



Feelings of Safety and Sense of Belonging in Scotland's Tertiary Education Sector: A Thematic Review to Support the National Equality Outcomes

Feelings of Safety and Sense of Belonging in Scotland's Tertiary Education Sector: A Thematic Review to Support the National Equality Outcomes

Issue Date:	23 March 2026
Reference:	SFC/CP/03/2026
Summary:	A thematic review exploring feelings of safety and sense of belonging within Colleges and Universities in Scotland to support the implementation of the National Equality Outcomes.
FAO:	Principals and Equality Leads of Scotland's colleges and universities, and the general public.
Further Information:	DIRECTORATE: Access, Learning and Outcomes EMAIL: equalities@sfc.ac.uk

Table of Contents

Feelings of Safety and Sense of Belonging in Scotland’s Tertiary Education Sector: A Thematic Review to Support the National Equality Outcomes	1
Executive Summary Creating safety and a sense of belonging in the tertiary system: the findings of a thematic review	4
Background	4
Key findings.....	4
Conclusions and recommendations.....	5
Feelings of Safety and Sense of Belonging in Scotland’s Tertiary Education Sector: A Thematic Review to Support the National Equality Outcomes	7
Purpose.....	7
Section One: Defining safety – Literature Review	7
Defining Feelings of Safety.....	7
Psychological Safety.....	9
Inclusion.....	10
Diversity within Institutions.....	11
Wellbeing and Mental Health.....	12
Belonging	13
Features of an institution supporting belonging and feelings of safety for staff and students	17
Defining safety within the NEOs.....	18
Section Two: Protected Characteristics, Safety and Belonging.....	19
Disability	19
Race	19
Gender Reassignment.....	20
Sexual Orientation	21
Sex.....	21
Section Three: Student Voices on Safety and Belonging.....	22
Defining safety and belonging	22

Importance of staff	22
Spaces on campus.....	23
Clubs and societies	23
Needs of different students	23
Representation	23
Collaboration	23
Section Four: Findings from 2025 Institutional Mainstreaming Equality Reports	24
Training	24
Staff and Student Views.....	24
Reporting Systems	24
Community	25
Section Five: Recommendations	25
For SFC	25
For the EHRC.....	25
For Institutions.....	25
Next Steps	26

Executive Summary

Creating safety and a sense of belonging in the tertiary system: the findings of a thematic review

Background

1. In 2023, SFC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published [Tackling Persistent Inequalities Together](#). This report provided a set of National Equality Outcomes (NEOs) split across protected characteristics and asked the sector to contribute to them and report on their progress in their PSED reports. SFC and EHRC held a national event to discuss the report and support the sector to make this transition. At this event, SFC and EHRC committed to a set of thematic reviews to provide support to the sector.
2. The sector asked for more clarity on what SFC and EHRC meant by the term “safety” in some of the NEOs (see below) and asked for this to be considered as a thematic review. Please note that in addition to the below the NEOs on sex and religion and belief have a strong link to safety and report and support systems.
 - Disabled staff and students report feeling safe in the tertiary system.
 - Trans staff and students report feeling safe to be themselves in the tertiary system.
 - Staff and students feel supported and safe and are confident that complaints of harassment or bias on the grounds of race will be dealt with appropriately because complaints procedures are fit for purpose and offer effective redress.
3. The review has been completed through desk-based research including published staff and student surveys and a series of focus group discussions with Students’ Associations.

Key findings

- The evidence showed that safety and belonging are central to positive educational outcomes and experiences.
- Safety and belonging are interconnected and directly impact on both staff and student experience.
- Individuals with protected characteristics face disproportionate barriers to belonging.

- Inclusion and psychological safety are foundational components of institutional wellbeing and performance.
- Data capture on belonging and protected characteristics remains inconsistent and requires sector-wide improvement.
- Students emphasised the importance of being respected, represented, and supported. Belonging was strongly linked to relationships with staff, access to inclusive physical spaces, and participation in clubs and societies.
- Students in colleges also highlighted the importance of access to student support funding, physical spaces and support structures in relation to safety and belonging.
- Differences were observed between university and college experiences, particularly regarding basic needs and community-building.
- Institutions are progressing work on equality, diversity, and inclusion by implementing training, enhancing reporting systems, and supporting staff/student networks. However, gaps remain around data quality, consistency, and cross-sector sharing of effective practice.

Conclusions and recommendations

4. The review concludes that SFC, EHRC and institutions should define safety in the context of the NEOs as follows:

Staff and students should feel supported and able to participate and engage with the institution and their employment and/or learning in a way which allows them to grow, flourish and express their true self, free from abuse or harassment.

5. It also outlined six key recommendations, these are:

For SFC

- SFC will explore mechanisms to better capture data on belonging in both the college and university sector by Autumn 2026 and will update equality progress and seek feedback on potential proposals by Spring 2027.
- SFC should publish and promote examples of innovative practice in bi-annual blogs up to April 2027 such as projects like the [STEP Appreciating Belonging and Enabling Change: From Strategy to Practice Project](#).

For the EHRC

- Working with SFC, EHRC should consider the support available to institutions regarding capturing staff data and declarations of protected characteristics, particularly where staff have chosen 'prefer not to say' and share good practice from across the public sector with the tertiary sector.

