

THE
BELONGING
PROJECT



The Ethos of Belonging

*A narrative model approach to
student engagement 2011-2015*

Report Authors

Bronwyn Clarke and Rachel Wilson

Acknowledgements

The Belonging Project team would like to acknowledge the support and contributions of our colleagues who have helped to advise, shepherd and disseminate information during the four year project.

The Belonging Project Reference Group:

Sue Bolt

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Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

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Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor, Learning and Teaching
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We would also like to thank the following groups at RMIT University for their ongoing support and assistance.

School of Media and Communication
Student Cohort Experience Reference Group
Office of the Dean of Students
Student Services
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT Library

Special Thanks to Louise Goodman – For her help in finalizing and editing this report.

Project Team

Academic Leaders

Bronwyn Clarke

Bronwyn is Programs Director in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Bronwyn's research areas in her PhD are: best practice models of selection and retention, and building students' professional identities from first year. In addition to her role as an Academic Team Leader for The Belonging Project, Bronwyn has been an Academic Team Leader for the Learning and Teaching Investment Fund project First Things First: Transition and Transformation of the Student Cohort Experience (2013) and has been an academic member of the OLT project Developing Graduate Employability (2014-15).

Bronwyn won a Learning and Teaching Award with The Belonging Project team members in 2013 and has had her teaching with Mr Terry Johal documented as best practice as part of RMIT University's Peer Partnership Program. Through the educational design consultancy at RMIT she has engaged in embedding professionally relevant pedagogy through 'real world' projects with industry. She has taught onshore and offshore for the past fifteen years within a Creative Industries program at RMIT.

Rachel Wilson

Rachel has been teaching within the higher education sector for over 20 years, specialising in the Screen Production discipline. Rachel has a number of teaching awards including a team 2008 ALTC citation. Prior to undertaking a role as Program Director (Media) 2012-2013 in the School of Media and Communication, Rachel was the program's Selection and Careers Officer.

Rachel's professional background is as a media practitioner. Her current research includes archiving, memory and representations of trauma. Rachel served as the President and National Secretary of the peak discipline body Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) from 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 respectively.

Project Team Members

Dr. Natalie Araújo, Research Officer

Natalie has completed a PhD in Social Anthropology, Juris Doctor in Law, MA in Latin American Cultural Studies, and holds a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Latin American Studies. She has ten years of experience in tertiary teaching and curriculum design. Natalie has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the UK, USA, Colombia, Vietnam, and Australia. She has also served as Chair of the American Association of University Women's Student Advisory Board.

Associate Professor David Carlin

David Carlin is an Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication and co-director of the nonfictionLab Research Group. He is a writer, creative artist, teacher and researcher. David's recent work includes the widely acclaimed memoir *Our Father Who Wasn't There* (2010); his creative nonfiction, essays and articles have appeared in Griffith Review, Overland, TEXT, Newswrite, Victorian Writer, Continuum and other journals.

David's current creative and research interests include literary nonfiction forms and genres (essay and memoir), memory studies, narrative and digital archives. His ongoing projects include the prose memoir/ biography *The Abyssinian Contortionist* (UWA Publishing, 2015), mixed media exhibition *Vault; the nonstop performing history of Circus Oz* (premiered at 2014 Melbourne Festival), the interactive digital archive, Circus Oz Living Archive and cultural exchange/collaborative residency program, WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange).

Dr. Lucy Morieson

Lucy graduated from RMIT in journalism before working as a researcher and reporter, most notably at online news publication Crikey. Inspired by her work in the world of online publishing, she returned to RMIT to complete her PhD on the political development of online journalism in Australia. While pursuing her PhD research, she also taught extensively across a range of courses and programs in RMIT's School of Media and Communication. Her role as Research Officer with The Belonging Project (2011-2012) provided an opportunity to combine the writing and interviewing experience developed as a journalist and researcher with the insights into the student experience gained through her teaching work.

Project Team Members

Karli Lukas, Academic Services Officer School of Media and Communication

As both an Academic Services Officer and graduate of the School of Media and Communication, Karli brought unique analytical and holistic perspectives to the project. Her extensive knowledge of RMIT staff networks and processes enabled her to contribute to position papers and represent the project lead team on various working parties.

Laetitia Shand

Laetitia is a professional manager in communications, arts, design and academia. From a background in commercial product marketing she has since worked extensively in academic research management. From 2011–2013 she was Project Manager for the Circus Oz Living Archive ARC Linkage Project at RMIT University. She has recently co-edited RMIT Design Research Institute's six-year retrospective publication 'RMIT Design Research Institute Designs on the Future' (Melbourne Books 2014).

The Belonging Project Team would also like to acknowledge the substantial and ongoing support of our colleagues in the School of Media and Communication, College of Design and Social Context and the Academic Portfolio. For a full list of individuals please refer to the project's annual reports.

Why Belonging Matters

“Over time and through various experiences, students’ sense of belonging, of personal acceptance, or having a rightful, valued place in a particular social context tends to stabilize and consistently influence one’s commitments and behaviours” (Strayhorn, 2012).

The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and when applied to the higher education sector plays a crucial role in academic outcomes for students. When a sense of belonging and social connectedness at university is explicitly activated it enhances students motivation to achieve and succeed (Walton, Cohen, Cwir & Spence, 2011).

Throughout our longitudinal research we have proven that it is possible to embed an ethos of belonging into formal and informal curriculum activities. In doing so, we have built confidence and capacity for students in disciplinary, interdisciplinary and global learning environments across the whole student lifecycle.

Using small-scale, low-cost initiatives informed by The Belonging Project’s Narrative Model we encouraged and delivered a range of positive interactions between staff and students to provide real life employability outcomes and establish skills critical for lifelong learning and success.

Belonging and student engagement

The need to belong is not only important for the long-term success of vulnerable students. Belonging has clear implications for the social experience of students and plays a critical role in academic outcomes.

Australian research into the role of belonging tends to focus on the transition to university and the first year experience, noting that these points are often fraught particularly for more diverse cohorts where “the culture of the institution is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting” (Krause et al., 2005, p. 9). The Belonging Project’s research affirms the role belonging plays in the early university experience, however our work extends this understanding and adopts a perspective that is inclusive of the entire student experience. We advocate embedding disciplinary, interdisciplinary and intercultural global learning opportunities throughout the student lifecycle in both the formal and informal curriculum.

With increasing numbers of Australians participating in high education as a pathway to employability, graduate outcomes have become a key accountability for education providers. As a result, educators are now charged with the responsibility of developing actively engaged, empathetic global citizens (Nikolic & Gledic, 2013) and producing the “repository of human capital” that “provides the workforce capability that underpins economic growth” in Australia (Universities Australia, 2014). Thus the unifying goal of The Belonging Project is to create a holistic approach to the student experience across all aspects of their interactions within the institution. By adopting a wider ethos of belonging this experience can extend beyond the institutional boundaries and into professional practice and the broader disciplines.

We have demonstrated that when the concept of belonging is adopted as an essential feature of the contemporary student experience it positively influences not just academic achievement and social engagement, but success in the achievement of career and employment goals.

Contents

Abbreviations, Key Terms and Nomenclature	4
Dissemination, outputs and resources	5
The Belonging Project: Approach	11
The Belonging Project Narrative Model	13
Guiding Principles	14
Methods	14
Overview of the project phases	15
Phase One: Planting the Seeds	17
Student focus group findings	19
Phase Two: Focus on the First Year Experience (Tier One: Disciplinary)	23
The disciplinary initiatives	24
Discussion	25
Phase Three: Focus on the Interdisciplinary (Tier Two: Interdisciplinary) .	27
The interdisciplinary initiatives	28
Discussion	29
<i>The interdisciplinary: Student perceptions</i>	29
<i>Staff engagements initiatives</i>	30
Phase Four: The Global at Home, At Home in the Global (Tier Three: Global) ...	31
The global initiatives	32
Discussion	33
<i>Harnessing diversity: Recognising and celebrating the students' existing diversity and strengths</i> .	33
<i>Embedding a global employability framework</i>	33
<i>Developing intercultural competencies through peak global experiences</i>	34
The Belonging Project: Conclusion	35
What worked for us	36
What to be prepared for	37
The future of The Belonging Project	37
Bibliography	39

Abbreviations and Key Terms Nomenclature

Abbreviations

FYE – First Year Experience

HEPPP – Higher Education Participation Partnerships Program

L&T – Learning and teaching

LTIF – Learning and Teaching Investment Fund

MC2015 – School of Media and Communication’s curriculum renewal plan

SES – Socio-Economic Status

Key terms

Co-creation: Students actively co-create their university experience and should be genuinely engaged in processes and decisions that involve them, by providing feedback, and, where appropriate, creative input in the change processes.

