



Building Belonging for Regional Student Retention in Higher Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

Belonging has been identified as important to student retention, engagement, achievement and wellbeing in higher education. It has been challenging for universities to foster, particularly in non-traditional student cohorts and in regional areas. This article aims to identify how belonging has been experienced and supported on four regional campuses of one Australian university (University of Wollongong) enrolling a high proportion of non-traditional students. It focuses on belonging's role in the students' successful progress beyond the first year of their university studies. The study examines the experiences of students through focus groups discussing what aspects of their campuses had contributed to students' success. This study extends previous work on belonging by describing how belonging is successfully cultivated in regional campuses through specific staff and student interactions that had built a culture of community and support, and how the belonging that resulted contributed to student retention. The study's findings demonstrate how principles from theory and research about practices that support student belonging can be successfully enacted in a university setting with students from regional and equity backgrounds.

Keywords: *belonging, retention, student engagement, regional, higher education*

Introduction

Student belonging is a challenge for universities in Australia and internationally and is significant because of its role in student retention, engagement, achievement and wellbeing (Crawford, 2024). Belonging has proven difficult to engender in university contexts, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds—those first in family to attend university (O'Shea, 2021), of low Socio Economic Status (SES) (Gopalan & Brady, 2019), students from regional, rural and remote contexts (Bunn & Lumb, 2024), students who are Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islanders (Carter et al., 2018) or ethnic minorities (Gummadam et al., 2016). The *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Australian Government 2024, section 4.3) argued that universities need to find new ways to support student belonging. In this paper we demonstrate the processes through which student belonging is supported, supporting retention and achievement.

By focusing on regional contexts, this paper contributes to understanding of how belonging can be fostered in non-traditional student cohorts. The article reports part of the findings of a 2019 study of four regional campuses at the University of Wollongong. The aim of that study was to identify strategies that contribute to the success of students at the University of Wollongong's regional campuses. 'Success' was defined as progression beyond the first year of study. This draws from Devlin and McKay's (2019) definition and is aligned with first in family students' views of success (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019). As student belonging was a strong theme that arose in the data, this article focuses on characteristics and campus led strategies that contributed to that sense of belonging. While previous research has identified the significance of belonging in higher education (Crawford, 2024), this study extends these findings by describing how belonging is successfully cultivated in regional campuses through specific staff and student interactions, and how it contributes to student retention.

Belonging in Higher Education: A Literature Review

In a review for the 2024 *Universities Accord*, Crawford identifies three theoretical frameworks on belonging in higher education—place-based, identity-based and relationship-based. However, belonging is also understood as a complex multi-layered and dynamic process (Guyotte et al., 2022) in which all three orientations likely co-exist. This conceptualisation recognises that belonging may be experienced in a variety of ways in different spaces and relationships, interacting with and contributing to several identities over time and space.

Allen et al. (2021) define belonging as "*the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences*" (p. 87). According to their framework, belonging emerges from a combination of personal competencies, opportunities and motivations to belong, and perceptions of belonging drawn from experiences. This latter contributor of experience in particular points to the importance of relationships (connections between people) as being at the centre of efforts to build a sense of belonging. It is not simply a matter of an individual's skills or motivation, but those characteristics being enlivened by affordances in university experiences for belonging to be experienced and built.

Within this relational view of belonging, at the university end, programs or services themselves are less likely to build belonging than are the interactions that occur within them. Indeed, based on a review by Allen et al. (2024), studies of belonging in universities have found relationships, the practices of educators, opportunities for connection and environments that are inclusive of diverse groups to be key influences. Crawford et al.'s (2024) longitudinal study of *Student Experience Survey* data showed that student experience, connection to other students outside of classrooms, and 'support to settle', predict belonging. Despite this evidence about the importance of relationships, connection and support, universities continue to struggle to apply this for regional, rural and remote students and other students from non-traditional backgrounds (Australian Government, 2024; Bunn & Lumb, 2024, Crawford et al., 2024, Cuervo et al., 2023).

Other conceptions of belonging focus on place, with Guyotte et al. (2021) describing 'nomadism' as students moved from a starting location (understood in terms of identity as well as physical place) through their relations and connections in various spaces, to experiences of belonging, 'unbelonging' (Cuervo et al., 2023) and identities in those spaces. Place may also be associated with identity, as has been described for rural, regional and remote students (Bunn & Lumb, 2024), though Webb et al. (2024) argued this identity of place interact with class and other identities in important ways to influence higher education participation.

