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4 **Building student belonging and engagement: insights into first year students'**
5 **perceptions of participating and learning together**
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11 *Abstract*
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14 *Student belonging and engagement has received increased attention in the*
15 *context of an expanding and more diverse higher education student population.*
16 *Student retention is regarded as a priority with many universities augmenting*
17 *their retention strategies to instil a sense of belonging. This article provides*
18 *insights into first year Business Management students' experiences of starting*
19 *their degrees and retention interventions at a university in the South of England.*
20 *It is based on findings from an ongoing study that applied Wenger's social theory*
21 *of learning and adopted an appreciative inquiry approach to focus group*
22 *interviewing to investigate students' perceptions. Students developed a sense of*
23 *belonging, constructed learner identities, made sense of their learning and*
24 *gained confidence, but also experienced instances of tension and frustration that*
25 *raise questions about the extent to which sociality practices within evolving*
26 *communities of practice can address diverse engagement and identity*
27 *development needs and mitigate disengagement.*
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36 **Keywords:** student belonging; engagement; retention; success; communities of
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41 **Introduction**
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45 Building student belonging and engagement for retention and success has been at the
46 centre of higher education (HE) policy discourse during a period of profound sector-
47 wide change in the UK (Thomas 2012; Trowler 2010). An increased and more diverse
48 student body in the context of widening participation has focussed minds on developing
49 approaches to student retention and success (Cartney and Rouse 2006; Rowley 2003;
50 Testa and Egan 2014; Yorke and Longden 2004) as has concern over risks and financial
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3 costs to students and universities (Simpson 2005) associated with non-completion.
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5 Belonging to the institution or course and identity issues are important for retention
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7 (Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003). Belonging has been conceived as students' sense
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9 of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, and feeling
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11 that they are an important part of the life and activity of the classroom (Thomas 2012),
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13 and has been closely associated with engagement. While student engagement is a
14
15 complex construct with multi-level phenomena and processes (Kahu 2013), the
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17 education sector's advocates and funders have attempted to grapple with the complex
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19 relations between these processes and initiate programmes to enhance the student
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21 experience to improve educational outcomes (Thomas 2012).
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27 The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, for example, in collaboration with UK Higher Education
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29 Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Action
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31 for Access, initiated a national programme, *What Works*, to foster student retention and
32
33 success in higher education institutions (HEIs). As one of 13 participating universities,
34
35 a university in the south of England developed an institutional strategy to enhance
36
37 student engagement, success and retention. In this context first year non-continuation
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39 was identified as a concern in particular courses that included Business Management. In
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41 2013/14 pedagogic and support practices incorporating specific retention and success
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43 initiatives that aimed to enhance students' sense of belonging and hence engagement
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45 were developed on these courses. This article presents findings and discusses
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47 implications relating to first year students experiences on one of these courses: Business
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49 Management, where the intervention encouraged active learning linked to personal
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51 development plans and employability through use of an online learning resource to
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53 capture student reflection on their learning development. In addition, group activities
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3 aimed to foster student belonging and engagement through interaction and collaborative
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5 learning.
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10 By highlighting students' perceptions of this intervention and students' early
11
12 experiences when starting their Business Management degree, this article aims to
13
14 contribute to an enhanced understanding of the complex processes of belonging and
15
16 engagement for student retention and success. It discusses issues related to belonging,
17
18 identity and learning drawing on a study (focus group discussions) conducted early in
19
20 the project to explore first year students' early experiences and perspectives on the
21
22 retention interventions that were introduced. The article begins by highlighting
23
24 Wenger's social theory of learning, encapsulated in communities of practice
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26 perspectives that framed this research. The methodology and methods applied to the
27
28 study are then explained. Insights into students' perceptions of participating and
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30 learning together are then discussed to illuminate their experiences of belonging and
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32 engagement. The article concludes with some policy and research implications.
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42 **Investigating belonging and engagement applying Wenger's social theory of** 43 **learning** 44

