Pillars of belonging: ethnic minority, socioeconomically disadvantaged students' experiences of belonging in higher education in Ireland

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Declaration/Disclaimer

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education, is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative A1, and does not, to the best of my knowledge, breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I hereby certify that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools have been used in the creation of the thesis.

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To my dear friend, Breda Butterfield, whose untimely death inspired me to treasure life and live every moment as if it were my last.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is a story of hope — hope for a better world, a fairer world, a world where everyone feels they can belong and no one is excluded. The story begins here with the disparate voices of the student participants who, for various reasons, left their countries of origin, made Ireland their home, and ended up studying in an Irish university. To you, my participants — your thoughts and experiences of belonging have formed the heart of this thesis and for that I am deeply grateful. This is your story of belonging, inclusion, exclusion, hope, resilience and dreams. Thanks to all of you for generously and powerfully sharing your insights on belonging. My thanks, too, to the staff who participated in the focus group, contributing their knowledge, expertise and ideas on belonging in higher education.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCU	Dublin City University
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DoE	Department of Education (has had several names changes) Department of Education (1924-1997), of Education and Science (1997-2010), and of Education and Skills (2010-2020)
DoJ	Department of Justice (previously named Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform)
DP	Direct Provision
FET	Further Education and Training
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IPA	International Protection Applicant
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Services
NAP	National Access Plan
NIHE	National Institute for Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PATH	The Programme for Access to Higher Education
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WP	Widening Participation

Glossary of terms

Convention refugee	A person who is recognised as being a refugee under the criteria set down in the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, as implemented by legislation in Ireland. (Department of Justice, 2024)
Direct Provision	Accommodation system provided to people seeking asylum in Ireland. (Government of Ireland, 2021)
EEA national	A citizen of one of the member states of the European Economic Area (EEA). (Department of Justice, 2024)
Family Reunification	Family Reunification gives certain family members permission to live in Ireland with the holder of an international protection declaration. (Department of Justice, 2024)
International Protection	Under the International Protection Act 2015, there are two forms of international protection: refugee status and subsidiary protection. (Department of Justice, 2024)
Migrant	Commonly understood to refer to someone who has chosen to leave their home to start a new life in another country. The movement is understood to be voluntary. (United Nations, 2023)
Programme refugee	A person who has been invited to Ireland by the Government. In general, they have the same rights as Convention refugees. (Department of Justice, 2024)
Refugees	Refugees are people forced to flee their own country and seek safety in another country. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the key legal documents that protect refugees. (UNHCR, 2024b)
Residence permit or Permission to Remain	An endorsement placed on the passport of a non-EEA national permitting individuals seeking asylum to remain in Ireland. (Department of Justice, 2024)
Stamps	Each residency permission type is illustrated by a stamp, for example, Stamp 1, Stamp 2, Stamp 3, etc., each conveying different entitlements. (Department of Justice, 2024)
International Protection Applicants/asylum seekers	Individuals who are seeking to be recognised as a convention refugee under the Geneva Convention 1951. (Department of Justice, 2024; UNHCR, 2024b)
Naturalised refugees	A term given to refugees who have naturalised in their country of asylum. (Department of Justice, 2024)
Subsidiary protection	A status granted to a person who does not qualify to be a refugee but who is at risk of serious harm if sent home. (Department of Justice, 2024)

Abstract

Pillars of belonging: ethnic minority, socioeconomically disadvantaged students' experiences of belonging in higher education in Ireland

Karina Curley

This exploratory qualitative study investigated how belonging is understood and experienced by ethnic minorities from socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) backgrounds in one Irish higher education institution (HEI). Underpinned by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction comprising field, habitus and capital, a creative methodological approach captured the lived experiences of nineteen undergraduate students via activity-based focus groups or one-to-one walking or online interviews, which was supplemented by a focus group with seven staff members.

Findings reveal the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of belonging, comprising five core elements: personal, social, spatial, protective, and civic. These findings make several key contributions to knowledge, including defining the pillars of belonging for this student group and exposing a habitus clash that focuses on the social and cultural dimensions of higher education. Additionally, the study highlights the necessity for decisive action to combat racism and discrimination, coupled with the urgency to purposefully adopt strategies for enhancing belonging — particularly the need for dedicated democratic spaces to foster dialogue, leading to transformative action.

The study outlines a comprehensive set of recommendations for policy and practice at the national and institutional levels. Nationally, these include the need for enhanced collaboration between government departments and national agencies (e.g., the Higher Education Authority) to address systemic barriers to HE experienced by this student group. Institutionally, these include implementing inclusive practices for fostering a sense of belonging.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The importance of belonging as a factor influencing student retention, engagement and success is increasingly recognised, especially in diverse higher education (HE) environments (HEA and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), 2022). In this thesis, belonging is broadly understood as an emotional connection to people, places or things (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010b; 2010), and more specifically in HE as a deep feeling of being accepted, included and valued within the institution (Ahn, 2017; Pedler, Willis and Nieuwoudt, 2022; Crawford *et al.*, 2023). The related term, "belongingness", used throughout, refers to the social behaviours that support belonging, including developing and maintaining social networks (Kovač and Vaala, 2021). While policy documents and reports often assume a clear understanding of belonging, the literature reveals that it is a complex and contested concept (Allen *et al.*, 2024). This complexity is often explored in literature predominantly from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and Australia, leaving a gap in the Irish context. This exploratory qualitative study addresses the gap by conducting research in one Irish university, focusing on socioeconomically disadvantaged, ethnic minorities — migrants, refugees and students with experience of the international protection system[1].

Building on my extensive professional experience working with underrepresented student groups in HE, the study focuses primarily on the sociocultural rather than the academic dimensions of belonging. The social dimension here includes the array of relationships and networks that students develop in the course of their studies (Ahn, 2017), while the cultural dimension reflects the dominant institutional values, norms and discourses that facilitate or hinder feelings of belonging (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003). Therefore, the study investigates spaces, extracurricular events, social interactions, and university culture rather than pedagogical practices. Although academic engagement was not the primary focus, the important role that faculty plays in fostering social connections (Thomas, 2012) emerged during the research process and is discussed where relevant. In summary, this study builds on previous studies (Ahn, 2017; Thomas, 2019; Pedler, Willis and Nieuwoudt, 2022) by exploring how ethnic

[1] See the glossary of terms for a formal definition of migrant, refugee and international protection applicant

minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged understand and experience belonging within Irish higher education.

1.1.1. Research terminology

This study adopts terminology set out in the Irish government's National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-2028, the guiding policy document for this research (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). The term "underrepresented" refers to student groups whose presence is disproportionately low compared to their representation in wider Irish society, while "socioeconomically disadvantaged" describes students from socioeconomic backgrounds whose social, economic and cultural circumstances limit their ability to access, engage and succeed in HE. The term "ethnic minority" is adopted from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, with the study focusing explicitly on the ethnic component of the definition:

> An ethnic, religious or linguistic minority is any group of persons which constitutes less than half of the population of the entire territory of a State whose members share common characteristics of culture, religion or language, or a combination of any of these. (United Nations, 2023)

1.2. Rationale

The ambition to promote a more socially just educational environment underpins this study, particularly considering Ireland's changing demographics. Over the past thirty years, Ireland's buoyant economy has attracted migrant workers from around the world, while increasing numbers of international protection applicants (IPAs) have also arrived seeking refuge (Meaney Sartori and Nwanze, 2021; Mc Daid, 2022). In line with Ireland's changing population profile, higher education institutions (HEIs) have experienced growing diversification of their student body (Higher Education Authority, 2023). Government discourse repeatedly cites the need for HE to mirror wider societal diversity, explicitly stating the need for restructuring and enhanced data collection to support widening participation (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). Despite several targeted funding streams for underrepresented groups, inequalities persist, especially for some groups and specific academic programmes (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). These lingering inequalities motivated me to pursue this research on the critical issue of student belonging. The research seeks to shed light on the lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion by a particular group of students from the diverse HE community, focusing on their social and cultural experiences within Irish higher education.

From the outset, this study recognises the interconnection between an inclusive environment and a sense of belonging. Creating an inclusive education system is inextricably linked to social justice and the belief that education is crucial in eliminating poverty and promoting social mobility (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; UNESCO, 2017). In Ireland, inclusive HE is enshrined in national policy. The Education Act, 1998, Section 9 (Government of Ireland, 1998) mandates that education providers, including universities, must meet the learning needs of all students. Similarly, the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971 (Government of Ireland, 1971) and the Universities Act, 1997 (Government of Ireland, 1997) legislate for equality, diversity and inclusivity in HE. The government's commitment to change is evidenced by the publication of four successive National Access Plans (Higher Education Authority, 2004, 2008, 2015; HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). The most recent NAP (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022) emphasises creating a more inclusive HE environment, acknowledging that some students "simply do not see themselves as belonging" (p. 22). Moreover, the first goal listed in the plan focuses on inclusivity, characterised by equity of access and increased diversity across programmes. This explicit reference within national policy to a lack of belonging underscores the urgency and relevance of this research. Given the strong link between belonging and inclusion, it is hoped that an enhanced understanding of belonging arising out of this study will contribute to developing an inclusive education environment, which, in turn, will help to cultivate social justice thinking and practice.

This study builds on previous research on belonging in HE, particularly in the UK, where there is a longer history of multiculturalism within higher education. The research evidence points to lingering gaps in our understanding of students' sense of belonging in HE (Freeman, Anderman and Jensen, 2007; Ahn, 2017). Crucially, this dearth of research is particularly evident in the sociocultural dimension, as much of the existing research has focused on ensuring more inclusive teaching and learning environments. While vital, this singular focus often overlooks the powerful influence of the wider social and cultural landscape of the university in fostering student belongingness. This thesis addresses this critical gap. Drawing on my extensive experience working as a professional dedicated to promoting access and participation for underrepresented student groups (see Section 1.3), this research brings a distinct, practitioner-informed perspective. My day-to-day work involves adopting a strategic and operational approach to developing and implementing widening participation initiatives designed to help students access and participate in higher education. Working directly with these students has shown me how the ongoing challenges they encounter in adjusting to the demands of university life fundamentally undermine belonging.

Research focusing specifically on belonging in HE in an Irish context is limited. Having said that, many studies have contributed significantly to understanding how underrepresented student groups, particularly from a class-based perspective, transition and adapt to third-level education, focusing primarily on academic preparedness and the socio-relational arena (Keane, 2009, 2011b, 2011a; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020). A recent study by Scanlon *et al*. (2020) explored the transition experiences of SED students in an Irish HEI, with a focus on peer relationships and their sense of belonging. They concluded by advocating for further investigation due to the paucity of research in this area. Of particular relevance to this current study is a community needs analysis conducted in 2021, which examined the HE experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum in Ireland (Meaney Sartori and Nwanze, 2021). It revealed that many students did not feel a sense of belonging to their institution. Building directly on these insights and responding to the call for further investigation, this study takes belonging as a starting point, aiming to develop a deeper understanding of the concept and how ethnic minority students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds experience belonging within the social and cultural landscape of an Irish HE. By focusing on these under-researched elements of the student experience in an Irish context, this research will contribute much-needed empirical data to inform policy and practice aimed at creating an inclusive educational environment.

Given the changing demographics in HE in recent years and the aspiration (expressed in the NAP 2022-2028) to ensure every student feels a sense of belonging, this study is timely and necessary in advancing how belonging is understood and experienced by ethnic minority SED students in a HE setting. The research aimed to address the questions outlined below.

Research questions

- What does belonging in HE, in a general sense, mean to ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, including students who are migrants or refugees or students who have experience of the international protection process?
- What cultural and social dimensions of university life, if any, instil, or do not instil, a feeling of belonging for these students?
- What, if anything, would help to enhance the sense of belonging in HE for these students?

1.3. Positionality

The interpretation of research data is profoundly shaped by the researcher's own historical and cultural standpoint — in other words, how they see and understand the world through their positional lens (Nelson and Gould, 2005; Milner, 2007). Positionality refers to the stance the researcher adopts within a specific study, and should be openly acknowledged and articulated from the outset (Darwin Holmes, 2020). As Banks (1998) notes, it is crucial for researchers to declare explicitly aspects of their identity, experience, background, values and beliefs that may influence the research process. To address subjectivity and potential bias in this study, I was guided by aspects of Milner's (2007) nonlinear framework, focusing on self-awareness, relational understanding and contextual positioning for conducting reflexive and ethical research. This included practices such as:

- Actively listening to participants to identify any unspoken assumptions about HE culture. For example, I was particularly aware when students exhibited obvious emotion characterised by silence or hesitation when they were discussing belonging experiences.
- Taking the time after meeting participants to reflect on the interactions, specifically noting times where a participant's narrative conflicted with or confirmed my own experience as the Widening Participation Officer.
- Journaling my ongoing feelings and emotions about the process, particularly when a participant's lived reality caused me to feel anger, frustration, surprise or emotion. Journaling was a means of managing these emotions and paying close attention to instances where my desire for socially just practices might have shaped an interview question or my interpretation of the students' narratives.
- Talking through ideas and reflections with my supervisors and critical friends, using these discussions to deconstruct how my professional background and personal experiences might predispose me to interpret in a manner that confirmed what I expected to hear rather than what was shared.

Throughout the study, I was acutely aware of my positionality as a white, mature, middle-class, Irish woman, undertaking research with ethnic minority students from SED backgrounds. My experience as a first-generation student in HE, navigating for myself at that time what felt like an alien and isolating environment, provided me with some degree of insight into the challenges experienced by "non-traditional" students. Nonetheless, as I began my research journey, I experienced all the anxieties and tensions described by Luttrell (2019) when researchers are aware of the unequal power

relationships dominating the research process. Such tensions included the possibility that students would see me solely as a staff member with knowledge and power, and consequently feel intimidated about sharing sensitive details about their daily reality. To address my anxieties, I willingly embraced Luttrell's recommendation to strive for "Good Enough Methods", opting for "vulnerability and relationality rather than mastery" (p.6). In practice, this commitment meant taking time before beginning the data collection to acknowledge and name power differentials (namely, being an Irish, white female in a privileged position researching ethnic minority students seeking recognition and opportunities to build their lives in Ireland). I also used this time to talk about my role in the research process, the rationale for my research, and to explain how the process intertwined with my widening participation work. Rather than presenting myself as an expert, I shared openly and honestly about my anxieties as a learner in the research space, expressing the sense of responsibility I felt to listen actively to their stories and accurately interpret their experience. Moreover, I followed Mertens' (2017) advice for culturally diverse research, which involved consistently examining my own beliefs and approach, revisiting the power differentials. This involved seeking perspectives from my supervisors as well as colleagues, students, and friends with knowledge and experience in different areas of the research process (especially cultural diversity). I also reflected consistently on my findings to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the participants' experiences and not unduly influenced by my cultural viewpoint. For instance, when interpreting the data, I consulted with a colleague with expertise in refugee education and with students who had both participated and not participated in the research to seek their feedback on emerging ideas and the findings generated by the analysis. These feedback sessions were informal and unstructured rather than planned. For example, in one such conversation, a student participant not only reassured me that my interpretation of institutional belonging accurately reflected the experiences of this student group but also explained in detail how their migratory experiences, characterised by loss, fear, and the danger of leaving their old life behind, contrasted sharply with the hope of new beginnings offered by higher education. This critical insight prompted me to ensure that the analysis of belonging was not viewed solely through an institutional lens but was deeply influenced by the participants' profound contextual and emotional histories.

Despite the apparent disconnect between me and the student research participants, the setting and research topic were relevant to my role as the institution's Widening Participation Officer, which focuses on ensuring underrepresented student groups can access and succeed in higher education. The role is situated in what Whitchurch (2008,

p. 378) calls the “third space”, a term used to distinguish support staff from academic and administrative roles within a university. While the role is not one of policy formulation, my active participation on several local, regional and national committees presents frequent opportunities to inform and influence strategic decisions related to support for NAP priority groups. This third space position not only gives me insight but also creates a responsibility to represent student voices accurately and ethically, using the privilege of my institutional position to inform and advocate for change in support of these students.

My professional background in inclusive education informed the focus and framing of this research. My career of forty years spans roles as a specialist teacher and education officer, working exclusively with diverse and underrepresented groups, including early school leavers, long-term unemployed adults, Irish Travellers, and students with disabilities. Among my career highlights to date are two periods in Africa:

- Four years teaching in Lesotho: this experience provided an early and powerful lesson in adapting my pedagogical and social practices across cultural divides. It also reinforced the necessity of contextualising teaching and learning to achieve inclusion.
- Four years working for women’s economic empowerment in Mozambique: this experience forced me to think beyond my immediate pedagogical practices and consider the wider social and economic implications of skills development for the women who participated in the project.

My experiences in Lesotho and Mozambique shaped my understanding of what it means to feel welcomed and included in the community. But more importantly, they challenged and broadened my perspective on knowledge and on whose knowledge counts. While in theory I was employed as an educational practitioner, in practice, I learned much from the rich cultural backgrounds of the communities I had the privilege of working with. Collectively, my diverse professional experiences fostered my passion for inclusion and nurtured my belief in the value of education as a passport to enhanced life opportunities. Importantly, these experiences taught me that the primary barrier to participation is often rooted in social, economic and cultural exclusion, a perspective that directly underpins the theoretical framework for this study.

For the past 27 years, my work has focused exclusively on supporting individuals and communities experiencing educational, social and economic disadvantage to access and participate in education. For the first 12 of those years, my role was community-

based, followed by a transition to higher education, where I have worked as a Student Support Officer. Additionally, at the University where I work, I coordinate the University of Sanctuary programme[2]. These roles have provided deep insights into the multifaceted and complex challenges faced by students, particularly ethnic minority SED students. They have also highlighted the structural constraints that shape the work, including increasingly demanding accountability and reporting requirements based on targets and outcomes. While my professional role is guided by the University's strategic ambition to "transform lives and societies", I have often observed a disconnect between this aspirational goal and the lived realities of many students. This gap between the institutional ideal and students' lived realities served as the impetus for this study. Over time, I became increasingly aware that the students' experiences of education were not necessarily emancipatory, and hence did not always reflect the institution's ambition to transform lives. In particular, I was drawn to the students' sense of connection to the University as they navigated these challenges across an array of spaces, supports and services. Initially, I assumed that the pressures students faced in juggling personal and academic responsibilities would inhibit their ability to feel connected to the institution. However, as my research evolved, it became clear that belonging is not a one-size-fits-all concept; rather, it is dynamic, personal, and context-dependent.

As the institution's Widening Participation Officer, I occupy a dual position as both practitioner and researcher, which renders me an insider/outsider in the research process. This position offers both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, my role provides access and contextual insight; on the other, it raises ethical considerations around bias and power dynamics. My role as a university employee, particularly as the Widening Participation Officer, inherently places me in a position of institutional power relative to the students who are the subjects of this research. This power dynamic, both real and perceived, was a key consideration in determining my methodological approach to ensure participants felt safe and empowered to share their experiences. By explicitly engaging with this dual positionality, I aimed to use my access and insight responsibly, acknowledging and naming potential power differentials, and addressing ethical risks through a consistently reflexive practice (see Chapter 3: Methodology). The ultimate goal of this research is not merely to understand but to leverage my insider position to inform meaningful improvements to policy and practice that are genuinely responsive to the

[2] The University of Sanctuary initiative was established to create a culture of welcome and hospitality for migrants, refugees and IPAs in higher education. It also aims to raise awareness about why people seek sanctuary and the obstacles they encounter.

lived realities of ethnic minority SED students. The next three sections contextualise the study, beginning with an overview of the broader international context.

1.4. The international context

The most recent World Migration Report 2024 (McAuliffe and Oucho, 2024) states there are currently about 281 million international migrants globally, with figures showing year-on-year increases since records began. The report's authors note that the primary reasons people seek to migrate are work, family and education, and for the vast majority, the process is safe, positive and legal. However, some individuals are forced to flee their homes due to urgent and tragic circumstances. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Report for 2023 describes a dismal picture of a "world in turmoil marked by war, displacement, human rights violations, coups and national disasters" (UNHCR, 2024a, p. 3). Internationally, in 2023, wars in Ukraine and Gaza gained much attention, though the UNHCR responded to a total of 43 emergencies in 29 countries during the year. In 2023, the number of people under the remit of the UNHCR, including refugees, international protection applicants, internally displaced people, returnees and stateless people, reached a new high of 122.6 million, while the number of protracted refugee situations grew to 59 across 37 countries (UNHCR, 2024a). These statistics give a sense of the pace of change, the extent of the migration crisis and the current level of uncertainty and instability across the world.

Internationally, several initiatives aim to challenge inequities and promote social inclusion. For example, Agenda 2030 is a plan of action aimed at eradicating poverty and promoting a more equitable world (United Nations, 2024). It involves all United Nations (UN) member states collaborating to achieve the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognising the valuable role of education in tackling social injustice, SDG 4 relates specifically to education provision, articulating an inclusive and equitable vision and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Another initiative, the "15by30" target championed by UNHCR, aims to increase the percentage of refugees accessing higher education globally to 15%, equating to approximately half a million people, by 2030 (UNHCR, 2025). However, with only 7% of refugees currently enrolled in HE worldwide, compared to 40% of non-refugees, the initiative will require a sustained and coordinated commitment by HEIs and stakeholders to meet the target (UNHCR, 2024a). It is notable here that the refugee global enrolment figure is likely higher than 7%, as accurate and consistent data is either unavailable or unreported (UNHCR, 2020). While, these initiatives are welcome, they are only effective if they

positively impact practice. Thus, ongoing commitment and monitoring are crucial to ensure the aspirations outlined in documents materialise.

1.5. The Irish context

Ireland’s demographic composition has changed rapidly in a relatively short period, mirroring upward global migration trends. This change began in the early 1990s as economic growth led to the recruitment of workers from abroad to address a skills shortage (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999). Recent years have seen continued and significant migration due to geopolitical events. Since February 2022, 113,917 people fleeing war in Ukraine have been Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BoTP) and issued with a Personal Public Services Number (Central Statistics Office, 2025). The number of international protection applicants (IPAs) applying for asylum in the first ten months of 2025 was 10,813, bringing the total number of IPAs in the asylum process to 32,728 (International Protection Office, 2025). As Ireland grew more culturally and ethnically diverse, the education system gradually began to reflect this shift (Keane and Heinz, 2016). While in the mid-2000s, changes were more noticeable at primary and post-primary levels, recent years have seen a notable expansion in diversity and inclusion across the HE sector (Clancy, 2024).

While progress has been made in Irish integration policies, significant inequalities persist for migrant communities. The Covid-19 pandemic severely exacerbated living conditions for IPAs in Direct Provision[3] (DP) centres in Ireland, a situation highlighted in the *White Paper on Ending Direct Provision and Establishing a New International Protection Support System*, which pledged to end the DP system by 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2021). However, a 2022 report commissioned by Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre, concluded that the government would not meet this goal within the envisaged timeframe due to increased challenges of accommodation shortages (Thornton and Ogunsanya, 2024).In early 2021, the HEA Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion conducted Ireland’s first National Race Equality Survey of all HEIs, with the findings included in the Race Equality Report published in October 2021 (Kempny and Michael, 2022). The report was followed by the launch in September 2022 of a Race Equality Implementation Plan 2022-2024, which called on HEI leadership to actively

[3] Direct Provision was the name previously used for accommodation and other basic supports offered to people in the asylum process. In 2022, reflecting a move away from old systems, the government announced its intention to change the name of the service from Direct Provision to International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS). However, in this study, the participants continued to use the old name Direct Provision when referring to the state support, hence, it is the name used throughout the thesis.

embed race equality within their institutions. Building on this, the HEA launched the Anti-Racism Principles for HE in March 2023; all HEIs have since committed to implementing these (Higher Education Authority, 2023). The Principles follow the definition of race equality established in the initial report as: “equal representation, equal experiences and equal outcomes of staff and students from minority ethnic groups, including Travellers” (Kempny and Michael, 2022, p. 2).

In summary, this section provides a brief overview of Ireland’s changing demographics, issues with Direct Provision and efforts by the HEA to address race inequalities in the HE sector. The next section provides a broad overview of the higher education landscape and its rapidly changing context.

1.6. The higher education context

The traditional role of the university was rooted in the pursuit of truth, creating knowledge and sharing information (hooks, 1994). However, once valued as spaces for critical debates, HEIs have been “increasingly commercialised and become an adjunct of corporate power and culture" (Giroux, 2014, p. 55). Although education continues to be recognised for its social and economic roles, neoliberal philosophies have increasingly shaped educational policy and practice (Ball, 2010; King, Travers and McGowan, 2021). The selling of education services is now commonplace, with institutions actively involved in financial planning and commercial adventures (Ball, 2012, p. 18). This shift had led to a stronger focus on employability and the economic demands of the state, steering HEIs towards the practice and principles of the market economy. Evidence suggests that HEIs are becoming gradually entrenched in neoliberal frameworks, eroding their traditional role as sites of critical inquiry and knowledge creation (Hughes, 2007).

The impact of these forces on HE practice is palpable, with increased workloads, additional reporting and accountability requirements, and greater attention to metrics and rankings (Hughes, 2017; Larsen and James, 2022). Criticising the increased emphasis on accountability, Ball (2012) notes that more time is now spent reporting on tasks achieved rather than doing the work. Thus, as Tinto (2006) claims, HEIs are in a difficult predicament as they navigate competing demands. Furthermore, a rise in individualism, fuelled by the desire for wealth and power, has led to the erosion of concepts like public good, community, and responsible citizenship. These have been replaced by overwhelming expectations of personal responsibility and a completely privatised notion of freedom (Giroux, 2014). Aligning with Giroux, Ball (2010) claims that current educational policies do little to promote social cohesion, as the increasing trend

towards commodifying educational subjects detracts from any ideals of education for the good of society.

While the idea of universities as democratic spaces remains as relevant and necessary today as ever, market-driven forces actively undermine this role, threatening the foundation of democracy itself (Giroux, 2014). Democracy demands a culture of questioning, a space to explore and challenge complex ideas around power and authority (Shields, 2004; Craven, 2012; Walker, 2012; Hughes, 2017), and is crucial for fostering critical citizenship and facilitating public debate. HEIs are ideally situated to provide such spaces, acting as "neutral and trusted stakeholders" (Vilalta, Betts and Gómez, 2017). However, this neutrality is precisely what is being threatened or challenged by neoliberal forces. Recognising that neoliberalism is here to stay, Ball (2012) views an enhanced understanding of the power dynamics and discourses permeating HE as essential if institutions are to maintain their identity and continue to nurture free and critical dialogue within the neoliberal university.

This brief overview of the status quo of universities points to a rapidly changing environment, impacted by global forces that are challenging the core and substance of HE. Solutions are rooted in democratic spaces that foster critical dialogue, returning to sharing information and creating new knowledge based on values and principles that promote a socially just educational environment. While this study focuses on the belonging experiences of a specific student group in HE, this snapshot situates the institutional environment within wider national and international developments. The next section looks specifically at HE in Ireland.

1.7. Higher education in Ireland

The Irish higher education sector transformed from a small, elite system in the 1960s (Lynch *et al.*, 1965) following the introduction of free secondary education in 1967. This reform, coupled with a growing demand for a skilled workforce, spurred the establishment of a network of Regional Technical Colleges (later known as Institutes of Technology (IoTs), complementing the academically oriented universities. The National Institutes for Higher Education (NIHEs) Limerick (1972) and Dublin (1975) also focused on educating a workforce for a rapidly expanding technology and business sector (Kinsella, 2020). By the 1980s, the system was characterised as an expanded "binary" structure overseen by the new Higher Education Authority (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017).

Participation in HE expanded significantly in the 1980s and 1990s due to improved retention rates at second level and increasing numbers progressing to third level (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017; Clancy, 2024). A landmark development occurred in 1996 with the introduction of the Free Fees Initiative, a decision aimed at removing financial barriers for full-time EU students who met certain residency requirements. This initiative, coupled with means-tested maintenance grants, led to a surge in enrolments. By 1991, the number of students in Irish HE had reached 91,000 – up from 18,500 in 1965 (Department of Education, 1995).

Additionally, there were significant developments at the European level. In 1999, Ireland became a full member of the Bologna Process[4], leading to the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2003. In the early 2000s, Ireland's HE sector received substantial investment under the so-called Celtic Tiger economy. During this period of unprecedented economic growth, Ireland boasted one of the highest tertiary attainment rates in the EU. In 2016, 44% of 20-24 year-olds in Ireland (up from 32% in 2010) were attending tertiary education, compared to 42% across the OECD region (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (OECD, 2018). However, the global financial crisis of 2008 brought an abrupt end to the boom, leading to a sharp decline in funding for HE.

Despite the downturn in the economy, a commitment to social development still permeated HE policy documents during this period. In 2011, the government published the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), articulating a broad and inclusive vision for HE. The strategy outlines plans for a more coherent and sustainable HE system, including designating Institutes of Technology as Technical Universities, developing regional clusters, and merging institutions. In 2020, responsibility for funding, policy and governance in further and higher education moved to the newly established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The Department formulates policy and strategy, while the HEA monitors the implementation of actions across the third-level sector. In 2023, DFHERIS published a Statement of Strategy outlining six strategic goals and continues to prioritise inclusion as one of these (DFHERIS, 2023).

Throughout the ongoing structural changes, promoting access, participation and success of underrepresented student groups remains a national priority (Clancy, 2024).

[4] The Bologna Declaration in 1999 committed to establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to make higher education in Europe more inclusive, accessible, and competitive.

By 2019, Ireland had achieved one of the highest tertiary educational attainment rates in Europe (40% of the 15-64 age group had achieved a third-level qualification) (Indecon International Research Economists, 2021). However, disparities remain, for instance, greater numbers from higher social groups are enrolled in traditional universities, while those from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to attend the technical universities (Clancy, 2024). As support for ethnic minorities who are socioeconomically disadvantaged falls under the broader banner of access or widening participation, the next section presents a brief overview of access development in Ireland. In particular, it looks at national efforts to support access and participation of underrepresented groups in HE.

1.8. An overview of access to higher education in Ireland

For the past five decades, the Irish government has committed to tackling education inequalities and promoting social inclusion (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017). In the 1960s, when secondary school completion rates (and, consequently, progress to HE) were low, the Department of Education faced the task of creating a learning environment that would enable individuals from SED backgrounds to access HE. A landmark report commissioned by the Minister for Education in 1962 revealed severe disparities, concluding that the education system met neither social nor economic needs (Lynch *et al.*, 1965). It indicated that between three and four per cent of the population progressed to third level, mostly from families in the higher social grouping, namely, professionals, employers and managers. The findings were a catalyst for a concerted effort to challenge educational inequalities. One major milestone following the launch of the report was a decision in 1967 to introduce free secondary education, thus paving the way for enhanced educational opportunities.

Over the years, significant progress has been made in addressing social inequalities through legislative reforms and practical initiatives. In 2003, the recognition of growing inequalities in HE led to the establishment of the National Access Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education under the Department of Education, which oversaw the publication of the four National Access Plans mentioned above. These Plans have ensured sustained funding for HE to support underrepresented groups, including ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. As shown in Table 1, these targeted supports have resulted in increasing numbers of students from underrepresented groups progressing to HE (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). However,

issues with collecting, recording and monitoring student data have long been recognised as problems to be addressed, resulting in data that are not always consistent and comparable (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; Higher Education Authority, 2024b).

Table 1: Percentage increase in students in HE from underrepresented groups 1998-2020

Target group as a percentage of new entrants	**1998 (Higher Education Authority, 2004)**	**2015 (Higher Education Authority, 2015)**	**2020 (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022)**
Semi- and unskilled manual worker group (18-20 years old)	16%	23%	26%[5]
Full-time mature students (23+)	4.5%	13%	7.5%
Students with disabilities	0.9%	6%	12.4%
Irish Travellers	1.4%	35 students	33 students

Currently, Irish HEIs are not required to report data on ethnicity, and this information is not requested when students register in universities (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). The Equal Access Survey, however, is a voluntary survey which collects information on the social, economic and ethnic backgrounds of new students who enter HE for the first time (Clancy, 2024), and while this offers some insight into who is attending HE, the data are more representative than accurate (see Figure 1).

[5] From 2019, the metrics for measuring SED status changed to the Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) making it difficult to compare data to previous years.

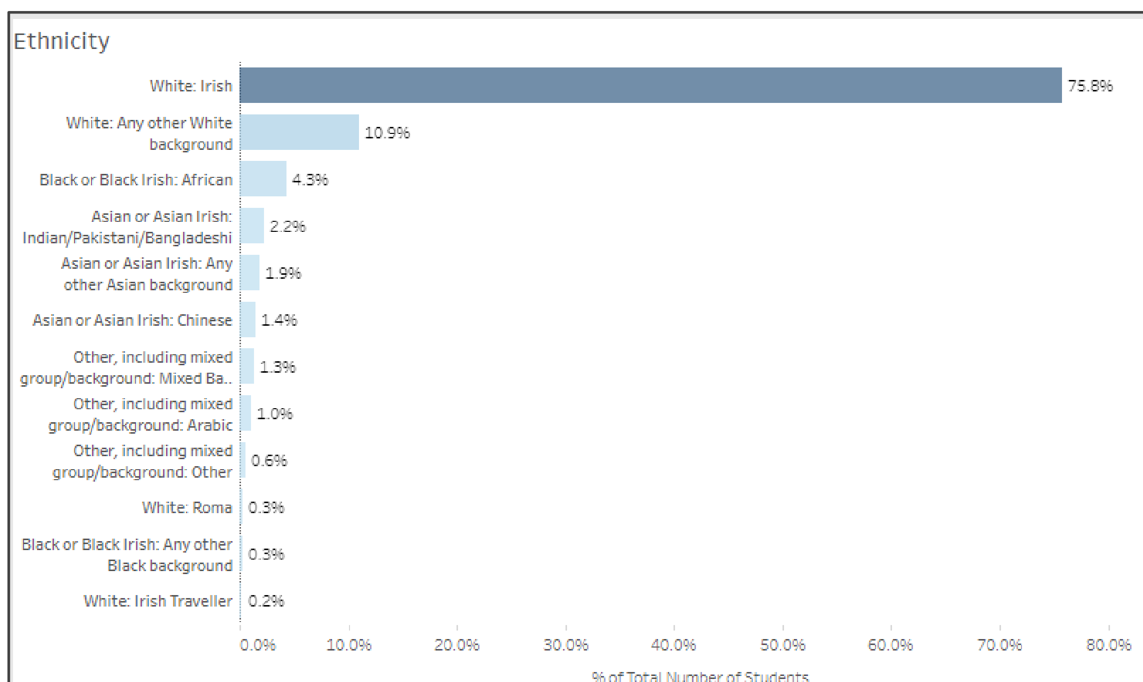

Figure 1: Ethnicity data for new entrants to HE in Ireland, 2021-2022 (HEA, 2024b)

Furthermore, the lack of data, especially in relation to ethnicity and other social identity-based categories, means HEIs do not know the complete profile of their student body and consequently cannot tailor services accordingly. Although it is positive to target support at specific cohorts, in practice, there is no way within current Irish HE structures to identify many of the subgroups listed in the above graph, as the information is not collected (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). However, the government has acknowledged the shortfalls in quantitative metrics and committed to a new Access Data Plan during the lifetime of the current NAP (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). While this section presented an overview of access development in Ireland, the next section delves deeper into widening participation, describing how policy and practice impact and support migrants, refugees and IPAs in accessing HE.

1.9. Widening participation

This section describes the challenges of defining and conceptualising WP. It presents an overview of WP target groups in general, before focusing specifically on barriers and support for ethnic minority SED students seeking access to HE.

1.9.1. Definition of widening participation

WP is an elusive concept, characterised by "competing discourses and contradictory policy" (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010, p. 108). The term can refer exclusively to

accessing HE (Gorard *et al.*, 2019; Younger *et al.*, 2019), or be used more broadly to include access and subsequent post-entry support for students (Elliott, 2018; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020). The ambiguity is often the result of contextual interpretation. For example, Harrison and Waller (2017), writing from a UK perspective, use “participation” to mean “entry” but acknowledge that it can also refer to follow-on support. Alternatively, Elliott (2018) uses "access to and participation in HE", implying “access” as entry and “participation” as post-entry support (p. 66).

Similar variations exist in Ireland. Hannon *et al.* (2017) focus on WP from an outreach perspective. In contrast, Scanlon *et al.’*s (2020) research with working-class students acknowledges that WP can mean access, participation and completion. From a policy perspective, the HEA adopts the term WP in limited circumstances, opting instead to use “access” in policy documents. In a working paper on Access and Retention (Higher Education Authority, 2017), the HEA articulates that access for target groups includes the full range of support activities:

> Access refers to bringing in students from the target groups (pre-entry work), appropriate teaching and learning and associated resources, participation in research and postgraduate opportunities, positive student experience and successful progression and completion. (p. 2)

If WP is to acquire enhanced recognition and attention, clarity and coherence in the meaning and use of the term would be a good starting point. For this study, WP is viewed as the continuum of support provided throughout the student journey, including access, participation and completion.

1.9.2. Conceptualising widening participation

Irish WP policy is closely aligned with the government’s commitment to equity of access in HE. The term entered Irish educational discourse in the late 1990s, heavily influenced by the equality rhetoric in the UK, which called for increased participation from underrepresented groups in higher education (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010). While earlier sections of this study have noted Ireland’s awareness of educational inequality since the late 1960s, WP only gained momentum and visibility within HEIs in the early 2000s. Fleming *et al.* (2017) conceptualise WP as a triad of coordinates: principle of fairness, equality of opportunity, and identification of target groups. Indeed, much of what has emerged in access policy focuses on these three principles.

The principle of fairness, embedded in national access policy (Clancy, 2024), has guided the development of several initiatives aimed at increasing participation. Early participation data revealed that the HE student body continued to be dominated by those

from middle- to high-income backgrounds (Higher Education Authority, 2004), prompting a strategic and targeted approach. Consequently, the first National Action Plan (Higher Education Authority, 2004), and subsequent iterations, emphasise the importance of institutional responsibility in promoting access for learners of all backgrounds and abilities (Higher Education Authority, 2008, 2015; HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). Equality of opportunity focuses on creating new and enhanced pathways to HE as well as offering financial incentives to learners and institutions to support the access agenda (Higher Education Authority, 2004). Developed pathways include the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), mature student entry, and strengthened links between further and higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2017). The National Access Office oversees the implementation of access policy and the administration of funding for access-related initiatives (Higher Education Authority, 2017). Finally, the identification of target groups determines which populations should be prioritised under WP initiatives.

1.9.3. Widening participation target groups

In tandem with ambiguity over WP as a concept, there is a lack of consensus regarding the student cohorts assigned the WP designation. For example, in general, students entering a university under the banner of WP may be referred to as non-traditional students (Elliott, 2018) or underrepresented students (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). However, further confusion emerges when deciding what students meet the WP criteria, with a tendency to categorise them all as “working class” (Ahn, 2017). Similarly, “minority groups” is used as an umbrella term that can refer to any minority group, such as mature students or ethnic minorities (Thomas, 2019). Furthermore, different terms are used to describe what is meant by “working class”, such as “marginalised” (Larsen and James, 2022), “low socio-economic status” (O’Sullivan *et al.*, 2019), or “socioeconomically disadvantaged” (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022).

Regarding the categorisation of priority groups for WP in Ireland, there has been a notable evolution over the years. The NAP 2015-2019 lists six groups (Higher Education Authority, 2015), while the NAP 2022-2028 lists three main groups (socioeconomically disadvantaged, membership of the Irish Traveller or Roma communities, and students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities). The first of these three groups, socioeconomically disadvantaged, lists eleven new subgroups, including lone/teen parents, survivors of domestic violence and students who are migrants or refugees or who have experience of the international protection process, or students from ethnic minorities (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). Although being listed as a priority group brings

entitlements to support and funding for HE, the level of support varies across groups. The marked differences in support available to these groups is usually linked to residency and nationality status (Higher Education Authority, 2024c).

1.9.4. Widening participation initiatives

Although the HEA allocates funds to access initiatives, institutions have autonomy in deciding how the funding is spent. This has resulted in significant variances across the sector in staffing, teaching and learning supports, and services (Higher Education Authority, 2017). Much of the research conducted on the experiences of SED students in HE draws on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, especially how power and privilege perpetuate social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984; Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017). To counter such inequalities, WP programmes focus on addressing barriers to exclusion and providing more equitable resources for underrepresented student groups (Mc Daid, 2022). However, this approach can reinforce a deficit perspective (Shields, 2004; Healey and Stroman, 2021), placing the burden of adapting on individuals rather than addressing systemic inequalities (Keane, Heinz and Mc Daid, 2022). A further concern regarding WP relates to the student experience. While much attention has been given to describing activities and interventions delivered under WP, less has been done to theorise or evaluate that experience (Keane, 2011b, 2011a; Younger *et al.*, 2019; Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025). Therefore, while a wide variety of WP interventions and activities are delivered across HEIs, there is limited evidence available to confirm how they impact students' perceptions and experiences of HE.

1.9.5. Barriers to higher education for migrants, refugees and international protection applicants

Refugees and individuals seeking international protection continue to face complex and interrelated barriers accessing and progressing through HE in Ireland (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017; UNESCO, 2019; Meaney Sartori and Nwanze, 2021). Many of these barriers are documented by Meaney Sartori and Nwanze (2021), such as international fees, finances, legal status, lack of information, DP centres, racism and lack of cultural awareness, recognition of prior learning and English language proficiency. These barriers, outlined in their research and supported by other recent Irish studies (Cronin *et al.*, 2020; Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023) show the complexity and interconnectedness of the challenges facing migrants, refugees and IPAs wishing to access higher education. These challenges not only prevent individuals from feeling any sense of belonging and welcome in higher education but also actively contribute to

feelings of non-belonging and exclusion. Acknowledging the extent of the barriers for this student group, the government has implemented several support schemes to alleviate the situation.

1.9.6. Financial support for migrants, refugees and international protection applicants

While the financial cost of attending HE remains a significant issue for all NAP groups (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022), it is particularly challenging for migrants, refugees and IPAs who face additional nationality and residency barriers. The government established the Free Fees Initiative in 1996 (Higher Education Authority, 2024a), which covers the tuition fee for full-time undergraduate programmes in an approved HEI. However, there are clear eligibility criteria for this scheme, including strict nationality criteria. While migrants can attend HE if they meet the entry requirements, they may not be eligible for free fees. Students who do not meet the requirement for free fees must be assessed to determine their fee status. HEIs, as autonomous institutions, have discretion in determining fee status. This has resulted in a lack of national coherence in the fee assessment process, particularly for people new to Ireland. In addition to free fees, refugees and individuals who have been granted subsidiary protection[6] or permission to remain[7] can apply for the State grant known as SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) (SUSI, 2024). However, eligibility criteria for SUSI are linked to residency, nationality and income requirements.

A further source of funding includes the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), a multi-strand government initiative designed to support the delivery of time-bound activities addressing NAP objectives. The PATH 2 1916 Bursary Fund provides a limited number of grants each year to students who are the most underrepresented in higher education. However, this Fund is competitive and also has strict nationality and residency requirements (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022).

Aware that many IPAs faced significant barriers accessing HE, the government established the International Protection Student Support Scheme (IPSSS) for Further Education (FE) and HE students in 2016. A minimum of three years' residency as a requirement for eligibility has resulted in a relatively low uptake (Government of Ireland, 2019). This is because many prospective students will have received a response to their

[6] A status granted under the International Protection Act 2015 to a person who does not qualify to be a refugee under the Geneva Convention 1951 but who is at risk of serious harm if sent home. (Department of Justice, 2024)

[7] An endorsement placed on the passport of a non-EEA national permitting them to remain in Ireland. (Department of Justice, 2024)

asylum application within the three-year period, with the consequent change in status taking them out of the international protection process and making them ineligible for the scheme. In 2016, another opportunity became available when the University of Sanctuary programme was established in Ireland to address gaps in funding options for migrants wishing to access third-level education, but who did not qualify for state support. Participation in this programme is voluntary on the part of HEIs. Each institution establishes its own scholarship criteria, resulting in a lack of consistency across the sector.

This section presents an overview of WP from several perspectives. It identifies basic issues defining the concept, agreeing target groups and measuring effective interventions. While, on the surface, it appears that there is a range of financial supports available, accessing support is particularly difficult for applicants who do not meet the strict residency and nationality requirements. In addition to financial support, further barriers have been identified, outlining the extent of the challenges facing ethnic minority SED students accessing and participating in HE. The next section describes the study's participants.

1.10. Research participants

The primary research cohort was undergraduate students attending a university in Ireland who aligned with a subgroup listed in the NAP 2022-2028. As outlined in the previous section, the NAP identifies three main groups, one of which is the socioeconomically disadvantaged group. Within this group, there are eleven subgroups, covering a broad spectrum of challenging life circumstances that contribute to disadvantage. The student participants were recruited from one of the subgroups: "students who are migrants or refugees or who have experience of the international protection process, or students from ethnic minorities" (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022, p. 52). The NAP's categorisation of ethnic minorities who are socioeconomically disadvantaged suggests a degree of homogeneity among these groups, though in reality they may differ significantly.

From a NAP perspective, students are identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged when experiencing particularly challenging life situations contributing to disadvantage, including being from low-income backgrounds or socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Additionally, it can include individual-related circumstances such as being a first-chance or second-chance mature student, a lone parent, a carer, a refugee, or having experienced homelessness or the international protection system. While the initial metric

for access programmes was founded on individual-related measurement based on social class, the difficulties associated with collecting this class-level data for new entrants prompted the HEA to adopt area-level measures of deprivation instead (Clancy, 2024). The issue of merging ethnic status and socioeconomic disadvantage could potentially present a particular challenge for the students in this study, given that their social positioning and financial circumstances may have been very different in their country of origin. However, due to altered life circumstances, they now present as socioeconomically disadvantaged in Ireland, though variations within this categorisation can also differ considerably, depending on income and entitlements to state support (see Section 1.9.6).

Categorisation within the international protection or asylum-seeking process also presents challenges. In Ireland, the asylum process is governed by the International Protection Act 2015. International protection refers to the status an individual holds within the State (Government of Ireland, 2015), including the following categories:

- An *international protection applicant* (IPA) (sometimes referred to as an asylum seeker) is a person who has applied for international protection and is seeking refugee status (Government of Ireland, 2015).
- *Refugees* are individuals forced to flee their country and seek refuge in another country because of conflict, violence, persecution or threats to personal safety (UNHCR, 2024b). They are frequently forced to abandon their homes, leaving behind family members, jobs and personal possessions. Returning home is generally not an option.
- A person who does not qualify for refugee status may be granted *subsidiary protection* by the State, recognising that the person would be at serious risk if returned to their country of origin.
- If neither refugee status nor subsidiary protection status is granted, applicants may be granted *permission to remain* in the State, usually based on personal grounds (Government of Ireland, 2015).
- There is no international legal definition for a *migrant* (McAuliffe and Oucho, 2024). However, unlike refugees or IPAs, migrants are generally people who move voluntarily to a new country, often for work, study or personal reasons. A migrant is free to return home at any time.
- Finally, following the European Council Temporary Protection Directive in response to the war in Ukraine, mandating EU Member states to offer protection and support to the Ukrainian community, Ireland began offering temporary protection to Ukrainian refugees in March 2022.

Furthermore, students may be first- or second-generation migrants, born in Ireland, or naturalised citizens, and as such may not self-identify as belonging to this subgroup.

The section demonstrates the challenge of trying to categorise students with multiple, complex identities. Moreover, it highlights the heterogeneity of the student participants, raising questions about the benefits and drawbacks of defining students in this way. On the one hand, naming them as a subgroup draws attention to the specific needs of students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, grouping them in this way does not consider the range of individual circumstances experienced by this group.

One final category is relevant to the classification of the student research participants, though ultimately not applicable to them. The term "international students" is used to categorise students from outside Ireland who come to study here, other than those who arrive in the country as migrants or seeking asylum. These international students are generally from affluent backgrounds in their home countries. While, in most cases, they might also be considered ethnic minority students, the category of international students is not a NAP target group. International students are managed under separate institutional policies and support structures, and unlike migrants and people seeking asylum, require study visas. A report commissioned by the HEA (2018) states these students are integral to the internationalisation of the HE system and concludes that international students in Ireland are generally positive about their orientation experiences and support available to them. Peer mentoring, in particular, was viewed as extremely beneficial, and while access to health care and counselling was welcome, they felt that provision in these areas could be improved (Clarke, Yang and Harmon, 2018). In contrast, accommodation was challenging with different levels of support being offered by institutions to secure a place to live. Additionally, integration, particularly with Irish students, was difficult, as was making friends outside of the international community. Likewise, other studies reported international students experiencing similar challenges adapting to their host learning environment, including isolation, lack of integration with domestic students, and a lack of belonging (Dunne, 2009; Idris, Ion and Seery, 2019; Cena, Burns and Wilson, 2021). While a comparative exploration of belonging between international students and migrant communities would provide rich and valuable insights for institutions, this was beyond the scope of this study.

In addition to generating data with the student participants, I used triangulation as a strategy to enhance the credibility and depth of the findings by examining the preliminary research findings within a staff focus group, inviting a cross-section of staff representing

a range of different roles to participate. Triangulation with staff allowed me to corroborate the preliminary findings, identifying areas of convergence and divergence in staff experiences and opinions, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of my findings. (See Section 3.5.4. for more details.) It is noteworthy that all staff invited to participate were involved in an initiative to promote an enhanced sense of belonging among the student community. The varied perspectives from staff provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the complexities of belonging, illuminating different facets that might have been overlooked with a singular approach. The data from both the students' and staff sessions were coded individually and then cross-checked to provide a more robust and holistic view of the student experiences.

