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What is the Role of Trust in Peer Support Schemes for Underrepresented Students?

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how peer support schemes can be used to facilitate meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging for underrepresented students. Using three case studies, the study explored and compared peer support leaders' narratives about their experiences at three universities: one in the United Kingdom (UK), one in the United States (USA), and the other in Singapore. One-to-one interviews and focus groups were completed with 25 students (15 in the UK, four in the USA, and six in Singapore) to explore their perceptions and experiences of being a peer support lead within their institution. These three case studies (one at each institution) explore the multifaceted concept of belonging in order to identify the relative influences of social connection, shared culture/experiences and interpersonal trust. The results demonstrated that the students were aware of the challenges faced by underrepresented students and how peer support schemes can facilitate belonging. Whilst the three settings are diverse, the findings demonstrate that supporting learning transitions and the navigation of liminal spaces through peer support can encourage trust, belonging, and student success. We propose a conceptual model for considering how social connection, shared culture/experiences, and interpersonal trust can contribute to the central goal of belonging. This conceptual model can be used as a resource to support consideration of peer support schemes for underrepresented students that can be developed to support student belonging.

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing students' learning experiences and providing spaces to facilitate engagement has become a primary focus within higher education (HE) internationally (Bilham et al. 2019). This agenda is driven by the aim to make HE accessible and equitable to all, however, key metrics of success—access and participation, retention, degree and graduate outcomes—reveal inequalities related to race, gender, and social class (Forsyth et al. 2021). These inequities may be particularly experienced by students attending institutions at which more white students than racially underrepresented students are enrolled, often referred to as predominantly white institutions (Bourke 2016). Policies at both institutional and national levels seek to reduce these inequalities, often through initiatives that seek to foster a sense of belonging among a more diverse cohort of students. The higher education literature suggests that institutions encourage a sense of belonging so that students can feel part of a university community (Hamshire and Wibberely 2017). Belonging is, thus, framed as the panacea to structural barriers that hinder student success.

Whilst belonging is described as critical to student success (Kahu, Ashley, and Picton 2022), it is not uniformly defined (Lim et al. 2023). Therefore, it is unclear what belonging is, how it is experienced by a diverse student body, and why exactly it is important. It is, however, noted that underrepresented students can have difficulties developing a sense of belonging (Gagnon 2018; Hindle et al. 2021) and that they may also feel a lesser sense of belonging in comparison to their white counterparts (Cureton and Gravestock 2019). Students' feelings of social acceptance are associated with their sense of belonging to the university (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007).

Often one of students' primary concerns upon entering higher education is connecting socially so that they feel they have made the right choice about their institution. When faced with stressful situations, students find it valuable to be able to talk to a peer for emotional support (Walsh 2015; Yomtov et al. 2017) and engage in shared learning and networking, underpinned by mutual respect (Carey et al. 2018), and these conversations often foster belonging. Peer support and mentoring are student support systems used in an increasing number of universities internationally and are designed to provide a structured opportunity for these interactions, facilitating a sense of social belonging. The concept of peer support has been around for many years (Williams and Reddy 2016) and draws on the understanding that whilst lecturers may be experts in their subject areas, students are experts at being students (Collier 2015; Longfellow et al. 2008) and can therefore help their peers become accustomed to a new institution.

Peer support schemes (mentoring or other programs where experienced students carry out structured roles as leaders who guide their less experienced peers) usually aim to facilitate an environment in which students can feel that they belong (Hamshire, O'Connor, and Jack 2019). These schemes employ students who are usually successful students as peer support leads in order to help new students by providing a learning space in which they share expertise and experiences. These peer leaders may be particularly helpful to underrepresented students, whose experience of belonging in higher education can be fraught as they embed in the social and cultural norms of the university (Kahu, Ashley, and Picton 2022).

Drawing on data from three peer support case studies in three different educational and cultural contexts, this paper explores three areas: students' perceptions and experiences of their peer leadership roles, the impact of structured peer support programs facilitated by underrepresented students, and the impact on a sense of belonging in a broader context of diversity and peer support. In all areas, trust surfaced as a key element.

