

Sense of belonging in higher education

Improving belonging together

Cite:

Ten Brink, A., Brouwer-Schudde, E., Paalman-Dijkenga, I. (2025) *Sense of belonging in higher education. Improving belonging together*. Viaa University of Applied Sciences.

1.1. Abstract

Viaa University of Applied Sciences saw signs of student's *sense of belonging* declining through previous research at the facility (Noppers, 2020). This is a national trend seen by students (Dopmeijer, 2021). The research on *sense of belonging* at Viaa University of Applied Sciences is based on the principles of *design-oriented research* (Aken & Andriessen, 2011) and elements of *Appreciative Inquiry* (Masselink et al., 2020). Van Aken and Andriessen emphasize the importance of allowing space for unforeseen outcomes in research design. Through pop-ups there was space for unforeseen outcomes; all students of Viaa University of Applied Sciences could participate in the research at the pop-ups and give their own opinion on the subject matter of that specific pop-up. Each pop-up retrieved data and emerged into another pop-up that deepened the research. The data of the first pop-up showed what students define as aspects of *sense of belonging*. Based on those aspects, the researchers have defined the status of *sense of belonging* at Viaa University of Applied Sciences by a survey (pop-up 2) and in another pop-up deepened by a deepening group-interview (pop-up 3). The results of those pop-ups gave the researchers action points to promote the *sense of belonging*. In the last two pop-ups, the researchers followed the action points given by students. For the fourth pop-up, they made an inventory of what was needed to get more relaxation by sports and play. Behind the scenes, action points were selected and implemented. A feedback moment emerged from these actions and students got a moment to give feedback on the research in a member-check (pop-up 5). The students appreciated all the actions that were followed up. By making space to talk about the subject, the researchers gained insight into aspects of *sense of belonging*, the status of *sense of belonging* at Viaa University of Applied Sciences and retrieved practical actions to promote *sense of belonging*.

1.2. Key words

Sense of belonging
Higher education
Student well-being
Student-based
Promoting belonging

1.3. Introduction

More than fifty percent of students in higher education and universities in the Netherlands experience symptoms of physical discomfort (Dopmeijer et al., 2021). Research suggests that an intense *sense of belonging* and the ability to maintain mental well-being are crucial for student welfare. Previous studies conducted at Viaa University of Applied Sciences on stress-related complaints and performance pressure have also highlighted these concerns (Noppers, 2022). Further research is needed to deepen understanding of these issues and to develop strategies for fostering a *sense of belonging* among students.

The concept of *sense of belonging* is challenging to translate into Dutch, as no single term fully captures its meaning. Researchers have therefore chosen to use a combination of translations, including feeling at home, feeling connected, and feeling a *sense of belonging*.

Student well-being has been in decline for several years, and education plays a key role in improving students' mental health. Well-being is defined as a sustainable positive mental state combined with the absence of psychological complaints and is influenced by both study-related and external factors. While higher education institutions cannot directly influence all these factors, they can support students through targeted policies and interventions (Korpershoek, 2021). Research has shown that students who feel at home in their educational environment achieve better academic results and demonstrate more stable study progress. Student well-being has become a priority on the Dutch policy agenda, particularly following several studies (e.g., Blackman, 2020; Dopmeijer, 2021; Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science [MinOCW], 2019; Mouw et al., 2021; National Institute for Public Health and the Environment [RIVM], 2018; Social and Economic Council [SER], 2019). While concerns about student well-being have existed for some time, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges.

Research objective and questions.

The aim of this research is to identify the key factors that influence students' *sense of belonging* at Viaa University of Applied Sciences. This objective leads to the following central research question:

How can the *sense of belonging* among students at Viaa University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle be improved?

The study is based on the principles of *design-oriented research* (Van Aken & Andriessen, 2011) and incorporates elements of *Appreciative Inquiry* (Masselink et al., 2020). This article discusses both the research process and its findings.

