# Stop, Collaborate and Listen:

## Moving Beyond Ice-Breakers in Understanding Sense of Belonging in Law Schools

**Professor Lydia Bleasdale (School of Law, University of Leeds)**
L.K.Bleasdale@leeds.ac.uk

**Jill Dickinson (Leeds Beckett University)**
S.J.Dickinson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Whilst there has been some debate around what constitutes sense of belonging,[1] it is generally considered to be a multi-faceted concept[2] with common understandings centring around 'the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical spaces, and individual and collective experiences.'[3] Fostering sense of belonging is pivotal within Higher Education[4] given growing understandings of the positive benefits that it generates, including increased motivation, confidence, engagement, and achievement[5] wellbeing and self-worth;[6] and 'meaning of life.'[7]  The literature notes how sense of

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[1] Johnson, R.M. and Strayhorn, T.L. (2025). Fostering Belonging Through Academic Affairs: Advancing policy and practice. New Directions for Higher Education, 2025, 5-8. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20528.

2 Raines, A.R., Francis, G.L., Fujita, M., and Macedonia, A. (2023). Belonging from the perspectives of individuals with disabilities: A scoping review. *Psychology in the Schools,* 60(6), 2112-2127. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22864.

[3] Allen, K.A., Kern, M.L., Rozek, C.S., McInereney, D., Slavich, G.M. (2021). Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 73*(1), 87-102. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409.

[4] Johnson, R.M. and Strayhorn, T.L. (2025). Fostering Belonging Through Academic Affairs: Advancing policy and practice. New Directions for Higher Education, 2025, 5-8. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20528.

[5] Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2022). A sense of belonging at university: student retention, motivation and enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *46*(3), 397–408. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844.

[6] Ruedas-Gracia, N., Botham, C.M., Moore, A.R., and Peña, C. (2022). Ten simple rules for creating a sense of belonging in your research group. *PLOS Computational Biology 18*(12), e1010688. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1010688.

[7] Lambert, N. M., Stillman, T. F., Hicks, J. A., Kamble, S., Baumeister, R. F., & Fincham, F. D. (2013). To belong is to matter: Sense of belonging enhances meaning in life. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 39*(11), 14181427. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213499186 .

belonging can also positively impact certain groups, including first-generation university students[8] and those studying online.[9] Whilst the benefits of, and potential for, developing a sense of belonging are well-recognised, findings from the HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey 2022 demonstrate how only 45% of respondents reported feeling a sense of belonging at their university.[10] Such issues are compounded by the differences of opinion around how best to achieve sense of belonging in practice[11] and the multiplicity of relevant factors involved.[12] Given such challenges, the forthcoming edited collection on *Student Belonging in Higher Education: Perspectives and Practice*[13] will be a particularly timely contribution to the ongoing discussions and debate.

Within the field of Legal Education, studies have called for stakeholders, including senior leadership, academics, professional services colleagues, and employers, to develop more nuanced understandings of students and their lived experiences of the Law School that can affect their sense of belonging.[14] There are continuing discussions and debates around the future of learning landscapes,[15] and calls for Higher Education Institutions to meet

[8] Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2022). A sense of belonging at university: student retention, motivation and enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *46*(3), 397–408. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844.

[9] Dulfer, N., Gowing, A., & Mitchell, J. (2025). Building belonging in online classrooms: relationships at the core. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2024.2349993.

[10] Neves, J. and Brown, A. (2022). *Student Academic Experience Survey. (*Advance HE and HEPI). https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey.pdf

[11] Allen, K.A., Kern, M.L., Rozek, C.S., McInereney, D., Slavich, G.M. (2021). Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 73*(1), 87-102. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409.

[12] Blake, S., Capper, G., and Jackson, A. (2022). *Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach*. (Wonkhe and Pearson). https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf.

[13] Young Ahn, M., Venn, E., and Lowe, T. (eds). *Student Belonging in Higher Education: Perspectives and Practice* (Routledge, 2026).

[14] See for example Bodamer, E. (2020). Do I Belong Here? Examining Perceived Experiences of Bias, Stereotype Concerns, and Sense of Belonging in U.S. Law Schools. *Journal of Legal Education, 69*(2), 455-490. https://jle.aals.org/home/vol69/iss2/11/

- [15] Elkington, S and Dickinson, J (2025) Editorial: Reimagining Higher Education Learning Spaces: Assembling Theory, Methods, and Practice. *Higher Education Research and Development, 44* (1), 8-19.https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2438587.
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their social responsibilities.[16] Against that backdrop, this Special Issue contributes to existing understanding about students' and academics' belonging in law schools by: introducing and exploring new data; problematising the concept of belonging; considering initiatives which have been shown to support student sense of belonging (or which have the potential to); as well as making recommendations for future research and practice in this area.

