonstrating care for students' basic needs, which would otherwise hinder their participation on campus and their ability to belong.

- ATU: Period Promise: This resource directly addressed period poverty and stigma. An unspecified level of funding was secured in 2022 from the HEA Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and was matched by ATU. The initial investment was used to purchase and install over 190 free product dispensers across nine campuses, with the cost of products being a recurring expense. These resources were also complemented by a campaign, "NailTheStigma" that sought to destigmatise periods, a basic but prevalent barrier to campus life participation.

- DCU: The Pantry: Responding to research showing that 25% of students worried about affording food, The Pantry provided free meals and toiletries as well as a place for students to socialise. While specific funding figures were not provided, the case study noted that staffing costs were the largest resource requirement. Utilised by over 2,800 students in one semester alone, its success was reflected in its high demand and the clear sense of community it built.
- UCD: Free Commuter Breakfasts: This weekly social hub, with a range of free breakfasts, was targeted at commuter students, a group often disconnected from campus life. It had high attendance and was run by the Students' Union, meaning its resource costs were likely in-house.

2. Facilitating Peer-Led and Community-Focused Social Connections

Belonging was effectively promoted through social settings and programs that brought students and staff together for a shared purpose.

- TUD: Couch to 5k/ Fun Runs & DkIT's Fittest: These two exercise challenges built community through shared, low-pressure activities. DkIT's "Fittest" challenge engaged 170 participants, who collectively logged 10.5 million steps, with €1,000 in funding from Healthy Louth used for prizes and promotion. Similarly, TUD's Fun Runs, with a budget of just €600, created a "sense of belonging, pride, and accomplishment" for all participants through its celebratory, inclusive run activities that incorporated in-house promotion and prizes.
- NCAD: Food and Care: This workshop for all 320 incoming students used food and storytelling to promote community and belonging. The initiative was funded through Healthy Campus seed funding and supplemented by college resources. Its main resources were the time of staff, the use of the cafeteria space, and art materials. One staff facilitator noted that students "came into the room individually but left in groups as friends". This also led to the formation of a student-led society emphasising longevity.
- TUD: Healthy Campus Cookbook: This project fostered belonging through cooking collaboration. It received 60 recipe submissions from the university community, which were nutritionally analysed by TUD nutrition students. A shared university resource was thus created, which cost just €1,400, through printing limited copies of a cookbook. An event launch and prizes for the recipe competition was also held.
- UL: BioBlitz: This project brought students, staff, and expert local ecologists together to connect with their university in an environmental initiative involving nature walks and the documentation of the species observed on the campus. It also created mentoring opportunities between students and experienced biodiversity recorders. Seventeen students and seven local ecologists took part, with a prize awarded to the top recorder.The project created a sense of campus pride: "Everyone who visited UL for the first time and all of us who took part were greatly impressed and proud of our campus".

3. Targeted Support for Marginalised Students

Marginalised students who may face additional belonging challenges were targeted by HEI initiatives.

- TCD: Ethnic Minorities Support Group: This group created a psychologically safe space for students from ethnic minority groups to discuss issues like micro-aggressions, racism and acculturative stress. While the specific funding is unspecified, the group's operation within the Trinity Student Counselling Service suggested that resources were provided from the university's support services budget. The success is captured in student testimonials (e.g., "[it was] incredibly supportive and affirming").
- The RCSI Mental Health First Aid program enabled 15 medical student participants to feel they had gained "essential mental health communication skills" via training. The students were given an intensive certification and costs included catering, manuals, and an additional instructor. This initiative promoted a collective culture of care, making students, particularly those with mental health difficulties, feel more connected.
- ATU: I-SWAP: This intervention involved an 8-week Mental Health Literacy and Well-being Program delivered by trained facilitators. It was co-created by students with ADHD and was participated in by 39 students. The project was funded by the HEA North-South Research program. A rigorous evaluation found that participants "particularly liked the sense of community/belonging developed through the sessions" and the program led to a reduction in depression and an increase in self-esteem.

4. Campus Wide Wellbeing Initiatives

Belonging was also promoted through activities and events that promoted wellbeing, holistically, across campuses.

