

STUDENT SENSE OF BELONGING AND ITS IMPACTS ON HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

Entering higher education can be an alienating experience leading to institutional and systemic drop out. Academic help-seeking behaviour as a self-regulated learning strategy is one way to counteract this. But help-seeking can be enabled or hindered by several factors including a student's sense of belonging. In this study we attempted to understand how issues of belonging impact on student help-seeking behaviour and, if they are positively related, how institutions of higher education might promote a greater sense of belonging. We collected a total of 818 student submissions from students in an academic recovery programme. Our thematic analysis of these submissions revealed that students did feel a lack of belonging leading to help-seeking hesitancy. We also captured students' voices to understand what conditions would enable a greater sense of belonging and we make recommendations on how institutions may work to create these conditions for students and thereby empower their help-seeking behaviour.

Keywords: academic help-seeking, help-seeking hesitancy, self-regulated learning, belonging, student success

INTRODUCTION

The transition to democracy that started in the early 1990s in South Africa can also be seen in the country's programme for the transformation of higher education. This programme aims to increase equity in access and success (Department of Higher Education and Training 1997, 3). The student rhetoric of the 2015/16 protests claim that these aims had not been achieved

(Kumalo and Reddy 2021, 179–180; Le Roux and Groenewald 2021, 855). The data support these claims in that the South African higher education system still suffers low completion and high dropout rates with a significantly racialised disparity in student achievement (Council on Higher Education 2013, 8–9). A prominent challenge to student success is institutional culture; a culture that is often experienced as alienating (Strydom et al. 2016, 3). A feeling of being alienated from, or not belonging in, an institution or higher education, can impact student behaviour and be the difference between success and failure (Croxon and Maginnis 2006, 132). In this article we refer specifically to the behaviour of academic help-seeking which has been positively associated with academic success (Erlbaum 2013, 1–3; Karabenick and Gonida 2017).

Help-seeking is a success strategy (Fallon and Bowles 1999, 12–13) yet people are often reluctant to ask for help (e.g., in the case of mental health, Andrews, Issakidis, and Carter 2001, 421–422) and students in higher education are no different, often delaying help-seeking (Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen 2010, 1), sometimes until it is too late. Students struggle to ask for help for many reasons including feelings of stigmatisation and embarrassment and, also due to a preference for self-reliance. A review of the literature on help seeking behaviour show that gender, age, cultural background, stigma, help-seeking experience, personality, attitudes, and subjective norms all impact whether students will seek help or not (Bornschlegl, Meldrum, and Caltabiano 2020, 486). There is also a lack of trust in support structures (Gulliver et al. 2010, 1) and it has been suggested that students' sense of belonging may also impact their use of help-seeking strategies (Won, Hensley, and Wolters 2021, 114). The shift to online learning during COVID-19 heightened students' feelings of isolation (Fouche and Andrews 2022, 152) and with South African universities moving further towards online and blended learning as a “standard part of the future of higher education” (Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande) (Businessstech 2020) we need to be conscious of how this move may impact students in the longer term. “[F]or many students, technology has not functioned as an equaliser. Instead, it has put tremendous pressure on our most vulnerable students and has created a space which could easily render them faceless and voiceless, while inducing unprecedented anxiety” (Fouche and Andrews 2022, 153). Students who feel disempowered and detached from the system and like they do not belong may be less likely to ask for help.

When students do eventually seek help, they are more likely to turn to their social support network rather than seek help from professional services like those offered at a university (Kirsh et al. 2016, 330; Li, Dorstyn, and Denson 2014, 163). This suggests that students feel more comfortable asking for help from those they can relate to, have a connection with and feel that they can trust. Ideally a campus should be seen as a community where students can trust that

faculty and that university personnel are there to help (Ostini et al. 2020, 65), yet students often do not feel this way. This may be attributable to a missing sense of belonging. Here we present a study of students at a South African University (SAU) who have been placed in an academic recovery programme to understand the relationship between sense of belonging and how we may use this knowledge to create a more enabling environment for student success.