1.11. The research context

This site for the study was Dublin City University (DCU), which incorporates three teaching campuses on the northside of Dublin city. Established in 1980 as the National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) specifically to address the increasing demand for graduates with technical and technological skills, it received university status in 1989 and changed its name to Dublin City University. In 2016, three other third-level institutions, St Patrick’s College, the Mater Dei Institute and the Church of Ireland College of Education, were amalgamated into DCU. Initially, the NIHE had a strong human capital dimension, focused on building links between HE and industry. However, over the years, the focus shifted, with the University embracing the transformative ideal of HE and equipping students with a range of graduate attributes (Kinsella, 2020). The student population at the time of writing is approximately 19,000.

Since its establishment, DCU has shown a commitment to inclusion and widening access to underrepresented groups (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2019). Its targeted outreach work and financial scholarships for marginalised students living in the local catchment area led to the establishment in the early 1990s (Kinsella, 2020) of the DCU Access Service, the first such service in Ireland and today one of the largest in terms of the number of students being supported. DCU’s Strategic Plan 2023-2028: Transformation for an Unscripted Future, focuses on the whole-student experience, with pioneering a transformative student experience listed as one of its primary pillars (Dublin City University, 2023). A further example of the University’s ambition to promote educational inclusion was its designation in 2016 as a University of Sanctuary.

In 2023, aware of the need to promote enhanced connection and engagement among students, DCU launched Care & Connect, "a whole-of-university approach that situates

national frameworks and initiatives under an overarching DCU Health and Wellbeing Strategy" (Dublin City University, 2024). The initiative aims to promote the respect and dignity of all students, emphasising that the health and wellbeing of students is everyone's responsibility. The initiative is led by the Student Support & Development Service in collaboration with the Students' Union.

1.12. The meanings of inclusion and belonging

In the HE sector, terms like access, belonging, inclusion, and diversity are frequently used interchangeably, creating the potential for conceptual ambiguity (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017; Kelly, Padden and Fleming, 2023). This lack of clarity necessitates a clear distinction, particularly between inclusion and belonging (Kovač and Vaala, 2021).

Inclusion is generally understood as an ideology and a set of practices that actively recognise and celebrate difference (Evans and Lunt, 2002; Kovač and Vaala, 2021). From a HE perspective, Healey and Stroman (2021) view inclusion as the extent to which students see themselves recognised and represented in the policies, practices and cultures permeating all aspects of the education environment. Thus, inclusion cannot be a one-size-fits-all concept, and is best viewed as a spectrum requiring active, individualised support (Butler, 2021).

In contrast, belonging is a more personal and intimate process with a profound emotional dimension, relating to how one feels in a particular situation (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010b). In their conceptual analysis of the concepts, Kovač and Vaala (2021) acknowledge that belonging and inclusion are similar, integral to inclusive practices, and grounded in "the basic feeling of acceptance" (p. 1208). However, they argue that these are distinct concepts. For them, inclusion is a broad environmental goal where diverse social groups collaborate and coexist, whereas belonging is seen as a more personal and intimate process.

This brief overview acknowledges the ambiguity between the two concepts, emphasising the potential for confusion in their practical application. The next section presents the study's theoretical framework, which examines belonging through a Bourdieusian lens.

1.13. The theoretical framework of the study

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is informed by the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose powerful “thinking tools” about social inequality and cultural reproduction provide a useful lens for analysing social phenomena. Bourdieu’s preference for empirical analysis — understanding social practices rather than abstract theorising (Hage, 1998; Grenfell, 2014) — makes his work particularly relevant for analysing belonging in a higher education context. His insights are crucial for examining power dynamics, education reproduction and inequalities in institutional settings. Bourdieu’s thinking tools centre on three interrelated concepts: habitus, field and capital. The dynamic interplay of these concepts is succinctly captured by Bourdieu in the following equation:

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

(Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101).

While Bourdieu developed these concepts to analyse the issues and populations of his time, this study adopts a contemporary perspective, applying this equation to examining the belonging experiences of ethnic minority students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in HE. There follows a more detailed overview of each of these concepts as well as their application to practice.

1.13.1. Habitus

Habitus, a core concept in the work of Bourdieu, refers to the system of internalised and transposable dispositions shaped by one’s background, influencing how one perceives and acts in the world (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). For Bourdieu, these dispositions are embodied practices, encompassing capacities, tendencies, and abilities to recognise and to act (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990), including automatic gestures, even those as seemingly insignificant as ways of walking, eating or talking (Reay, 2004). Operating “below the level of consciousness and language” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 467), habitus functions like an intuitive “feel for the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 224). Adding further clarification, Hage (2025) explains that dispositions do not necessarily require a practical manifestation, but rather influence and shape one’s actions. This highlights how individuals whose habitus aligns with a particular social space often excel or exert influence within it.

Consequently, students from diverse cultural backgrounds may experience tension when their habitus encounters an unfamiliar and dominant institutional culture. Such

tensions are documented by Reay *et al*. (2009) in their research on nine working-class students attending an elite university in the UK. Although the students successfully adapted and developed creative responses that enabled them to excel in their new environment, the initial transition period was marked by significant self-doubt and questioning. The current study builds on this previous research, focusing particularly on how socioeconomically disadvantaged students from diverse cultural backgrounds adjust to university life in Ireland. Crucially, it aims to add more nuanced perspectives on their belonging experiences in HE. It is hoped that the insights gained regarding belonging will inform future developments in policy and practice, contributing to existing aspirations to transform lives and societies.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus is a dual dynamic: a "structuring structure" and a "structured structure" (p.170). It is "structuring" in that it shapes one's present and future practices, while being "structured" by past experiences, such as family, education and cultural influences (Grenfell, 2014). This framework is particularly useful for understanding how migrant communities adapt to new social spaces and how existing HE structures may accommodate, exclude, or reproduce inequalities.

The practical implications of understanding this dynamic for students' sense of belonging are illustrated powerfully by two US studies. Walton and Cohen (2007) explore a brief intervention with first-year minority students to mitigate feelings of belonging uncertainty among Black and white first-year students. A follow-up study by Brady *et al.* (2020) examines the long-term impact of a belonging intervention on Black American graduates who, some seven to eleven years earlier, had participated in the intervention as first-year students. The findings highlight the success of the intervention in normalising feelings of inadequacy and overcoming academic challenges. Both studies confirm that these interventions successfully changed students' perspectives of social reality, challenging their existing habitus and supporting them in fashioning and refashioning themselves in new surroundings. This demonstrates that habitus, while deeply structured, is not entirely deterministic and can be consciously reflected upon and reshaped.

Although this brief overview of habitus gives a sense of the complex and dynamic nature of the concept, to examine it in isolation from field and capital would overlook the relational interplay in the social world (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The next section presents an outline of Bourdieu's understanding of field and implications for practice.

1.13.2. Field

Bourdieu encourages us to look at field as a structured space of differing positions where agents struggle for valuable resources. Field denotes a specific social space involving a network, or a configuration of objective relations between individuals, groups, and institutions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Grenfell and James, 1998) Various social agents constitute the field, each seeking to assert or maintain their positions within that space based on the amount of capital and power considered valuable for the purposes of the particular field (Bathmaker, 2015). Field has boundaries and rules, determining who is included and what actions are permissible (Grenfell and James, 2004; Grenfell, 2014). It is clear that any attempt to understand belonging must include an examination of the power and social positions within the field. Furthermore, as it is possible to be present in more than one field at a time (Grenfell, 2014), it is crucial for this study to understand the HE fields to which the students belong and how they navigate in and between fields. For example, within higher education, faculties, schools and class groups can all be considered fields.

Two key properties of field are relevant to this study.

- **Autonomy:** This refers to the capacity of agents within the field to exert or maintain dominance and resist external interference (Grenfell and James, 2004; Bathmaker, 2015). This has resonance for HEIs in a rapidly evolving sector. Although Irish HEIs are autonomous institutions, they are increasingly pressurised to meet the demands of the market economy and report to external funding bodies. These external pressures can exacerbate internal power dynamics as different authorities within HE compete for increasingly scarce resources. Furthermore, HEIs are governed by overarching principles, such as equity of access (Grenfell and James, 1998), which significantly influence their priorities and purposes. Therefore, a hierarchy exists within HE as educational authorities and agents (academics, professional staff, or administration) seek to maintain their position and the power to determine how and where resources are allocated. It follows that commitment from authorities is fundamental to creating equity of access and an inclusive university environment.
- **Contested space**: Fields are characterised by tension and power struggles, especially with increased heterogeneity within and between them (Bathmaker, 2015). This observation has particular significance within an evolving HE context, especially as inequalities continue to persist within the field. In their research, Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2023) draw attention to such power inequalities by

highlighting the discriminatory and racist experiences of minority ethnic students attending school in Ireland. They call for anti-racist training for staff and students. In a similar vein, Reay (2012) calls for systemic change, such as "social redistribution, radical curriculum innovation and discursive shifts" (p. 594) to address inequalities. This current study, therefore, examines the power dynamics within the university field by analysing the student research participants' stories. Their narratives will illuminate how such dynamics impact their sense of belonging in HE. The next section looks at Bourdieu's concept of capital and how it fuels inequalities within a field.

1.13.3. Capital

Capital refers to resources and assets of different kinds valued within a social system that confer privilege and power. Bourdieu identifies three main forms:

- **Economic capital:** Bourdieu (1984) describes economic capital as the accumulation of wealth and assets, often accrued through qualifications and professions. Furthermore, the levels of distribution vary among different classes of people, with the dominant classes (professionals and senior executives) having larger volumes of material and cultural goods. Economic capital has relevance for the student participants in this study because the cost of education, coupled with limited access to funding, continues to create barriers to accessing and participating in HE.
- **Cultural capital**: "[r]epresents the sum of valued knowledge, styles, social and physical (bodily) characteristics and practical behavioural dispositions within a given field" (Hage, 1998, p. 53). In other words, they are tangible or symbolic products that are valued within a social space. The more avant-garde or desired the products are, the greater the value — such products "yield a profit in distinction" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 228). Moreover, the value of cultural capital can change over time — one avant-garde can replace another, concluding that "recognition is followed by consecration" (Grenfell and James, 2004, p. 510). This is particularly relevant for individuals navigating new cultural contexts, seeking validation for their existing cultural capital.
- **Social capital**: "The sum of resources, actual and virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of relationships" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). These networks, especially those of influential individuals, offer significant benefits, including "sturdy norms of generalised reciprocity" (Putnam, 2002, p. 7), whereby members of networks

frequently call on each other for favours. However, social capital benefits are inherently exclusionary, making it challenging for outsiders to gain access to and recognition in new communities (Ahn, 2017). This study highlights the importance of social networks for students, especially migrants, refugees and people in the asylum process, navigating complex HE systems in the absence of such support.

Bourdieu also uses the term "symbolic capital", such as knowledge, credentials or qualifications, to describe accumulated capital that bestows recognition and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1984). He views symbolic capital as the cruellest and most unequally distributed form of capital (Hage, 2025). It is in relation to this pursuit of legitimacy, recognised as symbolic capital, that Hage (1998) introduces the concept of "national belonging", which he explains as a complex, often unequal, hierarchical, and contested social construct. For Hage, national belonging is an unequal playing field, with certain groups positioned as "unquestioned" nationals, while others (often minority groups) are more or less national, subject to the control and judgement of the dominant group. He suggests that the desire for national belonging as a form of symbolic capital is fuelled by the motivation to accumulate national cultural capital to enhance recognition from the dominant culture. This theoretical drive is acutely relevant to students in HE who lack Irish citizenship; for these students, accumulating national symbolic capital through assimilation, such as mastering language, gaining residency, or achieving academic qualifications, becomes crucial, often a pragmatic strategy for achieving a sense of belonging within the institutional field.

1.13.4. Application of Bourdieu's tools to higher education

For Bourdieu, the logic of practice stems from the interplay between habitus, field and capital (Reay, 2004). Furthermore, he did not view practice as a collection of isolated incidents, but rather a way of existing and being in the world: "being is always practical being" (Hage, 2025, p. 24). This study centres on practice, specifically on how the interplay of these concepts impacts the belonging experiences of migrants, refugees and IPAs in Irish HE. Of relevance here is how transnational migration impacts habitus and, subsequently, belongingness. According to Guarnizo (1997), transnational migration fuels rather than reduces inequalities across class, gender and regions. He introduces the concept of "transnational habitus" (p. 281), which he explains as a dual set of dispositions that migrants develop, shaped by life in their home and host country. Critical to this study is how transnational habitus manifests in a HE context. For example, does this dual habitus generate internal conflicts or specific struggles for belonging?

Bourdieu (1988) highlights how those "born into a positively distinguished position" are inherently "adjusted to the immanent requirements of the social and cultural game" (p. 783). He critiques how educational systems assign status by awarding titles or credentials, which can be "ennobling" or "stigmatizing" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 23). This raises the question: what happens to those not privy to privileged positions? For migrant communities in HE, whose cultural, linguistic or social capital often goes unrecognised in a new field, the challenge of navigating the "rules of the game" is significantly intensified. Migrants may strive to accumulate nationality by mastering the language, accent, or cultural norms of their new country, yet the ease of this process depends heavily on their existing habitus and capital (Hage, 1998). Thus, in an Irish context, people who speak English, look European, or have advantageous social networks are more likely to succeed, or achieve what Hage calls "national belonging". In contrast, when such assets are lacking or unacknowledged, the process of accumulating national belonging is more difficult. By focusing on the lived realities of the student participants, this study examines the extent to which they feel their cultural, linguistic and social capital are valued and, in turn, contribute to belonging in HE.

When applying the concept of field to this study, it is not only critical to ascertain what fields foster or hinder belonging, but to examine other fields external to the HE environment impacting student belonging. Ultimately, by examining the interplay of transnational habitus, unacknowledged capital, and the internal and external fields students navigate, this study will reveal the full complexity of belonging within the Irish HE landscape.

1.14. Thesis outline

Chapter 1 discusses an overview of the research, including the rationale, my positionality, and the research context. It also includes insights on belonging and inclusion, and the theoretical framework guiding the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature, beginning with an overview of the experiences of minority students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education. It then reviews relevant literature on belonging in general, and, more specifically, belonging in HE for underrepresented groups from minority backgrounds. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology adopted for the study, including the research design, data-generating process and data analysis. Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive overview of the research findings under three primary themes: understanding belonging, belonging and the person, and institutional belonging. Collectively, the findings present a general

understanding of belonging, its relationship to inclusion, and insights into the student participants' personal and institutional experiences of belonging. Chapter 5 interrogates the dominant themes generated by the research in light of the literature review. This discussion chapter presents a new analytical framework for belonging, showcasing the concept as five key pillars (personal, social, spatial, protective, and civic), enveloped with emotion. It highlights the protective pillar as foundational to belonging for this student group. Additionally, it explores the person-centred significance of the personal, social and civic pillars, suggesting the need to consider the individuality of students when addressing belonging in HE. Additional sections explore the role of the HEI in fostering a sense of belonging, especially from a strategic perspective. Chapter 5 concludes by advising the adoption of a transformative lens when supporting and enhancing belonging. Chapter 6 presents the conclusion, contributions to knowledge, implications for practice, limitations of the research, and possibilities for future studies. The primary contribution to knowledge includes the five-pillar model as a tool to support belonging developments for this student group in a HE environment. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1. Introduction

A number of threads converge in this study, namely, belonging, higher education, and widening participation for a specific student group — ethnic minorities from SED backgrounds. The literature presented here connects and analyses these threads from numerous perspectives. The chapter begins by outlining the search strategy, followed by reviewing empirical studies examining the experiences of similar populations in HE. It then examines belonging in HE, with a focus on the study's participant group. It concludes with a brief review of existing analytical frameworks for belonging before presenting a recap of the research questions and a graphic of the initial conceptual framework informing the study.

2.2. Search strategy

The study employed a multi-stage research strategy to ensure comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature, moving from broad exploratory searches to a more targeted approach.

An initial scoping phase was conducted to identify key terms, seminal authors, and foundational texts. This stage primarily used Google Scholar and was supplemented by searches on the websites of key national and international bodies, including the Irish Higher Education Authority, relevant Government of Ireland Departments, the United Nations and UNHCR. This phase helped to establish the foundational context and refine the search terms.

A more targeted approach was then adopted using academic databases to retrieve peer-reviewed literature. The primary search strategy involved using a combination of keywords, including **belonging, higher education, socioeconomically disadvantaged, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers** and **international protection applicants**. Two main databases were selected for their relevance:

- Academic Search Complete: A comprehensive, cross-disciplinary database used to capture a broad range of literature from various fields.
- Education Research Complete: A discipline-specific database used to target literature directly related to educational theory and practice.

The search results were then screened for relevance and quality. Consideration was also given to the currency of the research, though seminal works were included regardless of the publication date. Articles were excluded if they were in a foreign language or focused exclusively on a school or health setting.

A robust literature management system was maintained throughout the study. The Zotero citation management tool was used to gather and organise all sources, including peer-reviewed articles, books, conference papers, government reports, and theses. DCU's repository of dissertations and theses was a valuable resource, as was the Sage Research Methods resource for guidance on methodological approaches. Essential articles and core texts were summarised and categorised under relevant research themes on a Google Sheets document to facilitate thematic analysis.

2.3. The experiences of underrepresented student groups in higher education

This introductory section contextualises the study by reviewing multiple empirical studies conducted with underrepresented student groups in HE across a range of countries, prioritising studies that have engaged with Bourdieu's conceptual tools. Ideally, the review would have focused on a student population similar to the participants in this study, but, as research in this area is limited, the review includes a wider student group, including students from low-income families, mature students, and first-generation students — groups that may or may not include ethnic minorities. It is crucial to emphasise that the participant group for this study (ethnic minorities who are socioeconomically disadvantaged) is inherently heterogeneous; their backgrounds and lived realities vary significantly across the globe depending on their individual histories. Thus, while the experiences of the students who participated in this study can be examined within particular fields or contexts, they cannot be generalised to what is ultimately a heterogeneous group. The experiences of the students are examined under three subheadings: the positioning of minority students in HE, habitus and learner identity, and finding the right fit.

2.3.1. The positioning of minority student groups in higher education

Viewing underrepresented student groups through a deficit lens is a well-documented but highly contested perspective that continues to shape institutional policies and practices. This approach individualises educational inequality by focusing on students'

perceived lack of habitus and capital, rather than possible systemic barriers (Shields, 2004; Craven, 2012; Reay, 2012). Critics argue that such framing obscures structural inequalities and perpetuates injustice, echoing Bourdieu's (1988, p. 778) claim that "academic struggles are only a particular case of the symbolic struggles that go on in everyday life". Furthermore, Bourdieu contends that universities reinforce privilege by legitimising dominant cultural norms and undervaluing alternative forms of capital — not only are "the ruling ideas, in every age, the ideas of the ruling class, but … the ruling ideas themselves reinforce the rule of that class" and in doing so establish their legitimacy (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. xv).

This issue is particularly relevant to the migrant community whose valuable skills, knowledge and experience are frequently unrecognised by the host society (Meaney Sartori and Nwanze, 2021). Furthermore, Reay (2012), referring specifically to the manner in which the skills of working-class communities are often undervalued, calls for an educational approach that values their vocational skills and knowledge. Building on Bourdieu, Ball (2010) highlights the growing relevance of learning that occurs outside formal education. He argues that access to this type of learning demands significant investments of time, money, energy and social capital, which are realistically only available to certain segments of the population. Therefore, not only is the informal learning of the dominant culture validated by society, but individuals with social, economic and cultural capital are more likely to have the resources to pursue learning outside the formal system.

Research consistently shows that working-class and ethnic minority students are frequently positioned as lacking the attitudes, behaviours, or academic dispositions required to succeed in HE (Shields, 2004; Reay, 2005; Butler, 2021; Healey and Stroman, 2021). This framing overlooks the structural inequalities inhibiting access to and success within the system. Reay (2005) highlights how universities, while declaring themselves neutral, often overlook how their practices favour middle-class norms and values, leading underrepresented groups to feel like imposters or outsiders, affecting their sense of belonging and learner identity. Additionally, the persistence of the deficit narrative raises more serious questions about the practice of racial stereotyping and bullying within the education system (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023). Supporting such claims, Darby's (2022) findings highlight that not alone are racism and microaggression[8]

[8] Microaggressions are the subtle, everyday verbal, behavioural, or environmental messages that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults to people based on their membership in a marginalised group (Nepton *et al.*, 2025)

ongoing issues in the tertiary system, but there is a systemic denial that such practices exist, with teaching staff ill-prepared to address the problem.

Examining students' perspectives of belonging in a post-1992[9] UK university, with a statistically higher percentage of "non-traditional" students in terms of class, maturity and ethnicity, Read *et al.* (2003) illustrate how discourses around academic writing often judge students from such backgrounds as deficient, dismissing their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This positions non-traditional students as problems to be addressed, rather than valuable contributors to academic knowledge. Kitching (2011) extends this critique in the Irish context, revealing how widening participation policies can still position certain groups, such as students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds or minority communities, as "at-risk" or "deficient". Similarly, Ní Dhuinn and Keane's (2023) research with "minority ethnic" students in an Irish HEI indicates a tendency by some teachers to adopt a deficiency lens based on assumptions about competency in the English language, with students who did not speak English as a first language frequently being considered academically deficient.

Crucially, as an antidote to the deficiency discourse, some studies provide an alternative narrative by demonstrating the students' abilities in overcoming adverse situations and adapting to their new environment (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Reay, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Macqueen, 2017). Many studies (Brady *et al.*, 2020; Murphy *et al.*, 2020; Larsen and James, 2022; Jackson, Harvey and Sherman, 2023) also highlight the positive long-term impact of even small, targeted interventions in fostering belonging and countering deficit framing for minority group students. Such interventions include mentoring programmes, building self-efficacy or facilitating critical discourses that challenge feelings of isolation and marginalisation.

This section highlights a tendency to view underrepresented student groups as deficient, failing to acknowledge the students' determination and resilience. Ultimately, such a view misrepresents the root causes of inequality and risks limiting widening participation practices in HE to addressing deficiencies rather than recognising abilities. The next section examines habitus as a factor in determining who goes to college and its influence on learner identity.

[9] In the UK, a post-1992 university refers to a former polytechnic or other higher education institution that was granted university status in 1992 (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003)

2.3.2. Habitus and learner identity

As described in Section 1.13.1, habitus is multilayered, and while deeply linked to individual histories, it is also shaped by family and societal experiences (Reay, 2004; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Although rooted in early childhood, habitus is not fixed but continually structured and restructured (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990; Maton, 2014). From an individual perspective, habitus encompasses a person's knowledge, expectations and understandings of the world, and contributes to constituting the field, not just as a reflection of the world but as a genuine contribution to its reality (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Thus, each person brings to the field a personalised embodiment of their dispositions, which poses challenges for managing the needs and expectations of individuals, especially when they are members of what is assumed to be a homogeneous student group.

Familial habitus refers to the deeply rooted beliefs, values, attitudes and lived experiences collectively shaped and transmitted within the family unit (Reay, 2015). Family circumstances, particularly the educational experiences of parents, can profoundly influence attitudes to education. Hence, middle-class students often approach HE with a sense of certainty and entitlement, as their familial habitus positions university attendance as a natural and expected progression (Reay, 2015). For instance, middle-class students with a family history of university attendance will be a lot more confident about their university choice and more balanced in their emotions because they can draw on existing capital to mitigate feelings of doubt and fear (Reay, 2005). In fact, research by Reay *et al.* (2009) show that middle-class students engaged in little active planning in relation to university choice. In contrast, students from underrepresented groups often experience tension and ambivalence, navigating between competing identities and divided loyalties (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009, 2010; Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017). Case studies, such as Reay *et al.*'s (2009) *Strangers in Paradise*, reveal the emotional and academic challenges faced by working-class students in elite universities, including feelings of exclusion and self-doubt. Bourdieu (1984) explains such tension as "objective limitations", leading to feelings of exclusion and a sense that this field is "not for the likes of us" (p. 471). In other words, when people are excluded from goods, places, people and services, they, in turn, internalise that belief and exclude themselves. Ultimately, the mismatch between the familial habitus of underrepresented students and the dominant institutional culture creates a profound sense of difference, which often manifests as a feeling of not belonging.

In addition to individual and familial habitus, Reay (2015) also highlights the influence of institutional habitus, describing how HEIs shape and are shaped by the students they recruit, with their culture and historical foundations frequently reflecting the surrounding society. In a recent UK study, Rees *et al.* (2024) examined the experiences of ethnic minority students on a speech and language training programme. Referring to their inability to fit in, the students reported feeling like outsiders in "a very white middle-class sector". They spoke about feeling different in the class group and consequently felt less valued and accepted (p. 2269). This feeling of being different is a recurring theme in similar studies (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023; Nepton *et al.*, 2025).

For Bourdieu, examining habitus without field is a pointless exercise as the relationship between them is the key to understanding practice (Maton, 2014). It is important to note here that habitus only becomes active within the context of a specific field — the same habitus can generate different practices depending on the field's configuration (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Reay, 2004). As mentioned earlier, education is a field in a multidimensional social space (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990), with higher education viewed as a separate field within that space. One's positioning within the space, coupled with the amount of capital relevant to the specific field, will determine one's trajectory or life opportunities. A case study by O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019) examining alternative entry routes provides valuable insights into how capital and habitus impact the confidence and belonging of underrepresented groups within the HE field. All students in the study referred to their lack of "navigational capital" to progress to HE. While family or community role models facilitated their decision to apply to university, not all students had access to such support. Other studies highlight how the type and quality of education received before transitioning to HE also determine the degree of capital transferable across fields, with some students from underrepresented groups feeling they lacked the skills required to excel in university (Keane, 2011; Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017; Bülbül, 2020).

While Bourdieu's work is frequently viewed as deterministic (Reay, 2015), he acknowledges that, given the right impetus, change is possible. He views habitus as an open system of dispositions constantly exposed to new experiences — "durable but not eternal" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). However, this does not mean change is easy, especially when there is a misalignment with the students' habitus and the conditions of the field (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Moving beyond one's familiar habitus requires agency, reflexive thinking, and often the support of significant figures such as mentors or teachers. Research highlights the importance of targeted programmes, foundation courses, and accessible information to build the confidence

and sense of belonging of students from underrepresented groups considering applying to HE (Keane, 2011; Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020). In a pre-entry initiative with SED students to enhance educational capabilities, Hannon *et al.* (2017) found that building the social and cultural capital of students helped to develop capabilities such as autonomy, hope, voice and identity. Similarly, another pre-entry study by O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019) highlights the benefits of alternative entry pathways. Although acquiring new academic skills helped to build confidence and ability, the students reported feeling "less than and inferior to direct entry students" (p. 568). Such initiatives highlight the importance of targeted support and building capital before students transition to HE; they also suggest the need for continuing such support in the post-entry space.

The barriers to HE for underrepresented groups are well documented, including economic, cultural and social factors (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020; Indecon International Research Economists, 2021). Yet, despite the apparent enormity of the challenges, many of these students display the ability and determination to enter and succeed in university. The next section presents some of the key challenges for underrepresented groups, reviewing some of the personal strategies adopted as their existing habitus encounters unfamiliar territory.

2.3.3. Finding the right fit

For Bourdieu, education plays an integral role in shaping habitus. Moreover, he consistently decries the way education reproduces societal inequalities, with the dominant group using its position to determine what knowledge is and what should be passed on through the school system. As explained in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, pedagogical actions serve the interests of dominant groups who consistently reproduce an unequal distribution of cultural capital, reinforcing the current social hierarchy (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Crucially, Bourdieu's analysis of the interplay between habitus and field is readily applicable to the education field and helps to enlighten our understanding of what happens when habitus intersects with an unfamiliar social space — "it is like a divided or torn habitus" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Conversely, when habitus encounters a familiar field, it is like a "fish in water", readily adapting to the surrounding world. Thus, habitus provides individuals with dispositions, perceptions and knowledge to make sense of the world around them, with those familiar with the "rules of the game" adjusting readily to the new environment. Habitus, therefore, does not explicitly inform practice. Rather, practice is the outcome of the intersection between habitus and one's current circumstances (Maton, 2014). As

Hage (2025) explains, how we are in the world is always based on practice or what he calls our “practical being”. “Practice is how we come to belong to the world, and how we come to see the world as belonging to us” (p.24).

Bourdieu’s “fish in water” metaphor is useful for understanding how students fit seamlessly into the system when their habitus and capital align with the dominant institutional culture. This is ultimately about “practical being” — the augmentation of one’s sense of self that is achievable only through the implementation of appropriate practices (Hage, 2025). For instance, Keane (2011a) offers valuable insights on the notion of practical being, demonstrating an inherent confidence in academic ability and sense of fit exhibited by traditional entry students. In contrast, students who had entered through the alternative access route continued to question their ability and exhibit imposter syndrome despite having participated in a pre-entry programme and having acquired a level of academic preparedness. Similarly, writing about the experiences of refugee students studying online courses, Brunton *et al.* (2019) refer to “duelling identities” as students navigate their new world as online learners and their identities as IPAs in the external environment. These examples indicate that for students from underrepresented groups, it may be more apt to use “fish out of water” to describe those who experience “disjunctures of habitus” (Reay, 2004) during the transition period.

Although many studies demonstrate the challenges and stresses for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, there is also a substantial body of work articulating the personal strategies students use to adapt to their new environment. For example, Rees *et al’s* (2024) findings show how students modified behaviours, such as modelling how white peers communicated or changing accents in order to fit in. Similarly, Ní Dhuinn and Keane’s (2023) study with ethnic minority students in HE found that some students consciously attempted to hide aspects of their racial identity to blend in with their white peers. Students, undoubtedly, bring their own trajectories to the HE field, with some finding aspects of their habitus that suit the new environment. For example, learners with academically high dispositions may have a greater sense of fit in elite universities than in their predominantly working-class schools (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Such situations emphasise the complex navigation required between the learner and social identity.

A recurring theme emerging in research for students whose habitus does not align with the HE field relates to concerns about social connections, including the ability to make friends and fit in (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020; Rees *et al.*, 2024). Given the strong link between belonging and social connections, forming close

friendships is essential to creating a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2002, 2012). Keane's (2011b) research with access students and traditional-entry student groups in HE identifies key social strategies adopted by these diverse groups, such as "distancing" and "clique-ing".

In her work, Keane (2011b) observes two distinct self-protective forms of distancing: "subservient distancing", where access students protect themselves from feeling inferior to "other" students, and "status-maintaining/raising distancing" practised by traditional-entry students to defend their perceived superior status. Furthermore, cliquing was common across both forms of distancing as students grouped together based on commonalities such as wealth, appearance, age, interests, attitudes and living arrangements. Keane connects this tendency of interpersonal attraction with the principle of homophily — a term adopted by McPherson *et al.* (2001) to explain a behavioural pattern where "contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (p.416).

These homophilic practices are replicated across other studies. For example, Dunne (2009), in his study exploring how students perceived cultural differences within a HE environment, found similar cliquing trends between host and international students. Here, host students were hesitant to mix with international students based on a perception of being culturally different, primarily because of age and nationality. Similarly, Rees *et al.* (2024) found that ethnic minority students formed relationships with other ethnic minority students as they were acting in a comfort zone and eliminating the burden of having to explain themselves to "other" students.

Across the many studies outlining the experiences of underrepresented groups in HE, the resilience, determination and ability of students to overcome adverse circumstances and adapt to the new environment are noteworthy. However, much of the research highlights examples where the emphasis is on the student to adapt rather than the system accommodating the student. In advocating for social justice in education, Shields (2004) believes it is both essential to recognise how habitus hinders equity and justice and to adopt new approaches to challenge deficit constructs. Such approaches include valuing rather than ignoring diversity and recognising and naming the benefits of difference instead of remaining silent.

Likewise, Reay (2012) calls for a new vision for education — one that "moves beyond narrow secular self-interests and economic ends" of the dominant group to one that includes valuing the knowledge, skills and experience of underrepresented groups (p.

589). Similarly, hooks (1994) views enhanced cultural diversity as crucial to transformation, including “a rethinking of the ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies” (p. 30). She believes such practices will help to counter biases centred on white privilege, imperialism, sexism, and racism. Hughes (2007, p. 309) also proposes a "purposeful pedagogy" that creates space within the curriculum for critical conversations. Craven (2012) asserts that space must be made in education for the practice and ethos of social justice, adding that the work requires adequate funding. Alternatively, Parker (2007) focuses her attention on research universities, suggesting a more concerted effort by institutions to "find and support students who challenge conventional knowledge and bring fresh perspective" (p. 791).

In summary, this section highlights lingering inequalities in HE, particularly for underrepresented groups whose habitus does not align with the dominant institutional culture. Furthermore, it shows the efforts some students must make to survive in HE, placing the onus on the student rather than the institution. As the students in Rees *et al.* (2024) suggest, institutions need to become more inclusive by addressing systemic issues around diversity and disadvantage. In the absence of structural change, students from underrepresented groups will not feel they belong in the institution and will continue to feel isolated and excluded.

2.4. Belonging in higher education

Before examining belonging in higher education, it is necessary to provide a general understanding of belonging. As with many concepts, at first glance the casual observer might assume the idea of belonging to be unambiguous, but a deeper examination shows it frequently lacking clarity, leading Antonsich (2010b) to describe it as a term "vaguely defined and ill-theorized" (p. 644). Descriptions of belonging refer to its ordinariness, such as "a concept that intuitively makes sense" (Bacon, 2019, p. 28) or "belonging is simply there" (Bennett, 2014, p. 1). Writing from the perspective of vulnerable minority groups, including migrants, some researchers suggest a caveat, positing that belonging is a feeling people do not think too deeply about unless it is threatened in some way (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Ahmed, 2007, 2011; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2018). Thus, finding a sense of belonging can become a desire for people experiencing belonging uncertainty or when their belongingness is threatened. In her book *Belonging,* hooks (2009) describes returning to where she grew up to search for a sense of belonging when she couldn't find it elsewhere. "I found there essential remnants of a culture of belonging, a sense of the meaning and vitality of geographical place" (p.

22). Likewise, in her book, also entitled *Belonging*, Corless (2021) articulates the determination of individuals to find their natural birth mothers, describing people lacking a sense of belonging as "feeling untethered — floating almost, from place to place, looking for a sense of home" (p. 104). Belonging then appears "as complex as it is intuitive" (Buonfino and Thomson, 2007, p. 6). The quotes from hooks and Corless introduce the significance of connection, either to a place or to people, as central to belonging, reinforcing Yuval-Davis's (2006) assertion that the search for belonging is magnified when a sense of belonging is threatened.

The need to understand students' sense of belonging in HE has gained significant momentum in recent years, driven by several pertinent issues. There is overwhelming evidence linking belonging with engagement, retention and success (Tinto, 1975; Thomas, 2012; Ahn and Davis, 2020a). This need is even more urgent today, given the substantial rise in student disengagement in the post-Covid era (Larsen and James, 2022; Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023) and the pandemic's negative impact on students' well-being and mental health (Hoover, 2022; Smyth and Nolan, 2022; Peterson *et al.*, 2023).

While these three issues make a compelling reason for enhancing belonging, some authors argue for a more critical approach. Graham and Moir (2022), for instance, warn against viewing belonging as a panacea for the many challenges of HE. They suggest that the dominant narrative around belonging is a neoliberal construct, promoting a homogeneous ideal that can perpetuate injustices and inequalities, especially for those students who cannot, or choose not to, conform. Instead, they recommend developing a pedagogy focused on developing students as critical beings, with confidence to be themselves and engage constructively with the world around them.

The literature on student belonging in HE largely resonates with the theoretical aspects of belonging discussed earlier. Adding more nuanced perspectives on belonging theory, seminal research by Goodenow (1993) with young adolescents in a classroom environment provides a foundational understanding of belonging in an academic setting, describing belonging as "students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others … and of feeling part of the life of the class" (p. 25). This emphasis on being valued, accepted and recognised is a recurring theme in subsequent studies (Thomas, 2012; Ahn, 2017; Butler, 2021; Healey and Stroman, 2021). The core idea is that belonging is more than just being a member of the institution; it is about being accepted for who one is, without feeling the need to conform, and having the opportunity

to contribute and participate in a meaningful way to institutional activities (Thomas, 2012; Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023). This highlights a tension between students' need for authentic inclusion and the institutional pressures to assimilate into a dominant culture.

2.4.1. Benefits of belonging in HE

Existing research leaves little doubt that belonging has many benefits for students and for the institution. Earlier references highlighting links between belonging and well-being (Myers and Diener, 2018) are reflected in the HE environment (Healey and Stroman, 2021), with a sense of belonging positively affecting well-being, happiness and, in turn, academic achievement (Allen *et al.*, 2021, 2024; Jackson, Harvey and Sherman, 2023; Nepton *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, numerous studies confirm belonging is crucial to student retention and success (Tinto, 1975, 2006; Thomas, 2015, 2019). For example, in an empirical study carried out with freshman students in the US, Freeman *et al*. (2007) found when students feel a sense of belonging in class, they are more motivated and confident about achieving their academic goals. Furthermore, studies examining factors influencing belonging in HE highlight the significance of engagement and social connection (Freeman, Anderman and Jensen, 2007; Thomas, 2012, 2015; Healey and Stroman, 2021), while Thomas (2012) identifies belonging as critical to retention and success, and engagement as essential to belonging.

In her study with part-time mature students in the UK, Thomas (2015, 2019) explores the meaning of belonging in HE from the perspective of student retention and success, aligning a sense of belonging with on-campus student engagement, both academic and social. Her findings draw attention to mature students who study part-time, commute long distances, combine study with employment or have caring responsibilities, concluding that such students do not have the same opportunities to engage in campus activities, which, in turn, affects their sense of belonging and impacts success and retention. Thus, she argues for institutions to provide a range of opportunities for engagement.

Engagement in HE comes in many guises, but, generally, social connections incorporate a variety of interactions, including connections with friends and peers, participation in clubs and societies and Students' Union events, and interactions in academic and professional spaces. Research also indicates that students engage in different ways in different spaces, with not everyone needing the same degree of connection (Buonfino and Thomson, 2007; Thomas, 2012). Regardless of the type or level of engagement, it

is crucial in developing students' social and communication skills, essential to university life and beyond (Hoover, 2022).

Following its participation in the What Works? Student Success and Retention Programme 2008-2011, Bangor University undertook research focused specifically on belonging in university. The initial study by Ahn (2017) and a follow-on study by Ahn and Davis (2020a), used an open-ended survey called the 10 Words Question[10] to examine students' sense of belonging to the university. The studies were aimed at the general student population and were not targeted at specific student cohorts. The findings in both studies were categorised into four domains of belonging: academic, social, surroundings and personal space. The research concluded that student engagement policies in HE had previously focused primarily on academic and social engagement, thus omitting other areas affecting the students' lives. Therefore, policies and practices linked to engagement should consider the four domains of belonging to ensure that supports address the holistic needs of students. While the majority of the studies described above have examined the significance of engagement for fostering a sense of belonging in the general student body, other studies have focused on belonging and underrepresented student groups. While the benefits of belonging in HE are widely documented, this sense of belonging is not universally experienced. The next section provides a deeper analysis of the interplay of privilege and inequality with belonging and related concepts such as inclusion and exclusion.

2.4.2. The interplay of belonging and inequality in higher education

In a Bourdieusian sense, inclusion and exclusion could be considered an antinomy or what Bourdieu himself terms "paired oppositions" — concepts that seem logical but simultaneously contradict or limit each other (Bourdieu, 1988). In his article *Belonging in an Age of Exclusion*, Slee (2019) explains that he assumed a correlation between inclusion and exclusion, believing that advancing inclusive education would dismantle the exclusive practices that marginalise vulnerable communities. However, he notes with dismay that such a shift has not happened, with a growing divide persisting between privilege and inequality. Building on this tension, Butler (2021) asserts that inclusion and exclusion are not oppositional terms. She argues that inclusion exists on a continuum rather than being a simple matter of in or out. She introduces the concept of

[10] Ahn devised the 10 Words Question format for her doctoral study and has used it in follow-up research studies. The 10 Words Question is an open-ended quantitative survey asking students to list ten words indicating their sense of belonging to the university.

"unbelonging" to capture the experience on this spectrum, explaining the "dynamics of simultaneous presence and exclusion" (p. 17) and how one feels in a particular situation. Thus, given the complexity of belonging and oppositional terms, any attempt to understand belonging in HE must consider the concepts of unbelonging and exclusion. Such considerations recognise Bourdieu's assertion that language is never value-neutral, and acknowledge that power differentials exist in every social setting (Grenfell, 2011).

From a HE perspective, evidence suggests that power and privilege continue to influence who belongs and who does not (Reay, 2012; Healey and Stroman, 2021; Graham and Moir, 2022; Nepton *et al.*, 2025). As Butler (2021) argues, privilege brings entitlements and rights to participate in HE, with the more privileged enjoying greater rights and enhanced immunity from feelings of exclusion. In contrast, research from the US highlights that racial-ethnic minority students from SED backgrounds often experience a lack of belonging rooted in feelings of inadequacy perpetuated by persistent stereotyping and discrimination (Freeman, Anderman and Jensen, 2007; Murphy *et al.*, 2020; Nepton *et al.*, 2025). These feelings profoundly impact the students' experience, well-being and mental health, as well as contributing to disengagement from academic life. Likewise, research by Jackson *et al*. (2023) on racialised minority students in the US found a detrimental impact of discrimination on academic achievement, often eroding students' confidence in their ability to succeed.

Similar patterns are mirrored in an Irish context, where Darby (2022) found that Black and Minority Ethnic students experienced daily microaggressions on campus, and their rich ethnic and cultural differences were undervalued. Likewise, recent research by Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2023) examined the schooling experiences in Ireland of 25 ethnic minority students attending HE, revealing that inequalities, discrimination, racism and stereotyping persist. The study drew attention to ongoing identity challenges and efforts made by the students to belong. This research, along with that by Darby (2022) echoes calls by Jackson *et al*. (2023) for anti-racism and intercultural training. Such training is crucial for teachers and students, as it educates and raises awareness about the importance of recognising and valuing difference.

Aligning with Bourdieu's analysis of power dynamics within social spaces, Healey and Stroman (2021) contend that feelings of belonging or not belonging are essentially influenced by systemic structures that position certain identities, behaviours and ways of being as superior or normative. These structures position individuals along intersecting "lines of race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, language, class,

indigeneity, or ability" (p. 2). Such concepts reinforce Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, emphasising how overlapping identities create distinctions that seek to include or exclude people from specific environments. In other words, how we experience advantage, privilege, disadvantage, or exclusion is relative to our "hierarchical positioning" within society (Kavanagh, Waldron and Mallon, 2021, p. 3).

Belonging is also strongly influenced by a tacit understanding of how to behave in specific contexts and groups (Healey and Stroman, 2021). As mentioned previously, Bourdieu (1988) describes this practical knowledge in social situations as having a "feel for the game" (p. 782) — not because those who know the rules are trying to be superior but because their habitus fits perfectly with the unspoken rules of society. Even small daily rejections, or microaggressions, hold power within a group. Over time, the cumulative effect of these encounters can lead to heightened insecurities and disconnection (Butler, 2021) with repeated feelings of exclusion, however subtle, eventually leading to profound alienation.

2.4.3. Supporting belonging in HE

Supporting belonging in HE means actively removing barriers to belonging and working to create an inclusive environment for all students (Allen *et al.*, 2024). While a sense of belonging is significant for everyone, racial and ethnic minority students are more likely to experience discrimination and negative stereotyping, which directly impact their sense of identity and connection to the university (Rees *et al.*, 2024; Nepton *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, supporting belonging involves providing specific, often individualised, assistance to students who struggle to adapt and engage with university life. Research indicates that such support is crucial at all stages of the student journey. For instance, O'Sullivan *et al.'s* (2019) research highlights how Foundation Years and contextualised entry pathways can facilitate belonging for students from "low socio–economic" backgrounds. Their findings showed that participation, particularly in the Foundation Year, helped students to build positive connections with role models and mentors, thus compensating for the lack of navigational capital within their communities.

Similarly, Hannon *et al.* (2017) advocate for increased emphasis on building the capabilities of students from "low socio–economic" backgrounds. They are critical of WP policies that align with neoliberal principles, which focus predominantly on targets and employability. Instead, they call for specific programmes to build HE-related social and cultural capital. Their research demonstrated how developing capabilities such as agency, hope and voice, identity and knowledge, positively influenced students'

aspirations and sense of entitlement to HE. The significance of providing diverse entry pathways is further reinforced in a recent article on study progression data for SED students (Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025). Based on the study's findings, the authors call on WP policymakers to focus on resourcing school-university pathways to broaden access to HE. Although limited evidence still exists to demonstrate the effectiveness of pre-entry activities (Keane, 2011b, 2011a; Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025), these studies suggest that targeted, timely interventions can greatly assist in building "bridging capital" and effectively increase the aspirations and expectations of SED students to transition to HE.

While traditional WP policies focused on increasing access to HE for underrepresented student groups, more recent policies emphasise the significance of student participation and success (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022). As Keane (2016) notes, if HEIs are genuinely interested in promoting social justice and ensuring that the outcomes of WP policies extend beyond metrics, it is crucial that the supports and services offered to these students are "targeted, relevant, realistic and timely" (p. 148). Therefore, while pre-entry support plays a significant role in preparing underrepresented groups for entry to HE, follow-on support is essential to ensure students are facilitated to adjust to the unfamiliar HE environment.

In particular, the literature convincingly confirms the significance of the first-year experience and the necessity of establishing supportive networks to aid retention and success, especially during the transition period (Murphy *et al.*, 2020; Jackson, Harvey and Sherman, 2023). Likewise, research repeatedly highlights how the social aspect of university life creates a sense of belonging and connection (Ahn, 2017; Ahn and Davis, 2020a; Scanlon *et al.*, 2020). Such evidence clearly illuminates the importance of planning and implementing initiatives to build connection. Examples of good practice include peer mentoring projects (Thomas, 2012) or projects focused on building students' self-efficacy and confidence for engagement and learning (Larsen and James, 2022). Based on evidence from previous studies and Bandura's[11] theory of self-efficacy, Larsen and James conclude that building self-efficacy in marginalised students enhances their sense of belonging and reduces feelings of isolation. Other projects indicate the benefit of niche interventions for supporting student belonging, especially for first-generation students or minority students who may experience insecurities or belonging uncertainty as they adapt to an unfamiliar habitus. For example, findings from

[11] Bandura (1977) developed social cognitive theory, which contributed significantly to understanding the link between learning and self-efficacy.

Scanlon *et al.* (2020) found that a targeted orientation programme for SED students facilitated their transition to the unfamiliar HE environment and frequently resulted in the establishment of lifelong friendships. An alternative example includes Jarvis's (2018) initiative, which provides safe spaces for vulnerable students to share their feelings and fears about risk with other students in similar circumstances and with support staff. An early reading and writing intervention by Murphy *et al.* (2020) with first-generation, racialised ethnic minority students in the US indicates an enhanced sense of fitting in within the institution. However, they add a proviso, noting that the intervention worked for students who had time to engage with it and thus was not suited to students with complex issues who struggled to balance diverse areas of their lives.

While supporting belonging often focuses on the provision of specific targeted interventions for students at risk of isolation, enhancing belonging adopts a more holistic approach, embracing inclusive principles and practices that are integrated across all levels of the university (Allen *et al.*, 2024). Instead of focusing on specific targeted events, there is an increasing tendency towards universally designed activities, ensuring everyone benefits (Kelly, Padden and Fleming, 2023, 2024). For example, Thomas (2012) in her review of belonging initiatives in higher education concludes that mainstreaming institution-wide interventions is much more effective than holding once-off events. Furthermore, in their twenty-year systematic analysis examining belonging in HE, Allen *et al.* (2024) present a comprehensive overview of the strategies and interventions for fostering belonging. The strategies include ideas for policy and practice enhancements, valuing diversity, building relationships, and training for educators. Allen *et al.* (2024) stress the need for institutions to adopt a holistic approach to belonging and avoid delivering interventions in isolation. Furthermore, they advise that future research in this area should adopt rigorous research designs to examine the effectiveness of these strategies. While the review provides crucial insights on belonging in HE, its focus, solely on studies that appeared in the *Journal of Teaching and Learning Practice,* is a significant limitation.

2.5. Analytical frameworks for belonging

The complexity of defining belonging stems from its cross-disciplinary links and the vast range of perspectives from which it is analysed. Research has its roots in social geography (Massey, 1994), psychology (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and sociology (Bennett, 2014), covering topics from nationality to class. This breadth means belonging

is studied in diverse communities, from the general population to specific groups such as third-level students.

To analyse this complexity, Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010b) developed multidimensional frameworks, with an emphasis on emotional attachment and social positioning. Collectively, their work correlates strongly with Bourdieu's theoretical framework. While Yuval-Davis and Antonsich focus on social positioning and emotional attachment, Bourdieu offers a necessary structural foundation, using habitus, capital and field to reveal how structural inequalities operate to inform who belongs and who remains on the margins. All three approaches (Yuval-Davis, Antonsich, and Bourdieu) demonstrate that individual feelings are embedded in broader social relations and power dynamics that determine access to resources, legitimacy, and recognition.

While Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010b) primarily address the social dimension through attachment and social positioning, the work of Pollini (2005) and May (2011) convincingly demonstrates the significance of socio-relational interactions by detailing how individuals identify not just with the physical space but with the social relationships and collective identity within it.