Students played an active role in this research in two ways. Most students contributed by providing data through pop-up sessions, while Instagram was used as a tool to ensure transparency, allowing students to view preliminary results and upcoming research activities. Additionally, three students participated as co-researchers, collaborating with members of various research groups and student counselling services. This interdisciplinary approach resulted in a diverse research team, emphasizing the significant involvement of students throughout the study.

The goal of this research is to determine how Viaa University of Applied Sciences can enhance students' *sense of belonging* and to explore students' existing ideas on this topic. Given the significant role of student experiences, the sub-questions focus on capturing their voices and perspectives:

1. What is meant by *sense of belonging*?
2. How do students perceive *sense of belonging*?
3. What challenges do students experience regarding *sense of belonging*?
4. What existing initiatives at the Viaa University of Applied Sciences contribute to *sense of belonging*, and how can they be expanded?
5. What ideas, thoughts, or wishes do students express about strengthening *sense of belonging*?
6. Based on the previous sub-questions, what actions should Viaa University of Applied Sciences take to promote *sense of belonging*?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to provide actionable insights that support student well-being and foster a more inclusive and connected academic environment.

1.4 Sense of belonging in higher education

The concept of *sense of belonging* has evolved over the years, with different definitions emerging in research. One of the earliest scholars to explore this concept, Goodenow (1993), defined *sense of belonging* as: "The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80).

Subsequent research has expanded on this definition, exploring both its apprehension and conceptualization. Strayhorn (2018) provides a more comprehensive definition: "*Sense of belonging* refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering of feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued, and important to the campus community, including faculty, staff, and peers" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 4).

Both research and practice have contributed to the understanding of *sense of belonging*, with studies identifying various domains and aspects that shape students' experiences. One of the fundamental distinctions in the literature is between academic and social aspects of belonging. Academic integration refers to alignment with educational content and engagement with lecturers, while social belonging encompasses interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions, such as feeling recognized and experiencing a positive atmosphere within the school environment (Gomes, 2021; Tinto, 1993). Deunk and Korpershoek (2021) also emphasize the need for both social and academic integration.

Other researchers have further refined these domains. Pickford (2016) identifies three interconnected aspects of sense of belonging:

1. Behavioural (Transactional) Aspects: taking initiative, enthusiasm, time spent at school, adherence to rules.
2. Emotional Aspects: feelings of community, learning environment, emotional reactions toward school.

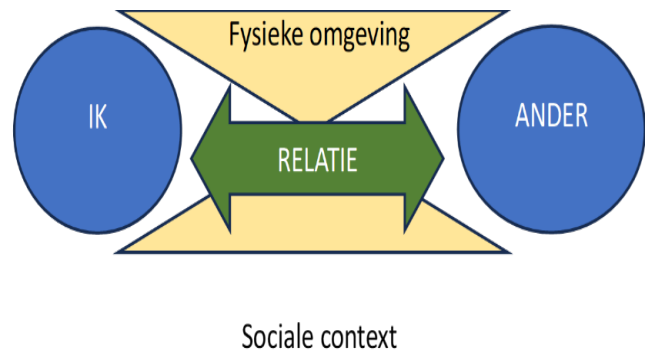
3. Conceptual Aspects: abstract elements such as curriculum design and motivation to learn and develop skills (Pickford, 2016; Smith, 2021; Korpershoek, 2020).

Ahn and Davies (2020), based on their empirical research, propose a clustering of *sense of belonging* into four domains with thirteen subdomains and twenty-eight categories. While they confirm the importance of social and academic engagement, they identify two additional variables that positively influence students' sense of belonging:

- Surroundings: the physical living environment, accommodation, and cultural aspects.
- Personal Space: personal identity, self-respect, and the way an individual interacts with their environment.

Figure 1

Relation between the other and the individual



Note. Adapted from Noppers (2024).