BACKGROUND

Whilst sense of belonging is difficult to define, students' experiences of belonging can be considered through the lenses of both academic and social belonging (Kahu, Ashley, and Picton 2022). Academic belonging focuses on students' connection with their disciplinary focus and career path; social belonging addresses their integration into the institutional community and feelings of connection with their peers. Social connectedness encompasses students' experiences of satisfaction with relationships and social groups (Jorgenson et al. 2018), having friendships, being listened to, and feeling connected to others (Schreiner 2020). Social integration experiences are important for student development (Schaller 2010), mental health (McIntyre et al. 2018), academic achievement (Fischer 2007), adjustment in the first year (Pittman and Richmond 2008), and persistence (Fischer 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Social connections (feeling valued) and shared culture/experiences (fitting in) (Kahu, Ashley, and Picton 2022) contribute to a sense of belonging and the feeling that the student is in the right place (Cole, Newman, and Hypolite 2020). Additionally, a sense of belonging to an institution can

improve students' mental health and well-being (Allen et al. 2021). When students do not feel like they belong or are not in the right place, there can be considerable challenges, and this is particularly noted for underrepresented students attending predominantly white institutions (Cole, Newman, and Hypolite 2020), For example, Latina STEM majors struggled to develop friendships with other STEM students with shared characteristics, affecting their personal support (Rodriguez and Blaney 2021), while for Black and Hispanic students, developing formal social ties through campus involvement in clubs and organizations led to college adjustment and satisfaction (Fisher 2007). Social connections may appear to be the responsibility of the student, but campuses should assist students in facilitating social interactions instead of assuming they will do so on their own (Hussain and Jones 2021; McIntyre et al. 2018). Krusemark and White (2020), for example, encouraged compulsory peer mentor programs as a campus initiative to address the lack of social connections that resulted from the pandemic. Intentional institutional efforts to facilitate belonging and a sense of mattering so that students are affirmed for who they are (Cook-Sather et al. 2023) are essential.

Whilst interacting with others different from themselves is beneficial to students (Pike and Kuh 2005), Kahu, Ashly, and Picton (2022) identified familiarity as an antecedent for belonging, which may be especially valuable for underrepresented students. Campus culture may appear to be shared, but underrepresented students typically do not experience campus culture as white students do, highlighting the importance of shared experiences and culture. Paredes-Collins and McIntosh (2020) stated that for underrepresented students, the experience of community with their underrepresented peer group offers a familiarity that is less available within the broader institution. Wilson and Leaper (2022) found positive outcomes for underrepresented students resulted from perceived similarity to ethnic-racial peers and having ingroup connections. In a study of Black students at a predominately white institution, Foxx (2021) reported that all participants found connection when they understood each other's "cultural codes" (120), which included experiences, words, phrases, and nonverbal communication that they did not need to explain. Underrepresented students identified the importance of having a friend group comprised of ethnic minority peers (Gao and Liu 2021; Maramba and Museus 2013), with social identity-based groups benefiting minoritized students when that student felt comfortable and "made authentic connections" (Vaccaro and Newman 2016, 935). This social support can lead to greater trust in both their peers and their environment (Guo 2017).

Trust implies risk and requires vulnerability, based on an expectation that those someone trusts will act in one's best interests (Thielman and Hillbig 2015), and because trust assumes ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trusted party (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis 2007). That trusted party may be an institution or an individual. Institutional trust in a college or university is positively affected by many factors, including policies that prioritize students' interests. Offering services perceived to be additional, such as mentoring programs, can signal support for students and impact institutional trust, leading to student satisfaction and retention (Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota 2015).

Individual trust is an important element of the mentoring relationship, with protégé trust in their mentor leading to satisfaction with the mentoring experience (Bear and Jones 2017). Although incoming students often do not know their peer mentors prior to participation in the program, since mentors are peers, students may see them as part of "their immediate circle" and quickly establish trust in their mentors (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011, 789). This "particularized trust" may be based on students' in-group status as peers (Uslaner 2018), which can increase interpersonal trust generally (Wang and Hu 2021). Fosnacht and Calderone (2020) suggested that social cohesion is predicated on social trust, and their study revealed that racially/ethnically underrepresented students had lower levels of trust in their institution, suggesting attention to trust building is needed. Thus,

peer support schemes may provide experiences resulting in trust that is beneficial for students' social integration and sense of belonging.