2.6. Conclusion

The chapter presented a foundational and theoretical understanding of belonging among underrepresented student groups in HE. The review began by demonstrating how pre-existing social structures fundamentally shape the student experience. Bourdieu's conceptual tools — habitus, capital, and field (as outlined in Chapter 1) were critical in examining the differential experiences of transition and participation, whereby middle-class students often experience HE progression as an entitled right, while students from underrepresented groups face tension, isolation and doubt. Crucially, the literature highlighted an ongoing tendency by policymakers and practitioners to adopt a deficit perspective that places the onus on the student to adapt rather than examining the need for systemic and institutional change to promote diversity and inclusion.

Building on a theoretical understanding of belonging, the literature review then examined belonging specifically in HE. This included the benefits of fostering belonging and strategies for supporting its implementation in a university setting. The review concluded by presenting two existing analytical frameworks for belonging that provided a baseline understanding of the concept.

By integrating critical theories of social reproduction with the literature on belonging, this study is positioned to move beyond simply contextualising students' lived experiences. It aims to interrogate the interplay of institutional practices and deeply embedded inequalities to reveal where and how belonging is achieved, or denied, for underrepresented groups.

The theoretical journey outlined in this chapter was an integral part of an initial iteration of the conceptual framework (Figure 2). As the research progressed, this framework was further refined (see Figure 24).

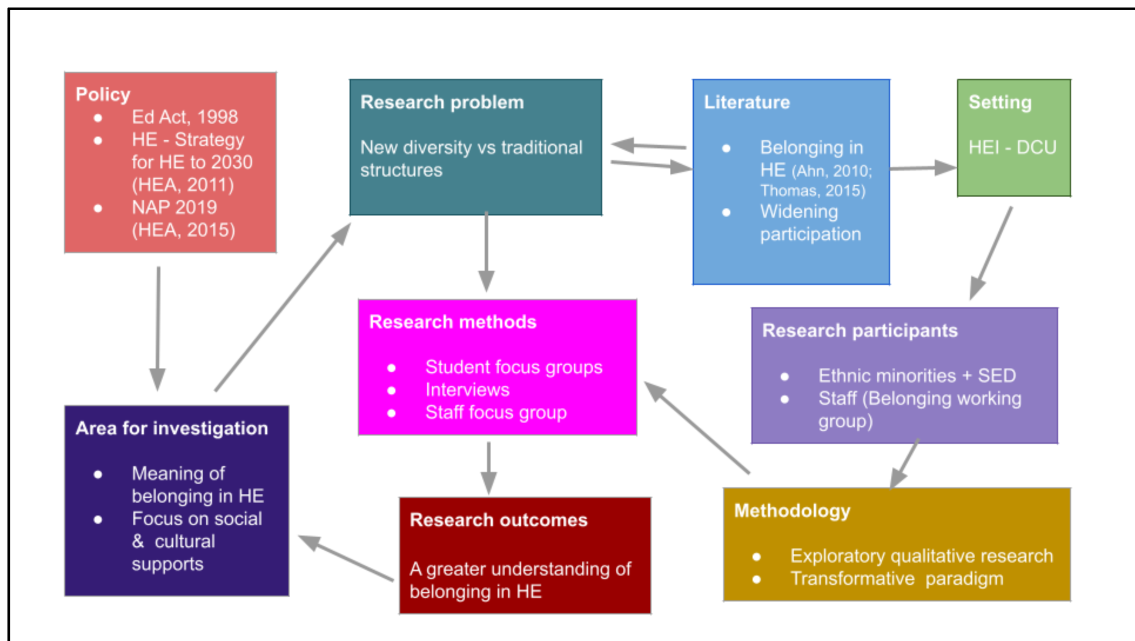

Figure 2: Initial conceptual framework

The next chapter will describe the research methodology, guiding the reader through each stage of the process, including the research design, data generation methods, and data analysis procedures. The research questions, which are foundational to the study, are repeated below.

Research questions

- What does belonging in HE, in a general sense, mean to ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, including students who are migrants or refugees or students who have experience of the international protection process?

- What cultural and social dimensions of university life, if any, instil, or do not instil, a feeling of belonging for these students?
- What, if anything, would help to enhance the sense of belonging in HE for these students?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research design or the "procedural plan" adopted for this study (Kumar, 2011, p. 94). It begins with a recap of the overall aim of the research, followed by an outline of my philosophical worldview and the ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives influencing the study. It then presents a thorough description of the methodology, including the recruitment process, the data generation approach, the ethical considerations, the limitations of the methods, and the data analysis procedures. While the approach presented here appears linear, the process was, in practice, reflective and iterative, with ongoing revisions to ensure trustworthiness, accuracy, dependability and reliability throughout the design process.

3.2. Aim of study

The aspiration of promoting a welcoming and inclusive environment in a higher education setting underpinned this study, with an overarching aim of exploring the sense of belonging experienced by a small cohort of ethnic minority SED students. The research focused specifically on the degree of belongingness experienced in the social and cultural dimensions of a university setting.

3.3. The research paradigm

A paradigm (or worldview) is a set of philosophical assumptions that includes a researcher's beliefs and values, guiding and influencing their study (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, these assumptions are closely aligned with the researcher's positionality, such as identity, background and standpoint relative to the research context (Milner, 2007; Darwin Holmes, 2020). When selecting a paradigm for this study, I considered several factors, including the research topic, research participants, and my experience, knowledge and values (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). After considering other paradigms, such as critical theory and the participatory paradigms (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Heron and Reason, 1997), I was drawn strongly to the transformative worldview (Mertens, 2007b, 2017) because it incorporates the belief that research should contain a social action agenda, which involves engaging in dialogue with research participants to identify and challenge areas of inequality. As this was an exploratory study, it did not assume the existence of such issues from the outset. Rather, if inequalities or suggestions for enhancing current

practice emerged in the findings, a plan of action would be required. Acknowledging that paradigmatic boundaries are permeable (Maxwell, 2012; Romm, 2015), I also drew on aspects of social justice; the transformative paradigm, however, remained the fulcrum of the study. The selected paradigm and its associated philosophical beliefs were particularly relevant to this research because they provided a framework for examining inequalities, social justice and cultural complexity (Mertens, 2007b; Mertens, Holmes and Harris, 2009; Mertens, 2010). With its human rights-based agenda, this paradigm engages individuals from culturally diverse groups to contribute to social justice by challenging the status quo, questioning existing practices, and addressing power issues (Mertens, 2010). I was aware that my personal values could influence how reality is perceived; thus, teasing these out was integral to the paradigm as "the researcher and research participants may have different values as a consequence of unearned privilege" (Bazeley, 2013, p. 24). Therefore, discussing values was a component of the data-generating process, whereby the participants and I openly shared our perspectives on different emerging research themes, such as what is important to us when we find ourselves in unfamiliar spaces or in a minority in a group setting. Furthermore, the transformative paradigm echoed Paulo Freire's emancipatory ideals, including the criticality of dialogue to transform the world. For example, in writing about dialogue, Freire (1972) emphasised "… that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man [sic]", adding that "those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression" (p. 61). Thus, creating the space for participants to share their experiences mirrored the ethos and vision of the transformative paradigm and aligned with the aims of the study. Table 2 summarises the dominant inquiry paradigms I reviewed before deciding on the transformative paradigm.

Table 2: Inquiry paradigms — adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2005) and Mertens (2010)

Topic	Paradigm			
	Post positivism	**Critical theory**	**Participatory**	**Transformative**
Axiology — nature of ethical behaviour	Informed consent Respect privacy	Informed consent	Practical knowing — autonomy, cooperation, and hierarchy in culture are intrinsically valuable	Respect for cultural norms and the promotion of human rights and social justice
Ontology — nature of reality	Naive realism — one reality knowable within a specified level of probability	Historical realism. Virtual reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, gender or ethnic values.	Subjective-objective reality	Recognises and interrogates the belief that reality is open to multiple interpretations
Epistemology — nature of knowledge	Objectivity is important. Researcher engages dispassionately and objectively	Transactional/ subjective value Mediated findings	Critical subjectivity in participatory transaction	Interactive link between the researcher and participants; Knowledge is socially and historically situated.
Methodology — approach to systematic inquiry	Experimental/ manipulative/ mainly quantitative	Mainly qualitative dialogue	Qualitative interactive	Mainly qualitative (dialogue); Contextual and historical factors are described.

3.3.1. The philosophical beliefs

The philosophical beliefs discussed in this section refer to the transformative paradigm. In this paradigm, the axiological dimension — the role of values in shaping research — is paramount, guiding other areas of the research design (Mertens, 2007a; Mertens, Holmes and Harris, 2009). Foregrounding axiology resonated with me because social justice was explicitly named from the beginning and recognised as foundational to the study (Mertens, 2007b; Mertens, Holmes and Harris, 2009). In line with my values, I adopted a cyclical methodology (Mertens, 2007b), offering participants flexibility with the interview scheduling and the data-generating approaches as well as opportunities to review and comment on transcripts, including adding new insights if relevant.

The transformative paradigm also calls for researchers to reflect critically on their positionality — their identity, background, values and social location relative to the research context (Milner, 2007; Darwin Holmes, 2020). I engaged in a sustained reflexive process to examine my own assumptions, values and potential biases — a particularly relevant process given the cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the participants (Mertens, 2017). Early in the research process, my participation in a nine-week Black Studies course provided a powerful space for reflection. The emotionally charged discussions during that course deepened my awareness of the historical and structural aspects of power and privilege associated with whiteness, particularly when contrasted with the systemic racism and discrimination experienced by members of the Black community. These discussions provided a safe forum for "researching the self" and reflecting on the "self in relation to others" (Milner, 2007, p. 395), allowing me the space to reflect on my racial and cultural heritage and how it might influence my interactions with students and interpretation of data.

In conducting this qualitative research, I recognised that my positionality as a white, middle-class, university-educated researcher and staff member (working in an area related to my research topic) was influential, conferring significant power and privilege in my interactions with participants. Drawing on Luttrell's (2019) concept of "good enough" methods, I acknowledged that I could not achieve a purely objective or ideal account, but instead focused on achieving transparency regarding the inherent tensions and contradictions. Like Luttrell, I accepted that "good enough" researchers make mistakes fuelled by deep engagement with participants and a sense of responsibility to present accurately their voices and experiences. My role in widening participation and my racial identity meant that participants may have felt pressure to respond in certain ways or share what they believed I wanted to hear, hence the necessity to examine my own beliefs continually (Mertens, 2017) and to commit to the ongoing questioning of my methods and influence to ensure that the findings prioritised the participants' lived realities, rather than inadvertently reproducing my own biases. For example, an August 2023 journal reflection revealed a tension regarding the time required for manual transcription versus outsourcing the process. I ultimately decided that self-transcription was essential for deep engagement with the data, requiring a subsequent thorough listening back to ensure accuracy

This study's methodological paradigm was rooted in both ontological and epistemological considerations. Ontologically, the research aligned with the notion of multiple, socially constructed realities, emphasising how power and privilege influence different interpretations of reality (Mertens, 2007a, 2007b, 2017). A core purpose of the

study was to ask probing questions about whose reality is privileged and to uncover versions of reality where injustice existed, to identify potential areas for change. Epistemologically, I identified with Mertens' (2007b) belief that knowledge is created through positive interaction and trusting relationships. As Mertens (2017, p. 20) asserts, "the participants' perception of the researcher is a crucial piece of the puzzle" and impacts the quality of engagement and data generated. For example, establishing a collegial atmosphere was paramount. To achieve this, each interaction began with informal conversation, providing participants the time and space to share how they were feeling that day and fostering rapport before formally beginning the discussion.

Considering the elements of the transformative paradigm outlined here, my positionality as the institution's Widening Participation Officer and University of Sanctuary coordinator was viewed as critical to the process. Many of the research participants were familiar with the Widening Participation unit and the support offered by the Sanctuary Programme. I was thus considered an insider researcher or could even have been described as an external-insider, a term Banks (1998) uses for a researcher from one culture who, through experience, comes to a deep appreciation of another culture's belief systems. From Kanuha's (2000) perspective, "Insider, indigenous, or native research refers to conducting research with communities or identity groups of which one is a member" (p. 440). However, as I am not a member of a minority ethnic community, I adopted a broader definition, incorporating the notion of conducting research within a work-based setting that takes into consideration the interplay of the researcher, context and current situation (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). While external-insider researchers might not possess the same cultural knowledge or lived experiences as those within the community, Banks (1998) argues that this should not be a deterrent from undertaking such research. He stresses that researchers have a responsibility to engage in studies that empower marginalised groups, accurately convey the complexity of ethnic communities, and include their views, perceptions and visions.

My insider position presented both distinct advantages and inherent methodological risks. On the one hand, I possessed prior in-depth knowledge of the practice and was well-placed to influence and effect change (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). On the other hand, this status, while providing authentic and valuable knowledge, also posed a significant risk of bias (Mertens, 2007b; Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). There was the added risk that knowledge of the participants could potentially mask my power during the data-generating process and influence the interpretation of data (Barron, 1999).

To address these risks, I consistently clarified and articulated my positionality. I also engaged in critical subjectivity (Reason, 1998), which required a self-reflexive approach to knowledge and an awareness of my personal values, attitudes and beliefs. The specific reflexive strategies I adopted are described in Section 3.8. This process of self-reflexivity also helped me consider the personal implications of the research, aligning with Mertens' (2017) assertion that the transformative goal is multi-levelled, with implications for participants, the researcher and society.

3.4. The research approach

The research strategy in this study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach to investigate the sense of belonging felt by ethnic minority students who were also SED. Qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate methodology because of its focus on capturing the lived reality of the research participants in their natural setting (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Throughout the data-generating process, I aimed to empower participants to share their personal stories and experiences of belonging, taking time to reflect on and interpret the meaning of their accounts. This approach is aligned with the practice of qualitative research, which Denzin & Lincoln (2003) define as "a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible" (p. 4). They further assert that these practices, such as interviews, conversations, memos or field notes, not only represent the world but potentially have the power to transform it. This transformative dimension, coupled with the possibility of the findings having a meaningful impact, confirmed its suitability for this study. An additional benefit of the qualitative method was the flexibility to adopt a variety of approaches while maintaining a focus on quality rather than quantity (Bazeley, 2013). Since the students' voices were the central tenet of the study, this flexibility was critical for exploring and interpreting their sense of belonging in HE. Table 3 summarises my approach.

Table 3: Philosophical beliefs for the research

Belief	Description
Paradigm	A transformative worldview was adopted.
Axiology	The values inherent in this study promoted human rights and advocated for increased social justice. These values guided and influenced the other three elements of the research design.
Ontology	The ontological element was informed by the belief that different interpretations of reality are based on power and privilege.
Epistemology	Knowledge is created by unearthing different interpretations of reality through building collaborative and trusting relationships with marginalised communities.
Methodology	This was an exploratory qualitative study using focus groups and walking interviews/online interviews to generate data.

In choosing qualitative research, I was aware of counterarguments favouring quantitative research, with its objective, accurate, unbiased and independent characteristics also having many advantages (Creswell, 1994). However, I was not swayed by these arguments. Instead, I aligned with the sentiments expressed by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), who assert that subjectivity and values are present in all research because "human beings cannot be value-free" (p. 16), and values invariably influence all research paradigms. Therefore, my subjectivity and that of the participants were acknowledged, which included engaging in ongoing reflection on my subjectivity and integrating it into the research data (Flick, 2023).

3.5. The data-generating process

Selecting the methodological approach for the study required the consideration of several factors, such as the fit with the overall paradigm, the participants, the practicalities and the need to address the research questions (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). Having considered several research tools, for example, using either interviews or focus groups, a decision was made to use a two-phased approach. This involved each student participant engaging in a two-hour activity-based focus group followed by a one-hour walking interview. However, this plan was later revised to accommodate students' availability. The revised plan included participants engaging in a focus group or interview, but not both (see Section 3.5.1).

The decision to use focus groups and interviews was influenced by the benefits of using two complementary approaches: focus groups were viewed as an effective way to foster discussion among participants, while the interviews would provide an opportunity for a one-to-one encounter, especially for participants who might not feel comfortable sharing in a group. As Flick (2023) posits, the essence of the focus group is the interaction among participants and the subsequent emergence of data from the shared conversations. In contrast, interviews, though considered time-consuming and prone to subjectivity and bias, are interactive, flexible and effective tools for collecting in-depth knowledge about real-life experiences. Initially, all interviews were planned as walking interviews. However, two students' inability to come on campus necessitated conducting these interviews online (Section 3.5.3). Therefore, hereafter, the interview process will be referred to as walking/online interviews. Furthermore, to enhance the validity of the process, a staff focus group was conducted with representatives from the University's Care and Connect initiative[12].

The data sources used in the study were:

1. Transcriptions from student participants' focus group discussions
2. Activities from the student focus groups: Mapping, 10 Word Question and Future Focus (see Section 3.5.2)
3. Transcriptions from walking/online interviews
4. Transcriptions from staff focus group
5. Annotations, reflective memos, and analytical memos

The following sections provide more details about the data-generating process.

3.5.1. Recruiting the student participants

A non-probability, purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit participants. Non-probability sampling aligned with the choice of qualitative research and was advantageous as it facilitated the study's exploratory nature and allowed for iterations and revisions in the research design as the process developed (Denscombe, 1998). A purposeful sample indicated that participants were selected to align with the study's aims and to help address the research questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Generally, a small sample size characterises qualitative research (Denscombe, 1998, p. 23). Therefore, having reflected on the research criteria and reviewed several similar studies, I determined that a minimum sample size of twelve student participants would be sufficient to achieve data saturation, though every effort would be made to recruit more if possible (up to a maximum of twenty). At the outset, it was envisaged that the twelve

[12] A description of the Care and Connect initiative is provided in Section 1.11

students would participate in a focus group, with at least eight of them agreeing to participate in a follow-on interview.

While the staff recruitment process was relatively straightforward, recruiting student participants was much more demanding and prolonged. Challenges with recruitment and participation required revising the data generation strategy and reviewing my expectations. The necessity to update the initial strategy aligns with the description of qualitative research as an emergent process (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Following discussions with potential participants, it was clear that there was a reluctance to commit to both a focus group and an interview, with the majority citing a preference for one or the other. Based on this feedback, I abandoned the idea of asking the same student to participate in a focus group and an interview, as it was clearly neither feasible nor practical. Having reflected on alternative approaches, a decision was made to retain both focus groups and interviews, aiming to recruit twelve students (2 x 6) for the focus groups and eight different students for the interviews (See Table 4).

Table 4: The data-generating progression process

Data-generating plan	Focus groups	Interviews
Initial data-generating plan	12 students (2 groups x 6 students)	8 one-to-one follow-up interviews with students who **had** participated in a focus group
Revised data plan	12 students (2 groups x 6 students)	8 one-to-one interviews with students who **had not** participated in a focus group
Actual data-generating process	12 students (one student later withdrew from the study) (5 groups x 2/3 students)	8 one-to-one interviews with **different** students 6 walking interviews 2 online interviews

When planning the study, I made several decisions around the data-generating process based on my experience as a student support officer. These included:

1. To focus on undergraduates only, based on the assumption that their experiences of belonging would vary widely from postgraduates. Undergraduates would most likely not have attended university previously and would therefore require more mainstream and targeted support around belonging and inclusion.
2. To focus primarily on second-year and third-year students (third years who were not in a final year of study). This decision was informed by my knowledge that first year is often a settling-in period, meaning students may not yet have

reflected on their belonging experiences. Furthermore, since final-year students are under pressure to complete their studies, discussions about their workload and stress would be necessary before engaging them in the study.

Therefore, second years and third years (not final year students) were deemed the most suitable potential research participants. However, due to recruitment challenges, one first-year and three final-year students who had volunteered to participate in the study were added as participants.

To reiterate a point made earlier, given the lack of data available within the University on student ethnicity, it was anticipated from the outset that the recruitment process would be challenging, as there is currently no way of knowing the recognised total population of the NAP sub-group: migrants, refugees, or students with experience of the international protection system (Clancy, 2024). Therefore, before commencing the study, gatekeepers with responsibility for students who fitted the research brief (access students, mature students and Further Education and Training (FET) entrants) were contacted, and their willingness to support the process was assured. However, there were two caveats: firstly, having progressed from first year to second year, FET students were no longer identifiable, thus sending an email to second-year FET entrants was not an option. Secondly, I was advised by one of the gatekeepers to send my initial recruitment email to the access student ambassadors only in order to restrict the number of emails going to the entire access group. Recruitment began in early March 2023 and continued for three months.

The initial recruitment drive involved sending a research information sheet (Appendix A) and recruitment emails (Appendix B) to second-year mature students and the access student ambassadors. I adopted this cautious approach to recruitment as I was conscious that over-recruiting could pose as many problems as under-recruiting. As the first set of emails did not garner any interest, an email was sent to third-year mature students. However, there was no response from this group either, prompting me to rethink the recruitment strategy. Notably, two students applied who met the ethnicity requirement but did not meet the socioeconomic status. Hence, they were deemed ineligible for the study.

Self-identification was used to verify eligibility for socioeconomic status and ethnicity, with the criteria discussed between the participants and me when completing the Expression of Interest form (Section 3.6). Socioeconomic disadvantage was indicated by the student’s receipt of one or more (where applicable) of the following payments:

- The maintenance grant under Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI)
- Department of Social Protection means-tested social welfare payment
- University of Sanctuary scholarship
- 1916 Bursary grant (a competitive grant available to the most socioeconomically disadvantaged students that complements existing student supports)
- Weekly payment to individuals living in Direct Protection
- Monthly stipend for Ukrainian students in receipt of Temporary Protection

The ethnicity indicator required students to self-identify as being an ethnic minority student. This group included (but was not limited to) migrants, refugees, international protection applicants, or beneficiaries of temporary protection (see Section 1.10 for a definition of each category). The challenges of identifying as both socioeconomically disadvantaged and an ethnic minority student are also outlined in Section 1.10.

Given the lack of response to the group emails, a more personal and targeted approach was adopted. In a second recruitment drive, I reached out to colleagues in the Students' Union who, in turn, sent recruitment emails to students known to them, such as class representatives and student advisory groups. Additionally, an academic colleague circulated the recruitment email to her class group, resulting in two students expressing interest in the study. An email was also sent to undergraduate University of Sanctuary scholarship students. Finally, I sent invite emails to students known to me through my role as Widening Participation Officer. It is notable that some students who did not have the time to commit to a focus group or interview asked if they could complete a survey, highlighting time as a significant factor affecting participation. Although it was reassuring to have students commit to the study, there were additional issues in coordinating their availability and commitment, especially as several weeks had passed since the recruitment process began and assignment deadlines and the exam period were looming. Furthermore, some students requested the option to participate online. The inclusion of an online option necessitated additional ethical and logistical considerations. As Zoom was the recommended and supported online platform for virtual meetings in the University, it was used for one online focus group and two interviews. For the recorded elements of the data-generating process, I adhered rigidly to the University's Zoom security settings. For more details on recruitment limitations, see Section 3.7.

In total, twenty students were initially recruited, with twelve signing up for the focus groups and eight for the interviews[13]. Fourteen were known to me to varying degrees

[13] One student who participated in a focus group later withdrew from the study, citing personal reasons.

through my work as the Widening Participation Officer, while six were unknown. In the end, there were 19 participants in the student group.

The student participants recruited were from diverse regions, including Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, South America and Ireland. The manner in which they described their nationality and ethnicity was also diverse — ranging from mentioning the specific country to the use of terms such as Black Irish, Irish Black, Irish Asian, Black African, and Irish African. Although this data offers a more detailed description of the participants, the information presented here is restricted in order to preserve the anonymity of the students. While participants were not asked explicitly to state their residency status in Ireland, it emerged voluntarily in the discussions, especially in relation to rights and entitlements to State support for higher education. Eleven participants stated having a Stamp 4 (Permission to Remain), five had Irish citizenship, and the remaining had temporary protection or refugee status[14]. A total of 19 student participants were drawn from across five faculties, with the majority from the Faculty of Science and Health. Their academic levels spanned all four undergraduate years, with the largest group being second-year students. The majority of participants were mature students. Table 5 gives the gender breakdown, while Table 6 provides an overview of the time resident in Ireland.

Table 5: Student participants by gender

Gender	Participant numbers
Female	13
Male	6

Table 6: Length of time student participants were resident in Ireland

Years in Ireland	No.
1-5	11
6-10	5
11-20	2
Born in Ireland	1

3.5.2. Planning and conducting the student focus groups

Motivated by a keen personal interest in art-based methodologies and a desire to engage student participants (many of whom did not speak English as a first language),

[14] A definition of each of these terms is provided in the Glossary of Terms on page xiii.

in an interactive but non-formal data-generating approach, I explored activity-based options for the focus groups, and attended a one-day workshop on creative art methodologies with Dr Helen Kara, author of *Creative Research Methods* (Kara, 2015). The workshop provided an overview of various methodologies, and, while some sounded tempting, it was evident that there were several factors to consider before making a decision, such as the research questions, my skillset, the participant cohort and the resources available. A shortlist of options was compiled and discussed with supervisors, relevant colleagues and personal contacts with expertise in creative methods. After exploring a wide range of creative activities, I designed a focus group where each participant would compile a four-page book about belonging, to include a cover page and a page each for three evidence-based activities, namely, Mapping, 10 Words Question, and Future Focus (Appendix C). The three activities are described below.

3.5.2.1. Mapping

The first activity was planned to capture the participants' general understanding of belonging by creating a map to represent their sense of belonging in the world. The activity was based on a technique known as Information World Mapping (IWM), which complements traditional qualitative interview methods, requiring participants to create maps of their personal information world (Greyson, 2013). IWM is "an arts-based, participatory method that documents and triangulates contextual factors shaping people's everyday information and practices" (Kitzie *et al.*, 2022, p. 1). While IWM focuses on information sources and practices, the technique was modified for this study to elicit information about belonging, including where participants feel a sense of belonging in the world and who or what fosters that belongingness. Although the aim of the mapping activity was described to participants, they were given minimal guidance on how to create their own map, while being reassured that there was no right or wrong way to do it.

3.5.2.2. 10 Words Question

The 10 Words Question came from the work of Dr Mi Young Ahn (2017), who had developed the activity as part of her PhD research entitled "Sense of belonging as an indicator for social capital: a mixed methods analysis of students' sense of belonging to university". Ahn used the 10 Words Question as an open-ended question in a large-scale survey, inviting participants to write down up to ten words that came to mind when they considered their sense of belonging to their university. Over 400 responses were

received. The essence of the activity centres on its simplicity, keeping "the participants' mind free from any prejudice, stereotypes, or preconceptions" (Ahn, 2017, p. 90). To explore the suitability of this activity for a small-scale focus group and to request permission to use the tool, I corresponded with Dr Ahn, who readily granted permission, offering advice about using it with a small group rather than disseminating it as a large-scale survey. I anticipated that the activity would capture students' sense of belonging to the University in a succinct format that could be analysed efficiently and effectively.

3.5.2.3. Future focus

The third activity was based on a creative technique known as a "postcard from the future" (The Re.imaginary Group, 2020). The activity invites participants to imagine a future where positive changes have occurred due to their efforts. They are then asked to send a postcard describing the change to someone close to them. For this study, the activity was modified. Participants were invited to imagine what belonging would look like for them 50 years into the future and describe it in writing or by drawing it. I selected 50 years, considering that a shorter period might hinder the participants from imagining substantive change, while anything longer might be too far into the future for them to envisage. Research indicates that this methodology enables participants to remove themselves from their immediate circumstances and escape into a future utopia (The Re.imaginary Group, 2020). In planning this activity, I hoped to get a glimpse of the sense of belonging that the students imagined for themselves in the longer term.

3.5.2.4. Title page

The final activity in the student focus group involved participants adding a title page to their book, with the option to decorate the cover if time permitted. Below (Figures 3 and 4) are examples of the covers participants designed for their Belonging book.

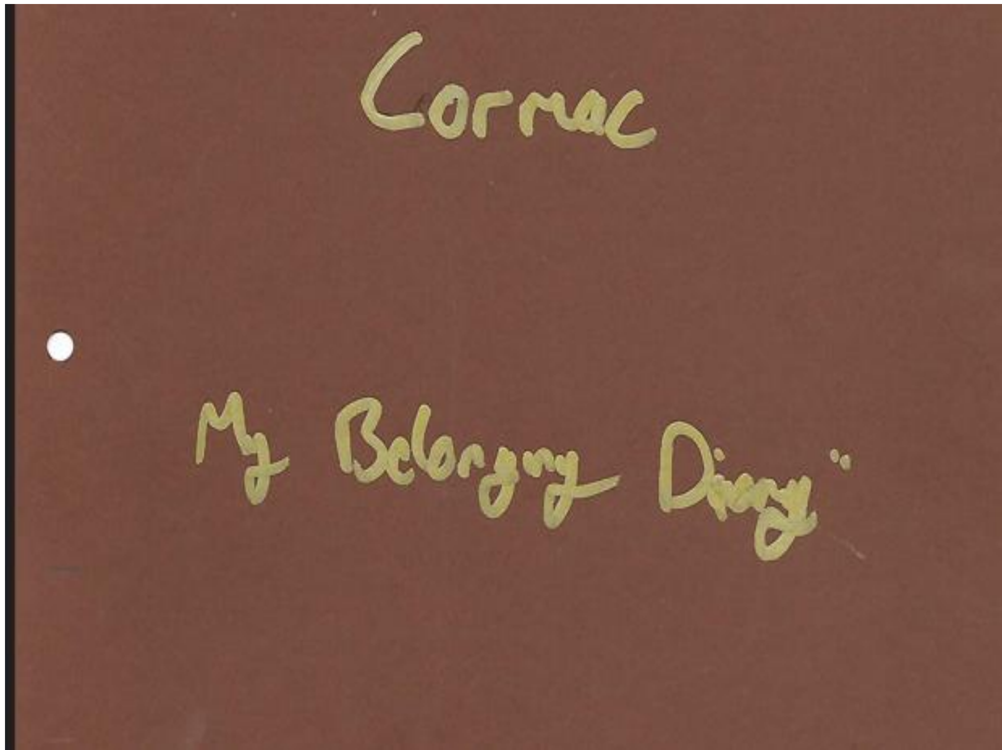

Figure 3: Sample title page from Belonging books (Cormac)

Figure 4: Sample title page from Belonging books (Elena)

The student focus groups were designed to explore belonging using creative methodologies. Before the focus group, I met with the participants to discuss ethical procedures and ensure the relevant forms were signed. Five focus groups were conducted between April and June 2023, four in-person and one online (see Table 7).

Table 7: Summary of focus group dates, locations and number of participants

Date	**Location**	**Focus group composition**
3/04/2023	In-person	2 participants
14/04/2023	In-person	3 participants
8/05/2023	In-person	2 participants
1/06/2023	Online	3 participants (one of whom later withdrew)
6/06/2023	In-person	2 participants
Total		**11** (excluding the participant who withdrew)

The rooms selected for the on-campus focus groups were neutral communal spaces, meaning they did not take place in staff areas or rooms students used for their classes. I assured the participants of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the option to withdraw from the study at any time. While the focus group discussions were recorded, the recorder was paused during the activities to allow participants time for reflection and quiet focus. After completing the activities, participants were invited to ask questions, share their thoughts or comment about the activity, but there was no compulsion to do so. Each focus group lasted two hours, with a short break after an hour if required. The level of engagement with each activity was encouraging and positive, and overall, the groups provided a diverse range of valuable data. See Figure 5: Covers of the completed books.

Figure 5: Covers of the completed books

3.5.3. Planning and conducting the walking/online interviews

The walking interview differs from a traditional interview in that the researcher interviews the participants while accompanying them, usually walking around a given area (Kinney, 2017). The technique recognises the value and expertise of the participants and is considered an excellent way to explore their relationship with space (Jones *et al.*, 2008). Having read about the potential of walking interviews, I was enthused about the idea, especially given the relevance of the spatial element to belonging and the relatively unstructured nature of the process compared to traditional interview formats. I offered the participants the option to decide the route and places visited. Allowing participants to input into the process fostered a sense of empowerment or partnership and created a more equal power dynamic between the interviewee and me (Kinney, 2017). In all cases, however, during the interviews, it came to light that the participants frequented a limited range of campus locations, thus truncating the route available for the interview and threatening to cut it short. At this point, the student and I agreed to extend the route and explore new areas.

Although I initially planned for all interviews to be walking interviews, two were conducted online to accommodate the students' availability. Fortunately, several walking interviews had been completed by that time, enabling me to transfer insights from those to the virtual interviews, such as prompting participants to imagine visiting different locations on campus. In their recommendations for interviewing marginalised groups, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest engaging in unstructured interviews. However, in this study, aiming to capture specific information related to belonging in HE, I planned some key questions in advance (Appendix D). Hence, while a semi-structured approach was adopted to questioning, I took the approach of recalling questions from memory to allow the conversation to flow naturally as the interview progressed.

While walking interviews have many advantages, they can pose challenges. Thus, I needed to consider practical and ethical issues such as each participant's walking capability, the weather, ambient noise, and the practicalities of the recording (Jones *et al.*, 2008). Also, there was a concern regarding confidentiality owing to the possibility of the research participant being observed with me during the interview process and the risk of parts of the conversation being overheard by passers-by. Therefore, adhering to best practice guidelines, good preparation, contingency plans, and agreement on logistics with each participant before the walks were essential for the interview process (Kinney, 2017). For example, I discussed with the participants the starting location, the preferred route, how the recording would be conducted, who would hold the recorder and the possibility of having to move indoors due to adverse weather or noise.

Interviews took place between April and July 2023 and lasted from 50 to 60 minutes. Six were conducted as in-person interviews and two as online interviews. The walking interviews confirmed the advantages and disadvantages of the approach as outlined in the literature. In general, they provided an invaluable opportunity to engage with participants in discussions about their relationship with spaces on campus, especially spaces where they did or did not feel a sense of belonging[15]. When conducting the interviews, it was noted that many participants were unfamiliar with wider campus spaces and tended to congregate in areas adjacent to their own schools. As expected, the downside of the approach was the background noise, including passing vehicles, wind and loud conversations.

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[15] There were also hidden benefits to the walking interviews, such as the revelation of emotions related to places — "happy" places, places to be avoided, or places that triggered memories. While walking around the campus, participants shared stories, experiences and hopes, all prompted when passing certain locations. For example, at one stage during the walk, a student pointed out the exact spot where a photo of her had been taken many years previously, in the hope that one day she would be a student in DCU.

3.5.4. Staff focus group

When preliminary findings were available from the student interviews and focus groups, a focus group was conducted with staff to seek their input on the emerging themes and to gather their perspectives on belonging in light of the findings. This in-person focus group was conducted with staff representatives from the institution's Care and Connect initiative, a programme focused on student well-being and inclusion. Including the staff voices was considered an important aspect of the triangulation process (see staff focus group details in Table 8) because their perspective was crucial for corroborating, contextualising, or highlighting potential divergences from the student data. When I initially planned the staff focus group, the intention was to invite the ten representatives from the already existing Student Belonging working group. However, between planning the methodology and recruiting the participants, the group was subsumed into the broader Care and Connect initiative. Therefore, I focused on the thirteen members from one of the Care and Connect subgroups called Healthy Relationships and recruited from other subgroups where necessary to ensure the representation of staff roles. Despite sending twenty recruitment emails (Appendix E), only seven staff committed to participating in the focus group, with the majority of those contacted being unavailable or on leave. The focus group was conducted in early July and lasted one hour (see focus group schedule in Appendix F). To protect the anonymity of the staff members, each person was assigned a pseudonym.

Table 8: Staff focus group

Pseudonyms assigned	Departments represented
Noah	Student Support & Development
Beth	Student Support & Development
Joseph	Academic
Emily	Library
Samuel	Student Support & Development
Ava	Students' Union
Isabella	Student Support & Development

3.5.5. The piloting and transcription phase

Acknowledging the benefits of holding pilot sessions (Jairath, Hogerney and Parsons, 2000; Maxwell, 2012), I conducted one pilot student focus group and two pilot walking

interviews. Six students participated in the pilot focus group. The pilot was informative and provided reassurance that participants would not only engage with the process but might also enjoy the experience. Based on the feedback, enhancements included modifying the icebreaker, adjusting the time plan, and changing the physical environment. Similarly, the two pilot walking interviews were beneficial, highlighting issues with practicalities, particularly the potential impact of noise on the recording quality. Despite concerns about background noise, I decided to use walking interviews as a data-generating method, convinced that the added benefit of the spatial dimension outweighed the potential problems with audio quality.

Following each focus group and interview, the audio recordings were imported to Otter, a transcription software. The audio files were labelled and dated. As each recording was transcribed and corrected, the finished document was exported to a Google Drive folder, and the copy in Otter was permanently deleted. While a verbatim version of each transcription is on file, a copy of the transcribed texts was cleaned, where necessary, to enhance the meaning, flow and clarity of the quotes. The hard copies of the Belonging books were scanned and stored on Google Drive as PDFs.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were considered at every stage of the research process (Maxwell, 2012). I requested a full committee review as part of the ethical requirement policy due to the vulnerability of the student participants and the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic. Ethical approval was granted in February 2023 (Appendix G).

Students who expressed interest in participating in the research were contacted by email or phone to confirm they met the research criteria[16]. All participants signed an Informed Consent Form (Appendix H for students; Appendix I for staff) and a Plain Language Statement (Appendix J for students; Appendix K for staff). Before participating, the ethical procedures were explained to participants, including how their data would be collected, recorded, stored, shared and, eventually, deleted. Conscious that many participants did not speak English as a first language, I encouraged them to question any unclear words or phrases.

Having signed the Informed Consent Form, student participants completed an Expression of Interest form (Appendix L) to capture basic demographic information. The

[16] Being a recipient of scholarships, state grants or social welfare payments was used to determine qualification under the SED criterion for inclusion in the study.

purpose of the form was twofold: first, it confirmed in writing that participants met the research criteria, and second, it captured relevant information that would feed into the overall study.

My insider position as a researcher and staff member working in widening participation presented both distinct advantages and inherent methodological risks. My prior in-depth knowledge was beneficial, yet this proximity also posed a significant risk of bias (Mertens, 2007b; Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). There was a specific risk that students, some of whom were known to me, might feel compelled to participate or that my knowledge of them could potentially mask my power during data generation.

To mitigate this, I made a concerted effort to separate the staff and researcher roles by using distinct email addresses and neutral meeting places. Participants were assured that participation was voluntary and would not affect any existing support or relationship. They were also informed that they were free to withdraw at any time. It was reassuring that students were forthright and assertive about their participation, with a number of students opting out due to competing demands. Others clearly articulated their preferred level of commitment, availability and type of engagement. This open and honest dialogue alleviated any fears I had harboured. On the contrary, I felt many of the interactions were enhanced by the open and trusting relationships formed during previous encounters.

Throughout the data-generating process, all participants were treated equally and assured that their responses would be handled with strict confidentiality. All data were anonymised; participants were asked to select pseudonyms, even though some would have preferred to use their own names.

Special consideration was given to creating a safe and caring environment. For each focus group, I greeted the participants on arrival, ensured light refreshments were available, and engaged in informal conversation before commencing the data-generating process. This time allowed participants to unwind, relax, get to know the other participants, and ask questions. I also recapped the aims and process and reassured them of follow-on support if required.

Confidentiality was discussed in detail, with participants advised to share only information that they felt comfortable sharing openly in the group. They all agreed to respect and treat with confidentiality any information that was shared. Moreover, ensuring confidentiality, pseudonymity and transparency was paramount throughout the research process, especially as the small sample size increased the risk of the students'

identities being revealed. Thus, the information shared about the participants and their backgrounds was limited in order to safeguard against identification. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured and not influenced by my insider lens.

As the study involved researching a marginalised group, additional ethical complexities had to be considered to avoid the possibility of my becoming a self-appointed ally and ignoring my superior position in the research process (Barron, 1999). Intensified reflexive practice was essential. Throughout the recruitment and data generation, I took time after each interaction to reflect on the data and discuss emerging issues with my supervisors and critical friends. For example, I sought guidance on refining recruitment strategies as well as prioritising and eliminating themes during data analysis.

My role required continually questioning and addressing social issues, maintaining professional distance, and continually questioning personal assumptions. Otherwise, as Barron (1999) advises, the research could "result in objectifying the informants as passive victims, interpreting everything they do and say in those terms" (p. 47).

Maintaining professional distance was challenging, particularly due to the sensitive nature of the participants’ experiences. Throughout the data-generating process, when a sharing was particularly harrowing or moving, I acknowledged the contribution, allowed a few moments to sit with the emotion, did not probe for details, and only moved on when the participants were ready. Following each session, I used a reflexive journal to process my emotions and reflections arising from the interactions. The journal acted as a crucial emotional release valve, allowing me some quiet reflective space to ruminate on the participants' narratives and prevent my affective responses from influencing subsequent data collection or analysis. At the end of each interview and focus group, I debriefed the participants (Appendix M) and offered them a list of institutional and community supports.

Finally, as the research was conducted in my workplace, I addressed the possibility that my research into a generic theme such as belonging in higher education might encroach on the work of colleagues (Denscombe, 1998). Permission for the study was requested from the Dean of Students. It was crucial to make explicit in advance areas of the research that were likely to veer into colleagues’ territory, to seek their consent and to be open about the process and the findings. In line with good practice and ethical guidelines for conducting research, I provided colleagues and research participants with

updates at key stages of the process, especially on any issues relevant to them emerging from the findings.

3.7. Limitations of the research methodology

Although I made every effort during the process to ensure the study captured a diversity of voices and experiences, the final composition was not as representative of the NAP subgroup as hoped, with the majority of participants coming from an international protection applicant background, and limited numbers from refugee or migrant communities[17].

Furthermore, the age profile of participants was not representative of the age profile of the general student cohort, with the majority being mature students. Consequently, the findings about belonging reflect the experiences of an older student group rather than a younger cohort. The age disparity is particularly relevant to the insights gathered on social engagement and the impact of caring responsibilities, as these findings may have been significantly different had a large younger number of younger students participated.

The staff focus group of seven participants[18] was also relatively small and not representative of a wider group.

While the recommended number of participants for a focus group can vary from four to twelve, I was cognisant that too small a group might interfere with the group dynamics, whereas, in contrast, a large group might be problematic (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Having set a target of six student participants per focus group, I soon realised it would be impossible to configure the groups as planned due to their conflicting schedules and had to settle for smaller groups comprising two or three participants. Although the reduced numbers did not meet the recommendations for a focus group,

[17] The recruitment process faced several specific obstacles. Firstly, the University does not collect ethnicity data from students, making it impossible to email the target NAP subgroup directly. While social media or poster campaigns might be an option for some recruitment processes, I did not consider these mediums feasible due to the sensitive nature of the participants and the topic. Recruitment was therefore restricted to emails sent to wider student groups, which failed to garner any interest. Secondly, the recruitment process extended longer than anticipated, coinciding with the latter part of semester two — typically the busiest period of the academic year. Thirdly, the requirement that students commit to a two-hour focus and a one-hour interview was, on reflection, overambitious, with several interested students indicating time constraints as a barrier to participation.

[18] As explained earlier, it was conducted during the summer period when many staff were on leave. The researcher received several emails from staff apologising for being unavailable. On reflection, it would have been prudent of the researcher to reschedule the focus group, though this was not considered at the time.

the level of engagement and interaction mirrored the characteristics of a focus group in that the discussion was more interactive and collaborative than a series of backward and forward questions and answers (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Consequently, I continued to use the term “focus group”. Initially, I was disappointed with the small numbers in each focus group. On reflection, however, it is possible that the smaller numbers fostered a safer and more intimate space for sharing deep and emotional personal experiences.

There were also limitations around the focus group and interview process. When initially planning the research methods, I believed that an in-person process would be more appropriate to the topic and participants. However, coming on campus was not an option for some students, thus prompting a revision on how data would be generated. This unexpected challenge highlighted the importance of listening to participants and allowing flexibility in how, where and when data could be collected.

The recruitment process, while challenging, provided valuable learning for me, including an enhanced understanding of the spirit and ethos of qualitative research. Additionally, it challenged my assumptions about students' willingness and availability to engage in the process, even when offered the opportunity to share their voices and potentially contribute to change. The students who participated in the study provided an eclectic mix of backgrounds and experiences, adding to the richness of the data collected.

3.8. Validity

Validity was considered a crucial element of this study, encompassing the identification and measurement of the study’s original aims, and establishment of the accuracy of the findings from the perspective of the participants, readers and myself (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Therefore, guided by the recommendations of prominent researchers, such as Creswell and Creswell (2018), Denzin and Lincoln (2003), Flick (2023) and Cohen *et al*. (2011), I used various strategies to address validity concerns, such as trustworthiness, accuracy, dependability, reliability, and reflexivity.

Trustworthiness was a foundational component of the validity strategy. This encompassed my belief in the research findings, my willingness to disseminate them and to persuade readers and the wider research community that the findings were worthy of consideration. In essence, the trustworthiness of the findings moved validation "to the social world — a world constructed in and through our discourse and actions, through praxis" (Mishler, 2010, p. 420).

Triangulation was integral to creating trust in the findings and involved using evidence from multiple data sources to build a robust argument for the emergent themes (Denscombe, 1998; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). As this was a standalone study, the emphasis was on using different data sources (focus groups, activities, interviews) to enrich knowledge, thus adding to the breadth, depth, rigour and richness of the findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Flick, 2023).

Member checking is an effective way to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Flick, 2023) and was a crucial element of this study. The term refers to a process that allows participants to validate and amend their contributions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Bazeley, 2013). Once the transcription process was finished, I prepared a summary of each student participant's input, including personalised summaries for the focus group members. Before drafting the summaries, I listened back to each recording and read the transcripts multiple times, making notes and identifying key points in each transcript. The summaries were emailed to the participants, inviting them to correct any interpretive misunderstandings and add further information if necessary. Feedback from participants varied widely, from in-depth comments to minor edits, ranging from suggestions for greater emphasis on the specific challenges for online learners to ideas for topics to break down cultural misperceptions. Four participants did not reply to the member-checking request.

Providing a detailed description of the research context enhances the accuracy and, subsequently, the validity of the findings, as it gives the reader a sense of the research environment (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). However, I was cognisant of the relatively small sample size and the corresponding need to balance the provision of adequate contextual detail with maintaining participant anonymity. Hence, while acknowledging that greater detail would have enriched the research, participant anonymity was paramount.

To enhance the reliability and transparency of the research process, the analysis employed a detailed and systematic approach. Data were analysed using a robust and tested analytical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To ensure the interpretations were grounded in the data, I adopted an iterative approach, moving between raw participant accounts and emerging themes to make comparisons. Furthermore, I ensured a balanced perspective by explicitly including discussions of outlier accounts and contradictory narratives that did not align with the primary themes.

Based on a recommendation from Flick (2023) and others, I created an audit trail to record and monitor data-generating procedures, including dates the research was conducted and a record of each stage. The audit was developed to enable the reader to understand and assess the process, thereby countering dependability concerns (Appendix N).

I used what Creswell and Creswell (2018) call a “peer debriefer” to enhance accuracy and clarity throughout the research process. In this case, the peer debriefer was a critical, independent friend who read, reviewed and questioned the research at key stages. This person also listened to me as I talked through ideas, thus helping me to articulate emerging developments. The role was not to support academic rigour, but to ensure the text was presented clearly and logically to the reader.

Finally, to support validity claims, and in line with good practice (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Flick, 2023), I engaged in self-reflexivity to manage and address subjectivity. Reflexivity means "the self-awareness and knowledge of researchers themselves" (Barnes and McCreanor, 2022, p. 213). The practice of self-reflexivity required me to reflect on my own experiences and consider how they impacted the research process, analysis and interpretation of data, a necessary step that aligns with Milner’s (2007) advice for engaged reflection and representation. Moreover, implementing Luttrell’s (2019) concept of bidirectional reflexivity, this process demanded a “forgetfulness of self” — setting aside my inherent biases and assumptions, allowing me to approach the participants’ narratives with as much openness and neutrality as possible. Adopting a critical subjective mindset acknowledged the significance of subjective experience as "the ground of all our knowing" (Reason, 1998, p. 428).

Reflexive strategies adopted included keeping a reflexivity journal and being vigilant about my role and the impact connections with participants and the research site could have (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). I used the reflective memo feature in NVivo to document reflections resulting from the recruitment and data-generating processes (Figure 6 shows a sample). Additionally, following data completion, I kept a hand-written reflexive journal during the data analysis phase (Appendix O). The memos and journal provided a process record, including explanations of why certain decisions were made. This reflective process was also the medium used to document my preconceptions, analytical discussions, and potential insider interpretations, thereby making my perspective explicit (Bazeley, 2013).

For Jennifer, belonging is all about equality — having a voice and being valued in a group. She expressed a strong sense of social belonging and identity.

Racism, for her, was under the radar a lot of the time. Most noticeable was the lack of inclusion in what she considers the Irish circles. However, she has found her community and tends to mix with other non-Irish students. She pointed out a few times that the way people mix at work and in college is different — much better mixing at work. While she faced constant barriers, her resilience and hope have kept her going — motivated by a strong Christian faith and a belief that she will succeed and life will get better.
She doesn't allow her lack of inclusion to affect her, but instead focuses on the hope that being in college gives her. I was touched by the idea that life was hopeless until she received her place in university. Very positive about lecturers, support from lectures and professional staff and the canteen staff.