- TUD: Student Wellbeing Week: This initiative aimed to promote student engagement in on-campus wellbeing events to reduce student exam anxiety, encourage physical activity, arts and crafts, mindfulness and improve mental health prior to examinations. The project was funded by internal TU Dublin funding from different service providers and departments, and cost €10,000. This project created a positive "feel-good" atmosphere on campus throughout the week with over 350 students engaging in anxiety reducing activities prior to their exams.
- UL: Student Designated Contact Persons Panel (SDCPP): This project aimed to foster a supportive and responsive campus culture the promotes student wellbeing as a priority and addressing and prevent sexual violence and harassment in their institution. The SDCPP acts as a fully trained first point of contact for students who have experienced or are currently experiencing incidents of sexual violence and harassment (SVH). The SDCPP provides immediate, empathetic support and guides affected students through the available support services, both internally and externally, to aid their recovery. The impact of this initiative has yet to be assessed.
- UL: Be MindfUL program promoted belonging through inclusive peer support. The program, with a cost of approximately €2,500 per semester, engaged over 100 students in workshops that included training on cultural competencies, creating a broad peer-to-peer support network. This initiative made students feel more connected via their peers.

Appendix C – National Policy Alignment Table Summary

National Policy Alignment

The National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (9 Themes)	Evidence of Alignment
1. Build and support national and institutional strategies for student mental health	n/a
2. Develop partnerships on campus and in the community with health services to support student mental health	✔
3. Build campus knowledge and skills on student mental health and suicide prevention	n/a
4. Create campus communities that are connected, safe, nurturing, inclusive and compassionate	✔
5. Prioritise awareness training for all staff and students to enhance recognition and referral	n/a
6. Provide students with safe, accessible and well-resourced mental health support	n/a
7. Ensure that institutions have the critical incident protocols required for varying levels of student mental health crisis	n/a
8. Establish student supports throughout the higher education journey	✔
9. Collect and analyse data to inform measures to improve student mental health	✘

The Healthy Campus Charter and Framework. *We will:*	Evidence of Alignment
1. Promote the health and wellbeing of our students, staff and wider community through our institution's mission, strategy, policies, plans and practices, in line with the International Okanagan Charter.	✔
2. Act to create empowered, thriving, connected campus communities that foster an ethic of care, compassion, equality and inclusion.	✔
3. Identify and act on opportunities to support the health and wellbeing of students, staff and the wider community through the built, natural, social, economic, cultural, academic, organisational and learning environments in a sustainable way.	✔
4. Identify and act on opportunities to integrate health and wellbeing into the teaching and learning, research and services of all Departments, thus ensuring the development of citizens with the capacity to improve health and wellbeing of the wider community in their future life and work.	n/a
5. Consider how our planning and decision making for teaching, learning and assessment, research and knowledge exchange impact on health and wellbeing.	n/a
6. Adopt a strategic approach to promoting health and wellbeing on campus, that reflects locally identified needs and national health priorities, which is guided by the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework.	n/a
7. Engage in the National Healthy Campus Network to share our learning and work in partnership, as appropriate, to build evidence of effective approaches to developing a healthy campus.	✔
8. Contribute to research and collaborations to promote health and wellbeing locally and globally in line with the Okanagan Charter.	✔

Appendix D – AI Analysis steps

Step 1: Master prompt outlining detailed instructions for thematic analysis to Gemini AI

"Please conduct a reflexive thematic analysis on transcribed interview data from staff working to improve student belonging at Irish higher education institutions. The research aims to address the following questions (Please ensure that these are central to the development of themes).

- What challenges to engaging students are there to belonging initiatives?
- What institutional barriers are there to student belonging?
- What scalable and effective student belonging interventions are there?
- How can students partner with institutions to improve student belonging?
- How do institutions cater for belonging needs for different groups of students (particularly those who are marginalised)?

In your analysis, please explicitly state this adopted researcher perspective and how it frames the interpretation of the data. The researchers believe that first-year transitions, accommodation, clubs and societies, and a holistic institutional approach are particularly needed to improve belonging, and that belonging can be especially lacking in marginalised students (including those who are from ethnic minoriy groups, international, low income, and first generation). Belonging is important across the student life cycle from pre-entry to finishing. The researchers also wish to avoid blaming overworked staff or making unrealistic recommendations.

We are interviewing university staff to understand how they enable and foster students' connectedness and belonging. They work in one of the following roles: chaplaincy (CP), accommodation & residences (AR), clubs & societies (CS), student partnerships (SP), orientations (O), access & lifelong learning (ALL). One participant is from an academic background (Acad.). The analysis should follow a critical realist perspective (realist ontology and relativistic epistemology). When developing themes, please actively consider and comment on how a participant's specific role, knowledge, and experience influences their perspective on a given issue. Use these differing perspectives to build a more complex, multi-layered understanding of the factors that impact student belonging.

