

Six Years of (Un)Belonging: Enhancing Student Belonging and Educational Outcomes at the University of Westminster: A Review of Institutional Research, 2019-20 to 2024-25

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Summary

This report synthesises six years of internal research (2019–20 to 2024–25) on student sense of belonging at the University of Westminster, integrating findings from institutional surveys, qualitative studies, and a bespoke survey on co-curricular participation. It provides the first consolidated institutional evidence base on how belonging is experienced, what shapes it, and how it relates to student outcomes.

Overall, student belonging at Westminster is **present but fragile**. While most students report some sense of community, levels consistently fall below sector benchmarks and show limited sustained improvement over time. Belonging is highly valued by students, yet unevenly distributed, often dependent on individual circumstances, access to opportunities, and localised experiences rather than consistently embedded institutional practices.

The report identifies belonging as a **multidimensional and relational process** shaped by four core domains:

- **Peer connection and social integration**, which form the primary pathway through which belonging develops.

- **Academic integration and staff–student relationships**, which legitimise belonging within the learning environment.
- **Identity and inclusion**, where belonging is strengthened when students feel recognised and represented.
- **Co-curricular participation**, including societies, sports, and representative roles, which provide structured opportunities for sustained engagement and connection.

These domains operate within **structural constraints** – such as commuting, part-time study, employment, and cost-of-living pressures – which significantly shape access to belonging. As a result, certain groups (e.g., part-time students, commuters, mature students) experience systematically lower levels of belonging due to misalignment between institutional provision and lived realities.

Belonging is strongly linked to **wellbeing and educational outcomes**, but primarily as a *protective and enabling factor* rather than a direct determinant. Students with stronger belonging report higher motivation, engagement, and resilience, while weaker belonging amplifies the impact of financial, academic, and mental health challenges and increases the risk of disengagement. However, belonging alone does not guarantee success, and some student groups achieve positive outcomes despite limited institutional attachment.

The findings suggest that improving belonging requires a shift from isolated interventions to **whole-system design**, embedding belonging across curriculum, pedagogy, support, and student life. The report concludes that belonging should be positioned as both:

- a **core indicator of educational quality**, and
- a **mechanism for improving continuation, attainment, and wellbeing outcomes**.

Key implications include the need to:

- Embed belonging within course design and academic practice,
- Strengthen structured staff–student engagement,
- Redesign co-curricular opportunities as inclusive “belonging infrastructures,” and
- Address structural barriers rather than focusing solely on individual student deficits.

Introduction

The concept of student belonging encompasses the emotional and social integration of students within their academic environment. Having a strong sense of belonging has been demonstrated as important for student success, influencing educational outcomes, retention rates, and overall well-being.¹ Research has shown that high levels of belonging are associated with increased motivation, academic self-confidence, and engagement.² Sense of belonging is particularly important for first-generation students.³ In the case of online education, the implementation of belongingness strategies have been shown to improve student performance metrics.⁴ Other studies have shown the statistically significant impact of belonging interventions on student retention.⁵ Thus, the wider literature illustrates a positive association between fostering a sense of belonging and its broader educational and social impact. However, it was identified that no comprehensive review of existing *internal* research into localised factors influencing student sense of belonging and its outcomes had been conducted.

Over the past five academic years, the University of Westminster (Westminster) has generated a substantial body of research concerning student sense of belonging and related educational outcomes. However, this research remains scattered and siloed. This research rectifies that situation via conduct of an aggregation and analysis of relevant internal studies for the academic years 2019-20 to 2024-25.

Rationale and Aim

Rationale

¹ Karen F. Osterman, "Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community," *Review of Educational Research*, 70, no.3 (2000).

² Nadia Rehman A. Mahmood, Amir Mahmood, Irum Andleeb, Mussarat Iqbal and Xiao Huang, "Sense of Belonging and Retention in Higher Education: an Empirical Study across Chinese Universities," *Brazilian Journal of Education, Technology and Society* 16, no.4 (2023): 1067-1082; Megan Louise Pedlar, Royce Willis and Johanna Elizabeth Nieuwoudt, "A sense of belonging at university: student retention, motivation and enjoyment," *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 46, no.3 (2022): 397-408.

³ Pedlar, Royce and Nieuwoudt, "A sense of belonging at university."

⁴ David Bull, Ashley Johansen, Dawn Kaiser, Samirah Merritt-Myrick, Practice Nybro, Dan Santangelo, Lori Slater and James Tarr, "The effect of a belongingness strategy on online higher education student performance measures," *Cogent Education* 11, no.1 (2024): 1-15.

⁵ Andrew Alt, Yifei Li, Brigitte S. Gibson and Julia Mame Matuga. 2019. "The Impact of Social Belonging Interventions on Student Retention and Persistence in College." In: Proceedings of the 2019 AERA Annual Meeting: Supporting Low-income Students' College Transition: Factors Related to Sense of Belonging in the First Year, Toronto, Canada, 4 September 2019. American Educational Research Association.

Given the continued emphasis on enhancing student well-being and the plethora of information held by the University, now is an opportune moment to consolidate and analyse that data and make recommendations aimed at enhancing student wellbeing.

Aim

The primary aim of this project is to synthesise internal research findings as well as conduct and analyse a targeted survey to:

1. Describe institutional trends in student sense of belonging.
2. Identify the key factors influencing student belonging at Westminster.
3. Evaluate how involvement in student societies contributes to students' sense of belonging and educational outcomes.
4. Provide actionable recommendations to enhance the overall student experience and well-being based on the findings.

Research Questions

1. What factors influence student sense of belonging at Westminster?
2. What is the impact of student sense of belonging on educational outcomes at Westminster?
3. What is the impact of student sense of belonging on student well-being at Westminster?
4. What factors mediate the relationship between sense of belonging and educational outcomes at Westminster?
5. What interventions or programs improve students' sense of belonging in educational settings?

Strategic Alignment

This research is positioned to support the aims of key institutional strategies: 1) Access and Participation Plan (APP), 2025-26 to 2028-29, 2) Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and 3) *Education Strategy, 2023-2029*. In supporting the aims of the APP, the concept of sense of belonging has been foregrounded as a mechanism through which risks associated with continuation, academic attainment, degree completion, and progression can be addressed. The APP emphasises the need to move beyond a focus on access, ensuring attention is paid to sustained participation and equitable outcomes for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper demonstrates how the desire for strong peer networks and extracurricular opportunities foster a sense of belonging, encourage continuation, and

initiate discussions about employability. Furthermore, in positioning sense of belonging as an outcome and enabler of APP interventions, the paper provides insight informing the design, targeting, and evaluation of APP activities.⁶

Additionally, this paper speaks directly to the TEF's focus on student outcomes (i.e., continuation, completion, academic attainment, and progression into highly skilled employment or further study). The TEF recognises that excellent outcomes are underpinned not only by teaching quality, but also by the extent to which students feel supported and included and are therefore able to thrive within their learning environment – sense of belonging is a key component of this. In highlighting the relationship between sense of belonging and key outcomes, this research demonstrates how student understandings of support and inclusion intersect with curriculum design, support structures, and the availability and quality of extracurricular provision and shape engagement and ideation around continuation. In particular, the research complements the TEF's emphasis on educational gain, highlighting belonging as a form of social and educational capital that, over time, enhances students' academic engagement, resilience, and employability. The findings reinforce the value of inclusive teaching approaches, authentic assessment, and partnership with students and thus feed into institutional TEF narratives.⁷

Furthermore, the *Education Strategy's* commitment to delivering an inclusive, personalised and transformative educational experience aligns strongly with this paper. The *Strategy* acknowledges that, in addition to curriculum content, that confidence, connectedness and belonging are central to enabling all students to reach their full potential. In linking sense of belonging with continuation and progression, the paper provides an evidential underpinning for the *Strategy's* focus on inclusive curricula, authentic learning, and student partnership. The link to employability and progression is provided by the demonstration of how belonging facilitates access to networks, opportunities, and identity formation that are critical for graduate success.⁸

Thus, by evidencing the drivers of (un)belonging and how these interact with ideation about (non-)continuation, this paper reinforces the overall aims of the APP whilst offering evidence and

⁶ University of Westminster, *Access and Participation Plan, 2025-26 to 2028-29* (University of Westminster). <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/sites/default/public-files/general-documents/access-and-participation-plan-2025-26-to-2028-29.pdf>.

⁷ Office for Students, *Regulatory advice 22: Guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023* (Office for Students). https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/7722/ra22-tef-framework-guidance-final_for_web.pdf.

⁸ University of Westminster, *Education Strategy, 2023-2029* (University of Westminster). <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/sites/default/public-files/general-documents/Education%20Strategy%202023%20-%202029.pdf>.

language that can be used to strengthen future TEF submissions. In addition, it provides actionable insights to support delivery of the *Education Strategy*.

Method and Methodology

Rapid Evidence Assessment

In light of current institutional priorities around student continuation, wellbeing and equality of opportunity, a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) was used to synthesise relevant internal research. An REA was considered more suitable than a full systemic review given the focused, institution-specific nature of the available evidence – covering academic years 2019-20 to 2024-25 – and the study’s emphasis on identifying key patterns, insights, and implications to inform policy and practice. Data was included or excluded based on a set of pre-defined criteria (see Figure 1). Thematic Analysis was identified as an effective way to extract recurring themes from the data and pinpoint gaps within our institutional research.⁹

Figure 1. REA Protocol

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Date	Research written up or published in the academic years 2019-20 to 2024-25.	Research written up pre-2019-20.
Demographics	Studies related to students either currently or formerly enrolled at Westminster taking Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, Foundation Year, Undergraduate and/or Postgraduate (Taught and/or Research) courses. Research may relate to Home and/or International students.	Studies relating exclusively to non-Westminster students or pre-HE study (i.e., secondary school).
Language of study	Studies written or published in English.	Non-English studies.
Methods and Methodologies	Quantitative (e.g., longitudinal, cross-sectional, experimental), qualitative (e.g., interviews, focus groups), or mixed-methods research.	Studies with weak or no empirical design.
Publication Type	Institutional research/reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, reflective essays, unpublished dissertations, grey literature.	Blog and/or social media posts.