Outcome/main findings

- Belonging means the opportunity to talk/ be heard/be listened to (equality)
- High expectations
- Hard on herself
- Unbelievable determination to achieve
- Good insight into how she feels coming from DP
- A moving personal account about the way DP affects her relationship with other students
- Felt strongly that Irish are closed to non-Irish — something extraordinary has to happen
- Aspired to join social activities, but it wasn't possible with work — a constant struggle to juggle work and study
- Long struggle to find accommodation, especially with HAP
- Resilience, hope and faith.

Figure 6: Sample reflective memo from NVivo

3.9. Data analysis

Data analysis involved making sense of the texts and images collected during the data-generating process and interpreting the data using reliable, suitable and practical methods (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This study's qualitative data analysis framework was adapted from an approach initially developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the revised version by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020). The authors, pragmatic realists, developed their framework based on the view of knowledge as being socially constructed and reality as being open to interpretation. They adopted a flexible approach to making meaning from the lived experiences of research participants and relating them to the social world we live in (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020). I was drawn to their data analysis approach because it did not adhere rigidly to a particular process but adapted procedures to suit the uniqueness of the research context. Their methods were far from *ad hoc,* and their analytical procedures were thoughtful and thorough. Thus, the flexible but solid

framework seemed like an ideal fit for analysing the diverse data while being faithful to the transformative paradigm and research theme.

3.9.1. Overview of analytical approach

The data analysis approach developed by Miles, Huberman and, later, Saldaña is inductive, with data being selectively generated to explain the social processes and structures at the core of the events being researched. The data are analysed for patterns or clusters, seeking more data if necessary, before drawing conclusions based on links and relationships between the data sources (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020, p. 6). Furthermore, a recursive process with "three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 12) is critical to the approach and helps to enhance transparency and trustworthiness (Bazeley, 2013). For the revised framework, Saldaña adapted the original 1994 framework, maintaining its general ethos and integrity, but offering more relevant and practical examples to contemporary researchers. Additionally, in the updated version, Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020) changed terminology from “data reduction” to “data condensation”. Table 9 provides a summary of the framework developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020). It begins with the coding process, based on the assumption that the raw data has been transcribed and is ready for processing.

Table 9: The analytical process developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020)

Analytical process developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020)		
Analytical Process	**Description**	**Recursive process throughout the analysis**
First cycle coding	Open coding is the initial part of the data reduction process and involves assigning codes to words or chunks of text. (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020, p. 62). Open coding helps to determine recurring themes.	Data condensation using open coding. Revising and reordering initial codes into pattern codes
Second cycle coding	Also known as pattern codes — "advanced ways of reorganising and analysing data coded in first cycle methods" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 296). It involves grouping initial codes into units such as categories, themes or concepts.	↕
Jottings	These are annotations added to specific units of data. They are similar to reflective comments that can be added during the coding or writing stages to capture the researcher's emerging ideas.	Annotating, memoing and data display to further condense the data and form more general themes or categories
Analytic memoing	These memos capture the researcher's reflections about the data. Whether brief or in-depth, the reflections should move the analysis from descriptive to high-level thinking.	↕
Data display	Visual displays such as matrices, networks and graphics are alternative ways to analyse data and provide opportunities for new perspectives.	Assigning meaning, generating final themes or concepts and verifying data
Summarising the findings and drawing conclusions	The final step involves generating meaning from the data that has been coded and categorised. It includes interrogating the data, considering factors beyond and across categories, and cross-tabulating with demographics and literature to ensure the findings are robust, trustworthy and reliable.	

3.9.2. The data analysis approach adopted for the study

Good data management influences the type and quality of analyses conducted (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020), hence, having a robust system for data management was considered a crucial element of this study.

Copies of transcripts and scanned copies of the books were imported to NVivo. The tool proved invaluable at a later stage for manipulating, retrieving and displaying the data. It is important to note that while the software supported the analytical process, it did not do the analysis, with that task remaining firmly the researcher's responsibility (Bazeley, 2013). NVivo was used to structure and code the transcripts from the focus group

discussions and interviews, while data from the three student focus group activities were analysed using Google Sheets. The scanned copies of the books were imported to NVivo for storing, visualising and comparing the data only. Table 10 presents an overview of the data sources for this study.

Table 10: Data sources and analysis tools

Data source	Analysis tool
Focus group discussions (students and staff)	NVivo
Walking interviews (students)	NVivo
Activity 1, 2, and 3 (student focus groups)	Google Sheets

3.9.3. Analysing the student focus group activities

The Mapping,10 Words Question and Future Focus activities were analysed using Google Sheets, with a similar format followed for each activity. The analytical process is outlined in steps 1 to 5 below.

1. A Google Sheet was created for each activity.
2. Words, phrases or sentences from each of the activities were added verbatim to a Google Sheet (one sheet per activity).
3. The text was cleansed. For example, a short phrase like "*good relationships*" was changed to *"relationships*", and spelling errors were corrected.
4. Phrases or sentences were reduced by selecting (a) representative word(s) to capture the essence of the text, for example, "*being able to express myself freely*" was changed to "*freedom*".
5. Representative words were grouped into themes, which were then reviewed, refined and reduced.

The analysis of the three activities using Google Sheets resulted in three different sets of themes. The analysis of each activity is described in more detail below.

3.9.3.1. Mapping activity

The analysis of the mapping process involved transferring all the words and phrases from the mapping activity to a Google Sheet. The list below shows a sample of words from the mapping activity.

- Safety
- Having the ability to marry who I love
- Origin country
- Culture
- Family
- Meeting new people
- Recognition
- Extended family
- Feeling welcomed
- Being yourself
- Access to Higher education
- Beliefs
- Placement/ lectures, HoD support
- Talking to people like me from my age/gender/religion helped me to feel that I belong
- A place where I am given equal opportunities
- Old friends' group
- Extra support in DCU
- Going to eat with friends after class
- Engagement
- Minimal number of friends
- Interaction with people
- Freedom
- Access to Health care and social services

These words and phrases were categorised and assigned representative words, which were then clustered to form themes. See Figures 7 and 8 for examples of the maps created by the participants.

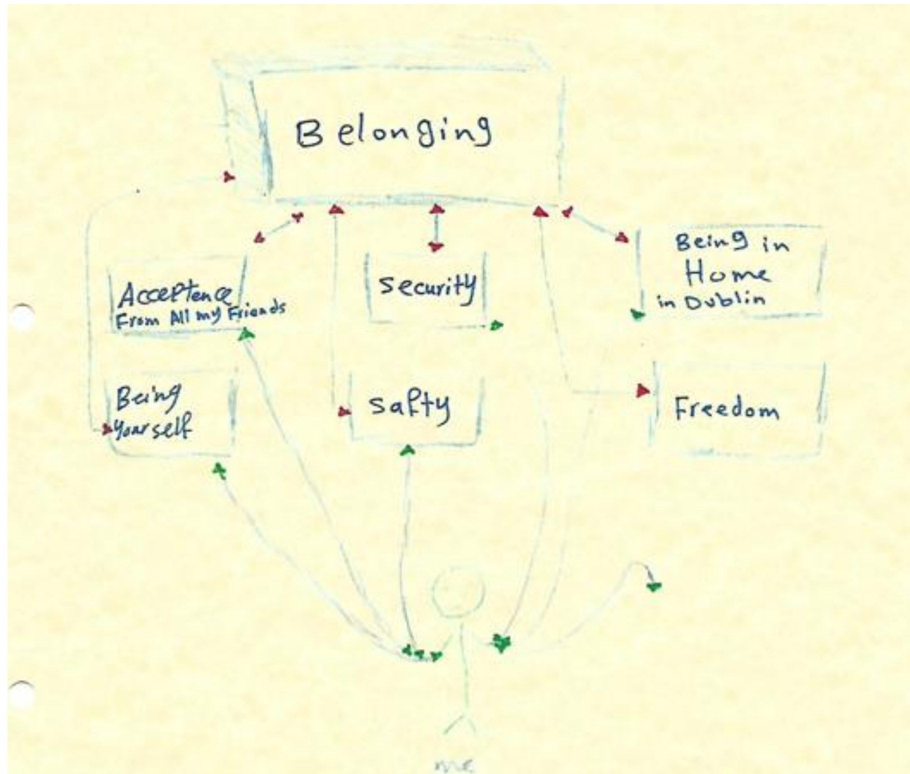


Figure 7: Mapping activity from the student participant focus group (1)

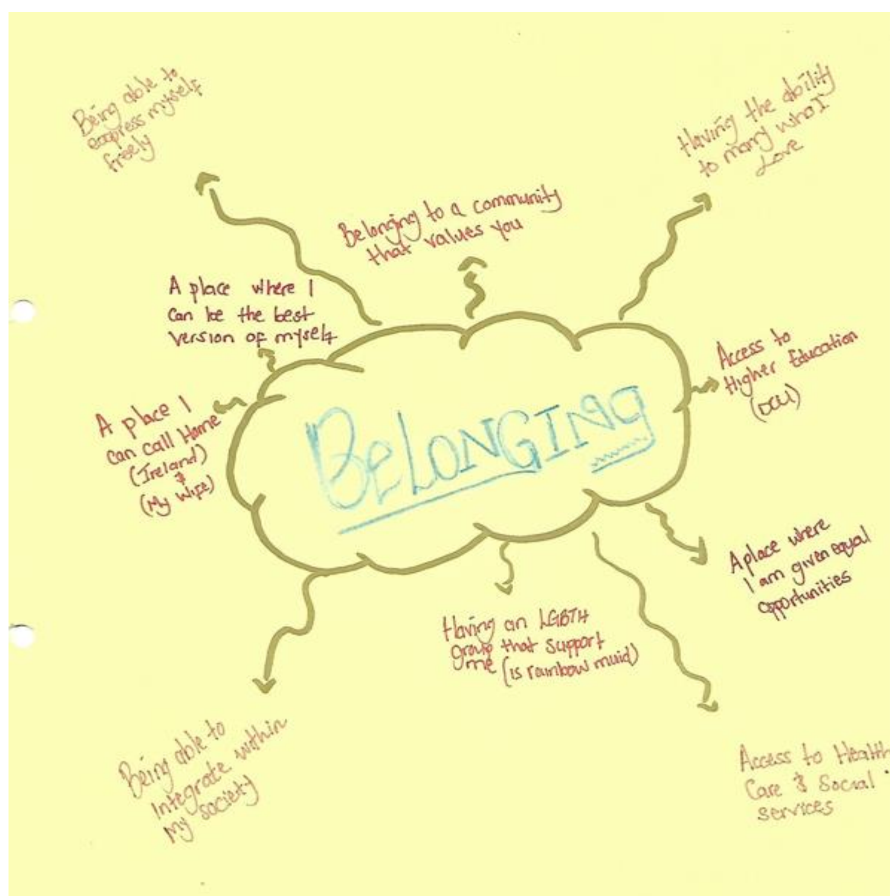


Figure 8: Mapping activity from the student participant focus group (2)

The mapping analysis generated seven themes, which are explained in Table 11. The themes aligned with the emotional, temporal, spatial and personal aspects of belonging that emerged throughout the wider focus group and interview discussions. These themes were central in helping to understand the complexity of belonging for the student participants.

Table 11: Final themes generated from the mapping analysis

Themes*	Themes explained
Support	Refers to access to all levels of support and services, including: ● support groups, e.g., LGBTQ+ groups ● access to services, e.g., social welfare and health ● access to higher education.
Relationships	Includes references to family, friends and community.
Place	Refers to feeling at home or having a place to call home.
Social	Includes formal and informal socialising. Also references to individual or group activities, e.g., hobbies, like listening to music or participating in sports.
Civic	Refers to the “Politics of Belonging” including the desire to be treated equally and fairly regardless of one’s social positioning within the field.
Secure	Refers to feeling safe or the need to be safe. Secure is a sense that your safety is assured, i.e., living in a society knowing that you are safe today, but you will also be safe tomorrow.
Personal	Refers to being valued and recognised — includes values, faith and belief systems.

**In developing these themes, representative words were counted once for each participant. For example, if a map showed numerous hobbies, the hobbies were grouped and counted as one.*

3.9.3.2. 10 Words Question

In the 10 Words Question activity, students were asked to list ten words representing their sense of belonging to the institution. Responses to this brief included individual words and short sentences. The analysis process is outlined below.

1. The individual words and sentences were added to Google Sheets.
2. The words and phrases were reviewed, cleansed, and assigned a representative word. Table 12 demonstrates the initial stage of cleansing and identifying the representative words for the responses.

Table 12: A sample of the representative words from the 10 Words Question

Narrative text as used in response to the 10 Words Question	Cleansed version	Representative words
Acceptance - accept all students from different walks of life	Acceptance - accept all students from different walks of life	**Acceptance**
Acceptance: being accepted for who you are (not what you are)	Acceptance: being accepted for who you are (not who you are)	**Acceptance**
Inclusion: being included not prejudiced (discriminated)	Inclusion: being included, not prejudiced (discriminated)	**Inclusion**
Access - to services (how easy it is to have access to services)	Access to services - how easy is it to access services?	**Access to services**
Communication - easy access to communicate with lecturers, e.g., (email, Zoom, face to face)	Communication - easy access to communicate with lecturers, e.g., (email, Zoom, face-to-face)	**Communication**
Friendship - creating a friendly environment that is mutual & beneficial	Friendship - creating a friendly environment that is mutual & beneficial	**Social activities**

3. The analysis resulted in a total of 99 representative words, which were then clustered into seven broad themes: support, social, opportunities, academic, inclusion, safety, and personal (Figure 9).

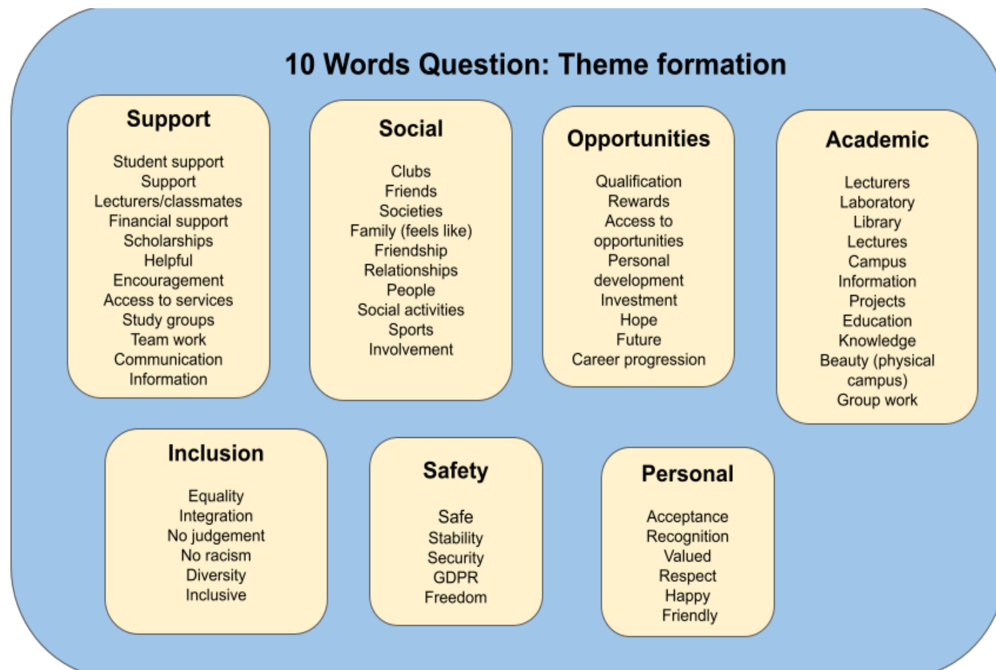


Figure 9: Final themes from 10 Words Question analysis

4. Only five of the 99 representative words had a negative connotation. Three of these related to course pressure, one to food on campus, and one to connection with peers.

While the themes generated do not differ significantly from those generated by Ahn (2017) in her study with a much larger group of students, the words (i.e., the students' expressed experiences) do differ. These differences are outlined in more detail in Section 5.5. For a further description of the themes, see Appendix P.

3.9.3.3. Future Focus

In the Future Focus activity, students were asked to look to the future and write about what belonging might look like for them in fifty years. The analysis involved a similar process to that outlined for the other activities. Figure 10 below illustrates a word cloud formed from an analysis of the words and sentences in Google Sheets, and gives an indication of what the students viewed as important for them to feel a sense of belonging in the future.

Figure 10: Word cloud capturing the essence of the Future Focus activity

The words and phrases used in the activity were analysed and systematically refined and reduced into the final list of themes presented below:

- Support
- Family
- Own home

- Inclusive society
- Contribute to society
- Contentedness
- Social connections
- Sense of place
- Diversity

3.9.3.4. Summary of activities analysis

The three sets of themes resulting from the analysis of the activity outputs are gathered in Figure 11 below. These themes reflect different perspectives on belonging as shared by the student participants in the focus group activities.

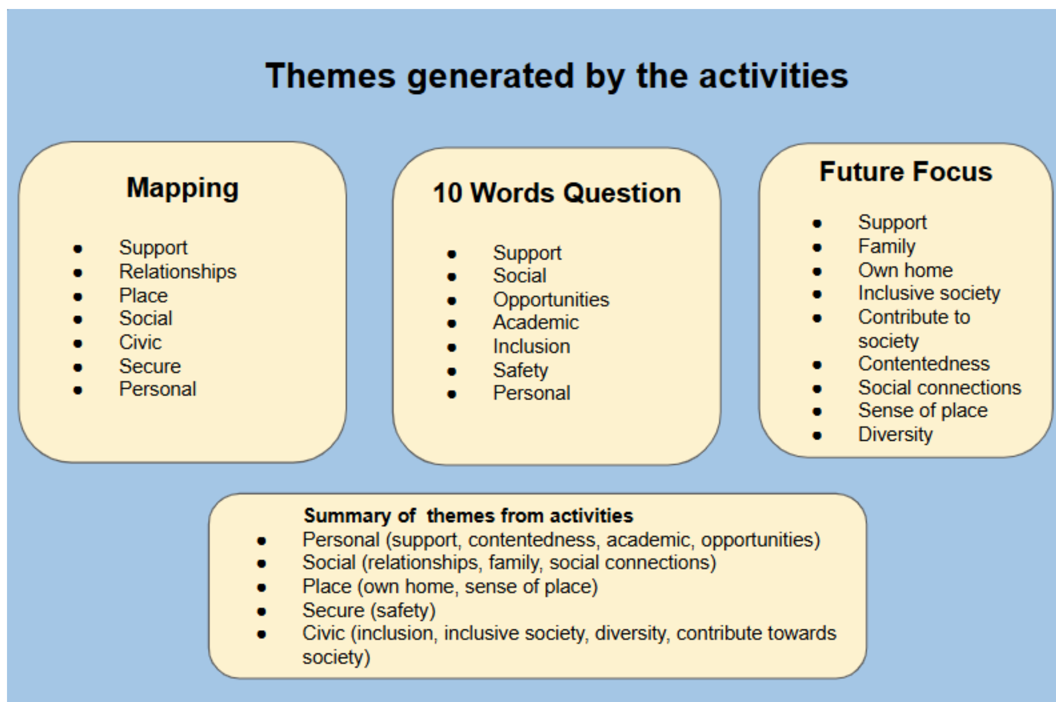


Figure 11: Overview of themes generated by the activities

In parallel to the above process, NVivo was used to manage and store the data from the focus groups and interview transcripts. The data were then coded and analysed. The themes generated from the analysis of the activities and the themes from the discussions and interviews were merged during Phase Six of the data analysis process. Figure 12 presents an overview of the complete analysis process, illustrating how the diverse data sources were merged to inform the findings.

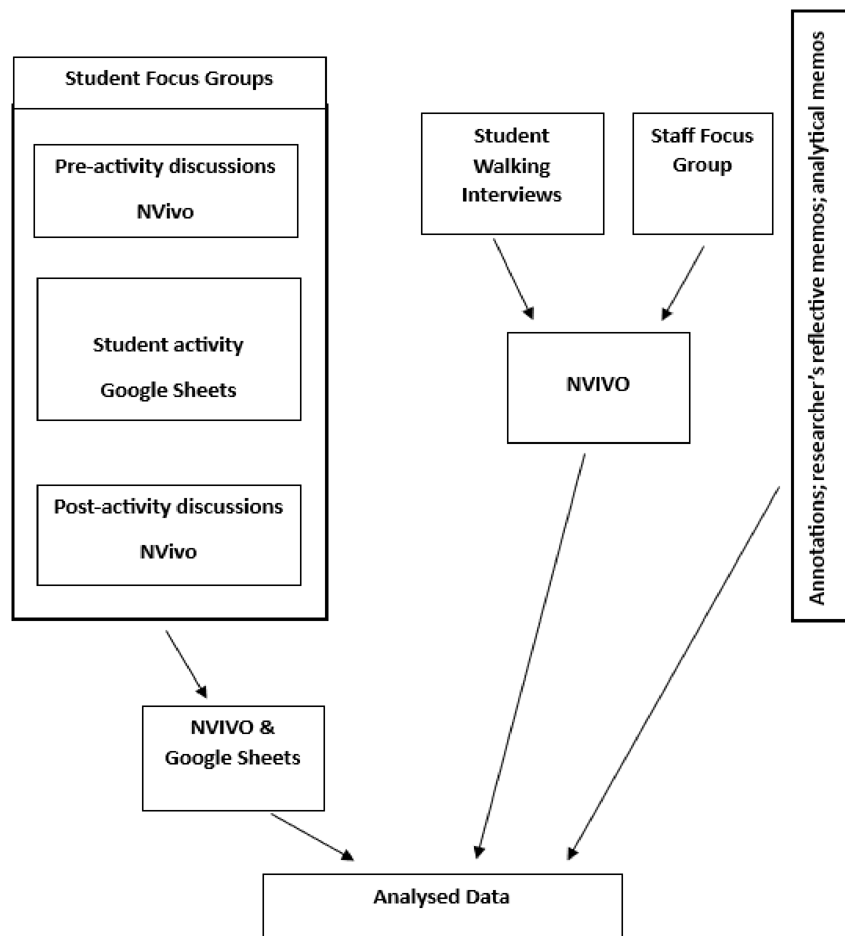


Figure 12: Graphic overview of the analysis process

3.9.4. Application of the data analysis framework

The data analysis framework developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020), as shown in Table 9 above, was adapted for this study. The process was divided into six phases as outlined in Table 13. In keeping with the framework's recursive nature, condensing the data, generating themes, and drawing conclusions was cyclical.

The phases are described below in more detail. Before commencing the coding process, the transcripts were read numerous times to develop a thorough familiarity and in-depth understanding of the content. Guided by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020), coding was viewed as an integral part of the data analysis process.

Table 13: Adaptation for the current study of the analytical process developed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Analytical process developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020)</th><th colspan="2">As adapted for current study</th></tr>
<tr><th>Analytical Process</th><th>Description</th><th>Recursive process throughout the analysis</th><th>Analytical process for current study</th><th>Recursive process throughout the analysis</th></tr>
<tr><td>First cycle coding</td><td>Open coding is the initial part of the data reduction process and involves assigning codes to words or chunks of text. (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020, p. 62). Open coding helps to determine recurring themes.</td><td rowspan="6">Data condensation using open coding. Revising and reordering initial codes into pattern codes

Annotating, memoing and data display to further condense the data and form more general themes or categories

Assigning meaning, generating final themes or concepts and verifying data</td><td>Phase 1:
First cycle coding</td><td rowspan="6">Data condensation using open coding. Annotating data and writing reflective memos

Further data condensing to form pattern codes or categories. Data display to provide alternative perspectives on the data

Assigning meaning and generating final themes, drawing conclusions and verifying the data</td></tr>
<tr><td>Second cycle coding</td><td>Also known as pattern codes — "advanced ways of reorganising and analysing data coded in first cycle methods" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 296). It involves grouping initial codes into units such as categories, themes or concepts.</td><td>Phase 2: Annotations and reflective memos</td></tr>
<tr><td>Jottings</td><td>These are annotations added to specific units of data. They are similar to reflective comments that can be added during the coding or writing stages to capture the researcher’s emerging thoughts or ideas.</td><td>Phase 3: Second cycle coding/ pattern codes</td></tr>
<tr><td>Analytic memoing</td><td>These memos capture the researcher’s reflections about the data. Whether brief or in-depth, the reflections should move the analysis from descriptive to high-level thinking.</td><td>Phase 4: Analytic memoing</td></tr>
<tr><td>Data display</td><td>Visual displays such as matrices, networks and graphics are alternative ways to analyse data and provide opportunities for new perspectives.</td><td>Phase 5:
Data display</td></tr>
<tr><td>Summarising the findings and drawing conclusions</td><td>The final step involves generating meaning from the data that has been coded and categorised. What does the data mean in the context of the research? It includes interrogating the data, considering factors beyond and across categories, and cross-tabulating with demographics and literature to ensure the findings are robust, trustworthy and reliable.</td><td>Phase 6: Drawing conclusions and verification</td></tr>
</table>

Phase 1: First cycle (open) codin

The first cycle coding, or open coding, involved working systematically through each transcript to interpret words, phrases, and sentences (Braun and Clarke, 2006). (See Figures 13 and 14 for samples of open coding). The aim was to capture participants' explicit descriptions, underlying emotions, values, opinions and implicit meanings, focusing on significant or recurrent elements in their narratives (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020). (Appendix Q shows a sample application of codes to raw data).

Open coding

Name	Files	Refere
Facilities on campus	6	14
Few or no experience of racism or discrimi	6	12
Financial struggles	7	23
Financial support - positive	4	6
Freedom to be yourself	3	9
Friends - general comments	8	12
Friends or classmates - positive	11	34
Friends or classmates- negative	8	31
Gratitude	6	13
Groupwork	3	11
Hope and resilience	5	7

Barriers to engaging with Clubs & Socs | Mai & Mira | Alex & Jay | Friends or classmates - positive

So like, on my first day back home at college, like I made up like five or six friends on the first day, first lecture, five friends, boom, that's it. I came in here, like I waited like a year and three months, maybe, till I got my first friend. Anything before that was like just group of study, like they will put us in a group - random group, you'll have just to deal with each other in that order.

Reference 3 - 0.51% Coverage

AJ 1:24

I completely relate to you because like, I still struggle to this day like to make friends in class. And because also, I think being a mature student already sets you in class with people who are like 19 or 18.

Reference 4 - 0.77% Coverage

Figure 13: Initial open coding in NVivo

Codes\\Open coding

Name	Description
A sense of place	Any references to a place belonging or a place enhancing belonging
Academic staff negative	Any reference to experiences with academic staff that were not positive or inclusive
Academic staff positive	Any positive comments about support or connecting with academic staff
Accent - insights and struggles	Any reference to an issue with accent rather than language
Accent - positive experiences	Reference to accent as a positive
Acceptance and belonging	Any references linking belonging and acceptance
Access to services	Any reference to having access to support or services on campus or in the wider community
Accessing and applying to university	Any reference to accessing information about access, university or funding, etc
Adopting a cosmopolitan worldview	Reference to feeling part of the wider world
Affinity to Schools in the University	Reference to Schools and how students felt about their Schools
Apprehension transitioning to university	References to feeling stressed or anxious about transitioning to university
Attachment to Ireland	References about the sense of attachment to Ireland

Figure 14: Example of open coding in NVivo

Initial codes were generated inductively, meaning the raw data informed the codes rather than overlaying the pre-existing theoretical framework on the data (Reay, 2004). To ensure consistency, each code was assigned a clear operational description (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020). Although the codes underwent several iterations, with some initial codes being deleted and new ones being introduced, the process resulted in 101 open codes. These codes formed the foundation for developing broader themes in the Second Cycle Coding.

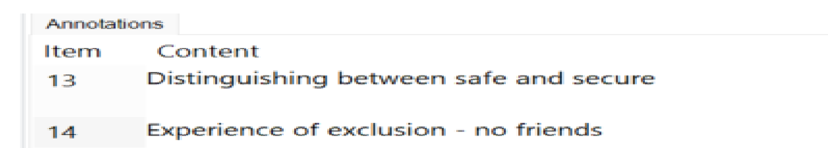
The next phase of the analytical process involved annotating the transcripts.

Phase 2: **Annotating the datasets**

After completing the open coding, I intentionally diverged from the sequencing advised by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña by undertaking the transcript annotation (usually Phase 3) before starting the second cycle coding. This divergence allowed for deeper immersion with the raw data and the coding process, thereby enriching the second cycle coding phase and ensuring more comprehensive thematic development.

This phase involved rereading each transcript and adding annotations directly into NVivo (Figure 15). These annotations functioned as “analytic sticky notes” to record my thoughts, emerging ideas, or comments, and served as a crucial check to ensure no salient points had been missed and all relevant data were coded.

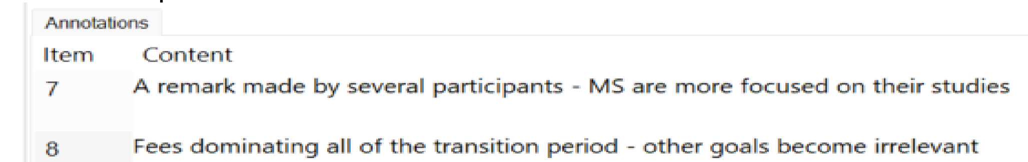
annotation



Annotations

Item	Content
13	Distinguishing between safe and secure
14	Experience of exclusion - no friends

A third sample of an annotation



Annotations

Item	Content
7	A remark made by several participants - MS are more focused on their studies
8	Fees dominating all of the transition period - other goals become irrelevant

Figure 15: Examples of annotations from NVivo

Having gained an enriched understanding of the data from the annotation process, I then proceeded to the second cycle of coding.

Phase 3: Second cycle coding — pattern codes

The second cycle coding or pattern codes involved clustering the open codes into fewer, more "meaningful units of analysis" (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020, p. 79). This process resulted in 15 distinct themes (Figure 16).

Second cycle coding — Search Project

Name	Files	References
Academic culture	12	81
Access and transition	13	120
Access to services	11	38
Attachment	12	65
Beliefs and philosophies	13	71
Cultural insights	11	55
Equality, diversity & inclusion	14	129
External environment	11	67
Identity	18	90
Personal needs	10	52
Pressures	11	75
Social connection	14	198
Support	14	83
The concept of belonging	14	182
University spaces	12	137

Figure 16: First iteration of themes (screen grab from NVivo) showing 15 distinct themes

The first iteration lacked conceptual cohesion, necessitating a further process of reduction and refinement. For instance, initial themes such as personal needs, beliefs, and philosophies were subsumed into a more general "personal" theme. Much of this refinement and identification of relationships between themes was done using pen and paper to facilitate sorting and grouping (Figure 17). This process identified four distinct areas emerging as contenders for key themes: the concept of belonging; personal

perspectives on belonging; institutional context of belonging; and systems and structures.

Initial attempts to structure the findings around these four broad areas were later revised to consolidate the information. Consequently, the themes related to systems/structures were merged into the theme related to institutional belonging. Figure 18 presents the final three themes and their corresponding sub-themes that informed the findings and analysis chapter (understanding belonging; belonging and the person; institutional belonging).

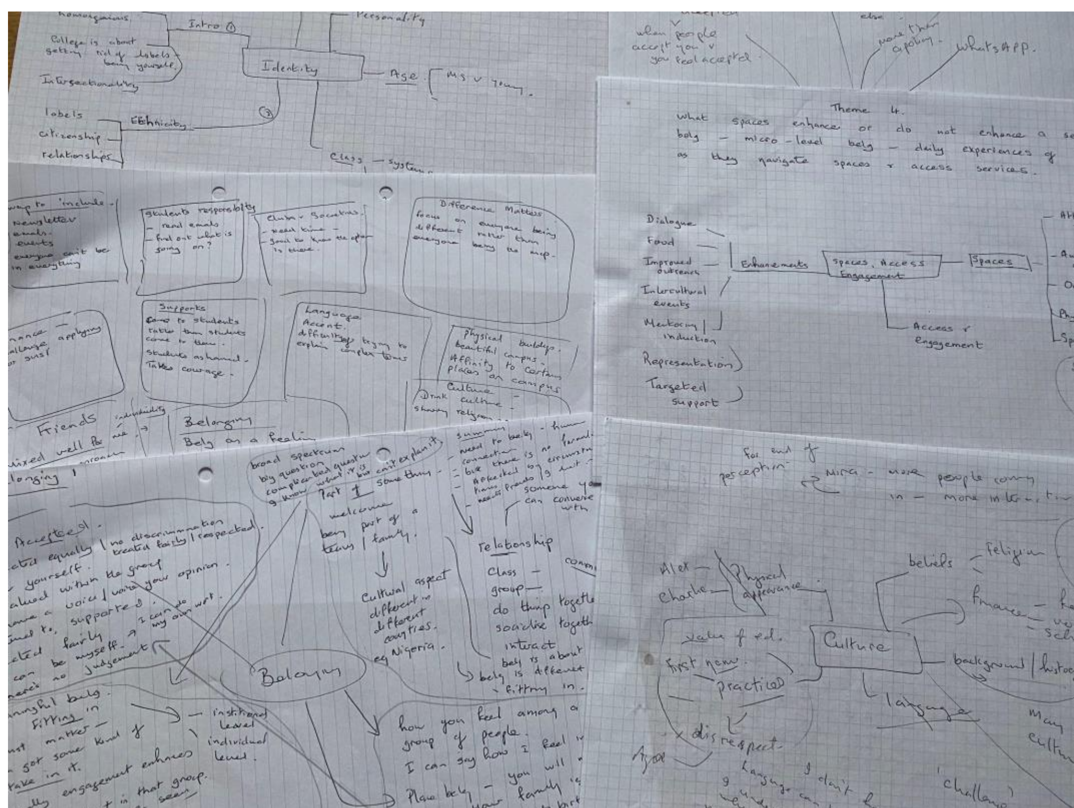


Figure 17: Identifying themes and sub-themes using pen and paper

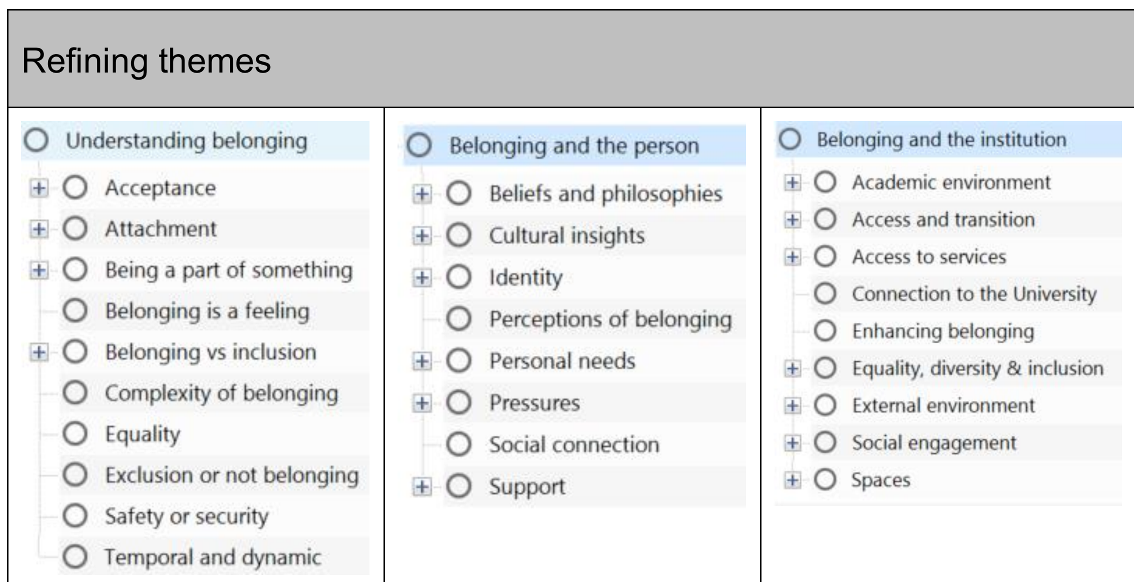
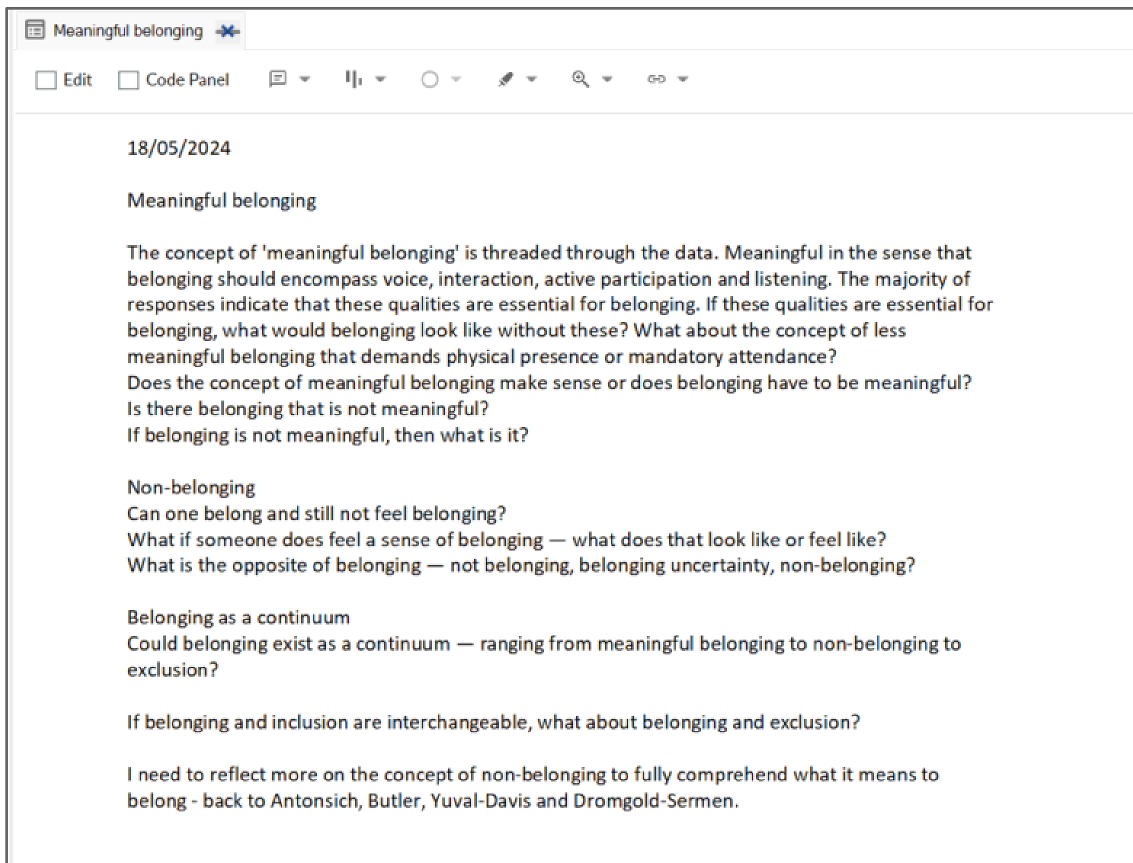


Figure 18: The refined and reduced themes and sub-themes (screen grab from NVivo)

Phase 4: Analytic memoing

This phase of the analytic process involved the use of analytic memos to capture my own reflections and ideas about the data (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020). Unlike reflective memos, these analytic memos helped me to move from mere descriptive analysis and surface-level observation to exploring and identifying more abstract concepts. The memos became a core tool for documenting my evolving thoughts and prompted me to question possible theoretical links. For example, what was striking about the data? What was the data saying or not saying? Each memo served as a space to pose analytical questions, explore provisional interpretations and challenge my assumptions (Figure 19).



18/05/2024

Meaningful belonging

The concept of 'meaningful belonging' is threaded through the data. Meaningful in the sense that belonging should encompass voice, interaction, active participation and listening. The majority of responses indicate that these qualities are essential for belonging. If these qualities are essential for belonging, what would belonging look like without these? What about the concept of less meaningful belonging that demands physical presence or mandatory attendance?
Does the concept of meaningful belonging make sense or does belonging have to be meaningful?
Is there belonging that is not meaningful?
If belonging is not meaningful, then what is it?

Non-belonging
Can one belong and still not feel belonging?
What if someone does feel a sense of belonging — what does that look like or feel like?
What is the opposite of belonging — not belonging, belonging uncertainty, non-belonging?

Belonging as a continuum
Could belonging exist as a continuum — ranging from meaningful belonging to non-belonging to exclusion?

If belonging and inclusion are interchangeable, what about belonging and exclusion?

I need to reflect more on the concept of non-belonging to fully comprehend what it means to belong - back to Antonsich, Butler, Yuval-Davis and Dromgold-Sermen.

Figure 19: Sample Analytic memo — Extract from belonging and inclusion memo

Phase 5: Data display

This phase moved beyond simple textual description by leveraging visual displays generated through NVivo as a core analytical tool. These displays offered alternative perspectives on the data, explicitly highlighting connections, outliers and hierarchies that might have been less obvious in textual formats.

Specifically, NVivo's project mapping features provided powerful visual summaries that displayed the conceptual architecture of each theme, critically assessing the interconnectedness of underlying concepts and the relative prominence of various ideas. To enhance the presentation of the findings in a condensed and systematic manner, data displays were incorporated. For instance, the hierarchy chart (Figure 20) provides an immediate visual representation of Theme 2, facilitating the most salient sub-themes by their relative size and prompting further interrogation with the raw data for accuracy and overlaps.

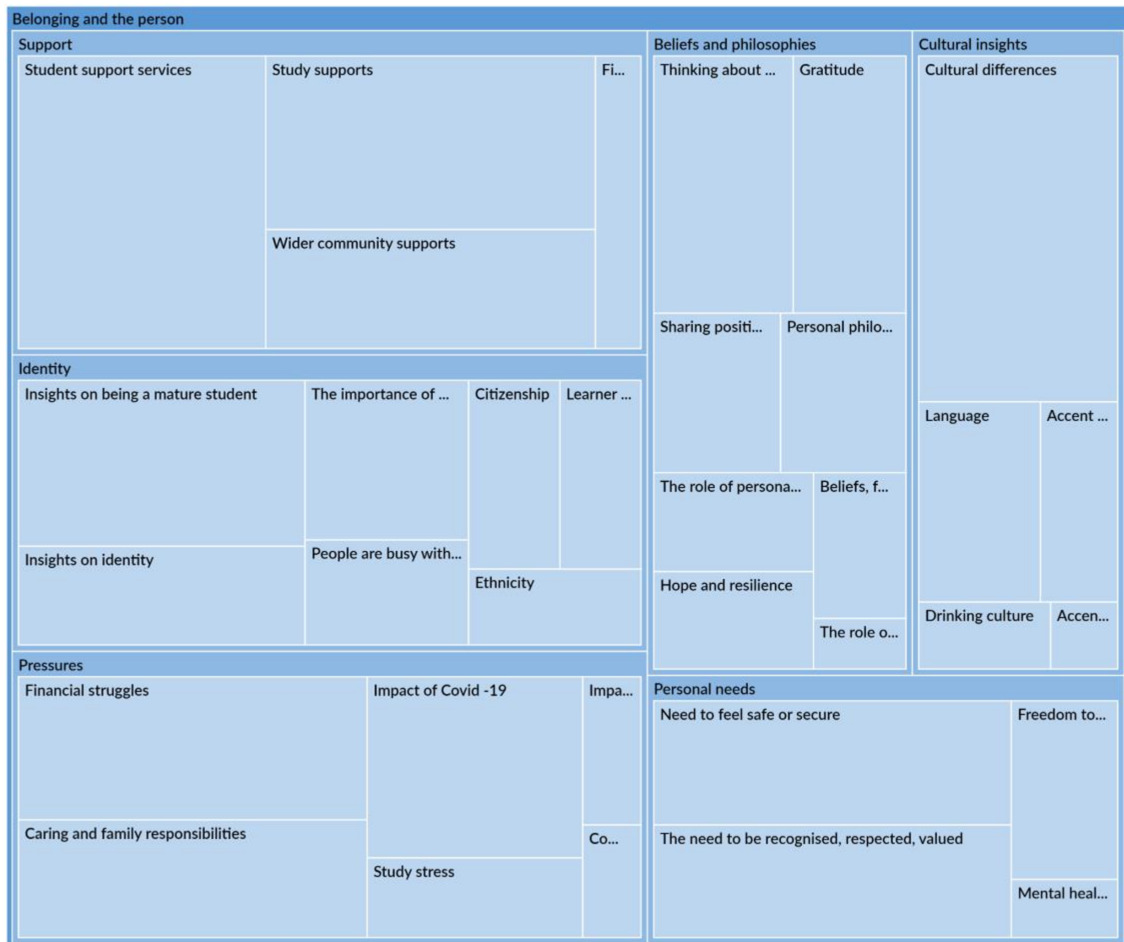


Figure 20: Hierarchy chart from NVivo showing Theme 2: Belonging and the person

Other graphics generated focused on sub-themes. For example, Figure 21 provides a simple diagram illustrating the range of topics discussed under the “Equality, diversity and inclusion” sub-theme. (The term “child” is a technical term used in NVivo.)

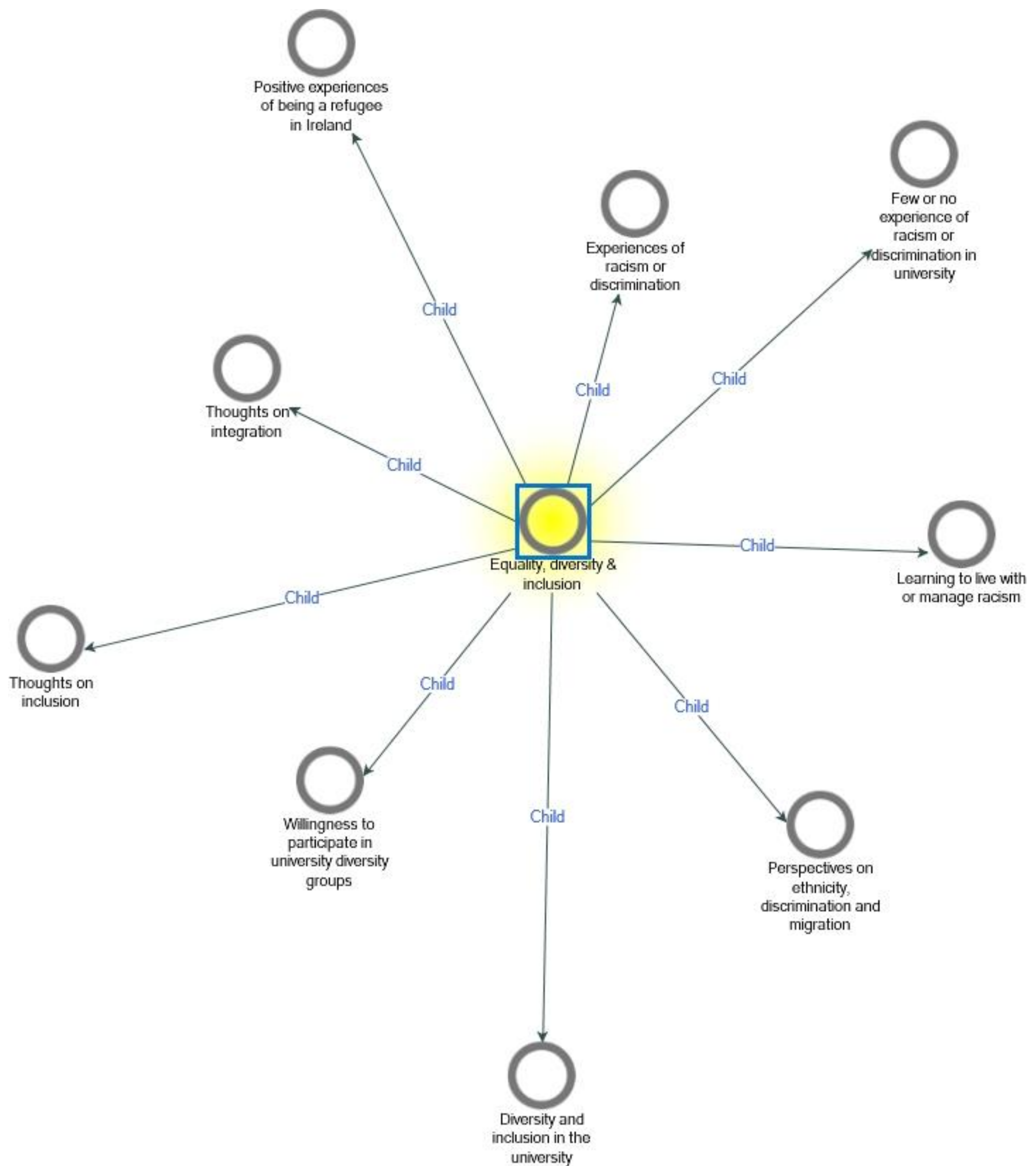


Figure 21: An NVivo explore diagram: Equality, diversity and inclusion sub-theme

Phase 6: Drawing conclusions and verification

This final phase moved beyond simple description to synthesise and refine the emergent data, ensuring a robust alignment between the findings, the research questions, and the theoretical framework. This iterative process was essential for contextualising the findings and providing the final structure for the report.

A crucial analytical step at this juncture was the merging of diverse data streams, specifically the rich insights derived from the student focus group activities (Section 3.5.2) with the themes generated through NVivo (Figure 22). This systematic cross-referencing served to both validate and enrich the final themes, particularly by identifying outliers, and resulted in a more holistic understanding of the student belonging

experiences. The central box in Figure 22 shows the refined themes after the merging process.

This deep engagement with the data was coupled with continuous critical reflection to ensure the validity and accuracy of the findings. This iterative approach involved:

- Re-reading and re-contextualising coded data.
- Challenging initial interpretations and exploring alternative explanations.
- Talking through emergent themes with my supervisors and a peer debriefer.
- Checking for conceptual gaps or overlaps.