This current study adds to the literature since it examines the data from interviews with underrepresented students in peer support leader roles. These interviews explored the students' experiences in this role that involves facilitating social integration for their underrepresented peer colleagues and their understanding of how such roles impact a sense of belonging. By utilizing the peer leaders' own narratives of their experiences and contributions in these roles, we can better understand the critical components of sense of belonging for the population they serve. These findings can inform the intentional efforts made to support student success in higher education.

A NOTE ON RESEARCHERS' POSITIONALITY

Throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing stages of this study, we have been aware of our intersectional positionality. Two of us are white academics researching and writing about the experiences of underrepresented students, and one is a co-author of colour. As such, the two white academics recognised that we are "outsiders" to the field we were researching and recognised our privilege which has been a key consideration throughout the research process. We aim to use our white privilege as a critical approach, centering underrepresented students' experiences and advocating for change when warranted so that all students can feel that they matter and are valued at their institution.

METHODS

The data presented within this paper was collected in three diverse contexts. The UK institution is a large metropolitan university, and the peer support scheme employed a group of students to engage with fellow students, create and deliver activities to improve sense of belonging, develop meaningful relationships between students and staff, and enable students to safely challenge all forms of discrimination. The USA institution is a mid-sized private university at which 17.2% of the student population identified as racially/ethnically underrepresented, and peer support for underrepresented students was facilitated on a one-to-one basis with a primary focus on first-year students. The Singapore institution is a large comprehensive university in which a peer support scheme was embedded within the on-campus residential housing in order to welcome and support students, with each peer leader working with several students. Due to the differences across the three institutions the terminology used to describe the roles was not consistent. For consistency within this paper, we have chosen to use the term "peer support lead" to describe these roles; however, to ensure that we accurately reflect the students' narratives, we have chosen to not change the terms that they used within the comments included in the findings section.

Data collection

This study utilized narrative inquiry to provide opportunities for students to tell their own stories about their lived experiences. Listening to students describe their experiences of working as peer support leads for underrepresented students was therefore the main aim of this narrative study, using either one-to-one interviews (USA and Singapore settings using Zoom) or online focus groups (UK setting using Microsoft Teams), due to the larger number of students working as peer support leaders within the UK. Within these sessions, the students were encouraged with a narrative prompt to tell the stories of their experiences of working as a peer support lead, beginning and finishing wherever and however they felt was most appropriate. As the students were working to support underrepresented students, discussions about race and ethnicity were frequently central to their

narratives without a specific prompt required to facilitate this. These methods received IRB/ethics approval from each university represented in the study. This narrative prompt encouraged the students to speak about themselves in relation to their peer support role for underrepresented students. Although there were individual variations in the words chosen across the three settings for the narrative prompts, it is broadly captured below:

> I would like you to tell me the story of your peer mentoring experiences, beginning wherever and however you want and including whatever is important to you. If it helps you to get started, then consider the story as a series of chapters or episodes and include whatever you think has been important to you.

Following the narrative prompt, open-ended prompt questions were used to clarify and further explore any topics of interest that were raised by individual students, such as comments about social events, individual experiences, and peer support scheme structures.

Data analysis

Each of the online interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and were all audio recorded and transcribed using either Teams or Zoom. To ensure accuracy, the transcripts were subsequently reviewed with the audio files and any discrepancies and typos were amended. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was undertaken using a framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer 2002; Spencer et al. 2013). This "framework" approach is an analytical process involving several distinct, yet interconnected stages described as:

- Familiarization
- Identifying a thematic framework
- Indexing
- Charting
- Mapping and interpreting

During the familiarization stage, the transcripts were read in order to gain an overview of the data set as a whole, whilst noting key ideas and themes (Ritchie and Spencer 1994). These themes and key issues were subsequently reviewed in order to identify an initial thematic framework. Index categories were subsequently identified and applied systematically to the data, and the data set was interpreted as a whole (Ritchie and Spencer 1994).

The transcripts were each initially considered individually and subsequently discussed by the three members of the research team until mutual consensus about the meaning of the data was reached through a process of triangulation. This line-by-line analysis used a constant comparative approach, and the three researchers returned to re-read each interview and discuss new themes and key issues as they were raised during the data analysis process.

