

Background

ECSA ran its 3rd round of Class Rep Conferences in February, focussing on 'Belonging & Inclusion'. It is the first time ECSA has run a workshop on this topic. It's a theme which is mostly explored at university level, however from talking to students throughout the academic year, we believe data on sense of belonging of students would prove useful in further understanding Edinburgh College students. Overall, the workshop had the following purposes:

1. To gather feedback on students' sense of belonging at Edinburgh College as well as the extent to which they feel included
2. To use that feedback to paint a picture of sense of Belonging & Inclusion at Edinburgh College to influence any further campaigns and activities
3. Highlight best practice and feedback to departments any areas which is affecting the belonging and inclusion of students at Edinburgh College

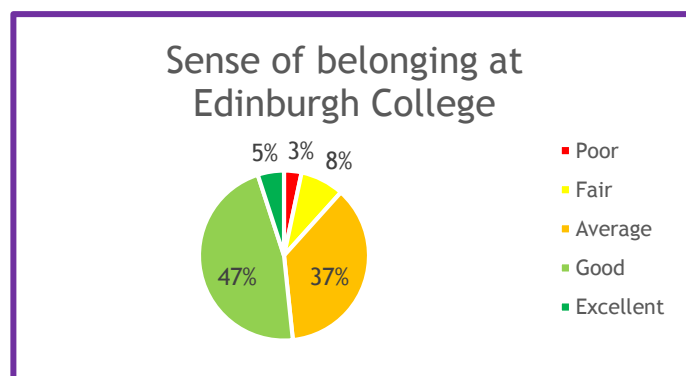
Workshop

The workshop took students through the key factors of belonging and the theory behind sense of belonging as a positive influence on academic excellence and personal development. ECSA took the initial stance that belonging refers to the sense that a student feels part of the College, their course, group of peers or the campus but also that sense of belonging often reflects their overall satisfaction with their learning and teaching.

The workshop itself focussed on rating their sense of belonging to Edinburgh College on a scale between "Excellent" and "Poor", with a section to provide comment on why they choose that answer. The students were also asked to rate their sense of belonging to other parts of college; their course, their group of peers and campus.

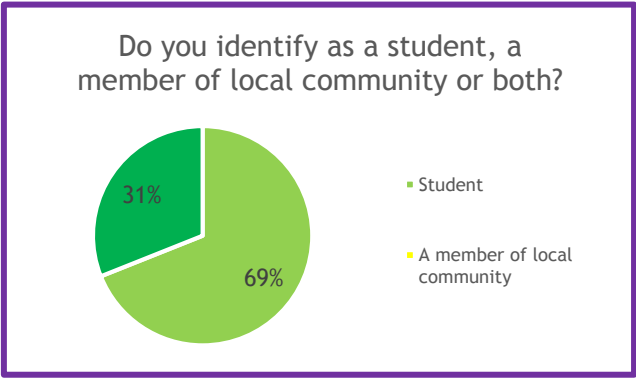
84% of respondents said they have an overall 'Good' or 'Excellent' sense of belonging at Edinburgh College, however it is clear the majority of students feel a sense of belonging to their course rather than Edinburgh College specifically.

Class Reps were asked to discuss which parts of their College experience makes them feel included as well as any areas we can improve to make their sense of belonging stronger. Class Reps were encouraged to consider if they experience any barriers to them participating in College activities such as caring responsibilities or part time jobs.



