

SEHEJ Special Issue 2024 – Editorial

"Where do we belong?" Collaborative Insights from RAISE Special Issue Groups' (Early Careers and Research Evaluation) Writing Project

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The shared vision between the RAISE Network's Early Careers Researchers and the Research and Evaluation Special Interest Groups (SIGs) curated this collaborated Special Journal Issue. We are pleased to share the sixteen articles in this edition, with a common theme of belonging and identity within higher education (HE). Insights were from colleagues who are, for some, new in publishing in student engagement, whereas, for others, they classify themselves as being at an early career stage. Therefore, this issue aims to support these groups of colleagues in their professional development and continue supporting the Development Route opportunity offered via this SEHEJ journal.

To start, collaborative articles from the guest editors documented the rationales and how groups of authors emerged from our two SIGs' activities, forming collaborative writing groups cross-institutions and supporting the writing groups during the publication process. Here, Sum et al. shared their reflections on the publication process via a "Q&As - A Conversation with the Editors", giving the readers insights into the thoughts behind the writing project. This was followed by Leubsen et al. "RAISE Special Interest Groups (Early Career Researchers and Research & Evaluation) Collaboration: A Case Study", discussing how the SIGs activity led to the forming and supporting the collaborative writing groups and the publication process. Undoubtedly, the learnings from these two articles hope to inspire colleagues from across the higher education sector to collaborate with meaningful learnings and experiences.

We had many contributions to this special issue that the volume, challenges and voices from the student engagement community face. Sense of belonging was the prominent theme in this special issue. Of the eight articles, Clough et al. explored the challenges and barriers for first-year home and international students in HE in the UK and Ireland through a scoping review, highlighting the importance of nurturing an effective and inclusive environment to facilitate the successful transition for both home and international students. An article by Pervez et al. continues this theme by examining the provision of support for mature international students at UK HEIs to foster belonging. Despite the wide range of support to foster the belonging of mature or international students, the provision to cater for mature international students remains underprovided. Looking further into the importance of building and fostering peer communities, Palfrey, a case study, provided insights into male-identifying dancers within Higher Education. Here, the author highlights how having role models in a particular underrepresented area to enhance a sense of community can inspire

young male dancers and performers, contributing to student engagement and wellbeing within HE.

Curriculum-related activity was highlighted as an approach to offer students opportunities to enhance their university and student experiences. Oliveira and Daya suggest that using placements as communities of practice is beneficial not only for students but also for universities and employers. Here, the article draws on a reflective account demonstrating how communities of practice can be a framework for social learning to support students in engaging with the discipline, offering valuable experiences, and supporting students as graduates ready. Another example is from Mills and Payne, a case study examining how using collaborative drawing as a tool can create a sense of community among architecture students. Here, the authors demonstrate that not only does collaborative drawing be viewed as a community of practice to improve a sense of belonging, but it also encourages students to develop other forgotten skills to improve communication between students, contributing to better wellbeing. The impacts of a sense of belonging could also influence students' attendance and engagement behaviours. Kirby-Hawkins examined the intersectionality of students' identities and life demands, suggesting that as students' needs evolve, addressing the challenges in response to societal changes like shifting to hybrid learning requires a nuanced understanding of students' responsibilities both within and beyond the classroom. Thus, recognising these dynamics becomes crucial for providing greater flexibility and accessibility to influence class attendance and engagement behaviours.

Succeeding in HE is undoubtedly complex. The experiences and sense of belonging are a few examples of students' challenges. Yet, the representation of culture and its sensitivity could arguably be another perspective impacting student success and sense of belonging. In an article from Cook, the representation and sense of belonging for People of the Global Majority in HE was examined, highlighting the discrepancies in representation and cultural awareness in HE. Thus, therefore, there is a need to acknowledge the support required for students from different ethnic background for equality and HE success. Extending this theme further, Hughes et al. provided a student voice paper on their lived experiences working as Student Inclusion Consultants, highlighting the importance of student voice as underrepresented students and the impacts they can contribute within HE. In contrast, Sum shared an opinion piece on her experience in navigating her professional identity as an ethnic minority early career academic and highlighted the challenges and ups and downs contributing to questioning "who am I?" as she develops her career. As a result, the discussion on the ethnicity award gap remains an ongoing topic within HE. Here, Kwofie et al. co-created an action research project to understand the experience of underrepresented students and highlighted the continuing challenge of widening and access participation at various levels within an institution. Considering this theme, embodying a sense of community is not just directly understanding and providing support for everyone but also catering to the needs of students from the underrepresented population.

The impacts of student engagement can also contribute to students' wellbeing, as suggested by Hayes and Serbic's article on the importance of having a wellbeing day

to promote wellbeing within the student population. This paper is a reminder to acknowledge students' wellbeing and place students at the heart of institutional activities. Though there may often be challenges for students to engage, inviting students to be co-producers of any strategies may benefit students' HE experiences. Other examples of including students in activities were using digital technology tools, as addressed by three papers in this journal issue. Brar et al. used an active approach to develop students' teamwork skills and confidence through gamification as an icebreaker and increase student engagement. Similarly, Nahar et al.'s case study using a critical narrative inquiry approach via vignettes allows students to participate in technology-enhanced learning activities to develop innovative solutions through their knowledge and skills in technology integration. Chandarana et al., on the other hand, provided a more disciplinary example of how the use of digital technology can help encourage learning communities and connected curricula, emphasising the importance of multidisciplinary teams. This provides value to the curriculum and develops support to enhance a sense of belonging within the community.

We had many contributions to this special issue. While we could not include everyone, the content shared by colleagues highlights the challenges that we continue to face. Who we are and having an identity while embracing our sense of belonging is complex. But to continue supporting our HE landscape, it has been highlighted that there is no single answer to solve all the challenges we face. Lived experiences and voices are to be heard, and this special issue has achieved that. As guest editors, we would like to thank all colleagues for sharing their work and, for some, giving you the first experience and opportunity of collaborating with others to publish within student engagement.