

Making belonging visible: From insight to action

STEP Conference 27 May 2026

PRESENTATION TITLE



Scotland's Tertiary
Quality Enhancement
Framework



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoinachaidh na h-Alba



STEP

Scotland's Tertiary
Enhancement Programme



Welcome: Activities as you arrive

An invitation to:

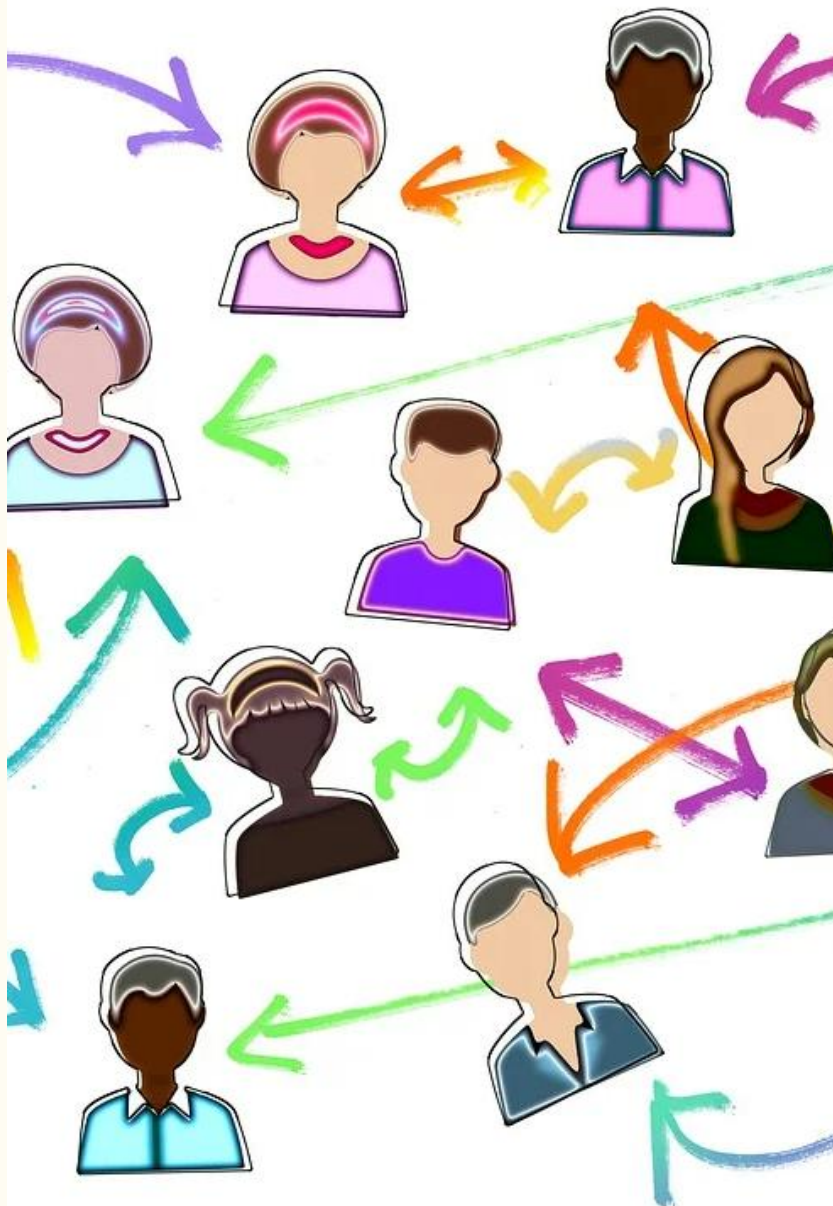
- Write the name you would like to use for this workshop, there are cards and pens on the table (add how to pronounce your name if helpful).
- Introduce yourself to people at your table.



Orientation: Supporting exploration of what belonging means, and what can we do?

Objectives for the workshop:

- Deepen understanding of belonging and its relationship to mattering, inclusion and connection.
- Examine evidence-informed and practice-based approaches to enhancing belonging across the tertiary sector.
- Enable participants to identify actions they can take to foster belonging.