⁹ Victoria Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using thematic analysis in psychology”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no.2 (2006): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Content	Studies investigating sense of belonging, sense of belonging interventions (i.e., mentoring, peer support programs), as well as research at the intersection of belonging and educational outcomes (i.e., academic performance, retention, motivation, engagement, etc.).	Studies that do not investigate sense of belonging or educational outcomes.
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Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data extraction and quality assessment followed a standardised pathway (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Component	Details
Standard data extracted	1. Author(s) name(s) 2. Year of publication 3. Study design (i.e., research strategy, methods and methodology) 4. Sample size 5. Student study level (i.e., Foundation, UG, PGT, PGR, etc.) 6. Measures of belonging, if used 7. Outcome measures (i.e., assessment/final grades, retention rates, etc.) 8. Key findings 9. Study limitations
Quality Assessment Tool	Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for qualitative and quantitative studies ¹⁰
Quality criteria	1. Methodological rigour 2. Sample size adequacy 3. Data analysis appropriateness 4. Relevance to the research question

Student Society and Sports Club Spotlight Study

Additionally, the study integrates findings from a bespoke survey investigating education and well-being outcomes concerning student society and sports members/leaders, and as those in course representative or FANS roles. The survey was distributed to members and officers of student societies through the University of Westminster Student Union (UWSU) to explore how participation in these communities shaped student sense of belonging and how it influenced educational and well-being outcomes. The survey collected participant demographics and data

¹⁰ http://mixedmethodsappraisaltoolpublic.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/127916259/MMAT_2018_criteria-manual_2018-08-01_ENG.pdf

about levels of engagement, and self-reported perceptions of belonging, well-being, and educational outcomes. Findings were written up as a narrative synthesis detailing how membership and/or leadership roles in student societies contributed to overall sense of belonging, well-being, and educational outcomes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Literature Review:

For the literature review, internal documents were collected from the university's academic departments, professional and student services, and other sources:

1. The Virtual Research Environment was searched to identify papers related to sense of belonging.
2. A message was sent via Viva Engage asking colleagues to highlight or email across relevant projects/research.
3. Targeted emails were sent to selected colleagues, such as the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation.

The search for institutional research concerning sense of belonging and educational outcomes returned 15 items. The nature of these items varied considerably in terms of method and methodology (see Sources).

Data Analysis:

1. Qualitative data from the literature review and surveys was synthesised into thematic categories. Data was then analysed thematically using NVivo 14.
2. Using Microsoft Excel as a tabulation and visualisation tool, quantitative survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns relating to sense of belonging.

Sources

This report draws on a wide range of surveys, including the National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES, 2024), International Student Barometer (ISB), Check-in Survey, Transformation in Students Survey (TiSS), and Engaged Students Survey (ESS). The methodologies of each survey enabled some but precluded other forms of analysis. Some collect data by the term, some annually, while others allow a greater period to elapse between iterations. For example, the Check-in Survey – a UWSU conducted, termly survey capturing student views on a broad range of topics – used repeated cross-sectional data allowing observation of population trends, while the absence of attrition bias means that the results can

be used to make generalisations as new participants are always included. However, longitudinal analysis has not been possible as there is no way to identify who responded from term-to-term. As such, while we can discuss population-level changes in sense of belonging, we cannot say if an individual student's sense of belonging has increased/decreased over time.¹¹

It is helpful to provide a brief description of the surveys analysed for this report. The NSS is an annual and anonymous UK-wide survey for final-year undergraduate students to share feedback on their experience of higher education (HE).¹² The PTES captures feedback on the learning and teaching experiences of taught postgraduates.¹³ Along similar lines, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) is a national survey that gathers information about the experience of any research student on a doctoral or research master's course – the PRES includes questions concerning community.¹⁴ In addition, UWSU designed and delivered the ESS in collaboration with the Institutional Research Team (IRT), providing valuable data on how students perceive the effects of various roles.¹⁵ Furthermore, the paper draws on the fourth wave of the TiSS, conducted in the first semester of 2024-25. The TiSS focuses on 'the added value of attending the University of Westminster' (i.e., educational gain). The survey asks students for the extent to which they agree with 48 statements across 11 groupings, including sense of belonging/engagement, on a 5-point Likert rating scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". This survey was distributed to first, second and final-year students. Since 2021-22, the TiSS has been sent to these students annually.¹⁶ In every case, surveys captured numerical and text data. Each survey question was reviewed by the researcher for relevance to sense of belonging and educational outcomes.

Beyond surveys, a variety of qualitative data sources informed this study, including peer-reviewed journal articles, pilot and project reports, as well as reflexive essays from a Westminster doctoral student.

¹¹ There is a very small population in the TiSS that this could be calculated for. However, response rates for the TiSS have hovered around 5%. As such, the sample size is not large enough to have confidence in extrapolation from the data.

¹² For more information, see <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about-the-nss/>.

¹³ For more information, see <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-ptes>.

¹⁴ Three questions in the 2023 PRES addressed "Community". Students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 1) I feel part of a community of postgraduate research students, 2) I feel a sense of belonging at my institutions, 3) There are sufficient opportunities to interact with other postgraduate research students. For more information, see <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/postgraduate-research-experience-survey-pres>.

¹⁵ Roles include student society member or leader, sports club member or leader, course representative, and FANS (Friends of Arriving New Students).

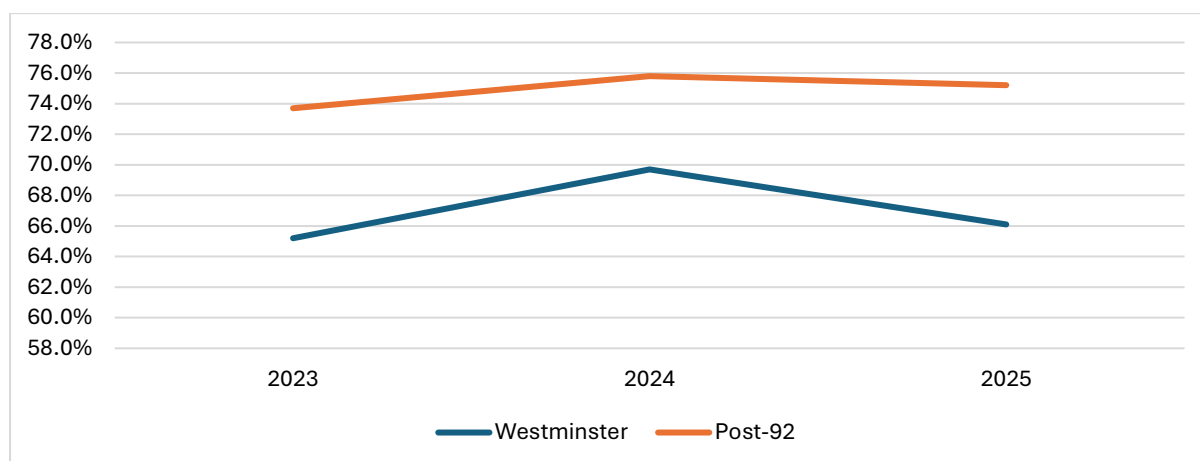
¹⁶ Kirsty Bryant, 'Transformation in Students Survey – Colleague Summary'.

Findings

1. Sense of Belonging at Westminster – Overall Patterns and Trends

At an institutional level, internal survey data presents a broadly consistent picture of student belonging over time: most students report feeling some sense of belonging or community, but at levels that remain persistently below sector benchmarks, specifically other Post-1992 institutions. For example, the 2025 PTES results show that 66.1% of postgraduate respondents felt a sense of belonging to Westminster. This figure was 3.6 percentage points down on the previous year (69.7%) but represents a 0.9% increase on 2023 (Figure 3). The results of Wave 4 of the TiSS indicate that 58.8% of Level 4 and 58.7% of Level 6 students agreed with the sense of belonging-related statements across this grouping.¹⁷ Analysis of these sources as well as NSS and Check-in Survey¹⁸ data indicate incremental movement on belonging, reflecting sensitivity to contextual factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in delivery mode, or cohort composition, but without any sustained upward or downward trajectory.¹⁹ Where declines are observed, they are typically shallow and shared across multiple groups, reinforcing the interpretation that belonging is shaped, to a significant extent, by institution-wide conditions rather than isolated demographic effects. Thus, belonging can be seen as a structural or systemic challenge.

Figure 3. I feel a sense of belonging at my institution (%), Westminster relative to Post-92 benchmark (PTES)



¹⁷ The sense of belonging/engagement grouping including the following statements: a) I feel I have a deep sense of belonging at university, b) I feel included by my peers at university, c) I feel connected to staff at university, and d) I feel my university is a compassionate environment.

¹⁸ Check-in Survey results – covering seven terms from 2021-22 to 2024-25 – on reported levels of belonging are similar for each college: Design, Creative and Digital Industries (now the College of Creative Arts and Technology (CAT)) (67.0%); Liberal Arts and Sciences (69.9%); and Westminster Business School (67.3%).

¹⁹ For example, one respondent commented: '[I was] going crazy cooped up in my home with people who are no[t] in the same boat as me. It was extremely isolating[.]' ID124CIS/CW/T22022122.

Feeling a sense of belonging to Westminster is important to many students. For example, for terms 1-3 in 2021-22 of the Check-in Survey, and using a three-point scale – “not important”, “somewhat important” or “very important” – the proportion of respondents who selected either “somewhat important” or “very important” in response to the question “How important is it for you to feel a sense of community at University?” ranged from 96.5% (School of Finance and Accounting) to 100.0% (School of Organisations, Economy and Society). For term 1, 2022-23 to term 1, 2024-25, the average proportion of respondents selecting “somewhat important” or “very important” on a five-point scale was 89.9%. The School of Applied Management reported the lowest level of agreement (84.1%) while the highest reported level was found in the School of Finance and Accounting (92.7%). This suggests that belonging *matters* to a sizeable proportion of students. As such – and given its interconnections with regulatory requirements and strategic goals – belonging is a salient issue.

Qualitative commentary adds important texture to these aggregated trends. Numerous responses to the Check-in Survey concur that the sense of community it engendered was a strength of Westminster.²⁰ Positive responses frequently emphasise Westminster’s friendliness, diversity, and informal sense of community, with students valuing the perception of a welcoming and inclusive environment. One expressed that the University possessed a ‘family[-]like spirit’.²¹ References to making friends on course and during extracurricular activities, feeling part of something larger, or appreciating the University’s multicultural character suggest that belonging is often grounded in interpersonal interactions rather than formal institutional structures.²² These narratives support the quantitative finding that belonging exists, but that it is largely *relational* and *contingent*.

At the same time, critical and ambivalent responses highlight the limits of such forms of belonging. Students commonly describe belonging as dependent on individual effort, chance encounters, or engagement in specific activities, rather than as something embedded consistently across the student experience. Additionally, whilst ideation about withdrawing or interrupting studies cannot necessarily be read as an absence of belonging, it can provide helpful insight into factors that *may* undermine belonging. Overall, 25.6% responded “Yes” to the question “Have you considered withdrawing, interrupting or deferring your studies since starting

²⁰ CIS/T1202122; CIS/T1202223; CIS/T2202223; CIS/T3202223; CIS/T1202324; CIS/T2202324; and CIS/T1202425

²¹ ID302CIS/T1202324.