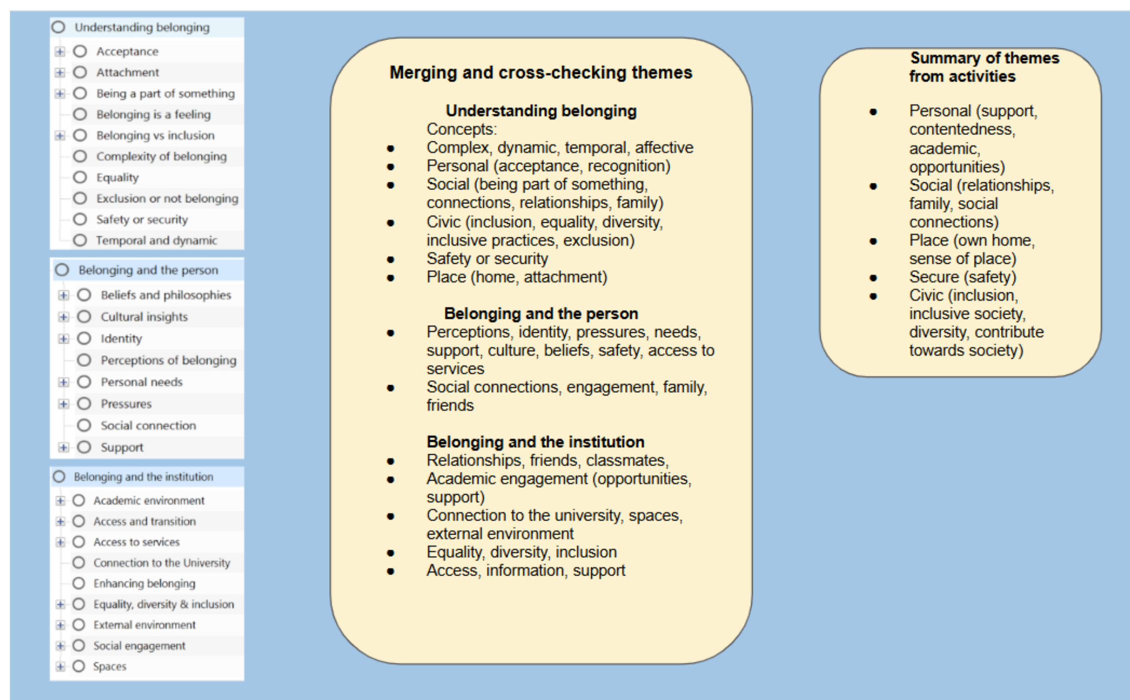


Figure 22: Merging and cross-checking themes from transcripts and activities

This final reflection consolidated the data into three primary themes: understanding belonging; belonging and the person; and institutional belonging. Table 14 provides an overview of the themes, including their alignment with existing belonging dimensions as discussed in Section 2.5.

Table 14: Overview of themes

	Name of theme	Description	Aligning with existing belonging dimensions
Theme 1	Understanding belonging	Conceptual overview of belonging — definitions and perspectives	Personal, social, politics of belonging (civic), emotional, spatial (place), temporal and dynamic
Theme 2	Belonging and the person	Belonging from a personal perspective, including personal perceptions and insights	Personal, social, politics of belonging (civic), safe/secure, emotional, attachment (place).
Theme 3	Institutional belonging	Understanding belonging in an institutional context, including social, academic and cultural aspects	Personal, social, politics of belonging (civic), safe/secure, emotional, attachment (place).

3.10. Final steps in the analytical process

Before completing the data analysis process, it was necessary to see how the themes aligned with the theoretical framework underpinning this study. This step allowed for an examination of the interplay of habitus and capital, and how these concepts manifest in the field of higher education to subsequently shape practice. These steps will become more apparent throughout the analysis and discussion chapters.

3.11. Conclusion

This chapter presented a comprehensive overview of the methodology used for the study, beginning with the research design, followed by a detailed description of each stage of the analytical process. It also discussed the ethical considerations relevant to the study and the methodological limitations. The next chapter shifts the focus from process to results, presenting the empirical findings from the data generation and analysis processes. Specifically, Chapter 4 will detail the main themes and sub-themes developed through the data analysis process. The chapter is structured into three main areas: first, a general understanding of belonging and its relationship to inclusion; second, detailing a person-centred perspective of belonging; and third, examining an institutional perspective on belonging. In summary, the analysis chapter will provide a contextualised and evidence-based understanding of the lived realities of the student research group.

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1. Introduction

This study explores the sense of belonging felt by a small cohort of higher education students, namely, ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. This chapter presents the findings from the data-generating process and illustrates how belonging is understood and experienced in a particular context by a specific group of people. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss how the findings align with the literature and the research questions. What follows here is a detailed description of the three primary themes arising from the data analysis: understanding belonging; belonging and the person, and institutional belonging. To facilitate the flow of the text, abbreviations were assigned to each participant as shown in Table 15.

Table 15: Abbreviations used for research participants

Research participants	Abbreviations used in the findings
Staff participants' focus group	Pseudonym + staff FG, e.g., “Emily, staff FG”
Student online focus group	Pseudonym + OSFG, e.g., “Elena, OSFG”
Student in-person focus group	Pseudonym + in-person SFG, e.g. “Mira, in-person SFG
Student walking interview	Pseudonym + SWI, e.g., “Andrei, SWI”
Student online interview	Pseudonym + SOI, e.g., “Tisha, SOI”

To assist in navigating this chapter, Table 16 outlines the themes and sub-themes under which the findings are presented.

Table 16: Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Theme 1: Understanding belonging	Areas of commonality
	Conceptualising belonging • Insights on belonging as person-centred • Insights on belonging as social • Insights on belonging as civic • Insights on belonging as attachment • Insights on belonging as secure
	Unravelling belonging and inclusion
Theme 2: Belonging and the person	Ethnicity • Perception • Physical characteristics • Cultural practices • Language
	Access to services and support
	Age
	Labels, positioning and citizenship
	Personal attributes: personality, resilience and faith
Theme 3: Institutional belonging	Institutional culture
	Social engagement
	Academic engagement
	Institutional spaces
	Enhancing belonging within the institution • Intercultural activities • Representation • Outreach, orientation and mentoring
	External environment

4.2. Theme 1: Understanding belonging

Establishing a thorough understanding of the student participants' perceptions of belonging was seen as fundamental to addressing the main research topic — the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging in higher education. The first thematic area reveals participants' understandings of belonging as a general, theoretical concept, distinguishing this from the personal and institutional experiences explored in later themes. The theme's findings are presented under three sub-themes: areas of commonality, conceptualising belonging, and unravelling belonging and inclusion.

4.2.1. Areas of commonality

Despite the participants' diverse, subjective articulations of belonging, the data revealed a crucial dynamic: four common aspects consistently emerged across the narratives, lending necessary coherence to the findings (Table 17). This indicates that while the context and means of achieving belonging vary according to the individual's history (habitus) and current environment (field), the underlying human needs and dimensions of the concept are shared. These four commonalities reflect essential, universal requirements for connection and acceptance. Specifically, they point to possible areas of intersection between the participants' individual habitus and the institutional field of higher education.

Table 17: Summary of belonging commonalities

Commonalities of belonging	Description
Emotional	Captures the emotive element of belonging in all its complexity. It relates to how feelings of attachment, welcome or recognition influence belonging.
Temporal	Covers the dynamic nature of belonging, indicating that belonging is not static but evolves over time.
Spatial	Encapsulates the space and place nature of belonging and the impact that varying contexts and environments can have on the sense of belonging.
Personal	Relates to the personalised nature of belonging. How belonging is experienced and understood depends on the individual.

Participants frequently described belonging as having a profound affective dimension. This was captured by Elena, who emphasised the emotional nature of the concept, stating, "we're not talking about words, we're talking about feelings, emotions and sensations" (Elena, OSFG). Other participants provided more nuanced examples, such as belonging is "feeling accepted" (Mai, in-person SFG). Mira expressed this affective dimension simply as "belonging is like when I feel belonging" (Mira, in-person SFG). Similarly, AJ shared: "Belonging to me is a feeling — when I hear the word belonging, it's more, "Do I feel that I can be myself?" (AJ, in-person SFG). Some staff participants shared similar perspectives: "Yes, it's one of those things that so much of it has to do with a kind of a feeling … feeling safe to agree and to disagree" (Samuel, staff FG) or "belonging is feeling people like you" (Rebecca, staff FG). Many participants believed

that feelings associated with belonging relate particularly to group scenarios at an institutional or societal level.

> I think feeling that the people around you like you. Feeling accepted and welcome really kind of heightens your sense of belonging because you can be within a community, within a group of people, and not feel like you belong — that acceptance makes that feeling. (Beth, staff FG)

The responses also evidenced the temporal and dynamic nature of belonging, illustrating how an individual's sense of connection evolves over time, especially following major life changes. Seun, for instance, shared a poignant example of this shift when returning to his home in Africa, noting that distance and time fundamentally altered his perspective and sense of place.

> You don't feel like when you were still young and were together … But once you separate, five years makes a big difference in the behaviour. It's like you have a different orientation and mentality, which begins to affect your life. (Seun, in-person SFG)

Spatial attachment was another key theme, with participants connecting their sense of belonging to specific places across different scales. At a micro-level, Eva noted a strong attachment to a particular location: "The place that I really like the most is the [place named] building" (Eva, SWI). Scaling up, Cormac spoke about a sense of belonging to DCU as an institution: "I have an attachment to DCU because I'm doing my degree here" (Cormac, in-person SFG). Finally, at a macro-level, Mira, who had recently acquired refugee status, shared an attachment to place and civic status: "I want to continue living here. That's my belonging. I want to belong to Ireland now" (Mira, in-person SFG).

Finally, the data highlighted the personal nature of belonging, revealing that individual identity, beliefs, values, and attitudes fundamentally shape how connection is experienced. For example, Mona's reflections on her personal identity within a group underscored the role of self-perception: "Maybe it's because, as a person, I don't really get too carried away — saying, oh, I'm black or this or that. I don't let that affect what I do or who I am. That's something about me" (Mona, in-person SFG). Similarly, Jennifer emphasised that her sense of belonging within a group relates directly to how she is perceived and treated as a person, underscoring the interaction between internal identity and external recognition.

> If I have the opportunity to talk and be listened to. If I have the opportunity to share my ideas, and if I have the opportunity to just be looked at — not as a different person, but just like a human being. (Jennifer, SOI)

4.2.2. Conceptualising Belonging

Five broad dimensions of belonging were generated from the data analysis and named initially as: personal, social, place, secure and civic. The following sections explain each of these in detail and, where relevant, introduce a more refined term for use in the later discussion and conclusions.

4.2.2.1. Insights on belonging as personal

The participants who focused on the person-centred dimension of belonging spoke predominantly about acceptance. In this context, acceptance was described from the perspective of the individual, including how someone expects to be treated in a group or feels in a group setting. Participants' examples were frequently underpinned by the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion. Here, Jennifer, one of the younger mature students, gave her understanding of equality: "For example, if we are in a group, it's knowing that everyone there is important despite the differences, language, backgrounds and age" (Jennifer, SOI). Similarly, for one participant, acceptance meant no discrimination or prejudice: "there is no judgment in your situation, and you can get the support that you need — the support that is available for everyone without any discrimination or injustice" (Joy, in-person SFG).

When asked what acceptance looks like in practice, many examples emphasised the need to be acknowledged as an individual. For example, Moe focused on the freedom to be your authentic self: "When you don't have to pretend that you are someone else to please the people around you. It's just you are yourself. Everyone will accept you … so you belong to that place" (Moe, in-person SFG). This profound desire to be accepted as one's authentic self can be analytically viewed through a Bourdieusian lens as the search for habitus validation. Participants are seeking recognition where their dispositions, identities, and cultural capital are not just tolerated but affirmed. This affirmation is sought without the need for any form of self-transformation or adaptation to an institutional habitus that differs substantially from their own. Furthermore, such acceptance would ensure their existing capital retains its legitimacy and value within the field.

Additional examples referred to the notion of meaningful belonging, encompassing a firm conviction that a sense of belonging must be accompanied by a corresponding sense that one's contribution is valued by the group: "You must have some kind of stake in it" (Samuel, staff FG). Daniel, for example, equated acceptance with being valued as an individual: "You just have to know that you're a valuable member of that community"

(Daniel, in-person SFG). The notion of “being valued” or “valuing” raises concerns, especially where the powerful “we” in multicultural societies openly acknowledge appreciation of societal diversity (Hage, 1998). In essence, to be valued, someone must do the valuing, suggesting a definite power differential involving an “us” and “them”. As noted by Hage, if a field is truly diverse, “there is nothing to “appreciate” and “value” other than ourselves" (p.140).

Similar responses reinforced the need for each person to feel they have a role and a voice in contributing towards the group’s activities. "You must actively participate in the discussion″ (Andrei, SWI). An additional point of relevance here is the intricacy of belonging interactions. Although participants primarily shared from a self-perception perspective, alternative viewpoints highlighted the importance of how others perceive you and how you perceive others.

> You must feel like your presence in this place that you belong to is important — you are seen, and you are perceived. It's kind of a reflection at the same point. You also have the responsibility to see the others as well. It's not one-sided. (Elena, OSFG)

In summary, then, the responses around acceptance presented a person-centred concept, embodying inclusive principles and fostering individual authenticity. Thus, examples of acceptance strongly incorporated the emotional dimension of belonging.

4.2.2.2. Insights on belonging as social

For many participants, belonging was conceptualised in terms of relationality and was frequently referenced akin to “being a part of something”. One staff member emphasised the importance of this participation, even when challenging: "… being a part of something in a way that it matters that you're a part of, it matters to you. It might not always be pleasant, but it is important" (Noah, staff FG). The repeated reference to relationships aligns with the assertion that social connection is a basic human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). For instance, when reflecting on the isolation he experienced during his initial months in university, Moe referred to the inherent need for connection: "I knew we would have to talk anyways because we cannot stay alone" (Moe, in-person SFG).

The significance of family and friends was highlighted repeatedly as integral to belonging, with age and life circumstances influencing the type and quality of relationships formed. Seun, for example, explained that his sense of belonging is fundamentally influenced by family responsibilities: "My belonging is my family" (Seun, in-person SFG). Furthermore, the diversity of relationship preferences reinforced the

idea of a relationship spectrum (Buonfino and Thomson, 2007), incorporating all types of connections, from close family ties to casual friendships.

Bourdieu's concepts of capital and field offer a powerful framework for analysing the necessity of human interaction and variations in how participants seek it. The university environment constitutes a field — a social space where agents compete for social position and resources. The participants' desire for connection reflects not only a basic need but an active engagement in the acquisition of social capital within this field.

While "meaningful belonging" requires active participation (Andrei, SWI), the diversity of relationship preferences (illustrated in the quotes below) accentuates participants' desire to strategically accumulate social ties, in a manner reflective of their individual habitus. These differing strategies highlight a continuum, indicating that while relationships are essential, they are valued based on specific symbolic capital such as recognition and perceived legitimacy.

> I'm not really like a social, active human. I like to be on my own for most of the time, but even I need some time to socialise. I have a few friends I always talk to, and they really like to talk to me. We spend time together, and I feel like that's enough for me to feel like I belong here. (Andrei, SWI)

> Mine [my belonging] is not about places. It's about people and diversity, and I like talking to people, getting and having friends. (Mai, in-person SFG)

> [belonging is] not necessarily about having friends: it's about having someone with who you can converse. (Eva, SWI)

Andrei's desire for a limited number of high-quality, reciprocal friendships reflects a strategic and deliberate approach to accumulating social capital, providing deep emotional and practical support. In contrast, Mai's preference for the acquisition of extensive social capital suggests an ambition to maximise her networks within the university field. Eva's emphasis on conversation, as opposed to friendship, points to the need for a particular type of exchange — one that grants immediate symbolic recognition and intellectual validation. Ultimately, the pursuit of belonging is informed by the individual's habitus, which instinctively guides their strategy for accumulating social capital within the university field. This ability to mould and develop one's habitus replicates Bourdieu's notion of habitus as both structured and structuring. For students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, references to building economic capital are notably absent. It may suggest that accumulating strong social networks mitigates the lack of economic capital they experience.

This section presented a general overview of how participants conceptualised belonging, with an emphasis on authenticity, recognition and connection. Other themes will build on this foundational understanding, revealing further insights into how this theoretical understanding is applied in practice.

4.2.2.3. Insights on belonging as civic

The findings in this section relate to what Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010b) referred to as the politics of belonging, hereafter in this study referred to as civic belonging. The concept encompasses a range of inclusive topics such as social positioning, citizenship, borders and bordering, and rights and entitlements. While the participants did not discuss all of these areas in detail, clearly the necessity for equality and inclusion within the higher education field and wider society was viewed as critical to belonging. Here, the findings convey more overarching and conceptual notions about civic belonging, while other themes will delve more deeply into the lived experiences and examples shared by participants. These discussions were dominated by the concept of inclusion and its close connection to belonging.

It is interesting to note that when asked to explain belonging, many participants used exclusionary terms such as "outsider" (Joy, in-person SFG) or "isolated" (Mona, in-person SFG), thereby defining belonging in terms of what it felt like not to belong. Tisha added more context to this idea: "Belonging, I think, is the sense of being part of the team, being part of the family, that feeling of welcome [and the opposite is]— you don't feel you don't belong there, like an outcast" (Tisha, SOI). Similarly, the findings here tended to associate recognising the authentic self with a positive sense of belonging, while exclusion generated feelings of isolation or disconnection.

From the outset of the data-generating process, it emerged that the terms “belonging” and “inclusion” were frequently used interchangeably, indicating a close connection between the concepts. However, when participants discussed inclusion, they did so with more confidence and fluidity. There was agreement on inclusion as synonymous with people, either in a formal setting such as a class group or less defined social interactions in community settings. Some student participants adopted a broad perspective on inclusion, linking it to "external companies" such as support groups and service providers and having access to relevant services at appropriate times. For example, Joy explained, "As a single parent in Ireland, I've received a lot of support from different services. So, in that way, I feel like I'm part of the community and part of Irish society as well" (Joy, in-person SFG). In contrast, other participants focused on the subtleties of

daily interactions in small group settings. For Mira, working in small groups in the laboratory is a vital lifeline for interacting with other students: "… you can interact with others. It's not an exam, you can just walk around. It's not like a class where you have to be quiet and just listen. So, it's easier to interact and joke …" (Mira, in-person SFG).

The majority of responses centred on the behaviour and attitudes exhibited by individuals in groups, with an implicit understanding that inclusive interactions encompass core principles such as recognition and value. Rose explained: "Inclusion, in my opinion, is the behaviour that people around you show you that makes the person feel wanted in the area" (Rose, SWI). Following a discussion about student experiences of interacting with staff on campus, one staff member commented:

> Two DCU staff, one had a positive and inclusive attitude that was helpful, and then one sort of didn't, but [consider] the impact on the recipient of that simple interaction. It doesn't cost funding — it's just an attitude. If we're really about inclusivity, these are the kinds of small things that make a big difference to somebody else. (Noah, staff FG)

Similar to belonging, participants placed inclusion firmly in the realm of equality and diversity, coupled with a belief that inclusive practices know no boundaries. "Inclusion is when you're in the same line and have the same rights as everyone. I feel included when I feel like I'm equal to everyone" (Mai, in-person SFG). Similarly, Charlie stated: "Inclusion would be like welcoming everyone, regardless of who they are" (Charlie, SWI). The notion of "everyone" was also exemplified by Cormac: "Inclusion means you are including everyone in whatever way that is, whether you're homeless, or you're coming from an LGBTQ+, whatever it is …" (Cormac, in-person SFG). However, the vast majority of participants focused on the engagement element of inclusion, referring to opportunities to engage meaningfully in group activities. As Charlie explained:

> I think part of the responsibility of being inclusive is to encourage that participation and to reach out. You're not just saying that we're open to anyone, but there is a level of building rapport with people, so they feel comfortable, too. (Charlie, SWI)

While the examples of meaningful inclusion were not dissimilar to meaningful belonging, the respondents revealed a subtle difference. Meaningful belonging emphasised the importance of the individual's experience and the personal feelings associated with feeling accepted and secure. Conversely, meaningful inclusion placed an onus on group members to intentionally foster participation and actively create an environment where every individual felt valued and able to contribute.

This distinction demonstrates that creating an inclusive environment is not only desirable but also essential. Moreover, it establishes inclusion as the bedrock for fostering belongingness. The expectation that group members actively encourage participation and demonstrate welcoming behaviour is essentially a demand for recognition from the dominant institutional habitus. It is a call against symbolic violence, including the concept of aristocracy discussed earlier. Furthermore, it calls for greater recognition of symbolic capital acquired in other social fields. The negative experience of feeling like an outsider or outcast is a direct consequence of unchecked symbolic violence. Therefore, participants define civic belonging not just as a formal right, but as an active demonstration of equality where those who hold the greater symbolic power exercise their responsibility to mitigate their advantage and validate the capital and identity of others.

4.2.2.4. Insights on belonging as being related to place

Findings relating to belonging as attachment, while less dominant than the other dimensions, were nonetheless critical for some participants. Responses referring to attachment adopted a broad socio-spatial perspective of attachment, encompassing connections to people, places and things. Attachment, as defined by the participants, resonates with Antonsich's ideas of belonging as feeling "at home" and "rootedness" — a feeling of deep connection. Aligning with Antonsich, some participants linked attachment to place-belongingness, which may not necessarily be a domestic dwelling, but rather a place offering familiarity, comfort and security. Additional thoughts about home reflected the tensions resulting from "transnational habitus" (Guarnizo, 1997), and the subsequent dual set of dispositions participants develop in navigating the habitus of home and host countries. Here, Mira articulates this tension, referring to her home country: "… they are my people and I understand their suffering … I feel toward them — so that's my belonging to them". She adds that, on the other hand, Ireland is the place that accepted and helped her when she needed help. She concludes: "For me, it's the same belonging in its core, but different for different reasons".

Discussions on attachment to places were particularly emotive for participants who were experiencing unstable living conditions due to homelessness, emergency accommodation or Direct Provision. Similarly, feelings of attachment were hindered by insecurities related to civic belonging and uncertainties about future belongingness in Ireland. As many of the examples of attachment were personal, reflecting the lived realities of participants, the topic is further expanded in other themes. While attachment and place were terms used by the participants, this dimension was renamed **spatial**

belonging to capture the essence of those experiencing tension of navigating a dual habitus across continents.

4.2.2.5. Insights on belonging as secure

The issue of safety and security emerged repeatedly throughout the discussions and was seen as critical to belonging, especially for students who were forced to flee their home countries due to war or fear. The two terms, safety and security, were frequently used interchangeably, as exemplified by AJ: "security is feeling safe … it's feeling you can be yourself without having to worry about what people might think of you" (AJ, in-person SFG). When speaking about safety or security, participants referred to the need for both physical and emotional safety, characterised by the absence of anxiety or the need to mask their identity. One student, Moe, saw a distinction between the terms, suggesting safety related to “feeling safe”, whereas security was more the physical aspect of safety: "there's no bombing, no snipers and no air force" (Moe, in-person SFG). Moreover, feeling safe was crucial for students like Moe who had fled violence in their own countries.

> Safety is the most important part of belonging for me because I came from a war country … where anyone can die at any time. Here, you're not afraid that you'll get arrested and die in jail because of something you said. (Moe, in-person SFG)

The participants' prioritisation of safety and security as a fundamental need establishes the criticality of this dimension before any higher-level belonging is possible. For students coming from war or instability, the need for physical and emotional safety is paramount before they can engage with the academic and social demands of student life. This suggests that the university's primary role for this cohort is not just academic development but also providing a safe and secure environment. This point is further expanded in other themes with specific examples related to the sense of safety and security offered by the university. Here, too, participants are expressing a profound desire for freedom from “masking their identity”. Similar to the person-centred dimension, this is a call for recognition that their habitus (in terms of ingrained dispositions shaped by war, fear and displacement) will no longer be hidden, but instead acknowledged, affirmed and encouraged.

In summary, for this student group, safety and security are not just part of belonging; they are the necessary foundation upon which all other dimensions of belonging are built. Having considered the significance of safety and security, and wanting to capture the essence of both concepts, this dimension was renamed **protective belonging**.

4.2.3. Unravelling belonging and inclusion

Throughout the data-generating process, many of the participants used the terms belonging and inclusion interchangeably. Hence, establishing clarity in how participants understood both terms became a crucial element of the research. Student participants expressed strong feelings about the terms, which can be grouped into three categories. The first group of participants claimed the two words were interchangeable. "I think they're both the same. They're not different words. They are the same because to belong, you have to be included in something" (Mona, in-person SFG). Likewise, Cleopatra stated: "to me, belonging would be — being included. Inclusion is belonging" (Cleopatra, SWI). The second group of participants believed the two words had different meanings, viewing belonging as the internal condition necessary for inclusion. Thus, a person should first feel a sense of belonging before actively benefitting from inclusion. The third group saw inclusion as a prerequisite for belonging. One participant outlined a scenario where two people spoke their own language in the presence of a person who did not understand the language. In this case, one person was not included in the conversation and thus had no sense of belonging.

> I find I need to be included for me to belong. So, I feel like being accepted and included makes you feel belonging. But if I'm not included in the conversation, that means you've already excluded me, which means I don't belong in your social circle and social gatherings. (Eva, SWI)

Figure 23 offers an overview of the belonging versus inclusion discussion.

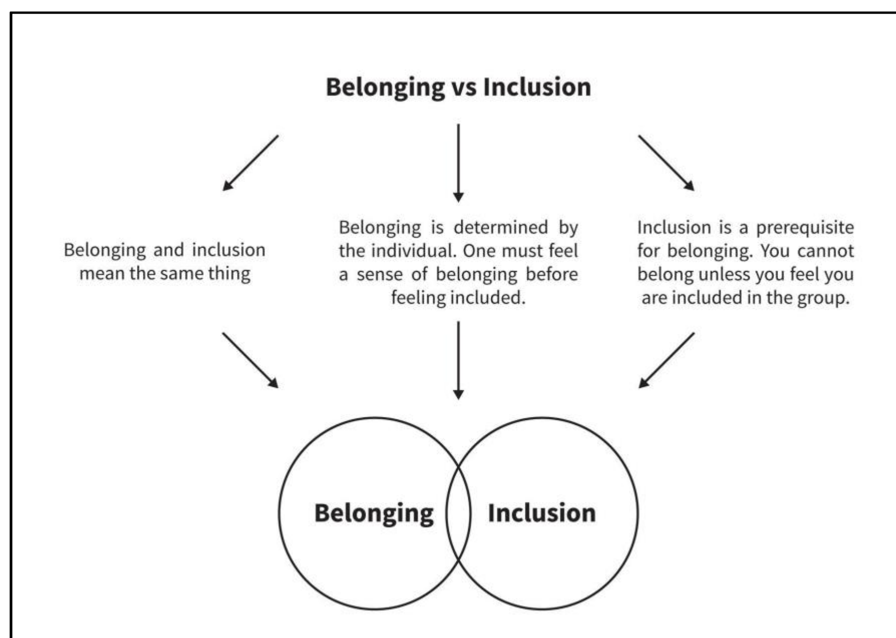


Figure 23: Belonging vs inclusion

The three distinct but firmly held interpretations indicate diversity in conceiving the belonging-inclusion relationship, which lends a further layer of complexity to Kovač and Vaala's (2021) point relating to the implications of blending belonging with inclusion (see Section 1.12). In this case, the issue is not solely that both terms blend, thus obscuring the uniqueness of each, but how to interpret the different understandings of divergence. This lack of clarity has implications for policy and practice.

The diversity of interpretations reflects the participants' perspectives on belonging and inclusion within the university field.

1. **Interchangeable** (Group 1): The view treats understanding belonging and inclusion as a single holistic outcome. It ignores any agency and power dynamics involved, focusing only on successfully achieving the end state — the affirmation of the self within the group.
2. **Belonging first** (Group 2): This view privileges the individual's pre-existing sense of habitus validation (person-centred dimension). It suggests that the habitus must be confident enough to project itself within the field, thus implying that internal feelings of belonging are a necessary precondition for inclusion in social settings.
3. **Inclusion first** (Group 3): This view identifies a cause-and-effect relationship governed by power and action. It emphasises that inclusion is a prerequisite for granting symbolic recognition. Only when this internal, inclusive affirmation is granted can the internal, emotional sense of belonging be securely achieved.

The conflicting definitions highlight the tension between the individual's internal disposition (habitus) and external relational dynamics of the social field. This lack of clarity highlights a potential, significant, policy gap focusing solely on the person-centred aspects of belonging instead of addressing the broader external behaviours that foster inclusiveness.

4.2.4. Conclusion

This theme reveals the multi-dimensional nature of belonging, comprising emotional, temporal, spatial and personal components. In its totality, belonging is showcased as complex, neither static nor easily defined, but profoundly personal and nuanced. Furthermore, the findings indicate how belonging is perceived vis-à-vis inclusion. Clearly, belonging is actively adapted, changed and shaped by people as they constantly navigate different places, time periods and circumstances.

4.3. Theme 2: Belonging and the person

4.3.1. Ethnicity

The findings revealed insights into how personal attributes foster or hinder feelings of belonging. Participants shared personal narratives about their lives, revealing profound insights about themselves, including their unique journeys, experiences and hopes for the future. Student participants repeatedly referenced ethnicity throughout their inputs, though to varying degrees. Ethnicity is rooted in a mutual understanding of the history, geographical locations and cultural practices of an ethnic group or community (UNESCO, 2020). The sharings straddled all aspects of this definition. When speaking about their ethnicity in the context of the University, many students saw themselves as the "other" vis-à-vis a larger, dominant group, whom they perceived to be Irish students. Ethnicity is discussed here in terms of perception, physical characteristics, cultural practices and language.

4.3.1.1. Perception

The findings here detail three different perspectives. Firstly, all student participants were aware of being a minority in a dominant culture, with many perceiving this to be a disadvantage, in that they were frequently either ignored or judged. This feeling was exemplified with phrases, such as "so you will be, like, on the outside" (Moe, in-person SFG) or "so you feel like, ok — I think I'm being left out" (Daniel, in-person SFG). Similarly, Elena shared: "I'm not European and not being white Irish puts some pressure on me … The fact of being European changes how you are perceived and how you are accepted. That's at least in my experience" (Elena, online SFG). This sense of being on the outside aligns closely with Yuval-Davis's (2006) theory of social positioning, where the process of social categorisation leads to a perceived judgement or devaluing of the out-group's identity — in this case, within the dominant university environment.

Secondly, there was a perception that Irish students did not understand ethnic minority groups, mainly because they had not been exposed to diverse cultures. Mai, one of the younger participants, shared her views on this topic:

> I talked to one of my friends — she's an Irish girl. She said half of her friends have never travelled and never seen anyone outside of these small areas — more like small villages. So, they come here, and they see Muslims, not only Muslims, but Africans and Asians, and they don't know how to interact with the foreign students. (Mai, in-person SFG)

Likewise, Joy spoke about a chasm between “us” and “them” because the backgrounds are so different: "Their childhood and yours — you grew up in Africa — but your childhood, the only thing you can remember is back in Africa — here it’s just your adulthood" (Joy, in-person SFG). In comparison, Mira offered a micro-example and explained how Irish students react when she mentions watching Netflix programmes, "they get surprised when we say we watch Netflix … ‘You watch these shows?’ We’re normal, you know" (Mira, in-person SFG). This apparent surprise at a shared cultural practice (Netflix) could be analysed as a microaggression, a form of exclusion that positions the ethnic minority student as fundamentally “other”, whose “normalised” behaviour was unexpected within the presumed shared cultural arena.

Third, the participants perceived that the lack of connection between the Irish and ethnic minority groups was more than a misunderstanding but was fuelled by a perceived reluctance by Irish people to include non-Irish people in their circles. For example, two participants shared their impressions of the class dynamics in the initial months. Moe described his initial experience in the class: "When I first came here to college, it was very hard to talk to people, and they won't be as willing to talk" (Moe, in-person SFG). Similarly, Jennifer explained that as time passed, some Irish people started interacting with her, "It depends, but I think for the majority, it just takes a long time for Irish to approach non-Irish people. Something very extraordinary has to happen" (Jennifer, SOI). Jennifer, however, offered a tempered perspective, adding: "I don’t blame them … I think people tend to identify with people who they are like" (Jennifer, SOI). Here, Jennifer's observation illuminates homophilia in practice, particularly noting the divide between ethnic minority and dominant student groups (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001). On a more positive note, Mira voiced her hope for the future:

> … that might change in Ireland, of course, in a few years' time because all those small little villages are going to change too … because more foreign people are coming in, they will try to interact with each other, and some understanding will happen. (Mira, in-person SFG)

Mira’s reflection is significant because it shifts the onus for change from the minority students’ efforts to assimilate toward a more inevitable demographic and structural evolution of Irish society.

These examples collectively indicate a perceived lack of understanding among the dominant group and a scarcity of opportunities, or even interest, in bridging the cultural gap. Taken together, these three perspectives reveal a progression from internal feelings of social marginalisation to barriers rooted in socio-cultural integration, culminating in the perception, among the student participants, of the dominant group’s

resistance to integration. While Mai and Joy suggest a chasm born of ignorance due to lack of exposure, Moe and Jennifer's accounts suggest more active boundary maintenance. The latter aligns with the concept of untrained border guards (Vieten and Yuval-Davis, 2018), where the dominant group's preference for "people who they are like" acts as a powerful gatekeeper to belonging.

4.3.1.2. Physical characteristics

Some student participants shared their experience of being treated differently because of physical characteristics. This provides practical illustrations of what Hage (1998) terms "racial classification", revealing subtle forms of "empowered practical prejudice" (p. 36) as a consequence of assigning racial meaning to physical differences. Charlie, who described herself as being from a mixed-race family and grew up in Ireland, shared that she was badly bullied when she was younger because of her brown skin and felt very unrepresented in her class at primary school. While she acknowledged that there is more representation now, the experience profoundly affected her and, in her own words, "made me feel invalid as a person" (Charlie, SWI). For Charlie, the effect of being made to feel "invalid" highlights how racial exclusion impacts the core sense of self, especially when the rejection begins in childhood. Similarly, Elena shared her feelings of inadequacy in relation to what she perceived as an "Irish look": "… because we are not Irish physically. Others here have more of a European look, but I don't … I'm very lacking" (Elena, OSFG). Elena's statement illustrates powerfully the internalised pressure to conform to a dominant physical ideal. Here, her physical appearance is interpreted as an inherent "lack", preventing her eligibility for full belonging. In tandem with Elena, Jay articulated feeling discriminated against each time he stepped into class at university.

> … two black guys in the class, and I remember stepping into that class on this campus and all the lads saying hi to each other, and I'm sitting in the back of the class, and no one talks to me. (Jay, OSFG)

Jay's vivid example of a real-life scenario suggests that the behaviour of his classmates moves beyond mere oversight, instead demonstrating a deliberate attempt to socially exclude. This covert denial of interaction acts as a form of microaggression, where his presence is registered but his social inclusion is rejected. These examples powerfully demonstrate Hage's (1998) analysis of passive belonging. The students are allowed a physical presence in the national space (the university classroom), yet they are denied the opportunity for what the participants described as "meaningful belonging". This relational dynamic highlights the privileged national position that feels empowered to

categorise and position the ethnic “other” as an object to be managed. Jay's experience, in particular, reinforces the notion of a perceived national space that not only belongs to the dominant group but also bestows the power to determine who shares that space.

These narratives illustrate the profound impact of being physically labelled as “other”. However, not all students accepted this imposition of difference. Mona, for instance, shared a counter-narrative of racial resilience: "So even in my class, I was the only one [black student] in the class, but I didn't let that put me off or basically make me feel a bit different" (Mona, in-person SFG). Mona’s declaration conveys a purposeful refusal to internalise the negative messages of difference, revealing an inherent personal agency that serves as a buffer in situations perceived as racially hostile or discriminating.

4.3.1.3. Cultural Practices

The findings presented in this section are an amalgamation of cultural references mentioned in the course of data generation. However, instead of following a discrete line of questioning, the references were interwoven in conversations. Permeating the staff and student responses was an implicit assumption that ethnic minorities are culturally different from the dominant societal culture. The cultural practices mentioned by student participants related predominantly to respect or religion. Primarily related to cultural practices was the notion of “respect” and an apparent belief that the level of respect shown to people in Ireland is somewhat less than what participants would have experienced in their countries of origin. Daniel, a mature student, was particularly animated about this topic: "You feel as if you’re being left out. There is no mutual respect[19]. Maybe it's a cultural thing for us from Africa where respect comes first in everything" (Daniel, in-person SFG). Additionally, he shared how the lack of respect makes him feel worthless. In his words: "You’re trying to give respect to someone, but you’re just taken as a piece of paper". Daniel’s intense language — feeling “worthless” and taken as a “piece of paper” — moves the discussion from mere etiquette into the realm of questioning existential security. This lack of mutual respect is perceived as a profound denial of dignity and recognition, signifying a failure to validate his cultural being within the host community. Respect was also mentioned by some participants in relation to elders and the respect shown to them, especially by not addressing them by

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[19] While this perspective on respect was shared by some students, a counter-perspective from a staff participant questioned the utopian notion of respect, suggesting there may be minority groups within all cultures who are marginalised in society.

their first name. Seun, a mature student, explained that there are younger students in his class from his country, but out of respect and cultural tradition, they do not call him by his first name, preferring instead to use the term “Uncle”.

> It was strange to me when I first moved out of my home country to call someone that is three to five years my senior by their actual name. If I want to call you, I cannot call your name directly as it's not acceptable in my country, and though I know you're not so bothered, for us here …we’re still African. (Seun, in-person SFG)

This tension articulated by Seun illustrates a clash between the ingrained cultural habitus and the more informal social conventions of the Irish host culture. It also highlights the extent of the social and cultural capital required to constantly navigate and negotiate unfamiliar social and cultural norms, inhibiting free and spontaneous interaction crucial for integration. While this topic merits further discussion, a more in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

A second cultural difference mentioned in the responses was religion. Although the cultural aspect of religion did not feature prominently in participant responses, it did emerge as a dominant aspect of belonging in the context of personal beliefs and values. Religion and identity were intertwined for a few participants, and religion very much influenced how they lived their daily lives. Two of the female participants, in particular, believed being Muslim hindered their integration in class. Mai shared her thoughts on this issue.

> The stereotypes about younger Muslims are not good in Europe. … Sometimes they see you as a Muslim girl, from a different country, and have this type of thought — she might have barriers and won’t want to talk to us. (Mai, in-person SFG)

Similarly, Mira discussed her challenges in a male-dominated class and expressed her discontent at being the only Muslim girl, "I’m the only Muslim girl, agh! and boys are really hard to talk to — they don't approach" (Mira, in-person SFG). While religion is a matter of personal belief, these narratives show that being visibly Muslim operates as a racialised identity marker in the Irish university context. The overt behaviour of classmates and the awareness of stereotyping shifts religion from a private to a public practice, bringing with it negative connotations. Such labelling acts as a powerful form of social boundary maintenance, where the dominant group manifests preconceived assumptions to justify and practice exclusion. Religion will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.3.6.

The cultural differences related to respect and religion demonstrate that social belonging is contingent upon navigating and sometimes questioning internalised cultural habitus.

In many ways, the narratives showcase that the negotiation of cultural practices is a significant arena for contestation, reinforcing the erection of social barriers and hindering integration. There were other cultural differences, such as food and socialising, but these were discussed in relation to the campus experience and thus are more relevant to Theme 3. However, the most frequently cited cultural difference was language, especially for participants for whom English was not a first language. Given the significance of language, it is addressed separately in the next section.

4.3.1.4. Language

The findings related to language illustrate a key mechanism of social exclusion rooted in deficits of linguistic capital (Grenfell, 2011). In general, many of the participants felt they understood English but struggled to express themselves clearly in the language. For example, Rose, who grew up in a country where English is the lingua franca but is not used in her community for daily interactions, was unsure of her ability to communicate clearly. "Language might be a little barrier because I know what I want to say, but I may not be putting it the right way" (Rose, SWI). This feeling of knowing but being unable to articulate clearly relates to Hage’s (2025) concept of practical being; if a student’s linguistic capital does not equate with the field’s demands, their ability to engage entirely in the academic setting is curtailed. Similarly, Andrei, who had only arrived in Ireland within the previous year but had studied English in his country, felt he sometimes lacked the fluency required. He described understanding everything people told him, but sometimes being unable to talk back. "I can forget some words — some translations." Additionally, he spoke about the challenge with accents: "To be honest, it was difficult to pick up the accent" (Andrei, SWI).

The challenges with accents and vocabulary articulated here reflect a distinct habitus clash within the academic field. Likewise, Eva shared her initial struggle with variations in accents during lectures and worried if it would affect her academic performance: "Sometimes you do not understand the accent and miss out on what is being said — missing out on relevant information that will help you pass. I feel like the language barrier also plays a big role in belonging" (Eva, SWI). Eva’s concern explicitly links the deficit in linguistic capital to a tangible outcome: a reduction in grade expectations. This anxiety, coupled with the lack of fluency to engage in spontaneous conversations, illuminates the language barrier as a powerful exclusionary tool. Moreover, it inhibits the development of social capital and contributes to the overall sense of not belonging, thereby reinforcing the notion that field requires a specific, often privileged, form of linguistic capital.

Collectively, the findings related to ethnicity, including physical characteristics, culture and language, highlight the breadth and depth of the concept as well as the practical considerations required to accommodate a diverse range of ethnicities into a structured system such as higher education. The next section focuses on the students' views on accessing services and support.

4.3.2. Access to services and support

The findings in this section provide insights into how the participants described access to services and support as essential for their sense of belonging and a successful student journey. It is noteworthy that the student participants had varied educational experiences before seeking refuge in Ireland. For example, Moe explained that many people who arrived here from his country were well-educated and came for safety and new opportunities: "Most of them are educated and don't want to waste time learning a new language, so that Ireland will be like the best option or the UK" (Moe, in-person SFG). Moreover, the majority harboured longstanding ambitions for HE, as exemplified by Cleopatra, a first-generation student, who repeated to herself many times: "I'm going to make it. One day, I'm going to be a student in DCU" (Cleopatra, SWI). Thus, although the findings revealed here relate to the students' current socioeconomic status, their individual starting points may have differed significantly. Clearly, throughout these discussions, the ability to accumulate national capital (Hage, 1998) varied, depending on an individual's degree of social, cultural and economic capital, which, in turn, impacted the ability to access and benefit from services and support.

When discussing the importance of "access", participants frequently used the terms "services" and "support" interchangeably. For example, while a "service" was frequently viewed as the unit delivering the support, it was the support itself that was deemed essential. Thus, these two terms are used here to mean both the services and the support offered. While participants referred to a range of support services, internal and external to higher education, such as SUSI or accommodation support, the findings presented here focus predominantly on internal HE services.

The findings showcased the significance of support offered during the pre-entry and post-entry periods. As post-entry support is covered in Theme 3, this section highlights issues related to access, particularly the lack of information about accessing HE. For example, Jay shared the sense of hopelessness he experienced in the asylum process and how he could not access higher education: "You've no documents, no papers, no

this, no that, and you need a Stamp 4[20]" (Jay, OSFG). Jay explained that he was lucky to have met someone who told him about the DCU Sanctuary scholarships. Likewise, Lexy explained that she initially deferred her college offer as it was impossible for her to pay international fees.

> I had to defer. I had a lot of things on my mind. I didn't even know if I needed to have textbooks and a laptop or if I would get resources, and the bus fare was also an issue for me. I couldn't work and raise enough money for the fees because I had to get childcare, which I couldn't. So it was hard for me because I could only work on weekends. And I couldn't raise the fee they wanted — €11,700 — the international fee. (Lexy, SWI)

The administrative and economic challenges articulated by Jay and Lexy (the requirement for a Stamp 4 and the need to pay international fees) clearly illustrate the structural barriers hindering the acquisition of national capital and recognition. Furthermore, the structural barriers, coupled with the limited recognition for prior learning (as mentioned by Moe), reinforce Meaney Satori and Nwanze’s (2021) findings that this student group faces distinct barriers to access, thereby creating a form of structural exclusion.

Lexy explained that everything changed when she received support and advice from the Sanctuary programme. Similarly, Andrei explained he accidentally heard about the financial support available to him: "I found it by accident. I wasn't looking for it, but just found it in a group chat" (Andrei, SWI). This reliance on finding information “by accident” highlights gaps with how HE is promoted and explained to students unfamiliar with the access process, making navigation of the field dependent on serendipity, pre-existing cultural capital or strategic relationships, rather than institutional design. Other students were more proactive in seeking information; Mona, for example, got the information she required at a DCU Open Day. "I went to the open day. It was actually helpful because it made me decide on the course that I've just finished" (Mona, in-person SFG).

The student participants also shared how their status as refugees or IPAs impacted their confidence and initial experiences at HE. For example, Jay explained that he was still in the asylum process when he started university, so although he felt unequal to other students, the support made him feel welcome. "At a time when we started at the bottom, they brought us up to campus, and it [the support] was so, so, so, so incredible" (Jay, OSFG). For some student participants, those initial feelings of inadequacy persisted. Jennifer described how her feelings dictate where she goes and what she does at the University: "I try not to go to places on campus and just do what I have to do" (Jennifer,

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[20] Stamp 4 indicates permission to stay in Ireland for a specified period, subject to conditions.

SOI). Jennifer's feelings of inadequacy and avoidance are manifestations of symbolic violence. Within the institutional structure, the student is made to feel personally responsible for their lack of systemic advantage, encroaching on their existential security and sense of belonging in the field.

In addition to information and confidence, the need for financial support was a consistent issue across all student participants. There was unanimous agreement that attending university would be impossible without financial support. "It is just 1916 [referring to the 1916 Bursary government scholarships] and SUSI that helps us pay the school fees" (Tisha, SOI). For student participants who were ineligible for state support, paying fees caused significant stress. For example, Joy described her struggles: "I'm paying my own school fees. I have two children; I'm working part-time and then [I am] full-time in college. So it's challenging for me" (Joy, in-person SFG). While all recipients appreciated the financial support received, broader issues concern the challenge of accessing and qualifying for financial support. Some participants referred to what they perceived as the complex SUSI application process and the difficulty of accessing the verification documents required. For example, Charlie, who struggled to get the correct verification documents for SUSI, described how her initial euphoria about starting university and making friends was rocked by her negative experience regarding the fee payment: "The initial period was 100% [about] fees — literally everything else fell into the background" (Charlie, SWI). These personal insights into the difficult financial situations experienced by some of the student participants reveal the consequences of lacking economic capital. Without access to such capital, navigating the financial hurdles of HE places greater demands on students, thus limiting the time and energy available to engage fully in their studies and militating against the development of any sense of belonging.

In many ways, the findings presented here offer glimpses into the extent of the daily challenges many student participants encountered in navigating information and financial barriers. Moreover, they draw attention to privilege and the apparently smoother pathways to and through university for students who have access to the social, cultural and economic capital to facilitate the transition to HE.

4.3.3. Age

This finding was particularly interesting as it moved beyond the immediate realm of ethnic minority status to question other barriers to inclusion. This led some participants to reflect on the impact of age in determining belongingness. It also emerged as an identity feature that made people stand out rather than fit in, a view expressed only by

the mature students themselves. The two non-mature student participants did not refer to their age differences within the class setting. Furthermore, some students were hesitant to attribute their sense of isolation in the class purely to age, but rather to a combination of age and ethnicity. Lexy drew attention to the difference between the two age groups: "But then there's a difference between mature students and the young ones. Mature students, black or white, we are together" (Lexy, SWI). Lexy’s quote clearly indicates age-based homophilic practice (Dunne, 2009; Keane, 2011b), demonstrating that age can be a stronger bonding factor than ethnicity in this context, with younger and mature students bonding primarily within their own age group.

For instance, Cormac, a younger mature student, explained his dilemma when he realised he was slightly older than most of his classmates and unsure where he should position himself socially.

> … that's the hard part also for me because I’m a mature student, but not far from a mature student. I was only 24, but still, because I’m in class with 19-year-olds, but they know each other from high school, and I’m trying to decide, do I fit in with the youngsters or stick with mature students? (Cormac, in-person SFG)

Cormac's struggle illustrates a disjuncture of habitus (Reay, 2004). He is caught between two opposing age groups, unable to fully fit in with either. The absence of a clear social position within the field creates yet another barrier to integration, inhibiting the seamless accumulation of social capital.

Recurring references by the mature student participants to the age difference signified the intertwining of age with identity. For example, Moe shared: "I'm not that young anymore — at least I am ten years older than everyone in college" (Moe, in-person SFG). Some mature students were adamant that the age difference prevented positive interaction, "I just cannot relate to them [the younger students]” (AJ, in-person SFG). This inability to relate was often explained by a lack of something in common, different priorities, or differences in academic motivation, with mature students feeling they were more diligent and organised when it came to lectures and assignments. Moreover, the accumulation of social capital and the development of meaningful relationships among mature students were often hindered by caring responsibilities, reinforcing the boundary between age groups. Such examples demonstrate the ongoing practice of distancing and clique formation (Keane, 2011b), often to the detriment of mature students who are the minority in class groups. The presence of more mature students was seen as advantageous, as exemplified by Seun: "You're lucky. I am the only mature student in my class. The majority of guys in my class are twenty" (Seun, in-person SFG). Adding

an alternative perspective, two mature students spoke positively about interactions in class and did not seem to distinguish between younger and older students.