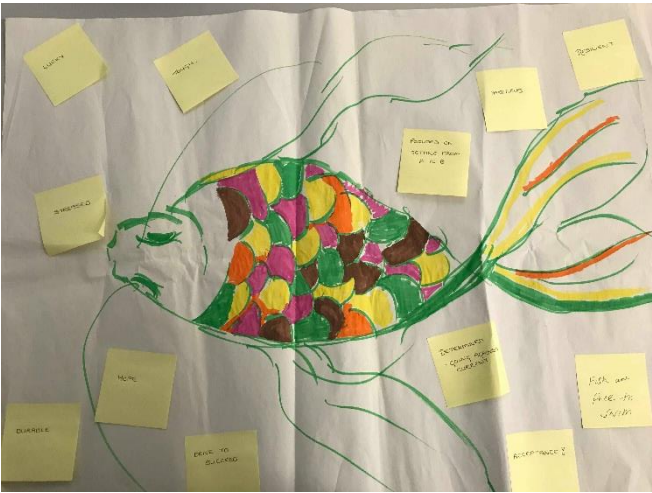
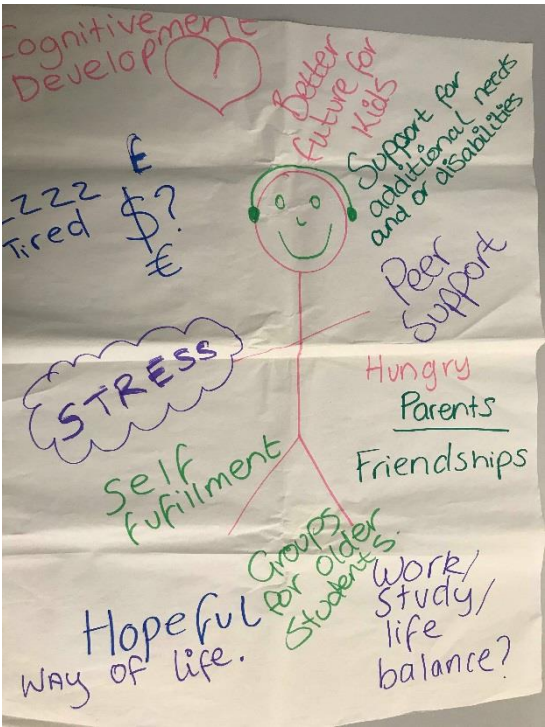
A total of 60 reps took part across 3 campuses from a broad range of courses and departments. Unfortunately, due to strikes the Midlothian Class Rep Conference was cancelled but a survey with the worksheet questions was sent to the relevant reps and those responses have been included.

Additional to the worksheet a couple of interactive tasks were included to stimulate discussion while getting useful data such as percentage of students with jobs alongside studying and caring responsibilities. To do run these interactive questions we trialled the use of the website, Socrative. The first question was to determine how the students identify; as a student, a member of local community or both.



The final activity of the workshop was for students to illustrate what they think an Edinburgh College student looks like. This gave very interesting and creative results. One drawing was of a multi-coloured fish showing diversity of students whereas another was a stick person with large eyes because they were tired and lots of arms illustrating the student juggling lots of commitments at the same time.

What does an Edinburgh College student look like?



‘Lucky’ ‘Tough’ ‘Stressed’ ‘Durable’ ‘Hope’ ‘Drive to success’ ‘Determined - going against the current’ ‘Acceptance’ ‘Focused on getting from A to B’ ‘Fish are free to swim’ ‘Ambitious’ ‘Resilient’

Belonging & Inclusion Themes

Overall, there were 4 key themes that emerged as areas that affects sense of belonging at the college both positively and negatively. If worked upon, these key areas could improve the student learning experience, increasing the likelihood students would rate their sense of belonging as 'excellent'.

1. Peers	2. Activities
<p>While a lot of comments highlighted the excellent friendships and connections students have made with their peers there was also mention of bullying and disrespectful behaviour.</p> <p>A number of students across different courses presented the need for a greater understanding of disabilities such as physical disabilities and autism. A student with autism was separately highlighting that they felt excluded from their classmates because he felt discriminated against.</p> <p>Courses that included opportunities for students to interact socially or on study trips received much more positive feedback from students. Seeing peers being a highly rated factor in sense of belonging proves the significance of facilitating social activities and integration into the classroom.</p>	<p>Across all ratings students mentioned a need for more integration of courses and classes in departments or similar topics to foster collaboration and a sense of belonging. Specifically, in courses with 'A' and 'B' groups students mentioned they would like the opportunity to have study groups across cohorts. Along a similar strand there were several suggestions revolving around inter-department competitions or study trips.</p> <p>Students who rated their belonging below 'Good' were more likely to mention lack of activities relevant to them especially physical activities.</p> <p>Across the board students felt unsure of what activities and services are available at the College and how to access them.</p>
3. Facilities	4. Barriers to participation at College
<p>Hair and Beauty students at Milton Rd very clearly stated feeling 'forgotten' about, 'separated' and 'unwelcome'. They generally rated belonging to their course as 'Good' but 'Poor to the College.</p> <p>Granton students highlighted the need for more social areas that were smaller and more suitable for students with anxiety and autism as the Hub is 'too loud and busy'.</p> <p>Students who rated their sense of belonging as 'Average' or below repeatedly mentioned toilets and facilities to be 'disgusting' attributing to a 'high school feeling'. At the conference it was discussed how the lack of cleanliness or caring about mess left behind can signal lack of sense of belonging. Specific feedback from these students have already been passed onto Estates and ISS.</p>	<p>Students repeatedly across all ratings of belonging mentioned a number of barriers to their participation with activities and services at College. Student parents & carers specifically mentioned time being a constraint as they are only funded for childcare during contact hours.</p> <p>Related to other time commitments it became evident from the Socrative questions that 63% have a part time job and all of those students said this was necessary for them afford going to College but also that it was a major factor inhibiting them taking part in out of class activities.</p> <p>Additionally, students mentioned the distance from where they live to the College being a barrier. The students had good discussions on how this could be overcome. The favourite option among the students was an inter-college bus to ensure access to activities available on other campuses.</p>