Identity is an important element of belonging at university (Bunn & Lumb, 2024; Cook & Cuervo, 2022; Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021; Burke et al., 2016) and no doubt contributes to the variation in students' experiences evident in studies such as Cook et al., (2022) and Cuervo et al., (2023). Importantly for the current study, non-traditional groups such as first-in-family, low SES, and

regional, rural and remote students have reported difficulty identifying themselves as capable (Burke et al., 2016) or as fitting into higher education (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021). Identity has also been shown to be important to belonging for marginal groups such as ethnic minority (Gopalan & Brady, 2019) and Indigenous (Carter et al., 2018) students. Finding others of a similar background and experience (Cuervo et al., 2023), forming trusting relationships with teaching staff (Burke et al., 2016), and feeling known or recognised (Bunn & Lumb, 2024) have all been reported in the literature as contributing to identities of belonging and capability for non-traditional students.

Institutional belonging has been a target pursued by universities as indicated by its inclusion in the 2024 *Australian Universities Accord*. Connections between the student and the institution are the focus, though there is a range of definitions of what this means. Kahu & Nelson (2018) frame this as an 'educational interface' between student and university factors. Students' identity as valued members of the institution (Crawford et al., 2024), and the university as a place where they feel they belong (Ahn & Davis, 2020) are also involved. Crawford (2024) also argued that 'institutional belonging' does not sufficiently capture relational, place or identity views that might mean students feel belonging to particular places or during particular experiences rather than to the university as an institution. Allen et al. (2024) noted a variation in belonging experiences, arguing that measures of institutional belonging are not framed to capture these.

Belonging is mentioned as important in multiple studies of Australian regional student success in retention and completion of university courses (Tinto, 2017, 2023; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Matthews et al., 2018; Ostini et al., 2020). More broadly, Gilani et al. (2024) found a near perfect correlation between belonging and students' intention to persist with their studies at varying time points in a degree. Tinto (2017) argued that the result of students perceiving themselves as vital members of a campus community is a sense of commitment that links "*the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise*" (p.4). This results in students being more inclined to persist despite the many adversities which can face those undertaking university study.

Belonging has been shown in research to contribute to student achievement (Allen et al., 2024; Larsen & James, 2022; Gummadam et al. 2016). Sotardi (2022) found that belongingness to university—defined as being seen as valued members of the institution—was related to academic achievement, at least in part through students' social self-efficacy and metacognitive strategies. Sotardi argued that feelings of belonging to the university bring confidence for social interaction and reflection on progress in learning, contributing to academic achievement. Larsen and James (2022) also linked belonging to achievement through self-efficacy that can be nurtured by the student-educator relationship. A related aspect of self which Burke et al. (2016) found related to belonging at university, is capability. Their research found that some students who were from non-traditional backgrounds, or who had entered university through an alternative pathway, could feel anxiety around their capability.

Belonging has been linked to student engagement (Kift, 2024). Kahu & Nelson (2018) identified belonging as one of four mediators of student engagement, along with self-efficacy, emotions, and well-being, with the mediators interacting with and influencing each other. They introduced the educational interface as a construct describing the intersection between student and university factors influencing student success. They argue that this interface influences and itself is influenced by belonging alongside self-efficacy, emotions and wellbeing. In this model, these four mediators influence one another. More recently Kahu et al. (2022) identified interpersonal engagement (supportive relationships) and academic engagement (feeling a 'fit' with their course) as specific forms of engagement described by students. These could link to belonging.

Students' sense of belonging has also been demonstrated to influence their wellbeing and more general health. In a large-scale United States survey, Gopalan & Brady (2019) found that belonging predicted stronger persistence, engagement and mental health in college (higher

education) students. In another United States survey of college students, Romeo et al. (2024) found that the extent of emotional support (the number of people with whom they could discuss personal concerns) influenced belonging, which influenced wellbeing. In Australia, Picton et al. (2017) likewise found friendships supported wellbeing through the support they offered.