El Zaatari et al. (2021) further connect *sense of belonging* to Bronfenbrenners ecological systems theory, introducing the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model. The element of time is a unique addition, highlighting how changes in curriculum and institutional organization over time influence students' *sense of belonging* (El Zaatari et al., 2021, p. 6)

Findings from our pop-up sessions with students provided valuable insights that align with the theoretical framework outlined above. Based on students input, ten key priorities for action were identified. Two of the most strongly supported action points were:

1. Intervision (Peer Consultation) Among Teachers: directly linked to academic and social engagement, as well as personal space.
2. Sports and Play Initiatives: primarily enhancing social engagement and creating a *sense of belonging* through shared surroundings.

These findings highlight the interconnectedness of theoretical perspectives with students' lived experiences, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to enhance students' sense of belonging.

1.5 Methodology

This research employs a *design-oriented research* approach (Van Aken & Andriessen, 2011), which emphasizes the importance of allowing space for unforeseen outcomes. This requires an open-ended methodology in which findings can shape the research process and lead to unexpected developments. To gather data, we implemented key moments, referred to as pop-ups, where students were creatively invited to share their thoughts on several aspects of *sense of belonging*. In addition to these pop-ups, a literature review was conducted. The comparison between existing studies and student-generated data followed an iterative process, repeated after each pop-up.

Data Collection Through Pop-Ups

The key aim of this research was to engage as many students as possible throughout the process. We organized four pop-ups, with a fifth pop-up dedicated to presenting the findings to the students and gathering their feedback. Additionally, student feedback was used to assess and refine proposed interventions. The pop-ups were inspired by the Jongeren Over method (Deddens, 2023), in which peer groups engage in discussions on a specific topic. The conversations that emerged, provided rich qualitative data for analysis.

Pop-Up 1: Exploring 'Feel at home' Factors.

The first pop-up aimed to explore the factors that contribute to students' *sense of belonging*. Researchers set up a living room-style space with a red sofa, symbolizing a comfortable place to discuss what makes students feel "at home." Students could either engage in face-to-face conversations or share their thoughts in a more individual manner by writing on a postcard. The latter option was the most frequently chosen, with five hundred students participating.

To ensure data validity and student well-being, at least two researchers were present at all times. This not only facilitated interaction but also contributed to the researchers' own *sense of belonging*. The findings revealed common themes across students' responses, highlighting shared perspectives on belonging.

Pop-Up 2: Survey-Based Investigation

The second pop-up adopted a survey method to quantify key factors contributing to *sense of belonging*. The survey addressed:

- The most crucial factors influencing belonging
- How well Viaa University performs on these factors
- Areas of strength and areas needing improvement

The survey themes were derived from the findings of the first pop-up. This session was set up as a cozy nook, again featuring the red sofa, but this time with an Italian restaurant theme. The design choice was based on insights from pop-up one, where students associated "eating together" with belonging. Students were invited to sit at a long dining table, scan QR codes to access the survey, and enjoy mini pizzas while playing small board games.

Over two days (January 17-18, 2024), two hundred and sixty-five students participated. The pop-up was held in the Agora, the central hall of Viaa University of Applied Sciences. A minimum of two researchers were present at all times to ensure data validity, meaningful student engagement, and visibility of the research team.

Pop-Up 3: In-Depth Conversations – The Pizza Party

The third pop-up, held on March 28, 2024, aimed to facilitate deeper conversations about students' experiences of belonging, allowing researchers to explore the stories behind the survey results. This event took the form of a pizza party, recognizing that participation required a considerable time commitment from students. Despite this, fourteen students took part in a group interview.

Four core themes, derived from the survey analysis, structured the discussion:

1. Identity
2. Being heard and seen
3. Consultation
4. Physical environment

Upon arrival, students were offered drinks while waiting for all participants to gather. The session began with a brief introduction, followed by discussions over pizza, with students seated at different tables corresponding to the four themes. Flip charts were used to document all ideas and insights. Two researchers facilitated each table: one leading the discussion and the other taking notes. The conversation allowed students to identify missing elements, which were also recorded. The session concluded with a summary of key action points, highlighting the most significant changes desired by students.