²² Check-in Survey, Term 1, 2021-22; Term 1, 2022-23; Term 2, 2022-23; Term 3, 2022-23; Term 1, 2023-24; Term 2, 2024-23; and Term 1, 2024-25.

University?”²³ Some of these responses can be mapped to sense of belonging. For instance, comments discussed feelings of isolation and loneliness, lack of connection beyond the course, or uncertainty about how to access wider university life; others cited responsibilities outside Westminster (e.g., work).²⁴ Figure 4 tabulates the breakdown by college and school level, revealing considerable variation. At the college level, CAT occupies several of the higher ranks, while WBS occupies some of the lowest. Furthermore, at the school level, an average of one third of respondents from the School of Arts, School of Media and Communication, and School of Social Sciences report that they had considered either withdrawing, interrupting, or deferring their studies between term 1, 2021-22 and term 1, 2024-25. Taken together, these accounts suggest that Westminster provides multiple possible routes to belonging, but that access to these routes is uneven.

Figure 4. Have you considered withdrawing...? Term 1, 2021-22 to Term, 2024-25 (Check-in Survey) (School)

College	School	No (%)	Yes (%)	Rank (% Yes)
CAT	School of Architecture and Cities	72.1	27.9	5
CAT	School of Computer Science and Engineering	75.8	24.2	8
CAT	Westminster School of Arts	63.8	36.2	1
CAT	Westminster School of Media and Communication	65.8	34.2	3
LAS	School of Humanities	72.8	27.2	6
LAS	School of Life Sciences	80.1	19.9	10
LAS	School of Social Sciences	65.7	34.3	2
LAS	Westminster Law School	74.8	25.2	7
WBS	School of Applied Management	89.6	10.4	12
WBS	School of Finance and Accounting	83.9	16.1	11
WBS	School of Management and Marketing	78.3	21.7	9
WBS	School of Organisations, Economy and Society	70.3	29.7	4

Overall, the evidence indicates that student belonging at Westminster is best understood as *present but precarious*. Most students report some degree of attachment or community, yet institutional averages lag behind sector norms and remain vulnerable to disruption. Belonging is, thus, neither absent nor assured, but operates as a conditional outcome shaped by social, academic, and structural factors that are explored below.

²³ Check-in Survey, 2021-22 to 2024-25.

²⁴ Check-in Survey, Term 1, 2021-22; Term 2, 2021-22; Term 2, 2022-23; Term 1, 2023-24; ID158CIS/T2202223; ID122CIS/T3202223; and PTES (2024).

2. Social Integration, Peer Connection and Community Formation

Peer connection (i.e., how belonging happens) emerges as one of the most significant mechanisms through which students develop, sustain, or lose a sense of belonging at Westminster. Across surveys and qualitative evidence, social integration (i.e., what successful belonging looks like at scale) is repeatedly foregrounded as central to students' experiences, shaping not only how welcome they feel, but also how confident, supported, and embedded they become within the institution.

Quantitative data from the Check-in Survey indicates that a notable proportion of students identify challenges directly related to peer connection, including meeting new people, making friends, and feelings of loneliness or isolation (Figure 5). That the data sample is limited to a single term makes reaching any definitive conclusions difficult. Whether the challenges identified constitute a persistent structural issue or an isolated case cannot be inferred. Importantly, these experiences are not limited to a single stage of study; they appear – qualitatively – at transition points throughout the student lifecycle, including entry into university, movement between years, and progression into postgraduate study.

Figure 5. What challenges have you had at Westminster? (Check-in Survey, term 1, 2024-25)

Challenge	No	Yes	% Yes	Rank
Alcohol/Substance abuse	1,052	7	0.7	18
Getting on with those in my accommodation	1,037	22	2.1	17
Bullying/discrimination	1,027	32	3.0	16
Knowing where to find support	976	83	7.8	14
Living environment (accommodation and transport)	1,004	55	5.2	15
Homesickness/Loneliness	974	85	8.0	13
Relationships	972	87	8.2	12
Confidence to do the things I want	907	152	14.4	11
Securing relevant work placements	862	197	18.6	8
Meeting new people/making friends	849	210	19.8	7
Finding part-time work	780	279	26.3	3
Work/life balance	828	231	21.8	5
Making the most of my time at university	891	168	15.9	9
Coping with the course	904	155	14.6	10
Gaining the right skills/experience for my career	848	211	19.9	6
Mental health (e.g. stress and anxiety)	801	258	24.4	4
Having enough money to get by	655	404	38.1	1
Finding a job after graduation	765	294	27.8	2

Qualitative responses provide deeper insight into how peer connection is experienced in practice. Many students describe initial anxieties about not knowing anyone, fears of not “fitting in”, or uncertainty about where and how to form relationships. These anxieties are particularly pronounced among new starters, for whom the scale and perceived anonymity of university life can be daunting. The following remark is typical: ‘As a new student, my primary concern would

be the fear of not fitting in or finding a close-knit group of friends. The vastness of university life can be daunting, and the thought of navigating this new chapter without familiar faces is a bit nervous [sic].²⁵ In this context, belonging is often described not as an abstract institutional feeling, but as the outcome of small-scale, everyday interactions: conversations after class, shared activities, and repeated social contact over time.

However, the evidence also highlights that opportunities for such interaction are unevenly distributed. Students frequently report that peer connection is largely confined to their immediate course or class, with limited opportunities to meet students outside these settings. This is especially evident among postgraduate taught students, who often describe a lack of cross-course or cohort-wide interaction, and among postgraduate research students, whose subject-specific and independent modes of study can exacerbate isolation. For instance, one student commented that: ‘it isn’t easy to meet other post-graduates in different course[s].’²⁶ In these cases, the absence of shared social or academic spaces restricts the formation of wider peer networks and weakens students’ sense of being part of a broader university community: ‘For the university there are also various different communities but I feel there is no personal interaction as such so that could be a work in progress.’²⁷ However, it should be acknowledged that belonging is not a priority for some international PGT students, with course length – often only one year – shaping the prioritisation of study over building friendship groups or engaging with Westminster’s extracurricular offer.²⁸

Physical and organisational factors further shape peer interaction. Comments referencing the lack of suitable communal spaces on some campuses – Little Titchfield being mentioned specifically in this regard. Intersecting community formation and the physical environment, one PGR student wrote about the feeling of separation from other students at the same level: ‘the postgrad student community is very disconnected’.²⁹ This may partly own to the nature of doctoral study which, in its specificity, can be isolating: ‘My DOS [Director of Studies] is the most positive aspect of my experience as a PhD student...and has guided my research very well. However, I am dissatisfied with Westminster and my PhD programme because there is no shared space for encounters, discussions, debates and mutual learning among PhD students...This lack of sense

²⁵ ID228CIS/C/T1202324.

²⁶ PTES (2024).

²⁷ ID359ISB2022.

²⁸ Katherine Mansfield, ‘The acculturative experiences of International Students at the University of Westminster’ (University of Westminster, 2023):16.

²⁹ ID410CIS/T1202324.

of belonging has made my experience...very poor and not stimulating in academic and intellectual terms.’³⁰

Furthermore, logistical challenges such time pressures linked to commuting or employment, and timetabling that limits informal socialising all point to structural constraints on peer connection. Where students are unable to remain on campus beyond scheduled teaching, opportunities for spontaneous interaction and relationship-building are reduced: ‘The timings of everything is [sic] very late. Some society’s events could start at least at 4 (even 2 pm would be amazing), especially considering classes usually end at 1 on Wednesdays...As a Muslim and female student living at home I am often unable to attend societies and events even though I want to due to late timings of most things.’³¹ As a result, belonging becomes contingent on participation in specific activities or roles, rather than emerging organically from the everyday rhythm of student life.

Despite these barriers, the data also reveals the transformative potential of peer connection when it is successfully established. Students who report strong friendships or membership in peer groups often describe feeling more confident, supported, and motivated in their studies. For example, a student commented that: ‘These experiences [being an active member and leader of various societies] have not only enhanced my personal growth but have also helped me forge lasting relationships and feel a deeper connection the Westminster environment.’³² Another stated that such experiences ‘motivate...me to go to university regularly for classes knowing I have a society event at the end of the day’.³³ Phrased even more concisely: ‘I spend more time at campus’.³⁴ Peer relationships are frequently cited as sources of emotional reassurance, practical advice, and shared understanding, particularly during periods of academic or personal stress: ‘It’s not just about academic life anymore, and it’s about contribution to something that makes the university experience more prosperous and more fulfilling. The support and friendships I’ve gained through involvement have made me feel more included, valued, and connected.’³⁵ In this sense, peer connection acts as both a social outcome and a resource that enables students to navigate the challenges of HE.

Overall, the evidence suggests that peer connection functions as a primary pathway to belonging at Westminster, but one that requires active facilitation. While many students are able to form meaningful relationships, access to peer connection is shaped by course structure, study mode,

³⁰ ID682ISB2022.

³¹ ID180CIS/C/T1202223.

³² ESS (2025).

³³ ESS (2025).

³⁴ ESS (2025).

³⁵ ESS (2025).

physical space, and time availability. Where opportunities for student-to-student interaction are limited, belonging becomes fragile and uneven. This theme therefore underscores the importance of creating inclusive, accessible, and sustained opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement as a foundation for a more consistent and equitable sense of belonging across the institution.

3. Belonging, Identity and Inclusion

Belonging at Westminster is experienced not only through social connection and participation, but also through students' ability to see themselves reflected, respected, and valued within the institution. Evidence across surveys, qualitative studies, and internal research demonstrates that identity-affirming environments play a critical role in shaping whether students feel able to belong authentically, particularly for those from under-represented groups.

Quantitative findings present a complex and sometimes contradictory picture. Disaggregated survey results indicate that overall levels of reported belonging do not map neatly onto single identity categories, and that patterns vary by instrument and cohort. For instance, the Check-in Survey indicates that White (66.0%) students as least likely to report that they agree that they belonged at Westminster, compared to Asian (73.0%) and Black students (73.1%).³⁶ Conversely, the fourth wave (2024-25) of the TiSS shows that while average scores for Black respondents increased by just over 3 percentage points, they continue to trail others by at least 5 percentage points in the sense of belonging/engagement statement grouping.³⁷

Furthermore, while most male and female students agree that they have a sense of belonging, there was some differentiation. For example, from term 1, 2022-23 to term 1, 2024-25, 91.1% of female respondents reported feeling a sense of belonging was either "somewhat important" or "very important" for them – the equivalent figure for males was 88.9%. While the likelihood that female students agreeing that they belong at Westminster has hovered between the mid- to high-60s and low-70s, there was a downward trend over the last four terms of data (i.e., term 1, 2022-23, 70.7%; term 3, 2022-23, 68.3%, term 1, 2023-24, 67.8%; term 2, 2023-24, 66.7%; and term 1, 2024-25, 63.7%). Male agreement with the statement "I feel like I belong at Westminster" did not show the same downward trend: except for term 3, 2021-22, where the figure rose to 87.0%, male agreement fell consistently between the mid- to high-60s and low- to mid-70s.³⁸ However, sex had minimal impact on whether society or sports club members/leaders, course representatives, or

³⁶ Check-in Survey 2021-22 to 2023-24.