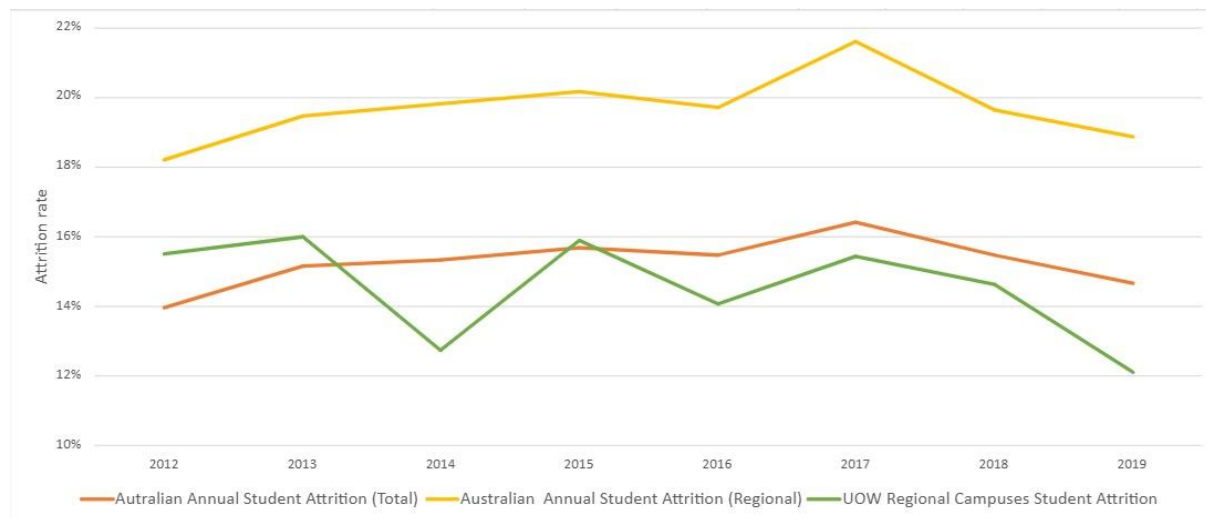
Ensuring all students achieve a sense of belonging is a complex task. Several studies have focussed on the experience of regional, rural and remote students at metropolitan universities in Australia. These studies find varying mixes of benefits and disadvantages in studying 'away from home' for different individuals (Cook et al., 2022), intersections between socioeconomic status and place in educational disadvantage (Webb et al., 2024) and a strong role of identity but also of the importance of access to more than a place to study for students' success (Bunn & Lumb, 2024). Ostini et al. (2020) found that staff at five Australian universities framed regional students in terms of their level of 'access' to university and that a shift was needed to student-centred lenses of belonging and individual person.

In a report of the challenges for access and participation in higher education of those from regional, rural and remote communities, and the role of Country University Centres in improving access and participation, Bunn & Lumb (2024) found that many regional, rural and remote students felt marginalised when studying at metropolitan campuses and experienced loss of financial and social resources on leaving their homes to study. Online degrees do not necessarily remove all the barriers to study for regional, rural and remote students. Bunn & Lumb found they may allow students to remain at home while they study but can result in feelings of isolation and reinforce variable access. The authors found that Country University Centres provided a dedicated space for study, identity, community and support for the students they interviewed. The current study looked at how these and other benefits contributed to belonging for students at the regional campuses of one Australian university, and what they revealed about the ways belonging contributed to student engagement, wellbeing and achievement.

Context of the Study

The University of Wollongong is made up of a network that extends to the regional districts Southern Highlands, Shoalhaven, Eurobodalla and Bega Valley in southeast New South Wales, Australia. Whilst one campus is in a sizeable regional area and hosts up to 500 students in a variety of programs including graduate medicine and social work, the others are in smaller more rural towns and range from 50 to 250 students in Nursing, Teaching, Business and Arts degrees. These regions are classified as Inner and Outer Regional. They have lower than state average household income, lower year 12 completion rates, lower Tertiary education attainment rates reaching as low as 2% in some pockets, and higher than average populations of Indigenous youth (Informed Decisions, 2025). Despite this, attrition data for the University of Wollongong's regional campuses 2012-2019 showed lower annual attrition than both national regional and total attrition figures (see Figure 1). This prompted the research study into what was contributing to the campus students' success.

Figure 1: Comparison of National and University of Wollongong's Regional Student Attrition Data 2012-2019



While changes in reporting methods make extending the data to the current day problematic, there are indicators that the trend has continued, with other kinds of success also evident. Between 2020 to 2024 student data from the University of Wollongong shows that regional campus students consistently achieved higher grades than their metropolitan campus counterparts in the same subjects, translating to an average subject mark for regional students between 4 and 8 marks above their metropolitan peers (University of Wollongong, 2025a). Uptake of student support services is also stronger at the University of Wollongong's regional campuses whereby students were far more likely to attend learning skills workshops with up to 47% in 2019 and between 70%-100% of regional campus students in 2024 attending optional cohort based learning skills workshops compared to under 5% on the university's major campus (University of Wollongong, 2019 and 2025b). The 2023 Student Experience Survey National Report indicated that "Students have historically rated their sense of belonging to their institution relatively low at both the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework level" (p. iv) reporting a positive sense of belonging by 46.3 per cent of all Australian undergraduates in 2023 (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024). By comparison, up to 63% of the University of Wollongong's Regional campus students indicated a strong sense of belonging in this same survey. Notably, this is despite the regional campuses enrolling large numbers of students from equity groups that have not been associated with such positive outcomes including: first in family, Indigenous, low SES, regional, rural and remote. It is worth investigating how this strong sense of belonging has been created, as a guide for ongoing efforts to build belonging for non-traditional students, including students in regional areas.

