

University students' sense of belonging



August 2019

Data from the National Student Wellbeing Survey



Study supported by:

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Foreword

Dear Educator

In the space of just a few weeks, from mid-June to early July, the higher education sector in Australia received two wake-up calls from the federal government. First was the Productivity Commission's long-anticipated investigation "The Demand Driven System: A Mixed Report Card." Then, shortly thereafter, the Minister for Education released draft legislation criminalising the activities of commercial essay mills.

The PC's report contained a number of findings about the impact of the Demand Driven System and the Widening Participation agenda that underpinned it. Among them:

- Additional students arrive at university with lower ATARs and weaker literacy and numeracy skills. Moreover, and not surprisingly, these additional students struggle more at uni, are more likely to drop out, and also have a more difficult transition to full-time, paid employment.
- "The incentives for universities to manage drop-out risks are weak. By and large, universities' incentives are to enrol more students. In many courses (particularly those without a laboratory component), the incremental costs of enrolling an additional student are low compared with the per-student revenue. *This imperative for growth has not necessarily aligned with the needs of the student, nor the needs of Australian society and the economy*". (emphasis added) (p.16)
- Based on the evidence, there is a "role for greater support for students to either build the skills required to succeed or exit early." (p.31) A well-designed policy would push universities to find ways to improve student skills to give them the best chance of success, or to "fail fast" so as to avoid incurring too much debt ("debt and regret" - the worst of all outcomes).
- *"The high dropout rate for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds suggests more should be done to support these students academically. There is private and social benefit in doing so, as they will likely be set on a path to better economic prospects. Though improving access is valuable in its own right, policy should aim to ensure access also leads to success."* (p.48-9)

Nearly concurrently the Coalition announced its intention to legislate against essay mill websites that offer bespoke essays for a fee. As I write, Parliament is considering legislation that will impose fines of up to \$210,000 or two years in prison for anyone found guilty of operating such a business.

No doubt it is politically expedient to be seen to be taking a hard line against cheating, and no doubt academic integrity issues can undermine the value of university degrees, and universities themselves. The legislation is, whether intentionally or not, shining a spotlight on international students, who are over-represented in statistics around plagiarism in particular.

Why might this be so? One reason is that many Asian countries have very different understandings of plagiarism and simply do not teach Anglo-Australian approaches to academic integrity. Another is that for students who are not native English speakers, the challenge of studying a university degree in Australia is both difficult and stressful,

particularly with an arriving IELTS score of 6.5. Add onto this the financial pressure many international students feel to succeed and there's a recipe for some students to cross the line.

The conclusion we draw is clear. For both domestic and international students, universities need to invest more in academic support, particularly early-intervention initiatives, academic literacy instruction, and 24/7 online and anonymous assistance. Large and growing enrolments of traditionally disadvantaged domestic students and anxious international students (often from non-English speaking backgrounds) deserve nothing less. Indeed, it's highly likely the Federal government's next step will be to direct TEQSA to mandate improvements in the student experience, as measured by QILT data, graduation rates, and employment outcomes. Universities would be wise to get on the front foot and move quickly to address these obvious areas of risk.



Jack Goodman
Founder, Studiosity



Introduction

In 2019-2020, every Australian has a better chance of enrolling in university than ever before. (Productivity Commission, 2019; Norton, 2019) This means lectures, online forums, and quads are home to more diverse socio-economic backgrounds, nationalities, cultures, life-stages, academic capabilities, and physical abilities.

This also means students today are more separated from peers and their campus by those same factors: time, distance, language, culture, age, life experience. These factors all have the potential to create a richer learning experience. They could also alienate.

Greater engagement and greater sense of belonging are correlated with reduced attrition. (Moodie, 2016) So universities are doing much more to cultivate a student's sense of personal belonging to their university and peers within this new environment, to deliver the best possible degree experience and improve retention. (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2019)

Growing interest from within the sector and from the public over the equality and accessibility of support and belonging has also accelerated initiatives and prompted new questions around belonging and the student experience. Does the Deaf community have the same access to services and support? Do international students have the same opportunity to succeed? Are online students second-class citizens? (Beasley, 2019; Bentley, 2019; Worthington, 2019;) These important questions and many others point to the complexity of creating a sense of personal belonging for all students.

The necessity of 24/7 support

As part of filling critical gaps in the holistic student experience for every student, Studiosity delivers one-to-one, 24/7 universally-accessible study support, from real people across the world.

Globally, 1.5 million students have access to Studiosity, and the comments and other data students leave inside the service provide deeper insight into satisfaction and improved confidence with the service.

This “Belonging” dataset

This insight into ‘Belonging’ is part of a broader, annual study - *National Student Wellbeing Survey* – that seeks to better understand the motivations, emotions, and demands of university students, and how to better tailor solutions.