As we reviewed the data, we noted that there were cultural differences in the ways in which the students articulated their narratives. Typically, the students in the UK and the USA were more willing to critique programs at their institution and suggest how services could be improved. The Singapore students, however, were more reserved and less emotive in their choice of language. We have aimed to accurately represent and locate their voices within the findings section of the paper but acknowledge that, whilst based on the words of the students, what is presented is ultimately our interpretation of the meanings of their words.

Ethical considerations

This project was approved by either an IRB office or ethics committees (whichever was most appropriate within the institutional context) at each of the three institutions. Involvement in the project was voluntary, and the students were invited to respond to an email invitation to participate followed by a period of two weeks to decide if they wished to volunteer. A participant information sheet outlining the ethical considerations was given to all participants by email, and written consent was given to the recording of the online interviews and focus groups. At the beginning of the online interviews and focus groups, the students were also given a further opportunity to ask any questions they might have about the study. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

RESULTS

Through the constant comparative approach, a mutual consensus about the meaning of the data was reached and the thematic analysis of the data resulted in the development of three key themes: social connections, shared experiences/culture and interpersonal trust. Despite the different contexts of the three universities and the peer support schemes at each institution, the overall findings indicated little difference in the perceptions of the students.

Social connections

Across the data set the students repeatedly highlighted the importance of social integration, particularly during the initial transition to university. Making space and time to connect with students and form initial connections during this time was identified as being vital to ensure that new students felt welcomed:

> Adi (Singapore): I think one of the things that I normally do, especially to my mentee, is to listen to them basically trying to ask questions, one question leads to another. Then the next thing you know conversation is really quite long one and from then I think they start to be more comfortable.

> Amelia (UK): It's a very big place, so it's very easy, especially if you're one of the few BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) students to feel alone, and it isn't always like a big like cloud over your head but it's like the subtle things so you just don't feel as you don't have as much access to things or you don't feel like people understand you the same way or you just don't feel like you're the main student in that course or whatever. If you just knew from someone else that they might have like the same experience I think it could be a little more powerful than we think because for me until I had those conversations, I didn't realize I was even feeling some of these things; they can be subconscious. So yeah, having each first year know that there's places for them . . . if that if that's what they're seeking, then I think it would be really good way to have that smooth transition into university that some people didn't get.

In addition, the students frequently noted that they used their peer support role to connect students to the wider university communities, usually beginning with their own social groups:

> Nicole (USA): I would bring my mentee to meet with my friends, just like introducing her to different people in order for her to not just know me but know other people to kind

of bridge the gap. That's something that a lot of people do they just kind of like bring their mentee [with them to social events] and then we kind of find everyone's connected with each other. It's just like being able to introduce them to people and get them ingrained in the community, because that's one of the main reasons of why people don't stay is because they don't have that community.

Sara (UK): I felt like we can actually like build relationships. You know what I mean? Not like I just see you once. . . I've got an opportunity to work with people and I really wanted to just be able to learn about other people's experiences of being underrepresented, so far being a part of it has taught me so much . . . one big reason was to meet other underrepresented people and to learn about other people's experiences.

Even when the peer support leads did not directly identify with or have shared interests with the students that they were working with, they endeavored to ensure that they facilitated social connections:

Tessa (USA): My mentee and I, we are very different people, but it's allowed me to see her interests and see like how I can find her connections to the people who like the same things as her. . . now she's kind of found her place and I'm really, really glad to see her like grow that way.

Adi (Singapore): The relationship with one mentee and the other mentee, it can be very different depending on what's their interests I think what makes the role really enriching because it's not again a one size fits all kind of thing.

Shared experiences and culture

Establishing a rapport across a shared culture was implicit across the interviews and the focus groups and was fundamental to facilitate a sense of belonging for students in underrepresented communities. All the peer support leads in the study identified as underrepresented students and for those who were in a predominantly white institution (the UK and USA settings), providing opportunities for shared cultural connection was a significant element of their role:

Nicole (USA): Coming into [the institution], it's kind of culture shock, especially if you haven't been in this type of environment before. Like as a marginalized identity, sometimes you have an expectation about how things are going to go and then you realize it doesn't go that way. And, like everyone kind of has, we all talk about this, like everyone has this kind of like moment where you kind of jolted back into reality. You're like okay like this is the situation that I'm in and sometimes it's not always bad, but sometimes it's not good. And um, yeah, like sometimes [the institution] it'd be a little bit stressful so when you're dealing with a lot of stuff dealing with not having someone that looks like you in your classes, difficulty of academics, sometimes, along with sometimes working . . . it could be a lot.