Method

The aim of this study was to examine how belonging has been experienced and supported on the University of Wollongong's regional campuses, and its role in students' successful retention. It re-examines data from a study conducted in 2019 whose aim was to explore what contributed to the success of students at the University's regional campuses, with success defined as continuing with their degree beyond the first year. It is important to note here that this meant the participants in the study were all defined as successful students. The deliberate strengths focus of the research meant the experiences of those who hadn't been successful (or had chosen not to continue in study) were not captured. As shown in Figure 1, attrition is low on these campuses. The focus of the study was the contribution of the regional campuses, with questions such as,

‘how would you describe your campus?’ and ‘what about the campus has contributed to your success?’ A qualitative design was employed to allow the researchers to directly capture the experiences and reflections of students and staff about their campus. This aimed to develop deep and versatile insights into the lived experience of regional transition and retention practices.

In 2019, focus groups of staff members and students on each of four regional campuses discussed what had contributed to students’ success at university. In total, 19 staff members and 20 students were involved in the focus groups, following invitations to all students who had progressed beyond their first year and all staff on the campuses. Student equity group membership reflected the large proportion of non-traditional students studying on the University of Wollongong’s regional campuses as shown in Table 1. Thirteen of 20 student participants identified belonging to at least one further equity grouping in addition to living and studying in a regional area, with 2 students in four to five equity groupings. The study was monitored and approved by the University of Wollongong’s human research ethics committee: UOWHREC 2019/230.

Table 1: Student Participant Equity Groupings

Equity group	Regional	Low SES	Disability	Indigenous	Remote	First in Family	Two or more groupings
n (%)	20 (100%)	10(50%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	3 (15%)	13 (65%)	13 (65%)

Transcripts were analysed thematically for contributions to student success, using Braun & Clarke’s (2022) stages of familiarisation, inductive identification of codes by researchers separately, then coming together iteratively to compare codes, discuss, name and refine the themes identified, and develop a codebook of how the data fit into the various themes. For this article, two of the researchers returned to the data to explore themes of identity, place and relationships in belonging, and analysed how these related to the themes of ‘culture of community’ and ‘culture of support’ that had previously been identified. This article aims to identify how belonging has been experienced and supported on the University of Wollongong’s regional campuses, and its role in student success.

Results and Discussion

Belonging

Despite being members of multiple equity groups that are traditionally associated with low levels of belonging to university, the regional students in this study expressed a strong sense of belonging to the campus where they studied. Belonging was evident in all focus groups, with 49 mentions of what researchers termed the theme of a ‘culture of community’. When asked to describe their campus, responses included “friendly”, like “a family” (21 mentions by students), “belonging”, “connection” and “being known”.

Speaker 4: Well, I mean like Will said, it's like a little family type thing, so we notice if one of us is struggling just in general, and everyone knows everyone, so everyone says hi and stuff. And very welcoming. (Student, C3)

‘Belonging’ meant students felt known and welcomed, opening the door to support from their peers. Social recognition—both being recognised and recognising oneself as a student—was identified by Bunn & Lumb (2024) as an important contributor to belonging for regional students at university. At these campuses, ‘being known’ went beyond simple recognition, to others

‘noticing if one of us is struggling’. For this student, ‘knowing everyone’ referred to students as much as to staff. Comments in staff focus groups showed that a goal of staff was ensuring students felt known, and that they themselves were known by the students. One staff member commented:

I think we do the basics well. I'm not saying we do them perfectly, but we know their names, we know back stories, we know a little bit about their challenge. We're pretty open with students. Staff are pretty open with students and welcoming, so there is a lot of sharing about each other's lives, experiences. It happens formally and informally. (Staff, C2)

‘Being known’ was mentioned nine times in the student focus groups, among whom most participants were first in their family to attend university, and all were regional. Previous work with first in family students has shown the importance of ‘fitting in’ and belonging for engaging with university (O’Shea et al., 2024). Being recognised as a member of the student group was particularly valuable to that process. It was an important contributor to the community culture and the sense that they were part of a ‘family’ on the campus.