With this survey, Studiosity seeks to take responsibility for, and contribute to, the growing national and global discussions around online student support and the online student experience.

This report includes an overview of data including both quantitative and qualitative insights, recommendations, and the complete data sets.

Method

Survey conducted by: The Digital Edge (based in Sydney, NSW).

This survey was commissioned by Studiosity to obtain insights into student attitudes and feelings toward study, their study patterns, and their expectations and experiences in their university courses.

Studiosity produced the questions for this survey, and The Digital Edge gathered the responses from Australian students via an online survey. 30,000 tertiary students that opted into Digital Edge's database received the survey invitation via eDM and website notifications on StudentEdge.org (a student-facing website that includes audience and study-specific content) in July 2019

After seven days of data collection, the survey was closed in July 2019, with 1,008 survey responses submitted.

Demographic of survey respondents

All public Australian universities were represented in the 1,008 student responses. The students were 18 – 42+ years old and consisted of a mix of both domestic and international students.

Survey design

To gather numerical results to specific behaviours and emotions, the survey was based on a quantitative design. However, to foster qualitative insights and enable respondents to further clarify and complement their quantitative responses, students were given the opportunity to provide additional comments. The survey was comprised of 24 questions.

The “Belonging” dataset included represents 4 questions.

Ethical implications and demographical data

The database of survey participants was managed by The Digital Edge. All respondents opted in to complete surveys around their student and study lives. The survey did not ask for names or other identifying information of the students.

Demographical data was collected on:

- Student age range and gender
- Study type (part-time or full-time students)
- Current year in degree
- Student location (metro, regional, and state) and distance to campus
- Employment (part time, full time, casual, unemployed) and annual income range
- Degree cost range
- Name of their institution (which has been excluded from this report, due to requests from Studiosity partner institutions)
- International or domestic student status

Analysis

Most survey questions were quantitative, followed by optional, free-text commentary. The overall analysis of the survey results was focused on the quantitative responses. Even without an in-depth content analysis of the qualitative content, the students' free-text responses were used to provide additional narrative, more comprehensive insight, and offer directions for further investigation.

Recommendations

Belonging and self-reported impact on satisfaction and grades

Student engagement and sense of belonging have been increasingly important national discussions since the introduction of the demand-driven system in 2009, and the increasing enrolment of non-traditional students, since. (Fernandes, Ford, Rayner, Pretorius, 2017; Morieson, Carlin, Clarke, Lukas, Wilson, 2013; Devlin, 2010)

Universities are seeking to grow a personal sense of belonging in each student, in a way that is also scalable.

We recommend universities improve accessibility and personalisation of all support services.

We recommend universities consider ways to amplify the reach of peer-to-peer services, as a way to translate the positive experiences of campus interaction to students with non-traditional schedules, including those studying externally, those with commutes to campus, students balancing families, and students who are also employed.

We recommend universities allow every student to benefit from formative feedback and early intervention with at-scale student support, as part of a holistic student support system.

Belonging – survey responses

The survey showed that while more than half of students feel like they belong to a community at their university, they still crave closer ties (58%).

Almost the same number of students reporting they have no sense of community or belonging at their university as those that feel they wholeheartedly do (21% verse 20%).

Q33. Do you feel like you have a good sense of community/belonging at your university?

Response	n =	%
Yes, wholeheartedly	210	20.83%
Yes, but I would still like to see more	584	57.94%
No	214	21.23%



Males are more likely to consider themselves wholeheartedly part of a community, compared to females (29% compared to 18%).



International students feel a significantly higher level of belonging compared to their local counterparts (88% compared to 78%).

Q34. Do you think your sense of community/belonging at university affects your grades, and overall satisfaction levels?

Response	n =	%
Yes	698	69.25%
No	310	30.75%

Q35. If yes, why?

Response	n =	%
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me work harder	165	23.64%
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me more open to asking for help	285	40.83%
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me feel less isolated	214	30.66%
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me think about dropping out less	34	4.87%

Q36. If no, why not?

Response	n =	%
My grades are not dependant on others	154	49.68%
I feel better when I solely rely on myself, and my grades aren't affected by that	102	32.90%
I find my sense of belonging elsewhere	54	17.42%



“This research has highlighted key learnings for the sector, which will hopefully lead to proactive steps being taken to improve the student experience for everyone. Ultimately, every student deserves the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging at their university, and online students are not less deserving. For online students, accessibility and personalised support are even more critical. And it is more than about reducing attrition, which has been studied. It is about equal access to positive experiences, interaction with peers and people of other backgrounds, to fulfil the promise of a university degree as a positive and life-changing investment. Quite simply, it’s about feeling you have a rightful place on campus and feel that you belong.”

