

### Exploring how a 'Sense of Belonging' is facilitated at different stages of the student journey in Higher Education.

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#### Introduction

New pressures on the English Higher Education (HE) sector, especially in the light of the new regulatory system of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), sees Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) measured on their retention rates in addition to existing measures such as student satisfaction and research (BIS, 2016). HEIs are now concerned about potential high rates of withdrawal, on top of low rates of satisfaction, having reputational, economic, ethical and legal implications (Thomas, 2012). In such a context, prior focus on satisfaction alone has given way to broader scrutiny of retention and belonging. Alongside these agendas, since 2012, HEIs have also changed: universities now charge higher fees than ever before and the government's removal of the cap on admissions has led to growth in student numbers. Over the last half century, the student demographic and modes of study in HE have changed dramatically: HEIs now take a variety of forms, alternative pathways of study have proliferated and the associated cost of being a student has risen (Lowe, 2017). HEIs have consequently been obliged to modernise their practices in relation to the student experience, 'sense of belonging' and engagement. For example, many HEIs are now investing millions in their campus estates, which now feature attractive buildings, state-of-the-art sports facilities, modern teaching rooms and cutting-edge technology suites, as well as trading on "community atmospheres" and "innovative learning spaces" (Havergal, 2014) to attract students and enhance their experience. Also, as the cost for HE has shifted from the taxpayer to the student, the emphasis on student experience and student success has grown (Thomas, 2012), with the majority of students surveyed by HSBC and NUS now having 'even higher' expectations of universities (NUS/HSBC, 2011).

With this ever-changing student experience as background, this paper contributes a contemporary study to explore further the positive factors, events and activities that contribute to a 'sense of belonging' across the study journey at the University of Winchester. It also gives insight into the expanding debate surrounding 'belonging' in HE, focusing on the positive forms of engagement that lead to a 'sense of belonging' rather than the barriers which have been extensively explored elsewhere (Thomas, 2016; Callaghan, 2016; NUS, 2013; Kuh *et al*, 2004; Mann, 2001).

#### Belonging

It is claimed that, at the heart of retention and success, is a strong sense of belonging, which is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in (Thomas, 2012). The Oxford English Dictionary (Fifth Edition, 2002) defines 'belonging' as: 'The fact of appertaining or being a part; relationship; esp. an individual's membership of, and acceptance by, a group or society.' The term is therefore apt for students' 'sense of belonging' or being a member of a university. Thomas *et al* (2012) define 'belonging' as being closely aligned with the concept of student engagement, encompassing both academic and social engagement - academic engagement being synonymous with deep (as opposed to surface) learning or compliance (Thomas, 2012). Brown also states that an individual's 'sense of belonging' to an organisation (such as a HEI) can derive from membership of groups within that organisation, which, in turn, can improve self-esteem and confidence (Brown, 2000). 'Belonging' can also be

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linked to students' self-determination within such domains as work and relationships (Deci and Ryan, 1985) with possible impact - which might be both positive and negative (Deci and Ryan, 2008) - on wellbeing. A recent student opinion piece reiterates the importance of belonging: "the excitement and joy that comes along with being a part of such a community catches, swallowing up new starters, lost and disengaged individuals and homesick students, giving them a support network, life-long friendships and, most importantly, a home" (Callaghan, 2016).

Consideration of the two concepts of 'belonging' and 'alienation' have been useful for informing this project. The 'What Works' study, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to investigate belonging in Higher Education in relation to the Widening Participation agenda, identified several factors which prevented students from dropping out and led them to succeed (Thomas, 2012). The project identified that between 33% and 42% of first-year students think about withdrawing from HE (Thomas, 2012). A review of this report, in parallel to Mann's work on student alienation, gives the reader a powerful sense of the significance of 'belonging' for a student within an HE environment that is not usually provided for the good of the learners or other community, but to satisfy the requirements of the teacher or institution and for the mark obtained (Mann, 2001). Mann also argues that most students entering the new world of 'the academy' are in an equivalent position to travellers crossing the borders of a new country (Mann, 2001), meeting barriers to 'belonging' when entering HE. By contrast, in the workplace, the Investors in People (IIP) organisation accredits firms and institutions with its benchmarking 'Standard' for effective people management - and therefore much greater consequential sustainability; the accreditation process, amongst many other relevant measures, investigates employees' 'sense of belonging' (Investors in People, 2013). This IIP Standard has been the hard-earned goal of many institutions, corporations, private companies (and, indeed, schools), keen to promote their own employees' 'sense of belonging', often referred to as the 'Corporate Glue' (Ferner *et al*, 1995).

### Student engagement

The sector has wide, sometimes conflicting, views on what 'student engagement' actually means (Dunne, 2016; The Student Engagement Partnership, 2014; Trowler and Trowler, 2010). However, for the purpose of this project and paper, the authors considered 'engagement' to be any interaction or activity a student has whilst at university. The paper will also refer to capitalised 'Student Engagement Activities' (SEAs), which are extra-curricular activities relating to the educational enhancement of a programme or course and which are closely associated with the sector recommendation to involve students in the enhancement of the student experience (Shaw and Lowe, 2017; QAA, 2012).

