Identity and Belonging in the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships Community

Background and scoping paper

As part of the delivery of the CSC Strategy 2025-2028, the CSC is seeking to develop an Identity and Belonging policy and guiding principles to support future work, foster an inclusive community for Commonwealth Scholars, Fellows and Alumni, and boost visibility of the Commonwealth Scholarships brand.

This paper provides a summary of research into identity and belonging both generally and within higher education settings in the UK, and experiences of international students. The paper also outlines ways in which the CSC currently fosters a community in which to belong for Commonwealth Scholars, Fellows and Alumni through both its activities and policies and frameworks.

The Identity and Belonging policy and guiding principles will provide a framework for the ongoing development of the CSC's programmes and activities, it's brand and visual identity, partnerships and collaborations, and the ways in which it engages with Commonwealth Scholars, Fellows and Alumni.

This paper is split into two sections. The first provides a summary of research conducted into the concept of identity and belonging, it's importance in the UK higher education setting, and key factors and barriers to building a sense of belonging.

The second section provides information on the ways in which the CSC currently seeks to foster a sense of belonging amongst Commonwealth Scholars, Fellows and Alumni. This includes factors which have impacted Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships over the last 66 years and therefore ways in which scholars and alumni may identify and belong within this community, and considerations on building a sense of belonging within this community.

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Section 1

Why does identity and belonging matter?

There is no one size fits all approach to belonging. Belonging is deeply personal and every individual experiences it differently.

Within a lifetime, the ways in which someone feels and seeks to belong changes. It can be influenced by the current environment they find themselves in, the people they are surrounded by, and previous experiences of belonging. Managing these factors can involve a process of (re)negotiating identity and the requirements for achieving a sense of belonging.

At one given time, people may also experience multiple forms of belonging, for example, as a colleague, friend, parent, and child. In some cases, people may also seek to achieve a type of

belonging, shaped by their expectations of an experience or its intended output. Based on these factors, belonging should be understood as fluid and flexible.

When individuals feel they belong, they are more able to be their authentic selves and achieve greater levels of satisfaction and engagement as barriers and challenges to their identity are removed or lessened. This involves a level of self-understanding or self-identification amongst individuals, which in the same way as belonging, is deeply personal and changes over time.

In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, love and belonging is featured as the third level of needs, forming the foundation of the pyramid above physiological and safety needs (essential for survival) for individuals to fulfil higher needs. This third level represents a fundamental human need for social connection and acceptance which can be fulfilled through building relationships and feeling part of a bigger team or community.
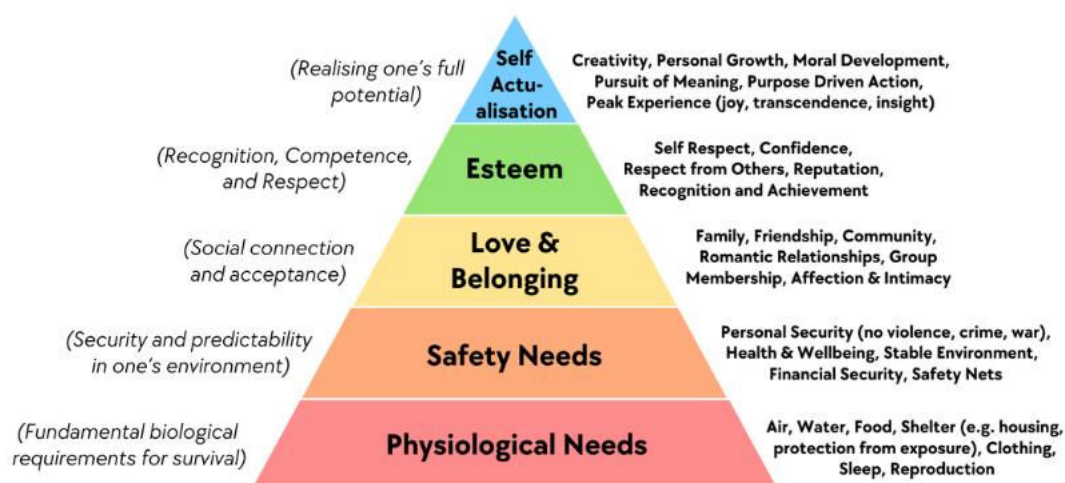
Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

Fulfilling this need, categorised as a 'deficiency' need (motivated by a lack of something) enables individuals to focus on higher-level 'growth' needs. The positioning of love and belonging within this hierarchy of needs provides a framework for understanding human motivation and behaviour and what is required to achieve personal growth and development. Achieving a sense of belonging is therefore an important stage in success and satisfaction.

