

# Belonging and persistence: the keys to Student Success - a 'Students First' Symposium

[studiosity.com/studentsfirst](https://www.studiosity.com/studentsfirst)

## Transcript

- Attribution: The speakers and the Symposium must be credited or referenced:

For example:

Speaker Name/s, (2024, August 6). *Studiosity Students First Symposium: Belonging and persistence*, [Webinar]. Studiosity.  
<https://www.studiosity.com/studentsfirst>

- Non Commercial: The conversation can be used for non-commercial purposes only.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:00:05] Good morning everyone. My name is Judyth Sachs, I'm the Chief Academic Officer of Studiosity, and it gives me great pleasure to be the person that facilitates these symposia for Studiosity. I want to acknowledge that I'm hosting this online conversation on the lands of the Gadigal people, and I also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the various lands on which you all work today, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in this meeting. I pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales and elsewhere in Australia. Today is our second symposium for 2024, and I believe we have 180 registrations. Which is really very good. So thank you to those who have registered. Thank you to those who, have actually turned up. I understand that work gets in the way of the fun. The focus today is on student belonging, persistence and success. And our panel today is, Professor Michelle Lincoln, DVC-Academic from the University of Canberra. Lisa Bolton, the director of QILT research and strategy at the Social Research Centre. Doctor Joey Crawford, senior lecturer in management at the University of Tasmania. And Angela Kagucia, postgraduate student in communications from the University of Canberra. So the focus for today, is I've done the introduction. I'm now going to invite the, the members of the panel to introduce themselves. And then I will

ask, each member of the panel a question, and then, we will start the conversation. Those of you that are in the audience, please put your questions in the Q&A. But also, I understand that a lot of interesting conversation happens in the chat as well. But if you want me to be able to ask the question, you've got to put it in the in in the, in the Q&A part. So, Angela, why don't you introduce yourself?

**Angela Kagucia** [00:02:13] Hi all, my name is Angela Kagucia. I am in the third semester of my Master of Strategic Communication, degree in the University of Canberra. I am also the postgraduate student representative to the Academic board here at UC, and I am the treasurer and the Student Representative Council.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:02:34] Thank you. Joey.

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:02:38] Yeah, sure. Thank you. Honoured to be here. And welcome, to you all. I'm Joey Crawford. I'm a lecturer at the University of Tasmania. I can see a few UTAS people and other people that I'm, familiar with. So welcome in. I have a background in measuring leadership and behaviour originally, and thinking about how humans relate and connect with each other, which is part of my interest in the space of belonging, and particularly how students belong and how belonging supports them to persist and stay. I recently wrote on belonging for the Universities Accord process, and I'm currently working in the space of how, AI is affecting our engagement with belonging and how AI is causing us to belong in different ways, and how we build online spaces that might support people to belong.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:03:26] Michelle.

**Prof Michelle Lincoln** [00:03:30] Good morning, everyone. Michelle Lincoln, Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic at the University of Canberra. And I'm on Ngunnawal land today, pay my respects to elders, past and present and to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with us today. I'm here because, I guess I have an institution wide view on belonging. And, I'm part of the group who make decisions about where we invest and where we're trying to get the best outcome for our students as possible across the entire institution. So, I guess I'm probably going to be commenting at a macro level, on belonging in universities.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:04:08] Michelle.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:04:11] Lisa.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:04:12] I'm sorry, Lisa. Sorry.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:04:15] Hi, everyone. I'm Lisa Bolton. I'm director of QILT research and strategy at the Social Research Centre. I was about 30 years in the sector before I moved out to what I like to call my first real job in the real world, which was a bit of a shock. I'm probably here as the data nerd component of the conversation. Because we have questions in the QILT surveys around students' sense of belonging and engagement. So. That's me.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:04:46] Thanks very much. So let's let's get on with the questions. And given that this is about students, I've already told Angela that she's going to be the first cab off the rank in terms of the questions. So, Angela, I'm interested to know, how do students define belonging, success and persistence and do their experiences and expectations aligned with what the university offers? I think you're on mute.

**Angela Kagucia** [00:05:16] There we go. Apologies. Thanks for that. I'd first start by defining, belonging and how it affects student success and how you need persistence in that. So I'll speak, based on my experience as an international student. I came to Canberra a year ago, and I when I first got here, I had this sense of otherness. I'm I'm new to this country, and I have no idea what is happening around me. I have no idea what the education system is like. This is the first time I have been out of the country, and the sense of belonging is that you have connections within the community that you are, you know, valued and you are supported. It involves, the formation of meaningful connections with your peers, with your faculty and staff, and also feeling that you have been integrated into the university culture. With success. It talks about, you know, typical, you know, academic success, but also seeing a personal growth, through achievements and the acquisition of skills, for future careers. With the persistence, it's the determination to continue and complete one's studies despite challenges. And, to your question, the, university well, the student expectations on on, belonging, you expect the university to create these opportunities for you to, you know, form these connections that I'm speaking about. And, UC does a good job of doing that in most cases, there are a lot of support systems in place to ensure that as an international student, as a new student at UC you're able to connect with your peers. You're able to connect with, the university, the faculties. And, there is so much support, academic

support. So there is support within the faculty, there's support, through the library and there's support through, student well-being and all of these need, a lot of persistence to keep going, to keep being able to, try and achieve your goals as a student.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:07:41] Thanks. Thanks very much. And. What would you want the university to do that they're not doing? And what would you what would your colleagues say and your peers in your class say, you know, this is what the university needs to do. This is the perfect opportunity because you've got the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic listening.