³⁷ Bryant, 'Transformation in Students Survey – Colleague Summary'.

³⁸ Check in Survey, 2021-22 to 2024-25.

FANS reported having a sense of belonging, with most respondents reporting that their role had a positive impact.³⁹

However, qualitative evidence consistently highlights that experiences of inclusion and exclusion are deeply shaped by how students perceive the institution to recognise difference, address inequality, and create spaces in which diverse identities can be expressed without fear of judgement. Ethnicity-related research foregrounds the importance of curriculum and pedagogy in mediating belonging.⁴⁰ Studies focused on addressing the BAME attainment gap by embedding EDI initiatives suggest that students' sense of belonging is strengthened when learning environments acknowledge multiple perspectives, challenge assumed norms, and provide visible representation through teaching staff, guest speakers, and reading lists. Students frequently describe culturally responsive curricula as creating a sense of recognition and legitimacy, enabling them to engage more confidently and to feel part of an inclusive learning community rather than positioned at its margins. One student expressed that '[embedded] EDI generated a sense of community and inclusion...' Another commented that: 'A wide variety of teachers and guest speakers from all backgrounds were displayed and this allowed me to feel a sense of inclusion and co-creation as a community of entrepreneurs.' A third noted that: 'I felt as though I...belonged to a community that was cared for and could be taught about to better my experiences.'⁴¹ Additionally, research involving Westminster students on promoting students' interests through inclusive and culturally sensitive curricula covers similar ground to Osho.⁴² Consistent with earlier research, racially minoritised students rate their curriculum as less culturally sensitive than their White peers – Black students rated it as less sensitive than Asian students. It was found that culturally sensitive curricula predicted students' interests while ethnicity did not. Thus, culturally sensitive curricula benefits all students, 'not just ethnically minoritised students'.⁴³

Conversely, qualitative reflections also indicate that diversity alone does not guarantee belonging. Some students describe difficulty finding common ground within highly diverse settings or navigating pedagogical approaches that require public self-disclosure or active

³⁹ ESS (2025).

⁴⁰ Yaz Osho, Lilian Miles and Sangeetha Srinivasan, 'SOES BAME Attainment Gap Project' (University of Westminster, 2021), 17. This research consisted of 11 semi-structured interviews, as well as focus groups, with academic colleagues, and focus groups involving 23 BAME students studying at levels 4 to 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁴² Yaz Osho, 'Report on embedded EDI Pilot and Project' (University of Westminster, 2021).

⁴³ Kathleen M. Quinlan, Dave S.P. Thomas, Annette Hayton, Jo Astley, Leda Blackwood, Fatmata K. Daramy, Morag Duffin, Muhammad Arslan Haider, Deborah Husbands, Richard Joiner, Helen Kay, Mary Mosoeunyane, Ian J. Turner, Claire Walsh and Dan West, 'Promoting students' interest through culturally sensitive curricula in higher education', *Higher Education* 88 (2024), 1345.

participation without sufficient scaffolding. In a reflective piece, Sum stated that while interactive pedagogies such as hybrid-/blended-learning and flipped classroom format can be exciting, they may actually leave ethnic minority students ‘struggl[ing] to embrace’ their own identity. Continuing on this line, Sum writes that: ‘We are who we are, but – sometimes – saying ‘I am myself’ is simply not enough when we are trying to find common ground in a space where everyone else looks different and dresses differently from us, for we feel judged and our self-confidence and our perception of ourselves are accordingly affected. This is especially true in a HE environment.’⁴⁴ In these cases, feelings of exposure, judgement, or self-consciousness can undermine confidence and weaken belonging, particularly for students negotiating racialised, cultural, or linguistic difference. These findings underscore that inclusive practice requires intentional design rather than reliance on demographic diversity itself.

Data addressing the experiences of students with disabilities further reinforces the conditional nature of belonging. Survey data indicates that most students with disabilities who engage in extracurricular or representational roles report a positive impact on their sense of belonging, yet these rates are often lower than for students without reported disabilities.⁴⁵ Qualitative comments suggest that accessibility, predictability, and clarity of communication are central to whether students feel able to participate fully. One student remarked on the need for there to be greater consideration of students with disabilities, as well as clearer opportunities to indicate support needs when signing-up: ‘I think there should be an option when signing up for events to ask if they need any support or accessibility.’⁴⁶ Thus, where reasonable adjustments are proactive and environments are perceived as flexible and supportive, students with disabilities frequently report feeling included and able to participate with greater assurance; where barriers persist, belonging is compromised.

Identity-based inclusion also intersects with faith, age, sexuality, neurodivergence, and caring responsibilities.⁴⁷ Across qualitative datasets, students report that experiences of unbelonging often emerge at points where institutional norms appear to privilege a narrow or assumed student profile. Examples include scheduling that conflicts with religious observance, limited visibility of certain faith or cultural identities, or teaching practices that do not accommodate different communication styles. A detailed example was provided by an Israeli and Jewish student, who commented: ‘Also as a Jewish and Israeli student I felt there was not enough consideration

⁴⁴ Kiu Sum, ‘Navigating my ethnic minority identity in higher education: a student reflection’, *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 7, no.1 (2021): 1-6.

⁴⁵ ESS 2025.

⁴⁶ ESS.

⁴⁷ ID204ISB, ID214ISB, ID412ISB, ID483ISB, ID567ISB, ID631ISB, ID644ISB, and ID662ISB.

towards condemning acts of antisemitism especially prevalent during conflict times in Israel. As well as starting the teaching this semester on the 26th of September, the most important Jewish holiday [Rosh Hashanah] in the Jewish calendar celebrating the new Jewish [year]. I got the feeling that the university tries to be inclusive with al[l] religions and ethnicities but lack that same attitude towards Judaism.⁴⁸ There were also instances where home/UK students commented on feelings of exclusion in teaching and learning contexts, particularly where classes contained high proportions of international students speaking their native languages.⁴⁹ Others perceived differential treatment or disparagement, as reflected in the comment: 'I sometimes feel discriminated/attacked for being a straight white person.'⁵⁰ While such experiences are not universal, their presence highlights the cumulative impact of small exclusions on students' sense of fit within the university.

Importantly, several strands of evidence point to the role of staff–student partnership and co-creation in fostering identity-affirming belonging. Initiatives that position students as collaborators in pedagogical development or institutional change are frequently described by participants as empowering and validating. Sum highlighted the positive impact on sense of belonging of participating in student engagement activities provided at Westminster.⁵¹ Specifically, the staff-student partnership (SPP) programme, where staff and students from different backgrounds collaborated on pedagogical projects, allowing doctoral students to 'unwrap [their] identity without stigmatisation or discrimination' in a way that 'transcend[ed] academic purposes and requirements'.⁵² In these contexts, belonging is experienced not simply as inclusion within existing structures, but as shared ownership of the academic and institutional environment.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that belonging is not identity-neutral. While many students report positive experiences within Westminster's diverse community, belonging is most robust where institutional practices actively recognise difference, address structural inequalities, and create conditions for students to bring their whole selves into academic and social spaces. Where inclusion is implicit rather than enacted, belonging becomes uneven and contingent. This finding reinforces the importance of embedding EDI principles across curriculum, pedagogy, and participation as a core component of an equitable belonging strategy.

⁴⁸ ID606ISB.

⁴⁹ PTES (2024).

⁵⁰ ID490ISB.

⁵¹ Kiu Sum, 'Navigating my ethnic minority identity in higher education'.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

4. Academic Integration and Staff-Student Relationships

Academic integration – feeling part of the learning environment, not just enrolled in it – and the quality of staff–student relationships play a decisive role in shaping students’ sense of belonging at Westminster. Across institutional surveys (TiSS, PTES, PRES, Check-in Survey) and qualitative evidence, students consistently describe belonging as being strengthened when academic environments feel coherent, inclusive, and relational – where staff engagement signals recognition, care, and intellectual partnership rather than transactional delivery alone.

Quantitative indicators suggest that measures relating to connection with teaching staff are typically weaker than peer-based belonging measures, yet they exert a disproportionate influence on students’ overall perceptions of the University. TiSS responses on feeling part of the learning community and supported by staff suggest that academic belonging is experienced unevenly. For instance, 58.8% of Level 4 and 58.7% of Level 6 students agreed with the sense of belonging statements in a grouping that included: “I feel included by my peers at university” and “I feel connected to staff at university”.⁵³

Qualitative evidence clarifies how academic belonging is formed in practice. Students frequently associate belonging with staff approachability, timely and constructive feedback,⁵⁴ and opportunities for dialogue beyond scheduled teaching. Positive experiences are often described in relational terms – being known by name, feeling comfortable asking questions, or receiving encouragement at key moments. The earlier reference PGR who wrote of their Director of Studies as ‘the most positive aspect of [their] experience’ and who ‘guided [their] research very well’ is a case in point.⁵⁵ Feeling part of academia was also expressed in terms of comfort, this could be in terms of staff making learning environments ‘comfortable’,⁵⁶ or in terms of the assistance on offer: ‘The continuous support from tutors and the check ins – [I] also feel comfortable sharing any hardships with tutors etc.’⁵⁷ Indeed, the Personal Tutor role is repeatedly identified as a critical mechanism, particularly for new entrants and international students, providing continuity, reassurance, and a point of connection to the wider institution during periods of transition.⁵⁸

⁵³ Bryant, ‘Transformation in Students Survey – Colleague Summary’.

⁵⁴ ID495CIS/T2202223: ‘[T]he support and understanding from teachers, especially my [P]ersonal [T]utor. [I] also like how feedback for modules are always taken on board or thoroughly considered.’

⁵⁵ ID682ISB2022.

⁵⁶ ID326CIS/T1202122.

⁵⁷ ID83CIS/T1202324.

⁵⁸ Mansfield, ‘The acculturative experiences of International Students at the University of Westminster’, 17.

Conversely, where academic interactions are perceived as distant or inconsistent, students report weaker attachment to Westminster even when peer connection is strong. Thus, limited feedback, unclear expectations, or minimal contact outside lectures can contribute to feelings of invisibility and disengagement.⁵⁹ In such cases, students may continue to progress academically while experiencing low affective belonging, reinforcing the distinction between academic persistence and institutional attachment. This suggests that access to academic belonging is uneven across programmes and study modes, and sensitive to local teaching practices rather than institutional messaging alone.