SEAs have been reported to make students feel as if they are a part of an institution, not just people who attend (Horseley, 2016), and they can also create a 'sense of belonging' through involvement, engagement and connectedness with the university experience (Kift *et al*, 2010). Student engagement activity may also link to increased satisfaction, belonging and integration into the student experience (Lawson, 2012; Astin, 1984) and can provide potential advantages for employability (Stuart *et al*, 2009). Indeed, many HEIs run activities for employability and enhancement reasons and these have also been identified to have alignment with skills' development and general engagement in the HEI (Kuh, 2007; Kuh *et al*, 2004). Callaghan (2016), a student from Newcastle University, also reports student engagement activity leading to a sense of belonging, of acceptance and of mutual respect. Studies also suggest that students invest greater effort in their learning when they become involved members of their university community and that positive interaction with peers brings about a 'sense of belonging' and increased student satisfaction (Morgan, 2003). However, with increasing diversity amongst the

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student body and since many students choose to commute or take alternative pathways of study, many may be prevented from fully participating in, integrating with or feeling as if they belong to HE, with possible detrimental impact upon their retention and success (Thomas, 2012). Such students can often be referred to as 'hard to reach', disengaged or alienated from the full student experience (Dunne *et al*, 2017).

In the light of the above literature, a decision was made to focus on the more positive forms of 'engagement' and on how these can contribute to a 'sense of belonging' across the study journey at the University of Winchester, rather than on more negative events and 'barriers'.

### Project summary

This research project was designed to explore how a 'sense of belonging' is facilitated at different stages of the student journey, with an intention of informing the institution's decision makers at the institution for planning purposes. The project was conducted by Owen Humphrey, a Masters student in the Philosophy of Education and Tom Lowe, a Student Engagement Project Manager, through the Winchester Student Fellows Scheme (described by Sims *et al*, 2014). The research team was paired together through this co-curricular Student Engagement activity, which aims at bringing together both a student and a member of staff in innovative partnership, with mutual targets, direction and input. Additionally, this scheme aligns with UK policy and literature surrounding student-staff partnerships.

This project conformed to the established ethical procedures of the University of Winchester. All students had every aspect of the research made clear to them before signing a consent form and were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Students' anonymity was of paramount concern and no participant can be traced or identified through the results of the research (cf. British Educational Research Association, 2011; University of Winchester, 2014).

### Methodology Phase 1

The origins of this partnership project began with the authors' being matched through the Universities 'students as partners' scheme. Both had expressed similar interests for investigation across the 2016-17 academic year and were influenced by a common awareness of new challenges facing the sector, with the Teaching Excellence Framework bringing new foci of attention (The Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). Initial discussions (based on the authors' experience of HE when students themselves, between the years of 2010 and 2017) highlighted a number of features considered to have a potential impact on 'belonging' at this university. For example:

- Where students live in the first year of study and the experience they have in that accommodation is likely to have significant impact on their 'sense of belonging';
- If students are members of sports teams, societies or other extra-curricular activities, then they are likely to have a more developed 'sense of belonging';
- If students commute to the University, then those students are likely to have a less well-developed 'sense of belonging'.

To gain a picture from a wider range of stakeholders of what features and characteristics of engagement and other student experiences contribute to a 'sense of belonging', it was decided to hold an on-campus 'Feedback Exhibition' for students. This forum would allow the team to

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gather more information from a variety of stakeholders as a basis for Stage 2 of the study - an institution-wide online survey.

The 'Feedback Exhibition' comprised several activities around a room, in a format that was marketed as 'taking only five minutes' of students' time. The 'exhibition' was made up of several posters intended to remind participants of their University experiences and to stimulate them to investigate these and draw together their responses to events, activities or themes which they felt contributed to a 'sense of belonging' whilst at the University. The activities are summarised below:

- A timeline of the student journey across eight A1 sheets was stuck up along one wall of the room, with each academic year and semester labelled. Students were asked to mark on the timeline when they felt they belonged and to annotate this with a factor or event;
- A mind map with the question "What does belonging mean to you?" which students were asked to annotate with their response;
- A mind map with the question "What factor(s) led to a sense of belonging at the University of Winchester?" where students were asked to annotate their responses.

From these activities, the team collated the responses, entered them into a spreadsheet and then coded them for thematic categories. The nine categories identified from the responses are outlined below in Table 1, followed by some discussion of each code. The key purpose of this analysis was to ensure that the survey for Stage 2 was closely aligned with student perceptions and to indicate those areas that were considered most important or influential. In total, forty-five students attended our feedback exhibition and produced 578 responses across the multiple activities. The most responses for a single code was 189 (Code 7: Socialising Activities) and the least was thirteen (Code 6: Student Union Activities). The remaining codes and their values are outlined below in Table 1. The team admits, however, that there were some constraints to carrying out our feedback exhibition; for example, the time of day when the event was held (11 a.m.-1 p.m.) and how this affected students and staff who were on campus.