For Institutions

- Institutions should include specific questions on sense of belonging and safety in staff and student surveys to set a baseline and measure progress on achieving relevant NEOs.
- Institutions should use this review to reflect and plan how they can improve, provide and promote a safe environment and sense of belonging for staff and students. This may be through supporting students' associations and institutional initiatives to foster belonging, creating and promoting physical spaces, supporting implementation and continuation of clubs and societies, student voice work etc. and how they share this work with colleagues across the sector.
- Institutions should ensure reporting mechanisms are in place and that they work for students and staff. These mechanisms should enable students and staff to raise concerns and issues within the institution. The data and feedback gathered should be used to further develop a safe environment and a sense of belonging.

Feelings of Safety and Sense of Belonging in Scotland's Tertiary Education Sector: A Thematic Review to Support the National Equality Outcomes

Purpose

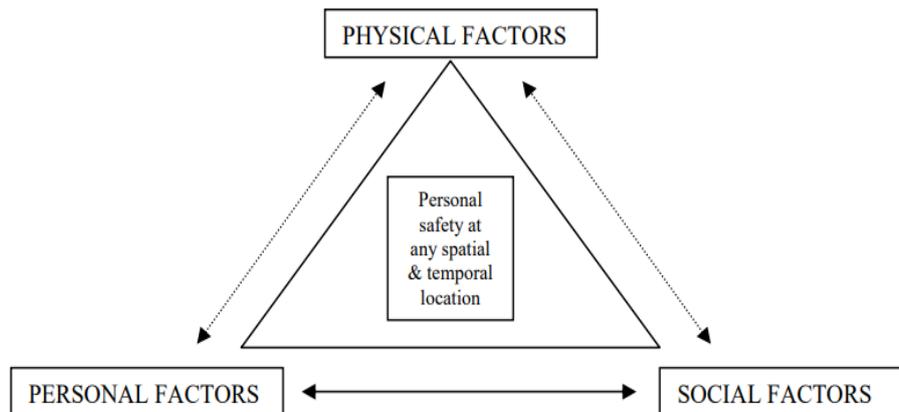
1. This document is a thematic review focused on safety and belonging in Scotland's tertiary institutions. It highlights challenges for staff and students, especially those with protected characteristics, and encourages progress towards the National Equality Outcomes. The report also showcases effective practices supporting safety on Scottish campuses.
2. The review is split into several sections, the first of which is a literature review of concepts of safety and belonging within tertiary education. The second section considers the current context of sense of safety and belonging for students with protected characteristics in the UK. The third section captures the feedback from student officers within Scottish institutions, and the fourth section considers institutional approaches to addressing safety and belonging.
3. The recommendations outlined at the end of this report are intended to support institutions in their work to achieve the NEOs particularly around feelings of safety but may have broader implications for inclusivity and culture within the sector.

Section One: Defining safety – Literature Review

Defining Feelings of Safety

4. In order to support the sector in tackling the NEOs relating to feelings of safety we must first identify how we define and conceptualise feelings of safety. The literature review below provides further information which informs the concept of safety and the interlinkages with a sense of belonging.
5. The consideration of safety for staff and students within Scotland's tertiary education sector requires a holistic approach to capture a personal sense of safety, particularly for those members of institutional communities with protected characteristics.

6. Waters et al. (2004)¹ defined campus safety as a combination of personal, physical, and social factors that affect individuals' sense of security, including protected characteristics, environment and lighting, and public services and resources.



7. Cheryl Step² suggests safety and belonging are closely linked. Even in less ideal conditions, shared community boosts safety. The paper presents a hierarchy of safety, starting with physical safety (per Maslow), which is essential for healthy connections. Psychological safety means feeling secure and valued, free from verbal threats; only then can emotional safety develop and experiences be shared. Meeting these aspects enables social safety, allowing participation. Moral safety arises when one feels committed to group values after the other forms of safety are fulfilled.

¹ Waters, J., Neale, R et al.; 'Personal Safety on University Campuses – Defining Personal Safety Using the Delphi Method' 2004

² The Interconnection of Safety and Belonging | PACEsConnection



8. Step cites research on belonging³ which indicated the positive impact social connection has been found to have on mental health. The author argues that ‘feeling safe allows us to build connection with others; that connection actually brings a higher sense of safety, social safety, which in turn supports our ability to be creative, make choices, plan and follow through with tasks that help us individually and as a group’. The concept that a sense of belonging is interconnected to feelings of safety is one we will look to further explore within the context of tertiary education.
9. The below section will explore various elements which contribute to an overall sense of safety and belonging within tertiary education, which institutions may find it useful to consider in their work.

Psychological Safety

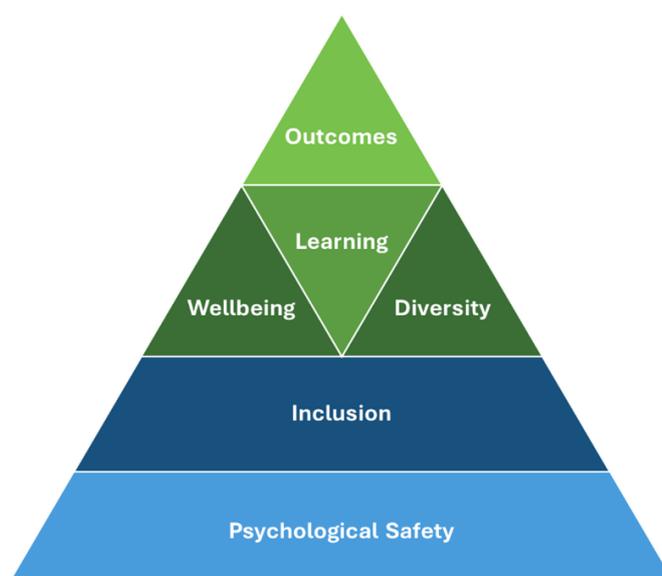
10. Research shows that psychological safety is important for nursing students in practical learning environments. Defined as a shared belief that it’s safe to take interpersonal risks—such as asking questions or voicing concerns—psychological safety encourages open communication, collaboration, and effective patient care. Creating positive learning spaces where students can speak up and contribute fosters both their sense of safety and belonging.