One mature student participant believed that starting in university as an older student required leaving behind an old way of life and creating a new persona.

> Unlike someone who's coming from Leaving Cert and not knowing the people you are with — it requires creating new friendships, creating new boundaries, getting to know each other. I don't know how to explain it, but it's like you have to find a new beginning of yourself to the old life that you know — so you're creating a new you in a new environment. (Eva, SWI)

Eva's reflection is critical, describing the conscious and often onerous task of moving from one habitus to another. This requirement to find a "new beginning of yourself" highlights the significant psychological and emotional costs required of mature students to achieve a sense of fit within the university environment.

These comments collectively highlight the significant role played by age in shaping belonging and social engagement. While being of similar age often fostered stronger bonds, marked age differences, particularly for mature students, frequently presented challenges to integration and feeling a sense of fit. Additional findings on age and social connections will be presented in Theme 3 (see Section 4.5).

4.3.4. Labels, positioning and citizenship

The findings made clear that living in Ireland as a migrant, refugee, or IPA centred on the labels assigned to individuals by the immigration system to describe their residency status. The label also significantly influenced their sense of identity. Some participants expressed their apprehension about entering the University as an IPA and the subsequent fear of being asked where they had come from. Lexy, who currently lives in DP, shared her relief at not having to answer such questions when she arrived on campus.

> I thought people would be asking me where I am from, who I am or where I live, and all that personal stuff. But coming here, I wasn't really asked those kinds of things — nobody cared where you came from or where you lived. It was just college. (Lexy, SWI)

Likewise, Jennifer had a similar fear which continued to linger as she established close friendships: "I feel very overwhelmed when I have the idea of sharing my life with someone that becomes close, even though I know it's normal if they ask questions about why I'm here or how did I leave" (Jennifer, SOI). Lexy's relief at not being questioned offers temporary respite from external positioning, permitting her to blend in rather than

stand out. Similarly, Jennifer's fear of questions about her background reflects a fear of being positioned outside the dominant group, and she prefers to blend in with the student group. Not all participants shared the same apprehension about disclosing their background. For example, a DP resident, Eva, felt confident enough to tell her friends where she lives. "No, it didn't really bother me that much because I never had any comments from anyone when I told them where I was coming from" (Eva, SWI).

The findings also revealed insights into the vulnerabilities caused by the asylum process and the chasm between pre-citizenship and afterwards. The significance of citizenship was emphasised by numerous references to either having citizenship or the number of years remaining before becoming eligible to apply for citizenship. For example, as Cleopatra explained, "I'm not yet due to apply for my citizenship because I only got my Leave to Remain[21] two years ago" (Cleopatra, SWI). The authority to grant citizenship represents the state's hegemonic power, determining the rights and entitlements for support and thus dictating an individual's level of national capital.

On a more positive note, the transformative impact of citizenship is exemplified by Rose, who described her struggle paying fees when she held a Stamp 4. Immediately following her citizenship, she qualified for State support "because now I'm a black Irish citizen, that was the only reason that I got SUSI; it actually did bring some kind of positive for me" (Rose, SWI). This quote provides definitive proof that labelling can hinder or grant access to capital. This example is not just about fees; it is about the augmentation of Rose's being (Hage, 2025) through the official recognition of her national capital.

This section relates closely to Yuval-Davis's (2006) belonging framework and social positioning theories, highlighting how identity impacts not only where one is socially located but also the hegemonic power determining the rights and entitlements linked to identity. In contrast to the imposition of hegemonic power by authorities, the next section focuses on the inherent resilience and determination of individuals.

4.3.5. Personal attributes: personality, resilience and faith

A spontaneous comment in one of the focus groups drew attention to the relevance of personality. It appeared as a moment of personal inspiration when Mona was discussing

[21] Leave to Remain (now called Permission to Remain) is an endorsement placed on the passport of a non-EEA national permitting IPAs to remain in Ireland, stating the duration and the conditions of their stay.

the positive way some mature and younger students interact: "I'm just thinking as well — would personality also be important? ... maybe it's because of their personality or the kind of person they are" (Mona, in-person SFG). Staff also referred to diverse personalities, questioning whether enough was done to accommodate them: "the diversity of opinions, the diversity of styles, personalities, needs and so on might not be getting enough of an airing" (Rebecca, staff FG).

References to "the kind of person they are" surfaced repeatedly in the student interviews and focus groups, with comments reflecting how certain personal attributes can drive and sustain resilience, even during challenging times. The significance of personality directly impacts all aspects of identity, especially its influence on an individual's attitudes towards their personal attributes and their ability to sustain effort. For example, Cleopatra felt that her positive mindset was crucial in helping her cope with daily stresses.

> My personal thoughts — I'm the kind of person who is always really positive. When I see that these assignments are not going well, I really try by all means to be positive … Also, being grateful for what you have increases that sense of belonging." (Cleopatra, SWI)

This positive mindset is crucial in helping to shape their student identity and approach other identities, be it a mature student or a working parent.

Similarly, Mona believed her inner joy helped her to maintain a positive frame of mind. "I did not have any negative experiences. I don't know, maybe because of my joy" (Mona, in-person SFG). For some of the participants, that feeling of inner peace and hope was attributed to their faith. Tisha, an older mature student, explained that she is so grateful to be in college at this time in her life and believed that God was instrumental in making it possible "so it's like everything was planned. Everything God planned" (Tisha, SOI). Likewise, Jennifer believed faith helped her to surmount the daily struggles of juggling work and university, even when she had to repeat a year. "I just try to live my life the best way I can, not carrying heavy loads. Whatever stresses me, I just talk to God. I'm a Christian, and I talk to Him and leave everything in His hands" (Jennifer, SOI). Here, it is clear that faith is a critical coping mechanism that underpins resilience for certain participants. Such faith motivates and sustains students even when faced with adverse circumstances and periods of isolation.

In general, determination and resilience characterised the student participant responses. Their dreams for a brighter future, revealed in the Future Focus activity, aligned with the sentiments shared throughout the data-generating process, with most students placing

positive family networks and wider social connections among the salient desires. Spatial belonging also featured prominently in their future aspirations, including the need to feel rooted to a place — to own a house, a garden and be integrated into the community. A sense of optimism about the future was reflected in words such as contentment, gratitude and contribution to society. There was a sense here that personal resilience fuelled their desire for systemic change, such as enhanced diversity, equality and inclusion in Ireland.

4.4. Theme 3: Institutional belonging

The findings in this theme reveal insights on belonging within the institutional field. The field here encompasses the broader HE context, including the institution and the surrounding area, which impact or hinder belongingness. The findings are presented under six sub-themes: institutional culture, social engagement, academic engagement, institutional spaces, enhancing belonging within the institution, and the external environment.

4.4.1. Institutional culture

This sub-theme reveals the student participants' insights into the relationship between institutional culture and belonging. Here, the emphasis shifts from the person-oriented role of habitus and capital discussed in Themes 1 and 2 to the institutional field. In general, except for the online space, the responses to institutional connection were positive. For example, Mira rated her sense of attachment to DCU: "I feel belonging 90% of the time" (Mira, in-person SFG). Other examples were more specific: "I come here every day because I want to, not because I have to" (Moe, in-person SFG). Integral to feeling welcome and included was the concept of equality. There was general agreement that the University made an effort to treat all students equally, with such treatment being crucial to belonging. For example: "We all get the same emails, the same assignments, have access to the same services and supports" (Tisha, OSI). "If I'm given work in college, it's not because I'm an asylum seeker getting different treatment, I'm just like any other Irish citizen" (Lexy, SWI).

Additionally, students acknowledged the freedom to be themselves and have an opinion, especially in lectures. Two students shared that they had been class representatives, and this was seen as a valuable way for them to have their voice heard. Here, Cormac described his experience: "I'm one of the class representatives. I feel even though I'm a mature student and a minority, they [the other students] included me in making decisions

and making certain that I had an input into things I want to see changing" (Cormac, in-person SFG).

In contrast to the positive experiences expressed by the majority of the student participants, the online learners painted a more negative picture of their reality — characterised by isolation, loneliness and discrimination. While these voices were keen to acknowledge support and encouragement from academic staff, such support did not compensate for the loneliness and lack of belonging they felt as learners. For instance, Elena shared: "when you're online, you've no idea what's happening on campus, how is the university structure or what's available (Elena, SFG). The yearning for recognition and meaningful relationships was typical of the online experience.

As part of the discussions, student participants shared their experiences of racism in the University, with some saying that racist incidents had not been an issue for them. Here Mona explained: "There was no criticism or racism or anything. Everyone just accepted everybody" (Mona, in-person SFG). Another group of the student participants had experienced racism but were eager to point out that it was not widespread and usually limited to particular people or isolated incidents, as exemplified by Moe: "it was the individuals, it wasn't about the system here" (Moe, in-person SFG). However, there was a group of students who did not specifically use the word racism, but gave examples of discriminatory behaviour, such as exclusion from groups or not being included in conversations, suggesting a level of casual microaggression that exacerbated feelings of being different. Here, Elena shares her experience of exclusion: "Unfortunately, it's in society and in college as well — there is no belonging […] I always have this feeling, including college, that I'm an outsider" (Elena, SFG). Many of the students explained that they had developed a degree of resilience to discriminatory comments or treatment and would not allow it to interfere with their overall experience. For example, Jennifer explained, "I'm just at that stage that I don't really mind. I can identify when something is personal and when it's not" (Jennifer, SOI). However, one student did suggest that there were people in the institution who needed to work on their attitude: "I believe the people who have the mentality [of racism] have a bridge to cross" (Jay, OSFG).

For example, Cormac explained, "I'm safe when I'm just in a place in university. So, it's a safety net" (Cormac, in-person SFG). It is important to note here that many of the student participants had fled their countries of origin because of war and fear, so feeling safe was critical to their well-being, mental health and ability to engage in their studies. In many ways, the stable university environment provided a welcome escape from the precarious living situations that many of the participants were experiencing daily. It was

acknowledged that feelings of safety and security were enhanced by the range of supports available to the students through the services provided by different departments and units within the University.

In summary, the institutional culture was generally inclusive and supportive, but with distinct points of weakness requiring attention and commitment.

4.4.2. Social engagement

As mentioned in Theme 1 above, being part of something or, in other words, social connection, was essential to belonging, regardless of the type or degree of engagement. For example, Rebecca shared: "a lot of the student experiences are centred around belonging and friends — making those connections" (Rebecca, staff FG). Some students shared similar sentiments: "… companionship and friendliness [are important] because what I found being in college [is] when you don't have those friends, it really affects you" (Daniel, in-person SFG). Discussions about friends varied between students who found it easy to make friends and those who found it challenging, as well as where and how friends are made. Mature students, in particular, had much to say about the impact of age on forming college friendships, with many finding interactions with younger students particularly challenging. Echoing Keane (2011a), the findings revealed evidence of "distancing" and "cliquing" within class groups. Here, there were vivid descriptions of distancing between mature and younger students. Furthermore, within these two distinct cohorts, there were definite cliques, informed by perceptions of "Irishness". For instance, Jennifer explained the class dynamics involving her African friends who were born "here": Initially, a few of them were hanging around with Irish people, then with time they [the friendships] just started shifting a little" (Jennifer, SOI).

Staff also spoke about the challenge some students face in making connections: "I'm just thinking about that edge between the student creating it [a sense of belonging] themselves and the rest of us in the college facilitating that process, and how particularly challenging that's been for many people since the COVID isolations" (Samuel, staff FG). It should be borne in mind that many of these students were joining university during or after the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and felt those restrictions hindered interaction.

> We were all on Zoom trying to navigate what was going on because the whole world was in shock. We were a big group, and we didn't know anyone. It was hard, literally, it was so hard to know if you belonged or not in DCU. (Cormac, in-person SFG)

Discussions relating to social engagement focused on interactions within the institution, especially those offered by the Students' Union and Clubs and Societies (C&S), with many participants acknowledging the valuable role they play in promoting social connections. Here, Mai shared her positive experience: "The main thing for people to feel like they belong to DCU is Clubs and the Students' Union activities" (Mai, in-person SFG). Even participants who did not engage in any activities acknowledged the benefit of engagement, expressing the desire to be involved if it were possible. "I would love the social aspect. If I had something accessible to me, I would get involved" (Elena, online SFG). Similarly, Tisha, who was not part of any club, saw the benefit of being involved: "I think it's a good thing to join one of the clubs and just see what goes on" (Tisha, SOI).

Many respondents answered in the affirmative when asked if they were members of any club or society, though closer examination revealed the answers were more aspirational than reflective of reality. For example: "I joined weightlifting but never attended" (Cormac, in-person SFG). "I did join, but I had to pull out because I had so many responsibilities" (Joy, in-person SFG). Many other similar responses were shared, referring to a desire to join at some other time or having joined but never attended. Only two participants partook of an activity regularly. Some staff members had strong views on this reported lack of participation in social events, suggesting engagement is essential for creating a sense of belonging and developing one's identity. Isabella linked low participation rates to the fact that many of this group are new to Ireland and, thus, prioritising basic needs. Referring to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, she advised that for personal development "self-actualisation needs to become more important" (Isabella, staff FG).

A lack of time and having caring responsibilities were the most frequent explanations for not participating in social activities. "It's because of time. I don't mind joining the club, but I'm thinking of the time I'll spend there and then come back home and have things to do" (Tisha, SOI). "I don't really get much time to do anything outside of lectures as I have to get home" (Rose, SWI). Other participants worried about the impact on grades. For example, Eva explained, "I haven't joined anything yet …I need my academic scores to be higher and I don't want to get overwhelmed with everything and then get low grades" (Eva, SWI).

Similarly, caring responsibilities caused additional stress for students. "It's very difficult. The first time I came to university, I wanted to do drama and was really excited about it … but when you have kids, you're rushing home, and it's really hard" (Mona, in-person SFG). Students based on one of the smaller University campuses cited the extra

pressure of having to move campus, as they explained most activities take place on the main campus (Charlie, SWI). Many participants also referred to the degree to which the drinking culture hindered social engagement. AJ shared her thoughts about this topic: "I still struggle to this day to make friends in class. In second year, some of them linked up for drinks and I went for one drink. But now, drinking every weekend is not me" (AJ, in-person SFG).

Throughout the student participant discussions, there were repeated references to WhatsApp groups, highlighting both their role in promoting engagement and the power dynamics involved in inclusion or exclusion. On a positive note, active engagement in WhatsApp groups fostered a sense of belonging to the class and a supportive social network. For example, Tisha described the benefits for her: "We have a WhatsApp group for the whole class. If we have any problem, we put it in there, and we all try to help each other" (Tisha, SOI). In contrast, some participants spoke about being excluded from WhatsApp groups and how that affects a sense of belonging. Mona shared her experience: "The younger ones — they have their own WhatsApp group, and we have our own mature student WhatsApp group. So sometimes I don't know what's going on because the class rep is in the other group" (Mona, in-person SFG). Another participant felt her non-Irish name was a cause for exclusion: "When my name pops up, everybody sees it's not an Irish name, and people normally don't reply to me" (Elena, online SFG). This brief overview of WhatsApp communication indicates the significant role of technology in nurturing or hindering relationships and the power within such groups to include or exclude.

These findings on social engagement highlight a strong desire for connection and the existence of abundant and diverse opportunities for social engagement, especially under the banner of Clubs and Societies. However, they demonstrate that complex socio-demographic factors and practical barriers can prevent meaningful participation.

4.4.3. Academic engagement

This sub-theme presents findings related to the role that academic engagement plays in creating a sense of belonging. Exploring academic culture was not part of the research design and was not included in any line of questioning during the interviews or focus groups. However, during the course of the data-generating process, student participants spoke about aspects of their academic life that helped to foster belongingness. Thus, the findings here represent comments that participants shared voluntarily as part of the wider discussion on belonging in the institution.

The majority of student participants spoke positively about academic staff, especially in relation to the support provided and the role they played in nurturing relationships within the class: "The deepest sense I got of inclusion and respect in DCU was from our programme directors. They were so, so good and engaged and always trying to get the best from us" (Jay, OSFG). "What makes me feel a sense of belonging in DCU is my lecturers, all of them always say at the end of lectures — 'just email if you're having any issues regarding anything'" (Cormac, in-person SFG). Additionally, some participants mentioned the beneficial role lecturers had in helping them to get to know each other during the transition stage. "The best thing the lecturers did was ask us to talk to the people sitting next to us. So, I think that broke the ice" (Rose, SWI). Not all comments were complimentary, but these were the exceptions. For example, Daniel believed that additional support from staff would have helped him excel, especially when it came to providing feedback and areas for improvement (Daniel, in-person SFG). However, the overwhelmingly positive comments illuminate the significant role that academic staff can play in nurturing belonging and bolstering self-esteem.

It was also evident that many of the student participants were happy with their lectures and excited about their learning, and that these feelings added to their sense of belonging. These positive learning experiences reinforced initial motivations and expectations of learning as transformative. In many ways, the newly acquired learning bestowed symbolic capital that would grant recognition and validation in Irish society, as exemplified here by Eva: "I'm taking my experience of what I've learned in my studies to my workplace" (Eva, SWI). Similarly, positive academic achievements were empowering and motivating. For example, Charlie shared emotionally how her recent positive exam results lessened her imposter syndrome: "I actually questioned it. I was like — surely it is a mistake" (Charlie, SWI).

Group work as part of coursework was also viewed positively and a valuable way to interact with other students: "Group study is really nice because you're reading together and explaining things together, and it helps" (Seun, in-person SFG). One participant added an alternative perspective: "Group work is very good, but I think it is going to take more effort to sustain the level of interaction within the group because when you're in classes, you get a sense of belongingness, but once you're out of class, it is gone" (Mona, in-person SFG). This latter point demonstrates profound analysis. Here, the participant recognises the utilitarian aspects of group work, while acknowledging that there are no possibilities of creating deeper social connections within this space.

4.4.4. Institutional spaces

The term “spaces” encompasses a broad range of areas across the University, including the physical and virtual environments. Early in the data-generating process, it became apparent that students had a strong affinity for what they considered their *own campus*, resulting in minimal cross-campus movement. The University has three distinct teaching campuses, and most student participants showed little awareness of or interest in locations other than their own. This sentiment is reflected in comments about the other campuses, such as: "I just passed by on the bus and saw some of them" (Andrei, SWI). "I've seen them, but not been inside it" (Eva, SWI).

While student participants described a general feeling of attachment to the institution as an entity, the majority also expressed a special affinity to their particular School building. For example, Cleopatra shared that her favourite place was the building where she was based and was grateful for access to a study space. "I love the classrooms because sometimes when we are free, we can remain in the class and do whatever discussion or group work there" (Cleopatra, SWI). Similarly, Andrei shared a preference for his primary location. "I just like this building because you can come here … and spend as much time as you want doing your homework and studies" (Andrei, SWI).

It is also worth noting that some participants had no interest or desire in getting to know the wider campus outside of their own environment. "Usually, I'm just going to the lecture room, maybe to the canteen or library and then home" (Rose, SWI). In line with this viewpoint, one of the staff members questioned the notion of belonging to a university, suggesting it may be more accurate to look at belonging to aspects of university life rather than the institution in its entirety. "Belonging to the university sounds nice, but I'm not sure people do belong to the university, rather that the university provides a world within which people work out questions of belonging and not belonging" (Joseph, staff FG). The micro-perspectives on belonging presented here reinforce this latter point, revealing a lesser sense of institutional attachment in favour of an attachment to more familiar and personal areas.

The physical environment also drew some positive comments. Some student participants expressed a sense of awe when first encountering their campus. Notably, many had not been on campus before starting their programmes due to Covid-19 restrictions. Mira shared her first impressions: "For me, I was enjoying everything and looking at the campus with glitter in my eyes" (Mira, in-person SFG). Similarly, Seun expressed disbelief at the contrast between DCU and his previous university in his home country.

> It's just so different from a campus in my country — it's all these trees and these fancy things … and all the computers. I was, oh, that's good — DCU has computers, we can use these, and they're all working! That's far from anything I would have at home. (Seun, in-person SFG)

Adding further context to these comments, many of the student participants came from countries with poor educational infrastructure, facilities and internet, thereby increasing that sense of amazement and appreciation of the on-campus environment.

In contrast to the apparent affinity for the physical on-campus spaces, two online student participants added alternative perspectives. One participant, Elena, who was in her third year, had never been physically on campus. As a mother parenting alone, without any family support in Ireland, studying online was the only option for her. She chose the University for its online programmes and inclusive principles, but felt it had not lived up to her expectations. She shared her experience of studying online:

> Sometimes I need to step back and think, am I in college, and what kind of experience am I having? And that's something that I constantly feel affects my learning in many ways. It affects my motivation because this process online is so lonely, extremely lonely. I don't think the support is the best. (Elena, online SFG)

A second online student shared a similar story of isolation in the online environment, explaining the initial discrimination he experienced the first day lingered throughout his studies: "I felt initially something wasn't right and, well, it kept going like this again, and, as time went on, I understood lots of things" (Jay, OSFG). Thus, the experience in the online space seemed to lack the sense of belonging and attachment generated by the physical environment.

While all interactions with student participants revealed insights about specific areas on campus, the walking interviews were particularly informative. These insights demonstrated a close fit between the students' individual habits and specific campus spaces. Where there were evident "disjunctures of habitus", such as the student bar (cultural barriers) or sports centre (economic barriers), students avoided these areas. Table 18 presents a brief overview of various spaces on campus, summarising how this group of students interacted with them.

Table 18: Summary of main campus spaces showing the student participants' perspectives

Spaces	Description	Student quotes
Libraries on all campuses	Referred to repeatedly as valuable and welcoming learning spaces.	"If I have a two-hour break, I go to the library". (Lexy, SWI)

Spaces	Description	Student quotes
Student Centres	Student participants were familiar with the student centre on the main campus, having used it occasionally for exams or events. Participants viewed it as a space for other students, but not necessarily for them. None of the student participants had frequented the student centre on the smaller campus.	"It's not a place that I like. I don't understand how the younger people like it so much". (Eva, SWI)
Student bar	The student bar, located on the ground floor of the main student centre, was not a place any of the student participants had frequented.	"It's my first time seeing a bar here". (Anton, SWI) or "I know it's the bar, but I've never been there before". (Cleopatra, SWI)
Canteens	Some participants felt the canteens were welcoming and fostered casual conversation. Some participants believed that they were being judged when they used lunch vouchers in the canteen, but only by certain staff. Some of the mature students felt the main canteens were noisy, opting for quieter spaces.	"I usually walk to the canteen — it's nice". (Anton, SWI) "I feel belonging everywhere except for the canteen. When we bring out the vouchers that we get for our lunch, the ladies there — they're not happy. We see different treatments". (Lexy, SWI) "They [mature students] go across to the other campus, which they find quieter and more conducive to conversation". (Charlie, SWI)
Sports Centres	None of the student participants were members of the sports centres. Some did not know about them, while some had tried to join but could not afford the membership.	"I tried to join the gym, but the price was not okay". (Eva, SWI)
Interfaith Centre and religious spaces	In general, these were not spaces the student participants frequented. Some had used them occasionally, while others did not know about them, though they would consider using the facilities now that they are aware of them.	"I didn't know there were any microwaves here, so I can actually bring my food and heat it here?" (Rose, SWI)

Spaces	Description	Student quotes
Professional services, e.g., Fees Office, Registry	These were spaces frequented on a needs basis and were generally perceived to be friendly and welcoming.	"In the University, everyone does their own thing, but if you need direction, there's always someone who's willing to help you". (Eva, SWI) "I feel a sense of belonging and inclusivity everywhere". (Jennifer, SOI)
Student Support services, e.g., The Health Centre, Counselling	The Student Support Offices were also spaces used on a needs basis, with the majority of participants finding them helpful.	"She [lecturer] linked me with student support or mature student support. And they referred me to the Student Assistance Fund, and that really, really helped. I wouldn't be here without that support". (Charlie, SWI)

In summary, when student participants mentioned feeling a sense of belonging to a place, they were generally referring to their own campus and, more specifically, their own study area. Thus, the findings draw attention to HE as a defined field, introducing the notion of fields within fields, with a greater sense of belonging felt in smaller, more familiar spaces. Overall, there was limited awareness of shared social areas, quiet spaces or walking routes. While participants did seem content to adhere to their routines, there was a degree of openness to exploring new spaces.

4.4.5. Enhancing belonging within the institution

This section presents ideas that participants felt would enhance student belonging. Throughout the interactions with staff and students, participants were asked if it was necessary to enhance belonging to the institution, and, if so, what that might entail. The responses are summarised below.

4.4.5.1. Intercultural activities

In general, participants were convinced about the need for intercultural dialogue: "More events culturally - like showing different cultures" (Isabella, staff FG). Jennifer outlined her ideas, advocating strongly for spaces to engage in intercultural dialogue to counter misinformation circulating on social media: "I think creating programmes for other people to explain their cultures — that would be great because sometimes people don't get the opportunity to have these conversations" (Jennifer, SOI). Staff also recognised the need for more cultural events. "Some of the African students told me that they go to an African

group, but they don't continue with them because there's no mixing and no sharing of cultures. So it might be an idea during the year to bring different groups together for some cultural events" (Beth, staff FG).

Participants shared ideas for more multicultural events, providing opportunities for different cultures to mix and learn from each other. As one staff member explained: "Essentially, communities aren't mixing, so we need more events culturally" (Isabella, Staff FG). Among the ideas were more fun events. For example, Mira suggested "events that integrate the different cultures, but don't include talks — talking for younger people is boring" (Mira, in-person SFG). These examples reinforce earlier points, suggesting a lack of understanding between cultures, and consequently advocate for increased awareness and understanding of diverse backgrounds.

4.4.5.2. Representation

Views about representation focused on the need for diverse groups to see their cultures, images and backgrounds embedded in the University structures and practices. Emily suggested something as simple as seeing your country's flag might help: "It's just one little extra thing to make a difference" (Emily, staff FG). In particular, Charlie believed it is essential to hear the voice of diverse student populations: "We need to establish a representation panel for inclusion, with students representing different aspects of diversity. However, representation must mean active participation" (Charlie, SWI). Additionally, she felt there should be areas on campus displaying diverse cultures "so people can visually see different backgrounds … so whatever they feel represents them is up on a wall somewhere". Cormac was equally vocal in calling for enhanced representation in the University. "The one thing that DCU lacks in terms of why people like myself feel they don't belong is representation" (Cormac, in-person SFG). These calls highlight that symbolic capital — seeing one's identity validated in physical and institutional spaces — is a crucial precursor to feeling a sense of belonging.

4.4.5.3. Outreach, orientation and mentoring

In an earlier section on accessing services and support (Section 4.3.2), participants emphasised the need for information. Similarly, when suggesting ideas for enhancing belonging, participants stressed the importance of outreach work and, in particular, the need to reassure individuals that support is available and to explain the different types of support.

There was similar agreement that orientation and transition were crucial periods for ensuring that students feel welcome and included. "All staff have a role in helping the student feel welcome, to feel that their voice matters and that their challenges matter, which is easily overlooked" (Samuel, staff FG). Some participants suggested peer mentoring during key transition phases in the student journey, emphasising that mentors should represent the diversity of the student body, as having mentors from similar backgrounds to their own was crucial.

> It would be great if first year students were brought in within that first week of Freshers' Week, and given a chance to meet final year students who studied the same course or have some connection that first years can relate to. (AJ, in-person SFG)

Another suggestion for enhancing belonging concerns targeted support. While it was acknowledged that DCU offered good support, there was a perception among some participants that the onus was on the student to access the supports, with a suggestion for a more proactive approach in how the supports are offered and delivered.

> I think it would be nice if it's organised so that they come to the students, instead of students going to them — maybe once a month or every two months, just to explain what kind of help is there because most people are maybe too busy, too ashamed or lack the courage to ask for help. (Tisha, SOI)

An additional suggestion related to clearer navigation of supports, especially when students require support across several units. For example, as Elena, who had multiple intersecting needs, explained, she would "like a more proactive offering of support, and helping the student to navigate through all the offices and support groups" (Elena, online SFG).

These ideas illustrate that enhancing and supporting belonging cannot be passive, but instead requires active and deliberate actions. In the words of Slee (2019), promoting inclusive environments means dismantling exclusion, thereby creating opportunities for positive interaction and participation. The range of intercultural activities suggested here would provide safe spaces for open and constructive dialogue. Such spaces would be ideal for creating awareness of diverse cultures and forums to understand and validate the symbolic capital of others. Furthermore, proactive outreach about information and support would help to build social and cultural capital. After all, information and support are only of value if the people who need them most know about and can access them.

4.4.6. External environment

This sub-theme captures some of the wider systemic issues that student participants felt impacted their sense of belonging in university, mainly accommodation and the impact of living in Direct Provision (DP). Across all the student participant interviews and focus groups, accommodation was the most frequently cited issue affecting their sense of belonging. Jennifer's comment mirrors that of many other participants: "Yeah, still looking for a house — every single time. I never hear from landlords" (Jennifer, SOI). It is important to note that none of the student participants lived on campus or in recognised student accommodation centres. As many had family members with them, student accommodation was not an option. Instead, they sought secure accommodation where they could establish a place to call home. The housing crisis in Ireland, coupled with their civic status, hindered their ability to find accommodation and caused significant stress. Some, like Daniel, felt powerless when it came to finding accommodation: "There is nothing you can do, you're powerless. When you're in a position where you don't hold the power anymore — it's really depressing" (Daniel, in-person SFG). Others, like Charlie, struggled with discrimination, especially in relation to the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): "There are ongoing issues with HAP … I know landlords can get in trouble now for discriminating, but how can you prove that they turned you down based on the fact that you're on HAP?" (Charlie, SWI).

Students living in DP faced even greater challenges, frequently making them feel stigmatised and insecure. Jennifer feared other students would find out where she lives: "Accommodation influences belonging a lot because even if I don't have to share these things, at the back of my head, I know, my circumstances are way different to the people I am with" (Jennifer, SOI). Similarly, Daniel associated his feelings of insecurity with DP: "It feels like everyone's looking down on you because they don't feel like you deserve that [education] because you are from nowhere … and [you are] coming from the system [DP] itself" (Daniel, in-person SFG). Lexy added an alternative perspective on life in DP:

> The way I feel at home and the way I feel on campus is different. It's very different. At home, you are an asylum seeker — you are not an individual. You are not a person. You are regarded as a group … I feel living in Direct Provision overshadows everything. (Lexy, SWI)

The student participants shared many other challenges related to DP that created belonging uncertainty, including the constant fear of eviction and ending up homeless, the struggle to make and maintain friendships, internal and external to the DP centre, and the inequality and discrimination they felt because of their treatment by the management of the centre. All of these issues merit further attention, especially as they

profoundly impact belongingness, but are outside the scope of this study. However, two issues, study facilities and travel, deserve specific mention because they directly impact belonging in university. Without exception, all the student participants living in DP (seven were currently living in DP, while another six participants had previously lived in DP) spoke about the challenge of trying to study in noisy environments, with poor and intermittent Wi-Fi and sometimes having to share a room with people on different timetables and work schedules.

> It is difficult, especially when you have an assignment, and you want to do it at a late time, and the study room is full, and you struggle to do it. And having to share a room with three different people — some are working and some are students. (Eva, SWI)

While it was acknowledged that transport is an issue for all commuting students, an additional issue for students in DP is the lack of choice, as accommodation is assigned and residents do not have the freedom to move closer to the University or to placement. "I hope I find a house in Dublin because of the travel" (Lexy, SWI).

In summary, accommodation emerged as a significant stress factor for all the student participants. For many, the uncertainty and cost associated with accommodation impacted their college life on a daily basis and profoundly affected their sense of belonging to the institution. Although they felt welcome in the University, insecurity about accommodation was a constant cause for concern, hindering their ability to engage fully in their studies. The many examples shared by the student participants highlighted the challenge of compartmentalising different aspects of their lives, and the inevitable blurring of boundaries between the internal institutional experience and the wider environment.

4.4.7. Conclusion

Overall, the findings in this theme provide many concrete examples of the institution as a place of inclusion and support, and a place of safety in the midst of a turbulent external environment. The student participants' lived experiences indicate where and how belonging takes place in the University, including points of attachment, the degree of social connection resulting from social and academic engagement, and the impact of the external environment on belonging. The repeated references to coming on campus each day and feeling safe highlight the importance of safe spaces for students, especially for those students who are navigating a myriad of external barriers on a daily basis. However, the findings also pinpoint areas for improvement, including dismantling exclusion and fostering opportunities for intercultural exchanges.

This chapter presented three themes generated during the research process: 1) understanding belonging; 2) belonging and the person; and 3) institutional belonging. Collectively, these address the research questions, showcasing the multiple, complex perspectives of belonging for the students who participated in this study. The first theme highlighted the complexity of belonging and introduced the inclusion-belonging nexus. The second theme revealed the individuality of the participants, while showcasing how their individual perspectives and realities impact their sense of belonging. The third theme focused on the institutional context, illuminating how culture, engagement and spaces can foster or hinder belongingness.

The findings revealed four commonalities across all the responses: emotional, temporal, spatial, and personal. Furthermore, the interrogation and analysis process generated five dimensions (which are now named personal, social, spatial, protective, and civic) specific to the study's participants. While these dimensions align to some degree with existing analytical frameworks for belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010b), the study highlights insightful perspectives relative to this study group. The dimensions also resonate with Bourdieu's concept of domination and positioning within the field. The next chapter develops these dimensions, structuring them within a coherent model. This chapter draws to a close by presenting a copy of the final conceptual framework for the study (Figure 24). The refined draft builds on the initial conceptual framework outlined in Section 2.7 (Figure 2), demonstrating the iterative nature of the research process and highlighting the explicit connections between the raw data, the analytical stages, and the theoretical framework.

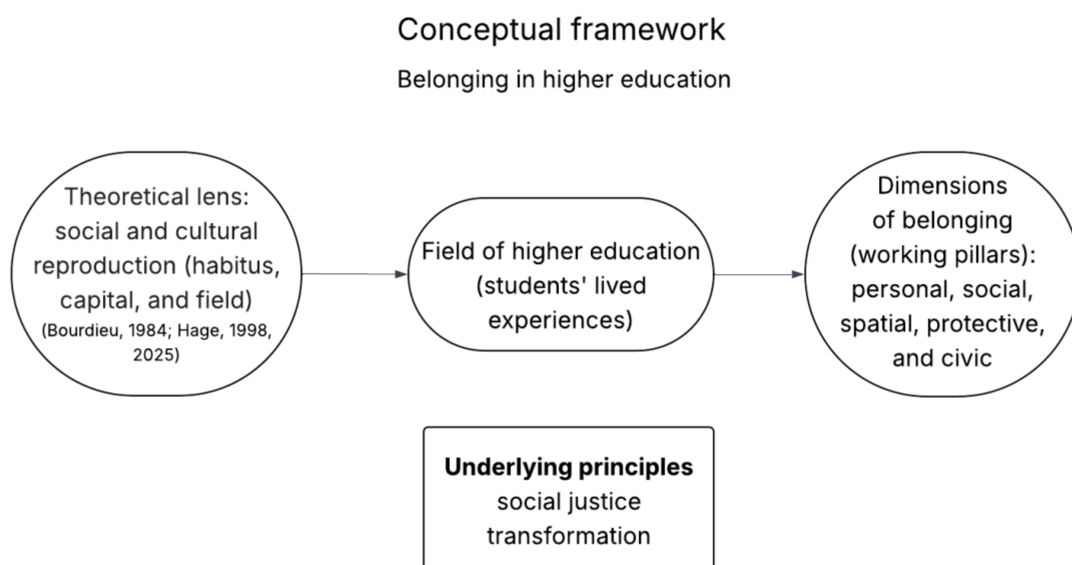

Figure 24: The study's final conceptual framework

The discussion that follows interrogates the findings vis-à-vis the literature and the theoretical framework guiding this study to inform the key ideas emerging from the research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study investigated the experiences of belonging in higher education of ethnic minority students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings were analysed according to three major themes: understanding belonging, belonging and the person, and institutional belonging. The following discussion considers five elements:

- The pillars of belonging
- Security: the foundational imperative for belonging
- A clash of habitus: a focus on the person
- The institutional field
- Institutional agency: transforming the field

5.1. The pillars of belonging

Early in the research process, it became apparent that exploring belonging in a HE context would be futile without first establishing a general overview of the concept. Thus, understanding belonging from the participants' perspectives emerged as critical to the study. At a superficial level, the words and phrases used by the participants to describe belonging echoed those repeated throughout the literature, such as "accepted", "rooted", "being part of something" or "feeling at home" (Antonsich, 2010b; Allen *et al.*, 2021, 2024). However, following a deeper exploration, the responses became far more nuanced. For example, for student participants who had fled their countries of origin because of war and fear, belonging was primarily about feeling safe and secure. Other descriptions included the freedom to make decisions about their lives, to speak freely, to be treated equally, or to be valued as a person. Such rich descriptions alluded to the complex interplay between individual dispositions and the social structures that shape their sense of place and acceptance, echoing broader sociological perspectives such as Bourdieu's (1984) conceptual tools and Yuval-Davis's (2006) work on social positioning. While these findings reinforce the deeply personal nature of belonging, they also highlight the challenge of applying generalised concepts to a highly diverse group.

The findings generated from the analysis were critically examined in light of existing analytical belonging frameworks (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010b) and are displayed in a new, synthesised model, which I have chosen to call the ***pillars of belonging.*** This model is specific to this study's student participants, and demonstrates that belonging is dynamic, multi-dimensional and complex (May, 2011; Ahn, 2017).

Based on the research, this enhanced understanding emphasises belonging as a deeply personal feeling — a feeling of being fully oneself without fear, judgement, or discrimination. It involves feeling connected, supported, recognised, valued, safe and secure in any interaction, regardless of where it occurs. Findings from this research suggest that belonging has five core pillars that capture the essence of the concept:

- **Personal**: reflects the desire to be one's authentic self, without feeling the need to modify or transform identity.
- **Social**: creating meaningful relationships, especially with peers and staff
- **Spatial**: feeling rooted and comfortable, not only in the physical and virtual institutional environment, but in the wider catchment area where students reside.
- **Protective**: a fundamental sense of safety, freedom from harm and fear, and protection of rights
- **Civic**: feeling valued and recognised within the HE field, including equal treatment and equity of access to services and supports.

The model frames the five pillars around a central hub, enveloped by emotion and dynamism (see Figure 25). While I refer to them as pillars, they could equally be called dimensions or components. This graphic indicates that emotion and dynamism are not separate pillars, but rather integral, pervasive elements common to all dimensions of belonging. The development of the five pillars arising from this study is a critical contribution to knowledge as it provides a coherent structure for an otherwise disparate concept. The new structure incorporates the findings from this study with:

- Yuval-Davis's (2006) two-level framework (belonging and the politics of belonging, with a focus on social positioning)
- Antonsich's (2010) two-level framework (belonging as personal and intimately linked to place-belongingness, and the politics of belonging, including a socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion dimension)
- Dromgold-Sermen's (2022) proposal to include secure belonging as a dimension of belonging.

Furthermore, in analysing existing definitions and conceptualisations of belonging, it takes on board Dromgold-Sermen's (2022) advice by developing a more nuanced model for studying belonging among a specific target group.

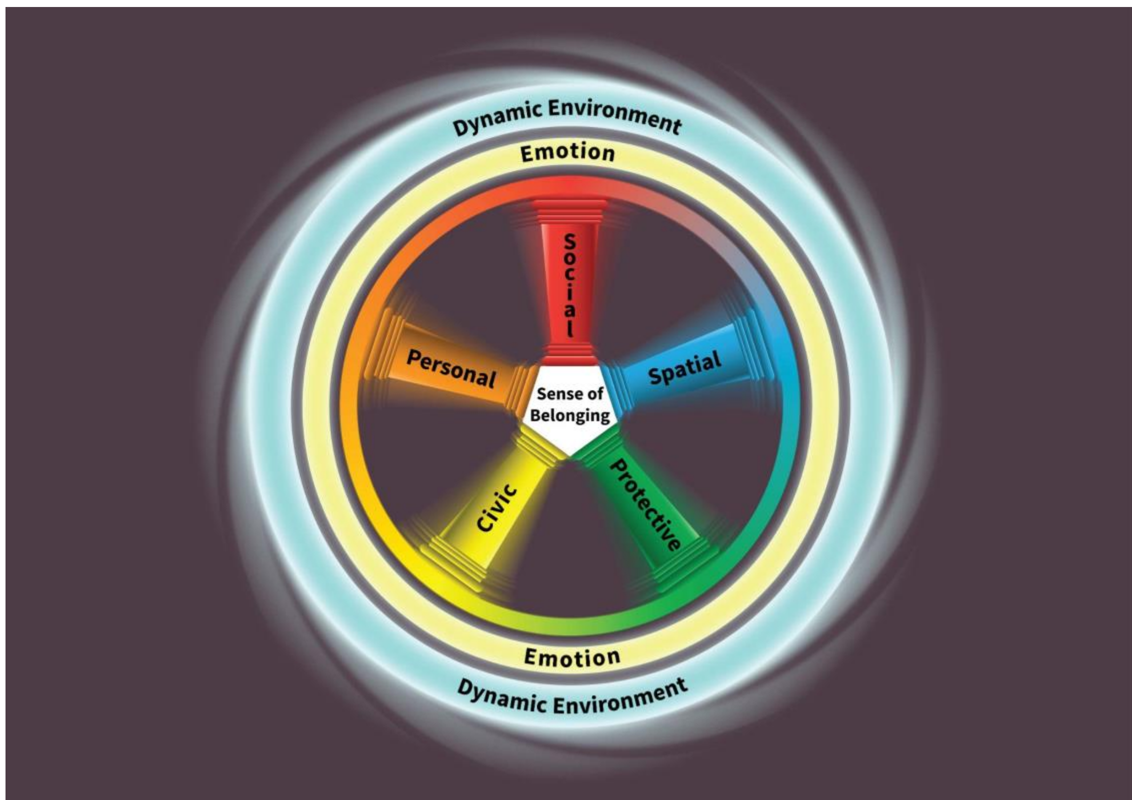

Figure 25: The five pillars of belonging, enveloped in emotion and always dynamic

As no comparable research is available for the specific student profile of this study, it is difficult to state definitively how the five pillars align with previous studies. However, the model aligns closely with existing dimensions across the personal (Antonsich, 2010b), social (Pollini, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006; May, 2011), place (Antonsich, 2010b, 2010a), civic (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010b; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2018), and secure (Dromgold-Sermen, 2022) dimensions of belonging. Crucially, this research builds on these existing, disparate dimensions by structuring them into a coherent, interrelated framework and by explicitly recognising the emotional and dynamic nature of the concept as enveloping elements. This is especially important as previous studies lack clarity regarding the emotional component; for example, Antonsich links emotion only with place belonging, omitting it from civic belonging. These pillars provide the essential lens through which the remaining sub-themes in this chapter are interrogated. Moreover, the pillars challenge the institution to dispense with the use of belonging as an umbrella term, and instead to consider the intricacies in the concept, particularly for this student group.

5.2. Protective: the foundational imperative for belonging

This section focuses primarily on the protective pillar of the framework, arguing that safety, security, and stability are non-negotiable foundations for this student group. The findings in this study mirror those of Dromgold-Sermen; although conducted in a different country and context, her participants also believed safety and security were crucial to belonging (Dromgold-Sermen, 2022). Similarly, the findings here also highlighted safety and security as crucial to belonging, though the terms are often used interchangeably. For the student participants who had experienced conflict or displacement, safety was generally related to the internal feeling of being protected. From an external, structural perspective, security encompassed knowing one is protected by the state's legal and physical systems, while the personal aspect involved the freedom to be oneself without fear of harassment or discrimination, including the freedom to voice opinions, not only in enclosed environments but also in public spaces. Crucially, the empirical data strongly supports a hierarchical view of belonging, consistent with psychological frameworks like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), where fundamental safety needs must be addressed before individuals can effectively pursue higher-order needs like belonging.

The findings related to secure belonging suggest that while the majority of the student participants acknowledged a degree of safety provided by the University environment, many respondents repeatedly expressed concern about fundamental security and stability issues, especially outside of the institution. Importantly, insights about security were strongly intertwined with accommodation, or rather the lack of secure accommodation, echoing the close association between place belonging and secure belonging as evidenced in other studies (Kearns *et al.*, 2000; Antonsich, 2010b; Blunt and Sheringham, 2019). Many of the student participants worried about being evicted from their accommodation and subsequently becoming homeless or being moved outside the commuter catchment area of the institution, causing them to drop out of HE. Furthermore, the findings emphasised how concerns about financial stability, residency permissions, and long-term integration generated overwhelming anxiety.

These structural fears clearly hindered the students' ability to feel secure and fully embrace the student journey and, consequently, their sense of belonging. The uncertainty about accommodation, residency status, prospects for employment and long-term integration contrasted sharply with their relative safety within the institutional boundaries. This dynamic of the institution as a temporary secure haven against a turbulent external environment provides valuable insight into unbelonging and non-

belonging (Ahmed, 2020; Butler, 2021). Unbelonging here is not just a lack of feeling belonging, but an active structural exclusion exacerbated by the uncertainty around accommodation that denies them the stability required to belong. Feelings of insecurity fuel belonging uncertainty (Yuval-Davis, 2006) and consequently impact achievement, health, confidence and motivation (Allen and Bowles, 2012; Healey and Stroman, 2021).

Given that physical, financial and legal security are non-negotiable foundations for belonging, especially for students with experience of conflict or displacement, it is clear that concerns about physical and emotional security must be addressed before students engage academically or socially. Furthermore, addressing such concerns in the HE environment would require the support and understanding of trained and empathetic staff.

5.3. A clash of habitus: a focus on the person

This section applies a person-centred perspective to analyse the findings through the pillars of belonging framework, exploring the challenge for an individual's habitus in an unfamiliar field. Here, the personal, social, and civic pillars are used as a lens to contextualise the findings and align them with existing literature.

5.3.1. The personal pillar

The participants' descriptions of belonging as a personal feeling resonated with the myriad studies referring to it as emotional and subjective. Their responses also align with research indicating that when a person experiences a positive sense of belonging, such as acceptance and recognition — this generates feelings of contentment and happiness (Myers and Diener, 2018; Healey and Stroman, 2021). In contrast, feelings of exclusion, such as feeling like an outsider or outcast, also confirmed previous research findings (Slepian and Jacoby-Senghor, 2021; Jackson, Harvey and Sherman, 2023). Insights into the personal pillar identified two recurring themes relevant to this student group: authenticity (freedom to be oneself), and recognition (being valued and recognised without judgement or discrimination). Findings related to authenticity indicated that the freedom to be one's authentic self was integral to belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2024). These findings validated existing research and resonated strongly with social justice principles, particularly the opportunity to be seen, listened to and heard without the need to modify or transform identity or behaviour. While the emphasis on belonging as personal is not new, previous frameworks have not named 'personal' as a distinct dimension; instead, it has been subsumed into other dimensions. For instance,

Antonsich (2010b) suggests that place belonging is strongly linked to personal and social relationships. Given the emphasis placed on authenticity, its status as a distinct pillar is merited.

This personal pillar was particularly poignant for the student participants, as many shared feelings of inadequacy compared to the dominant student group, whom they perceived as the white Irish. Such feelings align with research showing that marginalised students frequently experience doubt and imposter syndrome in broader social groups (Keane, 2011b; Larsen and James, 2022; Jackson, Harvey and Sherman, 2023). This struggle to reconcile their established personal and cultural dispositions with dominant expectations of the HE environment manifests as a disjuncture of habitus (Reay, 2004). Furthermore, the students' experience resonates with deficit thinking (Keane, 2011a; Reay, 2012) and social positioning (Yuval-Davis, 2006) theory, suggesting deliberate attempts at marginalisation, including placing responsibility for change on the student.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the findings demonstrate a clash of habitus as participants seek to adjust to the HE field. For this student group, the intensity of the adjustment brings an added layer of complexity, encompassing the transnational experience and the subsequent tension of merging dual dispositions (Guarnizo, 1997). Despite these challenges, the students clearly articulate their lack of interest in any degree of assimilation (Hage, 1998), asserting their desire for recognition and cultural validation. Such direct and powerful assertions place a direct responsibility on institutions to make a seismic shift — one that places the student at the centre and forces structural and cultural change.

5.3.2. The social pillar

While previous research highlighted the significance of relationships to belonging (Pollini, 2005; May, 2011; Ahn, 2017), the responses also highlighted a nuanced complexity not previously documented in the literature, including what social engagement meant to this group of students (see Section 4.4.2). Insights on social interactions provided real-life scenarios of navigating social, cultural and symbolic capital within the HE field, in particular, how social connections are prioritised in terms of time and energy allocation. The findings also illuminated a complex interconnection between social, protective and spatial belongingness, particularly regarding the dynamics and challenges of building social networks while living in precarious accommodation such as DP. Such challenges were further reinforced with a fear and reluctance to disclose personal information about one's background, worries about residency status, maintaining connections to family and friends in their countries of

origin, and navigating the disjunctures of habitus (Reay, 2004) characterised by dual dispositions and cultural clashes (Guarnizo, 1997).

In line with other studies (e.g., Freeman, Anderman and Jensen, 2007; Ahn and Davis, 2020b, 2020a), the responses indicated that the students appreciated various social connections and recognised the value of social networking and the accumulation of social capital. However, they expressed firm views about the connections important to them, ranging from a few close contacts to wider social networks. Thus, building social capital appeared driven by personality rather than other identity characteristics, with one student admitting he was not a social person and therefore did not need many friends. Among the many factors influencing the quality of a relationship was where the interaction took place, be it in a physical environment or online, suggesting a strong correlation between place, relationships and belonging. Given the dynamic and context-driven nature of social belonging, investing in physical, social "hang-out" spaces is essential.