Pop-Up 4: Turning Student Input into Concrete Actions

The fourth pop-up emerged from the results of pop-up three, focusing on making student suggestions visible and actionable. Students provided a “wish list,” categorized according to four domains identified in Dopmeijer’s (2021) framework. A major insight from previous pop-ups was the need for relaxation spaces between study sessions, which were linked to the domains of socialization and physical space.

For this pop-up, researchers created an “idea tree” in the Agora, the designated research space. Students could write their preferred games and sports on leaves and attach them to the tree, helping researchers determine which activities to incorporate into intervention plans. This was an independent activity, meaning students could contribute individually. Instructions were provided next to the tree, and researchers occasionally visited to engage in conversations.

A total of thirty-two unique wishes and one hundred and fourteen votes were collected. The responses were analysed and categorized to inform future actions.

Student Engagement and Research Impact

From the outset, students were actively involved in the research process, reinforcing their sense of agency and belief that their voices could drive meaningful change within Vaa University. Many participants expressed that they felt truly seen and heard on a deeper level.

To ensure that student perspectives were accurately represented, a member check was conducted during a fifth pop-up on June 11-13, 2024. Students were invited to evaluate the proposed actions using a structured survey with a five-point scale, assessing the perceived effectiveness of each intervention.

The final analysis focused on student satisfaction with the proposed improvements, ensuring that their feedback directly shaped institutional decision-making.

1.6 Pop-ups results

All pop-ups were analysed with a semi-structured approach. All the data was analysed and categorised based on the earlier discovered theory. After each pop-up, the researchers discussed the outcomes, so that data was interpreted in an objective manner to secure validity.

Pop-up 1

The first pop-up searched for an answer to the questions: What is meant by *sense of belonging*? And what do students think about *sense of belonging*?

The first pop-up retrieved terms that describe when students feel like they belong. Reactions were written on little postcard. Those postcards were analysed and gave eighteen codes (see table 1) that were the most retrieved amongst students.

Table 1

The eighteen codes that were most retrieved

Code
Being yourself
Being heard
Being seen
To have a say
Relationships with family and friends
Relationship with lecturers
Relationship with peers
Relationship with others
Physical surroundings
Atmosphere/ cosiness
Shared values and identity
Space for differences
Helpfulness
Equivalence and respect
Familiarity
without judgement
Safety/ reliability
Being open and honest

Note. Data extracted from this research.

In the first pop-up, it became clear that the *sense of belonging* is a term that is wider represented, than only in an academic social environment. Students give general terms that are needed in every situation to feel at home. Students across the school share eighteen different codes together. “The space to be yourself. People that you can trust. That you do everything together, and that you feel at ease to do so. Space to talk about everything”, was one of the comments. This was a comment that was most seen in the results. ‘No judgement’ or the opposite, ‘space for everything’ was seen in two ways; A tension field between feeling like you belong when there is space to be different from each other and feeling at home when you find mostly similarities. These aspects concentrate around values and identity. The comment: ‘I feel

at home when everybody is different and more themselves' and "Being treated equally. Respect for all beliefs, origins, norms, and values." show the possible tension.

Pop-up 2

Pop-up two was searching for an answer on the questions: What do students experience as problematic in the area of *sense of belonging*? and what is present in the university regarding *sense of belonging* that can be expanded? In total 265 students participated. In table 2, the exact numbers of students from each education are shown.

Table 2

The participating students divided by education and age.

Opleiding	Leeftijdscategorieën in jaren					TOTAAL
	T/m 20	21-24	25-29	30-40	40+	
HBO-V	55	36	0	0	0	91
HBO-V (deeltijd)	1	0	0	0	0	1
POH	0	1	0	0	3	4
Pabo	30	19	2	1	0	52
Pabo (deeltijd)	5	12	7	4	5	33
AD DEP	2	2	0	3	3	10
AD PEP	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social Work	28	27	5	0	0	60
Social Work (deeltijd)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Theologie	1	4	1	0	0	6
Theologie (deeltijd)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Godsdienstleraar	0	0	0	0	0	0
Master Syst. Wrkn Jeugd	0	0	1	3	4	8
TOTAAL	122	101	16	11	15	265

Note. Data extracted from this research.