Session design

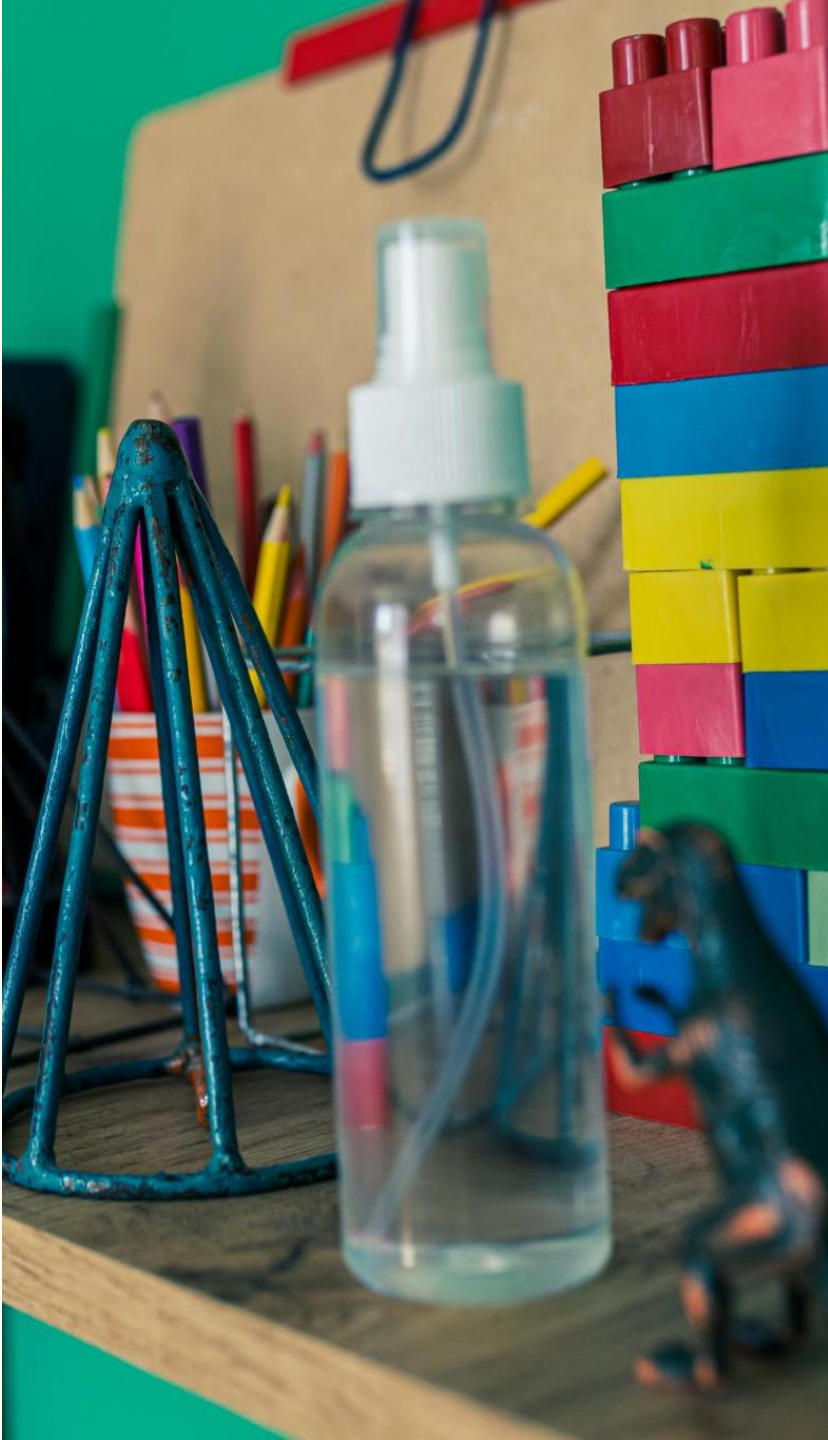
We have designed this workshop to support sharing, engagement and choice.

There will be small group activities, time for individual thinking, sharing, as well as listening.

Please share your perspectives and experiences; there are no 'right and wrong' responses – belonging is different for different people, places and contexts.

We aim to learn from one another.

There is no formal break – you are free to step out as you need to.