Code No.	Code	No. of occurrences
1	Pre-Arrival University Selection Processes and Activities	28
2	University Degree Processes and Activities	53
3	Sports, Societies, Student Engagement and other Student Activities	88
4	Housing / Halls Processes and Activities	28
5	Course / Programme-Related Processes and Activities	86
6	Student Union Activities	13

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7	Socialising Activities	189
8	A Sense of Place and Safety	74
9	A Sense of Ambition	19

**Table 1:** Categories identified from the Feedback Exhibition

It was decided to divide university processes and activities into two areas: 'Pre-Arrival University Selection Processes' and 'University Degree Processes', as there was such a high number of responses referring to '*choosing to study*' and '*enrolling*' at the University. This highlighted the importance of these processes, following Kift *et al's* (2010) view that student orientation is a core process of the student experience, not just a single event (Kift *et al*, 2010). Examples of three responses that informed these categories are:

- *Receiving the UCAS Acceptance Letter* (code 1)
- *Confirmation of Acceptance of Studies as an International student* (code 1)
- *Graduation* (code 2)

Code 3 was broad: 'Sports, Societies, Student Engagement and other Student Activities'. All such extra-curricular activity can have a significant influence on the transition process from university to the workplace, with the potential for better occupational status (Tchibozo, 2008). Astin (1984) suggests that a student who is involved in extra-curricular activities tends to have a better student experience. Similarly, Mahoney *et al* (2003) have explored how educational status is linked to positive changes in extra-curricular activity, participation and interpersonal competence. Callaghan (2016) reports that an engaged student who is involved in co-curricular activities will feel as though s/he is valued, not just as a student but as an equal, that s/he is listened to, not passively but with her/his opinions and ideas acted upon, and s/he will spread the community ethos herself/himself. Example responses included:

- '*Becoming a Student Academic Representative*'
- '*Joining a sport or society*'
- '*Sports Tour*'

Astin (1984) reported on the impact of where students live, with those in university residences performing better than other students. Code 4, 'Halls and housing', included a question on whether the student responding lived on campus or not and, if not, how far they travelled (further explored below). A study by The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) and Liz Thomas Associates (2016) outlined that commuter students experience significant barriers in relation to wider engagement activities. Consequences of increased tuition fees are that some students, rather than studying full-time, are taking alternative pathways to HE, studying later and living at home rather than in halls (Thomas, 2012). Pressures on student finances means that studying from home offers the prospect of some mitigation of cost; however, home-based students tend to find making friends more difficult than do those who have the advantage of communal living and consequently are likely to have weaker support networks (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Lowe (2017) has previously described the "campus bubble" as "the best and worst thing about this University"; for those outside, it was a negative experience, with barriers to both support and opportunities. Yorke *et al* (2008) suggest that younger students are even

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more likely that older ones to be unhappy with a new geographical environment. Responses from Code 4 include:

- *'Moving into halls'*
- *'First meal with house mates in halls'*

Course- and programme-related processes and activities (Code 5) relate to the routine requirements for engagement in a degree. Kift *et al* (2010) argue that students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to have a successful experience (Kift *et al*, 2010). Thomas (2012) refers to this as the 'academic sphere' - key to nurturing participation of the type which engenders a 'sense of belonging' (Thomas, 2012). The 'What Works' report identifies that belonging can be achieved through meaningful interactions between staff and students and can develop knowledge, confidence and identity for an HE learner (Thomas, 2012); Goodenow (1993) states that the academic environment in class involves support and respect. Furthermore, Kift *et al* (2010) discuss how 'Transition Pedagogy' is core to building academic learners in higher education, echoed by Warren and Luebsen (this issue of JEIPC). Examples of Code 5 are outlined below:

- *'Doing my first assignment'*
- *'Becoming more confident in my course'*

Code 6 was identified as 'Student Union Activities' relating to social events and, notably, coordinated democracy, such as student executive team elections, through The University of Winchester Students' Union. Acting as a student representative or council member can build confidence (Stuart *et al*, 2009) and becoming a Student Union Executive Officer is marketed in the language of: "give something back to your study body" (Winchester Student Union, 2017). Astin describes a highly-involved student as one who "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organisations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (Astin, 1999:518). Example statements for Code 6 included:

- *'Election week'*
- *'Standing in SU elections'*

Socialising Activities (Code 7) range from meeting others and having a conversation to making friends and to going to evening events and outings. Example statements included:

- *'Meeting my course friends'*
- *'First meal with housemates in halls'*

Codes 8 and 9 related to A Sense of Place (Code 8) - students being able to "*be themselves*", "*find themselves*" and "*feel respected and valued*". Goodenow (1993:23) discusses belonging as relating to '*liking*' or '*warmth*', which also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. A Sense of Achievement (Code 9) was drawn from responses such as "being able to make a difference" and "passing first assignment", associated with both personal achievement and campus community activity. Thomas states that a HE experience should be relevant to students' interests and future goals (Thomas, 2012:7). This is in line with Horseley (2016:3) who reflects that "*in a rapid, ever-changing world, those students who are fully engaged are no longer satisfied with the commonplace – we seek opportunities for the creation of something new, or the enhancement of what is already available*".

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### Methodology - Stage 2

The codes outlined above were incorporated into a survey to represent the different phases of the student journey. It was hoped that the second phase of the study would allow further scoping of the field to inform future practice and scholarly works. This survey would run over the Christmas vacation, between semesters, while students were mainly away from the university.

The survey consisted of questions asking how each participant felt about their 'sense of belonging' in relation to ten stages of the student journey:

- Pre-Arrival to University
- Year 1 Semester 1
- Year 1 Semester 2
- Year 2 Semester 1
- Year 2 Semester 2
- Year 3 Semester 1
- Year 3 Semester 2
- Year 4 Semester 1
- Year 4 Semester 2<sup>i</sup>
- Post-Graduation and Beyond

The survey requested participants to rate each of the nine codes, by means of a 1-10 Likert Scale to allow effective analysis and granularity as there was potential for positive preference when completing the survey. The Likert Scale questions were repeated at each 'phase' of the student journey.