³ [Mere belonging: The power of social connections](#). Walton, G. M., Cohen, G. L., Cwir, D., & Spencer, S. J. (2012). Mere belonging: The power of social connections. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(3), 513–532. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025731>

11. Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023)⁴ highlight that relationships and networks serve as social capital, fostering a sense of belonging through positive support and trust in the learning environment. Belonging impacts engagement, performance, and attitudes towards education and peers (Collins 2021⁵; Viola 2021⁶). Penner et al. (2021)⁷ found friendly staff and students enhance campus climate and belonging, supporting previous research on the importance of relationships for safety and connection in tertiary education.
12. International students were more likely to have a sense of belonging when the others in a group have similar backgrounds or experiences linked to their ethnic identity. This was linked to better mental health scores and may therefore have positive effects on student wellbeing (Penner et al. 2021).

Inclusion

13. To enhance belonging for staff and students, inclusion must enable diversity, and psychological safety is key—it supports but doesn't guarantee inclusion. According to the EdCan Network, diverse teams perform better, with psychological safety being vital for high performance. Inclusion is also fundamental to wellbeing; when employees and students feel well and safe, they achieve more. This perspective informs wellbeing initiatives within Scottish education institutions.



⁴ [Gulsah Dost & Laura Mazzoli Smith \(2023\) Understanding higher education students' sense of belonging: a qualitative meta-ethnographic analysis, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 47:6, 822-849, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2023.2191176](#)

⁵ [Collins, J. \(2021\). "Validation in Doctoral Education: Exploring PhD Students' Perceptions of Belonging to Scaffold Doctoral Identity Work." International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 16, 715–735. doi:10.28945/4876](#)

⁶ [Viola, J. K. 2021. "Belonging and Global Citizenship in a STEM University." Education Sciences 11 \(12\): 803. doi:10.3390/educsci11120803.](#)

⁷ [Penner, K., D. de Moissac, R. Rocque, F. Giasson, K. Prada, and P. Brochu. 2021. "Sense of Belonging and Social Climate in an Official Language Minority Post-Secondary Setting." Canadian Journal of Higher Education 51 \(4\): 26–39. doi:10.47678/cjhe.v51i4.189087.](#)

14. This research highlights the importance of viewing safety through an inclusion lens. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Student Academic Experience Survey 2022 found that institutional diversity supports students' sense of belonging. Institutions should consider ways to promote psychological safety to enhance inclusion and belonging.

Diversity within Institutions

15. Research shows student safety perceptions are closely tied to their sense of belonging at school. Institutional diversity influences this, especially when students find relatable groups.
16. Chiu et al. (2025)⁸ applied the concept of conditional belonging to minority ethnic Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students in the UK, finding that many felt their acceptance depended on their achievements. Students described pressure to appear high achieving in elite institutions, making their sense of belonging contingent on academic success. Black students especially noted feeling tokenised and alienated, which undermined their sense of inclusion.
17. Gost and Mazzoli Smith⁹ emphasise the importance of students forming connections beyond their cultural or linguistic groups to foster belonging, noting that gravitating toward similar backgrounds restricts diverse social interaction. Institutions should actively create inclusive spaces to support cross-group engagement. Gao and Liu (2021)¹⁰ found that limited cross-cultural interaction can increase isolation for minoritised students. While students often feel more included among those with similar experiences, there is a need to balance this with the benefits of broader diversity in social opportunities.
18. A report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) (2024)¹¹ had sought to capture the experiences of Trans and non-binary students within higher education within the UK from application and through their studies. The report makes recommendations for how institutions might seek to support trans and non-binary students through ensuring staff receive appropriate training, making data collection more consistent and for academic staff to be vigilant as to those students who may be struggling.

⁸ Chiu, Y.L.T., Wong, B., Murray, Ó.M. *et al.* 'I deserve to be here': minority ethnic students and their conditional belonging in UK higher education. *High Educ* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-025-01469-1>

⁹ [Gulsah Dost & Laura Mazzoli Smith \(2023\) Understanding higher education students' sense of belonging: a qualitative meta-ethnographic analysis, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47:6, 822-849, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2023.2191176](#)

¹⁰ Gao, F., & Liu, H. C. Y. (2021). Guests in someone else's house? Sense of belonging among ethnic minority students in a Hong Kong university. *British Educational Research Journal*, 47(4), 1004–1020.

¹¹ [Hepi-Report-174 Trans-and-non-binary-student-experiences-WEB-05_06_24.pdf](#)