**Angela Kagucia** [00:08:04] To be honest. In the first semester, there's a lot of communication from the school. Checking in on how you're doing, checking in on whether you've made use of the various support systems. But the first semester, it's more like, the honeymoon phase. And it's so beautiful. The moment you start adjusting, you feel like you're getting into the groove of things. It's it's great, but after the first semester, things get really real. Things get really tough. And, because you also have to commit to things like work, there's a lot less time to, check in with the school. And there's also less communication from the school about whether you're doing okay. And, there's less encouragement to make use of the support systems. I think there needs to be a consistent, attempt to ensure that students are meeting their personal goals, that they are succeeding, that they are not overwhelmed, that they're actually feeling integrated into the university culture. I'm in my third semester. And if you asked me last semester if I was feeling successful, I wasn't. I was not okay. The second semester was even more challenging, and I expect the third semester to be more challenging. And I know it only gets more difficult. And I'm doing my Masters, and I have the privilege of being a bit more mature than some of my companions. And so I have some coping skills, built into my system, into my schedule. But a lot of younger students don't have this. They don't have the luxury of experience. So I think also, creating. Creating programs to support students throughout by, you know, encouraging them doing stuff like, support programs, skills programs, things like that. Just throughout the entirety of the student's experience, there's a lot of requests for feedback in terms of, how you're engaging with the units? And that's really good. That's great. We can do more. But specifically on the personal, the social, the, emotional, all of those areas are very important to ensuring student success.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:10:27] Thanks very much. Second question I'm going to ask to to Joey. We've we've known some time of the importance of social

integration and student retention and success. Why is it still an issue? And then I might also ask Lisa, who is the who has access to the data. Why? Why is it still an issue? So Joey why don't you start, and then Lisa.

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:10:51] Good question. Tough question. Firstly, the I always think about social connection. Right. And when I'm thinking about social connection, I often try to pose a slightly different question. Right. Where are people connecting? And one of the, one of the challenges I think, that we've been experiencing in this kind of new world order of universities the last 40 or 50 years is universities aren't like they once were, where a person dedicated their entire life to a, to a university experience where you walk to university. I am a university student. People around me are university students, they're here to learn and only to learn. They probably have a degree of privilege attached to the resourcing required to go and be in and around universities and only universities. And so you have a social circle in your personal life. You have a social circle in your university. And that's all. That's all you need. Whereas now it's it's this huge myriad. And I always get a bit scared when I ask students to name the places they come from, and the places they're locating themselves from, in and from. I'm a parent. I'm a, I'm a I'm a friend of this person. I'm a carer. I work in this job and also in this job. I'm on the board of this thing. I volunteer for this group and space. And what it means is that when we come into universities, students come with such a diverse range of, different spaces that they're thinking about identities they're attaching themselves to, which makes it hard to connect sometimes, because instead of going to a space where we all have a shared understanding of the world and we all sharing the same values, it's very easy to connect with someone who's very similar to yourself. As we increase and try to become more diverse and equitable in university spaces, that automatically creates challenge for belonging. Because diversity and belonging don't always go, naturally hand in hand. Because the more diverse you are, the less the less easy it is for us to connect. Without training, without development, without support, despite the fact that both of those things are incredibly important to do in parallel.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:12:52] Lisa.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:12:54] As the resident data nerd, in the QILT survey, in the student experience survey, there's a question, whether the student feels a sense of belonging to their institution. And, Joey's done an amazing paper looking at that, looking at the, I think the drivers of of that particular item. But it's always been quite low in the like 50% or thereabouts of students who have a level of

positive response to that item. And that's been since the 1990s when we used to ask graduates, and since the SES started in about 2011. We see that the things that that say, if you take correlation as a sort of a, a vague notion of importance, it's things like induction and orientation activities and whether the teaching staff actively engage the students. So it's a bit that about that early forming of relationships with their peers, but also forming two-way relationships with the academic staff. And you see, you know, people knowing your name and that sort of stuff. And that's particularly important for, internal study mode students. So we see a difference, in, in the engagement, in those activities between, students who are studying on campus and expect an on campus kind of interactive experience compared to those who are studying online. And when Covid hit, we saw the sense of belonging scores drop in line with all the other measures where students' expectations about what a university experience is weren't necessarily met. So there's there's that component of what's important to the students. But there's also, I think, a component of what we think is important for students in terms of their skills development and that kind of thing. So there's only, there's two skills items which sit in that highest, relationship with the sense of belonging. One of which is working with other students as part of their study. So that team building kind of, skill development and spoken communication is the other. And so we see a lot of comments from students saying, I came to class, it was all online. The students, other students never turned on their cameras. I don't know who any of these people are, the dreaded groupwork. I don't know anybody. I don't know who to get in a group with, I don't know these people. So I think there's there's underlying issues that are not just the scores that come out of the surveys.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:15:34] In terms of what you said before, Joey, the relationship that students have with the university, you know, it's much more transactional. For many of them, they come to university, they do the courses, and then they go home; because they've got to work. They've got family commitments. To what extent do we need to rethink how we support students, given the different relationship that students have with learning, the different demands on their times, and the different expectations they have about how they learn and when they learn. Joey why don't you answer that and then I'll throw it over to you, Michelle, as well?