### Results

The survey had 155 respondents in total (45 male, 110 female - broadly reflective of the institutional gender balance) from a total student population of 7,540 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). However, of these, 34 were discarded from further analysis (7 males and 27 females), as they did not complete the 'belonging' questions (Q.7 onwards, Appendix 2). These were excluded from the analysis because they offered no data surrounding their 'sense of belonging', only their demographical information.

After an initial review of the results and a combining of the data into several summary graphs, it became apparent that numerous further analyses could be performed on these data. To support the mission of the Winchester Student Fellows Scheme, to "*improve the student learning experience*" (Sims *et al*, 2014:7), we contacted relevant professional and academic services at the University. The subsequent meetings took place across a four-week period, in which we asked these services what analysis they would like to see from our data. Further analysis was carried out for the following professional service groups: Academic Quality and Development, Marketing, Student Services and Widening Participation.

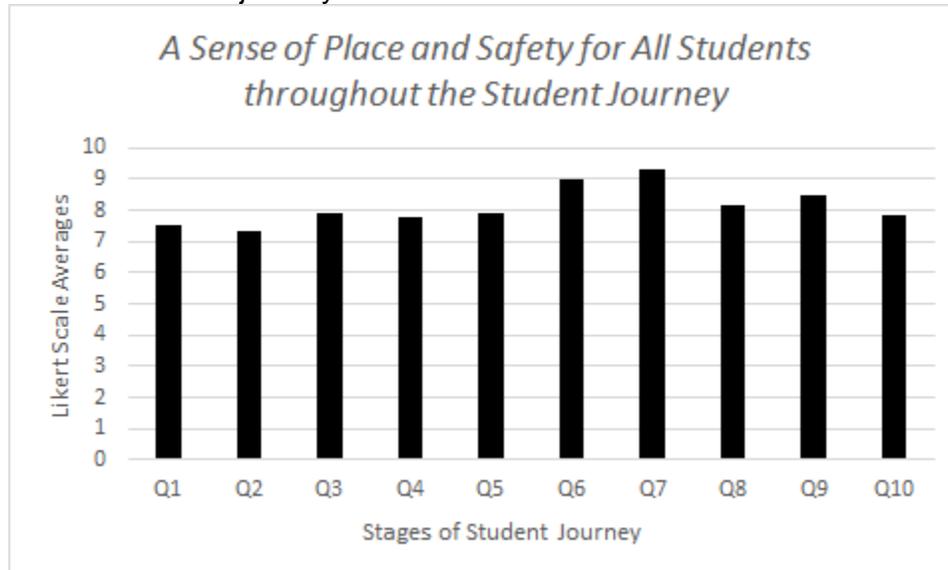
### Analysis

The following section highlights the six original questions that were asked of the data. Four of these questions came from our meetings with the professional and academic services and two from our own interests.

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### 1. A Sense of Place and Safety for All Students throughout the Student Journey

Figure 1 indicates a trend in how important students felt 'A Sense of Place and Safety' was to students' 'sense of belonging' at the University of Winchester. Interestingly, this category grew in importance as the student journey continued.



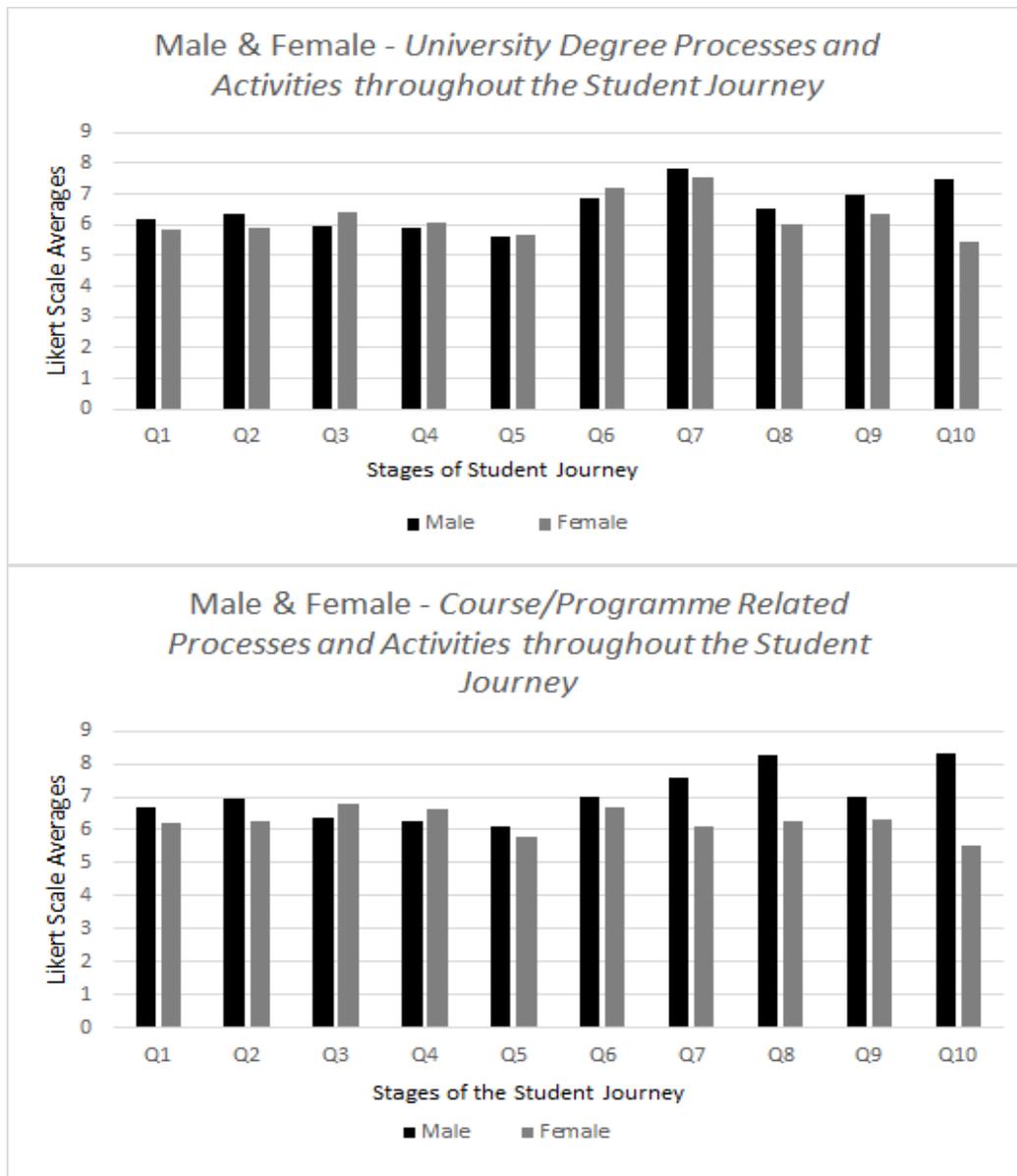
**Figure 1:** A Sense of Place and Safety for All Students throughout the Student Journey