As such, highlighting shared experiences as a peer support leader was identified as important to build trust and connections whether or not the peer networking events were face-to-face. The students at the UK institution found that using social media to connect with students had been useful:

Nora (UK): I think when we moved to focusing our energy on creating the online spaces on the content we wanted that is when we got a lot better traction. And I had people asking me about the peer support scheme more especially with the podcast [we created]. I think that gave a really good opportunity to speak about the issues that a lot of us have that are actually the same . . . really putting together that everyone was experiencing the same thing. I think it's [social media] massively important because a lot of the time, like we said, we didn't realize a lot of our experiences were the same until we started speaking about them mostly on the podcast. Sharing experience is always going to be beneficial.

Leila (UK): I think sometimes students don't even know they want to speak about their experience, they want to be heard or seen. So giving opportunities to them in the right place at the right time, a lot of ideas on ways to improve their experiences can happen.

A key aspect of the peer support role within the Singapore scheme was to provide help and support to new students. One of the successful ways identified in the interviews was through sharing personal experiences and working in partnership with other peer support leaders as a support network:

Luke (Singapore): I leveraged on senior peer mentors to provide pastoral care and share their experiences with mentees, so that these senior peer mentors can signal to the mentees to say that "I have gone through what you are going through now." "We went through the same process, we went to junior colleges, polytechnics, we now join [the institution], etc." These PMs shared their personal experiences and tips. That created a strong bond and belonging among the peer mentors and the mentees.

Peggy (Singapore): When I came to Singapore, my understanding of sense of belonging is to have a bunch of friends who have similar experience as me. But after I become a peer mentor after I experienced the peer mentorship programme and become the peer mentor, I realized that, having the same background, it's not necessary to form the sense of belonging. More important is having a similar experience. After we come together and having similar goals and understanding each other's, demands and needs. I think these factors are more important than just having similar backgrounds.

Several of the peer support leaders had the shared experience with their mentees of being involved in the scheme previously when they themselves were new students. They noted that this experience had given them a focus on facilitating social connections within their role:

Tracy (USA): I think that I really appreciate my relationship with my mentee more so because I also had mentors that were able to provide support for me both emotionally and academically. And I just am really grateful that I'm able to provide that social connection for someone else. It feels like a full circle moment in a way, you know. And I think that just kind of like keeping in mind that the more, and a lot of the mentors I've talked to have also have like the same like experience that because they had someone

who was mentoring them, they were also, felt the need to mentor someone else and provide that for them as well.

Interpersonal trust

Whilst not always explicitly named as such, particularly by the Singapore students, comments pertaining to the importance of building trustful spaces within the peer support lead role were consistent across student narratives:

Peggy (Singapore): I try to like, know how people actually think. So, in order to gain some real feedback into their life in Singapore. It's very important in this sense, so that I can communicate with different kinds of people and try to open up their heart through my interaction with them.

One of the students from the USA scheme described how a trustful space was established in a one-to-one peer relationship by sharing personal experiences to support others in similar situations:

Tracy (USA): I feel like she (the student Tracy supports) knows that I'm somebody that she can come to if she needs something. And we kind of have that kind of relationship established and she knows that if she needs help or needs someone to do work with, or if she needs help on like a personal matter like she definitely has reached out to me, and I know she's comfortable with doing so. So, I know that we have a positive relationship in that aspect. I think that for me personally there's also something that's just as important as your schoolwork is like your mental health. So, I'm okay with sharing my own personal experiences because I know that from what I've gone through, I can also like help others to work through the things that they might be going through or experiencing. There's not kind of like, that personal, professional like, super strict line. It's more of like a blurred line based off like what I can tell that she needs support from me in that moment.

Several of the UK students did refer to trust directly, and they acknowledge that trust between peer leads and students may not be immediate, but could gradually be built over time through shared experiences and social connections:

Adnam: (UK): I think you can't force it. I guess with students, and I hate using this word too much, but safe space is used quite a lot, creating an environment, not necessarily a safe space, but creating an environment where you can discuss topics and all it takes is one person to trust everyone else in that, for everyone else to slowly start trusting everyone else in that room. So, one person sharing a story, and then another person chipping in to say "You know what, that person was vulnerable, I'll be vulnerable now and I'll show a little bit of trust." Creating spaces where you have a pizza or a coffee with people and there isn't really a work agenda, you're just there to chat. And if you're lucky—if you have the right environment and the right people and the right timing it just forms naturally. That level of trust can be built quite quickly. But it also has to be quite small as well, you can't force 20 people to be in a room together and all build trust at the same time.