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47 According to communities of practice (CoP) perspectives (Wenger, 2009), social
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49 participation is the bedrock of learning, contrary to some curricula design that assume
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51 learning is an individual process. Wenger (2009) argues that learning has to be placed
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53 in the context of lived experience of participation in the social world. However, there is
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3 still much to be learned about how participating affects students (DeAngelo 2014) and
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5 the multi-faceted nature of engagement (Kahu 2013).
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9 Theoretically, Wenger's (2009) social theory of learning advances a multi-dimensional
10
11 view of learning. Learning as social participation involves active participation in
12
13 activities with people and practices in social communities, construction of identities
14
15 within these communities and meaning-making or interpreting what is done.
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18 Participation creates a social history of learning and a 'regime of competence' that
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20 includes:
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- 22 • Understanding what matters and the enterprise of the community
- 23 • An ability to engage productively with others in the community
- 24 • Appropriate use of the repertoire of resources accumulated by the community

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30 (Wenger 2010).
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32 Over time, the history of learning becomes an informal and dynamic social structure
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34 constituting a CoP.
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39 Conceptually, the theory integrates four interconnected learning components:

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41 *community* – learning as belonging, *practice* – learning by doing, *meaning* – learning by
42
43 experiencing and *identity* – learning by becoming to characterise social participation as
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45 a constructivist socio-cultural process of learning and knowing. Modes of belonging
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47 entail engagement (active negotiation of meaning through unfolding histories of
48
49 learning and practice that sustain identity), alignment (coordination of energies and
50
51 activity towards a shared enterprise) and imagination (extrapolation of experiences that
52
53 create relations of identity). Doing (engaging in activities, working together, talking
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55 and using artefacts) creates relationships of identification with the community.
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3 Experiencing different modes of belonging or identification (engagement, alignment
4 and imagination) shapes development of identity as learner or knower (Wenger 1998,
5 2009, 2010).
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11 For Wenger (1998) these interconnected components are underpinned by CoP which
12 incorporate systems of relationships between people, activities and the world that
13 overlap and develop tangentially with time and that facilitate negotiation, learning,
14 meaning and identity. 'Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it
15 is an experience of identity' (Wenger 1998, 215) and therefore learning cannot be
16 separate from identity development (Smith et al. 2004).
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27 While the use of the concept of communities has been problematized in terms of the
28 downplaying and loss of important defining characteristics originating from dialectical
29 and materialist theories in terms of the dialectic of the individual and collective (Roth
30 and Lee 2006) and its loose boundaries and meanings (Edwards 2005; Handley et al.
31 2006; Roberts 2006), it offers useful conceptual entry points into examining students'
32 academic and social engagement to establish how students can be supported. The
33 concept of communities has also been successfully and widely applied by other
34 researchers and practitioners to illuminate different facets of learning and institutional
35 transformation. For example, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) discuss the transformative
36 potential of blended learning environments mediated by information and
37 communication technologies which enhance interaction and sense of engagement within
38 a community of learning and suggest that community provides a stabilising, cohesive
39 influence as well as conditions for dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement –
40 the hallmarks for higher education.
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5 Daniel et al (2003) argue that the concept of community as a learning organism
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7 provides an analytical framework for investigating learning contexts involving
8
9 individuals and groups and serves as a basis to analyse and understand learning as a
10
11 social process. They illustrate how information and communication networks support
12
13 social engagement in virtual learning communities (VLCs), as hubs for information and
14
15 knowledge exchange in distributed CoPs, that foster interaction and social capital in the
16
17 form of trust, shared understanding, reciprocity and shared norms. Bielaczyc and
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19 Collins (1999) argue that a community approach addresses the needs of learners to deal
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21 with complexity, figure out things, communicate and work with others with different
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23 views and from different backgrounds and share what they learn.
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29 CoPs are viewed as social learning systems (Wenger 2010) involving doing things
30
31 together (Wenger 2000). The social theory of learning underpinned by CoP
32
33 foregrounds issues of sociality, relatedness, connectedness and learning together. Tinto
34
35 (2003) concludes that students tend to learn better together and form self-supporting
36
37 groups beyond the classroom when part of communities of learners. DeAngelo (2014)
38
39 suggests that students who discuss their course, study together in groups and interact
40
41 with faculty are more likely to continue to the second year. The concept of CoP holds
42
43 that individuals belong to many interconnected communities of practice at work, home
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45 and in relation to hobbies and that have their own practices, rituals, conventions and
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47 histories (Wenger 2009). CoP create practices of what needs to be done.
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51 CoP perspectives, however, say little about potential conflict and tensions in learning
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53 together. Van Der Haar, Segers and Jehn (2013) suggest that constructive conflict is a
54
55 basic process of team learning. These conflicts have to be negotiated and reconciled
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3 (Handley et al. 2006). Despite these silences, the notion of CoP engages with
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5 belonging, provides a compelling account of learning as socialisation into beliefs,
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7 values and practices (Edwards 2005) and explains inter-related aspects of learning
8
9 (Wenger 2009), and so forms a strong basis for systematically evidencing engagement
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11 for student retention and success.
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13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 **The Study**