Conduct this analysis on the following chunked (number of transcripts) interview transcripts.

- Identify themes and subthemes that represent patterns across the transcripts as a whole, not within individual interviews. Each theme should have a clear title, detailed description, and be supported by illustrative quotes (clearly identifying the interview transcript it comes from).
- For each theme, synthesise the perspectives from different roles, noting points of convergence (where staff agree despite their different roles) and divergence (where their roles lead them to different conclusions or priorities). All themes should explicitly connect the findings to the central research aim: understanding, building, and sustaining student belonging in Irish higher education. Use a clear and professional academic

tone. Do not use any other data apart from these prompts including the transcripts. Only use the participant's responses as data and do not analyse the interviewer's questions or speech. Do not hallucinate any information. Please wait until I send the transcripts in the next prompt".

Step 2: Insert transcripts into AI prompt splitter

Step 3: Send instructions to Gemini AI

"The total length of the content that I want to send you is too large to send in only one piece. For sending you that content, I will follow this rule:

[START PART 1/12]

this is the content of the part 1 out of 12 in total

[END PART 1/12]

Then you just answer: "Received part 1/12"

And when I tell you "ALL PARTS SENT", then you can continue processing the data and answering my requests".

Step 4: Send chunked transcripts in parts 1–18 … Gemini AI instructed to begin analysis only once all parts are sent

Step 5: Ask Gemini AI to incorporate researcher generated codes

"Please revisit and refine your earlier analysis using the following researcher-generated codes for each transcript (based on manual analysis)

Specifically:

- Use the researcher-generated codes to inform your understanding of the transcripts.
- Use this knowledge to further develop and guide the analysis.
- If relevant, highlight any discrepancies between your initial analysis and the researcher generated codes that may require further human interpretation.

* Researcher codes were provided independently for each transcript, following the format of belonging builders and blockers*"

Step 6: Integration of transcripts and researcher codes for latent analysis

"Now, can you use all of the information you have received to provide a full refined analysis of themes and subthemes.

- Beyond explicit topics, what latent themes or underlying assumptions can you infer from the transcripts? Provide as many illustrative quotes as possible to support each theme, clearly noting which transcript they originate from.
- Note if there are any limitations or ambiguities in the transcripts that make a definitive interpretation challenging? In this case, suggest alternative interpretations for further human review."

Step 7: The team reviewed these themes in a meeting and identified areas for Gemini AI to amend the analysis

"Thank you for this analysis. Please develop it further based on the following feedback: The themes are good but very brief, too quote heavy without much analytical text. Some quotes could be shortened and integrated into the analytical text".

Step 8: Further instructions for Gemini AI to refine analysis based on team feedback and integrating survey responses

"Please conduct the analysis with the following amendments:

1. Some participants chose to share their views in survey format, instead of an interview. Please integrate these survey responses as part of the data to be analysed alongside the transcripts.
2. Make these changes to the analysis:

- The format of integrating quotes within analytical text is very good. Please continue to use this format.
- For theme 2 – Change sub-themes to institutional blockers of belonging, and builders of belonging.
- For theme 3 – What is missing is the importance of peer connections and friendships for students, separate from the formal peer support. We discussed how students want friends. Please add another subtheme that reflects this and look for meaningful new quotes from the transcripts.
- Theme 4 – Integrate subtheme 4.3 with 4.2 as they are very similar.

Insert survey responses

Further instructions for Gemini AI to refine the themes and subthemes based on team discussions through an iterative process were undertaken.

Appendix E – Healthy Campus Staff Survey Details

HC Survey Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet// Research Project: Exploring Student Belonging in Irish Higher Education Institutions.

We invite you to participate in a research study. Before you decide, please read the information below carefully. If you have any questions, feel free to contact the researchers using the details at the bottom of this page.

What is this research about? This brief survey aims to gather insights from HEA Healthy Campus Coordinators regarding student belonging. It will explore aspects such as student partnership in initiatives and how impact is measured Example questions include: "To what extent are students actively partnered in your institution's belonging and wellbeing initiatives? (Please leave blank if you're unsure)" and "For any such belonging-focused projects, please briefly describe a key success and a significant challenge. How do you typically measure their impact?"