Activity 1a. Exploring belonging

Question: What does belonging mean to you?

Choices:

1. Scrapbooking – use magazines, glue, paper, rip out, stick, create.
2. LEGO – take some bricks and model.
3. Photovoice – take a walk with others or on your own, find an image(s) that have meaning for you (use your own camera phone).

Individual, pairs- your choice!

Time: 15 minutes



Activity 1b: Conveying creative insights into words

What does belonging mean to you?

Can you transform your creative expression (i.e. photo, model and /or scrapping) into words?

1. Individual thinking/writing: 3 mins.
2. Group work (7 minutes)
 - Share the word(s) you want to share at your table and put these on PostIt notes.
 - Capture a collective 'snapshot' of the words at your table, put your top 5 words on the Star Card.

Total time: 10 minutes



Sharing perspectives

Feedback from the room

(10 mins)

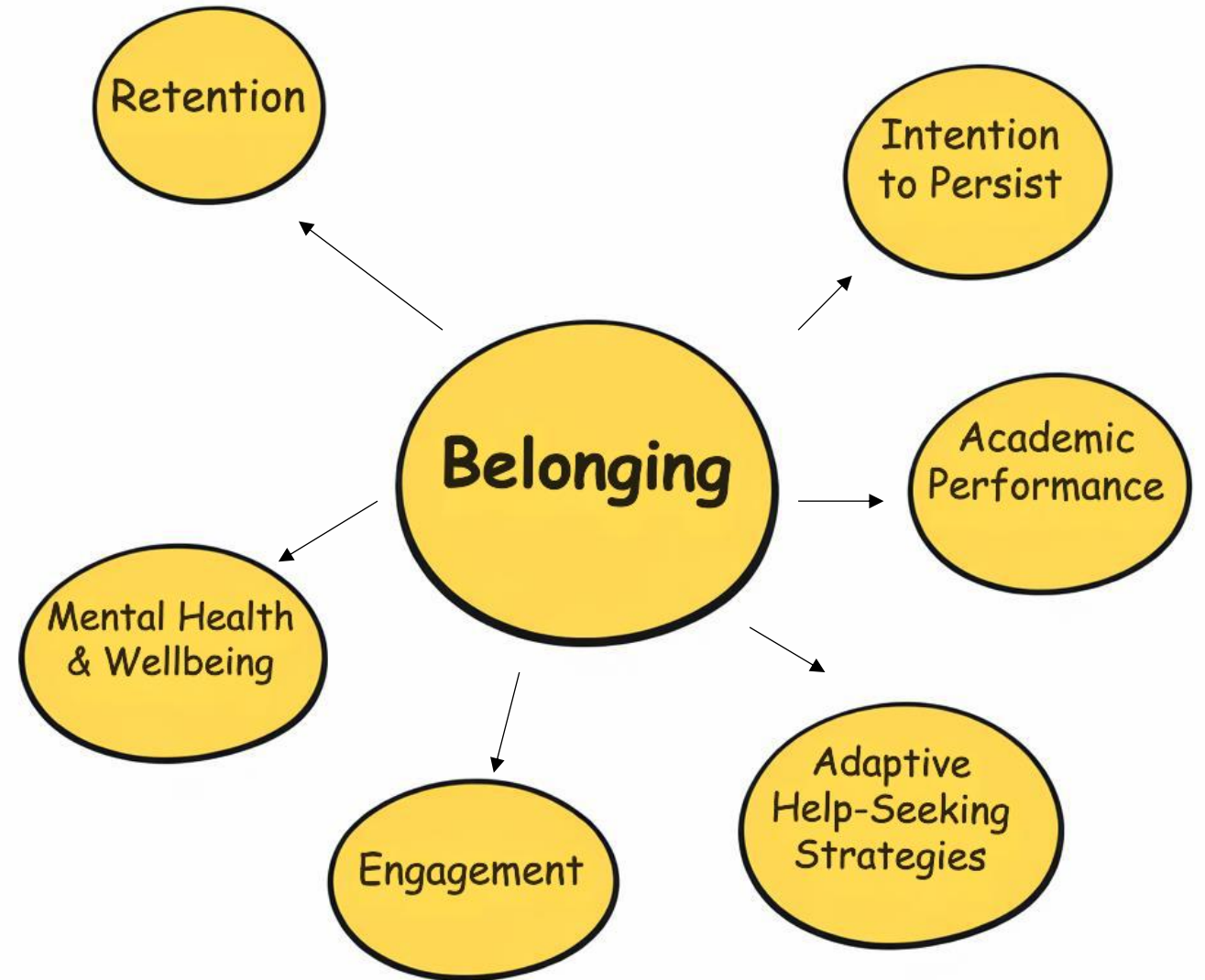


Insights from the literature and practice

Growing interest in student belonging internationally: Why?