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:16:10] Absolutely. And if students are different, right, we have to teach differently than we did 50 years ago. And, I'll go back so the belonging hypothesis, which is a social psychology piece, is about as old as I am. It still holds reasonably true, in the context that in order to build places where

people want to be and stay, we have to support them to build high quality connections and relationships. With a small number of people that are regular, frequent, and have a degree of affect or care, between them. Right. So in a university context, some people already have a lot of that. So you're coming to class and you've got a really supportive family that's overwhelming in terms of when you wake up, they're there, they're around in the evening they're there and they're supportive and on the weekends you're going on road trips and and whatever else. And your work friends are doing really great things with you. Some people have that and they may not be actually looking for more friends and or more, social resources in a university context. Part of our job is potentially to question whether whether we need to help them build, future contacts. So we need to kind of help them unlearn a little bit and relearn the idea that maybe they need a few good, strong networks in their new discipline space, and that might be something that we think about, but we also might say there are there other students that need more support and we might want to triage a little bit better. And say actually, these are the students coming to us potentially from, under underprivileged or underserved backgrounds that don't have strong social resources and, and, capital that might need more support. In the online world, and we write about this in the Covid context, when we forced all the students to go online, you know, I was I was I wasn't studying, but I was lucky. I had my office, I had my own space to work so I could sit far enough away from someone else and just focus and do my own thing. Some people don't have that. Some people use university libraries as a space to get away from, domestic violence from from really poor personal life contexts. So those online, environments don't actually support students to go to a place that was once safe: their learning world. So universities probably do need to change their belief and their their way of thinking about belonging. Some students need it in the university world. Some students might need it for their future careers. And some students might have a really strong resource set, and we might be throwing resources in an area that doesn't need it.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:18:33] Michelle.

**Prof Michelle Lincoln** [00:18:33] Yeah. I just want to go back to where Angela started in that, belonging means different things to different people. And she talked about feeling, supported and valued at university and feeling valid as a person that you had a right to be there and that you belonged. And then there's the social connection part. And so. What I take away from all of that is that this isn't it. It's a multifaceted construct, and therefore you need multiple different ways of addressing that with different groups of students. And so universities

need to take a very nuanced approach, I think, and understand deeply their students and the cohorts of students that they might have at university, including the diverse backgrounds that they come from. And so what that says to me is, you know, lots and lots of different opportunities for students to connect and engage in ways that they want to. And so for some, you know, that might be through the traditional things we've seen before, like clubs and societies and, sport, social sport, competitive sport, etc. but for others it might be about access to a queer space or a women's space or a parents room or prayer rooms, safe, culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. And so, you know, that's a very different strategy from playing sport, for example. And I think, you know, one, I think the online space is one that is challenging all of us, actually. And I think the starting place with that is understanding: what actually do those students want and need from their university education? And then there's what do we deliver to meet that? But, I can give you a really, quick example of something that we've tried, a course that is offered online. What we did was we grouped students in their online tutorial groups geographically so that we had a group from, northern Victoria, a group from western New South Wales, etc., and we grouped them geographically so that if they wanted to, there was a chance they could get together face to face and have a coffee. And while they did a lot of work online, we actually found that if the opportunity was there, they would catch up face to face with each other and form those different kinds of learner relationships. And so a simple thing like that, grouping students in tutorials based on - online tutorials - based on their geographic location, was one strategy that has worked quite well in terms of helping students feel a sense of connection and bonding.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:21:01] So the next question, for some students, being first in family or community, gives a sense of being a stranger or even feeling they're not deserving of being at university. In large universities, these students often get lost. How can these students be identified and what support can and should be offered? So I'm going to ask Joey again. And then I'm going to ask you, Angela, because, UC is not a large university, but I think that students do get lost and can feel quite lonely. So. So the question is being a stranger, feeling not deserving?

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:21:40] Yeah. Good question. A lot of universities use some kind of, diagnostic model when students come in the door where they kind of say actually, these students have particular markers of disadvantage. A few examples, right. Females are less, are often on that list. People from, with - people with disability. People that are coming from regional areas, etc.. And the



more markers of those, or the more intersectional components you have, the more support you might be likely to need. I like this model, and I also don't like this model. And the reason I don't like that model of detection based on a series of demographic characteristics, is that some people come from, so I come from a very poor background, and we were on the brink of my my mum declared bankruptcy when I went to university because I stopped working. So I moved away and and I stopped working and started kind of taking Centrelink to go and do a bachelor's degree. And so very low end of the, of the, financial privilege spectrum. But I've had other areas that I was doing quite well. I had a strong social network. I was in a small town, so it was very hard to kind of, not be picked up by someone on the way home from work. And so actually, yeah, I'll take it home because I know exactly where you live. So I had markers that meant that I was actually probably okay. Academically, I was doing fine. But on, on a, on one of these predictive models, I would have come up as a red flag. And you need to deploy some resources to make sure this person stays. And so in this case, it might be more about us being better as first year experience people and first year teachers. And saying actually looking at the front, of your student load and going ok I've got 400 students coming in the door. All of them have been online. All of them are kind of working through their content. Here's 35 students who actually haven't been haven't been engaging or don't look like, you know, they're quiet at the back of the class. What can I do to support them to actually start transitioning, into university and out of their previous, previous space? And it might be more, targeted actually kind of using a behaviour-based response rather than a demographic response as, as a kind of core.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:23:47] Angela. I've been an international student. At least I was an international student in America. I might as well have been an international student in, in, in Uganda because the Americans kept on saying to me, "oh, please, I just want to hear you talk. I love your accent", which immediately makes you feel dreadful. So that integration into it looked familiar, but it was not familiar. What was what was it like for you? Coming to Australia and coming to Canberra. Canberra is, you know, a very special place; particularly for its chilly winters.