Whilst there are counter-examples to the hierarchy of needs, attitude-based surveys have shown that the five needs are still important to individuals. The order in which they are fulfilled and whether all foundational needs must be fulfilled to achieve higher needs is debated and more sophisticated and streamlined versions of this hierarchy have been subsequently developed. However, this work still plays an important role in teaching on psychology, business, policy, and education.

Identity and belonging within higher education settings

Fostering a sense of belonging within institutions and organisations is an important way of supporting individuals to be their authentic selves. This includes ensuring that they feel seen, that they matter, that their values are aligned with the organisation and its work, and that they have meaningful relationships with others.

In a higher education setting, there is a strong correlation between student sense of belonging, academic success and retention, engagement, and wellbeing. It is therefore important that institutions understand the factors that create a space where students feel they can and want to belong, whilst also understanding the different identities within their student population.

Key factors to building a sense of belonging within higher education settings include:

- Inclusive pedagogy and curricula
- Academic confidence
- Diverse community, enabling a variety of voices and experiences to be shared
- Robust institutional policies and practices which enable diverse student populations to thrive
- Institutional culture that is aligned with students' values
- Open spaces where individuals are valued and respected and can interact
- Respectful, meaningful and productive relationships between students-students, students-staff, staff-staff
- Extracurricular opportunities and activities

Achieving these factors requires an understanding of what is within and not within students' control and where institutions must create spaces and guidance to enable a sense of belonging to be formed.

For example, institutions are responsible for developing their pedagogy and curricula to ensure they create inclusive and active learning environments which incorporate diverse perspectives, both through classroom interactions and in the texts and research studied. Where institutions provide spaces for students to connect, there is a reliance on students to proactively seek to engage with each other and form meaningful and productive relationships in these spaces.

In this way, supporting students' sense of belonging becomes part of the institutional culture and therefore the product of intangible moments in day-to-day lives.

For some students, the course of study or institution they study at is selected to achieve a predictive sense of belonging. For example, students choosing to study medicine and law often do so with the aim of becoming professional practitioners and achieve the skills and knowledge which enables them to belong in these fields.

Levels of belonging

It is important to understand that belonging within an institution can be experienced at different levels and intensities. Students may identify with their course, department and/or faculty more than the overall institution and/or with their network of peers, either academic or social. The overall institutional culture is expected to permeate through these levels, but this adds an extra dimension to understanding how a sense of belonging is formed and experienced both within an institution and across its student body.

As well as building a sense of belonging within the university and academic community, whilst at university students belong to multiple external communities. These may include the local community in which they live, their home community where they are from, extracurricular clubs and activities, and political, social and religious communities to name a few.

Within these communities, a sense of belonging is often fostered through shared goals, norms and values and the strength of interpersonal relationships which enable individuals to explore these. It should be noted that belonging within a community does not necessarily mean having things in common if the interpersonal relationships are strong.

It is also important to note that not everyone seeks to belong and some individuals will prefer and feel their authentic selves when not engaged in these communities and instead feel a sense of belonging through boundary making.

International student experiences

For international students, building a sense of belonging within the UK higher education setting can be additionally challenging compared to the experiences of home students.

International students must navigate academic and socio-cultural challenges alongside acculturative stress which can include culture shock, homesickness, overwhelm, and social isolation and cultural difference.

Depending on the geographic location of the institution, diversity of the student population and local population, and diversity of students within the course or classroom, international students may experience a feeling of conditional belonging. This can be formed by the social and institutional context in which they are studying and living, with the sense of belonging formed by the majority group rather than a practice of inclusivity.