19. WonkHE & Pearson¹² Study noted that students who were disabled, non-binary, gay and lesbian, and students who identify their sexuality as something other than heterosexual, bisexual, or gay or lesbian, report lower overall belonging within their comparator groups. This also emphasises the challenges in sense of belonging for those with protected characteristics.
20. Research from Osbourne et al. (2022)¹³ sought to capture Black students' experience of "acceptable" racism within a UK university. The research reflected on the experiences of a group of Black students within a predominantly white institution and the challenges they faced with experiencing racism. It seeks to highlight the power dynamics at play and the impact this has on Black students.
21. The Advance HE and HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey 2022 found that having a diverse student population was more important across all groups than in the previous year, rising from 21% for the total sample last year to 36%. Student diversity was even more important for LGB+ students (46%). Black students found having a diverse student population to be fifteen percentage points more important than White students. Black students also found staff diversity seven percentage points more important. Asian students also found student diversity to be more important, with 43% saying this contributed most to belonging as opposed to only 32% for White students. Asian students also found staff diversity important (30% for Asian students as opposed to only 19% for White students).
22. In the [Staying Power](#) report for Universities and Colleges Union, Rollock¹⁴ highlights the importance and impact of institutional culture on the experience of Black, female professors and the impact it can have on career progression for academics, particularly at the intersection of race and sex.
23. The research indicates that visible diversity of staff can have an impact on how individuals experience an institution as a student and staff member from minoritised backgrounds. Within sector feedback it has been reflected that there is still more work to do for staff to feel able to identify themselves within institutional surveys. SFC are investigating how we can work with EHRC to provide the tertiary sector with guidance on staff representation and diversity including support with data capture.

Wellbeing and Mental Health

24. Within the scope of this thematic review is a consideration of how feelings of safety within tertiary education and fostering a sense of belonging can impact on wellbeing

¹² [Building Belonging in Higher Education' Report \(2022\)](#)

¹³ Osbourne, L., Barnett, J., & Blackwood, L. (2023). Black students' experiences of "acceptable" racism at a UK university. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 33(1), 43–55. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2637>

¹⁴ [UCU Rollock February 2019.pdf](#)

and mental health of staff and students. The below resources set out some of what is available to institutions and learners in Scotland.

- [Student Mental Health Action Plan](#)
 - [Thriving Learners | Mental Health Foundation](#)
 - [What we do - Student Mental Health Scotland - Think Positive](#)
 - [Advance HE Education for Mental Health Toolkit](#)¹⁵ – This includes specific sections relating to race equity, LGBTQ+ students, transgender students, and those who are neurodiverse including ASC, ADHD and Sensory Impairments.
25. The Advance HE Education for Mental Health Toolkit outlines how institutions can support protected characteristics in the learning environment by focusing on psychological safety and social belonging. Research shows that a stronger sense of belonging is associated with improved well-being and mental health outcomes for higher education students (Gopalan, Linden-Carmichael, and Lanza 2022)¹⁶.
26. The Scottish Government released their [Student Mental Health Action Plan](#) on 13 September 2024. SFC contributed via the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group and must integrate the action plan into assurance procedures. Institutions are encouraged to use NHS and local authority resources. The Delivery Group still meets regularly, with SFC actively participating.

Belonging

27. In exploring students’ sense of belonging and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kelly et al (2024)¹⁷ provide the below definition to support their study:
- ‘The definition of belonging utilised in the literature that explores students’ sense of belonging in Higher Education is that belonging includes feelings of inclusion, and acceptance and being valued at university (Goodenow & Grady, 1993¹⁸).’

¹⁵ [Education for Mental Health Toolkit | Advance HE](#)

¹⁶ Gopalan, M., A. Linden-Carmichael, and S. Lanza. 2022. “College Students’ Sense of Belonging and Mental Health Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 70 (2): 228–233. [doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.10.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.10.010).

¹⁷ Kelly, M. L., Nieuwoudt, J., Willis, R., & Lee, M. F. (2024). Belonging, Enjoyment, Motivation, and Retention: University Students’ Sense of Belonging Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251241231242>

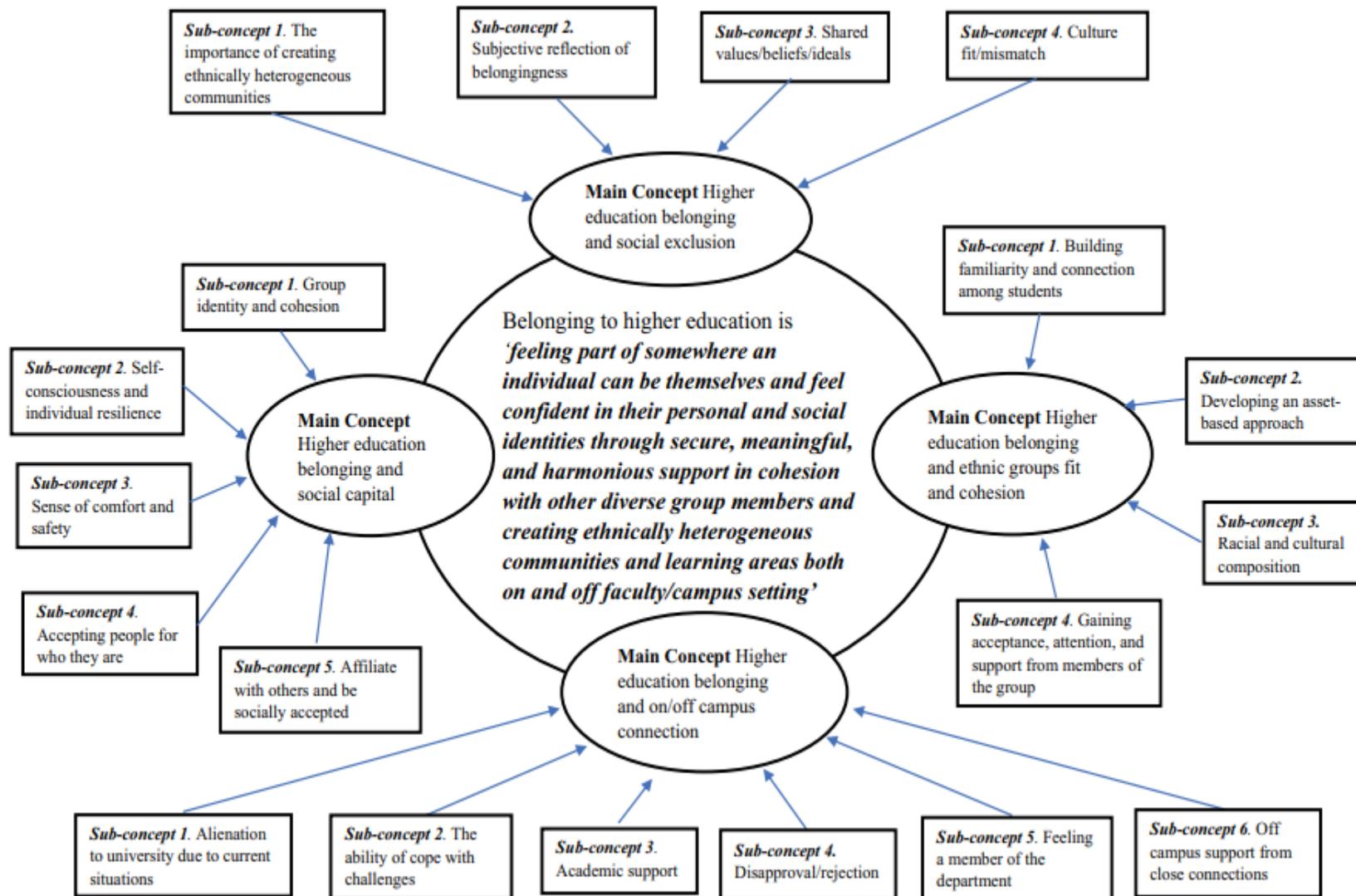
¹⁸ Goodenow C., Grady K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends’ values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 62(1), 60-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1993.9943831>