21 22 23 24 *Research objective and context*

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28 Our study explored first year Business Management students' early experiences of
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30 starting their degrees, including a retention intervention, part of a larger investigation of
31
32 the *What Works initiative* that aimed to enhance student belonging, engagement and
33
34 success. The intervention was informed by examples of good practice from an earlier
35
36 evaluation of institutional practices aimed at building student engagement and
37
38 belonging (Thomas 2012).
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44 Business Management at the studied university faces some of the most difficult
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46 retention challenges. A proportion of Business Management students are recruited
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48 through Clearing, which an internal institutional analysis suggests an increased
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50 likelihood of non-continuation for those students.
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55 First year Business Management students were enrolled on a 'Developing Academic
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57 and Employability Skills' module, introduced in the academic year 2013-2014. It
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3 included a blended learning 'Studentfolio' website resource, which aimed to foster
4
5 students' sense of belonging and motivation during their first year. Garrison and
6
7 Kanuka (2004) suggest that blended learning that involves online practices can afford a
8
9 sense of community, providing a stabilising and cohesive influence. Students were
10
11 required to create a webpage and record reflections of their experiences and learning
12
13 linked to ten milestones related to academic and social achievements, for example,
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15 settling in, socialising, team skills development, assignments and presentations for
16
17 which students received feedback from lecturers and tutors. The intervention also
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19 included a facility to blog, additional group activities and formal group assignments.
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21 The Studentfolio resource served as an online learning journal to record their
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23 experiences in this context.
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29 Business Management had around 300 students, of whom 259 were home full time
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31 students in 2013/14. The research found that the most positive outcomes of
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33 Studentfolio, often cited by participants included its provision of opportunities to:
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35 reflect on learning, record stages of learning development, and receive feedback from
36
37 academic staff and peers. The main shortfall of the intervention was that students felt
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39 that the first milestone related to settling in, was insufficiently related to the student's
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41 academic work and was perceived as an extra burden at the beginning of the course,
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43 when students already felt overwhelmed with work.
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49 *Research Methodology and Methods*