Disciplinary: Bounded fields defined by their specific frames or reference, traditional objects of study, theoretical canons, technologies, and methodologies.

First year student: A student who is yet to complete 96 credit points of study (equivalent to one full-time year) in their current program at RMIT University.

Intercultural: An approach to understanding and working with diverse cultures in ways that: recognises commonalities and differences; creates connections with others; fosters collaboration, and cultivates mutual respect.

Interdisciplinary: L&T practices which develop not just disciplinary knowledge, but also cultural competencies that facilitate the creation of new knowledge, theory, and concepts that extend and transform disciplinary boundaries.

At RMIT there are a number of terms that are institution-specific and, as such, do not have the same meanings to external audiences. The following table sets out these differences to avoid confusion when reading this document:

Elsewhere	RMIT Term
Subject	Course
Course	Program
Faculty	College
Online learning management system	Blackboard

Dissemination, outputs & resources

Projects

5 Grants = \$580,236

5 reports
11 key findings from students & staff
8 initiatives
1 Website & Resources

Scholarly outputs

5 Grants = \$580,236

11 Journal articles & papers
25 conference, symposium workshop
papers & workshops

Strategic outcomes

1 Award

Participants in 6 National
Strategic Linkages
Participants to 29 University
and College projects
Participants in 9 School projects

Dissemination, outputs & resources

Scholarly Outcomes

Grants

Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Lukas, K., & Araújo, N. (2014). *Global at Home: At Home in the Global. A framework for embedding global competencies across the curriculum 'at home'*. Learning and Teaching Investment Fund, RMIT University (\$100,000).

Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Carlin, D., Lukas, K., & Araújo, N. (2014). *The Belonging Project. Phase 4: Focus on the Global Experience*. Supported by the Academic Portfolio through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, RMIT University (\$50,000).

Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Carlin, D., Lukas, K., & Morieson L. (2013). *The Belonging Project. Phase 3: Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience*. Supported by the Academic Portfolio through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, RMIT University (\$160,000).

Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Carlin, D., Lukas, K., & Morieson, L., (2012). *The Belonging Project. Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience*. Supported by the Academic Portfolio through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, RMIT University (\$166,000).

Carlin, D., Clarke, B., & Wilson, R. (2011). *The Belonging Project. Phase 1: Planting the Seeds*. Supported by the Academic Portfolio through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, RMIT University (\$104,236).

Peer reviewed journal articles

Araújo, N., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Morieson, L., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2014). 'Belonging in the first year: a creative discipline cohort case study'. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 5(3). Retrieved from <https://fyhejournal.com/article/view/240><https://fyhejournal.com/article/view/240>

Morieson, L., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2013). 'Belonging in Education: Lessons from the Belonging Project'. *International Journal of First Year in Higher Education*, 4(2). Retrieved from <https://fyhejournal.com/article/view/173>

Peer reviewed articles – pending

Morieson, L., Araújo, N., Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Carlin, D., & Lukas, K. (N.D.) 'Belonging in Space: Informal Spaces and the Student Experience'. *Journal of Learning Spaces*. (Under review).

Araújo, N., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., Morieson, L., & Wilson R. (N.D.). "Disconnections and Connections in the First Year Experience: The Case of The Belonging Project". *Issues in Educational Research*. (Under review)

Araújo, N., Clarke, B., & Wilson, R. (N.D.). Belonging Across Cultures: Piloting More Engaged Study Tours. *Intercultural Education*. (Under review)

Conference papers – Refereed

Araújo, N., Wilson, R. & Clarke, B. (2015) Student Engagement for Employability: A Belonging Project case study. In T. Thomas, E. Levin, P. Dawson, K. Fraser & R. Hadgraft (Eds.), *Research and Development in Higher Education: Learning for Life and Work in a Complex World*, 38 (pp 1-10). Melbourne, Australia. 6 - 9 July 2015.

Araújo, N., Clarke, B., & Wilson, R. (2015). Why Belonging Still Matters: Student Success Beyond Generic Employability Skills. Presented at the 2015 STARS Conference, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.unistars.org/papers/STARS2015/12C.pdf>

Araújo, N., Wilson, R., Clarke, B., & Carney, L. (2014). The Global at Home, At Home in the Global. Presented at the 2014 *Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia Conference (PESA)*, University of Waikato, New Zealand. Retrieved from http://pesa.org.au/images/conference2014/PESA_Conference-2014-Conference-Papers-no-ISBN.pdf.

Araújo, N., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., Morieson, L., & Wilson R. Belonging in First Year. Paper presented at 17th *FYHE Conference*, Darwin, Australia. Retrieved from <https://fyhejournal.com/article/view/240/247>

Morieson, L., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., Wilson, R., (2013, July 7-10). Belonging in Education: Lessons from the Belonging Project. Presented at the 16th *FYHE Conference*, Wellington, New Zealand. Retrieved from http://fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers13/fyhe13_proceedings.pdf

Conference, symposium and workshop papers – Unrefereed

Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Araújo, N., & Lukas, K. (2013, Dec 4). *The Belonging Project*. Poster presented at OLT National Senior Teaching Fellowship Symposium, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

Araújo, N., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2013, Nov 21). *Approaches to Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching*. Presentation at The Interdisciplinary Student Experience Workshop, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Morieson, L., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2012, Nov 20). *Thinking About Interdisciplinarity*. Presentation of position paper and workshop to School of Media and Communication staff, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Carlin, D., Clarke, B., & Wilson, R. (2012, May 7-9). *Case Study: The Belonging Project*. Invited paper presented at 2nd Annual *Satisfaction in Higher Education Conference*, Sydney, Australia.

Dissemination, outputs & resources (continued)

Morieson, L., Lukas, K., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., & Wilson R. (2011, Nov). *But what do our students (really) want?* Presentation of paper to all staff about student focus group findings and project update, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Conferences and workshops convened

The Belonging Project. (2014, Dec). *Focus on the Global Student Experience*. Workshop with School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2014, Mar). *2013 Inaugural School of Media and Communication Learning and Teaching Forum*. School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2013, Nov 21) *The Interdisciplinary Student Experience*. Workshop with School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project team co-organised and sponsored a staff development opportunity: Ben McCann presented his OLT project findings to staff in the Schools of Architecture & Design as well as Media & Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne (June, 2013). *A Collaborative Multi-faceted Approach to Address the Gaps Between Student Expectation and Experience at University*. www.olt.gov.au/project-gaps-between-student-expectation-and-experience-adelaide-2009

The Belonging Project. (2012, Nov 20). *Thinking About Interdisciplinarity*. Workshop with School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Moeller, R., & Lukas, K. (2012, Feb). *Ice Breakers and Transition Teasers for the First Year Experience*. School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Lukas, K., & Morieson, L. (2011, Aug). *Project Launch and Staff Workshop*. Program Directors' Retreat, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Kalorama.

Panels, workshops and presentations

The Belonging Project (2015). *The Belonging Project: An Overview* Invited co-presented panel discussion in the Learning and Teaching for Sustainability Stream at RMIT Learning and Teaching Expo, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2014, Oct 29). Invited co-presented panel discussion at RMIT University *DSC L&T Innovators in Conversation 2014*, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2014, Jul). *First Things First*. Invited co-presented panel discussion at RMIT Learning and Teaching Expo, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2013, Mar). *Interdisciplinary Speed Dating*. Presentation at Inaugural School of Media and Communication Learning and Teaching Forum, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2012, Dec). *The Belonging Project: 2012 Update*. Presentation on key first year initiatives and findings at RMIT School of Media and Communication All School Meeting, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2012, Oct). *Let's Talk About First Year: Lessons from The Belonging Project*. Presentation at Teachers @ Work Staff Development Seminar Series, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2012, Aug). *The Student Cohort Experience Project*. Invited co-presented panel discussion at RMIT Learning and Teaching Expo, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2012, Aug). *The Belonging Project: An Overview*. Presentation to staff in the College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2011). *The Belonging Project*. Presentation at RMIT University Business Plan Student Cohort Experience Forum, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project. (2011, Nov). *But what do our students (really) want?* Presentation at whole-of-School meeting, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Awards

2013 RMIT Teaching and Research Award for 'Programs the Enhance Learning: The First Year Experience'. Citation: For devising a clear, holistic narrative for inclusion and belonging for students and staff within a school at RMIT University.