“We notice if one of us is struggling” in the original quote identifies the struggling one as “one of us”. Identifying with someone who is struggling makes it an accepted part of the experience for these successful students. This is an example of the power of belonging as identity. It shows the importance of belonging to feelings of capability to undertake university study (Burke et al., 2016). Tinto (2017) also recognised that one benefit of belonging is that the individual is linked to the community when challenges arise.

Being known personally themselves was a benefit of this culture that contributed to interpersonal belonging (Kahu, 2022). The small size of the campuses undoubtedly played a role in students feeling known and seen. However, this was also the case on the largest campus (C4) which had over 500 students enrolled in 2019, whereas the other campuses enrolled between 50 and 250 students in that year. As one student from campus 4 said, “I feel like on this campus you don’t feel like you’re just a number. You’re not just somebody walking around on campus. The people know who you are.” (Student, C4)

One of the benefits of belonging is the trust that is developed between staff and students, and between various members of staff as well. Burke et al. (2016) noted the importance of relationships of trust for students’ access to support, while Bunn & Lumb (2024) found this was key to the effectiveness of the Country University Centres in their study. Student focus groups described these trusting relationships with one participant stating that staff are “... in the trenches with you”. Another student noted “Everybody takes a role in ensuring success, starting from the tutors... to the admin support staff... and also the support services...”. Students made little distinction between professional and academic staff and often did not know their title or role but referred to staff simply by first name and saw them as student allies: “they’re part of your team”.

Belonging is built by regional campus staff making themselves known to students. They always use their first names and share personal stories and challenges as part of orientation and workshops to build rapport with students. Many staff members having a similar background to the students, assists with this rapport and contributes to students’ identity, as they find others from a similar background among both staff and students on their campus. Cuervo et al. (2023) noted the importance of this for students’ belongingness identity. Bunn & Lumb (2024) also identified the importance of Country University Centre campus staff coming from the local community. It means that students recognise others like them among the students and among the staff. Even though they are ‘non-traditional’ university students, they can identify themselves as a member of the university community on their campus. Staff sharing stories of their backgrounds also builds a partnership between staff and students. Picton & Kahu (2021)

described these as contributing to engagement through belonging. A campus manager explained:

We're really lucky at this campus that most of the staff members who interact with students regularly have been through a regional campus journey. Wiping everything out, we always have that in common with our students. That's an instant connection and sharing our story is just another way to emphasise that, hey, we're all on this journey together, and we want you to get through university and complete university, and we understand the struggles and the challenges and the challenges outside of university as well.' I think that's an instant connection. That's a way that we connect with our students and provide them with that additional support (Campus manager, C2)

A staff member at another campus described how she communicates this to students:

I think that the people who come and see me know stuff about me as well. It goes both ways. I hope they really came to know what your story is or if they say to me, "How did you, how is it that you can get this so that you can explain this?" And I go, "Because I'm from the same side of the tracks as you are." It's part of that kind of developing rapport or making stories. (Staff, C1)

Knowing and being known by tutors and other campus staff fosters belonging and promotes students' willingness to seek help, ask questions and engage. This accords with Burke et al.'s (2016) finding that relationships of trust increase the likelihood that students will seek support from those staff members. As one student explained,

Whenever there's a question I have, if I think it's ridiculous I can always approach you guys and you can tell me everything about it and I can walk away with more knowledge and more understanding and stuff, so it's been good for the little questions here and there that I'm like, "Oh I don't know if I should ask but I'll do it anyway." And then I'll walk away and I'm like, "Who's that that said that?" And I'm glad that I had that chat with them, I understand better. (Student, C3)

How Belonging Contributes to Students' Success at University

Delahunty & O'Shea (2021) identified feelings of 'fitting in' as important to first in family student belonging, contributing to identity as a student. For regional students in the current study, shared identity as 'being in the same boat' and 'having a shared experience' enabled even more than feeling 'at home'. It enabled social engagement, and through that, academic engagement (Kahu et al., 2022):

It's the staff, it's the people, everyone's sort of having a shared experience here. Everyone's sort of in the same sort of boat. So just slowly and surely you start asking the questions. People bounce off each other, and positive, really critical conversation ensues. That's all I can really put it down to is just the people, the environment. It's more relaxed. There's no sort of pressure. (Student, C2)

Sotardi (2022) established links between belongingness at university and students' self-efficacy suggesting that this may strengthen their interactions with the institution in academic, social and professional services spheres, as is described in the quote above. In relation to the professional services sphere, findings of the current study showed that because of their sense of belongingness, and particularly the relationships they had developed with academic and professional staff, students felt comfortable to approach staff for help. This may also explain the higher rates of attendance in learning development workshops at regional campuses reported earlier (University of Wollongong, 2019, 2025b).