**Angela Kagucia** [00:24:22] It it's I'm still adjusting to it, but, typically in a lot of the rooms that I walk into, a lot of the time I'm the only person of colour, and specifically from my part of the world in East Africa. And you notice it's very, very noticeable from the onset. And it's it can be quite uncomfortable. But I've taken up this, this, mentality that I'm here and there's a reason I'm here and I'm here to occupy space. I'm here for my voice to be heard. And I think that's the only

thing that's gotten me through. I also have to sometimes put on blinders and, be intentional about not, focusing on that, because at the end of it all, we are all people. Yes, we have, different experiences. We all have different backgrounds, and we are all unique. And so we are all here for a purpose. And focusing on that purpose has helped me get over the otherness that I feel a lot of the time.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:25:33] Thank You. Now, I've got a question here from Amy Martin. And Amy asks the question with regards to belonging, the belonging conversation and what university universities could do differently. What messaging is supplied to all students versus identified students, for example, international students? But I would also put Indigenous students and, refugee students there as well. Could we do better at encouraging all students to be involved in belonging support? And I don't care who wants to start answering that question.

**Angela Kagucia** [00:26:09] If I may. As a recipient of such communication, I noticed that there was a lot of communication from the international student, support centre. And, there was there was a lot of messaging about what I could do to, some of what I could do, what support systems I could join when I got on campus. That weren't necessarily available to or not necessarily not closed off, but it was specifically for international students. And. Well, that's good. It doesn't help with that otherness, where you're not really accustomed to being with people from, a different culture from you. International students, typically come from cultures, especially from African and Asian cultures, of being very similar. So there's a similarity to our experiences. And so being put together in these support groups, while it helps us form connections with each other, it doesn't necessarily help us integrate into the university culture. It took us a while to also understand the accent, because that's a whole other thing. You're learning with people who have a completely different accent. You're learning in a different, education system. So it took a lot of doing, and I think if some of these, programs involved us engaging with students from Australian backgrounds, I think that would have helped us, adjust a bit better, because it takes, at the very least, a semester for an international student to adjust to the accents, only the accents and the new system. So I think that's one of the things that can help.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:28:01] Okay.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:28:04] What we saw in the QILT data over Covid was that international students were the hardest hit. Both socially, there was questions about them, what was happening to them, external to their studies that was

impacting their study. So, you know, difficulty with where they were living, difficulty with their financials. But also they were more, dependent on the support networks at their institutions than the domestic students who could source that elsewhere. And so they were harder-hit. And in 2021, a lot of them were located offshore. So they were actually trying to study fully online. And when you saw the comments in there, they were really looking for a more international experience and looking for that, that engagement, particularly with Australian, students. And you see in the comments, and it's worth looking at the comments that those students are talking about only being exposed to their own cultural groups, or their own small group, and not integrating enough with the Australian students. And to some degree, that otherness is exacerbated by high stakes group work, for example, where the Australian students feel that they're are somehow disadvantaged through that process rather than setting up activities which, get both groups to recognise the value in the other that that, for example, international students would have a really good understanding of international business practices in their own countries. And wouldn't that be great for Australian students to interview them about that and vice versa? So activities where those groups are put together and they see the value in the other and, and engage with them on that basis, I think are really interesting activities institutions could undertake to to try to get that more international experience for both international students and domestic.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:29:59] So what I'm hearing you saying is there should also be a pedagogy of inclusion.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:30:03] Yes

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:30:04] That inclusion is really quite fundamental to learning about the other. And in learning about the other, trying to understand the challenges they're facing.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:30:15] Yes, I would say.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:30:16] Is that happening in any of the institutions that we've got around in front of us this morning?

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:30:22] I think it happens a lot in in single units, in subjects across across the university. So, in my, in my space. The evidence that we picked up from the QILT analysis we did was that teamwork skills was really important to contributing to belonging in our top ten, but access to group work was not an