Strategic Outcomes

National significance

Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012). *Effective Teaching and Support of Students from Low Socio Economic Status Backgrounds: Final Report*, Office of Learning and Teaching.

Jollands, M. Smith, J. V., Hamilton, M., Clarke, B., Grando, D., Xenos, G., Carbone, A., Burton, L., Pocknee, C. (2013-2015). *Developing graduate employability through partnerships with industry and professional associations*. Office for Learning and Teaching. Retrieved at <http://olt.gov.au/project-developing-graduate-employability-through-partnerships-industry-and-professional-association>

Dissemination, outputs & resources (continued)

Internal significance

Nomikoudis, M., & Bolt, S. (2012). *Pilot Projects to Define the Student Cohort Experience: 2012 Final Report*.

Peterson, F., & Hansen, S. (2012). *Media and Communication 2015: Program Suite and Delivery for the future*. Cited as influencing the School's vision for enhancing the student experience and program retention (p. 3). Consequently, the project team was invited to contribute to the M&C2015 Review project.

RMIT University School of Media and Communication. (2013, Mar). *Learning and Teaching Strategy 2013-2015*. Cited as both a key enabler of and reporting partner for the School, and formally acknowledged as a contributing member of the School Learning and Teaching Committee. (p. 3, 4, 8, 9).

University Program Annual Review (PAR) Report. Indirect acknowledgement: the College of Design and Social Context noted that the School of Media and Communication was seeking to enhance the student experience and retention "through improved orientation and transition activities; acting on student feedback and strengthened student engagement" (p.3).

RMIT University College of Design and Social Context. (2012). *Program Annual Review (PAR) Report*. Indirect acknowledgement: under key activities to prioritise and support, the College highlights the School's plans to enhance the student experience and retention "through improved orientation and transition activities; acting on student feedback and strengthened student engagement".

RMIT University School of Media and Communication. (2013). *Strategic Priorities and Profile 2013: Response to University Strategic Plan*. Cited as informing the School's strategies for accessing and widening participation through its L&T strategic action plan (p.3).

Invited consultations and contributions to committees, working parties and external projects

National significance

Jollands, M. Smith, J. V., Hamilton, M., Clarke, B., Grando, D., Xenos, G., Carbone, A., Burton, L., Pocknee, C. (2014-2016). *Developing graduate employability through partnerships with industry and professional associations*. Office for Learning and Teaching. Retrieved at <http://olt.gov.au/project-developing-graduate-employability-through-partnerships-industry-and-professional-association>

Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., McKay, J. (2012). *Effective Teaching and Support of Students from Low Socio Economic Status Backgrounds: Final Report, Office of Learning and Teaching*. Acknowledged as contributors to the project's final report and staff resources in relation to design and content (Clarke, B. & Wilson, R.).

Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Nagy, J., & Smith, L. (2010-2012). *Effective Teaching and Support of Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds: Resources for Australian Higher Education*.

Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., & McCann, J. (2009-2014). *A Collaborative Multi-faceted Approach to Address the Gaps Between Student Expectation and Experience at University*.

Leask, B. (2010-2012). *Internationalisation of the Curriculum in Action*.

Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). *Good Practice for Safeguarding Student Learning Engagement in Higher Education Institutions*.

Nelson, K., Joughin, G., Thomas, G., Lodge, J., Clarke, J., & Stoodley, I. (2011-2014). *Establishing a Framework for Transforming Student Engagement, Success and Retention in Higher Education Institutions*.

Internal significance – University level

Bolt S., & Nomikoudis M. (2011-2012). Student Cohort Experience Project. Academic Portfolio.

Clarke, B., Johal, T., & Quinn, S. (2013-2014). *First Things First: Transition and Transformation of the Student Cohort Experience in the Creative Disciplines*. School of Media and Communication.

Crisp, G., Hughes, O., & Pierce, J. (2013-2014). *First Year Experience Project*. Academic Portfolio.

Nomikoudis M., Harley J., Gopal S., Wallace A., & Porcaro P. (2012-2014). *Inclusive Teaching and Assessment Practices Project*. Academic Portfolio.

Peterson F., et al. (2011-ongoing). *MC2015 Program Review Project*. School of Media and Communication.

Sharp, K., Clarke, A., & Johal, T. (2011-2013). *Equal Local: Future-proofing RMIT's global reach by promoting equivalence in onshore and offshore learning*. School of Art and School of Media and Communication.

Brown, A. (2011-ongoing). Student Success Program. Student Services.

Student Services, I Belong Project. (2012 – ongoing). Project advisors, project team members and key School liaisons. Responsible for recruitment, design and implementation of discipline-specific workshops for visiting disadvantaged secondary school students.

Dissemination, outputs & resources (continued)

First Year Experience and Transition Project

(2013-ongoing). Invited to participate in the project's Reference Group, Systems Working Group and Transition Principles Working Group.

Inclusive Teaching Practices Project. (2012-2014). Advisors to project team and key School liaisons.

Equity and Diversity Committee. (2011-ongoing). Invited participatory membership (Clarke).

Education Abroad Student Mobility Photographic Competition. (2012-ongoing). Advisors to event organisers and key School liaisons.

Property Services, Informal Student Spaces Redevelopment Project. (2012-ongoing). Advisors to project team and key School liaisons.

Office of the DVC (Academic), Student Cohort Experience Project Reference Group. (2011–2013). Invited participatory members.

Student Services, Student to Student Video Competition. (2013). Advisors to competition organisers and key School liaisons.

Internal significance – College level

College of Design and Social Context, Retention and Attrition Project. (2012-ongoing). Invited contributors (Clarke and Lukas).

College of Design and Social Context, Selection Review Project. (2012-ongoing). Invited contributors (Clarke, Wilson and Lukas).

College of Science, Engineering and Health, First Year Experience Community of Practice Group. (2012-ongoing). Invited participants.

Internal significance – School level

School of Media and Communication, Learning and Teaching Committee. (2011-ongoing). Invited participatory membership.

School of Media and Communication, MC2015 Review Project. (2011-ongoing). Advisors as participatory members of the steering committee and key School liaisons to program teams.

School of Media and Communication, Learning and Teaching Investment Fund Round. (2014). Advise School staff as participatory members of the School's LTIF Community of Practice Group and advise staff in other schools on request.

School of Media and Communication, Transition and Orientation Coordination Team Proposal (2012 Oct). Submitted and endorsed by the School Executive and Learning and Teaching Committees. (Lukas, K., Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Carlin, D., & Morieson L.)

Key Internal Presentations

(2014 Oct). *Business Case for Student Atelier Refurbishment*. Presentation to Property Services Group, RMIT University, Melbourne.

(2014 Jun). *The Belonging Project: Project Update*. Presentation at RMIT School of Media and Communication Program Directors Retreat, Kalorama.

(2013 Nov). *The Belonging Project: Overview of FYE Initiatives & Findings*. Invited presentation to First Year Experience and Transition Project Reference Group, RMIT University, Melbourne.

(2013 Jun). *The Belonging Project: Overview of FYE Initiatives & Findings*. First Year Experience and Transition Project Reference Group, RMIT University, Melbourne.

(2013, Feb). *Creating Lively Informal Student Spaces: Lessons from The Belonging Project*. Invited presentation to Property Services Group staff, RMIT University, Melbourne.

(2012, Aug). *The Belonging Project: An Overview*. Presentation to the College of Science, Engineering and Health, First Year Experience Community of Practice Group, RMIT University, Melbourne.

(2012, Jul). *The Belonging Project: Project Overview and Key Student Focus Group Findings*. Invited presentation at the RMIT University Communications and Marketing Forum, RMIT University, Melbourne.