Background and objectives of the study

In 2021, due to an increase in students facing academic exclusion and considering how inequalities were exacerbated by the shift to remote teaching (e.g., Fouche and Andrews 2022, 151), the university in which this study was located, called the South African University (SAU), introduced a new policy to overwrite its usual academic exclusion criteria. This was done to give students a chance to recover (academically) from the impacts of emergency remote teaching and learning. In 2022 SAU launched a programme to support the academic recovery of these students as part of its academic advising offerings. This article analyses student data from the recovery programme to explore the relationships between belonging, help-seeking behaviour, and success. The academic advising initiative and its conceptual framing is described in more detail later in this article. The objectives of this study are to understand:

- (i) Whether issues of belonging are reflected in students' descriptions of what they struggled with?
- (ii) Whether issues of belonging impact help-seeking behaviour?
- (iii) If a sense of belonging and help-seeking are positively related, how can we in higher education promote a greater sense of belonging and enable students to engage in more help-seeking behaviour?

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Won et al. (2021, 112) demonstrated a connection between college students' sense of belonging and their use of help-seeking strategies. They showed that students' perceptions of their social contexts inform if and how they seek help with their learning. Here we construct our argument to show how feelings of belonging can be connected to the behaviour of help-seeking. If we accept this argument, we can expect our data to show that students' help-seeking intentions and behaviours are linked, at least in part, to their sense of belonging.

Belonging in South African higher education

A sense of belonging is considered a fundamental psychological need which, if not met, can

have negative effects on a student's ability to succeed academically (Maslow 1987; Maunder 2018, 757). While a sense of belonging is subjective and individualistic (Anant 1967, 393) it is heavily impacted by environmental and social factors. Strayhorn defines belonging "as a student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community ..." (Strayhorn 2018, 4). Others describe a sense of belonging as feelings of inclusion, (Maunder 2018, 757) having a place in a group (Tovar and Simon 2010, 200–201), feeling that one is important to others (Rosenberg and McCullough 1981) and having a shared faith that needs will be met through mutual commitment (McMillan and Chavis 1986, 9). Belonging can also relate to places, like the institution (Tinto 2017, 4) moments in time or events, and having shared experiences and backgrounds (Allen et al. 2021, 94). A feeling of belonging therefore relates to how students perceive themselves within a context i.e., how they might or might not fit into the institutional culture of their specific university campus, and to the broader context of higher education.

Students evaluate what it means to belong based on their understanding of what is expected of them in each setting (Graham and Moir 2022, 2). It therefore becomes extremely important that we communicate these expectations clearly and intentionally and with an understanding of its impact on our students' sense of belonging. To expect the same of all students is to expect conformity or a process of assimilation that only values a normative ideal (Graham and Moir 2022, 4). For students to feel truly valued they need to see themselves and their diversity of experience reflected in their institutions of higher education (Healey and Stroman 2021, 1). This is particularly relevant for South Africa, where despite being a Black African majority country, most institutions retain white colonial symbols and privilege non-African languages to the extent that Black students are even ashamed by the accented English that they might speak (Swartz et al. 2018). Many students report feeling excluded by language, racism, sexism, and economic status, so a feeling of belonging needs to go beyond a sense of assimilation to the existing institutional culture. This superficial idea of "assimilation" can be seen as a form of violence as it values some experiences while excluding others, leaving those who do not conform to expectations more vulnerable to shame and a sense of failure and inadequacy (Reed, Gates, and Last 2007, 41). This can make students feel that their identities and experiences do not belong in higher education.

Help-seeking behaviour

Students do not ask for help as often as they should, and this can impact on academic outcomes. This failure of students to seek out university-based sources of support is problematic as many

students will not access important support programs and these beneficial programmes may disappear due to underutilization (Benham-Hutchins and Clancy 2010, 353). Universities themselves may be partially responsible for creating help-seeking hesitancy in students. This is due to the messages that we give students that maintains that they are responsible for their own success and that their fate is in their own hands (Frey, Fischer, and Everlove 2009). We tell them that they must be resilient (Bass et al. 2016, 111), suggest that academic success and grit are intrinsically correlated (Pulkkinen, Chiro, and Perez de la Ossa 2021, 128) and that they must be independent (Antwerpen 2015, 683) to succeed. During the South African student protests some of the responses from institutions also resembled this form of “neoliberal” thinking and portrayed students as complainers who simply needed to work harder and apply themselves (Swartz et al. 2018). This messaging denies the real issues of systemic violence, injustice and inequality that students face and can have the unintended consequence of making students feel that they are, in fact, on their own, that they should always be able to help themselves and that if they need help then they probably don’t belong at university (Yasin 2021, 12). Indeed, South African university students, when reporting obstacles to their success, include fear of intellectual inferiority when asking for help as they are often told that university success is determined by the student’s ability to work independently (Swartz et al. 2018).