- Professor Judyth Sachs, Chief Academic Officer at Studiosity

“Keep helping me! haha you provide great feedback and support, studying online is hard enough and I am forever grateful.”

Student, University of New England, Writing Feedback on an Essay, 19 May 2019, 9:10pm

“You guys are awesome. As an online student to get such amazing feedback of this kind would just be a mission thank you so much.”

Student, Edith Cowan University, Writing feedback, 13 March 2019, 9:38pm

“Thank you so much!!!
According to your suggestions, I have modified my planning and I feel confident now!”

Student, University of Waikato, Writing Feedback, 14 March 2019, 8:08pm

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Appendix – Belonging

Q33 – 36 of the mid-year National Student Wellbeing survey

Do you feel like you have a good sense or community/belonging at your university?

	Total Completed	Gender					Age						Location										Internationally enrolled				
	Total	Male	Female	Transgender	I'd rather not say	Under 18 years old	18 - 25 years	26 - 33 years	34 - 41 years	42 - 49 years	50+ years	Sydney	Rest of NSW	Melbourne	Rest of VIC	Brisbane	Rest of QLD	Adelaide	Rest of SA	Perth	Rest of WA	Darwin	Rest of NT	ACT	TAS	Yes	No
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	a
Good sense or community/belonging at your university																											
Total	1008	265	732	3	8	0	941	57	8	2	0	287	35	277	28	85	36	61	4	159	10	3	0	15	8	73	935
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Yes, wholeheartedly	210	77	133	0	0	0	194	15	0	1	0	68	5	52	11	18	8	14	0	28	3	0	0	2	1	22	188
	20.83%	29.06%	18.17%	0%	0%	0%	20.62%	26.32%	0%	50.00%	0%	23.69%	14.29%	18.77%	39.29%	21.18%	22.22%	22.95%	0%	17.61%	30.00%	0%	0%	13.33%	12.50%	30.14%	20.11%
Yes, but I would still like to see more	584	143	434	3	4	0	553	24	6	1	0	154	26	169	11	49	18	39	4	96	3	2	0	9	4	42	542
	57.94%	53.96%	59.29%	100.00%	50.00%	0%	58.77%	42.11%	75.00%	50.00%	0%	53.66%	74.29%	61.01%	39.29%	57.65%	50.00%	63.93%	100.00%	60.38%	30.00%	66.67%	0%	60.00%	50.00%	57.53%	57.97%
No	214	45	165	0	4	0	194	18	2	0	0	65	4	56	6	18	10	8	0	35	4	1	0	4	3	9	205
	21.23%	16.98%	22.54%	0%	50.00%	0%	20.62%	31.58%	25.00%	0%	0%	22.65%	11.43%	20.22%	21.43%	21.18%	27.78%	13.11%	0%	22.01%	40.00%	33.33%	0%	26.67%	37.50%	12.33%	21.93%

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Do you think your sense of community/belonging at university affects your grades, and overall satisfaction levels?

	Total Completed	Gender					Age						Location										Internationally enrolled				
	Total	Male	Female	Transgender	I'd rather not say	Under 18 years old	18 - 25 years	26 - 33 years	34 - 41 years	42 - 49 years	50+ years	Sydney	Rest of NSW	Melbourne	Rest of VIC	Brisbane	Rest of QLD	Adelaide	Rest of SA	Perth	Rest of WA	Darwin	Rest of NT	ACT	TAS	Yes	No
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	a
Sense of community/belonging affect grades and overall satisfaction levels																											
Total	1008	265	732	3	8	0	941	57	8	2	0	287	35	277	28	85	36	61	4	159	10	3	0	15	8	73	935
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Yes	698	174	516	2	6	0	651	38	7	2	0	213	23	170	20	62	22	48	3	110	6	1	0	12	8	60	638
	69.25%	65.66%	70.49%	66.67%	75.00%	0%	69.18%	66.67%	87.50%	100.00%	0%	74.22%	65.71%	61.37%	71.43%	72.94%	61.11%	78.69%	75.00%	69.18%	60.00%	33.33%	0%	80.00%	100.00%	82.19%	68.24%
No	310	91	216	1	2	0	290	19	1	0	0	74	12	107	8	23	14	13	1	49	4	2	0	3	0	13	297
	30.75%	34.34%	29.51%	33.33%	25.00%	0%	30.82%	33.33%	12.50%	0%	0%	25.78%	34.29%	38.63%	28.57%	27.06%	38.89%	21.31%	25.00%	30.82%	40.00%	66.67%	0%	20.00%	0%	17.81%	31.76%

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If yes, why?