(2012, May) *Project Update*. Presentation at the RMIT School of Media and Communication Program Directors' Retreat, Kalorama.

Reports and Position Papers

Reports

Clarke, B. & Wilson, R, 2014 Report: At Home in the Global

Wilson, R., Clarke, B., Carlin, D., Araújo, N., Lukas, K., & Shand, L. 2013 Report: Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience

Wilson, R., Clarke, B., Carlin, D., Morieson, L., & Lukas, K. 2012 Report: Focus on the First Year Experience

Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Wilson, R., Lukas, K., & Morieson, L. 2011 Report: Planting the Seeds

Position papers

Araújo, N., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2013, Nov 21). *Approaches to Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching*. Presentation at The Interdisciplinary Student Experience Workshop, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Dissemination, outputs & resources (continued)

- Lukas, K., Clarke, B., Wilson, R., & Araújo N. (2013, Sep).
Know Your Students First: Unlocking the Potential of Diverse Commencing Student Cohorts Using Existing Systems and Data.
Position paper submitted and endorsed by the First Year Experience and Transition Reference Group, RMIT University, Melbourne.
- Morieson, L., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Wilson R., & Lukas K., (2012), *Thinking About Interdisciplinarity.* Position paper circulated to academic staff within the School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Belonging Project: Approach



2385 students
(Local and international)
directly participated



3500 students
(Local and international)
indirectly participated



313 staff
(Academic and professional)
directly participated

The Belonging Project: Approach

The Belonging Project is a longitudinal learning and teaching research project seeking to develop and define a new approach to enhancing student engagement and graduate outcomes in the School of Media and Communications RMIT University. The project, bound by the theoretical concept of belonging, grew from collaborative work undertaken within the School to develop and document a common pedagogical approach and create a unified learning and teaching narrative. Importantly, the project was aligned with the whole of undergraduate degree structure in order to achieve findings with transferability to other schools and higher education institutions.

The project sits within the context of the continually evolving nature of the higher education sector which presents numerous practical opportunities and challenges, not least of which is the changing role of higher education in civil society more broadly. Contemporary universities are both educational institution and broker between diverse stakeholders with complex and, at times, competing interests: secondary institutions, students who increasingly exercise their authority as knowledge consumers, and industries.

Thus, The Belonging Project is perhaps more than a research project. It is a demonstration of the value of a binding narrative, a shared vision for an organisation which looks to the future with an optimistic pragmatism. This view accepts and embraces change, and celebrates our collective and individual capacity to adapt and bend as needed in order to co-construct a student experience, both educational and social, which is capable of meeting the evolving needs of the higher education student cohort.

The Belonging Project demonstrates that an ethos of belonging has vital role to play in this binding narrative, for a sense of belonging is a human desire common to all stakeholders involved in the educational landscape. Our research proves that an ethos of belonging is indeed valued and wanted by all project participants, staff and students alike. This raises the question of ‘how do we work to embed practices and resources which can make this a universal reality?’

We have discovered that an institution-led and embedded commitment to such a binding narrative is important, however it is not always available. We have also learnt that much can be done with the supports and resources that are available, namely the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff and students with whom we work.

In reading this final report, we encourage you to view our work as but one example of the application of an ethos of belonging. We offer both an overview summary of our four-year research journey, and also present what we learnt which we hope may inspire the work of others. We do not prescribe or advocate absolute answers or solutions, for our work affirms that higher education is essentially a creative and dynamic space requiring flexibility, adaptability and imagination.

This document offers an overview and summary of the four phases of The Belonging Project (Page 9). Full reports on each phase of the project (2011, 2012, 2013 & 2014) can be downloaded from The Belonging Project webpage: www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-education/academic-schools/media-and-communication/research/projects/the-belonging-project/

The Belonging Project aims:

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1. | To develop strategies to support the participation and integration of all students, especially students from diverse circumstances, cultures and backgrounds. |
| 2. | To enhance student satisfaction and retention rates. |
| 3. | To increase opportunities within program structures for students to choose from a variety of interdisciplinary, international and/or industry/community-based learning experiences. |
| 4. | To help develop and make known a distinctive RMIT student experience, setting this university apart from other institutions in the sector. |

The Belonging Project Narrative Model

The Belonging Project developed and tested The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement (Diagram 1).

This model aims to foster student engagement and employability, and is designed to be flexible, adaptable and transferable. It embeds the acquisition of disciplinary, interdisciplinary and global competencies through a three-tiered approach to the student experience. This approach, which is underpinned by an ethos of belonging and mapped to the student lifecycle, views each student’s sense of identity and belonging as developing incrementally across the course of their undergraduate degree program

This approach proposes that students initially identify most strongly with their program cohort, thus research within the first tier focuses on building connections (within year and across-year groups) supporting the development of disciplinary and professional identity. In the second tier, as students begin to make sense of their discipline in relation to other disciplines, research focuses on creating collaborative interventions within a rich interdisciplinary environment. In the final tier, students start to think of themselves as future professionals within a global and intercultural context, thus research focuses on facilitating global intercultural experiences. In combination, this three-tiered approach offers a flexible means to support students to develop their identity as professional, employable and ethical global citizens.

The Belonging Project Narrative Model does not approach each tier as rigidly successive and locked to a particular year. Rather, elements of all tiers are present across the three year undergraduate student experience, but with a shifting emphasis. The model does not prescribe specific

structures or forms of belonging, but offers a flexible and transferable way of working in higher education environments that can be reimagined and reinterpreted in different institutional and disciplinary settings.

In line with the project model, The Belonging Project approach acknowledges that universities are spaces where value is co-created by consumers within complex frameworks of actors and resources (Karpen, Hall, Katsoulidis & Cam, 2011). Students are positioned as co-creators of their university experience, and are actively engaged in change as a means to empower their experience.

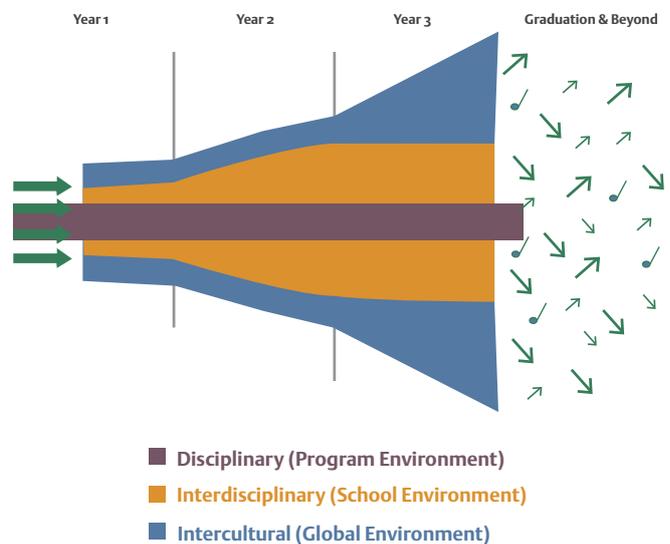


Diagram 1: The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement.

Sense of identity and belonging is built incrementally through:	
Tier One: <i>Disciplinary</i>	Students establish a strong disciplinary and professional base within a diverse disciplinary cohort .
Tier Two: <i>Interdisciplinary</i>	Building on the disciplinary base, students become more aware of the interdisciplinary community of the wider school and university .
Tier Three: <i>Global</i>	Students test their disciplinary and interdisciplinary identity and knowledge through working in a wider world of intercultural and global links and experiences and identify as professional, employable and ethical global citizens .

Guiding principles

The Belonging Project research interactions and interventions have been informed by a set of **guiding principles** evolved through the four phases of the project:

The Belonging Project's Guiding Principles	
Co-created	To utilise co-creation techniques wherever possible and to promote staff ownership by identifying and supporting 'champions'.
Capacity strengthening	To aim towards capacity strengthening through the incremental building of cultural capital and capacity over time.
Embedded	To be embedded within the formal and informal curriculum.
Grassroots	To develop and support numerous low cost grassroots initiatives recognising that in order to develop trust and long-term success, initiatives must be driven from the ground-up.
Holistic	To be holistic in order to successfully encompass the entire student lifecycle
Inclusive	To be inclusive of both the formal and informal curriculum, and of staff (academic and professional) and students. Each is central to the development, implementation and sustainability of the project.
Iterative	To be iterative, integrating cycles of reflection and evaluation into every stage of the research, as guided by an action research methodology.
Low cost	To aim to be low cost in order to ensure sustainability.
Student centred	To adopt a student centred approach in order to mirror contemporary practice and encourage active knowledge creation and deep learning.
Sustainable	To be sustainable in order to ensure ongoing viability.