Strong sense of belonging is linked to a range of positive experiences and success for students.

A range of connections between belonging and student success



Gilani et al (2024)



What is student belonging?

- Perception of connectedness to peers, staff, institution.
- Feelings of safety, being valued, accepted.
- Perceptions of social support

[Allen, et al (2024), Mahoney et al (2022)]

What shapes belonging?

Interconnecting factors

Belonging changes with time, context.



Events and Activities Transition

Welcome Events

Different Student Needs

Widening Participation

Communications

Co-creation

Student Societies and Groups Peer Support

Programme Management

Space and Environment Classroom / Teaching

Personal Tutoring

How to support a strong sense of belonging

- A diversity of approaches
- From whole institution to small actions that make a difference.

Edmunds & Gilani (2025)



And mattering?

- Closely related to belonging but not the same..
- Mattering is a belief that others notice, care about us, value us.
- In some contexts, students may not feel that they fully 'belong'.
 - In these contexts – students feeling they matter is important.



Prompting thinking about belonging

In what ways do all students have the opportunity to participate in social and academic communities, and to feel included and that they belong?

What opportunities do students and staff have to collaborate as part of a learning community within their course and subject area?

What social opportunities are there for students to get to know other students outside of class, including students on other courses?

How are students and staff supported to feel safe and welcome in their learning spaces?

Are students and staff mindful of their responsibilities to one another and foster a positive, respectful, kind, and inclusive environment?

Are students informed and respectful of the diverse community of their student and staff body?

In what ways does the institution and students' association enable the creation and support of student-led communities?

Activity 2a: Reflecting on your context

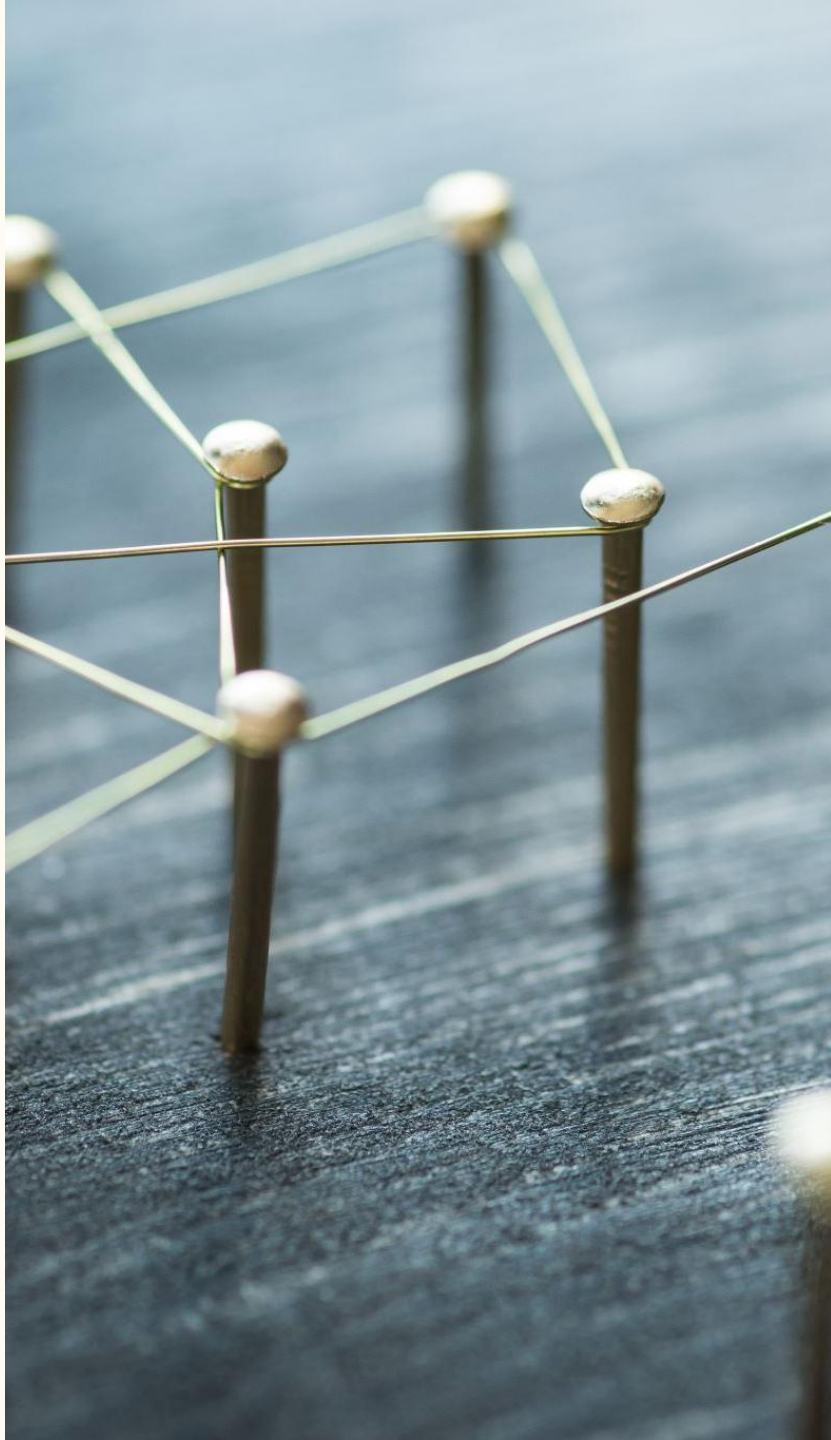
Choice: Individual reflection or table discussion (10 mins).