We begin with Emma Jones, Angela Sorsby and Christopher Daniel Lomas discussing trauma-informed learning, particularly in an online context during the Covid-19 pandemic. Jones et al. draw upon the results of their online survey with 121 students at the School of Law, University of Sheffield (conducted during lockdown in 2020). Through the paper, Jones et al. describe the various approaches that are highlighted in the findings from this study as 'simply good practice' that have the potential to support all students. In doing so, they note a need for law schools to move towards becoming 'truly trauma-informed' by basing their approaches on four, key principles. First, there needs to be a recognition that both students and staff can be affected by trauma. Second, law schools should note the links between trauma and social injustice, and take the lead in confronting any associated challenges through advocating trauma-informed practice. Third, law schools should adopt a more holistic approach that embeds trauma-informed practices across their activities. Finally, there are opportunities for institutions to provide law school communities with appropriate training and resources to help develop trauma-informed practices. Jones et al. conclude there are opportunities for some re-imagining of legal education without requiring widespread or substantial change, and call for 'the prevalence and long-term impacts of trauma to be explicitly acknowledged and responded to within all aspects of legal education' in order 'to foster belonging within law schools and provide a post-Covid-19 environment that understands the lived experience of its community and responds in a way which promotes flourishing and growth.'

Verona Ni Drisceoil reflects upon the experiences of a sometimes-neglected group within the student belonging literature, namely academics. Buy-in for belonging work requires academic engagement, understanding and authentic enthusiasm, with Ni Drisceoil's piece helping us to better understand how to leverage those qualities. In calling for critical reflection upon our approach to, and understanding of, belonging – including challenging perceptions of who is responsible for ensuring a sense of community and belonging,

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[16] Hayter, C.S., & Cahoy, D.R. (2018). Toward a strategic view of higher education social responsibilities: A dynamic capabilities approach. *Strategic Organization, 16*(1),https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127016680564.

especially for students – Ni Drisceoil encourages us to work towards a more equal allocation of, and reward for, the labour of community and belonging within law schools.

Foluke Adebisi continues with Ni Drisceoil's theme of problematising 'belonging' and 'community', further developing the argument that these senses are not understood and 'done' by all members of law school communities in the same ways, or to the same extents. In exploring why race is important to 'belonging' within the context of Higher Education (HE), Adebisi recognises the sector's metrication of engagement, retention, and attainment, and notes how institutional systems that promote students to feel comfortable, safe, and secure (in terms of both self-perception and perceptions by others) can support students to thrive within the university setting, and decrease the awarding gap. Adebisi also examines what role the content and approaches of law school curricula have in creating 'unbelonging', and warns against adopting a performative approach in addressing racial injustices and racialised unbelonging that disregards the inherent complexities around how they are created, proliferated, and felt. Through the research, Adebisi calls for law schools to engage with 'the history of racialised enslavement and dispossessive colonisation' through adopting 'an honest and rigorous' approach to begin the process of 'unbelonging.'

Rachael O'Connor's piece considers 'unbelonging' from the perspective of students who self-identify as working class, with a particular emphasis upon how imposter phenomenon can affect their engagement with support and their sense of belonging. O'Connor draws upon findings from Listening Rooms[17] – conducted with seven Law students at a Russell Group University – to argue that law schools can help mitigate the negative effect that imposter syndrome has on the student experience; as well as to advocate for the expansion of such research by examining working the experiences of working-class academics in law.

The final pieces of the Special Issue offer insights into how student and staff belonging might – despite the varied challenges explored in the first half of the Issue – be supported within law schools.  Karina Murray and Pariz Lythgo-Gordon evaluate the long-standing 'pod' system that was first introduced at the University of Wollongong in 2006, whereby students are allocated to a group of approximately 25 for studying and timetabling purposes. Following the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data gathered from 125 student participants and 9 academic participants, Murray and Lythgo-Gordon conclude

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[17] Heron, E. (2020). Friendship as method: reflections on a new approach to understanding student experiences in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *44*(3), 393–407. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1541977.

that activities which create small group, student learning communities, especially for first-year students, promote feelings of connected-ness and confidence. The development of such 'pods' offers opportunities for fostering sense of belonging, a positive learning environment, and student wellbeing.

David Yuratich examines another long-standing, but more widespread, student initiative which might conventionally be considered to only have academic and employability benefits; namely, student law reviews. Following a systematic review of varying types of student law reviews, Yuratich provides insight into the Royal Holloway students' experiences of volunteering on a student law journal. He reports on findings from his research that demonstrate how there was a positive correlation between involvement in the law review and sense of belonging, with three factors (the extent to which students could develop and enjoy relationships with their peers; positive exchanges with faculty; and the extent to which students felt they could support their school) being especially key to sense of community. Yuratich ends by calling for a 'playbook of best practices' around the creation and practice of law reviews to increase so that the community, belonging, and other benefits can be maximised.

As a collection, the papers demonstrate the complexities in defining, understanding, and experiencing belonging and addressing related challenges. Whilst the contributors all agree on the importance of this concept, their research evidences how this concept can mean different things to different people at different times and in different contexts. Particularly within an increasingly difficult HE environment which is characterised by depleting resources, it can be challenging for law schools and their institutions to fully understand the issues presented around belonging and provide tailored offers to meet diverse needs. Together, these papers illuminate a clear need for further theoretical and empirical research in this area to develop broader and deeper understandings around the issues, what works (and what doesn't), and what may be possible in terms of developing future interventions, evaluations, and iterative practices.