Pedagogical design further mediates academic belonging.⁶⁰ Inclusive teaching practices – such as transparent assessment criteria, clear scaffolding of participation, and sensitivity to diverse educational backgrounds – are associated with greater confidence and reduced anxiety.⁶¹ However, qualitative accounts also indicate that pedagogical approaches requiring high levels of active participation or implicit cultural knowledge can unsettle belonging when insufficiently supported.⁶² This is particularly evident for students navigating linguistic transition, educational discontinuity, or cultural difference.⁶³

Postgraduate cohorts highlight distinct dynamics within this theme. Postgraduate taught students often report limited time to develop sustained academic relationships, with compressed course structures restricting opportunities for ongoing staff engagement.⁶⁴ For postgraduate research students, supervisory relationships are central to academic belonging.⁶⁵ Where supervision is experienced as supportive, communicative, and consistent, students describe greater confidence, motivation, and wellbeing; where it is fragmented or isolating, academic belonging deteriorates rapidly, with knock-on effects for progress and mental health.⁶⁶

Across cohorts, the evidence points to the importance of *relational consistency*.⁶⁷ Belonging is more robust where supportive academic engagement is embedded across modules and over

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁰ Osho, Miles and Srinivasan, 'SOES BAME Attainment Gap Project'; and Osho, 'Report on embedded EDI Pilot and Project'.

⁶¹ Quinlan, *et al.*, 'Promoting students' interest through culturally sensitive curricula in higher education'; and Osho, 'Report on embedded EDI Pilot and Project'.

⁶² Kiu Sum, 'Navigating my ethnic minority identity in higher education'.

⁶³ Mansfield, 'The acculturative experiences of International Students at the University of Westminster'.

⁶⁴ PTES (2024).

⁶⁵ ID682ISB2022; and Kiu Sum, 'Supporting Doctoral Researchers' social isolation through a student-led community'. *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* 8, no.1 (2022): 1-7.

⁶⁶ Sum, 'Supporting Doctoral Researchers' social isolation through a student-led community'.

⁶⁷ PRES 2023; and Sum, 'Supporting Doctoral Researchers' social isolation through a student-led community', 2-5.

time, rather than dependent on individual staff goodwill.⁶⁸ Workload pressures, contact patterns, and institutional emphasis on inclusive pedagogy therefore shape the extent to which academic belonging can be sustained at scale.⁶⁹

Overall, this theme demonstrates that academic integration at Westminster is fundamentally relational and structurally mediated. While many students experience high-quality staff–student relationships, access to academic belonging is uneven across programmes and study modes. Strengthening belonging in academic contexts therefore requires sustained attention to curriculum design, pedagogical practice, staff capacity, and the visibility and coherence of academic support, positioning staff–student relationships as a core mechanism through which institutional belonging is enacted.

5. Participation Beyond the Curriculum (Societies, Sport, Roles)

Participation beyond the curriculum plays a critical role in shaping students’ sense of belonging at Westminster, operating as one of the most consistent and tangible mechanisms through which social connection, identity formation, and institutional attachment are strengthened. Evidence from the ESS and Check-in Survey demonstrate that structured extracurricular engagement – through societies, sports clubs, course representation, and FANS roles – has a clear and positive association with perceived belonging, community, and wider educational outcomes.

Across role types, students who participate in extracurricular activities are significantly more likely to report feeling connected to the University and part of a wider community. Survey findings consistently show higher levels of agreement with belonging-related statements among society and sports club members compared to non-participants, with the differential between these groups remaining visible across survey waves. The Check-in Survey reinforces many of the ESS findings. Students who reported being a member of a society or sports club were more likely to agree that they belonged, with the percentage point difference between members and non-members reaching 17.7 in term 3, 2022-23.⁷⁰ Furthermore, committee members (78.5%, n = 252) were more likely to agree that they felt as though they belong at Westminster than non-committee members (67.6%, n = 1,224).

Qualitative evidence reinforces this pattern, with students frequently describing societies and clubs as primary sites for making friends, developing confidence, and accessing inclusive spaces

⁶⁸ ID682ISB2022;

⁶⁹ Osho, Miles and Srinivasan, ‘SOES BAME Attainment Gap Project’; and Osho, ‘Report on embedded EDI Pilot and Project’.

⁷⁰ The percentage point difference ranged from 4.9 (term 2, 2023-24) to 17.7 (term 3, 2022-23).

where shared interests facilitate connection, as well as supporting positive mental health.⁷¹ One student reflected that: ‘Being a member of the Law Society has had a significant positive impact on my sense of belonging at the University of Westminster, considering that I don’t have many friends or my family in London and I often feel isolated. Their compassionate approach, professionalism and guidance made me feel safe and at home.’⁷² Another commented: ‘The University is very welcoming and helpful. As international students we need all the help we could get[,] and the University is giving that from the start. All the society [sic] makes us feel connected.’⁷³ Such sentiment was not limited to the ESS or ISB.⁷⁴ Furthermore, FANS noted the positive effect of their role on ‘feel[ing] part of a wider student community’.⁷⁵ In terms of mental health and wellbeing, extracurricular activity was noted as remedial: ‘I joined the Yoga society and it was the perfect way for me to unwind amidst my studies.’⁷⁶

That said, some students felt societies at Westminster were not as active as those elsewhere, noting that they ‘barely organise events’.⁷⁷ This was a view echoed in the ISB: ‘I expected more events organised by the university as well as more activeness in the societies.’⁷⁸ This suggests that while facilitative mechanisms of connection and community building are present, Westminster is some distance from saturation.

Narratives from society members and leaders emphasise the importance of *regular, structured interaction* in fostering belonging.⁷⁹ Unlike ad-hoc social encounters, societies and clubs provide repeated opportunities to engage with the same peer group over time, allowing relationships to deepen and a sense of collective identity to emerge. For many students – particularly those who feel isolated on their course, live away from campus, or lack established friendship networks –

⁷¹ Check-in Survey, term 1, 2021-22 to 2024-25.

⁷² ESS (2025).

⁷³ ID189ISB2022.

⁷⁴ ID358CIS/T1202122: I love joining societies at Westminster, they arrange so many good events which feels so great to join and be a part and also[,] they are [a] good source of making new connections...’

⁷⁵ ESS (2025).

⁷⁶ ID939CIS/T1202425.

⁷⁷ ESS (2025).

⁷⁸ ID576ISB2022. See also ID642ISB2022.

⁷⁹ ESS (2025). For example: ‘These experiences [being an active member and leader of various societies] have not only enhanced my personal growth but have also helped me forge lasting relationships and feel a deeper connection to the Westminster environment’; and: ‘It’s not just about academic life anymore, and it’s about contributing to something that makes the university experience more prosperous and more fulfilling.’

society membership is described as the point at which Westminster begins to feel like a community rather than solely an educational provider.⁸⁰

Sports clubs, in particular, appear to foster strong forms of belonging rooted in teamwork, shared goals, and active, in-person participation. Students frequently describe sports environments as inclusive, motivating, and socially supportive, with camaraderie extending beyond training sessions into wider student life. One student explained that: ‘Throughout all of my undergraduate I didn’t make many profound friendships and certainly didn’t feel a sense of community until I became a member of the [M]uay [T]hai club. We all had a common interest and attending classes was enjoyable and healthy, while also being fun and social. The social events were also a great way to feel a sense of belonging outside of classes at the uni.’⁸¹ These findings suggest that participation which combines social, physical, and aspirational dimensions may offer especially robust forms of belonging, though access to such opportunities is shaped by practical constraints explored below.

Similarly, representational and support roles – such as course representatives and FANS – are associated with heightened belonging through students’ sense of contribution and recognition. The following statement is illustrative: ‘I got involved as a FANS because I believe in the power of the community and wanted to contribute to making a positive impact in my local area. Whether through volunteering or supporting local initiatives, I wanted to create a stronger sense of connection with those around me.’⁸² Students undertaking these roles often describe feeling more connected to both peers and staff, citing increased confidence, visibility, and a clearer sense of purpose within the institution: ‘Being a course rep has made me feel much more connected to the university. It’s not just about attending meetings[,] it’s about feeling like you’re part of something bigger, where your ideas and efforts actually matter. Getting to know other students and staff on a more personal level has made Westminster feel a lot more like a community rather than just a place I study. It’s been really rewarding to know that even small contributions can help create a better experience for everyone.’⁸³ In these cases, belonging is reinforced not only through peer connection but through *institutional embeddedness* – feeling listened to, valued, and able to shape the student experience for others.

⁸⁰ ESS (2025). For example: ‘Being a member of the Law Society has had a significant positive impact on my sense of belonging at the University of Westminster, considering that I don’t have many friends or my family in London and I often feel isolated.’

⁸¹ ESS (2025).

⁸² ESS (2025).

⁸³ ESS (2025).

However, the evidence also highlights that access to extracurricular participation is uneven. Barriers to involvement are repeatedly identified in survey free-text responses, including limited awareness of available activities, ineffective communication from societies and clubs, timetabling clashes with teaching or employment, late-evening scheduling, venue location, and accessibility needs.⁸⁴ For instance, students urge changes to ‘the timing of events’, as late-finishing activities may exclude some from participating.⁸⁵ However, communication issues constitute a substantial proportion of student complaints. One student wrote: ‘I do not currently know about sports offered at [W]estminster...’ Another, January starter, highlighted that: ‘Most January intake students have no idea how and when to join any clubs or societies.’⁸⁶ For students who had taken steps to engage a society or club, non-response resulted in exclusion from an activity they expressed interest in: ‘I once asked to enter the Basketball sports club and I never got a reply so I was never able to try it out.’⁸⁷ For some students, these barriers result in frustration or disengagement, particularly where initial attempts to participate are met with poor communication or lack of response.

Issues of accessibility and inclusivity are especially salient. Students with disabilities, caring responsibilities, religious commitments, or substantial work obligations report finding it more difficult to attend activities scheduled at fixed times or locations. Indeed, the schedules of working students means that they are unable to make use of the resources and facilities available: ‘Opening hours – I work full-time and am studying part-time, and notice the gym, while free, isn’t open after study hours, which is when it would be most convenient to use.’⁸⁸ Where societies are perceived as inactive, clique-based, or insufficiently welcoming to new members, opportunities for belonging are further curtailed: ‘For the Anime Society[,] I would make more of an effort to include and welcome new members.’⁸⁹ These patterns reinforce the finding that while extracurricular participation can function as a powerful belonging intervention, its benefits depend on inclusive design.

Importantly, participation beyond the curriculum also intersects with educational outcomes. Many students report that involvement in societies, sports clubs, or roles enhances their motivation to attend campus, persist with their studies, and manage academic pressures.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Check-in Survey, term 1, 2022-23; term 2, 2022-23; term 3, 2022-20; and term 1, 2023-24.

