

Title: **In search of a sense of belonging for online learners**

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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Articulate their understandings of Sense of Belonging (SoB) and its impact on their own learning
- Consider findings of emergent research addressing SoB for online learners
- Discuss with colleagues the potential impact for learners of having a sense of belonging when undertaking a programme of online studies
- Access a beta version of a tutor toolkit supporting student SoB, co-developed by four Scottish universities, funded by the QAA Scotland
- Debate how tutors might design and maintain online spaces to support learners develop a sense of belonging using the proposed toolkit.

Session Outline

A sense of belonging (SoB) is a recognised and valued concept in education; campus based learners value SoB, stating that it promotes feelings of being cared for and mattering to one or more people in a group who in turn matter to them (Strayhorn, 2012; Hoffman et al., 2002-2003; Locks et al., 2008; Thomas, 2012). There is currently a continuing interest in online learning, with an attendant increase in numbers (Allen and Seaman, 2013). Online learning can provide a flexible learning space, allowing students access to educational opportunities whilst continuing to fulfil their various professional and familial responsibilities (O'Shea et al., 2015). However, for many learners, the online space may be isolating, alien, even threatening - resulting in high attrition rates and lower than expected student attainment compared with campus-based programmes. Limited research has addressed the nature and origins of a SoB for our online learners, and its impact, or not, on their learning. We believe that it is highly desirable in any online programme for learners' to develop a SoB and we concur with Thomas et al. (2014) in their suggestion that strategies which foster learners' SoB could enhance online learners' educational experiences and improve retention.

This session will stimulate debate about SoB, before reporting an on-going collaborative venture between four Scottish universities, developing an online tutor's toolkit. The toolkit

provides practical tutor guidance, exemplars and videos about how online tutors may promote learners' SoB at various stages in the programme – before, during and closing. Delegates will have an opportunity to view this toolkit and debate how they would use it to promote SoB in the online environment. Concurrently, a joint Scottish-Italian initiative is researching the origins and impacts of SoB in two contrasting settings and cultures. Initial findings will be reported for information.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

2 minutes	Introductions	Presenter/s
10 minutes	Prompter questions In your studies, consider an occasion which promoted, or did not promote a sense of belonging for you? What impact did it have for you? Share with your group	Group-activity
10 minutes	Report on emergent research into online learners' sense of belonging addressing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do online learners consider sense of belonging to be? - What impacts online learners' sense of belonging? 	Short overview of initial findings from research activities
5 minutes	Brief overview of online toolkit demonstrating examples of tutor guidance and case studies	Presenter/s demonstration
10 minutes	Prompter questions Consider how the tool-kit suggestions may work (or not) in your own environment. Share with your group	Group-activity – 1 section of the tool-kit per group
5 minutes	Reporting back to larger group	

References

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