Help-seeking behaviour is as a form of self-regulated learning (Karabenick and Gonida 2017) and so has been positively correlated with student achievement (Zimmerman 2002, 64). The act of help-seeking requires that a student can monitor themselves, assess their needs and then act towards a goal of information acquisition, expanding expertise, and self-improvement (Paris and Paris 2001, 92). But students often fail to recognize that they need help (Hom, Stanley, and Joiner 2015, 31) or even if they do realise they need help, they feel that they should be able to manage their problems on their own (Kirsh et al. 2016, 333) and so won’t act to get that help. There are many additional barriers to help-seeking (Dunley and Papadopoulos 2019, 703) such as stigma (Nobiling and Maykrantz 2017, 315). This could be self-stigma which are negative thoughts about oneself. Self-stigma has a greater impact on first generation students while continuing generation students are more affected by how help-seeking would be perceived by others (Garriott et al. 2017, 439). When students do eventually seek help, they will first approach easily accessible but less reliable resources such as online sources and peers before moving on to less easily accessible but highly informed resources like tutors and lecturers (Kirsh et al. 2016, 333; Li et al. 2014, 163). This second step is more likely when there is perceived instructor openness, a sense of trust that their needs will be met and belief that help-seeking is approved behaviour (Thomas and Tagler 2019, 3).

Belonging in relation to help-seeking

To successfully navigate higher education requires a certain amount of both cultural and social capital. Bourdieu describes cultural capital as the knowledge and ability to interpret institutional requirements and understand the rules of the game. Social capital refers to having networks of trust, group membership and relationships that confer advantage (Bourdieu 1997, 47–49). Without these it can be extremely difficult to negotiate the unfamiliar, complex, and often hostile environment of higher education. Most students entering South African higher education lack this capital as many are first generation students. Additionally for many the dominant language is not their first and for others still, higher education, its jargon and its structures are opaque. Strayhorn (2018, 4) describes belonging as a student's perceived social support on campus. This is akin to Bourdieu's (1997) concept of social capital of networks of trust, group membership and relationships. Even if students were to enter university without much social capital, they may be able to accumulate it by building networks and relationships on which they come to rely and trust, as such a student may also be able to achieve a sense of belonging even if they do not feel that way at the beginning.

To accumulate the other capital, cultural capital, i.e., a better understanding of the expectations of higher education, students must be able to ask for help. Having a network that they trust (social capital) can enable this help-seeking behaviour. This idea is counter to the concept of independence and self-reliance as the only path to academic success and instead leans into the idea of interdependence (Frey et al. 2009, 17) which much like the African philosophy of Ubuntu promotes help-seeking. In African culture Ubuntu is a dominant cultural philosophy that locates identity within a collective as opposed to the individual and believes that the individual is not independent of the collective. Rather, the relationship between a person and their community is reciprocal, interdependent, and mutually beneficial (Oviawe 2016, 3). Ubuntu includes capacity to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Oviawe 2016, 5) and proposes that during times of challenge persons can turn to their community for help. By inference, to be able to confidently ask for help one must first feel like part of a community that you trust. Indeed, when students themselves reflect on their success journeys they comment regularly on the positive role of supportive social networks (Swartz et al. 2018). All of these represent a concept of belonging by creating connection, care, value and being accepted (Strayhorn 2018, 4). It is therefore our proposition that a greater sense of belonging will have a positive effect on student use of help-seeking as a strategy for success.