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54 An appreciate inquiry (AI) approach underpinned the focus group discussion design to
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56 elicit both positive and negative experiences as well as propositions for improvements
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3 following Bushe's (2007) approach. AI allows for opportunities for participants to talk
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5 about problems and elicit suggestions for positive change and solutions to problems
6
7 within the AI categories of discovery (positive aspects), dream (envisioning future
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9 developments), and design (consolidate plans). AI typically involves stakeholders,
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11 including students, in the development of their institution through group discussion
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13 (Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett 2000). In the context of this study, we posed semi
14
15 structured questions to participants to identify beneficial aspects of retention
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17 interventions and their early experiences and explore possibilities for future
18
19 development and enhancement of interventions (Fitzgerald, Murrell, and Newman
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21 2001). Boyd and Bright (2007) suggest that AI research participants feel valued and
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23 empowered when they share ownership of organisational development. The AI
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25 approach was therefore considered appropriate for engaging students in this study.
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32 Two focus groups, lasting one and half hours were conducted in two stages, around
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34 critical transition stress points: settling in period during the first term and after the
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36 January coursework submission and exams during the second term. The first stage
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38 involved nine Business Management students (five female and four male) in November-
39
40 December 2013. They were aged 18 to 21 years and included one EU, one international
41
42 and seven UK students. The second stage involved four participants from Business
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44 Management (three female and one male, one international and three UK) in March
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46 2014 with two students having participated in the first focus group. A two stage
47
48 approach was adopted to identify how participants' experiences developed over time
49
50 from Semester 1 to Semester 2 after the January assessment. This was informed by
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52 previous work relating to ways in which students' orientation and cultural adjustment
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54 develops after students start their degrees (Jones and Fleischer 2012).
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5 Participants were self-selecting as they had responded to requests to volunteer to take
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7 part in the research. Students were recruited via an email circulated to all Business
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9 Management students in the First Year. Course tutors further advertised the research
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11 via email and during face-to-face interactions emphasising the voluntary nature of the
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13 research. Students were asked to email the researchers if they were interested in
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15 participating. There was no relationship between the researchers and students.
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21 Themes for AI focus group discussions were drawn from literature on belonging,
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23 motivation, engagement and confidence (Thomas 2012; Yorke and Longden 2004,
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25 2008). Questions relating to belonging, motivation, engagement and confidence were
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27 framed within AI categories (Bushe 2007) of discovery (positive aspects), dream
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29 (envisioning future developments), and design (consolidate plans). During the focus
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31 group the researchers explained these different stages.
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37 Data was initially coded in these AI categories in Nvivo 10. It was then analysed
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39 thematically highlighting aspects of students' experiences that were beneficial,
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41 including elements of the intervention that were effective, and aspects of intervention
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43 that could be developed. Further analysis of the data was also undertaken applying the
44
45 lens of belonging, doing, experiencing and becoming (Wenger 2009) to provide deeper
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47 insights into students' perceptions of participating and learning together to illustrate the
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49 opportunities afforded by, and the challenges in developing CoP.
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3 **Belonging and engagement: insights into students' perceptions of their**
4 **participating and learning together**
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9 The following subsections consider issues of learning and identity development related
10 to belonging, doing, experiencing and becoming (Wenger 1998, 2009), categorised
11 within the themes of belonging to the course and engagement with learning together.
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13 Challenges related to these themes are also discussed.
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21 ***Belonging to the course***
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25 Online communication, a main focus of the intervention, and group-work emerged as
26 themes and activities that facilitated belonging, doing and experiencing, constituent
27 components of Wenger's social theory of learning and evolving CoP. The Studentfolio
28 online resource was deemed by focus group participants to help nurture their belonging
29 in the sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers,
30 and feeling that they are an important part of the life and activity of the classroom
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32 (Thomas 2012). In discussing its benefits, a student noted:
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43 'It's a good way to get extra access from students to teachers...It makes me feel
44 like I've been considered more. And whether you need it or not, I think it just
45 reiterates the fact that you've got a safety net, you've got people there to help
46 you (FG1, Student 6)'
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54 Focus group participants described beneficial learning oriented aspects indicative of
55 being part of a community of practice, for example, shared goals, working as a team,
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3 helping each other and contributing, mutual respect among peers and sharing ideas,
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5 discussion and debate (Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla 2003; Garrison and Kanuka
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7 2004). For example:

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11 ‘So, if you don't understand something and you ask a question, they don't make
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13 you look like you're stupid or make you feel like you're stupid. Everyone kind
14
15 of just help each other out. So, that's quite nice’. (FG1, Student 1)
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21 ‘You always feel part of a team. And like it's never sort of you on your own
22
23 wondering what to do. You've always got someone else in your group there that
24
25 you can ask them like what to do, discuss it with them, that kind of thing. I
26
27 think that's quite good.’ (FG1, Student 2)
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32 Students formed their own self-supporting groups (Tinto 2003) via Facebook and
33
34 initiated supportive email practices. Email contact was perceived as beneficial:

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38 ‘...emails and everyone keeping in touch all the time, checking up to see if
39
40 you've done your work and if you're doing okay and stuff like that’. (FG1,
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42 Student 1)
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47 Key to learning is activity, time spent on tasks, and social interaction with others, the
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49 active use and testing of information and ideas, and the active practicing of skills in a
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51 meaningful context (Smith et al. 2004). A student noted:
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3 'I'm quite interested in the group work. So, it'll help me a lot for the future
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5 when we do business with the other people. And learn how to collaborate'.
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7 (FG1, Student 7).
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11 Through group activities linked to their courses, students developed practices of 'what
12
13 needs to be done' (Wenger 2009) and 'doing things to together' (Wenger 2000) akin to
14
15 CoP that engendered supportive learning environments. Participants reported that with
16
17 time they got to know each other better, recognised that other students experienced
18
19 similar challenges to theirs and had similar interests and became more relaxed with each
20
21 other and their lecturers. A perceived benefit of the intervention included:
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27 'Getting to know seminar tutors and being able to voice your opinions. Like
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29 being able to not kind of question them but like more like have a debate or
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31 discussion with them'. (FG2, Student 3)
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37 Participating in group activities helped students develop a sense of belonging to the
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39 course. Students spoke of their changing abilities aided by collective actions. They
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41 talked about different social configurations of their groups and learning how to work
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43 with a group (Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla 2003) to achieve educational objectives
44
45 and learning outcomes of their course modules. For example:
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50 'I think you feel more belonging the more you get to know obviously the people
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52 you live with and your seminar group, and the fact that we're so comfortable at
53
54 our whole seminar group, it makes you feel, I guess, it kind of does make me
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56 feel a bit more belonged' (FG2, Student 2).
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5 'I think because everyone's from like different backgrounds, done different
6 subjects like throughout sixth form and GCSE's and stuff. It does kind of play
7 on the strengths and weaknesses. So, it makes group work more interesting.'

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11 (FG1, Student 3)

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16 'When you're in a group, you find out the weakness and strengths of individual
17 people as well as yourself. And by working in a group, you can help get like
18 slow those weakness down to make them into your own strength, help you
19 succeed more. Because you have to work together to succeed. You can't just do
20 it all yourself and expect them to not do anything. So, you've got to take part in
21 this work otherwise you're not going to get the mark.' (FG1, Student 8)

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29 'I don't usually like working in groups. And so to get a good working
30 relationship with other people I feel was an achievement for me'. (FG2, Student
31 1)

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38 Group and classroom dynamics can also lead to conflict and tensions, underscoring
39 limits to sociality facets of CoP. While students acquired, shared and combined
40 knowledge (Van der Haar, Segers, and Jehn 2013) to learn, they reported some
41 frustration and tensions in team-learning and learning to adapt. Students describing
42 early experiences of group-working explained:

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51 '...there were a lot of challenges at the start. It was, yeah, it was really tough'

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54 (FG2, Student 2)

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3 ‘sometimes if you happen to not work well with your partner, maybe the
4
5 outcome is not as good as you expect...Sometime people do not care’ (FG1,
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7 Student 7)
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11 ‘Obviously, you’ve got people who really want to get good grades and do put
12
13 the effort in and will turn up to meetings when appointed. And then, you get
14
15 people who obviously aren’t as positive because they think, “First year doesn’t
16
17 count towards anything.” And they don’t think about other people.’ (FG2,
18
19 Student 2)
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25 Despite the potential for conflict in relation to team learning within communities of
26
27 practice, CoP perspectives say little about these tensions. Van der Haar et al (2013),
28
29 suggest that team learning consists of three basic processes that include sharing
30
31 information, co-construction of meaning and constructive conflict that are facilitated by
32
33 team activity, boundary-crossing and reflexivity. Individuals bring to a community,
34
35 personal histories of involvement with other social groups whose norms may
36
37 complement or conflict with one another. These conflicts need to be negotiated and
38
39 reconciled for individuals to have a coherent sense of self (Handley et al. 2006). In our
40
41 study, classroom tensions occurred in situations where different learner preferences,
42
43 identities and motivations conflicted over learning tasks.
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50 In discussing these tensions, students highlighted their doing and experience (Wenger
51
52 2010) in negotiating these tensions. They described new emergent states (such an
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54 improved understanding of individuals’ strengths and weaknesses, differences in
55
56 motivation and attitudes towards responsibility) and strategies (speaking up, taking the
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3 lead and challenging others) in navigating differences to achieve shared goals through
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5 processes of negotiating and institutionalising meanings (Roth and Lee 2006).
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10 *Engagement with learning together*

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15 Focus group discussants mentioned instances of transformative learning where they
16
17 contributed to the production, exchange, distribution and consumption of learning
18
19 establishing the dialectical relation of individual and collective. One student remarked:

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22 'I think like in group work, you're only as strong as your weakest member. So,
23
24 you really have to like rely on other people. Like to get everything done, you
25
26 can't just do it yourself. Like, we've just done like a business project like as a
27
28 group. And we were like, oh, you do this task. You do this task. And
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30 everyone's done their tasks, and everyone got it in in time. And we all kind of
31
32 worked together to make it as strong as possible. So, it's like five minds are
33
34 better than one.' (FG1, Student 9)
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41 Seen in this way, meaning was grounded in the actions and the significance of the
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43 actions in relation to the encompassing activity (Roth and Lee 2006) or enterprise
44
45 (Wenger 2010), the commitment to and responsibility for learning and engagement.
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50 Their sense-making of, and the meanings they attached to, their learning suggested that
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52 they had a reflective awareness with one student speaking of the intervention
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54 commenting: 'it makes you reflect' (FG1, Student 9). Participants described instances
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56 of improved quality of their learning through spending more time learning together,
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3 experiences of ‘gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge’ (Tinto 1998, 172) and
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5 modifications in interpretations of knowledge and actions elicited (Edwards 2005)
6
7 through group work and face-to-face and online communication. For example:
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11 ‘...as I get to know more of the people that's on the course, I think I appreciate
12
13 more and more working as a team, and getting involved with the team members,
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15 especially when you're in a group task. It's not just about what it is that I can get
16
17 from them. But I'm contributing to the team. And everyone's really benefiting
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19 from it...it sounds cheesy but when you do get other people's opinions and
20
21 perspectives, it does help you to branch out in your level of thinking. And it
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23 allows you to get a perspective that you wouldn't have had by yourself or it
24
25 takes you a shorter time to get there if other people help’. (FG1, Student 6)
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32 ‘I liked the groups, how we kind of got left to operate amongst ourselves. And
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34 actually, just see kind of how the group just grows and develop as time goes by.’
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36 (FG2, Student 2)
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41 ‘You just build-up relationships within a group as well, and everyone becomes a
42
43 lot more understanding, and you kind of learn what ticks each other off or how
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45 to just have harmony in the group.’ (FG2, Student 2)
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50 Increasing confidence also engaged students with their learning and learner identity
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52 development within evolving CoP. The locus and mechanics of confidence-building
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54 reside in a number of different activities, accomplishments, achievements in Wenger's
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56 (2009) interconnected learning components of belonging, becoming, experience and
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3 doing in interacting productively for learning purposes. One described their growth in
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5 confidence supplanting initial reservations:
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10 ‘There will always be someone who didn’t want to do the work or they weren’t
11 doing it properly or they’d wait until the last minute to hand it in, so, say, if I
12 was leading in that group, then, I’d have less time to kind of put it all together
13 and really go over it and evaluate it. And so, that made it a bit more difficult.
14 But the weird thing is that even though they’re kind of affecting the group, you
15 still don’t really want to tell them like, point a finger and really just get into it.
16 But just over time, I’ve got more confident in telling them, “Can you just do
17 your work? Because we need it.” So, yeah, I think I adjusted myself in terms of
18 dealing with these people who didn’t want to work. I became less, like,
19 apprehensive about getting firmer with people.’ (FG2, Student 2)
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34 Confidence affirming experiences have been associated with increased intention to
35 persist with university education (Thomas 2012). Reservations and mistrust of learning
36 tools can limit performativity in online reflection impacting on academic and social
37 integration processes. For example, some students’ attributed early reticence in the use
38 of Studentfolio to issues of trust and lack of confidence in maintaining privacy.
39 Students indicated, ‘So, you don’t really know who the certain information is being
40 accessed by’. (FG2, Student 3), ‘I felt it was too personal’ (FG2, Student 1), and ‘you
41 don’t want to let too much to slip’ (FG2, Student 2). As Ross (2011) has argued,
42 working online amplifies the destabilising and disturbing effects of compulsory
43 reflection. Reflective writing and practices, while an important element of teaching,
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3 learning and engagement, can produce subject positions and power relations that some
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5 students find tricky to navigate.
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9 Students also described transformative experiences learning to figure out things
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11 (Bielaczyc and Collins 1999) and evoking leadership: For example,
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16 ‘It was getting our whole group to actually work together and contribute and not
17
18 me and xxx pulling it together two hours before the deadline...The first time, we
19
20 were doing...we spent like two or three hours on the day of the deadline
21
22 rewriting people’s work because they’d copied and pasted it off the internet. I
23
24 mean, it’s stressful and it’s unfair that it’s put down on us two just because we
25
26 decided to take the leadership roles. And that’s why we’ve got so much better
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28 because we’ve realised the people we need to obviously give simpler jobs to,
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30 and actually like give them more instructions to certain people. (FG2, Student 4)
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36 Socio-construction of knowledge, meanings and learner identities occurred, for example
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38 through students learning how to work with each other and adapting to group dynamics
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40 by understanding what was required, what they could contribute and how they should
41
42 position themselves in relation to the completion of the academic task - discursive shifts
43
44 that aid our understanding of learning through participation. By examining the
45
46 practices, what they represent, allow and constrain, the interactions and how students
47
48 adapt as they engage in these practices (Edwards 2005), we gain insights into some of
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50 loci and mechanisms of belonging and engagement.
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Conclusion