That *A Sense of Place and Safety* scored both consistently and highly throughout the student journey might possibly be explained by the fact that both the campus and the city of Winchester are safe, with a community atmosphere; the city is also registered as a Purple Flag City<sup>ii</sup> (Winchester City Council, 2015). The actual reason, however, is unclear and more research would be required to clarify this.

The Widening Participation team and Student Services were interested in finding out how both males and females felt about their 'sense of belonging'; in particular, because of national policy surrounding men's underachieving in HE (Hillman and Robinson, 2016).

### 2. Male and Female responses to University Degree Processes and Activities throughout the Student Journey

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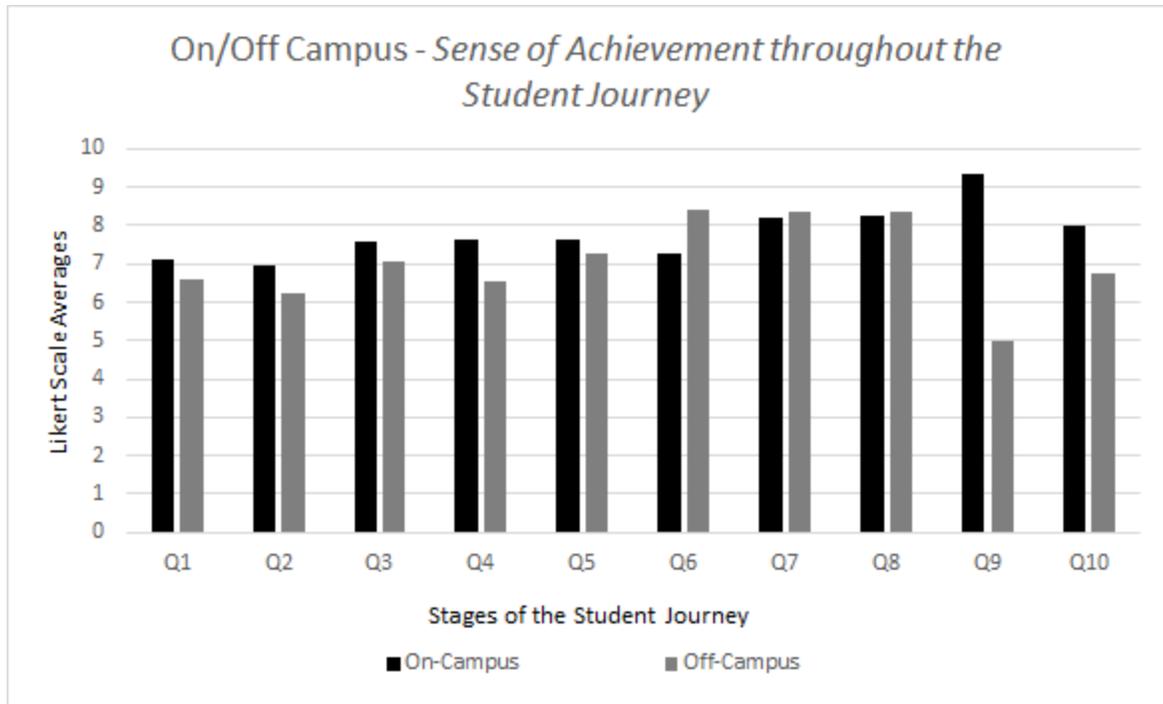


**Figure 2:** Male and Female Responses for All Codes at All Stages of the Student Journey

In analysing whether there is a difference between both *University Degree Processes and Activities* and *Course-/Programme-Related Processes and Activities*, findings suggest that both males and females rated them similarly right until the latter stages of the degree, post-graduation and beyond. At this point, male students seemed to believe, more than their female counterparts did, that these aspects positively affected their 'sense of belonging' at Winchester, especially in relation to *Course-/Programme-Related Processes*'. This again would be of interest for further investigation.