important factor. It was related but not an important factor. And that's what what Lisa was saying there resonates quite a lot with some of that evidence. That. Getting access and learning how to be in a team and learning the skills of because teamwork skills are communication they're about accepting the person on the other side of the of the communication dialogue and being able to relate to someone else. Those skills were much more important to supporting people to build connections, than forcing students to go and write a 3000 word report where they chunk it out and they kind of write half a page each and you can see very clearly which student has written in which spots. In my, my context, my, my teaching. So I get the privilege, I think, in my, space, I teach leadership development and behaviour. So I get the opportunity to kind of focus a lot more on the relational components of student learning. If you're learning about, I don't know, first year biology, maybe that's a bit harder. But in my case, I put students into into groups, in their first week. And it's a random configuration. And each week they're meant to meet outside of class at least once; so they can do it however they want: zoom, face to face, whatever else. I do try to ping them on, post codes. So I kind of group them up in spaces that are similar, just like Michelle was saying earlier, and get them to meet and go through an activity. The activity is not weighted, there's no assessments; it's a hurdle, so it's required for them to complete it. And then at the at the end, their job is to kind of they're meant to be influencing their group. So they're meant to be practising processes of leading and influencing. And there's a cumulative portfolio piece they're working on as they're getting through. And then there's kind of a high stakes individual assessment at the end, based on all of the times they've had to go meet with each other for an hour. The first semester that I did this, we found, like when I asked students how long they were meeting, some of them were meeting for half a day. And they were doing the activity for about an hour. And then they were sitting around the room together, talking about their assessments and talking about their activities. And and it worked really well because I can't be there all the time. And the power imbalance that I have as an academic that marks their assignments and stands at the front of the room behind a whiteboard, tells them that I can't be their friend. But I can facilitate and support them to build friends at a, at a, a more, power-balanced level. So peer relationships.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:32:53] Michelle, do you have anything to offer?

**Prof Michelle Lincoln** [00:32:55] I was going to add, actually, a fairly recent observation is, we're all we're all aware that students are working a lot, because of cost of living pressures and what we've been seeing outside of the classroom.

I actually agree with Joey that this this is something that's probably, best facilitated within units and, and teaching context, but, external to that, because international students have limits on the amount that they can work, they're actually the ones that are tending to engage more in university activities that are meant to facilitate belonging and social connection for all students. International students are doing that far more than our domestic students, because our domestic students are not on campus, they're working. And so there's sort of almost a turn around there, in terms of, who's engaging with what in the university. Our, you know, most popular sport on campus is badminton. And it's played by international students, largely. And so, it's just an interesting an interesting turn of events, I think. And it's another challenge is around getting that integration between domestic and international students.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:34:05] There've been a number of questions for, in the Q&A, but also people putting questions before the symposium today on online learning. And certainly during Covid online learning was the pedagogy du jour. So what can online providers do to promote a sense of belonging to their student cohorts? And I'd like all members of the panel to provide some sort of perspective. So why don't we start with our student first. So, Angela, what about you?

**Angela Kagucia** [00:34:42] I think some of the, the techniques that, the other panel members have spoken about would be really helpful. I think, some of the things that we do in UC, like, doing the discussion forums, I think, those help students engage a little more in discussion. I think that's more on the academic side. I think for them to have that sense of belonging, there needs to be a lot more thinking about what can do this. I think this needs a bit more research. I think this conversation is a great start, but we wouldn't necessarily be able to answer this question in this, panel. In, in in what I'm feeling because it's a lot more there's a lot we need to look into into specifically what can be done for online students because it's not the same experience that you have on campus. You can't involve online students in orientation activities the same way that you would with, on campus students. You can't involve, online students in the same capacity that you would with the career fairs. So what? It's an area of research, an area of growth.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:35:57] Thank you.

**Prof Michelle Lincoln** [00:36:01] I'll agree with Angela. And I would add that I think. We do need to do the work around understanding what that means,

given that we know that it's so important for, success and progression and we've got to grapple with if it's not the traditional way of belonging that we thought of in the past, what is it to these, this group of students? And I suspect it's it's not it's things not like say, friendship and having friends and knowing people. It's about professional networking. It's about, meeting people who can help you in your career goals as a student who's online. And I think sometimes what I see with students in this space is the connection to the, to the academic, to the lecturer, to the teacher is actually, prioritised over connection to other students. I think that takes careful management. And I think the ability to be taught by guest lecturers, experts in the field, potential employers that facilitate that professional networking is potentially part of what these students want. But I think, again, it's something, as Angela said, that we need to, do more research and test.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:37:10] Joey.

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:37:12] Yeah, I agree. I suppose is the easy answer. I think the first comment I'd make is that we can't treat online students the same as we treat on campus students. The way that we engage with them is very different. The way that, you know, even even cool breakout rooms and nice simulated environments is still very different than having a table in the corner you can walk over to and say, hey, how are you going? Or you can drop in and kind of see. You can feel the presence, the space of the space you're in, all the people learning. Which is slightly lost when you're sitting in bed on, with your pyjamas on with headphones, the laptop. And the kind of students that we're seeing online are also different. So the people coming on campus often do have a bit more time available. They have a bit more resources, to be able to come to class and come and do and spend dedicated time learning. People online might be trying to convenience-learn slightly and work their way through. How do I learn? Given I have to work 60 hours and whatever else and try to squeeze squeeze in some learning in that mix. But the big observation, or the big comment I make is that if, the biggest predictors of belonging are human connection. So if I have if I support you to interact with other students, I build a place where you might be able to belong. And in that model, we actually want to say, how do I find a relationship? The first kind of meaningful, student to student relationship for every single student in my delivery. And when you start simulating the front component of your units and your subjects and, I see Sally's in, in the chat talking about a transition pedagogy for the first year as well, to make sure students have their first friend or their first meaningful connection with another student. Because I agree with Michelle, we need to have students