Creating an environment for everyone to belong

Whilst belonging remains personal, fluid, and can be experienced in multiple ways at one time, there are common factors which help to create an environment in which everyone feels they can belong and be their authentic self, and common barriers to this.

Barriers to building a sense of belonging within higher education settings

There are several barriers to creating and maintaining a sense of belonging both at the institutional and individual level. This can include navigating the multiple forms of belonging that can exist at one time, the influence of political and geopolitical factors, an individual's level of proactivity to engage, and misalignment of personal and institutional values and/or how these are actualised.

Barriers to belonging typically impact the capacity to engage and can include:

- Personal commitments beyond the academic, such as work and family
- Health and welfare matters
- Prioritisation of what individuals want and what they can achieve
- Diversity of the student population
- Accessibility of activities, networks and peers
- Environment and surroundings
- Policies and frameworks to enable a free exchange of ideas and recognise the diversity of backgrounds

When developing a space and behaviours to foster a sense of belonging, it is important to consider:

- Mutually agreed expectations and value frameworks
- Training in diversity, equity and inclusion practices and policies
- Peer networking and collaboration across different groups and focused on different aspects of university life, such as academic, personal and professional development
- Flexible or adaptive course programming, which enables students to access opportunities regardless of personal and professional commitments and disability

Equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging

Institutions are increasingly expanding Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies to encompass belonging.

This highlights a deeper understanding that for EDI strategies to be successful, students must feel a sense of belonging within the institution at the foundational level. This means that their needs, voices and experiences are valued and recognised within the institutional culture, with EDI strategies and initiatives working as an additional measure to ensure a safe and welcoming environment.

Section 2

Identity and belonging in the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships community

Background

Over the last 66 years, over 31,000 individuals have been awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship and/or Fellowship to study in the UK or at a UK university via distance learning by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK (CSC). The CSC Secretariat provides the administrative function of the Commission, with teams including expertise and delivery across alumni, communications, evaluation, policy, and programme delivery.

Country eligibility for Commonwealth Scholarships is determined by the country's membership status within the Commonwealth. Over the last 66 years, some countries have left the Commonwealth and therefore citizens are no longer eligible for these awards, whilst other countries have joined.

Funding for Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships has been sourced from different UK government departments and awarding bodies, some for the delivery of specific programmes or levels of study, such as the one-time Rutherford Fellowship which supported post-doctoral researchers.

Additionally, the awarding of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships has changed over time, with the programme now focused on supporting the co-creation of research, innovation and solutions to advance sustainable development priorities across the Commonwealth and beyond.

Each of these changes impacts the overall identity and brand of Commonwealth Scholarships, the make-up of the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships community, and how members identify with and build a sense of belonging with each other and Commonwealth Scholarships.

Building a sense of belonging for Commonwealth Scholars, Fellows and Alumni

The CSC seeks to engage Commonwealth Scholars, Fellows and Alumni throughout the scholarship journey, from confirmation of award to the end of their relationship with the CSC. These activities are designed to build a relationship between the CSC and its scholarship recipients, support recipients in understanding the aims and objectives of Commonwealth Scholarships, acquire the skills and knowledge to achieve these aims and objectives at the individual and institutional level, and create meaningful professional and personal relationships with like-minded individuals.

This engagement is most noticeably in the form of events and activities, such as:

Scholar engagement

- **Regional Networks** which enable scholars based at the same university or region to connect whilst studying
- **Connect and Collaborate**, the CSC's annual event for scholars studying in the UK to meet, share ideas and showcase how their scholarship work is making a difference in the world

- **Commonwealth-related events and activities** hosted by Commonwealth accredited organisations, such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which provide scholars with insights and connections with Commonwealth-wide networks.
- **Cumberland Lodge residentials** where scholars participate in workshops and interactive learning opportunities to build the skills to apply their studies to achieve real-world impact.