Another student noted that the visibility of a scheme to support underrepresented students led to an increased sense of institutional trust:

> Amelia (UK): Knowing that you don't have to go out of your way to do that [find other students of color] and that the university is creating spaces for you to do that, it makes you trust in the institution a lot more so as soon as they find out there's [peer leaders] they were like really keen to become one.

However, this same student also noted that at department level a lack of trust could lead to feelings of exclusion:

> Amelia (UK): From the very beginning . . . they have like a little family within that department already, so they already had that trust between them. . . So when we were brought in [as peer support leads]. . . it was almost natural for them to trust us . . . and because my department never highlighted to me that there was ever any space for us it's not that same trust.

Social integration, shared culture, and interpersonal trust are interconnected aspects of belonging, but none of the aspects is of greater importance than the others. For example, shared experiences and culture contribute to both social integration and interpersonal trust since the familiarity of shared experiences and cultures may serve as a catalyst for social integration and interpersonal trust. Trust can also facilitate social integration and can further shared experiences and knowledge of shared culture based on confidence that positive outcomes are intended. Social integration may lead to greater shared experiences due to the connections established and feelings of trust. All three aspects are linked to contribute to students' sense of belonging.

DISCUSSION

Whilst belonging is repeatedly recognized as being important for students' higher education experiences, what exactly constitutes as belonging and how we develop it, particularly for underrepresented students, remains difficult to specify. Indeed, whilst recent debate and discussion has focused on student belonging, the concept has become an enigma, interpreted and applied in diverse ways. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore peer leaders' perceptions of their role, in terms of the impact on underrepresented students' experiences, in order to better understand the function of the different components of belonging. The rationale for this study was that developing a sense of belonging and mattering at university is essential for all students, as it can be pivotal in shaping students' perceptions of their university studies and ultimately retention.

The students who participated in this study across the three institutions gave generously of their time and showed uniform commitment to facilitating the transition of underrepresented students. By utilizing a narrative methodology and allowing the interviews to be led by the students themselves, we have gained insight into their authentic experiences, rather than directing the students towards issues that we as researchers had assumed were important. In selecting comments from their narratives to illustrate our themes, we do not intend to be critical of them or their efforts to provide the best support in their roles as peer support leaders.

The participants were self-selected in that they volunteered to be included in the study after an email invitation. Most of the students reported good experiences overall, although a number had suggestions on how the scheme in which they participated could be improved. Whilst other students

may have highlighted other aspects of being a peer support leader, the narratives of these students offered an insight into their experiences, providing a greater understanding of what the role of peer support leader for underrepresented students meant for these individual students. Despite the very different institutions and schemes, the thematic analysis of the transcripts identified three remarkably similar components of belonging identified by the peer support leaders: social connection, shared experience and culture, and interpersonal trust.

Social connection

Fundamental to each of the three peer support schemes was the purpose of facilitating social connections, particularly during students' initial transitions to university. A range of different methods were used to advocate for and support students during this liminal space, including one-to-one and group meetings, as well as social media content. Whilst all the students were positive about how these schemes offered social connection, further exploration is required to identify which modalities were most successful. However, it is important to note that the responsibility for providing opportunities for social connection should not be solely the responsibility of the peer support leaders, and institutions need to consider how they offer a portfolio of activities both within and outside of taught spaces to meet the diversity of student needs.

Previous research has already noted the importance of providing opportunities for social connection to facilitate belonging; however, as noted by Kahu, Ashley, and Picton (2022), framing belonging merely about relationships will limit our understanding of the construct. Broader contextual factors need to be considered to explore the impact of both the wider surroundings (including accommodation and leisure provision) as well as academic spaces (both online and physical) particularly for underrepresented students who may not always see themselves as welcomed within predominantly white institutional spaces (Cole, Newman, and Hypolite 2020).