Questions:

What could you initiate or enhance that would support students' sense of belonging or mattering in your context?

What would be needed to initiate or enhance practice (e.g. support, staff development, resources, time, space)?





Sharing ideas across the room

Feedback from the tables from facilitators



Seeking your input: What does effective and practical support look like?

Group work (3 mins per paper)

Some ideas already noted on the paper.

Prompts:

Give it a 'star' if you think it's a great idea
Add your comments to the paper e.g.

- Please do...
- Please don't...

Stay in touch and/or contribute

The Belonging Project



Appreciating Belonging and Enabling Change Project (STEP Project)

Our interest: What works in Scotland's Tertiary Sector in relation to belonging and mattering.

- Do you know of any cases/examples?
- Would you like to be kept up to date with progress and events?

Scan the QR code or email:

STEPBelong@hw.ac.uk

Please provide us with some feedback, thank you

One for you to
take-away



One thing
I enjoyed...

One thing
to do
differently...

One take-
away for
my practice..

Resources & sharing events

Centre for Belonging in Education.

<https://www.centreforbelonging.org.uk/>

Advance HE. Student Needs Framework.

<https://advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning/student-needs-framework#Framework>

sparqs. Student Learning Experience Model.

https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SLE_model_digital_resource.pdf



Register now for our
50 minute, online
sharing sessions:

Tuesday 9 June 1100-1150am
Thursday 11 June 2.00-2.50pm

References

Allen, K. A., Slaten, C., Lan, M., Craig, H., May, F., & Counted, V. (2024). Belonging in higher education: A twenty-year systematic review. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(5), 1-55.

Edmunds, K., & Gilani, D. (Eds.). (2025). *Student Belonging in Action: Practical Case Studies to Foster a Sense of Belonging Across the Higher Education Student Journey*. Taylor & Francis.

Gilani, D., McArthur, D., & Thomas, L. (2024). The promise and limitations of student belonging as a predictor of retention. *Trends in Higher Education*, 3(4), 993-1016. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu3040058> ↗

Mahoney, B., Kumar, J., & Sabsabi, M. (2022). Strategies for student belonging: The nexus of policy and practice in higher education. 'A practice report'. *Student Success*, 13(3), 54-62