To test this proposition, we conducted a study that collected and analysed student data from an academic recovery programme that a South African University (SAU) launched in

2022 as part of its academic advising services. The university's advising framework and the academic recovery programme lodged in it are underpinned by elements of capability theory (Sen 1999) as applied to education (Walker and Unterhalter 2007; Van Pletzen, Sithaldeen and Fontaine-Rainen et al. 2021, 35–36) which recognises the enabling qualities of personal agency and freedom of choice (Wilson-Strydom 2015, 3). The recovery programme itself follows principles of developmental advising that focus on imparting skills to students that empower them to take ownership of their academic success (Hagen and Jordan 2008, 21–24). The programme incorporates aspects of appreciative enquiry which enable students to uncover what is working well in an approach or process, understand why it works and identify how those successes can be amplified and converted into a strategy for academic success (Hutson 2010, 10). The programme further includes elements of strengths-based advising which tap into student motivation and engage students in their own learning (Soria and Stubblefield 2015). One aim of the programme is to enable help-seeking as a strategy for academic success (Zimmerman 2002, 65; Erlbaum 2013, 1–3; Karabenick 2004, 578; Karabenick and Knapp 1991, 229).

The programme provides support to students that have returned to their studies on conditional academic probation (i.e., students at risk of institutional departure). The programme follows a developmental advising curriculum delivered in the form of group sessions facilitated by peer advisors. It is aimed at strengthening student confidence in themselves, and their faith in institutional support while developing a sense of community with each other. In this way the programme intends to impact behavioural changes towards greater help-seeking. As part of their engagement with the developmental curriculum, the students submit structured reflections after their group sessions. To complete these submissions students were asked to reflect on some of the challenges they had faced, their plans to overcome these challenges in the new academic year, and if or how they might seek help in overcoming these challenges. For this study we wished to understand how, if at all, issues of belonging impact on students' help-seeking behaviour, but the issue of belonging was not explicitly probed.

METHODOLOGY

Ethics clearances

Ethical clearance for this work was provided by one of SAU's faculty research ethics committees (Van Pletzen et al. 2012).

The sample

Data was collected for this study from the submissions that students made at three different points of the academic recovery programme run since March 2022. Three submissions were requested from students over a period of four months. The programme was attended by 352 students, though participation fluctuated over the course of the programme. The sample analysed for this study is the total of 818 student submissions received from students. Sample sizes (n) for each of the three deliverables differ, reflecting fluctuating student participation rates as the programme progressed. Table 1 presents an overview of the curriculum of the recovery programme consisting of three themes. We first trained peer advisors taking them through content related to the themes, we provided the peer advisor with guidelines on how to facilitate discussions with their group and we provided questions or instructions to guide students in completion of deliverables. Table 1 shows the details of these steps.

Table 1: An overview of the deliverables of the recovery programme and the curriculum leading up to them

Deliverable	1	2	3
Sample size	352	324	142
Theme	Appreciative inquiry (Hutson 2010).	Strengths based advising and capability theory (Soria, Morrow, and Martinen 2017).	Empowering help-seeking behaviour as a strategy for success (Zimmerman 2002; Erlbaum 2013; Karabenick 2004; Karabenick and Knapp 1991).
Content of peer advisor training sessions	Introduction to the application of appreciative inquiry towards understanding how a student might harness their strengths towards academic recovery.	Introduction to strengths based advising and capability theory PA's taken through the exercise of how to facilitate a conversation on designing a game plan for academic recovery.	Introduction to the concept of help-seeking as a strategy for success. What factors enable help-seeking e.g., developing a web of connections. How to direct students to support.
Guidelines for peer advisors to facilitate group sessions	How do you think this programme will assist you? What are your strengths? What are the things you do well? In terms of your studies, what are the things that you enjoy? What are your academic and university-related goals for the semester? Have you got your goals for the year already? If so, what are they?	Invite students to share to visualise a dream world? Think of ways of how to make this dream a reality? Imagine the possibilities you can achieve if you set a plan and systematically work towards it? Remind student that they also have the necessary support from the institution, and the peer	Identify your web of connections. Who (or what) are the individuals, groups, and support units available to support and sustain you? Present your web of connections. Help-seeking behaviours rely on interconnectedness, and interdependence. Watch a video (REF) (insert URL here) The video is made by an SAU