Mirroring similar trends in other studies (Keane, 2011b; Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023), there was substantial evidence suggesting that 'having something in common' was essential for positive social connections, thus explaining the emergence of cliques and distancing in class groups. While these previous studies demonstrate a tendency for similar student profiles to form small groups or cliques, the findings here revealed a deliberate choice by the dominant class members to exclude. Reflecting homophilic behaviour, the exclusion criteria were based on a perceived degree of likeness (Dunne, 2009; Keane, 2011b), with the dominant group assuming the role of untrained border guards, determining who was in and out of such groups. Such behaviour reinforces Hage's (1998) notion of governmental and passive belonging, with students who perceived a strong sense of national belonging feeling entitled to make decisions about group composition.

While Keane's (2011b) research provided valuable insights into the class-differentiated behaviours of middle- and working-class students within the socio-relational arena, this study revealed the added complexity of intersectional identities. Frequent references to specific student groups such as "Irish students", "ethnic minority students born in Ireland, "ethnic minority students born outside of Ireland", "mature students", and "younger students" amplified the notion of subgroups within classes and gave the impression that, consciously or unconsciously, students were assigned to groups depending on several intersecting physical, linguistic and cultural differences. In contrast to a general trend among younger students to prioritise social activities (Scanlon *et al.*, 2020), the findings

here aligned with studies showing that mature students or students with caring responsibilities (Keane, 2011b; Thomas, 2015) are less likely to engage in formal or informal socialising after lectures. In many cases, students' current circumstances prevented them from participating in activities despite their desire to engage, opting instead to allocate the time available to their families and studies. Additionally, there were cultural and logistical considerations, such as the prominence of drinking culture among "Irish students" or the time required to travel between campuses to attend social activities. Having noted the limitations of social networking, many participants were keen to acknowledge the valuable role of clubs and societies in promoting social integration as well as the variety of clubs available, especially special-interest groups such as the LGBTA Society and the Islamic Society. It was generally recognised that the existence of these groups contributed to a sense of belonging, even if the student participants themselves were not members.

These findings highlight changing trends in social engagement and the significance of shorter periods of informal social interaction during group work, between lectures or over lunch. Also, the increased variation in student profiles and modes of study, such as online, part-time, mature and commuting students, prompts questions about social connectedness, including where and how it is fostered. The findings also raise questions about the institution's role in promoting social connections vis-à-vis student agency and responsibility for making connections.

Clearly, students recognise the merits of social capital and want to generate it for themselves. Furthermore, there is ample evidence demonstrating the link between engagement, belonging and retention (Thomas, 2012). This suggests the need for institutions to look beyond traditional forms of social integration (often delivered by clubs and societies and aimed at younger demographics) and to explore informal, shorter networking opportunities. These opportunities should be integrated not only into the physical setting but also through devising effective ways to foster connection in the online learning environment.

5.3.3. The civic pillar

As most of the participants had arrived in Ireland as refugees or IPAs, civic belonging was a sensitive topic. They were keenly aware that their residency status and other factors, such as ethnicity and financial instability, impacted their social positioning (Yuval-Davis, 2006) and, thus, their sense of belonging. Mirroring other recent research conducted in an Irish context (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023), the findings revealed the

marginalisation, discrimination, isolation and exclusion they frequently experienced as migrants, refugees or IPAs. Securing access to HE was a significant determinant in reducing feelings of marginalisation and discrimination. At the same time, subsequent challenges (e.g., finance, accommodation, transport) could reignite those feelings. Achieving a qualification was seen as a way to affirm recognition and support access to employment, thereby offering enhanced life choices. From a Bourdieusian perspective, securing a HE qualification would enhance symbolic capital and support the accumulation of national belonging.

Revelations about residency status were woven into the participants' responses. There was general agreement that acquiring citizenship brought an improvement in rights and entitlements and thus enhanced civic belonging. Until citizenship was granted, there was a constant sense of not fully belonging (Bryan, 2009; Butler, 2021), a sense that echoed many previous studies (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010b; Ahmed, 2020). This would indicate a clear link between citizenship acquisition and enhanced belongingness.

In tandem with discussions about residency status, there were strong assertions about the need for equality and the elimination of unjust practices. Fostering belonging, as with inclusion, involves challenging and addressing unbelonging and exclusion (Slee, 2019; Butler, 2021). Echoing other studies, racism emerged as a recurring theme, both internal and external to the University. (Kavanagh and McGuirk, 2021). From the perspective of this study, the diverging viewpoints about racism were particularly insightful, ranging from no experience of racism to blatant examples of it. In line with other studies (Brunton *et al.*, 2019; Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023), students gave examples of hiding information about their backgrounds for fear of further exclusion, particularly any reference to being in the asylum process. There was a strong sense that students felt the onus was placed on them to develop resilience and overcome discriminatory practices. This highlights the necessity that such microaggressions and stereotyping cease, as the findings included both subtle microaggressions and blatant examples of racism and discrimination.

Such exclusionary practices highlight the urgency and necessity of those critical conversations referenced in the findings and the literature. Dialogical practice is integral to a socially just environment, creating space to share and understand one another's perspectives. Therefore, it is clear that change requires action, and even if a particular change seems menial, it could yield positive results (May, 2011; Kavanagh, Waldron and Mallon, 2021). While it is heartening that HE institutions are tasked with developing Race Equality Action Plans, it is imperative that these become living documents, with a corresponding plan to monitor and evaluate their impact.

Furthermore, insights from some participant discussions highlighted the lack of integration into Irish society, even with citizenship, the prevalence of racism in the community, and a perceived unwillingness by Irish people to embrace diversity. Such concerns align with Bryan's sentiments (2009) about citizenship, namely that naturalisation reduces feelings of marginalisation, discrimination, isolation and exclusion. While citizenship is desired, it will not grant automatic inclusion and acceptance in Irish society. Something more is needed, particularly democratic spaces for critical dialogue and opportunities for education and awareness-raising about different cultures. Many students indicated that they had come to Ireland alone or as a nuclear family. They faced isolation in two dimensions: lacking an extended family network (with limited options for reunification due to a lack of civic status), and lacking connections into the immediate and wider community. Insecurity about status hindered social connections as many participants believed they were judged because of links to the asylum process and other identity factors like culture and language.

Such insights highlighted the necessity to establish strong supportive networks within the HE environment. Examples of such networks include spaces for ethnic minorities to meet and share experiences in small supportive groups, or wider networks with strong allyship willing to challenge and address structural and systemic barriers. Civic belonging relates not only to issues of citizenship but also to persisting discriminatory practices and judgements about who belongs and who does not. The findings here confirm that insecurities about civic belonging profoundly affect the overall sense of belonging among the student participants. Change requires challenging unjust practices, raising awareness about cultural diversity, and delivering intercultural and anti-racism training for staff and students.

5.3.4. Conclusion

This sub-theme used the personal, social and civic pillars of the analytical framework to examine the person-centred nature of the findings in light of relevant literature. In categorising the student participants as a NAP subgroup (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022), namely, ethnic minority SED students, one might assume that members would exhibit homogeneity, but the findings revealed each student's unique background, culture, experiences and memories. This individuality was mirrored in how students interpreted and explained their understanding of belonging. The findings are in line with a recent study indicating a tendency to link belonging to outdated views of homogeneous student groups, who are marginalised and "othered" because they lack the cultural and social capital of dominant groups (Graham and Moir, 2022). In addition to emphasising the

person-centred nature of belonging, the findings demonstrated how intersectional identities shape one's social positioning within the HE field, thereby underscoring the need for a range of flexible and targeted support for this student group.

Much of the existing evidence on belonging in HE points to the significance of engagement in fostering a sense of belonging and attributes student retention and success to that feeling. However, the student participants in this study appear to be an anomaly. For them, social engagement was not a priority, and the lack of engagement had no apparent impact on retention or success. Instead, despite numerous challenges and barriers, the students displayed determination, resilience and motivation to complete their studies. Such ambition and drive were fuelled by the lack of options available to them and a belief that a qualification would enhance their life chances and offer them a brighter future. The unique set of student drivers (determination, ambition) contrasts sharply with the expected institutional drivers (social engagement, cultural capital acquisition), indicating the potential for a habitus clash as students seek to find their "social being" within the HE field.

5.4. The institutional field

This sub-theme contextualises the findings related to place-belongingness, focusing on the institutional field and its role in fostering feelings of belonging and inclusion. The findings clearly highlight the multi-layered nature of the HE field, ranging from the wider institutional landscape to smaller sub-fields like faculties, schools and programmes. The sections here include the spatial pillar, the belonging-inclusion nexus, from theory to practice, and the external environment.

5.4.1. The spatial pillar

This section focuses on the dimension of belonging associated with a place — that innate need to feel "rooted" or "at home" in a place. In contrast to the cosy, comfortable feeling that images of home often trigger, the findings here revealed vivid insights into life in a "no-man's land", with many of the students expressing an overwhelming sense of urgency and desperation to find a place to call home. This urgency existed despite their strong emotional connection to their countries of origin. While many had settled in Ireland and felt they belonged here, they also spoke of a persistent spatial connection (Massey, 1994; Ugba, 2011) that would always link them to the physical places or family members they had left behind. The findings resonated with other research on migration (Ahmed, 2007; Vieten and Yuval-Davis, 2018) and the struggle between belonging and not belonging as students navigated borders and boundaries. The students' narratives

provided vivid reinforcement of the inherent yearning to feel rooted and attached to a physical place, or a community — somewhere to call home. These yearnings echo Antonsich's research on place belongingness (Antonsich, 2010b, 2010a), particularly the strong emotional ties linked to place.

Findings here suggest that most student participants felt some degree of belonging to the University, although, on closer examination, the concept of 'university' appeared somewhat elusive. With the exception of a few (mainly students pursuing online courses), participants expressed a strong sense of attachment to their own school buildings, programmes and class groups. Since little evidence supports a positive correlation between belonging in individual classes and wider university belonging (Freeman, Anderman and Jensen, 2007), we cannot assume that students who felt an attachment to their school buildings transferred this attachment to the University as an entity. Furthermore, the findings revealed that even students who developed positive social connections within the class showed little or no desire to extend these connections beyond the classroom. The findings raise questions about the notion of belonging to the institution as an entity, pointing to a distinct preference among many of the student participants to foster connections and a sense of belonging within smaller groups and specific settings.

In general, responses linked institutional belonging with four key identifying factors: the physical space, the social space, the academic space, and access to support and services. The physical space, as noted previously, was related to campus spaces and facilities. In particular, the findings highlighted the importance of study spaces for the students who lacked access to study facilities at home. Whether in the library, the computer lab or empty classrooms, these spaces were recognised as essential study facilities, with access to such resources fostering a sense of support and belonging. Clearly, when some participants spoke about a sense of place, they were referring to a physical space on campus. At other times, place-belongingness was characterised by the social connections within it. For example, chatting with friends and classmates over lunch provided a deep sense of connection, with students seeking out places conducive to social interaction or group work. Finally, while the academic space was viewed as an ideal arena for fostering connection, the potential for interaction was not maximised. Frequently, the quality of relationships developed within academic spaces depended on individual staff members, class sizes, class dynamics and the time allocated to group work and class interactions.

In addition to physical, academic, and social spaces, there was unanimous agreement that access to services and support was critical to a sense of belonging. While the students acknowledged and appreciated the range of supports available to them, some found navigating the support or finding one person who could address their multiple concerns difficult and often frustrating. Furthermore, the findings gave no indication that the institution provided coherent support that recognised or addressed their complex intersectional identities. This latter finding supports Crenshaw's (1991) warning about the consequences and limitations of considering only one identity while failing to consider the complexities of intersectionality.

It is important to note here that being a student may only be a fraction of an individual's identity and some may even decide not to identify as a university student (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). Furthermore, students' sense of attachment to the university is profoundly impacted by their living arrangements, with students who live off campus often feeling marginalised from peers and, thus, in a lower position (Thomas, 2002). Therefore, examining belonging in HE is further complicated by the challenge of defining the HE field and the probability that there are other social spaces, such as accommodation, impacting student belonging.

The findings in this study depart markedly from previous studies examining belonging in HE, which generally highlighted the significance of positive surroundings for fostering a sense of belonging (Ahn, 2017; Ahn and Davis, 2020a). In Ahn's (2017) study, positive comments about locational references, such as living spaces and geographical areas, implied that students felt connected to these spaces. In contrast, the responses here repeatedly indicated how issues with accommodation, particularly life in DP centres, hindered a sense of belonging. Although the institution made them feel welcome and supported, worries about the external environment prevented them from fully benefitting from the sense of belonging offered through the University environment.

This significant finding highlights a disconnect between a vision for an inclusive education environment and the corresponding lack of support outside the confines of what is considered the institutional remit. The contrasting images of on/off-campus support raise questions about compartmentalising support and the institution's role, if any, in assisting students with broader personal issues, such as seeking accommodation, supporting students who find themselves homeless, or providing alternative options for students who, for various reasons, cannot study at home. This dynamic draws attention to the significance of pre-existing social capital (Ahn, 2017) for people who can tap into extensive social connections to gain privileged access to

information, knowledge, and support. How then does an institution create an inclusive environment rooted in equity and fairness?

5.4.2. The belonging-inclusion nexus

Belonging and inclusion are frequently blurred in the research literature, a confusion that is particularly problematic in higher education (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017; Kovač and Vaala, 2021). While this study's participants often used the terms interchangeably, the findings ultimately provided valuable insights into how they compared and contrasted the two concepts. Consistent with existing theory, the data clearly showed belonging as a profoundly emotional experience (Antonsich, 2010b, 2010a; Allen *et al.*, 2021, 2024), influenced by various factors in daily interactions. Likewise, insights into inclusion align with its established ideological and moral perspectives (Evans and Lunt, 2002; Healey and Stroman, 2021; Kovač and Vaala, 2021). Although the interweaving of belonging and inclusion is complex, clarifying the relationship is a difficult but necessary step to be able to draw a logical conclusion for this discussion.

From an institutional perspective, Kovač and Vaala (2021) argue that using the terms belonging and inclusion interchangeably has significant implications for planning and delivering support services, as this lack of clarity can lead to staff developing their own interpretations. Therefore, they suggest viewing them as distinct terms. From a policy perspective, inclusion refers to the principled ideological intent and the support offered to individual students who need it (Evans and Lunt, 2002) — the findings in this study aligned with this understanding of inclusion. For participants, inclusion was essentially about group dynamics, with most responses defining it as how others treat a person in group settings. However, some participants were eager to stress the reciprocal nature of group dynamics, adding that it is also how one treats others. Belonging considers the emotional element, i.e., what a particular student feels as a consequence of inclusive practice (Larsen and James, 2022). The responses convincingly evidenced the person-centred nature of belonging, reflecting the emotional thread enveloping all five pillars.

For this study, the challenge lies in clarifying the belonging-inclusion nexus. While viewing belonging as the "heart of inclusion" (Kovač and Vaala, 2021, p. 1212) is not in contention, placing inclusion on a pedestal may disregard belonging's inherent potential and complexities to guide and inform inclusion. While there is an argument for viewing both concepts separately, the findings here favour an alternative approach that focuses on outcomes rather than terminology. This involves minimising analysis of the terms and

placing greater focus on how the two concepts work together to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging. Whether a student views belonging and inclusion as similar, believes belonging is necessary for inclusion or sees inclusion as a prerequisite of belonging is not the crux of the issue. It is far more critical that decisions about belonging and inclusion result in positive student experiences, promoting success (Jarvis, 2018; Healey and Stroman, 2021) and opportunities to thrive (Thomas, 2012). From a strategic and policy perspective, unravelling belonging and inclusion seems relevant and logical, but the differences appear less critical in more everyday practical scenarios. Though the findings did not provide definite answers to the belonging-inclusion debate, this research suggests a symbiotic relationship between the two concepts, with each nourishing the other and benefiting the student community. Figure 26 illustrates the belonging-inclusion nexus.

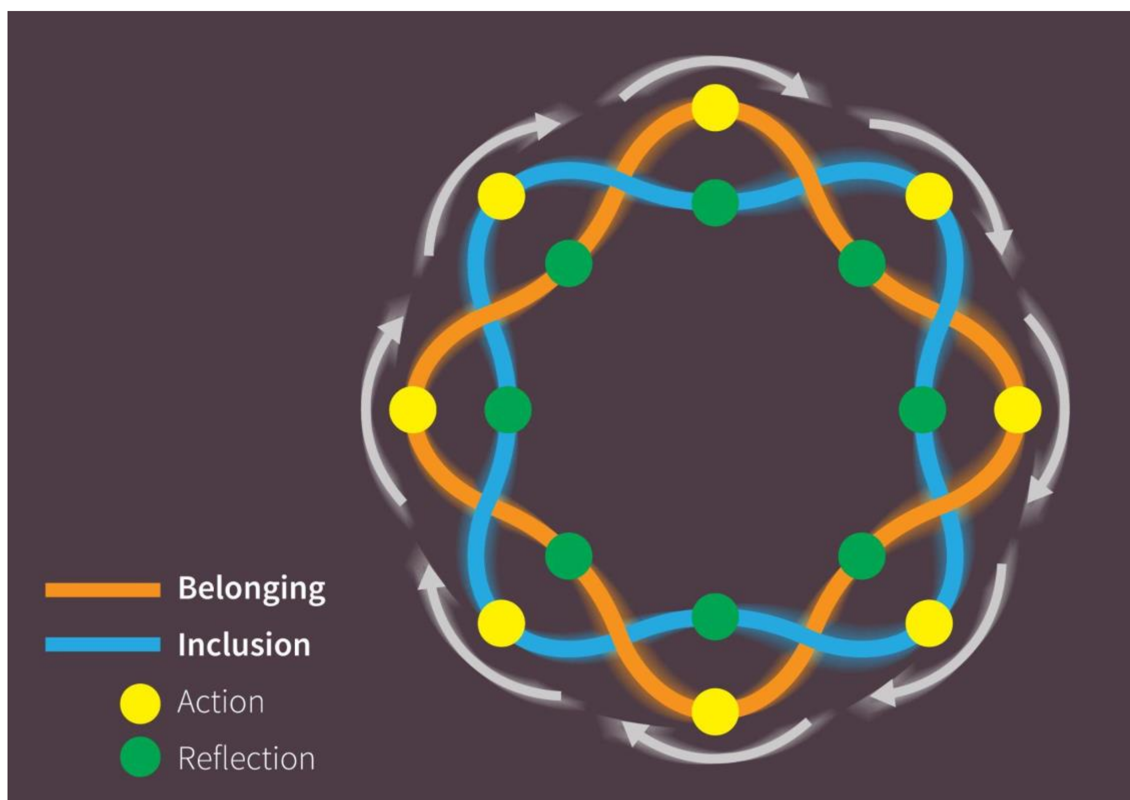

Figure 26: The belonging-inclusion nexus

Each concept weaves around the other, with action and reflection taking place in both spaces, leading to positive reinforcement of both. Ideally, this action and reflection process would involve students and staff collaborating in the design, delivery and evaluation of actions. Given that a praxis conceptualisation aligns with a social justice ethos (Freire, 1972; King, Travers and McGowan, 2021), it is crucial to incorporate this

cyclical action-reflection process into policy and practice. The successful implementation of the nexus relies not on the number of actions, but rather on the ability to review and revise actions based on reflective practices. While both concepts can be theoretically separated, their practical implementation dictates a symbiotic relationship: inclusive actions are the structural and strategic commitments that allow the emotional experience of belongingness to flourish.

Although students appeared confident when discussing belonging versus inclusion, considering the dynamic and evolving nature of belonging (Antonsich, 2010b, 2010a; Ahmed, 2020), these perspectives are subject to change depending on external circumstances. Thus, rather than view the inclusion-belonging interconnection as fixed, it is best understood as fluid and adaptive. For this to happen, inclusion cannot be merely performative language in institutional policies, strategies and reports (Butler, 2021; Peterson *et al.*, 2023), but must be a dynamic concept that is continually implemented and reviewed. Likewise, belonging cannot be relegated to a mechanical, box-ticking exercise but instead elevated to what the participants described as “meaningful belonging” — a dynamic concept that aligns closely with inclusion ideology by recognising and valuing differences in a manner that is ongoing and reflective (Hughes, 2007; Butler, 2021; Larsen and James, 2022). While the symbiosis between belonging and inclusion offers a theoretical solution to the terminology dilemma, teasing out the practicalities is crucial and provides valuable learning for this study. Having acquired a deeper understanding of these concepts, the challenge lies in applying the theoretical understanding within the institutional field.

5.4.3. From theory to practice

The findings show the centrality of inclusion for fostering belonging, thus supporting the notion of belonging as a key component of inclusion (Kovač and Vaala, 2021). Furthermore, the findings suggest that inclusion requires a whole-of-institution approach, thereby aligning with similar outcomes from other studies (Kelly, Padden and Fleming, 2023). Figure 27 illustrates the features of an inclusive institution where difference is recognised and valued, and structures facilitate and foster a sense of belonging. Adopting a whole-of-institution approach to inclusion makes it everyone’s responsibility, requiring a top-down and bottom-up commitment.

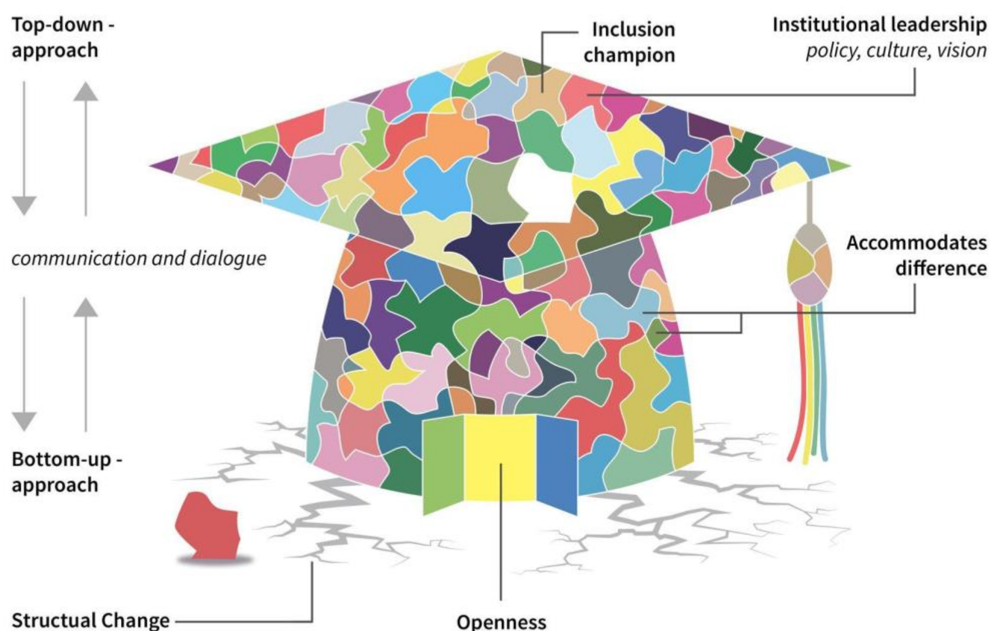

Figure 27: Features of an inclusive institution

5.4.4. A top-down approach to belonging and inclusion

A top-down approach to inclusion considers what is required at the leadership and management levels to create an inclusive educational environment (Kelly, Padden and Fleming, 2023, 2024). Existing research identifies an inclusive culture as the foundation of inclusion, where inclusive policies and strategies permeate all aspects of institutional life (Healey and Stroman, 2021). While the language and signals in policy documents can create a welcoming and open atmosphere where everyone feels they can belong (Healey and Stroman, 2021), it is imperative to go beyond mere buzzwords and avoid paying lip service to inclusion (Ahmed, 2007; Butler, 2021). However, the findings here revealed that participants demonstrated limited awareness or consideration of inclusion at the policy or strategy level, or rather, they did not associate inclusive practices as emanating from policy decisions. Despite this, the participants' examples of good practice may have stemmed from policy decisions. For example, some students equated their acquiring access to HE with an increased sense of belonging. Their access, however, may well have had roots in an inclusive admission policy. These findings mirror those of Kelly *et al.* (2023), who found that students seldom see themselves in university strategy and policy. Overseeing inclusive policy and strategy demands active leadership and guidance from all sectors of the institution. However, the findings in this study

provided no explicit examples of or references to inclusive leadership or champions of inclusion at senior levels. The voices of inclusion need to be heard and seen (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998), to offer reassurance to marginalised students that they have allies and advocates in senior positions. This study therefore identifies an apparent gap in communication between the communities represented by the student participants and governance structures.

A socially just education system considers whose voices influence and inform inclusive decisions, including policy intent, design, principles and practice (Shields, 2004; Walker, 2012). Despite the necessity for structural change in HE to enhance belongingness cited in recent policy documents (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; HEA and DFHERIS, 2022), the findings here indicated little or no involvement by the student participants in university structures and processes, perhaps reflective of "performative diversity" (Leong, 2021). In this study, two student participants had previously been class representatives, and this was viewed as a valuable way for them to have opinions and contribute to discussions. Similarly, others who had not been class representatives themselves commented on the value of the "class rep" system as a mechanism for raising concerns and having their voice heard. While these positive comments about the class representative system were noted, the general lack of engagement by this student group remains a cause for concern, and supports evidence from previous studies that minority students do not see themselves represented across all aspects of the university (Butler, 2021; Larsen and James, 2022).

It also underscores the need for safe spaces for counter storytelling, so the voices of minority groups can be heard. It is imperative that policies do not reflect the opinions of the dominant group only (Crenshaw, 1991; Leong, 2012; Ball, 2015), and that people in prominent positions do not use their authority to speak on behalf of others (Freire, 1972). Moreover, attention must focus on representation, including who and what voices are heard and represented across various structures and how representation is selected and agreed upon (Shields, 2004; Leong, 2012; Walker, 2012). Many of the student participants indicated that they did not see themselves represented in the University environment and expressed a desire for greater representation, including staff and student role models that reflect the diversity of the student body. However, some students did not prioritise representation and had few expectations or aspirations for a more inclusive university. Instead, they felt the existing inclusive support, such as accessing services or receiving the same emails and advice as other students, was sufficient. Crucially, the student participants' experiences of belonging occurred at the

micro-level in daily interactions, without them making a direct connection between those experiences and institutional leadership or policy.

5.4.5. A bottom-up approach to belonging and inclusion

While inclusion may be embedded in institutional policy, it is meaningless without action. The findings revealed some positive examples of inclusive institutional practice in academic and social spaces. Several students spoke about the positive impact of having time in class during the first week in university to get to know other students. In contrast, students who did not have this experience spoke about the challenge of making friends and subsequent feelings of isolation and loneliness. Such experiences align with other studies that posit the benefits of caring learning environments (Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017; Healey and Stroman, 2021; Larsen and James, 2022). Many other similar examples revealed that these practices were frequently instigated by individual staff who, perhaps, recognised the value of creating a community within the class (Gorard and Smith, 2006).

In wider social spaces, many student participants reported positive interactions with professional and third-space staff across the institution. It is noteworthy that when referring to positive belonging experiences, students often mentioned small, seemingly incidental actions that made them feel valued and recognised. Such actions included a smile from a staff member, a quick response to an email or, as one student shared, being granted access to the library when she had forgotten her student card. What these findings clearly reveal is that belonging was often experienced in ordinary everyday interactions, and it was these experiences of being recognised, supported and valued that fostered belongingness. Also, while inclusion may well be embedded in institutional policy, its practical implementation frequently depends on staff committed to equity and social inclusion (Ahmed, 2007).

Although academic culture was not part of the research *per se*, the strong role that academic staff can (and, in some cases, do) play in promoting a sense of belonging was clearly revealed. The findings are in line with extensive literature supporting the value of caring academic staff (Larsen and James, 2022; Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023). Many of the student participants spoke about the care and support received from lecturers, with one student describing a lecturer as being like a "mother" to them. Some participants, though not all, felt that contributing to group work, assignments and discussions in lectures allowed them to be themselves and express their personal opinions. Such comments resonated with the sentiments of personal belonging and the

need to be valued and heard (Healey and Stroman, 2021; Kovač and Vaala, 2021). These spaces were critical for amplifying the voices of minority ethnic students and thus fostering belonging (Shields, 2004; Walker, 2012). They were also sites for critical pedagogy (Hughes, 2007), with some students sharing excitedly about critical discussions of contemporary issues like power, mental health and inequality. Outside the academic arena, however, they were passive participants in university life and structures. Therefore, findings from this study spotlight the educational arena as the only space within the institution where the student participants felt they had the freedom to speak freely and amplify their voices.

In contrast to the caring and support felt by the student participants in the academic space, it was also the site of exclusive practices, with many citing concrete examples of ongoing daily microaggressions that affected their sense of belonging. The numerous references to exclusion because of physical appearance, accent or background emphasised power disparities between privilege and marginalisation, and mirrored findings from other studies (Gao and Liu, 2021; Healey and Stroman, 2021; Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023). These findings reinforce the endemic and persistent nature of race and racism.

5.4.6. Conclusion

Embedding a sense of belonging in HE is critical. Creating an inclusive system where difference is valued and every student can flourish requires structural and systemic change. Bourdieu was instrumental in illuminating the inherent inequalities and power of aristocracy within the HE field. His writings advocate for the recognition of diverse cultures and ways of being, claiming that the symbolic capital of the dominant classes cannot continue to determine the "rules of the game" and one's positioning within the social field. Thus, we are brought to those critical conversations, to the challenge of changing "attitudes and values, and in particular the investment in hierarchy, intellectual superiority and elitism, of the upper and middle classes" (Reay, 2012, p. 594). Transforming the institutional field to become an even playing field requires several conditions: that everyone not only knows the rules of the game, but has the economic and social capital required for active participation, and that the symbolic capital of all players carries equal value and recognition. Such radical transformation in thinking and acting would ultimately ensure that no one feels like "a fish out of water".

5.5. Institutional agency: transforming the field

This study began by naming several converging threads woven throughout this thesis: belonging, higher education, and widening participation, with a focus on ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The research process delved into each of these areas to offer a deeper understanding of how these threads intertwine and manifest in the HE landscape. As this chapter draws to a close, this section reflects on the disparate ideas discussed and proposes a way forward. The headings here are: fostering student agency through institutional transformation; the pillars of belonging vis-à-vis the four domains (Ahn, 2017); and implementing change.

5.5.1. Fostering student agency through institutional transformation

The rationale for this study is rooted in social justice and the need to create an inclusive HE environment where every student feels a sense of belonging. Furthermore, it is informed by a transformation paradigm that seeks to move beyond the promotion of social justice to actively embedding it in every aspect of university life. Having conducted the research and interrogated the findings, the discussion now focuses on transformation, especially what it means in light of the findings and the study's theoretical framework.

For the student participants, it was clear that authenticity was a central tenet of belonging — to be seen and heard without the need to transform in order to please others. Moreover, they had no desire to assimilate into the dominant culture. On the contrary, they wanted their habitus (in some cases dual habitus), such as internal dispositions, beliefs and cultural identities to be valued and recognised by the dominant culture. Such recognition requires structural and systemic change.

While Bourdieu was often accused of adopting an overly deterministic attitude to habitus, viewing it as structured and defined, he also asserts transformation is possible, though not easy (Thompson, 2014). For Bourdieu, the key to unlocking transformative potential lies in "social reflexivity", meaning the ability to recognise that every aspect of society is socially determined, and change requires identifying those determinants (Hage, 2025). If HE, then, is serious about social justice, it must be a catalyst for change and fostering reflexivity.

Dialogue is critical to change. Therefore, critical dialogues in democratic spaces must be facilitated, promoting what Freire (1972, p. 81) terms "conscientization", the

deepening awareness about inequalities inherent in one's life. Additionally, this critical dialogue must be intentional, leading explicitly to action and transformation (Mertens, 2017). Such dialogic practices should change mindsets, challenge inequities like power and domination, and promote a more egalitarian society. It calls for diverse cultural groups to come together for a common purpose; "a new ethics, founded on respect for difference" (Freire, 1992, p. 137). However, for the students in this study, awareness raising and identifying differences are insufficient — transformation requires action. Therefore, if widening participation is to truly fulfil its mandate, the inequities named by students (information deficit, lack of recognition, financial barriers, labelling, entitlements to HE) must be addressed.

To conclude, in a higher education context, transformation necessitates the creation of university spaces, not only to facilitate the dominant students to reach their potential, but also where everyone within those spaces can flourish. Thus, I propose a variation to University College Dublin's (Kelly, Padden and Fleming, 2023) tagline, changing from "university for all" to "we are the university". Adopting Hage's (1998) aspirations for society, the latter tagline recognises the university as the sum of its parts — there is no assimilating, no tolerating or no valuing because everyone is equal.

5.5.2. The pillars of belonging and Ahn's (2017) four domains

Ahn (2017) explored students' sense of belonging to the university, with a particular focus on the sense of belonging as an indicator of social capital. The mixed methods study aimed to inform institutional policy from a student experience perspective and was conducted in a Welsh university. Over 400 undergraduate and postgraduate students across the university participated in the study, with 77.4% declaring their ethnicity as white-British. The study identified four domains of belonging (personal, social, academic, and surroundings) and recommended that institutions consider the multilayered nature of belonging, rather than confine belonging to social and academic domains. These domains correspond generally to the five pillars of belonging identified in this current study (Section 5.1) (See Table 19)

Table 19: Domain comparisons: Ahn (2017) and current study

Domains/categories of belonging in HE	
Ahn (2017)	**Current Study**
Personal Social Surroundings Academic	Personal Social Spatial Protective Civic

The following similarities and differences are noted across the two studies:

Personal: while the personal aspect of belonging was common to both studies, the way it was understood and experienced varied considerably. In Ahn's study, the personal domain is related to life satisfaction and attitudes to life, like independence, goals, pride, or respect. In the current study, the emphasis was on recognition and authenticity, indicating students' strong desire to be valued within group settings.

Social: similarly**,** the social aspect was also common across both studies, with interpretations of social engagement varying widely across both studies. In Ahn's study, social meant clubs, societies, fun events and socialising (pubs and nightclubs). Additionally, her participants used words indicating a strong sense of community connection like involved, connected, together, or close. In contrast, social activities in the current study were a lot more contained (and constrained by personal circumstances), involving smaller gatherings and more impromptu encounters.

Surroundings: the concept of surroundings or spatial belonging was described and experienced differently in each study. The difference was exacerbated by the variance in living arrangements of the participants. Ahn conducted her study with the general student body, many of whom lived on campus or locally. Her participants used positive words to describe their surroundings (beauty, beach, hills, mountains), indicating a strong sense of belonging to the university environment and the catchment area. In contrast, this was not the case in the current study, where students indicated a strong affinity with specific places on campus, but none within the catchment area, their homes, or wider communities.

Academic: while the words associated with the academic sphere like lectures, lecturers, qualification or award were common in both studies, they are categorised differently in each. In her study, Ahn chose to create a separate domain to capture references to academia, while this study only deemed academic terminology important from a

personal perspective. For example, when the participants in this study referred to a third level qualification, it was not from a wider ideological perspective, but rather related to how it would enhance their life opportunities. Hence, in the current study, references to belonging in the academic arena were categorised under the person-centred pillar.

Protective: while safety and security were among the words listed by Ahn's participants for fostering belongingness, they were not prominent. In her study, they were used in the context of life satisfaction, implying they felt secure and safe in their life. In contrast, the need for safety, security and stability was paramount in the current study, with students yearning for an enhanced sense of security in all aspects of life.

Civic: references to civic belonging or insecurities around residency did not emerge for the students in Ahn's study, more than likely because the majority of participants identified as British. However, in the current study, insecurities around residency and labelling meant concerns about civic belonging were palpable and prominent, thus justifying civic belonging as a separate pillar in this study.

Importantly, distinct areas of overlap were identified between both studies, in particular the multifaceted and complex nature of belonging, and the necessity for institutions to consider this complexity when designing belonging supports. This study both agrees with and builds on Ahn's findings. Clearly, it is essential to adopt a broad and flexible approach to enhancing and supporting belonging. However, when dealing with particularly vulnerable students, strategies and processes around belonging need to be more nuanced and targeted. This is not to reject the value of mainstreaming (Thomas, 2012), merely to underscore the need for additional specialised support and care.

5.5.3. Implementing change

This section describes the development of an inclusivity toolkit and presents the foundational framework for it, specifically for the subgroup researched in this study: ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. While creating a comprehensive, polished version of a toolkit is outside the time constraints of this thesis, this section justifies such a toolkit and presents a framework for enhanced provision around three key areas: social, academic and support. These areas reflect the findings, analysis and discussion presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

The social component involves reframing and reimagining what social engagement looks like for students who are unable to participate in more traditional forms of university social activities, particularly those designed to take place in the evenings or at weekends

(e.g., extracurricular activities organised through Clubs and Societies; informal social events). Given the robust evidence suggesting a strong link between engagement, retention and belonging, coupled with an increasingly diverse student population, exploring innovative and informal approaches to social engagement seems timely and imperative. Although the students in this study were not actively engaged in extracurricular activities, they expressed a deep yearning for social interaction, albeit at levels suited to their individual personalities and circumstances. While the idea for alternative social activities is not new (Thomas, 2019), the sense of urgency for such activities for this student group is compounded by the lack of stable family and community networks outside the university environment.

The social component would require a review of existing informal social spaces throughout the campus and identifying potential spaces for development. Such a review should inform a short- and long-term plan to develop these spaces in a way that fosters and supports social interaction. Additionally, the toolkit would offer guidelines and suggestions for promoting and delivering intercultural activities.

The academic component involves exploring the potential within academic spaces to foster belonging, for example, by allocating time at the beginning of a semester for students to get to know each other. Developing this element of the toolkit would necessitate exploring and encouraging enhanced opportunities for group interaction within formal class settings, in particular, the need to create what Graham and Moir (2022, p. 13) call a “relational pedagogical approach” (one that centres on mutual respect and connection) that moves away from the notion of belonging to the university, and instead fosters open communication that recognises the unique contribution and value of each student.

The support component includes both mainstream and targeted initiatives. At one end of a spectrum, this encompasses targeted and smaller supportive networks designed to share experiences and manage trauma. At the other end, it includes mainstream activities open to the general student population that focus on building academic skills, wellbeing and personal development. In the absence of such networks of support (familial, social or community) there is a need for specific, targeted support that considers the needs of the whole person, inside and outside the institution.

Table 20 provides some suggestions of the provisions deemed essential to fostering a sense of belonging in HE for ethnic minority SED students. Following completion of this

study, an in-depth review of best practices locally, nationally and internationally would be beneficial in informing future enhancements and developments in this area.

Table 20: Fostering belonging in Higher Education

Components	**Examples of pre-entry activities or initiatives**	**Examples of post-entry activities or initiatives**
Social	● Access to outreach activities that are engaging, informative and fun. ● Incorporate a fun element into open days, emphasising the importance of the social as well as information and processes.	● Targeted orientation for students new to education in Ireland. ● Make orientation fun and engaging, especially during the transition period. ● Explore opportunities within school buildings and communal areas to create informal spaces for social interactions. ● Be extra vigilant for students who are not engaging and link them to relevant support. ● Encourage students to avail of peer mentoring.
Academic	● Provide details for English language courses and academic English exams. ● Provide guidance on validating prior learning, so any previous qualifications are recognised and valued. ● Offer options for self-learning or courses in the community to build confidence and skills transferable to university.	● Encourage academics to allocate time to building classroom connections. ● Encourage accurate and positive representation of diverse communities in the curriculum. ● Provide guidance and support to staff in naming and challenging exclusive practices in lectures and promoting positive conversations about inclusion. ● Encourage staff to offer democratic spaces for dialogic engagement that value participation and contributions of diverse voices.

Components	Examples of pre-entry activities or initiatives	Examples of post-entry activities or initiatives
Support	● Targeted, timely and clear information related to access and support. ● Staff trained in addressing enquiries specific to students from migrant, refugee and international protection backgrounds, especially about rights and entitlements to higher education. ● Referrals to appropriate services such as English language classes or career guidance services. ● Have mentors or role models who can support and encourage minority students during the pre-entry stage. ● Targeted rather than general invites to open days. ● Proactively promote the services available to reduce anxieties and doubts about academic ability and achievement.	● Support students through the transition process, including accessing support and registration ● Be vigilant for students on extremely low incomes, especially students living in DP or emergency accommodation. Ensure such students are supported with necessities (food vouchers, stationery or laptops, where possible). ● Assign a support worker to vulnerable students to ensure they receive holistic support ● Provide safe spaces for students to meet to share experiences and support each other ● Identify allies within the university who champion and advocate for inclusive practices and support local and nationally ● Develop links with relevant external bodies to ensure continuity of the on-campus/off-campus support ● Actively advocate for the elimination of exclusive practices and a zero-tolerance approach to racism ● Provide anti-racism training for staff and students

The proposed toolkit would be a guide to assist academic and professional staff to plan, design and implement a range of activities both mainstream and targeted for this student group. The availability of such a toolkit would raise awareness of the complexity and multifaceted nature of belonging for this student group and help to make belonging everyone's responsibility.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter analysed key findings generated by the research and considered them in light of relevant themes from the literature review. The discussion presented an in-depth analysis of belonging, putting forward a new framework for belonging for ethnic minority SED students in a HE context. Based on the findings generated in this study and a review of existing analytical frameworks, belonging is presented as an emotional and dynamic concept comprising five pillars: personal, social, spatial, protective and civic. The pillars offer a structure to interpret and contextualise the findings and provide helpful guidance for developing interventions and support for this student group. A comprehensive analysis of the belonging-inclusion nexus was also presented, concluding that there is a symbiotic relationship, with an inclusive environment crucial for fostering belongingness. Additionally, the interrogation of institutional culture and spaces provided valuable insights on enhancing belonging and fostering transformation for the student participants. The next chapter will conclude the research, beginning with an overview of the study, including a summary of the literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion chapters. It then presents the contribution to knowledge, implications for national and institutional policy and practice, the research limitations, and suggestions for future studies related to belonging in HE. The thesis concludes with a reflective narrative.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

Underpinned by a commitment to social justice and a transformative worldview, this research aimed to gain an enhanced understanding of the experiences of belonging for ethnic minority socioeconomically disadvantaged students in HE. A robust theoretical framework based on Bourdieu's conceptual tools — habitus, capital, and field — guided and supported the study. This framework provided a lens through which the manifestation of belonging in the field was interpreted.

The study explored the lived experiences of a subgroup in NAP 2022-2028 (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022), namely ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, including students who are migrants or refugees or students who have experience of the international protection process. An exploratory qualitative approach using a creative methodology was used to conduct research with 19 students and seven staff members. The staff focus group, with members of a cross-university student support initiative, took place after preliminary findings were available. This group's input was used to triangulate the research findings and incorporate their expertise into the research process. Creative methodologies were used to engage students in focus groups or walking/online interviews. A framework based on work by Miles and Huberman (1994) and subsequently adapted by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020) was used for analysis and interpretation of the data. The findings generated three primary themes (Chapter 4): understanding belonging; belonging and the person; and institutional belonging. These themes provided an enriched and contextualised understanding of the concept, highlighting the person-centred nature of belonging and the institution's key role in facilitating it for a diverse student group. The discussion in Chapter 5 situated the findings within the broader theoretical landscape, interpreting the themes in light of relevant literature to explore the wider implications of an enhanced conceptualisation of belonging in a HE environment. The discussion focused on exploring a general understanding of belonging, followed by personal and institutional perspectives.

The findings in this study contribute to existing research by capturing the lived experiences of a specific group of students in a particular context. While most studies on belonging focus on the general student population or singular identity characteristics, this research provides a distinctive perspective by exploring the experiences of ethnic minority students through the lens of two intersectional identities. Additionally, the analysis is informed by my deep insights derived from years of promoting educational

opportunities and inclusive practices. Collectively, the findings and discussion offer a comprehensive analysis of the sense of belonging among this student group in one university, with a focus on the institution's social and cultural dimensions. The study was informed by the following three research questions.

Research question 1

- What does belonging in HE, in a general sense, mean to ethnic minority students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, including students who are migrants or refugees or students who have experience of the international protection process?

Research question 2

- What cultural and social dimensions of university life, if any, instil, or do not instil, a feeling of belonging for these students?

Research question 3

- What, if anything, would help to enhance the sense of belonging in HE for these students?

The following section indicates how the study's findings answered these questions and outlines the study's contributions to knowledge. This is followed by recommendations for policy and practice, limitations of the research, proposals for future studies, before concluding with a personal reflective narrative.

6.2. Contribution to knowledge

This section establishes how this study builds on previous research to make a distinct contribution to knowledge. The contributions here are informed by the research process, especially the findings, which amplified the voice of the student participants by allowing them the time and space to share their experiences of belonging in HE.

Contribution to knowledge (1): the pillars of belonging

The first contribution to knowledge, an enhanced understanding of belonging for ethnic minority SED students in the context of HE, is captured in Section 5.1. Drawing on findings from focus groups and interviews, the model comprises five pillars in a dynamic environment — personal, social, spatial, protective and civic — with emotion

underpinning the experience of all pillars. While reinforcing the established notions of belonging as a dynamic, person-centred and context dependent (Ahmed, 2020; Healey and Stroman, 2021), the pillars further demonstrate the complexity and multifaceted nature of belonging for this student group. Applying the model to a HE setting necessitates integrating the pillars into all aspects of university life, thereby requiring a whole of university approach and making belonging the responsibility of all. The dynamic and evolving nature of the concept demands the adoption of a flexible and adaptable approach to belonging initiatives, consistently informed by reflective practices.

The contribution recognises students' profound desire to be their authentic selves and the freedom to speak without fear of reprisal (Allen and Bowles, 2012; Graham and Moir, 2022). Crucial here is the centrality of support for fostering belonging, ranging from pre-entry information to a range of post-entry provisions. The services offered should help to build economic and social capital, as well as assist students to adjust to HE, manage past traumas, and flourish. Most notably, the availability of support is vital as many lack a strong sense of family or community network in Ireland.

From a social perspective, students acknowledged and appreciated positive social connections (Thomas, 2012; Ahn, 2017), though there was no pattern dictating the formation or composition of such relationships. There were strong indications of homophilic behaviour within class groups explained by age, backgrounds and cultural differences. Furthermore, many students felt they were isolated within the class, which they interpreted as not being part of the Irish in-group.

Spatial belonging encompasses feeling rooted or attached to a physical or socio-spatial environment (Massey, 1994; Pollini, 2005; Antonsich, 2010b). This pillar was particularly emotive for the student participants as many had left their homes to find refuge in Ireland, only to end up living in precarious accommodation that offered no sense of spatial belonging. The lack of attachment to a stable home or community contrasted sharply with the sense of belonging many of the participants felt on campus. Although the campus was not always a panacea, it offered a sense of safety and stability lacking in the external environment.

Protective belonging relates to feeling safe (Dromgold-Sermen, 2022) — safe from war, bombings and from the fear of being murdered or attacked for being oneself or speaking freely. For the students who had fled war, fear and persecution, this pillar was foundational and non-negotiable. All the on-campus student participants felt the University offered them the sense of safety they craved, though for many that feeling of

safety vanished outside the University environment. In contrast, the online learners had not experienced the same sense of protection or safety as the on-campus students.

The fifth pillar, civic belonging, relates to the politics of belonging, including residency status, citizenship, labels and entitlements. Central to this pillar was a yearning to be treated equally to others, without judgement, discrimination or stereotyping (Healey and Stroman, 2021).

Collectively, these five pillars offer an enhanced and nuanced understanding of belonging in HE and highlight the importance of adopting a flexible and holistic approach to supporting belonging. The findings also provide rich insights on the interconnection between belonging and inclusion.

Contribution to knowledge (2): the belonging and inclusion nexus

Although students spoke extensively about their lived experiences of belonging, their responses were frequently intertwined with feelings of inclusion, confirming the interconnection between the concepts, with belonging a critical element of inclusion. While Kovač and Vaala (2021) distinguish between belonging and inclusion in a school setting, this study moves beyond acknowledging them as separate concepts, identifying how they might work together in a HE environment. The nexus is a significant contribution to knowledge, emphasising the necessity for institutions to understand the nuances between the concepts, in particular the significance of inclusion for fostering belongingness.

Contribution to knowledge (3): the habitus clash: the sense of belonging in the cultural and social dimensions of HE

In general, many of the students felt a strong sense of belonging to the University, though more especially to their individual schools. The extent to which students connected with the institution was context dependent and was considerably influenced by individual histories, circumstances, identities and personalities. The contribution here relates to the habitus clash (Reay, 2004) experienced by students who not only had to navigate the tension of moving from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment but also had the challenge of integrating a dual habitus into a dominant HE culture (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023). For the students, the friction lies in the space between adapting to fit in and being true

to their existing dispositions, including linguistic and cultural practices. This study makes it clear that the students expressed little desire to transform. Instead, they wanted their difference valued and recognised by staff and fellow students within the institution. In other words, they yearned for enhanced recognition for their symbolic capital within the HE field.