The factors noted in the survey were based on the most chosen codes students agreed on in the results of the first pop-up. In the table below, table 3a, the five best scored statements of *sense of belonging* are made visible. There was no average score that added up to be 7.8 or 8.0. Therefore, there are no aspects noted in those rows.

Table 3a

Five highest scored statements about Sense of Belonging- averages per education (range 1- 10; one means completely not and ten for completely).

Average. Score	HBO-V (Full-time) (n=92)	Pabo (full-time) (n=52)	Pabo (part-time) (n=33)	Social Work (full-time) (n=60)	Rest (n=28)
8,8		-Feeling Safe			
8,7				-Feeling safe	
8,6	-Feeling safe	-Being yourself -Feels at ease			-Feeling safe
8,5		-Feeling welcome -Cosy			
8,4					-Being yourself -Without judgment approached by teacher
8,3	-Being yourself -Feels at ease -Feeling welcome				-Feeling at home -Feels at ease
8,2	-Feeling respected			--Being yourself -Feels reliable -Feeling welcome – cozy	
8,1			-Being yourself		
8,0					
7,9			-Feeling safe -Feeling welcome -Feeling respected		
7,8					
7,7			- Without judgment approached by teacher -Contact peers		

Note: Data extracted from this research.

In table 3b, the statements that were scored the lowest are categorised by education and age. There was no average score tot concluded to be 6.6. Therefore, there are no aspects noted in those rows. The aspects that were voted on came also from the retrieved codes from pop-up 1.

Table 3b

Five highest scored statements about sense of belonging- averages lower dan 7.0 or lower per education (range 1- 10; one means ‘completely not’ and ten for ‘completely’)

Average Score	HBO-V (Full-time) (n=92)	Pabo (Full-time) (n=52)	Pabo (part-time) (n=33)	Social Work (full-time) (n=60)	Rest (n=28)
7,0			-Feeling valued	-Feeling heard	-Having a voice in the school -Connected with Viaa
6,9	-Connection with teachers		-Feeling seen	- adjacent curriculum -surroundings -Connected with Viaa	
6,8		-Having a voice in the school -adjacent curriculum	-Feeling heard		
6,7	-Connected with Viaa	-Offered curriculum	-surroundings -Connection with teachers - Connection with Viaa	-Space for relaxing	
6,6					
6,5	-Having a voice in the school		- adjacent curriculum -Space for relaxing		
6,4			- Having a voice in the school	-Connection with teachers	
6,3			- Offered curriculum	- Offered curriculum	
6,2				Having a voice in the school	

Note: Data extracted from this research.

The second pop-up taught us that Viaa is doing well when you look at the grades given on subjects focussing on the social engagement, but the academic aspect and the surroundings score lower. Noteworthy is that students gave all pass marks on the survey, but on the other hand, students who gave comments in the open section, gave the researchers sometimes shocking stories. While most students feel save and welcome, other student had negative experiences with being fully accepted for who they are or who they supported. A contrast researchers wanted to understand better.

Pop-up 3

Pop-up three was searching for an answer on the following questions: What ideas, thoughts or wishes for shaping *sense of belonging* are put forward by students? And what ideas, thoughts or wishes for shaping *sense of belonging* are put forward by students? In pop-up three, students were invited to have a deeper interview in groups. Students who applied, got the chance to give once again their thoughts on four domains. In the end we included a conclusion on what the researchers would try to give back to the school on what needs change. The following ten points were written down.