Deliverable	1	2	3
Sample size	352	324	142
	What are the things that you need to do or achieve, to meet those goals?	advisor is available to help.	student, who reflects on their first-year experience.
Instructions/questions for student submissions	<p>In ten words or less what do you want to do better in your remaining time at SAU?</p> <p>What would you say were the three biggest challenges that you faced in achieving academic success in 2021?</p> <p>What would you say are your three greatest strengths that got you to SAU in the first place and that have kept you moving forward?</p> <p>What is still possible for you achieve in your remaining time at SAU?</p> <p>How do you think you could better apply your personal strengths to this?</p> <p>What support do you think you would need to enable you to activate your strengths?</p>	<p>Prepare a Game plan showing</p> <p>What does the rest of the academic year look like for you?</p> <p>What is your main goal for this year?</p> <p>How are you going to achieve this goal?</p> <p>What do you need to do to achieve it?</p> <p>When are you going to achieve this?</p> <p>What are the signs that things are moving in the right direction?</p> <p>What else do you need to pay attention to?</p> <p>What support do you need?</p>	<p>Think back to your experiences of online learning.</p> <p>Reflect and share on the following in a paragraph or two.</p> <p>When you need help, do you ask for it?</p> <p>What makes it difficult for you to ask for help?</p> <p>What do you think could make it easier to seek help.</p>

Analysis

Our research design took a deductive approach as we wished to specifically explore notions of belonging emerging within student reflections and if and how this might relate to help-seeking behaviour. Being conscious of the impact of the online learning environment that was forced onto the university by COVID we also searched the data for how belonging and help-seeking was experienced particularly in this virtual university space. We collected qualitative data from student submissions using the process described in Table 1. These were treated confidentially and anonymously. Applying thematic analysis framework, we used a 6-step approach to our analysis (Braun and Clarke 2008). The first step was familiarisation with the data including transcribing audio, reading the text, and taking initial notes, and looking through the data to get familiar with it. We then highlighted sections of our text looking for phrases or sentences – relating to our questions and producing shorthand labels or “codes” to describe their content. After we went through the text, we collated together all the data into groups identified by codes. We performed the coding exercise in NVIVO and used open coding, developing, and modifying

the codes as we worked through the coding process. Similar codes were grouped as themes and subthemes. Our research objectives, questions and the literature review guided the characterization of themes and subthemes.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the student submissions reveals several key themes and subthemes that relate to our research questions. Below we summarise these as findings and provide student quotes for illustration.

Students' descriptions of challenges include issues of belonging

In our findings students describe a struggle to feel connected and point out that this was exacerbated by being taught, and having to learn, in an online environment. They also describe how these increased feelings of isolation and made it more difficult to ask for help.

Students reported difficulties with being able to find other students that they identified with, and who shared their challenges and experiences. This lack of a sense of community led to feelings of isolation as described by this student:

“... So, it was really challenging because I did not have friends. So, I was alone in every course that I did, especially in the second semester. So, it was hard for me to communicate or ask for help.”

Students felt unsupported and that they needed more engagement from tutors and lecturers and with each other. While some students felt able to ask for help from their lecturers and tutors, some felt that the help they received online was sub-par, disengaged and often late. Some would have preferred to seek help in person. Though students wanted to ask for help they did not always feel like they could trust that their needs would be met by support structures:

“Having to learn online was very difficult because I could not ask any questions; ... I did not know anyone around UCT. There was a lot I did not understand ... It was so overwhelming for me because I didn't even have residence in UCT, so my social life was also very limited.”

It was disorientating for students to go from being high-achieving, self-reliant school-leavers to being put on academic probation. This experience of failure impacted their sense of value and worthiness. Students struggle to accept that they belonged in higher education and felt a loss of identity and confidence leading to imposter syndrome which impacted help-seeking as relayed by this student:

“I got excluded at the end of 2019 returned in 2021 to a very different isolating university experience. Feeling like I do not belong in the space that I am in and thus being embarrassed to ask questions or seek support.”

Issues of belonging do impact help-seeking behaviour

Belonging and help-seeking hesitancy

A lack of trust in support structure, concerns that help-seeking is not acceptable behaviour, a feeling of alienation from the institution and not knowing where to go for help are all factors leading to help-seeking hesitancy as described below:

“For the times when I don’t ask for help, it is because I either don’t want to look like a person who does not have their life figured out, be it in academics or finances or I avoid asking for help because I fear the person I am asking for help from might not be helpful or might make me feel small and asking for help would have been a waste of time.”