Nurturing positive social connections and opportunities for engagement, especially in the first few weeks in university, is viewed as crucial to fostering belongingness. Belonging, in turn, is critical to retention and success (Thomas, 2012). The student participants in this study were an anomaly, with no evidence linking their retention and success to belonging or social engagement. On the contrary, participation in formal and informal social activities was not a priority for the students. Instead, the students prioritised study and family commitments. Furthermore, there was also no indication that a lack of belonging or belonging uncertainty impacted students' confidence or motivation in their ability to complete their studies. Rather, the students were driven by a deep personal desire to gain a third-level qualification and a hope that this would give them enhanced life opportunities. Despite this motivation, their student journeys were frequently depicted as lonely, mired by constant challenges and barriers. As they progressed through university, they seemed content to avail of whatever opportunities were possible within the limited time available to them, though many did not seek or avail of any extra-curricular events.

While the support provided by the University was greatly appreciated, some felt it could be improved by offering more proactive and coordinated services. This finding directly justifies the essential value of the proposed toolkit for fostering belonging in HE. Since traditional social interventions are ineffective for this time-constrained group, the toolkit moves beyond deficit-model approaches to focus on proactive, coordinated, and highly nuanced support aimed at integration. The design of this toolkit is informed by the students' experiences in the social and academic spaces that validated their symbolic capital and mitigated the friction of the habitus clash (Healey and Stroman, 2021).

Contribution to knowledge (4): dismantling racism and discrimination

While students acknowledged several inclusive practices within the University that fostered a sense of belonging, including access to a wide range of support and services, there were also vivid descriptions of unbelonging and social exclusion. While many of these findings are not new in Irish HE (Darby, 2022; Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2023), they

do indicate the persistence and often subtle nature of these exclusive practices. Despite previous calls for anti-racism training and diversity and inclusion educational programmes, little appears to have changed. This contribution moves beyond the need for awareness raising and training, to identify the necessity for action, accountability and allyship. In other words, this contribution calls for enforced accountability and measurable action, requiring the support of dedicated staff and resources.

Contribution to knowledge (5): enhancing a sense of belonging in HE

The participants provided valuable insights into enhancing belonging in the institution. Access to information was seen as crucial to fostering belonging, especially at the pre-entry stage (Larsen and James, 2022). Moreover, the information needed to be targeted and relevant to migrants, refugees, and IPAs. It was felt that role models and peer mentors would greatly enhance the students' sense of belonging at outreach and post-entry stages, but the people involved would have to exhibit similar profiles and circumstances to them (Walton and Cohen, 2011; Murphy *et al.*, 2020). Many discussions on enhancements focused on breaking down perceived cultural barriers and promoting intercultural dialogue. Participants felt strongly that diverse communities do not understand each other's cultures and backgrounds; therefore, talking to each other was seen as crucial. Intercultural events should include fun activities and spaces for more critical conversations. There was no sense that the students wanted to remain aloof from the dominant student group; on the contrary, they yearned to be integrated into social groups and be seen as valuable contributors to such settings. While institutional documents often frame the creation of democratic spaces as merely an aspirational strategy (Graham and Moir, 2022), the participants ground this concept in lived reality, suggesting that these forums are essential, valuable tools for breaking down barriers and fostering intercultural dialogue.

6.3. Recommendations for national policy and practice

The study highlights a number of recommendations for national policy and practice:

- The traditional understanding of the HE field as a stable, bounded social space is increasingly challenged by globalisation and the corresponding technological, environmental, and economic pressures. This is evident in the increasing permeability of boundaries, such as the shift towards a more unified tertiary system, or diverse modes of engagement, which complicate any universal

understanding of the HE environment. HEIs must rethink how they measure and support belonging across these diverse, unbounded educational spaces. Future policy should explicitly account for the experiences of a diverse community of learners, ensuring enhancements to policy and practice are not solely based on the traditional, campus-based model.

- Practitioners and policymakers must resist viewing the experiences of underrepresented students through an excessively deterministic lens. Future work must focus on student agency and the potential for institutional transformation. Interventions should be designed not just to help students adapt to the existing field, but to recognise and support their capacity to inform change, moving away from a model that treats the system as fixed and the student as deficient.
- The government should continue to address barriers to accessing HE for ethnic minority SED students, especially refugees and IPAs. For people seeking asylum and living in DP or emergency accommodation, paying international fees is not an option. A review of the strict criteria for entitlements to EU fee status is urgently required.
- Improved intersectional data related to ethnicity, age, disability status, prior qualifications and socioeconomic status, would greatly facilitate the early identification of vulnerable students, allowing support to be targeted at those most in need. Enhancements to the current system are long overdue and should be prioritised.
- The White Paper on Ending DP pledged to support students living in these Centres by providing accommodation options closer to their HE institutions. This commitment has not been realised. Implementation of this action would significantly benefit students living in precarious accommodation.
- A national student accommodation strategy is urgently required that considers a range of accommodation options. Based on the outcomes of this study, in addition to standard student rooms, emergency and short-term student accommodation would be particularly relevant. Additionally, the concept of student accommodation should be expanded to consider wider student profiles such as couples, families, or lone parents.
- Enhanced cross-governmental cooperation is needed to address the holistic needs of the student groups represented in this study in order to ensure they can fully participate and belong in HE. For example, there is an obvious overlap between the DFHERIS and the Department of Justice in this regard.

Collaboration between these two departments is essential to address the barriers to access based on labelling and civic status.

6.4. Recommendations for institutional policy

The policy recommendations outlined here are of particular relevance to the institution where the research was conducted:

- Belonging needs inclusive policies and practices. The principles and practices of inclusive education must be embedded in every policy and strategy: the ethos, language, culture, and vision of inclusion must permeate the institution so that nothing less is tolerated. Fostering belonging should be everyone's responsibility. Adopting a whole-of-university approach to belonging is critical.
- Inclusion needs visionaries, leaders and champions steering from the top, and practitioners, activists, and believers who provide a bottom-up approach. These actors would have to be seen and heard regularly, both advocating for inclusion and condemning exclusion — not just within the institution but commenting on broader injustices nationally and internationally.
- Based on this study's findings, consideration should be given to the dynamic, contextual, and person-centred nature of belonging. Such considerations would avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and instead recognise individuality and difference among the student community.
- Reay's (2015) critique that Bourdieu's work risks adopting a middle-class perspective and residualising working-class experience is a significant caution for practice. If concepts like cultural capital are uncritically applied, support programmes may inadvertently favour the dominant group while marginalising the knowledge and experience (symbolic capital) held by underrepresented students. The institution should adopt a critically engaged approach to theory, as advised by Reay, ensuring that empirical data on student experience leads to analytical insights. This includes valuing the diverse forms of capital brought by students.
- Structural change is crucial so that the voices of those most excluded from decision-making can actively contribute to policies, strategy, procedures and practice. Inclusion in theory and on paper is not enough; action is needed.
- Data are critical to inform strategy and policy decisions. Collaborating with the HEA to enhance data collection, especially data on ethnicity and intersectional identities, is essential.

- The fee status assessment criteria for refugees and IPAs needs to be reviewed and consideration given to offering EU fee status to this student group.
- The University recently signed the Anti-Racism Principles for Irish HEIs. It is imperative that the actions listed are planned and delivered with staff-student collaborations and regularly monitored and reviewed. Implementation of the principles needs commitment, action, funding, and vision. A zero-tolerance attitude towards discrimination and exclusion should be adopted.

6.5. Recommendations for practice in the institution

These suggestions summarise some practical recommendations for the institution, based on the outcomes of the research.

- A cross-campus working group comprising staff and students should be established to plan and deliver regular intercultural events. The impact of such events should be monitored and evaluated.
- Intercultural awareness training and anti-racism training should be actively promoted to the staff and student body.
- Considering how collective identity based on myths, sentiments, memories and commemorations can foster a sense of belonging (Fenster, 2004), it would be worth exploring the notion of identity markers in greater detail to ascertain what, if anything, would enhance a sense of connection to the University.
- Following on from the previous point, it would be worth reviewing what and why certain cultural events and celebrations are marked in the institution, to ensure they are reflective of the diversity of the student population.
- Considering the changing nature of the student profile, modes of study and growing pressures on students to balance work, study and home, it is timely to review the prominent role clubs and societies have heretofore played in promoting interaction and fostering relationships, and explore new ways to gain maximum benefit from the time students spend on campus or online for building connections.
- As schools hold a particular affinity for students, a review should be conducted of spaces within school buildings to create informal seating areas for fostering connection and conversation.
- The lack of a sense of belonging expressed by the two online students involved in the research suggests that this is an area that merits particular attention; this should include consulting with online students to garner their suggestions for enhancing a sense of belonging.

- There is a need to document models of best practice for fostering belonging in academic and social spaces within the institution. Disseminating ideas for fostering belonging will help to create the notion that belonging is everyone's responsibility.
- Given the criticality of secure belonging for this student group, it behoves the institution to incorporate a trauma-informed response to belonging, recognising that the absence of anxiety is a greater indicator of belonging for this group than participating in social clubs. Such a response would ensure that all institutional interactions, from student support to campus services, understand the importance of mitigating feelings of insecurity. Furthermore, training in trauma-informed practices should be available to relevant support staff, with students having access to dedicated, confidential support and safe spaces to manage and overcome these profound personal and structural insecurities.
- Finally, a review of all support services should be ongoing to monitor their effectiveness and accessibility. This is particularly important for students with several intersectional identities who are required to engage with a number of different services.

6.6. Research limitations

While conducting this research, I reflected continuously on my research motive and my responsibility to the participants, especially in ensuring the research captured the students' experiences and amplified their voices. However, despite the best intentions, interactions before and after the data-generating process were limited due to time and resource restrictions and the participants' availability. In an ideal scenario, this study would have embraced a participatory paradigm, using participatory action research as the methodology. Any future such research should engage participants from the outset and throughout all stages of the study.

The challenging recruitment process hindered a broader representation of student participants. This limitation was addressed in Chapter 3 (see Section 3.7).

Another limitation relates to the small sample size of the research cohort and the fact the research was based in one institution. Therefore, while the findings provide valuable insights at a local level, they cannot be generalised to a broader population.

When planning the research design, I focused on the social and cultural dimensions of the institution based on my experience and expertise. Thus, while this study provides

valuable insights into the socio-cultural dimensions of belonging in HE, exploring the experiences of the student participants in the teaching and learning space would have enriched the study and provided a more comprehensive overview of belonging HE.

While the decision to conduct qualitative research was driven by a desire to engage deeply with the research participants on the topic of belonging, the time and resources required for the methodology limited the number of participants. On reflection, a mixed methods study, with a larger quantitative study followed by smaller qualitative interactions, would have garnered a fuller and more representative institutional perspective, but, given the time and resources available, this was outside the scope of the study

6.7. Future studies

Throughout the research process, it was evident that many themes emerging from the literature and the research findings merited further exploration. One such theme was the relevance of cultural identity to belonging in a HE setting. Research limitations did not permit a detailed examination of the topic. Further research should examine cultural identity, the intertwining of diverse cultures and the promotion and fostering of diversity in a HE context.

The assumption that education is transformative also deserves consideration, especially in the context of ethnic minority students who arrived in Ireland with hopes of a better future and sought a third-level qualification. Further research in this area would include following up on their post-qualification experience to examine such topics as progression to meaningful employment, a sense of security related to residency, housing and finance, and their level of integration into Irish society. Additionally, research in this phase could examine the long-term impact of belonging on academic and career outcomes.

The association of inclusion and integration relative to belonging emerged as a finding in this study. Time, however, did not permit an in-depth exploration of integration and what it means for this group of students. Thus, research into the meaning of integration warrants further attention, especially from a macro perspective, which includes experiences and expectations of integrating into Irish society.

As alluded to in the discussion, there is a need to examine the extent and impact of racism in HE. Future research in this area would be particularly relevant given the recent adoption of the Anti-Racism Principles by the HE sector in Ireland.

Research evidence suggests that belonging in HE is experienced differently by different student cohorts, with students from minority groups and marginalised communities finding it challenging to integrate into the dominant university culture. Considering the changing profile of universities and changes in how students communicate and interact, a comparative study between student groups would be timely. Of particular interest would be a comparison of the experiences of ethnic minority students newly arrived to Ireland and those born in Ireland to families that had sought refuge here. Another possible study could compare the sense of belonging felt in HE by ethnic minority SED students with that of international students studying in Irish universities.

Finally, it would be interesting to replicate this study in other Irish HEIs to find out if students' sense of belonging mirrored the findings in this study.

6.8. A reflective narrative

Having come to the end of the research, I would have welcomed the opportunity to sit back, knowing I had addressed the research questions and the study would, in its own modest way, contribute to knowledge. However, reflecting on the study has illuminated the disparity between the narrow focus of the research and breadth and depth of the challenges being faced by the student participants. The needs are diverse, complex, interlinked and intersectional. The solutions, like the concept of belonging, must be equally multi-dimensional. Throughout the research process, I became increasingly aware that exploring belonging in HE isolated the student life from the non-student life and did not do justice to the complex and uncertain terrain of their lives. While exploring their sense of belonging in HE, students shared stories about their personal lives, some of which provided glimpses into experiences that are deeply buried and may never emerge — Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, Nigeria, fear, torture, pain. Berkovich (2014) reminds us that we cannot separate education systems from wider societal issues: they are inextricably intertwined. Thus, asking students to talk about their experience in HE in isolation from other aspects of their lives seems reductionist in light of their holistic needs.

Since completing the data-generating process in mid-2023, life in Ireland for minority ethnic communities has become increasingly threatening and challenging. In late 2023, anti-immigration sentiment, which had been simmering beneath the surface for some time, began to emerge more forcibly through increasing protests by local communities against housing earmarked for international protection applicants. Recently, Ireland has witnessed a noticeable rise in far-right rhetoric, particularly in the online space (Fattibene

et al., 2025). Research conducted by Fattibene *et al.* (2025) on over 400,000 social media posts between October 2020 and June 2021 highlights a growing threat from far-right groups as an array of disparate factions unite under the banner of far-right ideology. The November 2023 riots in Dublin marked a significant escalation, with violent incidents widely circulated on social media (Duggan and Whitlelaw, 2024), mirroring similar developments across Europe (Finn, 2024). The changing environment has heightened anxiety and fear among minority groups (Cannon *et al.*, 2022). In Ireland, much of the anti-immigration discourse is triggered by the severe housing crisis. However, as the crisis shows no sign of abating (Bowers, 2023), the scenario does not bode well for DP residents seeking to exit the international protection accommodation system and find accommodation in the community.

Despite the current unsettling climate and ongoing challenges faced by the student participants, it would be remiss of me to complete this study without acknowledging their resilience, determination and hope. Consistently, throughout the research process, it was evident that these individuals are driven by a desire and a dream of a brighter future. However, the aloneness that they are feeling is palpable, and they desperately need allies and a supportive community to facilitate their journey.

Reflecting on the findings and listening repeatedly to the student narratives — the counter storytelling, the sharing of their lived reality — draws attention to one poignant line from the literature review: "belonging, it seems, is an accoutrement of privilege" (Slee, 2019, p. 910). The stark reality of the student participants' stories, the yearning to belong, the need to belong, and the hope of belonging, contrasts sharply with the rights and entitlements afforded to more privileged students.

Social justice is about creating democratic societies — spaces where everyone can participate in open, purposeful and critical dialogue, where everyone is treated equally. Reay (2012) claims "the most intractable barrier to a socially just education system is the hearts and minds of the more privileged and powerful in society" (p. 593). We urgently need democratic spaces to question issues such as privilege, power, inclusion, inequity and diversity. Critical dialogue based on action and reflection is a prerequisite for social transformation — such transformation is timely and necessary. Freire's notion of conscientisation seems more urgent and real than ever if the student journey is to be transformative. If we do not work together to identify, name and address social inequities, the hopes and dreams that sustain the students from day to day will not materialise. With growing uncertainty, if there was ever a time for critical conversations, it is now.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information sheet

Introduction

My name is Karina Curley, and I am a third-year student on the Doctor of Education programme at the Institute of Education in DCU. I am currently undertaking research as part of my Doctoral Studies under the supervision of Dr Fiona King and Dr Elizabeth Mathews from the School of Inclusive and Special Education in DCU. My study is titled *'Exploring the degree to which students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged feel a sense of belonging in higher education, with a focus on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process'.*

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to better understand students' belonging in DCU. The research will give voice to students who seldom have the opportunity to share their stories with people who can influence policy and practice. These stories will enhance how belonging is understood and experienced in university and help to promote a more inclusive higher education environment where every student feels a sense of belonging.

Who can take part in the research?

Students from ethnic minorities who have experienced social and/or economic disadvantage, including migrants, refugees, or students who have experienced the international protection process, will be included. Staff who have an interest in and experience with student belonging will also be invited to a focus group.

What will the study involve?

For student participants, the study will involve a one-hour preparatory meeting, a two-hour focus group and a follow-on one-hour meeting. Students participating in the focus group can self-select to participate in a one-to-one walking interview on campus. Interview participants will be selected to ensure a representative sample across gender, background, age and programme of study is possible. For staff participants, the study will involve one focus group. The meetings, focus group discussions, and interviews will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes only.

What information will be collected?

The study will collect your thoughts and ideas about students belonging in higher education.

What happens if you decide not to take part?

There is no obligation on anyone to participate in the research; it is entirely up to you to decide if you would like to participate. Students who decide to do so will be asked to submit an expression of interest form and sign a consent form. Staff will be asked to sign a consent form. All participants will receive a copy of the signed documents for their records. Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason, and any data that has been collected will be deleted.

Will the information collected be confidential?

All information collected about you during the entire research process will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in the study, and no information will be linked to any person. All hard copy information will be held in a locked filing cabinet at the researchers' home until the research is completed. Personal data will be stored electronically and deleted immediately after the final hard-bound copy of the thesis has been submitted. All other digital information will be pseudonymised, encrypted and stored on DCU Google Drive for five years after submitting the final thesis. Any data collected will be accessed only by the researcher, Karina Curley or her supervisors, Dr Fiona King and Dr Elizabeth Mathews.

While every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed by the researcher and can only be protected within the limitations of the law, *i.e., data can be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.*

The research will be written up and presented as a research report. A copy of the research findings will be available upon request.

Are there any possible benefits to participants?

The study presents an opportunity for you to have your voice heard and share your thoughts about student belonging. The outcomes have the potential to influence how we think about belonging and influence future planning and development in this area. The research will be shared internally and externally at relevant forums and conferences.

Are there any possible risks to taking part?

It is possible that talking about your experiences of belonging may cause some distress. However, you are free to withdraw from the research at any time, and any data that you have shared will be deleted. Additionally, you will receive a list of internal and external support available to you.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, please email me, Karina Curley, at karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie or by phone at 087 4362586.

Appendix B: Recruitment email for students

Dear student,

My name is Karina Curley, and I am currently completing a Doctor of Education programme in DCU, undertaking research into the degree to which **students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged feel a sense of belonging in higher education, with a focus on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process.** Ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

If you experience low social and/or economic disadvantage and identify as an ethnic minority student, you are invited to participate in this research. The study involves attending a preparatory meeting, a two-hour focus group and a follow-on meeting. The focus group will include creative activities to explore your vision, understanding and experience of student belonging. The total time commitment is four hours. The preparatory meeting and focus group will occur between March and June 2023, with the follow-up meeting scheduled for autumn 2023.

Participants in the focus group can self-select to participate in follow-up one-to-one walking interviews on campus. The interview will last one hour. However, the numbers for the interviews are limited, and participants will be selected to ensure representation across age, gender, background, and programme of study.

By participating in this research, you will be contributing towards the research outcomes, including any ideas or enhancements to improve students' sense of belonging and, ultimately, the promotion of a more inclusive university environment. Your participation is voluntary, and all data collected will be pseudonymised and treated confidentially.

Additional information about the project is attached to this email. If you have any questions before committing to participate, please feel free to contact me at karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Likewise, if you would like to be informed of the outcomes of this research, email me at the same address.

Appendix C: Student focus group schedule

<table>
<tr><th>Activity</th><th>Minutes</th></tr>
<tr><td>Introductions - outline plan for Focus Group</td><td>5</td></tr>
<tr><td>Researcher recaps on the research documents

Aim of research
Plain Language Statement
Informed Consent Form
Data Protection
Expression of Interest form
Explain member checking</td><td>10</td></tr>
<tr><td>Invite participants to think about a pseudonym for the research. Note pseudonym.</td><td>1</td></tr>
<tr><td>Icebreaker - start recording

Describe how you felt walking into DCU for the first time</td><td>6</td></tr>
<tr><td>Opening discussion

This study is about your sense of belonging in the institution

- What does belonging mean to you?
- Comment on answers - e.g., what is attached/connected?
- How do we form attachments?
- What factors/aspects should I consider when looking at belonging?
- What does inclusion mean?
- Is inclusion the same as belonging? How/ why not?
- Do you feel you belong in DCU?

Stop recording</td><td>12</td></tr>
<tr><td>Activity 1 — My belonging map

Invite students to take a book or pick four cards to make a book.

Take time to map your connections/attachments - these can be recent connections or connections going back to childhood. There is no right or wrong way - you can design the map any way you like.</td><td>12</td></tr>
<tr><td>Call group back – Record

● Check-in - make sure everyone is ok after activity
● Invite thoughts on the activity - Discuss
● Check everyone is ok to proceed

Stop recording</td><td>10</td></tr>
<tr><td>Short break</td><td>5</td></tr>
</table>

Activity 2 — Belonging in higher education: 10 Words Question Please write down ten words that come to mind when you think about belonging in DCU. You can use words or sentences**.**	**10**
Call group back — Record ● Check in - make sure everyone is ok after activity ● Invite thoughts on the activity - Discuss ● Check everyone is ok to proceed **Stop recording**	**10**
Activity 3 — Future focus 2073 Imagine yourself 50 years from now writing about your sense of belonging. Where are you living? Do you feel included? What has changed from the time you were in DCU?	**15**
Call group back — Record ● Check-in - make sure everyone is ok after the activity ● Invite thoughts on the activity - Discuss ● Check everyone is ok to proceed **Stop recording**	**10**
Debrief and distribute list of supports	**5**
Next steps: member checking, interviews, summary of findings	**9**

Appendix D: Questions for walking/online interviews

The interaction process will be more narrative than a semi-structured interview. Therefore, while these questions are prepared in advance to guide the researcher, the researcher will ask questions from memory during the interviews, allowing the conversation to flow, rather than following a set format.

Introductory

1. How are you enjoying your time in DCU?
2. Why did you decide to come to DCU?
3. Tell me a little about your programme of study
4. What do you like best about being in university?
5. What do you like least about university life?
6. Would you say university life has lived up to your expectations?
7. How did you find the transition to university? What helped/hindered your transition?

Exploring belonging

8. What do you think belonging means?
9. Talk to me about your sense of belonging in DCU.
10. Where on campus do you experience the greatest sense of belonging? Why?
11. Are there spaces on campus where you do not find a sense of belonging? If yes, why do you not feel a sense of belonging in these spaces?
12. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?
13. Are there any aspects of the university that helped you feel a sense of belonging?
14. Are there aspects of the university that did not help you feel a sense of belonging?

Enhancing a sense of belonging — Ideas/suggestions

15. This research explores students' sense of belonging in higher education and looks at ways to make higher education more inclusive. Do you think feeling a sense of belonging on campus is the same as being included? If yes, explain. If not, what's the difference? (Exploring belonging versus inclusion)
16. Do you think changes are required in DCU to increase students' sense of belonging? If yes, what type of changes would help?
17. Is the government doing enough to help students from diverse backgrounds feel a sense of belonging in higher education? Explain your answer.

Ending

18. Exploring hopes, dreams, and plans for the future.

Appendix E: Recruitment email for staff

Dear _____,

My name is Karina Curley, and I am currently completing a Doctor of Education programme at DCU. I am undertaking research into the degree to which students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged feel a sense of belonging in higher education, with a focus on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees, and students who have experience of the international protection process.

As a member of the DCU Student Belonging Working Group, you are invited to participate in a one-hour focus group to reflect on student belonging in higher education. The focus group will consist of semi-structured questions relating to your vision, understanding and experience of student belonging

By participating in this research, you will be contributing towards the research outcomes, including any ideas or enhancements to improve students' sense of belonging and, ultimately, the promotion of a more inclusive university environment. Your participation is voluntary, and all data collected will be anonymised and treated confidentially.

Additional information about the project is attached to this email. If you would like to find out more about the project or have any questions before committing to participate, please feel free to contact me at karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Likewise, if you would like to be informed of the outcomes of this research, email me at the same address.

Appendix F: Staff focus group

Introduction

1. Introductions
2. Outline of focus group
3. Why a belonging working group in DCU?
4. Why are you participating in a Care & Connect working group?

Exploring belonging

5. Explore understandings of belonging.
6. Explore understandings of belonging in HE

Present preliminary research findings

The researcher presents an overview of the draft findings from the student focus group

7. Welcome any insights, observations or comments on the research.
8. What are the general thoughts/responses to the information presented?
9. Does the information fit staff beliefs/understandings?
10. What can be learned from the information?

Closing

11. What, if anything, can DCU do to improve students' sense of belonging?
12. How might any proposed actions be implemented?

Appendix G: Ethical approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

Dr Fiona King
School of Inclusive and Special Education

23rd February 2023

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2023/016**

Proposal Title: **Exploring the degree to which students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged feel a sense of belonging in higher education, focusing on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process**

Applicant(s): **Dr Fiona King, Dr Elizabeth Matthews, Ms Karina Curley**

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to full committee review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. As part of DCU REC's ongoing monitoring process, during your research you may be asked to provide DCU REC with a progress report. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Melrona Kirrane

Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

Research & Innovation Support
Dublin City University,
Dublin 9, Ireland

T +353 1 700 8000
F +353 1 700 8002
E research@dcu.ie
www.dcu.ie

Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes (for research students, this includes incorporating the letter within their thesis appendices).

Appendix H: Informed Consent Form (students)

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

The title of the research project is 'Exploring the degree to which students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged feel a sense of belonging in higher education, focusing on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process'. The research is being conducted by Karina Curley under the supervision of Dr Fiona King and Dr Elizabeth Mathews to fulfil the requirements for a Doctorate in Education in DCU. Ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Participation will involve completing an Expression of Interest form, attending a preparatory meeting, participating in a two-hour focus group and attending a follow-on meeting. Students who participate in the focus group can self-select to participate in a one-hour walking interview on campus. Participants for the interview will be selected to ensure representation across gender, age, nationality, educational background and programme of study. The time commitment for the focus group and related interviews is four hours. The interviews are scheduled for one hour. The meetings, focus group discussions and interviews will be audio-recorded.

Personal sensitive data will be collected from participants and processed as part of this research process.

- The Data Controller for the research is Dublin City University. This study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- The DCU Data Protection Officer is Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie /Ph: 01 7005118 or 01 7008257).
- The personal data will be collected and processed for research purposes only.
- The types of personal data to be processed are: Informed Consent Forms, Expression of Interest forms, focus group and interview audio recordings, de-identified transcripts, hard copies and photographs of student books.
- As soon as the final hard-bound copy of the thesis has been submitted, hard copies of data will be returned to participants, if desired, or alternatively, shredded and personal digital data will be shredded. The pseudonymised digital data will be retained for a maximum period of five years after the submission of the hard-bound copy of the thesis.
- Personal data will be used, at a later date, in pseudonymised form with all potential identifiers removed for publishing the research results.

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I understand that Dublin City University is the data controller	Yes / No
I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes / No
I understand the information provided	Yes / No
I understand the information provided in relation to data protection	Yes / No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes / No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes / No
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped	Yes / No
I am aware that participants' data will be pseudonymised prior to the publication of the research report.	Yes / No

Participation in all aspects of the research is voluntary, and participants can withdraw from the study and any stage during the process by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Any data that has been collected will be deleted.

While every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed by the researcher and can only be protected within the limitations of the law, *i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.*

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participant's Signature: ______________________________

Name in Block Capitals: ______________________________

Witness:______________________________

Date:______________________________

Appendix I: Informed Consent Form (staff)

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent Form (staff focus group)

The title of the research project is 'Exploring the degree to which students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged feel a sense of belonging in higher education, focusing on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process'. The research is being conducted by Karina Curley under the supervision of Dr Fiona King and Dr Elizabeth Mathews to fulfil the requirements for a Doctorate in Education in DCU.

Participation will involve attending an in-person focus group in the DCU, Glasnevin campus, which will be audio recorded. Following the focus group, the audio recording will be transcribed and the transcription stored digitally as a password-encrypted file on DCU Google Drive. Following transcription, the audio recording will be immediately deleted. The focus group will last one hour and will take place in autumn 2023. Participation in all aspects of the research is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study and any stage during the process.

Personal non-sensitive data will be collected from participants and processed as part of this research process.

- The Data Controller for the research is Dublin City University. This study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- The DCU Data Protection Officer is Mr Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie /Ph: 01 7005118 or 01 7008257).
- The personal data will be collected and processed for research purposes only.
- The types of personal data to be processed are: Informed Consent Forms, audio-recording from the focus group and de-identified transcripts,
- The anonymised data will be retained for a maximum period of five years after the research has been completed.
- Research participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process prior to publication of the final report by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Any data that has been collected will be immediately deleted.

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I understand that Karina Curley is the data controller	Yes / No
I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes / No
I understand the information provided	Yes / No
I understand the information provided in relation to data protection	Yes / No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes / No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes / No
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped	Yes / No
I am aware that participants' data will be anonymised prior to the publication of the research report.	Yes / No

Participation in all aspects of the research is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study and any stage during the process by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Any data that has been collected will be deleted.

While every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed by the researcher and can only be protected within the limitations of the law *i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions".*

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participant's Signature: ______________________________

Name in Block Capitals: ______________________________

Witness:______________________________

Date:______________________________

Appendix J: Plain Language Statement (students)

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

My name is Karina Curley, and I am a third-year student on the Doctor of Education programme in the Institute of Education, DCU. As part of my studies, I am undertaking research to explore the degree to which students who experience social and economic disadvantage feel a sense of belonging in higher education. My study will focus on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process. The research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Fiona King and Dr Elizabeth Mathews in the School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU. Ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

The research will give voice to students who seldom have the opportunity to share their stories with people who can influence policy and practice. These stories will enhance how belonging is understood and experienced in university and help to promote a more inclusive higher education environment where every student feels a sense of belonging.

Privacy Notice
As part of this research project, personal sensitive data will be collected from participants and processed in accordance with DCU's Data Protection Guidelines.

- The Data Controller for the research is Dublin City University. This study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- The DCU Data Protection Officer is Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie /Ph: 01 7005118 or 01 7008257).
- The personal data will be collected and processed for research purposes only.
- The types of personal data to be processed are: Informed Consent Forms, Expression of Interest forms, focus group and interview audio recordings, de-identified transcripts, hard copies and photographs of student books.
- The pseudonymised digital data will be retained for a maximum period of five years after the research has been completed. As soon as the research report has been completed, hard copies of data will be returned to participants, if desired, or alternatively shredded.
- Any participant has the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission.
- Participants have the right to access their own personal data. Please contact the researcher (karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie) or alternatively by contacting DCU's Data Protection Unit.
- Research participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process prior to publication of the final report by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Any data that has been collected will be immediately deleted.
- Personal data will be used, at a later date, in pseudonymised form with all potential identifiers removed for publishing the research results.

This study will generate data in two formats: hard copies and digital copies. The hard copy data will be generated during the focus group activity and returned to participants, if desired, or shredded on completion of the final report. The hard copy data will be photographed with photos retained along with the other digital data for a maximum period of five years.

Participation will involve completing an Expression of Interest form, attending a preparatory meeting, participating in a two-hour focus group and attending a follow-on meeting. Students who participate in

the focus group can self-select to participate in a one-hour walking interview on campus. Participants for the interview will be selected to ensure representation across gender, age, nationality, educational background and programme of study. Meetings, group discussions and interviews will be auto-recorded. The focus group activities will not be recorded. The preparatory meeting, focus group and follow-on meeting will require a total time commitment of four hours. The interview will last for one hour. Data will be collected between March and June 2023 with the follow-on meeting scheduled for autumn 2023. Participation in all aspects of the research is voluntary.

While every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed by the researcher and can only be protected within the limitations of the law, *i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.*

If any students experience any adverse effects from participating in the study, they can contact the researcher or the DCU Research Ethics Committee through the details provided below. Additionally, students can contact Student Support & Development (student.support@dcu.ie) for further information about student supports in DCU.

Further queries on this research project can be addressed to the principal researcher Karina Curley by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Queries or issues can also be addressed to Dr Fiona King (fiona.king@dcu.ie) or Dr Elizabeth (elizabeth.mathews@dcu.ie).

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie.

Appendix K: Plain Language Statement (staff)

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

My name is Karina Curley, and I am a third-year student on the Doctor of Education programme in the Institute of Education, DCU. As part of my studies, I am undertaking research to explore the degree to which socioeconomically disadvantaged students feel a sense of belonging in higher education. My study will focus on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process. The research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Fiona King and Dr Elizabeth Mathews in the School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU.

The research will give voice to students who seldom have the opportunity to share their stories with people who can influence policy and practice. These stories will enhance how belonging is understood and experienced in university and help to promote a more inclusive higher education environment where every student feels a sense of belonging.

Privacy Notice
As part of this research project, personal, non-sensitive data will be collected from participants and processed in accordance with DCU's Data Protection Guidelines.

- The Data Controller for the research is Dublin City University. This study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- The DCU Data Protection Officer is Mr Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie /Ph: 01 7005118 or 01 7008257).
- The personal data will be collected and processed for research purposes only.
- The types of personal data to be processed are: Informed Consent Forms, audio-recording from focus groups and de-identified transcripts,
- The anonymised data will be retained for a maximum of five years after completing the research.
- Personal data will be used in anonymised form at a later date, with all potential identifiers removed for publishing the research results.

The focus group will take place in person on the DCU Glasnevin campus and will be audio recorded. Following the focus group, the audio recording will be transcribed, and the transcription will be stored digitally as a password-encrypted file on DCU Google Drive. Following transcription, the audio recording will be deleted. The focus group will last one hour and take place In autumn 2023. Participation in all aspects of the research is voluntary, and participants can withdraw from the study at any stage.

While every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, the researcher cannot always guarantee confidentiality and can only be protected within the limitations of the law *i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.*

If any participant experiences any adverse effects from participating in the study, they can contact the researcher or the DCU Research Ethics Committee through the details provided below. Additionally, students can contact Student Support & Development (student.support@dcu.ie) for further information about student support in DCU.

Further queries on this research project can be addressed to the principal researcher Karina Curley by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Queries or issues can also be addressed to Dr Fiona King (fiona.king@dcu.ie) or Dr Elizabeth (elizabeth.mathews@dcu.ie).

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie.

Appendix L: Expression of interest form (students)

Privacy Notice
As part of this research project, personal sensitive data will be collected from participants and processed in accordance with DCU's Data Protection Guidelines.

- The Data Controller for the research is Dublin City University. This study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- The DCU Data Protection Officer is Mr Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie /Ph: 01 7005118 or 01 7008257).
- The personal data will be collected and processed for research purposes only.
- The types of personal data to be processed are:
    - Name
    - Email address
    - Age group
    - Nationality
    - Ethnicity
    - Information about the funding source for university
    - Information about family links with higher education
- The personal data will be retained until the final hard-bound copy of the thesis has been submitted and then it will be shredded.
- Any participant has the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission.
- Participants have the right to access their own personal data. Please contact the researcher (karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie) or alternatively by contacting DCU's Data Protection Unit.
- Research participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process prior to publication of the final report by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Any data that has been collected will be immediately deleted.
- Personal data will be used, at a later date, in pseudonymised form with all potential identifiers removed for publishing the research results.

DCU shall only process such data for the purpose for which you provide it. You have the right to withdraw your consent to processing and to access any data you submit on request. While every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed by the researcher and can only be protected within the limitations of the law, *i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.*

If any students experience any adverse effects from participating in the study, they can contact the researcher or the DCU Research Ethics Committee through the details provided below. Additionally, students can contact Student Support & Development (student.support@dcu.ie) for further information about student support in DCU.

Further queries on this research project can be addressed to the principal researcher Karina Curley by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Queries or issues can also be addressed to Dr Fiona King (fiona.king@dcu.ie) or Dr Elizabeth (elizabeth.mathews@dcu.ie).

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Name of study: Exploring the degree to which students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged feel a sense of belonging in higher education, focusing on ethnic minorities, including migrants, refugees and students who have experience of the international protection process.

Name of researcher: Karina Curley

By participating in this research, you will be sharing your thoughts and ideas about belonging in DCU. Your opinions and experiences will enhance how we understand belonging in the University and have the potential to inform future developments and promote a more inclusive higher education environment.

1. **Name**:

2. **What is your student email address**?

3. **What is your age group?**
   18-22
   23-32
   33-42
   43-52
   53-62
   63+

4. **Nationality:**
   a. If you have more than one nationality, please declare them all.

5. **Place of birth**:

6. **What is your gender**?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other

7. **How do you describe your ethnicity**?

8. **Are you in receipt of the following (please tick)**
   a. SUSI grant
   b. International Protection Scheme (for Further & Higher Education Students)
   c. Scholarship
   d. Other

If you are not eligible for State support, please give a reason.

9. Are you the first in your family to attend higher education?
If not, please explain:

Appendix M: Debriefing for student focus group

- Invite students to come back together and form a circle.
- General check-in is needed to see how everyone is doing.
- Thank participants for engaging in the focus group.
- Outline the next stages of the research.
- Close by asking each participant to share one word that comes to mind when they think about today's focus group.
- Remind participants of available support and circulate the sheet with the contact details of relevant support. The sheet will contain a list of relevant internal and external support to DCU and reminds that further queries on this research project can be addressed to the principal researcher, Karina Curley, by emailing karina.curley2@mail.dcu.ie. Queries or issues can also be addressed to Dr Fiona King (fiona.king@dcu.ie) or Dr Elizabeth (elizabeth.mathews@dcu.ie).

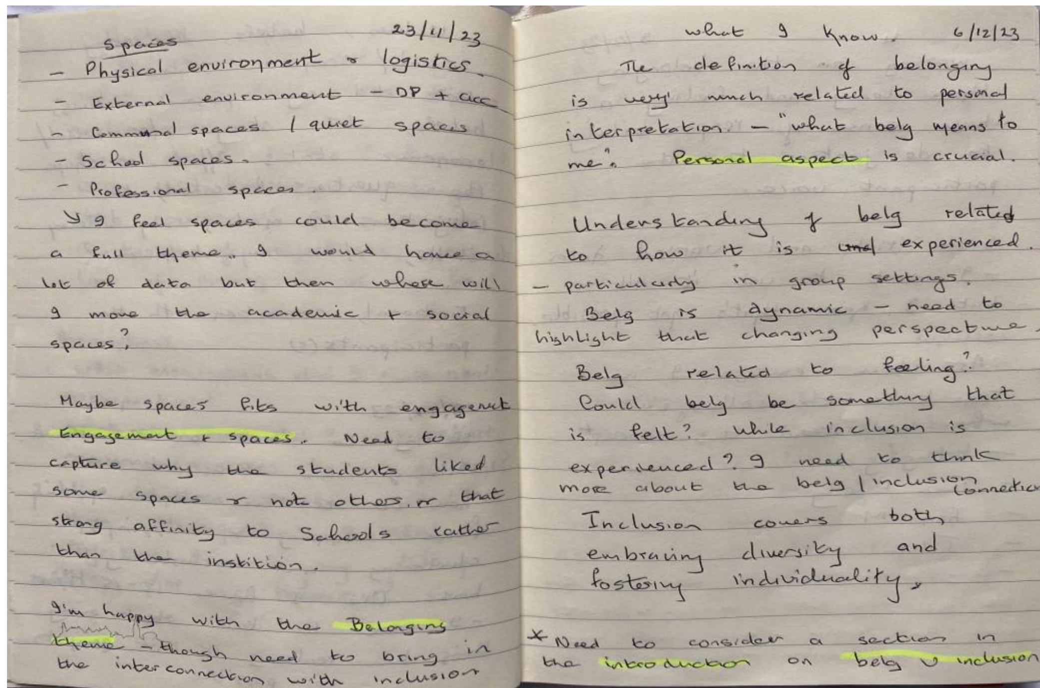
Appendix N: Research audit

Pseudonym	Stored	Date & place of data gathering	EoI forms	ICF - signed	Transcript	Transcript summary	Member checking	Book scanned	Coding NVivo
Daniel	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 1 in-person Glasnevin campus 3/04/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cormac	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 1 in-person Glasnevin campus 3/04/2024	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 1	Yes	No reply	Yes	Yes
Rose	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Walking interview 1 In-person Glasnevin campus 11/04/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 1	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes
Lexy	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Walking interview 2 in-person Glasnevin campus 11/04/2024	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 2	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes
Andrei	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Walking interview 7 In-person Glasnevin campus 15/062025	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 7	no	No	N/A	Yes
Elena	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 4 online 1/06/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Pseudonym	Stored	Date & place of data gathering	EoI forms	ICF - signed	Transcript	Transcript summary	Member checking	Book scanned	Coding NVivo
Seun	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 5 in-person SPC 6/06/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 5	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mona	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 5 in-person SPC 6/06/2024	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 5	No	No reply	Yes	Yes
AJ	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 2 in-person Glasnevin campus 14/04//2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Charlie	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Walking interview 6 in-person SPC 8/06/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 6	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes
Eva	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Walking interview 5 in-person Glasnevin campus 7/06/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 5	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes
Jennifer	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	"Walking" interview 4 online 9/05/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 4	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
Jay	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 4 online 1/06/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Pseudonym	Stored	Date & place of data gathering	EoI forms	ICF - signed	Transcript	Transcript summary	Member checking	Book scanned	Coding NVivo
Mira	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 3 in-person Glasnevin campus 8/05/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mai	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 3 in-person Glasnevin campus 8/05/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Joy	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 2 in-person Glasnevin campus 14/04//2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Moe	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Focus group 2 in-person Glasnevin campus 14/04//2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - focus group 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Withdrew	~~GD/ Completed data gathering student documents~~	~~Focus group 4 online 1/06/2023~~	~~Yes~~	~~Yes~~	~~Yes - focus group 4~~	~~Yes~~	~~No reply~~	~~Yes~~	~~N/A~~
Cleopatra	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	Walking interview 3 in-person Glasnevin campus 25/04/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 3	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes
Tisha	GD/ Completed data gathering student documents	"Walking" interview 8 online 25/07/2023	Yes	Yes	Yes - walking interview 8	No	No reply	N/A	Yes

Appendix O: Sample of reflexive journal entries



Spaces 23/11/23
- Physical environment & logistics.
- External environment - DP + acc
- Communal spaces / quiet spaces
- School spaces.
- Professional spaces.

I feel spaces could become a full theme. I would have a lot of data but then where will I move the academic & social spaces?

Maybe spaces fits with engagement
Engagement & spaces. Need to capture why the students liked some spaces & not others, & that strong affinity to Schools rather than the institution.

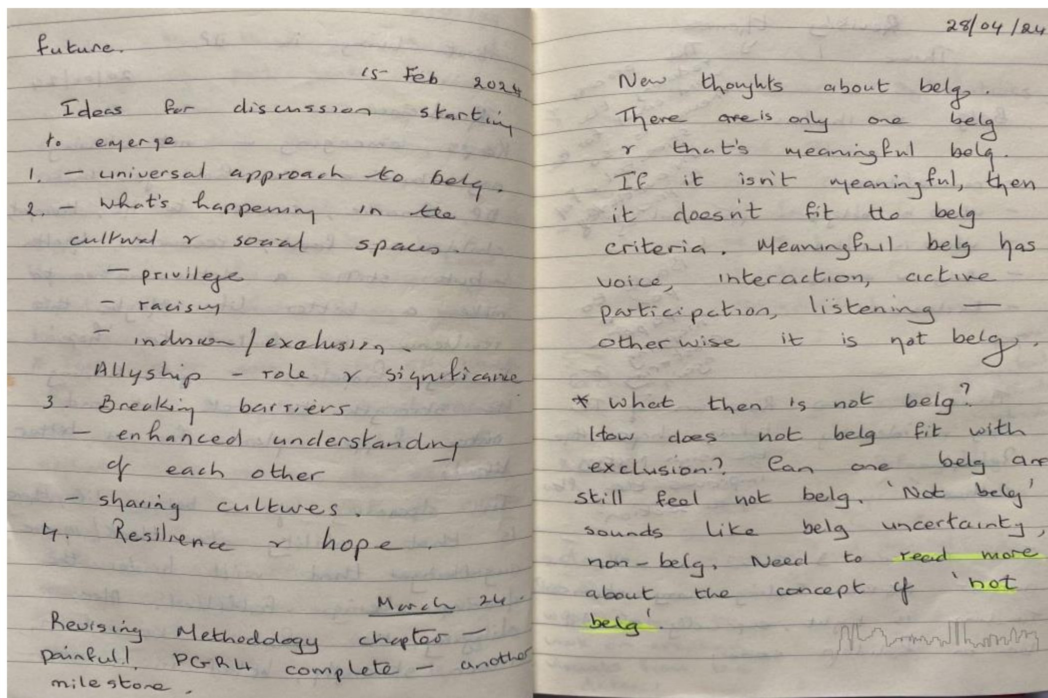
I'm happy with the Belonging theme - though need to bring in the interconnection with inclusion

what I know. 6/12/23

The definition of belonging is very much related to personal interpretation. - "what belg means to me". Personal aspect is crucial.

Understanding of belg related to how it is experienced. - particularly in group settings.
Belg is dynamic - need to highlight that changing perspective.
Belg related to feeling? Could belg be something that is felt? while inclusion is experienced? I need to think more about the belg / inclusion connection
Inclusion covers both embracing diversity and fostering individuality.

* Need to consider a section in the introduction on belg & inclusion.



future.

15 Feb 2024
Ideas for discussion starting to emerge
1. - universal approach to belg.
2. - what's happening in the cultural & social spaces.
   - privilege
   - racism
   - inclusion / exclusion.
   Allyship - role & significance
3. Breaking barriers
   - enhanced understanding of each other
   - sharing cultures.
4. Resilience & hope.

March 24.
Revising Methodology chapter - painful! PGRH complete - another milestone.

28/04/24
New thoughts about belg.
There are is only one belg & that's meaningful belg. If it isn't meaningful, then it doesn't fit the belg criteria. Meaningful belg has voice, interaction, active participation, listening - otherwise it is not belg.

* What then is not belg? How does not belg fit with exclusion? Can one belg and still feel not belg. 'Not belg' sounds like belg uncertainty, non-belg. Need to read more about the concept of 'not belg'.

Appendix P: Themes from 10 Words Question

Themes	Description
Support	‘Support’ featured most frequently in the responses, with some respondents listing ‘support’, while others clarified the type of support, for example, counselling, student advice and financial support. This broad theme also includes support provided by academic staff. In follow-on discussions, participants explained that the inclusivity of the supports was important, even if students did not avail of the supports, knowing that they had access to the support was crucial to belonging. Support also encapsulated sentiments such as encouragement, access to services, communications and study groups. While communications did not feature prominently in the responses, some students were keen to highlight its significance as an indicator of inclusive practice, citing positive examples such as the regular all-student emails with information about exams and activities.
Personal	This theme captured words associated with the personal dimension of belonging, such as acceptance, recognition, valued, respect and happy.
Academic	This theme encompassed words associated with the academic dimension, for example, laboratory, lectures, lecturers, knowledge, projects, campus, and group work. It also includes the physical campus and facilities. Some participants believed that access to quality lectures and facilities fosters a sense of belonging.
Social Activities	Social activities covered formal participation in clubs to less structured social engagement. It also included friends, social networks and casual interactions formed during their time at university. It included words such as clubs, social activities, involvement and sports.
Opportunities	Opportunities encompassed a wide variety of words related to future possibilities, such as reward, hope, opportunity, career progression, investment or progression. It also included personal development. The discussions related to this theme focused on the belief that looking forward to a brighter future instilled a sense of belonging. The frequency of words in this theme indicate its significance for students.
Safety	This theme covered safety, security, stability and freedom. For many participants safety meant safe from war or persecution, while security in this context related to the reassurance that they would remain safe. Freedom encompassed the freedom to be yourself and the freedom to speak without fear of reprisal. For students fleeing war and persecution, feeling safe was of primary significance.
Inclusion	This broad theme encompassed words linking an inclusive environment with a sense of belonging. Words under this theme included concepts such as equality, freedom, integration, diversity as well as no racism or judgement.

Appendix Q: Applying codes to raw data extract

Extract of raw data	Coded for	Code applied to data	Linked themes
So you want to engage and want to make new friends and all sorts - that was the hard part. But I think somewhere along the lines, for me anyway, it just worked out that we all made friends nicely. All the 19-year-olds. And now, like we're super good friends with them. And that's it - they're in their 20s now, so it was just - [Laugh] (Cormac, SFG)	Desire to make friends from the start Speaks positively about the friendships formed	Friends or classmates - positive	Theme 3 (Social engagement)
Now I want to move from the place where I live, which sometimes it seems like it doesn't influence, but it does - because in my relationship with my friends, I cannot just tell them "Oh, look. I came in here as an asylum seeker" - you never know how people are going to look at you. (Jennifer, SOI)	Living accommodation Impact of living in DP	Issues with accommodation	Theme 3 (External environment)
This is an amazing building, and I like it because it really gives me hope. And it really shows me that there is a brighter future for me with my education. I always feel comfortable here as well. (Cleopatra, SWI)	Significance of school buildings to student Indications of a brighter future	Affinity to schools in the University	Theme 3 (Institutional spaces)
So I feel like also the language barrier plays a big role in belonging as well. So it takes time, it does really take time, but you get used to it. (Eva, SWI)	Language as a barrier to belonging Difficulties with language improve with time	Language	Theme 2 (Language)