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Mattering vs belonging and the impact of academic advisors: online professional part-time students – a case study

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Presentation abstract

Belonging is not a new concept: it has been around for some time in higher education. The 'What works? Student retention and success' report concluded that 'belonging is critical to student retention and success' (Thomas, 2012). However, this can be difficult to achieve for some students such as those who study online. The research around a sense of belonging amongst online students, who have limited time and opportunities to participate in activities used to promote belonging at universities, is limited (Peacock et al., 2020). With an increase in online and blended courses within higher education (Dumford and Miller, 2018), mattering may be a more important factor for such students.

Mattering as defined by Dixon and Tucker (2008), is an individual's perception that they are important and are valued in their interpersonal relationships. Academic advisors have a key role in mattering: by building individual relations with students they can have a positive impact on feelings of mattering. McIntosh et al. (2020) found that students who feel supported by their academic advisors go on to have successful tutoring relationships. In a case study conducted within a Higher Education Institute that provides fully online courses for part-time professional students, the author examined feelings of mattering and belonging amongst level 5 and 6 undergraduate students. The case study found that the individual mattering relationships were more important than belonging to students who participated in the study. Students valued members of staff who went 'above and beyond' and showed care and mattering. Academic Advisors were key members of staff for these mattering relationships.

If students feel that they matter, this may well lead to an increased feeling of belonging and this is something that should be explored further.

Keywords: belonging; mattering; online.

Community response

The speaker explored the sense of belonging and mattering for students participating in part-time online undergraduate programmes at the University College of Estate Management, a specialist university offering courses to students in the Built Environment. The study aimed to discover what influenced students' feelings of mattering and/or belonging, including the role of professional services. Another area to explore was the role of academic advisors in mattering and creating personal relations with students. The author argued that the students' sense of belonging would increase if they felt they mattered.

The presentation, which was very well received by attendees, highlighted the distinction between mattering and belonging. The attendees' engagement with the presentation and positive response to the author's insights showed their interest and commitment to creating an inclusive educational environment that promotes mattering and belonging for students.

Thanks for sharing your experiences, Jacqui.

The author's insight about the distinction between mattering and belonging, focused on online students with a lack of, or limited, interaction with peers and staff, and informed educators to better support students. The attendees, especially those in the learning development (LD) field with less direct contact with students found this topic stimulating and eye opening. This study provided them with valuable insights into the online students' experience and that the sector needed to provide opportunities for these students to interact with their tutors and support staff. The presenter discussed the implications of Lifelong Loan Entitlement on a student's sense of belonging and/or mattering and shaping their academic experiences and well-being.

I am also talking about 'belonging' in another context and will add 'mattering' to it.

Since this session, I have been really thinking about the difference between mattering and belonging and how they interact. I have started gathering literature

around 'mattering'. It really resonated, especially in the context of being an LD tutor who will not always have an ongoing connection with a student or group of students.

The results of questionnaires and forums offered valuable insights into how mattering and belonging were perceived from the students' perspective. The responses to questions indicated that the students who completed the questionnaire were divided when it came to feeling part of an online community, both on the VLE and in the student community outside of the VLE. A theme that emerged via the forum analysis and the free text answers was the importance of individual members of staff.

The attendees stated their concern about the impact of mattering and belonging on students' academic experiences and fulfilling their maximum potential. They reflected on the consequences of the absence of these feelings and their possible impact on students' wellbeing and academic performance. The negative impact of isolation and demotivation due to the lack of mattering and belonging was acknowledged, highlighting the importance of creating inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Important topic, since without the increased feeling of mattering/belonging students could easily feel isolated, disheartened, demotivated, etc., not fulfilling their full potential!

One attendee suggested enhancing the presentation by incorporating visual-audio content as they felt the slides were too wordy. They proposed including the students' voices by visual-audio aids to improve audience engagement.

The info was presented in a quite wordy way - why not go a bit more audio-visual, e.g., let us hear students' comments? Just a thought.

Author's reflection

Thank you for the feedback. It is a good idea to make it less wordy, which I will take on board.

I am really pleased that I took the time to prepare this presentation on my research for the ALDinHE conference. It gave me the opportunity to go back and thoroughly review my research and pick and gain valuable feedback from others.

Initially, I approached my analysis by looking at belonging and mattering as two separate concepts, but on reflection, I now see them to be interlinked. Showing a student that I, as a member of staff at their university, care about them and that they matter to me as an individual will hopefully lead them to feel that they belong at university.

This theme ran through the data with the student participants often naming individual staff members they had mattering relationships with. As learning developers, we have the opportunity to build individual mattering relationships with students and help them feel that they belong at university.

Moving forward, I am keen to explore this further, particularly against the backdrop of popularity and convenience offered by online/blended courses.

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Jacqui Thijm is a Project Tutor at the University College of Estate Management. Jacqui works with and supports project students on their dissertation modules. Jacqui's research interests focus on the experiences of online students.

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