3. Primarily 'On-' and Primarily 'Off-' Campus Responses for All Codes at all Stages of the Student Journey:

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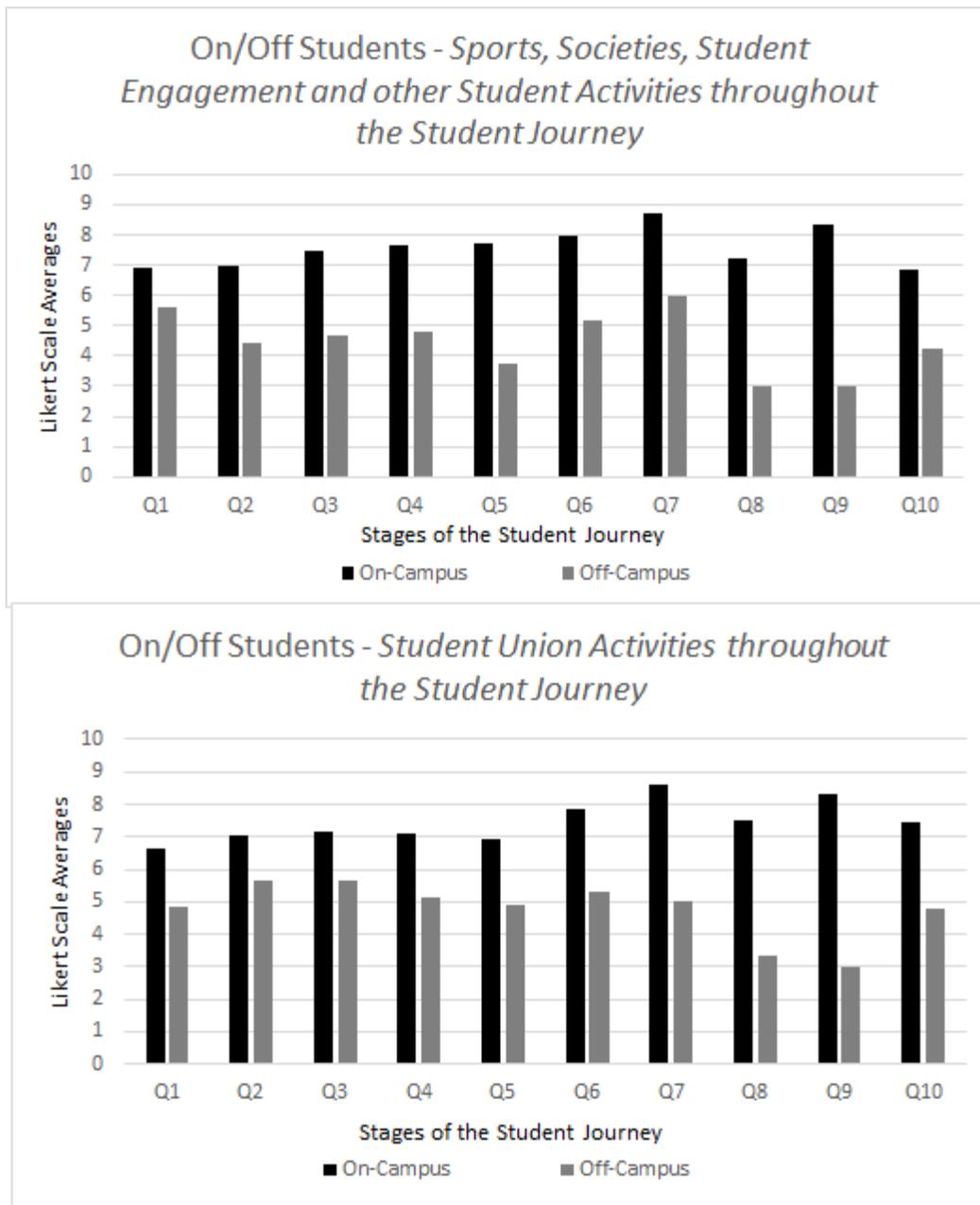


**Figure 3:** On/Off Campus Students – Sense of Achievement throughout the Student Journey

One key area of investigation throughout the research was in relation to how commuting students felt about their 'sense of belonging' in comparison to their peers living on campus. Off-Campus students consistently rated all categories below the on-campus students, apart from during Year 3 and Semester 1 of Year 4/Postgraduate, where they ranked *A Sense of Achievement* higher. Perhaps commuting students nearing the end of their degree perceive that they will now be able to complete their studies and, at the start of their postgraduate study, have a stronger desire to achieve than their non-commuting peers. However, commuting students 'sense of belonging' drops harshly during stage 9 (Year 4/PG Semester 2) and therefore the team recommends that further research is required to understand why this might be.