28. The paper expands on this definition arguing that, ‘Belonging is regarded as a fundamental psychological necessity, and “human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522¹⁹).’
29. In education, a student's sense of belonging reflects how integrated and accepted they feel in the learning environment, shaped by relationships with peers and staff and recognition of their abilities.
30. Fernandez et al. (2023)²⁰ examined belonging in universities, highlighting how gender and socio-economic backgrounds shape its meaning. Underrepresented students often described belonging as shared experiences, while some from lower socio-economic groups reported feeling less connected due to differing experiences from their peers.
31. Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023)²¹ have built on this and have argued in their meta-ethnographic analysis of sense of belonging for HE students that belonging is founded on the principles discussed in relation to psychological safety. The below diagram seeks to represent the main concepts which contribute to students’ sense of belonging.

¹⁹ Baumeister R. F., Leary M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>

²⁰ Fernández, D.P., Ryan, M.K. & Begeny, C.T. Recognizing the diversity in how students define belonging: evidence of differing conceptualizations, including as a function of students’ gender and socioeconomic background. *Soc Psychol Educ* 26, 673–708 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09761-7>

²¹ Gulsah Dost & Laura Mazzoli Smith (2023) Understanding higher education students’ sense of belonging: a qualitative meta-ethnographic analysis, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47:6, 822-849, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2023.2191176](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2191176)



32. Social capital here refers to relationships and networks formed in higher education, with safety and inclusion essential for building a sense of belonging.
33. Belonging among students from different ethnic groups is shaped by having spaces to share experiences, as highlighted in the diversity section (see paragraph 15).
34. ‘Social exclusion’ describes being left out of social groups, hindering relationship-building and belonging, which can affect individuals with protected characteristics and ties into intersectionality and identity.
35. On- and off-campus connections were influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, impacting belonging based on whether support networks are within or outside the institution, such as for mature students.
36. The WonkHE and Pearson ‘[Building Belonging in Higher Education’ Report \(2022\)](#)²² proposes four tenets which form the foundations of belonging within higher education; connection, inclusion, support and autonomy. The report examines each of these factors in turn, considering staff and student experience, survey data, actions in practice and recommendations for institutions.
37. The College Development Network Pathways from Poverty research²³ highlighted the importance of safe spaces and creating opportunities to build belonging both for learners and the wider community. The case studies within the report reflected on the benefit of wider community engagement projects hosted at the college which broke down barriers so that the institution was seen as accessible and aided transitions into learning.
38. As part of the Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) Enhancement Themes work, a student-led project sought to capture and share good practice around [innovation in digital communities](#) which culminated in an event in 2021 and ‘top tips’ for building online communities.
39. A collaborative cluster project which focused on creating a toolkit for developing a sense of belonging in online distance learning also formed part of the Enhancement Themes work. The cluster sought to enhance the student experience of distance, online, and rural learners by developing a toolkit to promote the learners’ sense of belonging at module and programme level. The toolkit can be found [here](#).