Thematic feedback

Excellent	<p>Students rated their sense of belonging at Edinburgh College ‘excellent’ for a variety of reasons and this represented 5% of the responses. Looking at the responses from students it is apparent that the main reason for rating their belonging ‘excellent’ is their sense of belonging to their course and peers. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘I feel a sense of belonging in my class and I belong to my course. My class and lecturers have been great’ • ‘Because I wear sports stuff I feel I belong to the college and my department (sports). We all feel part of a bigger team and enjoy sharing knowledge and advice’ • ‘I feel like I belong on my course because I enjoy the topics and everyone in my class are keen to learn. The lecturers are passionate about the course and it makes me feel good.’ • ‘The people I have met are so lovely and actually seem to care. The course is fun and I definitely see myself belonging here, except the campus experience isn’t always the best’
Good	<p>The vast majority of the evaluations received rated their sense of belonging as ‘Good’ (47%). Students mostly cite their class environments being good with supportive teaching staff and peers. However, they highlighted areas for improvement that make up the whole student experience, and, if implemented, could have possibly raised these courses to an Excellent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘I am overall enjoying my course but there is too much use of PowerPoints and our LDT lessons have been useless’ (computing) • A number of students have said they are happy with most everything but they are missing opportunities to be social and interact with their peers. A common suggestion is an after class/lunch time facilitated study group within departments where students can interact and share knowledge • ‘The closeness of our class and trust in one another is very encouraging. We have built this bond through group work and study trips and highly recommend other groups to do the same’
Average	<p>22 students rated their sense of belonging to Edinburgh College as average or 37 % of respondents. While, on the whole, students who rated their sense of belonging as average highlighted enjoying their time at Edinburgh College they had poorer satisfaction in different aspects of their experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disorganisation and lateness from teaching staff and students have affected students’ sense of belonging and enjoyment of classes. • ‘I like the people on the course but I don’t feel a particular attachment to the college, I could be anywhere’ • Noise levels and disruption from other students affected their learning experience as well as large social areas being noisy and intimidating • Students mentioned the process of getting bursaries could be easier and more accommodating from the beginning to give a good starting point of their time at College

Fair	<p>The 5 students who rated their sense of belonging below average cited a less-than-stellar experience in general and highlighted instances of feeling unwelcome and excluded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A student highlighted feeling accepted by teaching staff during one-to-ones but not in the class room as a whole, citing that this was impeding on their sense of belonging and is heightening the sense of feeling ‘out of place’ • One student mentioned teaching being focused around presentations with limited interaction, and described it as ‘old school teaching’ and as an inhibitor to engaging in the course • A sense of lack of support for extra needs in the classroom
Poor	<p>There were only two students who rated their sense of belonging to Edinburgh College ‘Poor’ and in those instances it was mainly reflected in their comments about the location of their classes and access to activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hair and Beauty students responded ‘as our course takes place in the other building we feel forgotten about by the rest of the College. We do not feel welcome and it leaves us with a disconnected experience’. These students do continue to praise their course and their peers, highlighting that within their department they do feel a sense of belonging. • Another student stated they were at College to get a qualification and Edinburgh College happened to be where they got in. This indicates this student is not open to engaging with activities, but are not necessarily unhappy with their experience

What Happens Next

A massive thank you to Class Reps for taking part and giving us their incredibly useful and constructive feedback. It is clear that there generally is a sense of belonging at Edinburgh College. This now gives ECSA & the College more baseline information and a real sense of what students value within their student experience and what is occasionally missing. Class Reps, and more broadly speaking, students, have lots of thoughts on their learning and are keen to share that feedback with us, we just need to make sure the college and ECSA are providing those engagement opportunities and having those all-important two-way conversations.

Overwhelmingly, one of the things that became evident through the conferences was, that the experience of all students is diverse but also similar in many ways. Students highlighted that they would feel a stronger sense of belonging if they were engaged in more activities/events. A lot of students would prefer activities to happen during the day and specifically in lunch time where others prefer after classes, evenings and occasional weekend activities.

This work will tie in with our end of year reviews and planning for future initiatives within ECSA but also in partnership with the College. ECSA hopes this data is useful for curriculum teams, and would encourage all teaching staff to engage with students about their experience at Edinburgh College.

This report will be made available to students & staff with the hope that it aids and influences more conversation around providing the very best student experience and promotes sharing of best practice.