An over emphasis on self-reliance or independence and that they do not feel like they necessarily deserve other people’s time also creates reluctance to seek help, as this student states:

“When it comes to asking for help, it’s quite difficult because most of the time I think I am inconveniencing people, I normally think I can solve things without help and realise later that I should have asked for help.”

Students felt that asking for help is not acceptable leading to self-inflicted stigma around help-seeking as described here:

“I find it difficult when I have to communicate with class reps or peers in these situations. I feel it may be because I do not want to be perceived any differently due to needing help in any way.”

The confidence to ask for help also comes from a sense of trust that your community will be there for you in your time of need. Many students are concerned that they will be judged for asking for help and made to feel “less than” because their issue is not important enough and so the help will not be forthcoming, as in this concern raised by this student:

“More students also meant more emails for lecturers, meaning that your email has to be of a certain importance, or be concerning something that they mentioned that you’re allowed to ask.”

Belonging and help-seeking confidence

When describing conditions that would enable help-seeking, students suggest that if they felt more confident that they belong in the institution and higher education more broadly, this would make them more confident to ask for help. This feeling of belonging comes with an understanding that they are not alone in the experience of failure and needing help and that that they have a place in a group of people who have shared their experiences as illustrated by this student comment:

“I guess it would be easier to seek assistance from someone who understands how painful it is to not to understand when the others do.”

One way to build confidence and reduce stigma around help-seeking is to allow students to feel that they also have something to offer in the process too. Students suggest an environment of mutualism and reciprocity and propose that if they had opportunities to also help others, they would feel less embarrassed to ask for help themselves as pointed out by this student:

“I think what will make it easier for me to ask for help is if someone asks for help from me first, I would feel more relaxed as I know they trust me enough to ask for my help so I can ask for theirs.”

Student visions for a greater sense of belonging

Students are hopeful that a move away from fully online learning will reduce isolation and loneliness and they see regaining connection to other students, the institution, and their purpose as part of their vision of a more successful future. To enable this greater sense of belonging students, wish:

- i. To connect more with others, especially those with whom they share common interests and values and to be able to share the load of their academic struggles:

“... I am a firm believer of sharing and I know how heavy it is to not be able to share your academic struggles because you do not want to be seen as someone who is dumb.”

- ii. To be more connected and engaged with the institution and to become part of a community both by having a system of accountability but also through contributing to leadership and helping others:

“In school I really enjoyed explaining content to my friends, I found it helped me learn as well as helped clarify things for my fellow students, and finally I think that a strength of mine was my confidence within in myself.”

- iii. To be able to share experiences with others. Students found it rewarding to share their experience with others that understand what they are going through:

“I’ve noticed the improvement that I’ve had for being able to interact with other people and stuff like that and hearing their side story for how they’ve been able to cope up in that problem are some of those, and they’ve worked for me.”

- iv. To feel worthy of being in university and important to the enterprise and to feel like they can trust institutional support to be there to help them:

“I would love to get support, you know like, someone to help me like you know I just I just want to be like when I need help with some like questions be like yo: ‘Can you help me with this?’”

- v. Students also want to feel like they have a place at the institution and in higher education, that they are where they are meant to be:

“I feel like I have not fully explored what I can do as a student and what is available for me to try out academically. I have not fully unleashed my potential as a student.”

DISCUSSION

“Gender, stigma, help-seeking experience, attitudes, subjective norms, cultural background and personality seem to be related to academic help-seeking” (Bornschlegl et al. 2020, 486). Class size and student age affect willingness to ask for help, with younger students less willing to ask for help (Brown, Barry and, Todd 2021, 402), masculine attitudes such as independence and competitiveness hinder help-seeking (Brown et al. 2021, 414) and very few student actually use campus resources to report sexual violence either because they are not aware or resources, not aware of policies and procedures or prefer to use informal structures rather than getting professional help (Pinchevsky and Hayes 2022, 2–4, 16). Help-seeking is therefore a complex behaviour that needs to be better understood as part of our strategy in designing student support that students will use. With this study we attempted to understand how issues of belonging impact on student help-seeking behaviour and, if they are positively related, how institutions of higher education might promote a greater sense of belonging. If we compare the experiences of the students on our academic recovery programme after the end of remote teaching, to the definitions of belonging presented in this article, many students did not feel a sense of belonging. Belonging includes feelings of being supported and connected to others and the institution (Tinto 2017, 4), being important to the campus community (Strayhorn 2018, 5–6), being included through having shared experiences and backgrounds (Allen et al. 2021, 94;