Methods

In order to test The Belonging Project Model, approach and guiding principles, The Belonging Project utilised a range of research methods and tools, each selected according to the specific research stage and the initiatives involved.

- Qualitative feedback via focus groups, workshops and interviews
- Small ethnographic video's demonstrating change
- Quantitative feedback
- Narrative research
- Co-creation and inclusive collaborative techniques
- Identification of and use of project champions

Full details of the research methods utilised in the four phases of The Belonging Project (2011, 2012, 2013 & 2014) are contained in the reports available on The Belonging Project webpage: www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-education/academic-schools/media-and-communication/research/projects/the-belonging-project/

Overview of the project phases

Phase	Tier	What we did
Phase One: <i>Planting the Seeds</i>	Foundation	Literature review, sector best practice mapping and application to school, testing of The Belonging Project Model, and development of first year experience initiatives.
Phase Two: <i>Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience</i>	Tier One: <i>Disciplinary</i>	Implementation and testing of the first year experience initiatives: Coordinated Orientation Week Activities; Cohort Day Out; Student Informal Spaces; Academic Transition Initiatives, and End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibition.
Phase Three: <i>Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience</i>	Tier Two: <i>Inter-disciplinary</i>	Development of a model of interdisciplinary practice and continued evaluation of the first year experience initiatives.
Phase Four: <i>The Global At Home: At Home in the Global</i>	Tier Three: <i>Global</i>	Development of a three-stage approach to test the development of global competencies through case study initiatives, and continued maintenance of academic output of the disciplinary and interdisciplinary tiers.



Students hard at work in the Atelier Space

Phase One: Planting the Seeds



Phase One: Planting the Seeds

Phase One: What we learnt

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1. | It is essential to foster a sense of belonging for staff if it is also to become a part of the student experience. |
| 2. | To have a commitment to sustained and continued engagement with staff at a grassroots level is essential if organisational cultural change is to be achieved. |
| 3. | Students require help with informal and formal interventions to improve their experience. |

The first phase of the project, *Planting the Seeds*, tested The Belonging Narrative Model. We first undertook a literature review to ensure that our work was benchmarked against international best practice and responded to identified gaps in student engagement initiatives globally. The knowledge we gained through this exploration informed our collaborative workshops with academic and professional staff and focus groups with students and recent Alumni to test and develop the model.

Through this work, we validated the model's logic and affirmed that for students, while a sense of belonging is initially localised – professional, disciplinary, or program based – it is also an experience they desire across and beyond disciplinary boundaries and within the dynamic environment of the School and University.

Aligned with the project's guiding principles, we adopted a narrative approach to draw together the diverse interactions that constitute the student experience which helped us to understand the range of concerns facing students at key points of their transition before, during and after their undergraduate experience.

Our work revealed that the tacit knowledge of staff is an essential tool in understanding the student experience within the School, and that interrogating and understanding the staff experience can assist to enhance the student experience. Perhaps not surprisingly, we learnt that a sense of belonging matters to staff, and their perceptions of the experience can positively affect student sense of belonging.

We also discovered that sustained and continued engagement with staff at a grassroots level is essential if organisational cultural change is to be achieved. This critical insight has proved common to all phases of our research, and affirms the recurring theme of the importance of harnessing the knowledge, expertise and resources of academic and professional staff, addressing their professional development needs and, importantly, providing the support required to sustain their commitment and participation.

The data that emerged from the student focus groups proved to be much richer and more detailed than anticipated, casting light on areas far broader than our project's immediate scope. In the first instance the data informed the selection and development of the series of pilot initiatives for Phase 2 of the project but overall it has provided the baseline evidence for the project from the students perspective. We have consistently returned to these findings throughout the project in the development of each phase's initiatives.



Student focus group sample

Student Focus Group Findings

Expectations about university and RMIT	
1.	Attending university is a 'common sense' decision for most participants.
2.	The decision is usually driven by employment goals, or encouragement from family, high school educators and peers.
3.	Participants have clear reasons for selecting RMIT – largely, strong program reputations and RMIT's image as creative, innovative and industry focused.
Orientation needs and expectations	
1.	A gap exists between informal university orientation and information-driven program-run sessions.
2.	Further assistance is needed to make early social connections with cohort peers.
3.	Orientation sessions that mix social activities with workshop-style collaborative academic tasks are needed.
4.	Early information, feedback and advice from program peers in second and third years is wanted.
5.	Orientation camp is a polarising idea – some love it, some hate it.
Social expectations and issues	
1.	Reports of cliques and competition among program cohorts.
2.	Emphasis on importance of social ties to their university experience, especially from second and third years.
3.	Perceived barrier between domestic and international students with both groups needing assistance to work through cultural differences.
Academic expectations and issues	
1.	High levels of anxiety over academic achievement overall, and particularly among first year cohorts.
2.	First year students also struggle with transition to a different learning environment.
3.	First year students in studio-based programs demonstrate anxiety around skills, and a lack of understanding about the difference between a skills-based course and conceptual learning.
4.	Specific transition issues for international students facing a radically different learning style, even for those who have completed foundation studies at RMIT or elsewhere in Australia.
Industry and professional identity	
1.	A lack of awareness and/or confidence around professional identity for most participants.
2.	A desire for more practical 'how to' information on industries and pathways, as well as basic information on approaching and getting started in the workplace.
3.	A desire for internships in all programs, and for those students who are offered them, support with finding and/or attending internships.

Cross-year connections

1. At present, cross-year connection is limited. More junior students feel intimidated by or isolated from their senior peers. Others simply had no cross-year interaction.
2. First years are keen for a mentor to allay anxieties about university assessment and standards, and provide guidance on what to expect from the later stages of their program.
3. Students in programs that offer a number of possible course pathways are keen for connections with senior students to advise their choice.
4. Students agree that any sort of attempt to set up a mentoring system need to be at least partly formalised to ensure its sustainability.

Interdisciplinary connections

1. Strong support for more or improved interdisciplinary connections as part of the student experience.
2. Strong awareness of the future professional value of interdisciplinary links.
3. Desire for a broader perspective of their School, University, and the wider world.
4. Activities suggested include speed-dating nights, 'lecture swaps' and sample classes.
5. Evidence that improved interdisciplinary connections could help break down strong cohort stereotypes and rivalries.
6. Need to be formally facilitated and mutually beneficial to the programs involved to ensure sustainability.

Student spaces and resources

1. Existing spaces are under-utilised and/or poorly designed/resourced.
2. Student hot-spots include Pearson & Murphy's Café, 'the fake grass', the Myer-Melbourne Central walkway (off-campus).
3. Some disappointment around access to resources.