Sotardi (2022) defined belonging in terms of students feeling valued by the institution. One staff member reflected on her own experience studying at the campus and noted the importance of being valued, for students' academic belonging. She suggest that this results in persistence:

I think too it reflects in that students feel valued. I remember my experience as a student here, I felt valued. And that was an important part of my growth throughout the degree and the reason why I stuck around. Because people knew who I was and appreciated what happened in tutorials when we all talked together and things like that. I think it's the same now. I think students feel valued, and if they feel valued, they'll stick around, they'll see it through, and they'll get over their various challenges that they may have in their study. (Staff member and a former regional student, C2)

Kahu and Nelson (2018) theorised belonging as a moderator of student engagement, alongside wellbeing, positive emotions and self-efficacy. The 'educational interface'—interaction between student and university factors—was what influenced those moderators, and through them, engagement. In students' comments the *relational* education interface is the key influential facet. Cultures of community and support are expressed through relationships and interactions between staff and students that result in belonging, contributing to other moderators of positive emotions and wellbeing and through them, to engagement, and ultimately success in terms of retention. This recalls Tinto's work on student persistence that is supported by social networks that foster engagement (Tinto, 2023). Students' engagement is stimulated by the sense of community and support they receive, as one student described: "you want to do the campus proud, and you want to do yourself proud and I think being on the regional campus it's really easy to do that because of the support you have." (FIF Student, C1). Students' sense of belonging grows from their integration into the social as well as academic life of the campus. Their wellbeing is supported by knowing that others—both students and staff—care about them. This goes a long way to explain the success in learning experienced by students at the regional campuses of the University of Wollongong, beyond their successful progression.

Comparisons With Lack of Belonging on a Metropolitan Campus

The strong belonging of the regional students in this study contrasts with studies of metropolitan campuses, which show regional students tend not to feel known or that there were others like them there (Cuervo et al., 2023). Some students recognised this, comparing their experience to one they had had, or imagined, at a metropolitan campus.

And I think people get to know you and recognise if you're in trouble, which I know for me last year, one day Bronte (admin) just caught me in the kitchen and just said something and I was like, "Yes, I really do need some help." Whereas I finished my nursing degree last year, but I have been to three other different unis and never finished a degree, and they were all in the city and it was because they were big monsters. It's very easy to just slip out if you're having any trouble. No one's kind of tracking you. (Student, C1)

Another student compared the ease of relationship with campus staff with the one she had with lecturers based at the metropolitan campus:

I think talking to tutors, the tutors and staff, the teachers and stuff, have been... it's a lot easier because you just see them around campus and they're quite relaxed, so you can just have normal conversation and you feel comfortable to be able to talk to them about other issues, not necessarily regarding to the class. So, I find that is a big thing because normally, with other teachers, you get very nervous or scared to approach them. But, down here, they're just so easy to talk to. (Student, C3)

This contrast drawn between their experience of belonging as students on a regional campus, and their sense of belonging associated with the metropolitan campus—alongside the importance of being known and of trusting relationships with staff—suggests that it is campus

belonging rather than institutional belonging that contributes most significantly to students' wellbeing, engagement and retention. The role of relationship in belonging is obvious, but consideration of place in belonging is important here too. These students were based at a regional campus and had lectures that were delivered from the metropolitan campus. They may have had some tutorials online and others on their regional campus. The student above is expressing strong belonging to their regional campus and lack of belonging in the relationship with their lecturer from the metropolitan campus. Thus, some students experienced both belonging and unbelonging at the same time, associated with different 'places' (on campus and online relationships).

It may be that on large metropolitan campuses belonging is also achieved in particular places rather than the institution as a whole. Belonging may be achieved in smaller units such as within courses or individual subjects, while in other places on the campus or in their degree they feel unbelonging. Edwards et al. (2021) identified belonging in a chemistry subject, for example. If this is the case, then measurement of belonging to the institution in large scale surveys may understate the level of belonging felt by some students, as suggested by Crawford et al. (2024) and Allen et al. (2024). It also suggests that attention to the interpersonal factors identified here is important in strengthening belonging, particularly for non-traditional students, including those from regional, rural and remote areas. Relationships, place and identity are all important in considering support for belonging at university.