Alumni engagement

- **Mentoring Programme** (also available to scholars) which pairs a current scholar with an alumnus to support knowledge and skills development and a practical understanding of how these can be implemented post-scholarship to achieve development impact
- **Alumni Associations** (also available to scholars) provide national and local networks for scholars and alumni to connect pre-, during and post-scholarship study
- **Alumni Community Engagement Fund** supports alumni in raising awareness of key development issues at the community level
- **Alumni Advisory Panel** provides a platform for Commonwealth Alumni to support the future of the programme and its scholars by sharing personal insight and expertise to contribute to the development of CSC activities
- **Development in Action webinar series** (also available to scholars) showcases scholar and alumni contributions to development across a range of global challenges and supports real-time networking

Alongside these events and activities, the CSC has implemented several policies and frameworks to build an open, welcoming and safe environment for Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni. These include policies on:

- [CSC Code of Conduct for Award-holders](#)
- [CSC Code of Conduct for Alumni](#)
- [CSC Award-holder Disciplinary Policy and Procedure](#)
- [CSC Code of Conduct for Virtual Events](#)
- [CSC Safeguarding Policy](#)
- [Equity, Access and Inclusion Policy](#)
- [CSC Disability Support Statement](#)

In addition to the above policies, the CSC also requires all incoming scholars to complete two online training modules on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Consent. This training is offered in collaboration with all three UK Government Scholarship Programmes and aims to inform scholars of the rights they have under the Equality Act (2010) whilst in the UK, and what is expected of them through this act and by the CSC as ambassadors of the Commonwealth Scholarship programme. This is a mandatory training to be completed in the first three months after arrival in the UK.

The CSC Secretariat is exploring information relating to inclusivity, neurodiversity and disability confidence training to ensure that appropriate support and training is provided in these areas.

Longer-term connection to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship experience

Following their studies, Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows are invited to share feedback on the longer-term impact of their scholarship experience and its application to their post-scholarship career and professional development. As part of the CSC's longitudinal study, alumni are surveyed every two-years over a 10-year period.

Findings present important insights into the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships. Within the context of understanding belonging, survey responses also indicate the

extent to which recipients continue to feel some form of connection or belonging to the CSC, and its impact on ways in which they belong in other communities or environments.

Based on recent data to the survey, the majority of alumni reported applying skills and knowledge from their studies in their employment. The data shows, within the first two years after their award end date, 92% of respondents indicated using skills or knowledge from their studies in a work-related setting. This trend remained consistent across subsequent follow-up periods, peaking at 96% at the eight-year mark. Similarly, when asked about applying skills and knowledge outside of employment, 83% of respondents reported doing so either 'Often' or 'All the time' in non-work-related contexts. While this trend remained relatively stable across follow-up periods, the proportion of respondents applying skills and knowledge outside of employment was generally lower than those using them in an employment setting.

Alumni were also asked how often they approached a problem in a different way because of something they learned during their studies. Almost all respondents reported doing so either 'Often' or 'All the time' across all follow-up periods, with the proportion of alumni reporting this remaining at approximately 95% throughout, indicating that the problem-solving skills acquired during their studies continued to be valuable throughout their careers.

Alumni were asked how often they taught a colleague something they had learned during their studies. While this question shows a slight downward trend over time from 88% at the two-year mark to 83% at the ten-year mark, it consistently remained above 80%, demonstrating that most of alumni respondents were 'Often' or 'All the time' able to share knowledge gained during their scholarship with colleagues.

Considerations

In fostering a sense of belonging within the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships community, and between the community and the CSC and CSC Secretariat, consideration needs to be made to the make-up of cohorts, the aims and objectives of Commonwealth Scholarships at the point at which individuals took up their awards, their motivations for applying, the impact of their Commonwealth Scholarship and/or Fellowship on their personal and professional development, and the level of engagement offered by the CSC and its uptake by individuals.

During their UK study experience, Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows will build a sense of belonging not just to the CSC and the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships community, but also to their host institution. This provides another form of belonging tied to the scholarship experience and one which may be stronger and more important to the individual than the CSC.

Understanding these perspectives and ways in which the relationship and sense of belonging between Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows and the CSC changes over time will play an important role in developing policy and guiding principles to ensure the needs of the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships community are adequately considered in the development of future activities and programmes.

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