Student communication

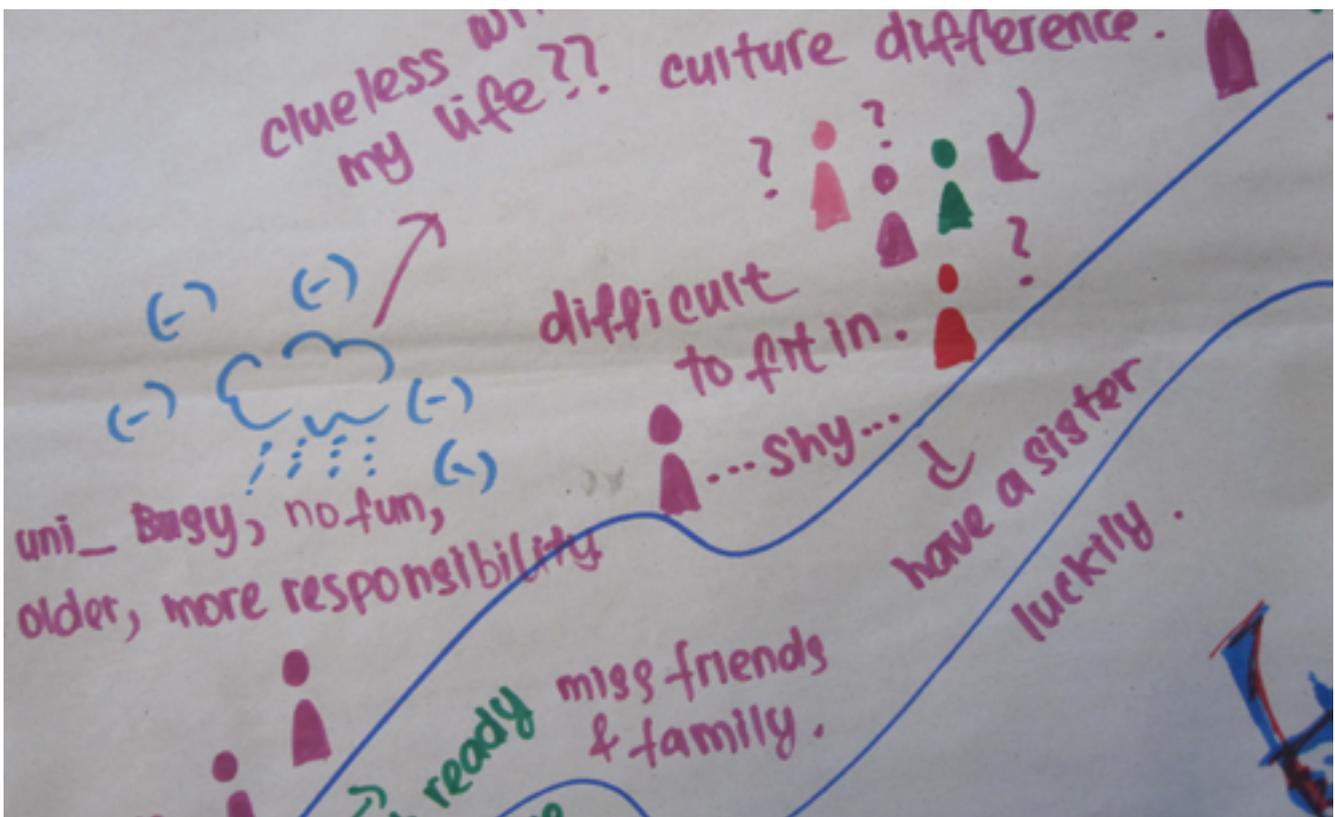
1. Facebook, Facebook, Facebook! For academic and social purposes - the new study group.
2. Prefer student-run for peer-to-peer advice and feedback.
3. Acknowledge challenges - legal and privacy.
4. Blackboard (RMIT's online learning management system) insufficient and unreliable.
5. Email seen as 'old school' or for professional use.

Internationalisation and global links

1. Hidden or real costs prohibitive for some.
2. Needs to be a 'value add' for local students.
3. International students already position themselves as global citizens.
4. Linked to future aspiration; further study or 'plan b'.
5. Seen as additional or post-university, not part of the undergraduate experience.

Alumni perceptions

1. No clear vision of future role for RMIT in their lives.
2. Connection to RMIT and alumni dependent on future success.
3. Early and growing awareness of peers as future professional networks.
4. International students particularly keen to teach or guest lecture.



Student focus group sample

Phase Two: Focus on the First Year Experience (Tier One: Disciplinary)



Phase Two: Focus on the First Year Experience (Tier One: Disciplinary)

Phase Two: What we learnt	
1.	Well-designed disciplinary practices need to be embedded .
2.	Embedding such practices is hard work .
3.	Achieving embedded disciplinary practices is worth it .

From the perspective of the student experience, disciplinary knowledge is often perceived as the building block of the university experience and professional competency. Disciplines create their own sub-cultures, replete with their own theories, discourses, and languages. Fluency in this disciplinary language and practice is assumed to be the baseline from which students should commence their learning.

The second phase of The Belonging Project, Focus on the First Year Experience, aimed to carry out a series of pilot initiatives that would improve and support the student transition to university life through a focus on the disciplinary perspective. This aim reflected existing literature revealing first year transition as the most challenging stage for students, and the most crucial for universities wishing to improve student retention and success.

Our work with student focus groups affirmed that the transition to university represents an academic and social shift for students “on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners” (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010, p. 3). Students, often much to their surprise, require the

assistance of teaching staff to make social connections with their cohort peers. Given the professional orientation of the programs in RMIT and our School, many students reported beginning university with a highly instrumental approach to their study, soon realising that social connections are central to success.

I just wanted to come here and get it done, to be honest. I didn't realize how much I actually cared about having friends until I was here and I didn't have any.

Students represented to us the transition challenges associated with key academic literacies that are often rendered invisible as ‘common sense’ to teaching staff. Students in programs that required the acquisition of technical skills, alongside conceptual development, expressed particular anxiety about differences in proficiency among the cohort:

I came to this course and was just so intimidated by the technical skill of everyone, I was like, how am I supposed to catch up? ...I think it creates a lot of unhappiness actually.

I later learnt that uni is not about technical training, it's about learning to think in a certain way.

The disciplinary initiatives: In response to the knowledge gained through this second phase of research, we developed and piloted five initiatives aimed at enhancing the first year experience:

Coordinated Orientation Week Activities

Cohort Day Out

Student Informal Space

Academic Transition Initiatives

End of Year Festival and Exhibition



The Student Atelier Space – The hub of student transition activities: Mid-year School Welcome (2012)

Discussion

Our research reveals that each of these five initiatives played a valuable role in enhancing the first year experience for participating students. **The Coordinated Orientation Week Activities** have proved largely successful over the years of the project and continue within the institution. Participating students indicated that they find their teachers welcoming, and enjoy making new friends with common interests.

I got to meet a lot of people who were interested in the same thing I was.

The **Cohort Day Out** has proved a simple, low-cost activity and successful way to develop stronger connections amongst program cohorts and significantly improve students' sense of belonging. It also assists students to develop key academic literacies, especially when part of a larger suite of well-timed formal and informal cohort building activities throughout their first year.

The **Student Informal Space** continues as an on-campus space, the Student Atelier, designed to foster an interdisciplinary environment where students can mix with peers from other programs and disciplines within the school and undertake a range of other activities including quiet study, group work and social activities. Throughout the life of The Belonging Project, this student co-created space has been a busy and popular hub of student activity that fills a gap between the formality of the library and the informality of public space.

Having a space that's not the library, that we can come to and be as loud as we like and do our group work is really important.

It feels like it's the students', like we own this place.

The **Academic Transition Initiative** has proved a means to broker relationships between School (academic and professional) staff and Student Services staff in order to break down barriers, facilitate relationships and improve student engagement across all stakeholders and on-campus services. Finally, the **End of Year Festival of Exhibitions and Events** represents an example of the value of embedding inclusive and co-created cross-program capstone events, shared across the University, as a means to mark key points of student transition and as rich opportunities to foster engagement for both current and prospective students.

These five initiatives clearly affirm the value of interventions aimed at enhancing the first year experience from a disciplinary experience, however they also reinforce an ethos of belonging which acknowledges that the spectrum of student needs are not tied exclusively to key stages or years in their academic and personal journey, but are organic and fluid, and therefore must be addressed through a flexible, adaptive and tailored approach.

Interventions aimed at embedding disciplinary practices can be developed and delivered at all levels of universities. Some ideas include:

Transition leadership positions responsible for transition and the first year experience.

Professional development modules focused on first year higher education pedagogy delivered to all program managers and interested academic staff.

Budget templates for formal and informal student engagement initiatives provided to program directors and school managers as part of budget planning.

School-based student informal spaces that are suitably funded and resourced.

Staff positions supporting end of year activities that are suitably resourced to support and foster unique opportunities for transition and marketing.

De-identified enrolled student data-packs provided to program managers to support staff to create meaningful and engaging program content.



School of Media and Communication students: 'Big O-Day' (2012)

Phase Three: Focus on the Interdisciplinary (Tier Two: Interdisciplinary)



Phase Three: Focus on the Interdisciplinary (Tier Two: Interdisciplinary)

Phase Three: What we learnt

Interventions aimed at fostering interdisciplinary practices can be developed and delivered at all levels of universities. Some ideas include:

Platforms for skills and interest exchange between staff and faculty across all schools and disciplines.

