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## Fostering Inclusive Learning Communities Together: Intersectionality, Belongingness, and Openness

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## **FOSTERING INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER: INTERSECTIONALITY, BELONGINGNESS, AND OPENNESS**

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In this Special Issue, we present a collection of 27 short contributions from our institution-wide project aimed at advancing inclusive education through student-led collaborative scholarship. A group of 21 undergraduate and graduate students from diverse personal and disciplinary backgrounds at Northumbria University offer their perspectives on ‘student success’ and other contemporary issues on equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability (including those aligned with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)). The students worked both individually and collaboratively to develop a collection of creative writing, visuals, artwork, reflective essays, and scholarly opinion pieces. Taking on board their personal and professional experiences, seven academic and professional service colleagues provided their responses to the students’ contributions in a series of short articles. Using our project as an example, I here highlight the importance of involving students, academics, *and* professional service staff members—all from diverse backgrounds—in collaborative scholarship initiatives, and the significance of intersectionality, belongingness, and openness as key elements in fostering inclusive learning communities together.

### **Creating a student-led scholarship project on inclusive education**

Can students, like professional educational leaders, shape the agenda for fostering inclusive learning communities? Can they put forward their ideas about equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability in the form of creative work and scholarly writing for a wide audience?

As inclusive education has become a core component in many institutional strategies, students play an important role in helping make curriculum, pedagogy, and student services more inclusive. Conceptual frameworks have been developed to promote working with students as partners to advance equity and justice in higher education pedagogy (de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, & Luqueño, 2021), and they have been involved as co-authors in scholarly and research publications on fostering socially just pedagogies (Munevar-Pelton et al., 2022). Apart from inclusive education, initiatives aligned with the United Nations’ SDGs have shaped a diverse range of education and research activities in different types of higher education institutions around the world (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Tong, 2022). These trends have created many opportunities for students to contribute to advancing sustainability, including quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and other SDGs linked to social and environmental justice. Although student voices and engagement have become central to initiatives on inclusive education and sustainability, there are few opportunities for students to take on a leading role beyond their programs of study or institutional structures. Given the importance of having diverse perspectives, it would be beneficial to involve both students *and* educators from diverse backgrounds in collaborative projects. Such opportunities, however, are relatively rare.

Our collaborative scholarship project offers and combines such opportunities in a single initiative, in which:

- Students take the lead in defining the range of topics on inclusive education and sustainability in our external-facing scholarly outputs; and
- Students, academics, and professional service colleagues from diverse backgrounds work collaboratively to create a collection of short contributions on fostering inclusive learning communities.

Our starting point is the open-access book project that explores the connections between research and teaching in higher education (Tong, Standen, & Sotiriou, 2018), in which a large consortium of students and academics worked in partnership to share their ideas on research-based education (Tong, 2018; Clark et al., 2019; Grindle & Tong, 2022). In the current project, we have kept the student-led approach to collaborative scholarship and asked our students from different personal and disciplinary backgrounds to create their own single-authored pieces. They were invited to reflect on ‘what success may mean to them’—for developing the themes explored in their own contributions as well as for collectively defining the scope of our scholarship project. ‘Student success’ was chosen as the prompt because it is both a theme central to a range of national regulatory, enhancement, and institutional frameworks (e.g., Lane et al., 2019; Advance HE, 2019; Office for Students, 2022), and a concept that students would be able to engage with when reflecting on their lived experiences. ‘Student success’ therefore serves as the underlying theme that unifies the collection of students’ short pieces, bridging experiences in their personal spheres and the wider agenda relevant to educators working in different institutional and cultural contexts.

Our students were free to choose to present their short contributions in the form of creative writing, visuals, artwork (all with an academic commentary), an opinion piece, or a reflective essay. These different genres have given them the flexibility to explore the affective dimensions of inclusive education, and to articulate their academic arguments in the scholarly pieces. Through creative work, our students have shared their sense of pride and expressed their feelings as they face challenges. In the opinion pieces and reflective essays, they have presented the links between published statistics, policies, and pedagogical practices—with arguments underpinned by the natural need to secure a sense of belonging in their learning communities. These different modes of expression have allowed us to understand both the emotional nuances and intersectional complexity of belongingness in their learning communities. As Strayhorn (2019) shows, the sense of belonging with peers on campus is, after all, closely linked to success in higher education.

The academic and professional service colleagues in this project have demonstrated their openness by sharing their own personal stories and perspectives. How often do our students have the chance to hear about their professors’ personal struggles and experiences? What about the perspectives from professional service colleagues who support the university community and may even be providing crucial support to our students? Their short pieces in this Special Issue are all based on their perspectives and lived experiences in relation to students’ ideas about the sense of belonging. Our academic and professional service colleagues have shown the power of empathy as they engaged in dialogue with the students in the project. Exploring belongingness

by showing openness from those in more powerful positions is a very effective way to foster an inclusive community. From a wide spectrum of professional roles and a similarly diverse range of personal backgrounds as the students in the project, our academic and professional service colleagues have revealed the significance of intersectionality in learning communities—intersectional barriers and successes can be shared, recognized, and discussed between students, staff, and educators.

We would like to invite you, our reader, to join us to reflect on the significance of belongingness and openness in learning communities, and to challenge any preconceptions about intersectional successes and barriers. As we look forward to the next stages of our scholarship project involving partner institutions, we hope that this Special Issue will provide ideas for fostering inclusive learning communities in different institutional and cultural contexts—through inspiring change and innovation across pedagogical practices, student support, and institutional strategies.

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