being able to build networks with industry. But if you've got a year 12 student that's coming into university for the first time and you put them beside a CEO, they're going to quiver and run away or make some really small talk and then run away and the connection's lost. And so we can support them to build, low stakes connections and low stakes connections with training, getting them ready so they can kind of unlearn their, their high school life or, and start to become a student in a university context and then eventually help them transition into being a professional, a nurse, a doctor, a, a teacher, a CEO or business manager, in my context. And that requires kind of their first, their first meaningful connection.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:39:35] I agree with Joey. And there's the issue around skills development, which often is implicit in a lot of of higher education studies still. And so those skills of, of working with other people, the skills, the spoken communication, how do we develop those skills in an effectively online environment? Because a lot of students are doing at least partly hybrid now. The institutions haven't necessarily come back to fully on campus delivery. So how much hybrid means that you're missing out on these developmental tasks and activities to develop your ability to work effectively in a team and communicate effectively, but in a fully online environment? A lot of work now is hybrid, so I only go to the office 1 or 2 days a week, and most of my engagement with my colleagues is in teams meetings. We jump on. Sometimes we just jump on for a chat or to have a general grumble about something from work. Fabulous. Because we know each other. So how do you foster those relationships and those, abilities around communication and working in teams for students who will find themselves in a more hybrid environment when they, you know, hit their forever job or their career? So it's it's, I agree with all of this, and it's important in the teaching and learning space that we understand how we make this work in a hybrid or online environment.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:41:13] Another area associated with online learning is AI. And of course, AI is very much the topic of the moment, both in its pros and the cons. And I don't. I'm just going to throw this one out there. Do you think AI can support student belonging? And what will students perceptions be of AI support? And this was a question that came in beforehand.

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:41:43] I can probably have a go first. We've just we just published some work kind of testing this relationship a little bit and trying to think about what happens when people are connecting, using AI. It always worries me a bit. Right? And the reason, the reason why I think that AI has a

potentially an inverse relationship with belonging long term, but not short term, is that as we the way - if we assume that belonging is built primarily on connections in place. So when we have human connections and meaningful connections, we feel like we belong and we belong to universities when we have a series of meaningful connections on campus or in an online space. If students and students, particularly disadvantaged students, require the most social skill training to get them up to a point where they can build meaningful connections, a lot of places where we build social connection are things like library support, going into a student advisor to seek help, getting sitting down with a peer and saying, "I don't know why I've been marked down for a comma in this spot, in my references" and trying to work through those things, whereas AI can do all of that, right. All of those basic skill tasks that that, we once had to do, AI can now do for us and make a lot of our life easier, which I love, but I also know how to do it. And I've also built the social skills attached to all those things beforehand. So if we're replacing, incidental social interaction, we're reducing the time that students have to learn how to connect with others. We saw this a lot in Covid where we couldn't go in, students couldn't go to campus and ask a librarian, "hey, I don't know why the teacher is saying my APA-7 headings are wrong", or "I don't know how to write this paragraph". Yes, they're learning the the writing skills, but they're also practising, implicitly making connections and building social skills, which a lot of our learning is, done socially. And so if we, in the AI context, I think AI is having a negative effect on our social skills, and that's likely to then lead into difficulty connecting, higher rates of social anxiety, for example, and eventually into a into a context where we don't belong as frequently.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:43:48] So you're making the distinction between the social interaction versus the cognitive development of learning.

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:43:56] Yeah. Yeah. That's right. So I think the distinction yes. Like as in, I think I like to pull them out and kind of make both of them implicit - um, explicit, sorry. But they are interwoven. Right. So we're we're building connections and we're learning. So AI can help us with the cognitive component. AI can potentially mislead us a little bit in the social.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:44:16] Any other members of the panel want to make an observation or a comment?

**Angela Kagucia** [00:44:21] I agree with, Joey, I think, the use of AI in the belonging space would work to isolating students more instead of working



towards, helping them develop that sense of belonging. Because no matter how much we create these great technologies, this, great AI's to help students - nothing can replace that social aspect of being a student. I think it would isolate students more if they became more dependent on AI tools to, resolve some of the issues that they're encountering. And that would exacerbate the issue of, not belonging.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:45:11] There's a question here from Jamie Chapman. And Jamie says, and Jamie's also made a comment about the AI point, but I think Jamie's question's an interesting one. Is self-care - is self-care should probably, are self-care skills actively encouraged in our support systems? And that's links to the issues of mental health and mental wellbeing that somebody brought up a little bit earlier on the chat. So it is. It is about educating the whole person, being aware not only of their learning, but also their wellbeing, their support. And so what does the puzzle look like and what do we in universities need to do to make sure the - to continue my metaphor - to make sure that each of the each of the pieces fit and support students, at the end of the day, it's actually supporting students that's our core business - support students to learn.

**Prof Michelle Lincoln** [00:46:10] I'm happy to start. I mean, there are some, curriculums that will directly address that. And often they are in, the health professions where we know that health professionals need to care for themselves while they are caring for others. But at a university level, interestingly, we have a distinction between student well-being and a medical and counselling service. And that distinction is important. Wellbeing is about keeping yourself well. And within that, there's almost levels of levels of care, and steps students can take from general advice, workshops around managing stress, etc.. Right down to we run a specific coaching program for success for students, which is a brief, multiple appointments, 3 or 4, one on one coaching with someone who actually helps students set goals, decide how they're going to approach their semester, what they need to do to keep themselves well, but also to keep themselves on track in progressing. And that's a fairly intense and high level intervention. But we're finding that, for some of our students, it makes all the difference. And so, you know, there's a whole range of different things there depending on what students come to us with. We need to meet the students where they're at in terms of their own journey around learning how to care for themselves. But I think it's absolutely the remit of universities, because our role is to put people in a position where they will learn, and where they can

learn well and succeed. And so I see it, as part of our role and with varying levels of, I guess, intervention to, use a health term, in that space.