Flagship interdisciplinary courses or studio programs.

Cross-course interdisciplinary frameworks.

Opportunities for student skills exchange.

The contemporary climate demands that professional practitioners possess a “synthesising mind” (Gardner, 2007, p.3) with the creative capacity to effectively engage in the translation and synthesis of knowledge both within and outside of disciplinary boundaries acquired through interdisciplinary learning.

The third phase of The Belonging Project, *Focus on the Interdisciplinary*, approached interdisciplinary learning as an essential exercise in refining and putting into practice disciplinary knowledge and identity. Interdisciplinary learning is a crucial aspect in developing competent and competitive graduates and a core experience for the development of effective communication practices, conflict management skills, and project management proficiencies

required of work-ready graduates in the current professional environment.

Our work focused on interdisciplinary student experiences that extended beyond the immediate cohort encounter, supporting students to solidify their understanding of disciplinary knowledge and expand upon it to develop the higher-level communication, project, and group work skills required in their future professional ‘real world’ settings. The interventions emphasised connections between and across disciplines, making the most of the existing interdisciplinary learning environment of our School supported by engagement with both students and staff through focus groups, workshops and consultation.

Interdisciplinary (Tier Two) aims were:

1. To research and develop a working definition of interdisciplinary activity that is appropriate to the specific context and practices of the School of Media and Communication.
2. To investigate and explore the range of opportunities currently available in the School in order to develop a typology of interdisciplinary literacies that can be mobilised in strategic discussions around L&T and in the development of new program and course models for MC2015.
3. To map a range of relevant existing case studies to inform the renewal process as well as broader L&T debates within the School, across the University and the wider tertiary education sector.
4. To research, capture and disseminate recommendations to capitalize upon existing informal interdisciplinary activities and foster new opportunities that bridge the formal and informal curriculums.

The interdisciplinary initiatives

In this interdisciplinary phase, our work focused on mapping and explicitly embedding interdisciplinary initiatives within the student lifecycle as a means of increasing students' social and cultural capital and thereby supporting positive long-term outcomes. We developed staff and student engagement initiatives and resources to

support interdisciplinary practices within the School of Media and Communications, and employed a feedback loop to investigate, document, and disseminate models of interdisciplinary practice within the school.



Interdisciplinary student groups in the Atelier Space

Discussion

Many positive insights and findings arose from this phase of The Belonging Project. Our identification of the need for program alignment within program structures has led to a major revamp of the undergraduate program structures for the School of Media and Communication and the introduction of integrated curriculum and studio teaching practice in order to make interdisciplinary teaching more feasible.

Overall students and staff shared positive perceptions about interdisciplinary teaching and learning, however we found that staff tended to focus on the significant and complex barriers inherent in this style of teaching. These perceptions were underpinned by concerns about their capacity to deliver effective interdisciplinary experiences,

suggesting that shifts in staff attitudes and both practical and definitional understandings about interdisciplinary teaching, rather than student skills or engagement, might be a key to the creation of vibrant interdisciplinary cultures within the university.

The interdisciplinary: Student perceptions

From the early stages of undergraduate studies, students anticipated a flexible workplace and the diverse roles and positions required of a 'portfolio career' in the creative industries. They recognised that in this professional landscape, flexibility is essential, and interdisciplinary learning, thinking and collaboration is what will equip them with the necessary skills to respond nimbly.

Students also identified the equally important role of interdisciplinary experience in social development and wellbeing as a means of broadening horizons and facilitating critical reflection, self-reflection, self-esteem, and perceptions of empowerment. Through the complex negotiations of difference it requires, interdisciplinary learning offers the kind of transformative experience that may facilitate a student's sense of a belonging within diverse educational and professional contexts.

Staff engagement initiatives

Staff identified gaps in existing approaches and opportunities to develop sounder interdisciplinary pedagogy, and highlighted challenges associated with interdisciplinary teaching and learning which highlight areas for future research, the most pressing of which is structural alignment within programs.

Staff highlighted the need for careful thought and planning in the timing and design of interdisciplinary activities within the curriculum and expressed a wariness associated with 'retro-fitting' the curriculum. Current interdisciplinary opportunities in the School of Media and Communication were revealed as typically industry-driven, not only in their outputs but also in their design. While these opportunities may lead to important networking opportunities for student employability, they may also lead to 'rushed' and imbalanced curriculum design and the positioning of universities as service providers for industry.

Staff also expressed concern about the time and resources required to manage student expectations and support them to effectively embrace collaboration and the objectives of the learning experience. This staff perception of the challenges of the interdisciplinary learning experiences versus the 'traditional offerings' argues an acute need for improved support services for staff teaching in an interdisciplinary environment.

Even with greater resource allocation and academic support, there may be unique challenges associated with interdisciplinary practices within creative disciplines beyond the necessary conditions required for effective collaboration. Programs in fields that are still working to establish themselves as disciplines and negotiate their own theoretical boundaries are concerned that interdisciplinary collaboration might be a barrier to disciplinary legitimacy. Meanwhile, established creative programs are wary of interdisciplinary collaboration that might limit their participation as a 'service discipline' or 'pack horses' for other people's ideas.

Phase Four: The Global at Home, At Home in the Global (Tier Three: Global)



Phase Four: The Global at Home, At Home in the Global (Tier Three: Global)

Phase Four: What we learnt

Interventions aimed at fostering global competencies can be developed and delivered at all levels of universities. Some ideas include:

Intercultural competencies professional development for staff focused on internationalising the curriculum to support the development of intercultural competencies in disciplinary contexts across all year levels ‘at home’.

Platforms for internationalised learning and teaching practices exchange between staff and faculty across all schools and disciplines.

Global learning and teaching communities of practice established within schools.

University-wide alignment of learning and teaching strategies and policies to support sustainable integration of the diverse academic cultures.

Increase equity to global learning experiences to facilitate sustained intercultural engagement for those unable to participate in long-term study abroad, supporting the development of more equitable relationships between participants in global experiences, and developing reciprocal travel opportunities for international university partners involved in study tours.

Holding that concepts of internationalisation and student employability are fundamentally linked in increasingly global employment markets, in this final phase of The Belonging Project, The Global at Home: At Home in the Global, we drew on global and internationalised curriculum models as proposed by innovators such as Betty Leask and Michelle Barker. This perspective is founded on the growing evidence that globalising the curriculum works best for the student cohort as a whole when it is embedded across the formal, the informal, and the “hidden curriculum” (Leask & Bridge, 2013, p. 81). While the concept of an internationalised or global curriculum is not new, staff continue to be confused about how to create meaningful classroom experiences for a global cohort and thus study tours and exchange programs remain the peak global experience for a limited number of students.

Meanwhile, like many universities throughout the sector, RMIT prioritises global connections and promises graduates that they will be ready for the contemporary international workplace.

While many student may be thinking internationally and positioning themselves as future global professionals, many may not consider this part of their student experience and even fewer are able to take advantage of existing exchange or study abroad opportunities.

The global initiatives

In response to our perspective on global and internationalised curriculum, this phase was divided

into three stages each of which reflected a key point of emphasis. We aimed to develop an integrated model for targeted interventions in curriculum design and pedagogy. These interventions, in the form of case studies, were designed to support students to develop intercultural skills, knowledge and awareness through a series of staged experiences situated ‘at home’ in local contexts. The research and interventions were predominantly carried out within the School of Media and Communication utilising existing University infrastructure.



Case study GRAP2199

Initiatives for Phase 4: The Global at Home: At Home in the Global

Stage one: Identify and acknowledge existing global diversity in the classroom ('feeling global')	Case Study: Data-packs and professional development workshop
Stage two: Fostering global perspectives ('doing global')	Case Study: GRAP2199 (Communication Design History and Theory A) Case Study: GRAP2200 (Communication Design History and Theory B)
Stage three: An 'at home' global peak experience ('being global')	Case Study: COMM2324 (Interdisciplinary Communication Project - RMIT Melbourne) Case Study: COMM2386 (Interdisciplinary Communication Project - RMIT Vietnam)

Discussion

Harnessing diversity: Recognising and celebrating the students' existing diversity and strengths

This phase of the project presented an opportunity to partner with RMIT's Office of Business Intelligence and the College Senior Advisors Learning and Teaching on the development of de-identified enrolled student data-packs and professional development workshops.