Persistence Through Difficulty

While the culture of community was important to the students' success, it was not sufficient on its own. Rather, this was partnered with a culture of support upheld by academic and professional staff and students. Barriers to study for regional students have been detailed by others (e.g. Devlin & McKay, 2019). The non-traditional students in this study experienced many of the difficulties noted by other studies of students from equity groups, including challenges of mental health, financial difficulties and understanding university processes (Delahunty, 2022). In this study such stories were almost invariably told in the context of how they had been supported through the difficulty, by staff members. For example:

I am only meant to clean toilets and make coffee and cart food around for other people for the rest of my life. What was I thinking? Who was I kidding? And then met Rachel (inclusion and access) who was just like, "no, you are meant to be here. Let's talk about your mental health". (Student- Mature age female, low SES, FIF, Regional, C1)

Or other students

It's a nice little family and I like that this campus is so small because you have that bond with all your classmates that you can go to the movies outside of school. They'll message you and go, "Hey. You okay? Noticed you were a bit off in class. Do you want to talk about it? Catch up for a coffee or something?" So, I think that that strong community is definitely here and it's very helpful. (Student, C4)

As a student explained, the sense of community and belonging and the support that existed within it enabled students to persevere with their studies despite challenges that exist for them. The following statement followed a discussion of difficulties encountered at the university's regional campuses, including difficulties with technology, distance travelled to campus, and a limited set of subjects available to study. The student's comment emphasises the importance of the relational interface, and the belonging it engenders, to students' success in the face of difficulty.

And fundamentally, when all the stuff is stripped away, 'cause it is just stuff, it's the essence of what a community is and the people in it - that's the really important stuff that makes you come back and makes you stick and endure (Student, C1)

Determination to continue despite barriers and difficulties is both an individual and a collective resource, supported by identity as a member of a regional campus community, which is also part of place. This recalls the notion of 'sisu' described by Delahunty & O'Shea (2025) in relation to first in family students, as a communal as much as an individual determination to overcome adversity. Tinto (2017, 2023) also wrote of the value of community for students' persistence through difficulty. Students in the current study spoke about how they supported one another when difficulties arose, for example:

And I think everyone, because you all get to know each other so well, everyone's very aware. Everyone's antenna's up if something's a bit awry with somebody and I think people are very supportive of that person and making sure they're okay. I mean that definitely, in our year, I'm sure it's in every class, just happens. (Student, C1)

How Cultures of Community and Support Were Deliberately Built by Staff

Whilst each campus had a distinct identity based on location, size and programs offered, and despite differences in experience (campus, equity group, difficulty experienced), there was remarkable convergence of students' conviction that the community and support were the aspects of their campus that enabled them to persist with their studies. Focus groups with staff concurred (again irrespective of campus or role) and revealed that neither the culture of community nor its link to student belonging was accidental. Rather, a culture of support was developed and enacted by staff on the campuses alongside this (25 mentions). Staff made deliberate choices to be available for students, for example, with the result that accessibility of staff was mentioned by 21 staff and 12 students in the focus groups.

Spending time in the 'tearoom' and at orientation and other events contributes to the sense of community and support as these staff members explained:

We all send email and, say, they will come to our office, formally make an appointment, and things like that, but the amount of times you're just in the tea room, and you say to somebody, "How are you going?" and they say, "Actually, I'm struggling with this assignment," and it's just that opportunity to say, "Oh, have you spoken to a tutor about that, or do you want to get some extra help with that?" or whatever it is, and you have that opportunity to direct them somewhere purely out of a relaxed conversation. – (Staff, C2)

Speaker 5: Well, we're visible.

Speaker 4: The orientation, even the whole program of orientation, I feel it's important for me to be around even if I just give my little talk for a few minutes, 'cause then they see me. So that's a strategy, that they got to know me. (Staff, C3)

Another part time staff member described how her work schedule is guided by student needs:

In terms of a practical sense, one of the things I do to make my job work ... in terms of the students, is that I try to be as flexible as possible from the point of view that I had. I'll try to be here from early in the morning if someone needs me. Not my best time, but definitely happy and right through and too late at night. If I know there's business students around, then I'll make my last appointment after their last tutorial. But also, in terms of the way that people can access me. (Staff, C1)

The deliberate building of the cultures of community and support at each campus, that was shared by and influenced decisions of all the staff members involved, suggests a key underpinning of efforts to strengthen belonging in students. This agrees with Bunn and Lumb's (2024) observation that staff members' approach to supporting students is key to regional campuses' effectiveness.

Allen et al. (2024) found similar contributors to belonging to those identified by students and staff in the current study: relationships, practices of educators, opportunities for connection, inclusive environments where they felt welcome. The students and staff at the University of Wollongong described how these contributors were woven together from the cultures of community and support that had been established and were continually sustained by the choices and actions of staff, and then by students as they experienced that culture. The existence of these contributors was not accidental. Rather, they were supported by campus managers who helped maintain a focus on student support and community on their campuses. On one campus staff members described how the manager did this with regular support meetings of all staff, and modelling and encouragement for supporting students:

We've had some very deliberate meetings about what the processes would be, who would deal with which problems... It was made really clear from the start. It wasn't accidental and the culture of care there, but I think if you're talking about building blocks, it's calming. It is definitely very deliberate the way things have worked out.

