

LAB 2 – Belonging & Participation

Nexus 3.0 Input

1. Background

Belonging is often discussed in higher education as a **personal or emotional experience**, yet in practice it is shaped by a complex ecosystem of institutional, academic and social factors.

For students from crisis contexts — including refugees and displaced learners — the challenge of belonging can be particularly significant due to language barriers, cultural differences, interrupted educational trajectories and limited social networks.

However, belonging is also increasingly relevant for **international students more broadly**, as Higher education institutions (HEIs) become more globally diverse.

To address this challenge effectively, belonging should be understood not only as a **feeling**, but as a **core institutional function grounded in an ecosystem of conditions and practices** that enable students to participate fully in academic and campus life.

2. Key Challenge

Despite its importance, belonging is rarely **measured or structured systematically** within HEIs.

Institutions often implement initiatives — such as mentorship programmes, orientation activities, or student clubs — but these remain fragmented, and it is difficult to assess whether they actually contribute to a sustainable sense of belonging.

Without a structured framework, HEIs lack tools to:

- understand the multiple factors influencing belonging
- identify gaps in student inclusion
- monitor progress over time
- design coherent institutional strategies.

3. Possible Direction: Belonging Ecosystem Matrix

One possible approach is to develop a Belonging Ecosystem Matrix to identify and track the key factors that shape belonging in HEIs.

Such a matrix could help universities analyse the ecosystem that supports student integration and participation.

Possible dimensions could include:

Academic dimension

- participation in classes and group work
- access to academic support
- interaction with faculty

Social dimension

- peer networks and friendships
- participation in student organizations
- intercultural campus initiatives

Institutional dimension

- inclusion policies
- representation of diverse student voices
- institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion

Language and communication

- access to language support
- confidence in academic communication

Wellbeing and support

- access to counselling and mental health services
- peer support structures.

The matrix could combine **qualitative and quantitative indicators** to help institutions better understand where belonging is strong and where gaps remain.

4. Proposal for Discussion

A possible next step could be to develop a **Belonging Ecosystem Matrix** (see Annex 1) as a practical tool for universities.

This tool could:

- identify key drivers of belonging within institutions
- provide indicators to monitor progress
- help universities design **structured pathways for student integration**
- support evidence-based institutional policies.

Such a framework could initially be tested in programmes supporting **students from crisis contexts**, where challenges of belonging are often most visible, and later expanded to benefit **the wider international student community**.

Another possible alternative step could be to develop a **Belonging Ecosystem Model** (See Annex 2), which in higher education can be understood as the result of two interacting dimensions:

- Individual experience (how students feel and participate)
- Institutional ecosystem (how HEIs structure opportunities and support)

Nexus 3.0 is interested in exploring approaches that treat belonging as a systemic institutional function, supported by measurable indicators and ecosystem design.

ANNEXE 1

Belonging Ecosystem Matrix (Discussion Framework)

Dimension	Key Factors	Possible Indicators	Possible Actions
Academic Integration	Participation in learning processes and interaction with faculty	participation in group work, academic mentoring, access to tutoring	peer tutoring programmes, faculty mentoring
Social Integration	Peer networks and student participation in campus life	participation in student clubs, intercultural activities, peer mentoring	student-led communities, buddy programmes
Institutional Inclusion	Institutional commitment to diversity and representation	refugee/international student representation in councils, inclusion policies	belonging councils, student advisory boards
Language & Communication	Ability to participate confidently in academic and social environments	progress in language proficiency, classroom participation	language support, academic writing workshops
Wellbeing & Support	Psychological safety and access to support services	access to counselling, peer support networks	culturally sensitive mental health support, wellbeing hubs
Pathways & Opportunities	Access to internships, research opportunities and career development	internship participation, mentoring programmes	employer partnerships, career mentoring

How this matrix could be used in the lab

Participants could:

1. **Identify which dimensions are strongest or weakest** in their institutions
2. **Add missing dimensions or indicators**
3. **Discuss how universities can move from fragmented initiatives to a coherent belonging ecosystem**
4. **Explore how progress on belonging can be monitored over time**

ANNEXE 2 –

Belonging Ecosystem Model (Discussion Tool)

Belonging in higher education can be understood as the result of **two interacting dimensions**:

- **Individual experience** (how students feel and participate)
- **Institutional ecosystem** (how the university structures opportunities and support)

Belonging Framework

	Weak Institutional Support	Strong Institutional Support
Low Student Participation	Isolation Students remain on the margins of campus life.	Protected but Passive Support exists but students are not fully integrated into academic or social life.
High Student Participation	Individual Resilience Students succeed through personal effort but without systemic support.	True Belonging Ecosystem Students actively participate and institutions create conditions that sustain inclusion.

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Key insight

Belonging emerges **when both dimensions are strong**:

- students actively participate in academic and social life
- institutions provide structures that enable participation.

Without institutional design, belonging depends only on **individual resilience**, which is not sustainable.

How this could guide the lab discussion

Participants could explore:

- What **institutional conditions** enable belonging?
- What **student participation opportunities** matter most?
- Where do institutions currently fall within the framework?
- What actions could move institutions toward a **true belonging ecosystem**?