The dissemination of these de-identified data-packs prior to the commencement of the teaching period, supported by staff workshops, resulted in more responsive and relevant curriculum planning. Additionally, the workshops we designed and presented offered a valuable platform for collaboration and sharing of knowledge and skills. In bringing programs together with this information and support, staff at all levels were able to respond to existing cohort diversity and make meaningful plans for the changing diversity of cohorts at multiple transition points within programs.

Our findings suggest that accurate and accessible information concerning cohort diversity may also facilitate more adaptive, responsive and innovative approaches to assessment and other indicators of student success. In addition, equipping staff with this information early and throughout the cohort lifecycle enables educators and higher education institutions to mediate student and employer expectations.

Embedding a global employability framework

Expanding existing best practice models of employer embedded curriculum and assessment design, our work within the first year core Bachelor of Design (Communication Design) course to create assessment tasks that supported students in developing aspects of their professional identity within the context of the

interconnected, globalised world demonstrate the benefits associated with such interventions. In addition, we ran two surveys issued to all academic staff in the School of Media and Communication inviting comment on professional development needs within the concept of 'The Global at Home'.

Findings reveal that early exposure to employers help students to clarify professional goals as well as build confidence in their pre-existing skills. Such early interventions promote a deeper sense of belonging to professional discipline, increase enthusiasm for the discipline and cement commitment to improve generic and specialist skills for future employment anywhere in the world. The opportunity to receive direct feedback at various stages in the completion of the task offers the opportunity to engage in a genuine dialogue with participating employers and reinforces a sense of belonging to the profession and early professional identity. Importantly, working directly with international 'real-life' clients tests student's capacity to adhere to professional standards, and expands their foundational skills and cultural understanding to develop internationally relevant communications and creative solutions.

From the perspective of staff, our results uncover a strong demand for resources, training and support to embed global competencies within curriculum:

The university needs to invest in these resources and in staff training which would identify what the particular cultural group has experienced in previous education. This is actually more critical than blanket cultural sensitivity training, and might help staff deal with the learning style of individual students and their particular backgrounds.

I have both international experience and contacts. I know how to embed these in my programs and courses. What I do

not have at RMIT is any supporting infrastructure (systems, processes and technological support) to enable these to be taken to an appropriate level. Having to apply for external funding to 'internationalise' is rather sad for a university that purports to have a global outlook. RMIT's systems are antithetical to good practice in this regard.

Our findings affirm the shared benefits associated with directly connecting students, educators, employers and clients to encourage a sustained dialogue from the beginning of the higher education experience. As one student noted in a focus group, this allowed students to develop their professional identity “organically and naturally” while simultaneously building core disciplinary skills. Importantly, employer-embedded assessment is proven to effect an increase in equity and professional connections for all members of the cohort by facilitating relationships between employers and students who might not otherwise participate these types of global project experiences in first year.

Developing intercultural competencies through peak global experiences

The Interdisciplinary Communication Project at home study tour provided positive results, particular for students from diverse backgrounds who were offered opportunities for sustained work-integrated intercultural engagement and

the development of basic tools for capacity building. Given that the acquisition of these capacities occurs in stops and starts alongside each individual's growing awareness of inequities and intercultural awareness, the project allowed for intercultural relationships to develop as organically as possible.

Despite these positive results, full reciprocity and equitable intercultural engagement remain ongoing issues, and highlight that study tours are not a one-stop answer to the development of global citizens. The challenge for educational institutions and educators is to recognize that “study abroad in and of itself does not lead to [that] development” (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002, p.43). Meaningful intercultural learning requires purposeful design that shapes spaces not only of encounter but also of sustained reflection. Reflecting on the teaching experience, course coordinators asserted that time-shifting and prolonged engagement resulted in overall better student experiences. However, like students, they noted that prolonging cross-cultural interactions did not completely negate the ethnocentric behaviours that had characterised earlier iterations of the subject.



Case study At Home Study Tour

The Belonging Project: Conclusion



The Belonging Project: Conclusion

Students learn best when they are connected and confident, and it is the obligation of universities to assist each individual to gain the skills and knowledge to achieve their professional and personal goals. A sense of belonging is essential to this objective.

Our work has proven the value of The Belonging Project Narrative Model. This model was designed for delivery in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University and informed by contemporary literature and research. Its design has been tailored to the characteristics and features of our university and, thus, the model is not presented for the purpose of direct application to other higher educational settings. Instead, it offers a rigorously researched reference for other institutions in the development of transferrable approaches to enhance the student experience.

Within the unique context of our institution, we learnt that:

1. The **Belonging Project Narrative Model works** when applied to a holistic, co-curricula environment.
2. **Belonging as an ethos also works**, particularly when embraced and embedded across programs, schools and the university.
3. **It's hard but worth it for everyone!**

Our research, recommendations and disseminations have made valuable contributions to our school and wider institution despite the inevitable changes – internal and external – which are characteristic of contemporary higher institutions globally. Like our students, we have adapted and approached our work with the flexibility required to navigate this vibrant and challenging terrain.

Thus, a key to our success has been the advocacy, passion and determination of all the project champions embedded throughout the university who share the objective of making the RMIT student experience one which meets the needs of the diverse contemporary Australian student population. This cohort consists of our research team, the staff and students who participated in the research, and the wider community of individuals who have supported and contributed to the project.



Students hard at work in the Atelier Space

What worked for us

1.	Start small and sustainable! Develop low-cost, flexible initiatives aligned to program, school and university strategic goals which can start small and build over time.
2.	Work with what you have got! Use action-based research models supported by short-term, initiative-based funding opportunities to maximise meaningful research outputs.
3.	Go grassroots! Harness support and engagement from key staff (academic, professional and service) and identify champions who will advocate and support your work.
4.	Connect with your sector! Get outside your institutional walls and engage with the sector and industry.
5.	Get your research out there! Disseminate and talk about your findings through a range of avenues, both within your institution and externally.
6.	Embrace diversity! Acknowledge the diversity (local and international) throughout your institution.
7.	Celebrate learning and teaching! A strong L&T culture is required and can be promoted by the project.

What to be prepared for

1.	Institutional change and the associated issues, including staff change fatigue and academic time constraints.
2.	Research team pressures associated with undertaking a longitudinal, multi-dimensional research project based on multiple interconnected and simultaneous phases and tiers.
3.	Changing research funding models and government priorities which impact upon project delivery, including staff and funding.
4.	Challenges associated with advocating for the incorporation of research findings into institutional practice in order to generate sectoral change.
5.	Challenges of embedding recommendations arising from a grassroots student-focused versus top down strategy-lead project.

The future of The Belonging Project

The success of the project can be measured through the ongoing life of initiatives. The data-pack initiative has been embraced by the University and is likely to become a valuable part in creating an enhanced first year experience for students entering at any point of a program. Cohort Days Out continue to be embraced by programs as a low-cost, easy to deliver model of building a sense of belonging within program cohorts, and the initiatives piloted in the School of Media and Communication stand as examples of ways to successfully adapt existing program components in order to create global intercultural experiences.

Yet, each initiative remains vulnerable in the absence of top-down, whole of university approach to an ethos of belonging. The Student Informal Space (The Atelier) is an example of the fragility of such initiatives. Despite its acknowledged value and importance in the construction of an engaged and positive student experience, in 2015 the integrity of the space was threatened by the legitimate needs for space for other uses of the building. The issues surrounding this initiative alone demonstrates the need for 'whole of university' commitment to ensure that projects of this nature are supported by institutional and structural

alignment if real and ongoing benefits of such research are to be achieved.

The enthusiasm of project participants has sustained The Belonging Project. Staff affirm the value the model and value the support and sense of belonging the project has brought within a context of constant change. Students feel more valued and committed to RMIT and their disciplines, and willingly advocate on behalf of the project.

The Belonging Project will continue to live through The Belonging Project Narrative Model, the work of staff champions who believe in an ethos of belonging, the positive experiences of students who participated in the project and the ongoing research by lead members of the project team, Bronwyn Clarke and Rachel Wilson. Watch this space!

We are happy to be contacted to discuss the Belonging Project in greater detail:

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Mapping the first year experience

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