**Lisa Bolton** [00:47:48] In in the QILT surveys, we've got a question which is "I've seriously considered leaving in the last 12 months" - remembering this is already August; the people who were going to leave, transition, probably already have. And this is your more engaged cohort who bothered to do a big survey. But the things that came out of that prior to the new items that are under it were health and stress was the big ticket one. Half the students who said they'd considered leaving cited health or stress. And in the newest survey, we've broken them out. So it's now mental health, you know physical health, stress. It's three separate things, but they're still all up the top. And financial difficulties is quite important. We had an optional set of items which uses the personal wellbeing index and asks students about, their level of stress and how well they're coping with that level of stress. And that was an optional piece that was developed by the sector with us. And they can just buy in. It's a it's a fee for service one, but each institution will get the data about the personal wellbeing index and those stress levels and how well they're coping. We also asked an extra question about whether they identify as LGBTQI plus, and also a more detailed gender question because the taxi one is... Maybe not great. And so what we see in the wellbeing index LGBTQI identifying students, students who identify as non-binary or other, and students with disabilities all have lower scores against the other in terms of their wellbeing index, and also in terms of how much stress they're feeling and being less able to deal directly with that stress. And so the sector have the power here that that if there are particular things that you need to know that, that you want to investigate, I encourage institutions that have bought into that module, to dig in there, give it to the right people. It's really fascinating. But also there's always the opportunity to start sort of customising the QILT surveys to get what you need out of it to be able to, to do this well.

**Angela Kagucia** [00:50:06] I think one of the avenues that universities can utilise to teach students, self-care skills; I've noticed that, especially here, with UC there are a lot of, activities planned through the university's accommodation partner, which is Uni Lodge. There are a lot of, activities like meditation, yoga, things like, pottery painting, a lot of, planting of trees, and in in those, settings, people are able to have conversations about self-care, there are workshops on, financial wellness. There are, workshops on, you know, taking care of your health and wellbeing. So I think that can also work towards, both self-care and enhancing the sense of belonging amongst students.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:51:00] My. I'm reflecting back on my experience of working in universities and in large, research intensive universities. And it certainly was the view and it was my experience that, if students got past the first six weeks, they were very likely to complete the semester. If they felt a sense of isolation, loneliness and working in an alien environment, many of them tended to drop out. So what's what's happening now in that first six weeks, which really is the basis where you either keep them or lose them. And Michelle I will ask you because you know that you've got the pan-university approach, and you've also worked in a large, research intensive university at Sydney.

**Prof Michelle Lincoln** [00:51:47] Yeah. I haven't seen a huge amount of change I have to say in the way that we approach it. We tend to be continuing to do the, traditional things that you would see in orientation week, although I certainly encouraged for that to really continue that sort of one week and done that we continue to run those activities where students have opportunities to engage. Right over the first semester, actually, and because students now start in second semester, it's kind of a year round thing. Although I was interested in Angela's comment about feeling like that, that level of communication dropped off in second semester. So that's really helpful feedback. Yeah. So I'd, I have to say, I haven't seen a huge amount of change there. I think that there's probably more scaffolding and assistance within the curriculum going on. I think the focus has come gone from being, outside of the curriculum, extra curricular stuff into the curriculum and how we really support students through that. So, early assessment, for example, before Census Day, is now pretty much, I think, in everybody's curriculum. And that's a good thing for students in terms of having to engage, test themselves and get some feedback on how they're going. And I think that will also help students make good decisions around, staying in units of courses. So, yeah, I think the biggest change is probably being within the curriculum, as opposed to outside.

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:53:10] Probably one thing to comment. I and I agree with Amy in the chat that was talking about the first assessment rather than the first six weeks, being like that big hurdle for a student, you know, it's, it's the thing that validates or, or conflicts with their identity that 'I'm a university student'. You fail an assessment first round for us as educators, we say, oh, that's fine. You know, you're welcome to fail as many times as you need to to learn. That's that's fine. Learning is meant to be uncomfortable. Learning is likely to induce, periods of anxiety. If you look at Ron Barnett's work, he says learning has to. Good learning has to include, degrees of uncertainty and anxiety because you're unlearning old things and learning new things. But for me, I think it's how you

triage your responses in that first assessment. So let's say a third year student's failed... Great. Before you send out the feedback to all the students and you press the the automatic publish marker. Maybe it's worth a quick phone call or an email to a student saying like, hey, actually, you're going to fail the assessment that's coming out later today. But that's fine. So for me, for example, I have a resubmit policy on the first assessments when it allows the student to resubmit and get a pass grade. If they meet the criteria, they can't get beyond a pass because they're getting an advantage over other students. But what it essentially does is allows them to move through that. And the first assessment's are always very, low stakes because in the first three weeks or four weeks, students might, like, I'm starting a first. I'm studying a unit at the moment and I've just joined it. So it's week three in UTAS, so I'm about to rock up to a class this afternoon, having not prepared at all, and having to catch up. With that experience and lots of people jumping in and out. So if we make our first assessments super low stake, give us a chance to kind of work out how students are going and where they're at and then respond without before you respond, kind of saying, actually, you failed, kind of work out how you deal with that, because that immediate thing that says you have failed, it's 44% or whatever that number is that that validates a student's fears 'I'm not a university student. I'm not a successful learner. I had difficulty, and I was I only a middle, middle of the range student in high school. So why would I be a university learner?' And try to work out how you respond to that identity challenge early so they can persist?