4. Primarily On- and Primarily Off-Campus Responses for Codes 3 (*Sports, Societies, Student Engagement and other Student Activities*) and 6 (*Student Union Activities*):

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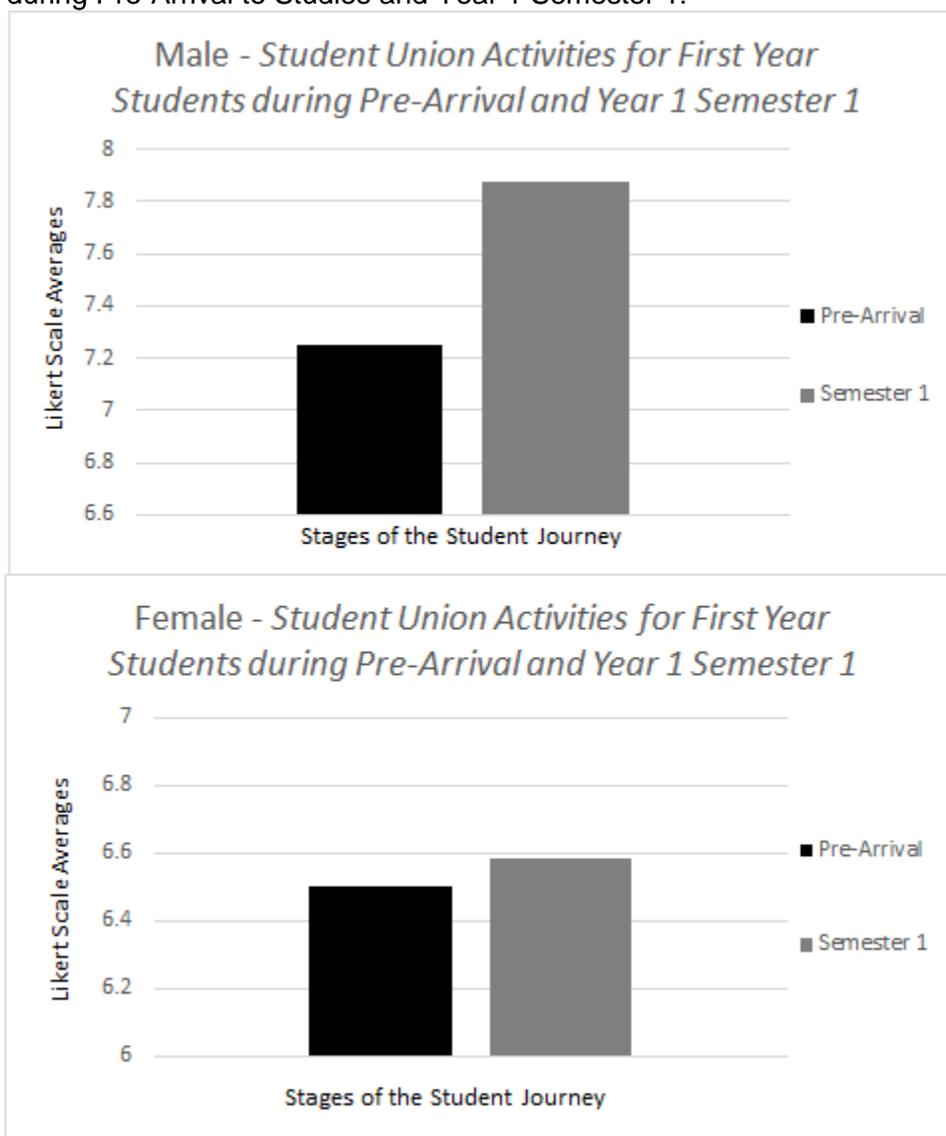
**Figure 4:** On/Off Students responses to Sports, Societies, Student Engagement and Other Student Activities and Student Union Activities throughout the Student Journey

In-line with current research that the Widening Participation team has undertaken at the Institution, it was interesting to investigate how particular groups of students felt about certain categories. A further inquiry concerning attitudinal gender differences was run in relation to *Sports, Societies, Student Engagement and Other Student Activities* and *Student Union Activities* across all points of the student journey. Both male and female students felt that their 'sense of belonging' was positively affected by both these categories but, without further research, it would be difficult to understand the reasons behind these low scores for female students.

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Further, students who lived off-campus did not believe that their 'sense of belonging' was as positively affected as those students who lived on campus. The team believed that this could be owing to the obviously greater exposure of both categories to students who are actively on and around the campus.

5. Male/Female first year students' rating of the Student Union contributing to Belonging during Pre-Arrival to Studies and Year 1 Semester 1:



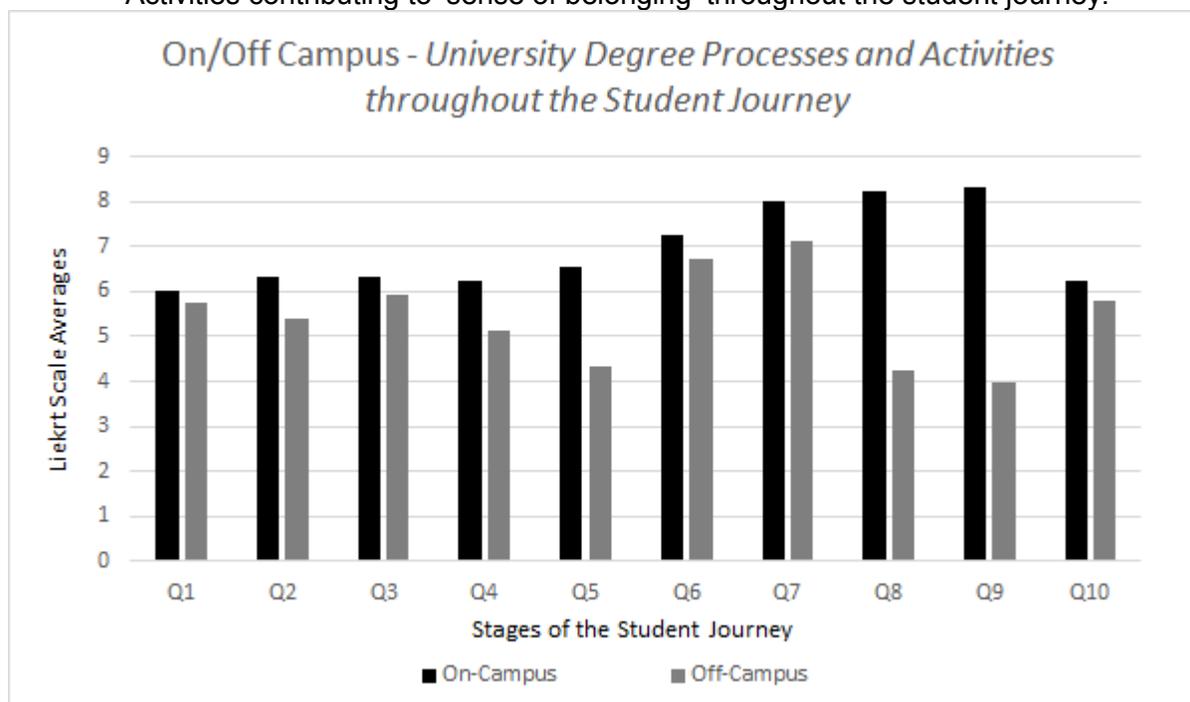
**Figure 5:** First year Male and Female responses to Student Union Activities throughout Pre-Arrival and Semester 1.

An example inquiry which was especially interesting related to the importance of Student Union Activities to male and female students in their first year of study at the institution. Owing to the timing of the survey, students would be able to answer the questions at only at two stages of the student journey: *Pre-Arrival to Studies* and *Year 1 Semester 1*. *Student Union Activities* contributed more to male and female students 'sense of belonging' in the *First Semester* than *Pre-Arrival to Studies*. A contributing factor to this could be that of exposure around campus to

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such activities, with newly-formed friendships and peers influencing students' decisions on whether to attend these events or not.

6. On-campus / Off-campus students' rating of University Degree Processes and Activities contributing to 'sense of belonging' throughout the student journey:



**Figure 6:** On-/Off-Campus responses to University Degree Processes and Activities throughout the Student Journey

Another key area of investigation considered how *University Degree Processes and Activities* affected all stages of the Student Journey in relation to students who lived on or off campus throughout the majority of their degree. Off-campus students during Years 1, 2 and 4 felt that *University Degree Processes and Activities* did not affect their 'sense of belonging' at the Institution as much as on-campus students. However, during their third year of study, there was a similarity between the degree of 'belonging' felt by both on- and off-campus students. This may have been because of the external help that the University offers for Final-Year Projects, such as dissertations and live performances. Again, further research would be necessary to understand this fully.

### Conclusion

Being involved in such student engagement activities as being in a sports team or society builds relationships beyond friendship groups (Stuart *et al*, 2009) and such activities are known to lead to a 'sense of belonging', which this study corroborates. Also, it is commonly assumed that students who live off campus experience barriers to engaging in HE (NUS, 2013); however, our data offer both perspectives with regard to the student journey and a comparison of on- and off-campus students. HEIs must consider the development of critical being – for personal engagement, inclusion and lifelong learning (Mann, 2001) – and acknowledge the heterogeneity of the student body; consequently, they must – by providing a range of opportunities to foster engagement and belonging (Thomas, 2012: 6) – meet students' need to engage and belong in different ways.

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This paper has offered a narrative and initial analysis of a study into 'belonging' at the University of Winchester. The research project was designed to explore how a 'sense of belonging' is facilitated at different stages of the student journey, with an ambition to inform decision-makers at the institution for planning purposes (and, in fact, planning in response to the project has already begun). From starting the project with un-evidenced theories, stereotypes and ideas, the team has been able to investigate grassroots enquiries by departments and expand thinking about new events and activities. The initial exploration described in this paper just begins to scratch the surface as the UK HE sector investigates students' 'sense of belonging' as a means to tackle retention and enhance the student experience. Although small-scale, this study has illuminated some factors which will support the University in understanding influences on students and the times at which a 'sense of belonging' is most likely to be developed or is of most importance. This area is worthy of deeper investigation, with the data supporting Horseley's (2016:3) view that engagement activities give students a "*sense of community and belonging which is such an integral aspect of university life*". The authors would welcome feedback, from colleagues in the sector, on the discussions begun in this paper in the interests of future discussion and collaboration.

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<sup>i</sup> Year 4 represents two possibilities; Post-graduate study such as standalone Masters or integrated Masters Programmes which this University has in its Primary Education department.

<sup>ii</sup> 'Purple Flag is an accreditation process similar to the Green Flag award for parks and the Blue Flag for beaches. It leads to Purple Flag status for town and city centres that meet or surpass the standards of excellence in managing the evening and night time economy (ENTE).' (ATCM.org)