1. An Online signpost for students to figure out where they can where to get help for their problem, solving the problem of constantly being at the wrong address.
2. One line in the way we open the day.
3. A survey about the current curriculum.
4. Intervision among teachers about identity and diversity and a feedback moment on their work done by students.
5. Five materials for sports and play, with the purpose being relaxing.
6. Styling of the classes.
7. More benches for calls and other workplaces throughout the school.
8. Make the mentors more all-round teachers, who know the ins and outs of the school.
9. Make a more even breakdown in the connecting activities.
10. A nice postcard for the catering, because students found out that the catering helped the researchers that much with the pop-ups and they give, in general, warmth and comfort during the day.

Pop-up three learned that students appreciate the opportunity to talk about their experiences with their *sense of belonging* and how Viaa University of Applied Sciences promote the *sense of belonging*. It was remarkable to see that students could all agree with the ten action points and saw the need to implement these points in promoting *sense of belonging*.

Pop-up 4

Pop-up four has as central question: What ideas, thoughts or wishes for shaping *sense of belonging* are put forward by students? the researchers took inventory with an idea tree.

Table 4

Sports and game ideas retrieved from students to stimulate relaxation in between lectures.

Desiderated SPORT	Desiderated Play
Ping Pong tafel	Thirty Seconds
Voetbal tafel	Wii
Ballen (volleybal, voetbal, basketbal)	Twister
Frisbee	Kubb
Boksbal	Qwixx
Badminton	Pictionary
Groot schaakbord	Jenga

Note. Data extracted from this research.

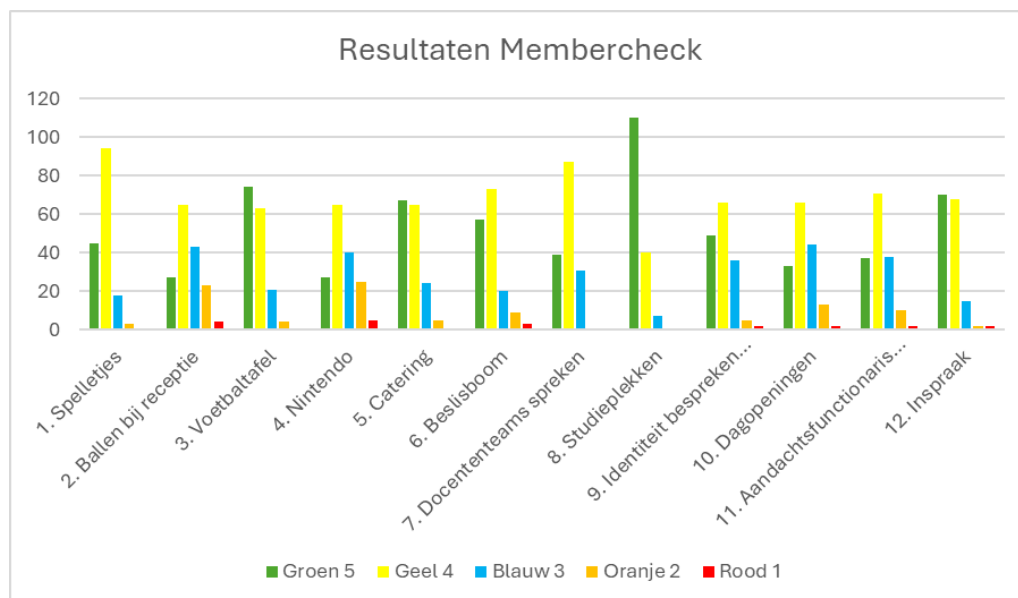
In total, we gained thirty-two wishes and one hundred and fourteen votes. The different wishes were analysed and structured so that we could make up the most popular options. That were a ping-pong table (fifteen votes), thirty seconds (eleven votes) and a Wii with Mario kart (seven votes). The other options had five or less votes. The options are discussed in the group of researchers. There is now a Wii in the school's library, there is a football that can be borrowed at the reception and different boardgames are available in the library.

