

Is Belonging Always Positive?: Cultivating Alternative Belonging at University

Project website: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/education-research/our-work/identities-in-education/sidus/pedagogical-materials-development-and-implementation/>

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Supporting the Identity Development of Underrepresented Students (SIDUS) Project (2020-2022)



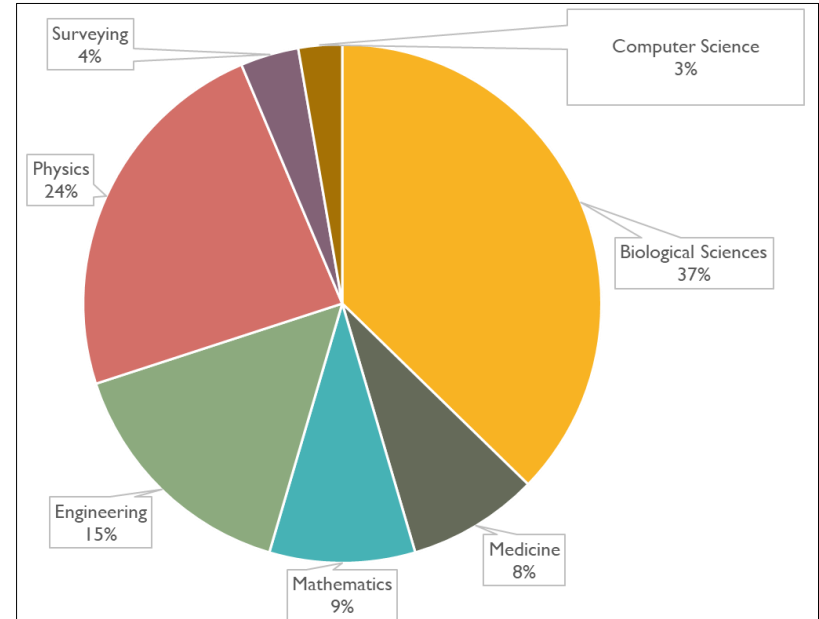
To promote **inclusion** and **supporting success** for STEMM students from **underrepresented groups**; fostering a diverse and inclusive academic community for all



To **empower** and **inspire** underrepresented students to cultivate a **sense of belonging** to the academic community & their **academic and professional identity**

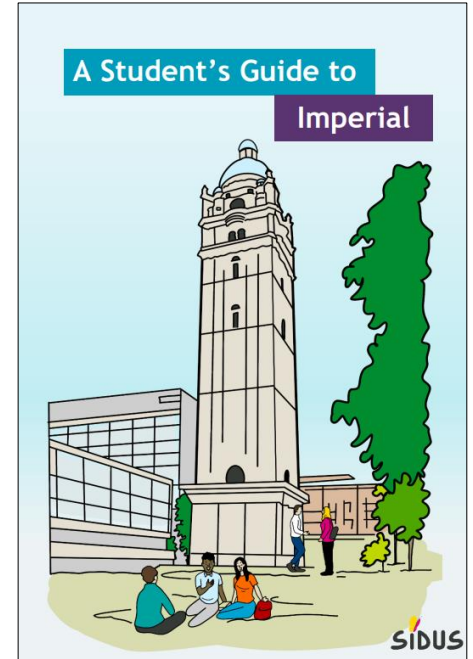
SIDUS project data

- 110 in-depth interviews with STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine) students from underrepresented groups:
 - ✓ 'BAME' (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic)
 - ✓ First-generation and/or working class
 - ✓ Mature (age 21 years or older on university entry)
 - ✓ LGBTQ+
 - ✓ Disabled or neurodivergent
 - ✓ Women



RQ: How does being ‘underrepresented’ affect students’ identities and career aspirations at university?

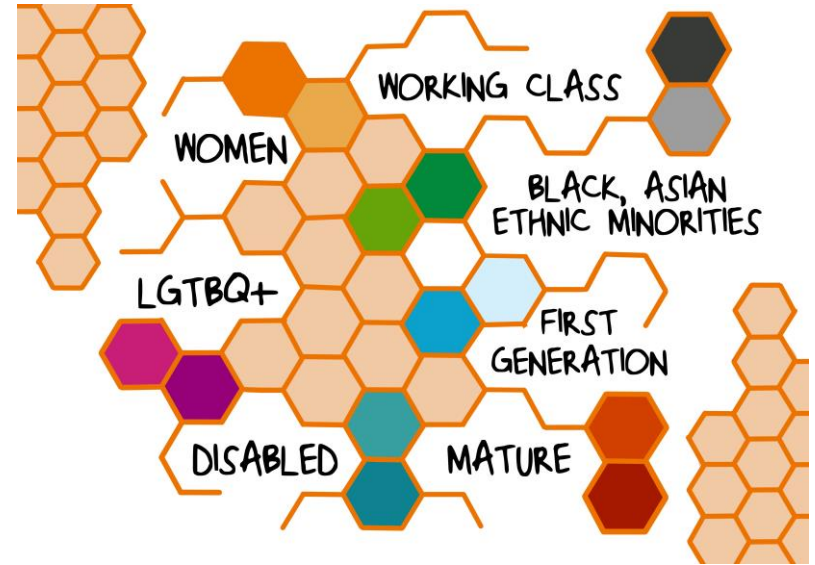
- Online interviews (approx. 50 mins each)
- Topics covered:
 - ✓ Sense of belonging in general
 - ✓ ‘Typical’ or ‘ideal’ students in each discipline/degree programme
 - ✓ Future career planning and future professional selves
 - ✓ Experiences of being ‘underrepresented’



SIDUS Student Handbook

Positive Lack of Belonging

- Students who did not belong to dominant belonging discourses BUT viewed this as positive
 - Disagreed with dominant belonging
 - Would have to hide or change important parts of themselves to belong
- Cultivated alternative or oppositional sense of belonging
- Two case studies
 - Katherine – finding fellow ‘outsiders’
 - Michelle - it’s a degree, not my life



Belonging Literature

Belonging as a feeling of being at ease or at home in certain spaces or in relation to certain people/communities/ideas

‘dominant discourses surrounding belonging often fail to consider a space for those students who may actively choose not to belong’ (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2021: 4)

‘belongingness is not inherently positive’ (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2021: 556).