²² [Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach](#)

²³ [Pathways-from-Poverty-Colleges-for-Communities.pdf](#)

Features of an institution supporting belonging and feelings of safety for staff and students

40. A study was undertaken by London School of Economics (LSE) Students' Union²⁴ to explore student perceptions of safety in the LSE community. Recommendations for physical changes following the feedback of students included improving lighting on campus, promotion of safe contacts in campus spaces and ensuring accessibility of campus during construction.
41. A study at Kingston University²⁵ found that students' feelings of acceptance, inclusion, comfort, and safety were tied to the campus' overall atmosphere rather than specific spaces. Campus areas helped foster social relationships, even though no particular space was linked directly to belonging.
42. Students' sense of belonging is mainly shaped by their relationships with peers and staff. Support from academic staff helps students develop a strong student identity during their transition to higher education (Levett-Jones et al, 2009; O'Sullivan et al, 2019). When students feel recognised by staff, it signals that they matter and are valued as individuals within the institution.
43. This again emphasises the relational nature of belonging. Institutions should be mindful of the spaces which are available to staff and students, both physically on campus and digitally, which can foster relationships and an inclusive atmosphere.
44. [Research by Edinburgh Napier University](#)²⁶ identified challenges for students transferring from college to university in Scotland, such as higher academic demands, joining established cohorts, and negative perceptions. To overcome social barriers, students suggested having a named contact, attending events like open days and freshers' fairs, and opportunities to build connections within the university.
45. [CDN Trauma Informed College Programme](#) began in 2023-24 after the Pathways from Poverty project, offering colleges training and resources to address learner and community challenges. This method can bridge service gaps, foster empowerment, and strengthen inclusivity by cultivating connections that promote belonging and safety for staff and students.
46. In March 2025, CDN and Colleges Scotland also released [Tackling Gender-based Violence in Scottish Colleges: Insights and Findings from CDN and Colleges Scotland's New Report](#), which reviews current strategies addressing gender-based violence and harassment in Scotland's colleges. The report highlights efforts to keep students safe

²⁴[Heather Farley, Caroline Hilgers, Olivia Storz; 'Student perceptions of safety in the LSE Community'](#)

²⁵[Mulrooney, Hilda & Kelly, Alison. \(2020\). The university campus and a sense of belonging: what do students think?. New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences. 10.29311/ndtps.v0i15.3590.](#)

²⁶[Meharg, Debbie, Craighill, Stephanie, Varey, Alison and Cairncross, Sandra \(2017\) Belonging: Blurring the Boundaries, Scottish Educational Review 49\(1\), 89-103.](#)

and suggests improvements such as preventative actions, enhanced training, better reporting systems, and sector-wide guidance.

47. The [LGBT Youth Scotland Life in Scotland: Education Report 2023](#) reflects participants' views how educational spaces can be respectful and inclusive of LGBTI Identities including:
- Respectful language – use of correct names and pronouns and correct use of LGBTI terminology.
 - Provision of a safe space within an institution for LGBTI students to access.
 - Fostering community – opportunities for LGBTI students to meet, share experiences and work together.
 - Promote an inclusive culture where LGBTI identities are understood, respected, and not taboo.
48. As part of Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) the [Appreciating Belonging and Enabling Change: From Strategy to Practice Project](#) will be led by Heriot-Watt University in collaboration with Dundee and Angus College, Glasgow Clyde College, Open University in Scotland, Robert Gordon University, SRUC, and UHI Inverness. The project intends to capture innovative and key practice to support belonging in Scottish institutions along with connecting experts from across the sector and disseminating the good practice.

Defining safety within the NEOs

49. Literature shows that safety and belonging in tertiary education are complex issues. For NEOs, considering intersectional experiences is key to creating an environment where staff and students feel supported and engaged. Institutions should evaluate how they enable growth, self-expression, and genuine participation as measures of success.
50. The following definition is intended to provide greater clarity and support institutions in their adoption of the NEOs:

Staff and students should feel supported and able to participate and engage with the institution and their employment and/or learning in a way which allows them to grow, flourish and express their true self, free from abuse or harassment.

51. This definition aligns with the reflections of current Students' Associations Sabbatical Officers who were interviewed about their experiences as part of the review process. This is discussed in more detail in section three of this report.

Section Two: Protected Characteristics, Safety and Belonging

52. The literature discusses how safety and belonging are defined and what affects individuals' experiences in tertiary education. This section reviews recent data highlighting ongoing challenges for students and staff with protected characteristics in UK tertiary education, underscoring the need to engage with NEOs to address persistent inequalities for staff and students.

Disability

53. In 2024²⁷, half of respondents to the Disabled Students UK (DSUK) [Annual Disabled Students Survey](#) felt part of a community, up from 42% in 2023²⁸. However, only 46% found extracurricular activities accessible, affecting their ability to connect and belong. DSUK aims for over 65% accessibility by 2033. While 53% had peers to share experiences with, just 26% felt represented and less than 25% felt supported by their students' union, highlighting institutional gaps.
54. Just 32% of students noted disabled academics as role models at their institution, impacting perceptions of inclusivity. Only 37% felt educators understood how to make teaching accessible, with challenges in ableism and inconsistent support persisting.
55. The Annual Disabled Student Survey, led by DSUK, examines disabled student experiences in UK universities. The 2024 report identified Heriot-Watt University as the only Scottish institution meeting response criteria. SFC will continue sharing updates about future surveys.

Race

56. SFC has identified a difference between the NEO's use of "Race" (as defined by the Equality Act 2010) and data classifications in the sector, which uses "Ethnic Group." While "Race" is a social construct that differs from "Ethnic Group" and "National Identity," the current terminology may overlook the range of individual experiences. Guidance on summarising ethnicity data for reports can be found on the SFC website ([for colleges](#)) and HESA ([for universities](#)). SFC will seek to better align terminology and data in future reports so that we reduce the risk of homogenising experiences across different ethnic heritages and backgrounds.
57. The Tackling Persistent Inequalities Together Report (2023) refers to the [EHRC's Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged Report \(2019\)](#) and suggests adopting its recommended actions when implementing the NEO on safety. This includes enhancing

²⁷ [2024-Access-Insights-Report.pdf](#)

²⁸ [Disabled-Students-UK Access-Insights-2023-Report.pdf](#)

reporting procedures, collecting relevant data, and working with the SPSO on complaint management.