1.7 Member-check

The member check searched for an answer on the question: what actions should be taken by Viaa University of Applied Sciences to promote *sense of belonging*, based on the previous sub-questions? Beside pop-up four, researchers did intervision among teachers, made an online signpost for students to find help when there well- being need some help, the daily openings were discussed in the teams of teachers and the catering got their postcard for their significant help. All these actions were shared on social media (Instagram). Not all students followed the account and to make sure that all of them could have the chance to see the actions done, research made a member check to see if the results were pleasing to the expectation that students had in mind. Figure 2 shows how the different points where we did actions for, were perceived as valuable.

Figure 2

Results from the membercheck.



Note. Data extracted from this research.

The member-check showed that all the aspects that should promote *sense of belonging*, also scored over 60% as effective. The students who filled in the member-check showed us that we honor the wishes by taking responsibility for the students who felt heard by this research. The most key point that has not been on the agenda of Viaa University of Applied Sciences is the space to study.

1.8 Conclusion and discussion

This study aimed to answer the central research question: How can the *sense of belonging* among students at Viaa University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle be improved? The findings indicate that students highly value the opportunity to actively discuss *sense of belonging* rather than being the subject of discussion. The iterative nature of the research, in which each pop-up built upon insights from the previous one, allowed for a dynamic exploration of students' experiences and needs.

Throughout the study, students expressed a powerful desire to share their experiences and contribute to shaping their educational environment. The second pop-up revealed that students identified two key factors as most critical to enhancing their *sense of belonging*:

1. Student-lecturer relationships
2. Opportunities for student participation in decision-making

For two of the four academic divisions at Viaa, students also emphasized the need for greater involvement in curriculum development. These findings align with existing literature on *sense of belonging* in higher education, which highlights the importance of social integration (Tinto, 1993) and student voice in institutional decision-making (Strayhorn, 2019).

A notable methodological insight emerged from pop-up four, where students initially found it difficult to see the direct impact of their contributions. While their preferences for sports and recreational activities were recorded, no immediate follow-up was visible. The research team's Instagram account played a key role in communicating results, but students who did not follow the account experienced a gap in information. This highlights the importance of multi-channel communication strategies in participatory research, ensuring that transparency is accessible to all students. The pop-up methodology proved effective in engaging a broad range of students and collecting rich qualitative data. However, certain methodological limitations should be considered:

- The informal nature of the pop-ups may have influenced which students participated, potentially leading to self-selection bias.
- The study relied on qualitative and participatory methods, which provided deep insights but limited generalizability. Future research could complement these findings with quantitative measures of belonging, such as validated survey instruments (e.g., the Sense of Belonging Scale; Hoffman et al., 2002).
- The reliance on Instagram as a communication tool excluded some students. A mixed-method approach to dissemination (e.g., combining social media with structured institutional updates) could enhance inclusivity in future research.

This study highlights the importance of intentional spaces for dialogue in fostering a *sense of belonging* in higher education. Understanding students' perspectives and implementing practical interventions can significantly enhance their connection to the institution. By making relational and structural connections visible, higher education institutions can actively reinforce students' *sense of belonging*, ultimately contributing to student well-being and academic success.

The research findings suggest that enhancing students' *sense of belonging* requires both structural and relational interventions. Practical steps include:

- Strengthening student-lecturer interactions through formal and informal engagement.
- Creating more opportunities for student participation in institutional decision-making, particularly in curriculum-related matters.
- Ensuring that feedback loops in participatory research are clearly visible to all students to maintain engagement and trust in the process.
- Ensuring that interventions are maintained by.

Additionally, this study underscores the self-reinforcing nature of *sense of belonging*: the very act of discussing belonging contributed to students' sense of being seen and heard. This finding aligns with Paalman (2024), who argues that making social connections visible is a key mechanism for fostering belonging.

This article is part of a larger research at Viaa University of Applied Sciences about Sense of Belonging in Higher Education. I wrote this article as a student, who participated in the team of researchers who did the larger research at Viaa University of Applied Sciences.

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