Katherine – Finding fellow ‘outsiders’

- Final year natural science student
- Mixed heritage, middle class but full bursary

“I feel like I kind of had a constant sense of **outsiderness** throughout my whole degree”

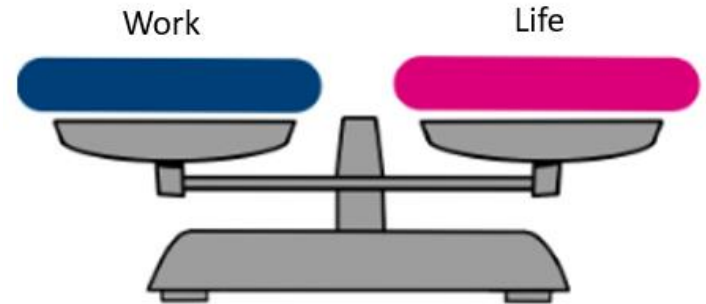
“I don't think I've ever felt a real sense of belonging with anything organised by [the university]. I felt **belonging within my friendship group**, but I felt like **us as a group were kind of outsiders** to the [university] experience.”



Katherine – Different Values and Interests

“We value other things as well. Like our entire sort of sense of worth is **not based solely on our academic performance**”

“they were super keen and getting really high marks and everything and sourcing out internships for every summer. And I definitely felt very overwhelmed like **I wasn't really on their level ... I found that I definitely connected with people that I shared a music taste with**”



Katherine – Being In-Between Worlds: Mixed Heritage and Class

- Lack of belonging connected to being:
 - Mixed heritage
 - Less wealthy than peers

“[I] didn’t really find myself fitting in with either group ... there was kind of this **strange disconnect** ... **I'm kind of this weird mixture** and those things aren't the things that maybe create a sense of identity or belonging for me.”

"the sort of difference in maybe **class or wealth** made a big difference because ... there are definitely a lot of private school people at [the university] and a lot of rich international school people ... And even though I was technically an international school student ... we never really like had a load of money"



Michelle – It's a degree, not my life.

- Foundation year natural science student
- Mature, entered university through an access course
- White British, middle class

“It feels **like I'm just doing it on my own**, which it doesn't bother me that **I'm not going to university for the whole social life**. I've got my friends at home. A lot of 18-year-olds will go to university to have the experience of parties and making new friends, which I've already done.



Michelle - Mature Student Lack of Belonging

“...in the first couple of weeks, I was definitely a bit overwhelmed ... it does feel like **I'm doing it on my own a bit**. But it hasn't put me off. And **I've got my group of friends and other things outside, so this isn't my whole life.**”

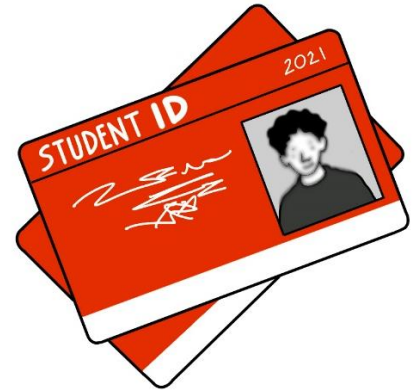
“I think it will be different because **I'm not interested in the partying side** ... It sounds bad, but **I'm not really interested in making friends at [university]**. I've got my friends, I'm happy with them. And **I'm just doing this course as a degree** rather than as making it my life for three years, four years.”



Michelle - The Impact of Autism and Nervousness

“I don't put myself out there like other students do. And I do **find it hard to talk in a group**, so a lot of the times I'm just **more of an observer** rather than getting involved. I think it is harder for me a lot of the time and I don't know what to say to people. I think in the past, especially at school, I've been **excluded because I'm very quiet around people.**”

“It's mainly a male-viewed thing. I think that's [being a woman with autism] something that is **an extra struggle on top**, that some people almost don't believe it”



Pedagogical implications

- Some students do not want to belong to dominant ideas of studenthood and belonging:
 - Mature students who do not fit the “young, full-time and residential” (Thomas, 2015: 41) student
 - Underrepresented students who are very different to their peers
 - Diversity of student experiences and very different senses of belonging for different students
 - Useful to consider: How inclusive are student-facing events which facilitate community-building and belonging to academic cohorts; whether a variety of events might be possible e.g., not all big events with alcohol after work



SIDUS resources

- **A Student's Guide to Imperial handbook** – https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/staff/education-development-unit/public/SIDUS-Handbook_Feb_2022.pdf
- **Bookmarks** – <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/staff/education-development-unit/public/SIDUS-bookmarks.pdf>
- **Posters** – <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/staff/education-development-unit/public/SIDUS-posters.pdf>
- **SIDUS staff guide to distributing and using the materials** – <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/staff/education-development-unit/public/Staff-Guide-to-Distributing-Materials-2022.pdf>

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