58. UUK's [Tackling Racial Harassment in Higher Education Report \(2020\)](#) reveals that 66% of individuals who experienced racial harassment reported losing trust, feeling isolated, or deliberately avoiding certain areas or people. Staff shared similar responses. Notably, women expressed higher rates of vulnerability (44%) than men (19%).

Gender Reassignment

59. This report recognises that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) experiences are diverse and intersectional. It uses 'trans' to refer to those whose lived gender differs from their birth-assigned gender, acknowledging evolving definitions.
60. The UK National LGBT Survey²⁹ found threats and harassment remain prevalent in universities, though somewhat less than in other settings. 22% of trans students faced verbal harassment at university (rising to 35% in colleges and 55% in secondary schools). Physical harassment affected 3% in universities, 4% in colleges, and 9% in schools.
61. The [LGBT Youth Scotland Trans Report 2024](#) highlighted:
- 19% of trans youth left education due to homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia, compared to 6% of cisgender peers.
 - 80% reported negative educational impacts; only 44% felt safe being themselves at work/training (vs. 64% of cisgender respondents).
 - The same survey found 80% of transgender participants believed discrimination affected their education, with 47% reporting lower attainment and 40% noting impacts on training opportunities.
 - Many young people missed opportunities due to transphobia, impacting their participation, performance, and leading to long-term effects such as missed qualifications and financial hardship.
62. The [LGBT in Britain: Universities Report 2018](#) noted one in five trans students were advised by staff to hide their identity, and many non-binary and trans students did not feel able to be themselves at university.
63. The University and College Union's report, [Challenging LGBT+ exclusion in UK higher education](#), found 91% of LGBT+ staff are open at work, though being 'out' can cause

²⁹ Government Equalities Office, National LGBT Survey Annex 6: Education, 2018
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-lgbt-survey-summary-report>

stress. Coming out as trans or non-binary presents unique challenges related to identity expression and societal expectations.

Sexual Orientation

64. According to the [LGBT in Britain: Universities Report 2018](#), 42% of LGBT students concealed their identity at university due to fear of discrimination, higher among trans (61%), disabled (51%), students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (48%), students of faith (46%), and bisexuals (47%) compared to gay/lesbian students (29%).
65. The report found LGBT students in rural areas were more likely to be encouraged to hide their orientation (18%) than those in urban areas (7%). Intersectionality showed 16% of students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds and 13% of students of faith reported being urged to disguise their identity.
66. The [Stonewall Shut out of Education Report 2020](#) highlighted that LGBT students often felt isolated and unsupported, citing lack of visible diversity and LGBT-inclusive content as key challenges.
67. The [LGBT Youth Scotland Life in Scotland: Education Report 2023](#) showed 69% of participants felt supported at college/university, noting the positive impact of openly LGBTI staff as role models.
68. UCU's [Challenging LGBT+ exclusion in UK higher education](#) report revealed 91% of LGBT+ staff are 'out' at work, with UK higher education viewed as relatively progressive, though some noted repeated disclosure could cause stress.

Sex

69. Gender-based violence (GBV) in tertiary education negatively affects the safety and sense of belonging of both staff and students. Various UK surveys indicate its prevalence: a 2013 NUS report found 1 in 4 female students experienced unwanted sexual behaviour; a 2018 survey by Revolt Sexual Assault³⁰ reported 62% of students and graduates had faced sexual violence; and a 2023 Oxford study³¹ showed one in five respondents were victims of sexual touching or rape. A [2021³² survey](#) of 554 male students revealed 63 admitted to committing 251 incidents of sexual assault, rape, or other coercive acts over two years.

³⁰ <https://revoltsexualassault.com/research/>

³¹ Steele, B., Degli Esposti, M., Mandeville, P., & Humphreys, D. K. (2023). Sexual Violence Among Higher Education Students in the United Kingdom: Results from the Oxford Understanding Relationships, Sex, Power, Abuse and Consent Experiences Study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 39(9-10), 1926-1951. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605231212167> (Original work published 2024)

³² [Understanding Sexual Aggression in UK Male University Students](#)

70. The Office for Students³³ piloted a voluntary survey among final-year undergraduates to capture GBV prevalence the methodology used excluded further education, postgraduate students, and those who did not complete their studies. Sector-wide conversations and consistent data collection are needed for comprehensive understanding and improvements. Recognising diverse experiences and intersectionality is crucial in addressing these challenges and fostering institutional growth. Much of the existing data is from third-sector organisations and trade unions, highlighting the importance of broad and systematic evidence-gathering.
71. In 2018 the [Equally Safe in Higher Education Toolkit](#) was developed as a free resource for Scottish colleges and universities working to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) on their campuses.
72. [EmilyTest](#) – has developed a [GBV Charter](#), training programmes and resources to support institutions to prevent and better respond to GBV in tertiary education.

Section Three: Student Voices on Safety and Belonging

73. SFC is immensely grateful to all the student officers and staff who took the time to provide their views on safety and belonging and what that looks like in their institutional context.
74. To explore safety and belonging, SFC consulted student representatives from Colleges and Universities at the start of the 2025-2026 academic year. Twelve interviews were conducted with elected student officers from eleven institutions via Microsoft Teams over three weeks. Students' Associations could also submit written responses, with three submissions received.

Defining safety and belonging

75. Student officers defined safety and belonging in their institutions as physical, emotional, and psychological security, acceptance, respect, and self-expression. Key elements included representation and building community with staff and students.