⁸⁵ ESS (2025).

⁸⁶ ID91CSI/T3202223.

⁸⁷ ID347CSI/T2202223.

⁸⁸ ID441CIS/T1202223.

⁸⁹ ESS (2025).

⁹⁰ ESS (2025). For example: ‘It motivates me to go to university regularly for classes knowing I have a society event at the end of the day’ and ‘I spend more time at campus’.

Although these impacts are self-reported and should be interpreted cautiously, they align with broader findings that belonging-rich environments support resilience, engagement, and skill development. Indeed, the acquisition of transferable skills – such as teamwork, leadership, communication, and networking – is frequently cited as an additional benefit, reinforcing the value of participation for both wellbeing and employability (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Top three self-reported transferable skills gained from role (ESS)

Top 3	Member or leader of a society	Member of leader of a sport	Course representatives	FANS
Teamwork	70.8%	87.9%	78.9%	88.0%
Leadership	49.2%	62.1%	71.9%	84.0%
Time management	52.3%	48.3%	50.0%	72.0%
Communication	78.5%	77.6%	76.3%	88.0%
Resilience	34.6%	39.7%	27.2%	34.0%
Discipline	41.5%	60.3%	35.1%	42.0%
Networking	71.5%	58.6%	67.5%	68.0%
Event planning	35.4%	31.0%	37.7%	68.0%
Creativity	41.5%	29.3%	24.6%	40.0%
Public speaking	38.5%	46.6%	54.4%	84.0%
Project management	22.3%	22.4%	24.6%	24.0%
Problem-solving	37.7%	41.4%	51.8%	58.0%
Advocacy	14.6%	10.3%	30.7%	14.0%
Negotiation	19.2%	19.0%	21.1%	26.0%
Interpersonal skills	56.9%	51.7%	53.5%	66.0%
Organisational skills	35.4%	43.1%	45.6%	56.0%
No transferable skills gained	2.3%	1.7%	0.9%	0.0%

Overall, participation beyond the curriculum emerges as one of Westminster’s most effective levers for fostering belonging. However, its impact is contingent on students’ ability to access, sustain, and benefit from these opportunities. Where participation is well-resourced, inclusive, and integrated into campus life, it can mitigate isolation and strengthen community. Where barriers persist, extracurricular engagement risks reinforcing existing inequalities in belonging. This theme therefore underscores the importance of positioning societies, sports, and student roles not as optional enhancements, but as integral components of an inclusive institutional belonging strategy.

6. Belonging, Wellbeing and Mental Health

Across Westminster’s institutional evidence base, sense of belonging and student wellbeing are closely intertwined. Check-in Survey data highlights mental health concerns as one of the most

frequently reported challenges faced by students (Figure 5). While financial pressures and future employment anxieties are prominent, a substantial proportion of students identify stress, anxiety, loneliness, and confidence-related difficulties as significant issues. Qualitative responses reveal that these challenges often co-occur with feelings of social or academic disconnection, suggesting that wellbeing concerns cannot be fully understood in isolation from students' experiences of belonging.

Loneliness and isolation are particularly salient within this theme. Students frequently describe difficulties in meeting new people, forming friendships, or sustaining social contact alongside academic and external responsibilities.⁹¹ For example, one student commented that: '[T]here is too much loneliness here' and 'I do wish there was a larger sense of community within the department/student body'.⁹² For some, isolation is situational and time-limited, associated with transitions such as entry into university or movement between study years. For others, particularly those studying part-time, commuting long distances, or balancing study with employment or caring responsibilities, isolation is more persistent.⁹³

Postgraduate research students appear especially vulnerable at the intersection of belonging and wellbeing. Evidence consistently identifies isolation as a defining feature of doctoral study, with PGR students describing the research community as 'very disconnected' and highlighting the absence of shared academic spaces for interaction and mutual learning.⁹⁴ While supervisory relationships are often experienced as a crucial source of support – and can mitigate some of these challenges – the wider lack of sustained academic community means that weak belonging is closely associated with stress, anxiety, and diminished academic confidence. This vulnerability is compounded by the liminal status of PGR students, positioned between student and staff communities, leaving belonging fragile and uneven, with clear implications for wellbeing, motivation, and progress.⁹⁵

Overall, this theme demonstrates that belonging and wellbeing at Westminster are deeply interdependent. Addressing wellbeing issues therefore requires more than individualised interventions; it necessitates creating relational, inclusive, and connected learning environments in which students are supported to build and sustain meaningful connections as part of their

⁹¹ Check-in Survey, Term 1, 2021-22; Term 2, 2021-22; Term 2, 2022-23; Term 1, 2023-24; ID158CIS/T2202223; ID122CIS/T3202223; and PTES (2024).

⁹² ID311ISB and ID273ISB. Also, ID479ISB, ID609ISB, and ID610ISB.

⁹³ ID479ISB2022.

⁹⁴ ID410CIS/T1202324.

⁹⁵ ID410CIS/T1202324. See also ID169CIS/T1202324 and ID131CIS/T1202324; as well as Sum, 'Supporting Doctoral Researchers' social isolation through a student-led community', 2-3.

everyday university experience. The implications of these wellbeing-belonging dynamics for students' academic engagement, persistence, and continuation are examined further in theme seven.

7. Belonging and Educational Outcomes

Across the institutional evidence base, sense of belonging emerges as an important – but not singular – factor shaping educational outcomes at Westminster. Analysis of survey data indicates that belonging functions primarily as a *protective and enabling condition*, rather than as a direct or universal determinant of continuation, attainment, or progression.

Mediating factors between sense of belonging and educational outcomes

At an institutional level, most students report that they do not intend to withdraw from, interrupt, or defer their studies. However, a consistent and non-trivial minority do express withdrawal ideation. Quantitative analysis shows that financial pressure, cost-of-living challenges, and mental health concerns are frequently cited as drivers of this ideation (Figure 7). Indicators associated with belonging – such as feeling disconnected from the course, lacking friendships, or feeling peripheral to the university community – are selected less often but remain persistent contributors.

Figure 7. Reasons for considering withdrawing (Check-in Survey, term 1, 2024-25)

Reason for considering withdrawing	No	Yes	% Yes	Rank
Balancing my studies with other personal responsibilities	982	77	7.3	4
Cost of living crisis	979	80	7.6	2
Financial reasons	967	92	8.7	1
I am not receiving value for money on my course	1,031	28	2.6	8
I don't have many friends at Westminster	1,014	45	4.2	5
I feel disconnected from my course	1,021	38	3.6	7
I feel disconnected from the Westminster community	1,034	25	2.4	10
I feel like I don't fit in at University	1,032	27	2.5	9
I no longer want to pursue my degree	1,053	6	0.6	11
Mental health reasons	980	79	7.5	3
Personal reasons (e.g. family matters or poor health)	1,017	42	4.0	6
Online learning/Covid-19 impact on the teaching	1,054	5	0.5	12

Importantly, qualitative evidence suggests that these belonging-related factors rarely operate in isolation; instead, they tend to *amplify existing pressures*, increasing the likelihood that academic or financial stress translates into disengagement. The data suggests that experiences of connection, isolation, and recognition shape students' emotional wellbeing and capacity to cope with academic demands. ESS data shows that students involved in societies, sports clubs, course representation, or FANS roles overwhelmingly perceive these experiences as positively influencing their likelihood of degree completion. ISB responses suggest that deficiencies of

integration into the academic community can act as stressors: ‘I would give a higher mark but the hassle with timetable, Registry office never replying etc[.,] was just driving everyone MAD and significantly affected the experience. You feel that you're on your own and have to sort everything yourself when you just landed in the country and don't know anyone from your course.’⁹⁶ While these are self-reported perceptions rather than causal measures, their consistency across cohorts and activities points to an association between *protective forms of belonging* and educational persistence.

The relationship between belonging and academic performance follows a similar, indirect pattern. Belonging does not reliably predict higher attainment outcomes on its own. Mansfield’s study found that continuation and completion with a good degree did not necessitate having a sense of belonging to Westminster. Thus, while over 75% of the study’s participants (n = 58) wanted to belong a substantial minority were indifferent.⁹⁷ That said, students who report strong peer networks, sustained staff engagement, or regular extracurricular participation frequently describe enhanced academic engagement, motivation, and confidence.⁹⁸ Qualitative accounts suggest that these benefits are mediated through improvements in time management, emotional resilience, peer accountability, and willingness to seek support, rather than through direct academic assistance (see Figure 6). In this sense, belonging strengthens the *conditions for success* rather than guaranteeing performance.

Postgraduate cohorts highlight important distinctions within this theme. Postgraduate taught students often report a strong academic focus combined with limited expectations of wider institutional belonging, particularly on shorter or intensive programmes: ‘I think the challenge was to be integrated in University event. For postgraduate students, there is a huge barrier in the communication for the events especially and socialising, especially the January intake. I didn't feel like we mattered, the feeling of belonging was not really out there. I feel like we go to school pay money but don't get the value for it.’⁹⁹ In many cases, this does not appear to undermine educational outcomes.¹⁰⁰ However, where additional pressures – such as isolation, financial strain, or weak staff connection – are present, limited belonging can increase vulnerability to disengagement.¹⁰¹ Postgraduate research students present a more acute relationship between

⁹⁶ ID332ISB2022. See also, ID609ISB2022, ID610ISB2022 and ID682ISB2022.

⁹⁷ Mansfield, ‘The acculturative experiences of International Students at the University of Westminster’, 4.

⁹⁸ ESS (2025).

⁹⁹ ID131CIS/T1202324.

¹⁰⁰ Mansfield, ‘The acculturative experiences of International Students at the University of Westminster’, 4.

¹⁰¹ PTES (2024); ID410CIS/T1202324; ID169CIS/T1202324; and ID131CIS/T1202324. See also, Sum, ‘Supporting Doctoral Researchers’ social isolation through a student-led community’, 2-3.

belonging and outcomes – 37.9% of PGRs reported considering a cessation of some form.¹⁰² In contrast, the 2024 PTES shows that 23.0% had considered withdrawing. Prolonged periods of solitary study, combined with high academic expectations, can intensify feelings of disconnection. Where supervisory relationships or peer networks are weak, wellbeing risks are heightened; where supportive communities exist, students report increased resilience and emotional stability.

As earlier stated, the evidence challenges assumptions that belonging is uniformly necessary for positive outcomes across all groups. Some students – particularly international and postgraduate taught students – report prioritising academic achievement over social integration and nonetheless demonstrate high levels of progression and attainment.¹⁰³ This nuance is analytically important: belonging should not be treated as a universal prerequisite for success, but as a factor whose *absence becomes most consequential when compounded by structural, financial, or wellbeing pressures*.