Maunder 2018, 757), having a place in a group (Tovar and Simon 2010, 214) and trust that your needs will be met (McMillan and Chavis 1986, 9). In our study students report a lack of connection as they struggled to find opportunities to share experiences with each other and engage with lecturers and tutors. Students therefore did not feel like part of a greater academic community. For some, this was also a first experience of academic failure and with it came a loss of identity as high academic achievers and deserving of a place in higher education. While online teaching and learning exacerbated these feelings and confirmed that physical distance from university is a deterrent to the development of a close connection with the institution (Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe 2014, 197), South African students reported challenges with belonging long before the pandemic (Kumalo and Reddy 2021, 184) suggesting that this is an issue that will be with us long after the pandemic if we do not take steps towards changing the status quo.

Our study shows a clear connection between students' sense of belonging and their help-seeking behaviour. Part of students experience of belonging is to feel that they matter, are cared about, accepted, respected, and valued by the campus community (Strayhorn 2018, 4) but our students were reluctant to ask for help because they did not feel like their need for help would be accepted or treated with respect. Some even felt that asking for help would devalue them in the perception of others. Students who lacked a sense of belonging were therefore hesitant to ask for help. In contrast when students were asked what would enable help-seeking, they describe this environment as one in which they felt they could safely share their experiences of failure and challenge, one in which they could be empowered to help others as well and one in which they had a community of shared trust. In short students describe a greater sense of belonging through connection, being important to the enterprise and having a community to count on in times of trouble (Strayhorn 2018, 3; Allen et al. 2021, 94; McMillan and Chavis 1986, 9).

Help-seeking is an important self-regulated strategy for student success and given our challenges with success rates and a highly racialised achievement gap in South African higher education it is not enough that we provide students with support, but we need to find ways to empower them to use this support more readily. Students themselves have indicated that if they feel more confident that they belong in the institution and higher education more broadly, this will make them more confident to ask for help. Some data suggests that online learning enables more autonomy and anonymity empowering students to feel less embarrassed to ask for help (Kauer, Mangan, and Sanci 2014, 7), but it can also present significant challenges to students' sense of belonging (Krishnakumar et al. 2022, 476). As higher education invests further in online and hybrid learning it becomes increasingly important that we work to enable belonging

regardless of the teaching medium. The student experience had not been the priority during emergency remote teaching and for our most vulnerable students who struggled with access to technology, lack of infrastructure and lack of digital literacy, it has been a disempowering experience and created more anxiety which was also seen by (Fouche and Andrews 2022, 153). The problems that are faced by the students cannot be solved by merely providing data bundles and laptops. Much more systematic assistance needs to be imagined that enables a greater sense of belonging for students whether in face to face, hybrid or online learning environments.

Our students make a connection to their sense of belonging and their willingness to ask for help. They further identify how this sense of belonging could be strengthened, proposing that if they had more connection with others, more engagement with the institution, a stronger sense of reciprocity and trust in their campus community and a greater sense of having a place in higher education, they would feel a greater sense of belonging. The process to develop a sense of belonging requires the complex interaction of three factors which include the environment, social, and cognitive attributes (Kift 2004). Here we provide some recommendations based on our findings, the literature, and our students' voices on how institutions could be thinking about better supporting a sense of belonging among students that will also enable help-seeking behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Create an environment that signals strongly that help-seeking is acceptable behaviour

Students evaluate what it means to belong based on their understanding of what is expected of them (Graham and Moir 2022, 7). This means that institutions need to move away from promoting a singular, self-reliant path to success and instead allow students to see themselves reflected in more diverse stories of success and struggle that we tell them. This frames the challenges that they face as part of a normal higher education experience and that there is no homogeneous profile of the ideal student to which they need to assimilate. In a South African context of a marginalised majority of Black students, many of whom are first generation students, from low-income households, and second language English speakers this is especially important as it recognises that our institutions of higher education, which are still largely based on a colonial system, do not accommodate the lived experience of most students.