Speaker 3: She (the manager) is always going, what's the best option for the students? Then she goes with that. You can see it in everything. I've started like, it's that kind of way of thinking is rubbing off on me as well. I'm like, "Is this working? How can we make it better?" It's all from her.

Speaker 4: It gives us permission to have that culture of care. That that's our priority so that we always think, how can this be better for the students and to be advocates for the students?

(Staff discussion, C1)

A Journey Towards Achieving Academic Belonging

In describing what had contributed to their success, several students described how the culture of support offered alongside the community culture helped them to journey from a place of not feeling academic belonging, to belonging:

Friendliness and just feeling welcome, and there's no such thing as a stupid question. It kind of is quite daunting, as a mature-age student, to come back and be educated. It's a different type of education as well. All the support that's out there has just been marvellous, and the understanding of some of the anxieties and overwhelming feelings that go with that, all stop and [then] amazing. (Mature Age Student, C4)

I think for me coming here, in high school I just sort of sat in the middle a little bit, and coming here and having the support that we have and realizing oh I'm actually pretty capable of doing this, and my results showing that I was actually doing pretty well, was a bit of a shock and I just sort of wanted to keep going and keep doing well for this campus because they had fostered that for me (Student - High School Leaver, Female, First in Family, Regional, Low SES, C1)

These student stories illustrate the development of identities of capability (Burke, 2016) and of academic belonging (Kahu, 2022) as a journey with movement towards a place of belonging (Guyotte et al., 2021) through experiences in the educational interface of students with the university, including trusting relationships with its participants that include students as well as academic and professional staff. This is why the 'culture of community and support' that was identified on these regional campuses was such an important developmental context (place) for their belonging and success. The intersection of identity, relationship and place in belonging is evident here. These need not be considered separate models of belonging (Crawford, 2024); in this study, student and staff descriptions of their campuses and how they achieved academic belonging there show all three dimensions—place, identity and relationship—at work.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Tracking belonging data longitudinally is difficult due to changes in definitions and measures. A limitation of the data reported is that it relates to a specific period (2012-2019). While there are indications that the effects have continued beyond this period as reported earlier, this cannot be definitively established. The 2024 *Universities Accord* shows that belonging remains a challenge for universities and is even more important in the current age. The findings of the current study are an important reminder of the value of community and support for building belonging. Further research could confirm that these cultures remain at regional campuses and investigate the extent to which they are experienced by individuals during their university journey. This may reveal subgroups who do not experience belonging on campus.

The current study focused on how a sense of belonging had been fostered on regional campuses of one university, as we sought explanations of remarkably low attrition rates of students at those campuses (see Figure 1). We recognise that a sense of belonging attached to the local community, family or other social groups can also contribute to students' wellbeing and success at university (Delahunty & Crawford, 2024). Understanding these processes could help universities to consider other ways of supporting students studying remotely or those who do not experience belonging to their university towards success.

Regional campuses at the University of Wollongong are distinct spaces that have supported belonging of their student cohorts, despite their non-traditional backgrounds. Identifying units or spaces within a larger campus or the wider university in which students similarly express belonging could provide an opportunity to investigate and compare how this belonging is grown and supported, and to determine whether the processes at the University of Wollongong's campuses are particular or hold features in common with other spaces that support belonging. Investigating whether cultures of community and support are essential to belonging in other university contexts will be important to identifying which elements need to be built into universities' efforts to engender belonging in their students, and how this can effectively be done to scale, particularly when these students are from non-traditional groups.

Conclusion

As the data presented here demonstrates, belonging can be achieved for non-traditional cohorts of students, and indeed can be stronger than that of traditional students. The culture of the unit or campus where students study is essential to this. Twin cultures of community and support contributed and were an important developmental context for journeys to belonging and success described by the regional students in this study. Challenges and barriers to study could be overcome through community and support that both drew on and resulted in belonging. These cultures were deliberately nurtured and sustained by staff, and this may be the key to increasing belonging at universities, whether for traditional or non-traditional students. Place, identity and relationships were all visible contributors to belonging in the participants' stories of their journey to belonging at university and what had supported them to succeed. Rather than separate models of belonging, these elements interacted with one another and are important considerations for the support of belonging among regional students.

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