Institutional support structures play an important mediating role within this theme. Students frequently reference the importance of knowing where to seek help and feeling confident that support will be accessible, timely, and non-judgemental. Where support services, Personal Tutors, or student-led initiatives are perceived as visible and responsive, students report greater reassurance even where wellbeing challenges persist. Conversely, uncertainty about support pathways can exacerbate anxiety and reinforce feelings of isolation.¹⁰⁴ Wellbeing challenges are more likely to emerge and intensify where students feel socially or academically disconnected, while experiences of belonging can moderate the impact of stressors and support persistence.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that belonging at Westminster is best understood as a *risk-mitigating and resilience-building mechanism* within educational trajectories. Strong forms of belonging – particularly those rooted in peer networks, meaningful staff relationships, and structured participation – reduce the likelihood that students disengage in response to challenge. However, belonging does not override structural constraints or guarantee academic success.

¹⁰² These calculations are based on Check-in Survey data covering seven terms across four academic years (2021-22 to 2024-25).

¹⁰³ Katherine Mansfield, 'The acculturative experiences of International Students at the University of Westminster' (University of Westminster, 2023):16.

¹⁰⁴ See related institutional research that discussion many of these themes: Scott Rawlinson, '[Academic and Practical Information Seeking Behaviours and Needs of International Students at Pre-arrival and Arrive \(First Year\) Stages](#)' (University of Westminster, 2023); Scott Rawlinson, '["Little Islands": Challenges and Opportunities for Student Carers at the University of Westminster](#)' (University of Westminster, 2023); and Joanne Alexander and Scott Rawlinson, '[Perspectives on Student \(Dis\)Engagement and Continuation \(Academic and Support Colleagues\)](#)' (University of Westminster, 2023).

Interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes are therefore most effective when they target belonging as a practical mechanism for reducing vulnerability and supporting engagement among students facing compounding risks, rather than as an abstract or uniformly applicable goal.

8. Structural and Contextual Barriers to Belonging

Beyond social, academic, and identity-based factors, students' capacity to develop and sustain a sense of belonging at Westminster is shaped by a set of structural and contextual conditions that constrain time, access, and opportunity. Evidence across our data indicates that these factors do not simply reduce participation; they re-pattern how and where belonging can occur, often privileging students whose circumstances align more closely with traditional, campus-centred models of engagement.

Study mode emerges as a key structural determinant. Part-time students consistently report lower levels of belonging and higher levels of withdrawal ideation than their full-time peers. The gap in sense of belonging is considerable, with 67.7% (n = 348) of full-time entrants agreeing that they felt they belonged at Westminster, compared to 51.0% (n = 26) of part-time students.¹⁰⁵ With regard to thoughts about withdrawing from studies, part-time students were marginally more likely to consider withdrawing (20.0%, n = 18) than their full-time peers (18.7%, n = 180).¹⁰⁶

Qualitative commentary suggests that this is less about motivation and more about temporal and spatial misalignment: limited days on campus, tightly scheduled teaching, and heavy external commitments restrict opportunities for informal interaction and sustained relationship-building. Consider the following statement from a part-time student: 'The University does not really cater to part-time students. The vast majority of events are mid-day and so not accessible to those who work[,] which limits the ability to mix with other students outside of class.'¹⁰⁷ In this context, part-time students describe feeling peripheral to the institution, with belonging experienced as episodic at best rather than cumulative. Another felt that 'there is almost zero regard for part-time students', making it easier to feel 'isolated'.¹⁰⁸ Comments from the PTES reinforce the notion that studying part-time can make developing a sense of belonging challenging – much of this intersects with age, with all the part-time students that commented being mature students. For

¹⁰⁵ Check-in Survey, term 1, 2024-25.

¹⁰⁶ Check-in Survey, term 1, 2024-25. It is also worth noting that part-time students typically have lower first attempt pass rates, higher mitigating circumstances claims and non-submission rates than the institutional average. These factors – coupled with those in Figure 8 – may be exacerbating the situation for Westminster's part-time students.

¹⁰⁷ PTES (2024).

¹⁰⁸ PTES (2024).

example, balancing study with other responsibilities such as work can make finding the time to interact with students difficult: ‘Since I am doing my course part-time (due to my day job) I am not able to interact as much as I would have liked’.¹⁰⁹

Employment and caring responsibilities further compound time poverty. A significant proportion of students balance study with paid work, caring roles, or both. While such responsibilities are not inherently incompatible with belonging, survey responses indicate that the timing and location of university activities frequently clash with students’ available hours. Mid-day events, late-evening society meetings, and travel to off-campus venues are commonly cited as barriers.¹¹⁰ For these students, belonging becomes conditional on the flexibility of provision rather than on interest or willingness to engage.

Commuting and campus geography also shape access to belonging-making opportunities. Students who live at a distance from campus, particularly those with long or costly commutes, report limited ability to remain on site beyond teaching hours: ‘Working and studying. Also[,] how far [away] Harrow Campus...[is]...makes it harder to participate in events.’¹¹¹ Another – not isolated – account focused on the costs of travel: ‘The travel time has been the most challenging as I live in [H]ertfordshire (outside of [L]ondon) so it takes quite a while by train, not to mention the cost of train and bus fares.’¹¹² Such realities for students restrict their opportunities for spontaneous social interaction, participate in extracurricular activity, and engage with support services. The following student explicitly noted the connection between geography as a barrier to organic sociability: ‘Other than the karaoke at the hideaway, all the social events seem to take place in Harrow. Which is fine when you live in Harrow, but if you live in London, that’s a long way to travel. So, outside the societies, it’s difficult to be randomly social.’¹¹³ Furthermore, commentary suggests that where campus time is experienced as functional and transactional – we see this particularly acutely for those studying part-time¹¹⁴ – students may succeed academically while remaining weakly connected to the wider university community.

The cost of living forms a pervasive backdrop to these constraints. Financial pressures – linked to accommodation, transport, and day-to-day living costs – are among the most frequently cited

¹⁰⁹ PTES (2024).

¹¹⁰ For example, ID441CIS/T1202223.

¹¹¹ ID184CIS/T1202122.

¹¹² ID221CIS/T1202122.

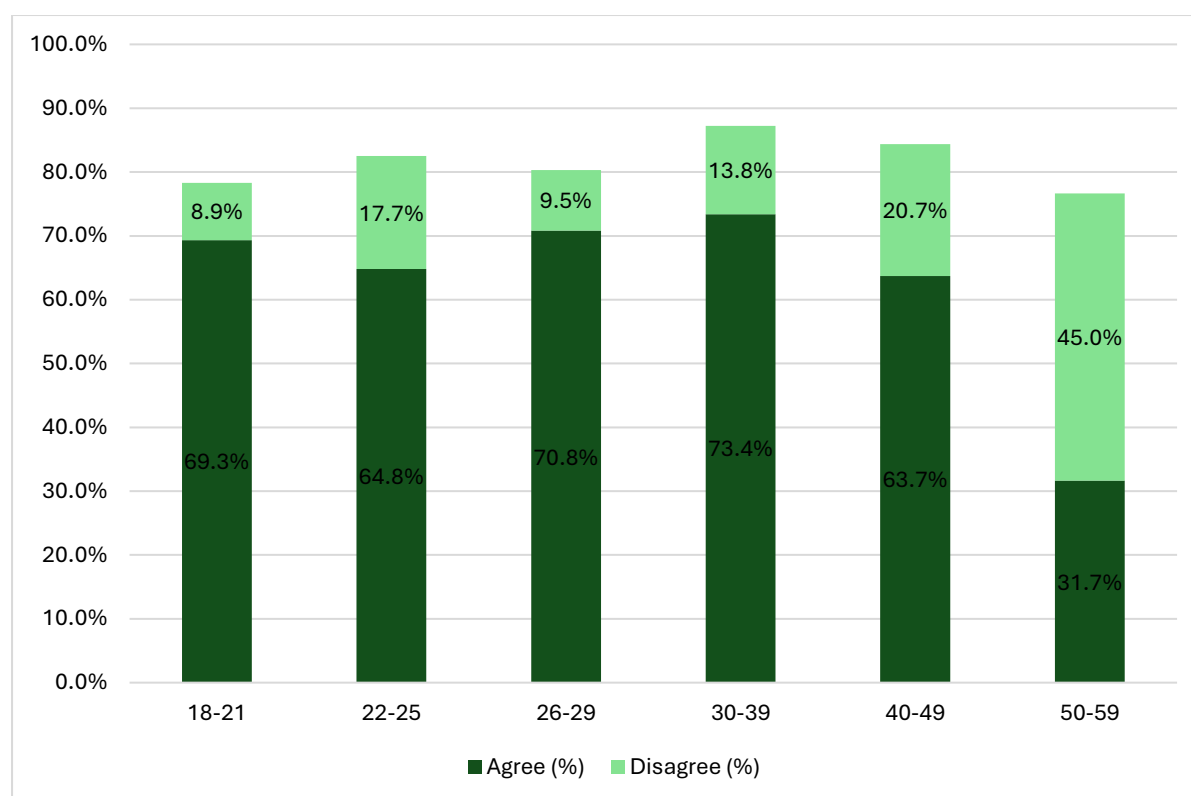
¹¹³ ID460CIS/T1202223.

¹¹⁴ PTES (2024). Specifically, see earlier commentary on university not catering for part-time students, as well as the following statement that the University has ‘almost zero regard for part-time students.’

challenges in the Check-in Survey.¹¹⁵ These pressures intersect with belonging in multiple ways: students may prioritise paid work over participation, limit time on campus to reduce costs, or experience stress and anxiety that reduce capacity for engagement. In this sense, economic precarity operates indirectly, shaping the conditions under which belonging can be pursued and sustained.

Age and life stage further intersect with these structural factors. Mature students often report feeling socially and culturally distant from younger cohorts, particularly where teaching and extracurricular provision is implicitly oriented toward school-leaver norms. Figure 8 shows the aggregated proportions of students who agreed (i.e., “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree”) or disagreed with the statement “I feel like I belong at Westminster”. Mature students, particularly those 40 or above, were more likely than younger students to disagree with the belonging statement.¹¹⁶

Figure 8. “I feel like I belong at Westminster” (Age Range, 2021-22 to 2024-25) (Check-in Survey)



While many mature students do not frame this as a deficit, particularly those with a society, club or other role, qualitative evidence indicates that limited opportunities to connect with peers at

¹¹⁵ Check-in Survey, term 1, 2021-22; term 1, 2022-23; term 2, 2022-23; term 3, 2022-23; term 1, 2023-24; and term 2, 2023-24.