Shared experience and culture

Sharing experiences that can establish a rapport across a shared culture was frequently identified as fundamental in facilitating a sense of belonging by the students in this study, and it is noted that underrepresented students frequently value a shared culture with their peers (Gao and Liu 2021; Maramba and Museus 2013). However, as noted by Cook-Sather et al. (2023), peer mentoring can foster a sense of mattering without students feeling that they need or want to fit within a specific cultural or institutional context.

Interpersonal trust

The findings presented here indicate that further exploration of the role of trust in facilitating students' sense of belonging is required. Social connections and shared experiences are already noted as components of student belonging within the literature, but there is limited research on how interpersonal trust can contribute. Based on the data from this study, and the relevant contemporary literature discussed earlier, we propose a conceptual model as a way of thinking about belonging with the three identified aspects—social connection, shared experiences and interpersonal trust—represented in Figure 1. below.

We suggest that when these three factors are inherent within a peer support scheme, underrepresented students will support positive student experiences. The three arrows indicate that none of the identified aspects are of more or less importance and that they are interconnected and need to be considered as each contributing to the central goal of belonging.

Figure 1. A conceptual framework for belonging in programmatic peer support schemes
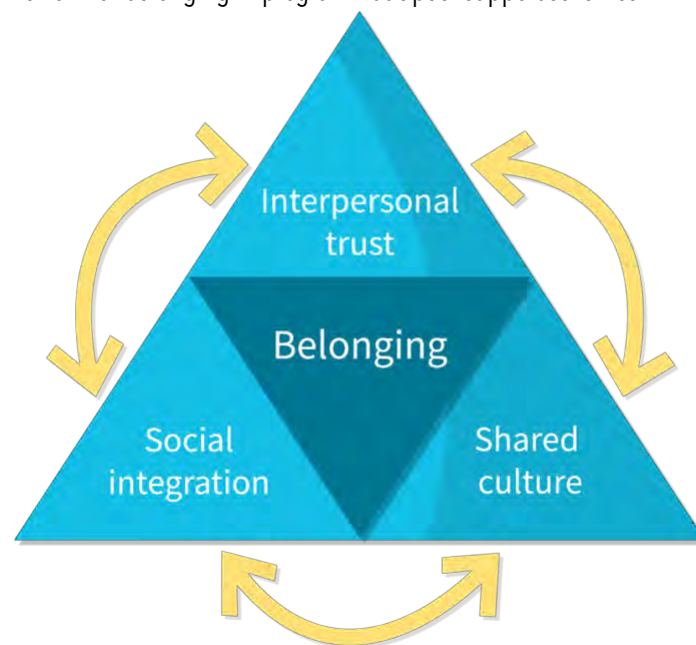
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study we have explored peer leaders' experiences and perceptions of working with underrepresented students in order to better comprehend how they understood and conceptualized their roles in facilitating underrepresented students' sense of belonging within higher education. The study adds to the literature by providing additional insights into the complexity of student belonging and by examining it through the lens of student peer support leaders' perspectives on how best to develop programmes that support underrepresented students. Whilst the findings of this study are drawn from a relatively small sample of student peer support leaders, they have confirmed that institutions and educators need to better understand how students perceive and experience belonging.

But the visibility and presence of underrepresented students alone through opportunities for social connection and shared experiences is not enough. Consideration of how students can create spaces and relationships that allow them to establish trust so they can feel that they matter and belong on their own terms is required. Only when students feel valued as key stakeholders with diverse identities and experiences can they work in partnership with faculty and staff to contribute to creating safe, trustful spaces. The findings and conceptual model presented here highlight the social and cultural complexity of students' sense of belonging and interpersonal trust, and this reframing allows us to step back and consider a more holistic view.

AUTHORS' NOTE

As we have worked together over the three years of this project, we have had difficulties finding the most appropriate terminology to use when we wanted to refer to students' characteristics across our three diverse educational settings (related to racial and ethnic characteristics). We all have different preferences; we believe that the real issue is not the terminology but the need to raise awareness of the multiple issues affecting students. We have therefore used the term "underrepresented" (those who are members of racial, ethnic or gender groups that have been historically underrepresented for more than ten years) (Elon University n.d.) to describe the student

groups who generously volunteered to work with us throughout this study, acknowledging that whatever term we used would not speak to all audiences.

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