Why are we doing this research? This survey is run by Professor Barbara Dooley and her team at UCD, Dublin on behalf of the HEA. The findings will contribute to a HEA report focusing on the scalability of student belonging initiatives, in addition to potential teaching and academic outputs.

Why have you been invited to take part? We invite you to participate because your experience as a HEA Healthy Campus Coordinator is highly valuable to this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.

How will your data be used? All responses will be confidential and anonymised. Your data will be used in a HEA report and may also contribute to teaching and academic outputs.

What will happen if you decide to take part? First, we will ask for your consent. Then, you will complete an online survey that will take approximately 30 minutes. The survey will ask about your institution's approach to student belonging, successful initiatives, challenges faced, and methods of measuring impact. No questions are obligatory; please skip any you wish to. We will also ask for some demographic information.

How will your privacy be protected? All information collected will be kept private and anonymised. Your personal details will be removed from all reports, and your data will be stored securely. While we take careful steps to protect your privacy, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Data will be retained for three years and then securely destroyed.

What are the benefits of taking part? While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation will directly contribute to a HEA report informing the scalability of student belonging initiatives across Irish HEIs.

What are the risks of taking part? This is a minimum-risk study. Potential risks include minor inconvenience due to the time commitment. If any questions cause discomfort, you are free to skip them.

Can you change your mind and withdraw from the study? Yes, you can stop the survey at any time without penalty. Once you submit your responses your data will be anonymised and so will not be possible to be withdrawn.

How will I find out what happens with this project? The findings will be incorporated into a HEA report, and there may be other academic outputs. Your identity will remain confidential in all reports.

Contact details for further information: Dr. Glen Jankowski: glen.jankowski@ucd.ie & Professor Barbara Dooley: barbara.dooley@ucd.ie

Thank you very much for your consideration.

HC Brief Survey Consent Form

By proceeding, I confirm I've read the study information and am happy to ask any questions if needing more information. I understand my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw before response submission. I agree to my anonymised responses being used for the UCD/HEA report and other academic purposes. I also understand that demographic data collected will not be personally traceable.

HC Survey Questions

- Background: Please indicate what proportion of your full time institutional role is or was taken up with Healthy Campus work?
  - Closed-ended response: 0-100%
- Background: What is your gender?
  - Open ended response
- How would you define student belonging within the context of your institution?
  - Open ended response
- To what extent is student belonging an explicit and clearly communicated priority within your overall Healthy Campus and wellbeing initiatives? (0 = Not at all to 5 = Very Much)
- How does this focus on student belonging influence your institution's Healthy Campus initiatives or future plans?
  - Open ended response
- For any belonging-focused projects/initiatives, please briefly describe: a) A key success: b) A significant challenge & c) How you typically measure their impact?
  - Open ended response
- How important is student belonging to your institution? *(Consider factors such as attainment, retention, progression and onboarding).*
  - Close ended response: 0 = Not at all important to 5 = Very Important

- What works well in promoting student belonging and how can other institutions adopt this?
  - Open ended response
- What challenges are there to fostering student belonging and how can we avoid these?
  - Open ended response
- What is needed to ensure scalability and long term sustainability of institution initiatives (e.g., that promote student belonging and/or healthy campuses)?*Note: Consider coordinator handovers, training manuals, long term funding.*
  - Open ended response
- Which of your institution's features do you think most effectively promotes student belonging?
  - Close-ended response. Participants selected all and any of a fixed list including *"The classroom", "The department or faculty", "Students' Union", "Sports Clubs", "Societies", "Social spaces such as the canteen or common room", "Study spaces such as the library", "Academic support services", "Wellbeing support services", "Online community spaces", and "Other …".*
- Which areas at your institution do you think student belonging could be most improved?
  - Close-ended response. Participants selected all and any of a fixed list including *"Policy development", "Strategies development", "Staff resourcing", "Funding for initiatives", "Collaboration with external organisations", "Collaboration with other offices/departments", "None, we are doing really well", or "Other …."*
- Is there anyone else involved in promoting student belonging we should send this survey to? *(Please provide their email address if possible)*
  - Open ended response
- If you would be interested in being interviewed via Zoom (likely during July 2025) to discuss student belonging further please click this link here to read the full information sheet and book an interview slot: [url].
- Finally, is there anything else you'd like to add?
  - Open ended response

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