¹¹⁶ Check-in Survey, 2021-22 to 2024-25. The “Under 18” and “60+” categories have been excluded from this analysis due to the small number of data points, 3 and 2, respectively.

similar life stages can intensify feelings of isolation.¹¹⁷ One mature new starter aged 30-39 enrolled on an undergraduate course wrote that: 'As a new student at university, the only thing I am slightly nervous about is the age difference among my peers. It can sometimes feel a little awkward since they are all very young. However, I'm here to follow my passion and pursue my goals, so I'm committed to doing my best to fit into different groups and make the most of this experience...'¹¹⁸ Another commented: 'I am a little older than most of the incoming students and I find that makes me a little nervous about making connections.'¹¹⁹ One postgraduate student (aged 36-40) expressed a similar view: 'I feel very different from my classmates. I am a native English speaker and a professional in my field and also older than most of them. It is a challenge to feel a part of a community when you are older.'¹²⁰ While it might not be the case for every mature student, age may be a barrier to belonging. Having an extracurricular role may mitigate this.

Importantly, the evidence suggests that structural barriers are cumulative rather than singular. Students who are part-time, working, commuting, and managing caring responsibilities experience multiple, reinforcing constraints on their ability to access belonging-making spaces. In such cases, low levels of belonging should not be interpreted as lack of engagement or aspiration, but as the outcome of misalignment between institutional delivery models and students' lived circumstances.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that belonging at Westminster is shaped not only by relational quality, but by the structural conditions that govern access to time, space, and participation. Addressing unequal experiences of belonging therefore requires institutional responses that go beyond encouragement or communication, focusing instead on flexibility, accessibility, and the deliberate redesign of opportunities to ensure that belonging can be developed across diverse study patterns and life contexts.

Cross-Theme Synthesis: How Belonging Works at Westminster

Taken together, the eight thematic analyses demonstrate that student belonging at Westminster is not a singular outcome or sentiment, but a *dynamic, multi-layered process* shaped by interactions between social connection, academic practice, identity recognition, participation

¹¹⁷ Most mature students who reported having a society, sports club, course representative, or FANS role reported that their position had a positive impact on their sense of belonging. This was especially notable among members or leaders of a society (91.3%, n = 21) or club (91.7%, n = 11) – 76.7% (n = 23) of course representatives reported a positive impact compared to 23.3% (n = 7) who reported no notable impact). ESS, 2025.

¹¹⁸ ID609CIS/C/T1202324. See also ID44CIS/T1202324.

¹¹⁹ ID566CIS/C/T1202324. This was a first-year student aged 22-25 enrolled on an undergraduate course.

¹²⁰ PTES (2024).

opportunities, wellbeing, and the structural conditions of students' lives. Belonging is best understood as something that is *produced over time*, unevenly distributed across the student body, and highly sensitive to institutional design choices.

At a foundational level, the evidence shows that belonging exists for many students but remains institutionally fragile. Theme 1 establishes that overall levels of reported belonging are relatively stable yet consistently below sector benchmarks, suggesting that Westminster offers multiple routes to belonging without embedding it uniformly across the student experience. This fragility provides the backdrop against which the subsequent themes operate.

Themes 2, 4, and 5 together illustrate how belonging is *generated relationally*. Peer connection (Theme 2) functions as a primary entry point, allowing students to feel socially anchored through friendships, informal interaction, and shared experience. Academic integration (Theme 4) then legitimises this sense of belonging institutionally: meaningful staff–student relationships, inclusive pedagogy, and consistent academic support signal to students that they matter within the academic core of the university. Participation beyond the curriculum (Theme 5) strengthens and stabilises belonging by providing structured, repeated opportunities for interaction, contribution, and recognition. Where these relational domains align, belonging becomes cumulative and resilient.

Theme 3 demonstrates that these relational processes are not identity-neutral. Belonging is mediated by how effectively institutional practices recognise difference, address inequality, and create identity-affirming environments. Students' capacity to belong authentically depends not only on access to peers or staff, but on whether curricula, pedagogies, and communities validate diverse identities and experiences. Where inclusion is enacted, belonging deepens; where it is implicit or assumed, belonging becomes conditional and uneven.

Themes 6 and 7 explain why belonging matters for students' lived experience and institutional outcomes. Wellbeing and belonging are mutually reinforcing: strong relational ties buffer stress, reduce isolation, and support coping, while diminished belonging amplifies anxiety and withdrawal (Theme 6). In turn, belonging operates as a *protective and enabling condition* for educational outcomes (Theme 7), reducing vulnerability to disengagement and supporting motivation, persistence, and confidence. Importantly, the evidence cautions against deterministic interpretations: belonging does not automatically produce success, but its absence increases risk, particularly where other pressures are present.

Theme 8 situates all of these processes within their structural context. Belonging is constrained – and often redistributed – by study mode, time poverty, employment, caring responsibilities, commuting patterns, cost-of-living pressures, and life stage. These factors do not diminish students’ desire to belong; rather, they delimit when, where, and how belonging can be accessed. Structural misalignment between institutional delivery models and students’ lived realities therefore emerges as a central driver of unequal belonging.

Synthesised together, the themes suggest a conceptual model in which belonging at Westminster is:

- **Relational:** formed through sustained interaction with peers and staff;
- **Institutionally mediated:** strengthened or weakened by curriculum design, pedagogy, and participation structures;
- **Identity-contingent:** shaped by recognition, inclusion, and power;
- **Wellbeing-linked:** both influencing and influenced by emotional health;
- **Structurally bounded:** constrained by time, space, money, and life circumstances.

This synthesis underscores that efforts to enhance belonging cannot rely on isolated initiatives or messaging alone. Instead, belonging emerges as an *integrative outcome* of how the University organises learning, relationships, participation, and support in ways that align with the diversity of students’ lives. This framing provides a foundation for the subsequent section on implications, positioning belonging as both an outcome to be fostered and a mechanism through which wider educational and wellbeing goals can be advanced.

Implications for Policy, Practice and Intervention

It has been established that belonging at Westminster is uneven, fragile at transition points, and strongly mediated by structural features of the educational experience rather than by individual characteristics alone. The implications that follow focus on actionable institutional responses that directly address the structural drivers of (un)belonging, drawing upon the *Being Westminster Strategy*, *Education Strategy, 2023-2029*, *APP 2025026 to 2028-29*, and *TEF Regulatory Advice 22* as interrelated mechanisms for change.

Treat belonging as a core indicator of educational quality: Across multiple cohorts, belonging emerges as a *precondition* for engagement, continuation and confidence, rather

than as an outcome that follows academic success. As such, belonging should be positioned as a quality metric, not only as a wellbeing concern:

- Integrate belonging-related indicators (e.g., early engagement, academic confidence, sense of connection to course and staff) into institutional quality monitoring alongside continuation, attainment, and progression.
- Require Schools and Colleges to articulate how course design, assessment and academic support contribute to belonging, not only to learning outcomes.
- Use APP governance structures to ensure that persistent patterns of reported (un)belonging – particularly among commuter students, IMD Q1-2 students and some ethnic minority groups – trigger enhancement activity, not just analysis.

This directly aligns with *Being Westminster's* values of inclusion and compassion with the *Education Strategy's* definition of high-quality education and TEF's expectation that providers evidence how learning environments enable all students to succeed.

Student support practice – structured academic belonging: Students value relationships with staff, but access to meaningful academic connection is uneven, leaving belonging dependent on chance rather than design:

- Strengthen the role of personal tutoring as a *structured academic belonging mechanism*, not solely a pastoral safety net.
- Standardise expectations for academic check-ins at key transition points (i.e., entry into Level 4)
- Use learner analytics not just to flag risk, but to prompt intentional conversations focus on confidence, expectations and course fit.

This responds directly to findings that belonging is relational but must be institutionally enabled, aligning APP early-intervention logic with *Being Westminster's* whole-person approach.

Focus on structural barriers, not student deficits: Experiences of (un)belonging are often shaped by commuting, time poverty, caring responsibilities and financial pressure, rather than by motivation or aspiration:

- Reframe targeted interventions to address structural constraints (i.e., flexible participation models; digital-first engagement where appropriate; embedding support within timetabled activity)
- Use intersectional APP data to prioritise students experiencing multiple belonging risks (e.g., commuter x IMD Q102 x part-time work).
- Evaluate interventions on their impact on belonging-related outcomes (confidence, connection, academic self-efficacy), not just participation numbers.

Both the APP and TEF caution against targeted intervention models that compensate for mainstream practice – those interventions that aim to “fix” a problem that is actually created by a structural constraint. The findings indicate that patterns of unbelonging are recurring, this signals that interventions alone cannot offset systemic features of the educational experience. Indeed, the APP identifies that risks are best addressed through complementary efforts – such as inclusive curriculum reform and early engagement – that look to improve the educational conditions in which all students learn. The focus is on how education is organised, not just by who students are.

Enable structured and inclusive co-curricular engagement as a core belonging mechanism: Across multiple cohorts, students consistently associate stronger belonging with opportunities to connect through societies, sports clubs, peer leadership and representative roles. However, participation in these activities is uneven and often constrained by commuting, time poverty, paid work, caring responsibilities and confidence. As a result, the benefits of co-curricular engagement accrue disproportionately to students already positioned to access them.

Reposition co-curricular engagement as a designed, structured and inclusive element of the Westminster educational experience, rather than an informal or optional add-on.

- Treat societies, sports clubs and student roles as belonging infrastructures, with responsibility for inclusion resting at institutional rather than with individual students.

- Move from models that encourage involvement to models that actively enable participation.
- Recognise engagement as contributing to educational quality, confidence, and progression, aligning with *Being Westminster*'s emphasis on community, inclusion and belonging, as well as the *Education Strategy*'s commitment to authentic and partnership-based learning.

In practice, this could entail the following institutional moves encompassing structural design actions, recognition and reward mechanisms, and targeted enablement – not targeting students – engineering a shift away from designing activities for a specific group and then expecting them students to participate towards one that looks at how opportunities are designed so that more students can realistically take part without being singled out:

- Structural design actions:
 - Increase timetabled or curriculum-adjacent engagement opportunities, reducing reliance on evening-only or high-commitment models.
 - Expand short-term, project-based and rotating roles, lowering thresholds for participation.
 - Improve transparency around how students can get involved, avoiding reliance on informal networks or prior experience.
- Recognition and reward mechanism:
 - Strengthen formal recognition of engagement (e.g., employability awards, transcripts, references).
 - Where appropriate and/or possible, expand paid or stipend-supported roles, addressing financial barriers to participation.
- Targeted enablement:
 - Design engagement opportunities that explicitly accommodate commuter students and those with limited discretionary time.
 - Use APP data to identify where structural design, rather than motivation, limits participation – and address this through redesign.

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