Enable students to cognitively disconnect needing help from a feeling of failure

Students felt a loss of identity going from being high-achieving, self-reliant school leavers to

failing at university. This confidence needs to be regained to ensure future success. By giving students the tools to assess their situation, acknowledge when they need help and act to get help, we enable an important self-regulated learning strategy (Paris and Paris 2001). A student who does not see help-seeking as an admittance of failure but as part of a suite of success strategies, is less likely to feel stigmatised by the process and more likely to ask for help. As institutions we need to build help-seeking into our institutional messaging of student success strategies and educate students that it can be used in conjunction with building persistence, grit, and resilience. This is also where we can adopt the spirit of Ubuntu more explicitly. Ubuntu allows for the relationship between a person and their community to be reciprocal, interdependent, and mutually beneficial (Oviawe 2016, 3).

Creating a context where students feel like they are an important part of the university

Our students want to feel worthy of being in university and important to the enterprise and to feel like they have a place at the institution and in higher education. Won et al. (2021, 113–114) demonstrate that students' perceptions of their social contexts inform if and how they seek help with their learning. Students want to connect more with their peers, especially those with whom they share common interests and values, but they also want to be more connected and engaged with the institution. For students to feel a sense of belonging we must intentionally create opportunities for them to engage in communities, with each other, senior peers, and university staff. Many institutions provide a number of interventions like mentorship, first year experiences etc to achieve this but these are often left unstructured and mentors themselves are often not provided much direction. Our academic recovery programme is highly structured with a developmental curriculum and peer advising training provided. Our data already suggest that many students have valued this space to meet with each other on a regular basis and already benefited from the opportunity to feel more connected to each other and the institution via their peer advisors. Another way to make students feel like their perspectives matter is to use student voice more intentionally in the design of student support so that they can see their needs reflected in the institution provisioning.

Creating a context to where students feel like they can trust their academic community

Students' "feeling of relatedness or connectedness to the institution" is linked to personal acceptance, respect, inclusion and feeling supported by others and is important to successful transition into higher education (Meehan and Howells 2019, 1376–1377). When students do

eventually seek help, they are more likely to turn to those they can trust (even if they are not well equipped to help) rather than turn to institutional support that might be very well equipped to help (Kirsh et al. 2016, 330; Li et al. 2014, 163). Our students do not feel they can turn to institutional structures for reasons of shame, feeling unworthy or simply because of poor support received in the past. To grow a greater sense of trust, requires that we have consistent culture of care across our support services. One way to achieve this is by having shared frameworks that guide our practice such as Ubuntu. Ubuntu includes capacity to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Oviawe 2016, 3). As institutions we need to think about how we design to create Ubuntu both in and out of the classroom. In terms of student support this would mean to design with relationships in mind.

CONCLUSION

South African institutions need more inclusive practices and a better understanding of why so many of our academically talented students never graduate. Studies like this, that unpack systemic factors challenging student success are especially important as South Africa faces a crisis of outcomes in higher education. With this study we wanted to assess the relationship between belonging and help-seeking behaviour in a group of students on academic probation at a South African University. The data shows a positive correlation between students' sense of belonging and their use of help-seeking as an academic success strategy. This positive relationship suggests that by promoting a stronger sense of belonging for our students, we will empower them to seek help when they need it and thereby improve their academic achievement. The study also allowed us to collect student voices on what would enable a greater sense of belonging. This has implications for the design of future interventions. By intentionally introducing students to the concept of help-seeking as a strategy for success and giving them the practical tools on how to monitor themselves, identify when they need help and where to go for this help, we can empower their help-seeking behaviour. By creating an environment in which students feel like they belong, are accepted, and are valued we make it more likely that they will ask for the help they need. This study reveals a need for further research that measure the success of interventions aimed at fostering a culture of belonging and help-seeking in South African institutions of higher education.

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