**Lisa Bolton** [00:55:23] So the other thing being the plethora now of academic calendars. So you have the well I consider it the VU model, but I think it's broader now. Where students are coming in every say, six or eight weeks and starting. So that idea of transition is a very different animal, where a student might be away for two weeks and they've actually missed a third of a whole unit. And so those different academic calendars, I think, might need different approaches, particularly, in my old world where I was still teaching where you had groups which had dropped down in size so that they were amalgamated, the level of disruption to those students and the networks that they'd already created - It's actually quite profound. And the level of dissatisfaction amongst those students was was frightening to behold. And so those different academic challenges in the way we integrate students into a group, say that already exists, for example, as Joey's experience, I think is more important now, the old two semester, virtually everyone starts at the beginning, I think might be gone. And we need to consider how those different academic calendars, as well as the different delivery modes might be impacting on those abilities.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:56:43] Sort of unpacking that a little bit. Sharon Altina asks the question how do we normalise hope seeking? So to actually ask for help requires a sense of, self-knowledge, but also confidence and feel that you're not being shamed. So how do we normalise that it's okay not to know. And it's okay to ask for help. And let, let me ask the psychologist. I'm a sociologist by training, so I can ask a psychologist. That's. That's you Joey?

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:57:16] Yeah. Organisational behaviour person, really. But then I'll take psychologist and, and probably get told off by the rest of the psychologists in the room. I think that's difficult, right. And that's a really difficult thing to do. You're helping someone. You're trying to teach them. Actually, it's fine to fail. It's fine to, seek out help. And that's what the fear of seeking help comes from. If you if you seek out help, it's me accepting the idea that I've failed or I'm not good enough or I'm whatever in that mix. And I think that's difficult. I embed, I embed points of failure in in the first handful of weeks, I call them points of failure. As a way to say, actually everyone does it. If you look at the Stanford, I think it's a collaboration project? I'm misquoting, I think. They had a real challenge supporting Black Americans to stay in their, their courses. And so what they started doing was they designed a program that, took videos of a really diverse range of students who had persisted through to the end here. And they made an assessment in the final year of their bachelor degrees that required you record a video, a letter, a, a blog, whatever that thing was, to build a huge range of artefacts to show students they'd persisted. So despite, you know, what you look like or the kind of challenges that that they'd faced that actually had persisted and it makes it normalises. And the assessment is like, how did you struggle? When did you want to drop out? And all the students said actually, I wanted to drop out eight times in first year, and I wanted to drop out 12 times in whatever I was. I remember almost dropping out of my PhD, at one point right before submission. Not quite sure why I have a thesis already done. Right. There was no logical reason for it, but I, I felt incredible desire to drop out and run away because you can't fail your thesis exam or your thesis submission if you don't submit it. And so part of that is probably us rethinking, you know, how we support students to accept that failure is pretty cool. You know, failure is fine. Failure evidences that you're on the track to learning but that actually it's a very normal experience.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [00:59:19] And a lot of research now around belonging talks about perseverance. And so you're a great case study of that perseverance. So

what what advice would you give to students who are just on that sort of liminal state. Will I stay or will I go? Sounds like a rock song doesn't it?

**Dr Joey Crawford** [00:59:36] I think the best thing I encourage students to do is sense check. So sense-check with someone who's done it or been through it. As much as you don't want to have people perpetuate bad, bad case studies. The thing that kept me persisting was one of my supervisors called me going hey like. It's a fine thesis, there's nothing wrong with it. Like I've done these 20 times before, you're my 21st candidate. And, there's no reason to believe that this isn't going to work. And it was that minor comment, like alright well, on a benchmark, he said that actually it's it's fine compared to other ones. And it was no longer my thesis was this alien thing that was horrific. And in my university was very uncommon to do publications, for example, in in your thesis at that point. So I'd kind of said, oh, I should be more contemporary. And I did that. But that didn't and that was fine, but was I was worried that it was going to be not poorly received. Because all the papers were published rather than being somewhere else. But sense-checking, going out and saying to another student, hey, I've actually done this poorly. And then they say actually I did the same thing and I passed or whatever is a way to challenge softly that assumption that you're going to fail by providing evidence to the counter.

**Prof Judyth Sachs** [01:00:44] Thank you for that. And Evelyn has reminded me that it's now 12:00. In fact, it's 12:01. So look, thank you for members of the panel for contributing to our conversation. I think it's been robust and it's been very interesting. And I thank the 103 people that started off and the 91 that stayed until the end. So thank you everyone. Enjoy the rest of your day. And remember we're here to support students. So thanks again and goodbye.