Importance of staff

76. Students valued visible, approachable senior leadership for fostering campus belonging. Officers highlighted the need for staff training to direct students to support services beyond the classroom. Consistency across campuses and courses was also considered important.

³³ [Sexual misconduct survey 2025 - analysis of results - Office for Students](#)

Spaces on campus

77. Physical spaces and facilities help build and foster community, while limited space hinders student belonging. Students noted progress on quiet rooms, prayer spaces, and gender-neutral, inclusive and accessible facilities, but acknowledged constraints like space and funding.

Clubs and societies

78. Flexible campus spaces support clubs and societies, which help students feel a sense of belonging—both academically and socially. Some challenges exist in developing these groups, especially when student volunteers are needed for organisation. Sports and active campus campaigns contribute to community and wellbeing, with Active Campus coordinators (part of a Scotland-wide network) facilitating sports clubs and promoting physical activity in colleges.

Needs of different students

79. Student representatives at colleges noted that various student groups, such as apprentices and ESOL learners, have specific needs and show diverse levels of involvement in campus life. Some students' associations recognised the need for targeted inclusion programs to better support less-engaged groups. These efforts include providing resources for liberation groups and organising informal language cafes. Officers highlighted that cultural events are vital for fostering a sense of belonging and promoting diversity. Sharing these effective practices more widely across institutions would be beneficial.

Representation

80. Student officers emphasised the value of being visible and approachable to foster trust and belonging within the students' association. They highlighted that closing feedback loops, such as 'you said, we did' campaigns, helps students feel heard and valued. Officers also noted the importance of class representative systems and empowering students to provide feedback. Additionally, they discussed how student involvement in advocacy beyond campus contributes to community change and strengthens students' sense of belonging.

Collaboration

81. Students engaging with SFC noted that safety and belonging initiatives involved collaboration between students' associations and institutions, such as joint induction efforts and referrals to student support. Financial hardship was highlighted as a challenge, with institutions providing support like free meals and access to social

security advice. The [SafeZone](#) app was promoted for physical safety, and ongoing cooperation ensured consistent communication and effective problem-solving.

82. Discussions with student officers revealed colleges focused more on practical basic needs and campus visibility, while universities emphasised programme-level communities and committee structures. Students across institutions also reflected on broader societal and political issues affecting their sense of safety and belonging, stressing the campus community's role in offering reassurance.

Section Four: Findings from 2025 Institutional Mainstreaming Equality Reports

83. Institutional Mainstreaming Equality reports were released in Spring 2025 as part of Public Sector Equality Duty reporting. The SFC [sector summary report](#) reflects the sector's commitment to National Equality Outcomes (NEOs), focusing on ongoing efforts across colleges and universities to address inequalities in tertiary education.
84. SFC reviewed good practices for safety and belonging, using institutional reports and discussions with Student Officers. This evolving process captures both established and new initiatives, often addressing intersectionality to ensure all students feel supported. We will continue to engage with institutions to develop case studies to build on the work of this thematic review.

Training

85. Many institutions emphasised staff and student training covering equality and diversity. In 2024, the University of the West of Scotland launched mandatory modules on psychological safety and inclusivity.

Staff and Student Views

86. Institutions gathered feedback through surveys, focus groups, and collaboration with associations and networks to assess perceptions of belonging and safety. Challenges remain in data collection and disclosure rates of protected characteristics; some institutions plan initiatives to encourage disclosure and address hesitance.

Reporting Systems

87. Several institutions highlighted systems for reporting harassment and mechanisms to resolve safety concerns among staff and students.

Community

88. Institutions showcased supportive communities for those with protected characteristics via staff networks, student association projects, clubs, and societies.
89. Belonging strongly influences student experience and safety. While progress is evident, institutional culture remains central to shaping perceptions.

Section Five: Recommendations

For SFC

- SFC will explore mechanisms to better capture data on belonging in both the college and university sector by Autumn 2026 and will update equality progress and seek feedback on potential proposals by Spring 2027.
- SFC should publish and promote examples of innovative practice in bi-annual blogs up to April 2027 such as projects like the [STEP Appreciating Belonging and Enabling Change: From Strategy to Practice Project](#).

For the EHRC

- Working with SFC, EHRC should consider the support available to institutions regarding capturing staff data and declarations of protected characteristics, particularly where staff have chosen 'prefer not to say' and share good practice from across the public sector with the tertiary sector.

For Institutions

- Institutions should include specific questions on sense of belonging and safety to staff and student surveys to set a baseline and measure progress on achieving relevant NEOs.
- Institutions should use this review to reflect and plan how they can improve, provide and promote a safe environment and sense of belonging for staff and students. This may be through supporting student associations and institutional initiatives to foster belonging, creating and promoting physical spaces, supporting implementation and continuation of clubs and societies, student voice work etc. and how they share this work with colleagues across the sector.
- Institutions should ensure reporting mechanisms are in place and that they work for students and staff. These mechanisms should enable students and staff to raise concerns and issues within the institution. The data and feedback gathered should be used to further develop a safe environment and a sense of belonging.

Next Steps

90. SFC and EHRC will continue to review good practice in relation to the NEOs outlined in the [Tackling Persistent Inequalities Together Report](#). SFC and EHRC will use this information to create case studies and will seek to share this learning more widely with the sector.
91. SFC and EHRC are exploring how best to work with the sector to review the approach taken and progress made at a national level on the NEOs. We will continue to reach out directly to institutions to update on this area of work.
92. SFC will look to continue to support the implementation of the NEOs through the development of a further thematic review relating to staff diversity within the sector.