	Total Completed	Gender					Age					Location											Internationally enrolled					
	Total	Male	Female	Transgender	I'd rather not say	Under 18 years old	18 - 25 years	26 - 33 years	34 - 41 years	42 - 49 years	50+ years	Sydney	Rest of NSW	Melbourne	Rest of VIC	Brisbane	Rest of QLD	Adelaide	Rest of SA	Perth	Rest of WA	Darwin	Rest of NT	ACT	TAS	Yes	No	
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	a	
Why sense of community/belonging affects grades and overall satisfaction levels																												
Total	698	174	516	2	6	0	651	38	7	2	0	213	23	170	20	62	22	48	3	110	6	1	0	12	8	60	638	
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me work harder	165	53	111	0	1	0	152	11	2	0	0	52	10	45	5	8	5	12	0	20	2	0	0	2	4	19	146	
	23.64%	30.46%	21.51%	0%	16.67%	0%	23.35%	28.95%	28.57%	0%	0%	24.41%	43.48%	26.47%	25.00%	12.90%	22.73%	25.00%	0%	18.18%	33.33%	0%	0%	16.67%	50.00%	31.67%	22.88%	
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me more open to asking for help	285	73	209	1	2	0	267	13	3	2	0	83	4	71	9	31	10	25	1	44	2	0	0	5	0	20	265	
	40.83%	41.95%	40.50%	50.00%	33.33%	0%	41.01%	34.21%	42.86%	100.00%	0%	38.97%	17.39%	41.76%	45.00%	50.00%	45.45%	52.08%	33.33%	40.00%	33.33%	0%	0%	41.67%	0%	33.33%	41.54%	
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me feel less isolated	214	43	168	0	3	0	200	12	2	0	0	68	8	46	6	17	6	11	2	41	2	1	0	4	2	17	197	
	30.66%	24.71%	32.56%	0%	50.00%	0%	30.72%	31.58%	28.57%	0%	0%	31.92%	34.78%	27.06%	30.00%	27.42%	27.27%	22.92%	66.67%	37.27%	33.33%	100.00%	0%	33.33%	25.00%	28.33%	30.88%	
Feeling like I am part of a community and that I belong makes me think about dropping out less	34	5	28	1	0	0	32	2	0	0	0	10	1	8	0	6	1	0	0	5	0	0	0	1	2	4	30	
	4.87%	2.87%	5.43%	50.00%	0%	0%	4.92%	5.26%	0%	0%	0%	4.69%	4.35%	4.71%	0%	9.68%	4.55%	0%	0%	4.55%	0%	0%	0%	8.33%	25.00%	6.67%	4.70%	

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If no, why not?

	Total Completed	Gender					Age					Location											Internationally					
	Total	Male	Female	Transgender	I'd rather not say	Under 18 years old	18 - 25 years	26 - 33 years	34 - 41 years	42 - 49 years	50+ years	Sydney	Rest of NSW	Melbourne	Rest of VIC	Brisbane	Rest of QLD	Adelaide	Rest of SA	Perth	Rest of WA	Darwin	Rest of NT	ACT	TAS	Yes	No	
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	a	
Why sense of community/belonging at university doesn't affect grades and overall satisfaction levels																												
Total	310	91	216	1	2	0	290	19	1	0	0	74	12	107	8	23	14	13	1	49	4	2	0	3	0	13	297	
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0%	0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
My grades are not dependant on others	154	32	121	1	0	0	141	13	0	0	0	35	7	47	5	14	5	7	0	30	0	1	0	3	0	10	144	
	49.68%	35.16%	56.02%	100.00%	0%	0%	48.62%	68.42%	0%	0%	0%	47.30%	58.33%	43.93%	62.50%	60.87%	35.71%	53.85%	0%	61.22%	0%	50.00%	0%	100.00%	0%	76.92%	48.48%	
I feel better when I solely rely on myself, and my grades aren't affected by that	102	41	61	0	0	0	99	2	1	0	0	25	3	40	2	6	7	4	1	11	2	1	0	0	0	3	99	
	32.90%	45.05%	28.24%	0%	0%	0%	34.14%	10.53%	100.00%	0%	0%	33.78%	25.00%	37.38%	25.00%	26.09%	50.00%	30.77%	100.00%	22.45%	50.00%	50.00%	0%	0%	0%	23.08%	33.33%	
I find my sense of belonging elsewhere	54	18	34	0	2	0	50	4	0	0	0	14	2	20	1	3	2	2	0	8	2	0	0	0	0	0	54	
	17.42%	19.78%	15.74%	0%	100.00%	0%	17.24%	21.05%	0%	0%	0%	18.92%	16.67%	18.69%	12.50%	13.04%	14.29%	15.38%	0%	16.33%	50.00%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	18.18%	

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