In focussing on both engaging and challenging early experiences of first year students, the study highlights three key areas of importance to HEIs. First, it is important that HEIs consider how curricula and teaching might be developed and reorganised to provide for sustained engagement between teachers and students and facilitation of peer-to-peer interactions to enhance student CoP, in a climate of declining units of staff resources dealing with a large number of students (Rowley 2003). Building student engagement necessitates enhancing processes and structures that aid learning such as CoP, virtual or face-to-face, in ways that are responsive to the needs of increasingly diverse students.

Second, it is equally important to seek ways in which retention interventions, curricula and teaching might help to convey the message to increasingly diverse students that they belong to the University and the course. A sense of belonging can be cultivated by a range of university provisions, both academic and extracurricular.

Third, development of learning practices, from an organisational viewpoint, involves sustaining interconnected collections of communities of practice (Roberts 2006; Wenger 2009). There is some mileage in HEIs paying attention to the different communities of practice of first year students (such as those mediated by social media) and integrating these in retention activities aimed at fostering engagement and belonging, as some students in the study sustained engagement by forming self-supporting groups beyond the classroom (Tinto 2003). Students who get together and continue to talk about the

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2
3 content of their course outside the classroom are more likely to progress into the second
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5 year (DeAngelo 2014).
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9 In conclusion, we argue that CoP play an important role in fostering a sense of
10
11 belonging and engaging students in learning. Generally participants in all focus groups
12
13 were engaged with their learning and course with the data suggesting that the key
14
15 dimensions of Wenger's (2009) social learning theory (meaning, identity, community
16
17 and practice) were in place for most learners. Students felt a sense of belonging to their
18
19 course, and were developing a strong identity as students in their discipline, an area also
20
21 identified by Thomas (2012) as important for retention. Membership to a peer
22
23 community of practice through face-to-face and online collaboration, communication
24
25 and discussion increased student engagement, confidence and sense of belonging. The
26
27 importance of belonging to a peer community for learning outcomes and student
28
29 success is emphasised by Wenger (2009) and Tinto (2003).
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36 Overall research participants reported mainly positive experiences of participating and
37
38 learning together. Early university experiences and the retention interventions provided
39
40 students the opportunities to 'participate in the practices of the community as well as the
41
42 development of an identity which provides a sense of belonging and commitment'
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44 (Handley et al. 2006, 642). Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and
45
46 encouraged by others (teachers and peers), and feeling that they are an important part of
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48 the life and activity of the classroom (Thomas, 2012) was evidenced by their comments
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50 in the focus group discussions.
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3 However, our study also suggests that there are sociality limits to the implementation of
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5 CoP values and principles, and therefore their nurturing in interventions designed to
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7 help support students' transition into university. There is the need to consider what
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9 happens beyond the communities of practice, the broader socio-cultural contexts in
10
11 which students are embedded as this broader context generates a fluidity and
12
13 heterogeneity within communities which belies the idealisation of communities as
14
15 cohesive and homogenous (Handley et al. 2006). Tensions, conflict and exclusion are
16
17 often overlooked in considerations of CoP.
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22 While our study provides useful insights into what works for students in terms of
23
24 building their engagement and sense of belonging, further research is required into
25
26 nuanced factors that inhibit student success, and specific combinations of factors that
27
28 lead to withdrawal. More studies are required to gain deeper insights into the interplay
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30 of various context-specific factors that inhibit a sense of belonging and engagement
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32 across different universities.
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