



Developing a sense of belonging: what is it that helps students 'fit-in' on their course
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Overview

- What do we mean by belonging, and
- why is it important?
- Research methods
- Findings
- Summary





About Belonging

What do we mean by belonging?

- ‘Belonging’ has been used to refer to a sense of belonging to the
 - institution (Percy, 2002)
 - the course or programme (Kember, Lee and Li, 2001)
 - and in relation with others such as the tutor and other students (Thomas, 2012), (Strayhorn, 2012)

- Closely linked to
 - engagement - “precursor for engagement” (Hardy and Bryson, 2009)
 - social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993)

Why look at belonging?

- Reason to consider withdrawing from university (Foster et al, 2011)
- Retention (Thomas, 2012)
- Student success (Strayhorn, 2012)
- Choice of university (Reay et al, 2001)
 - *I'd never fit in there*
- Something we can do something about?
 - Subject to change
 - Needs to be satisfied on a continual basis
 - Context dependent (Strayhorn, 2012)
 - It can be reversed (Palmer, O' Kane and Owens, 2009)

Where do you belong?

- What groups do you belong to?
 - Real world
 - Virtual

- What do you gain from belonging to these groups?



Research methods

'What Works?'

Student Retention & Success

- NAO report – Staying the Course (2007) & 2008 PAC response
- Sector has good understanding about why students left, less good about what helps them to stay
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation & HEFCE jointly funded 7 projects representing 22 HEIs (2008 – 2011)
- HEA/ Action on Access appointed as expert reviewers
- The primary purpose of the programme was to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation about the most effective practices to ensure high continuation and completion rates.

What Works? Student Retention & Success

Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change:

final report from the
What Works? Student Retention & Success programme



HERE Project

Higher Education: Retention & Engagement

Strand One: Student Doubters - why some first year students have doubts, but stay

Strand Two: What programmes do to support retention, in particular, looking at practice and examples



Strand One

- **Student Transition Survey (online)**
 - All first year undergraduates March – May 2009
 - 9% response rate (656 students)
 - Follow on focus groups
- **Student Transition 2011 (online)**
 - All first year undergraduates February – May)
 - 6% response rate (452 students)
- **Welcome Week Survey 2012**
 - 6% response rate (441 students)
- **Limitations**
 - Voluntary responses
 - May not be accessing students not engaged with university





Findings



Belonging to institution

Belonging to the institution

- Over a third (37%) of our sample said that they had considered withdrawing from their studies at some point so far in their first year
 - 28% had considered leaving but had since decided to stay at NTU

Spectrum of reasons to stay

- From positive decision to ‘*no choice*’

Key differences between non doubters and doubters

- Relationship with staff
 - *I think it was just that it was knowing that I had someone to talk to here about what my concerns were*
- Belonging

Focus group findings 2009

Belonging: non doubters

All of the students who had never had doubts could all describe the time when they felt that they belonged to the university

- *I think it starts when you walk down the street and you see someone and you go hey ... I know them from University and that's what made me feel like it [like I belonged]*
- *The more people you know through other clubs and stuff the more you feel part of the University*
- *The second term is when I started to feel more at home because in the first term you are always referred to as a fresher and 2nd term you are a first year student...I've got more friends, more like friendships, rather than just knowing lots of people*

Belonging: doubters

Theresa, had had doubts and still describes herself as having difficulty 'fitting in'. She has stayed because she doesn't feel she has much choice.

- *I don't seem very involved with the University to be honest ...probably if I see my tutor on the road, he wouldn't recognise me*

Charlie, on the other hand, who had had doubts but made a positive decision to stay, described that now she could recognise places and people,

- *I feel better now because now I feel like I know where everything is and I always see someone walking around that I know if I want to stop and talk to them*

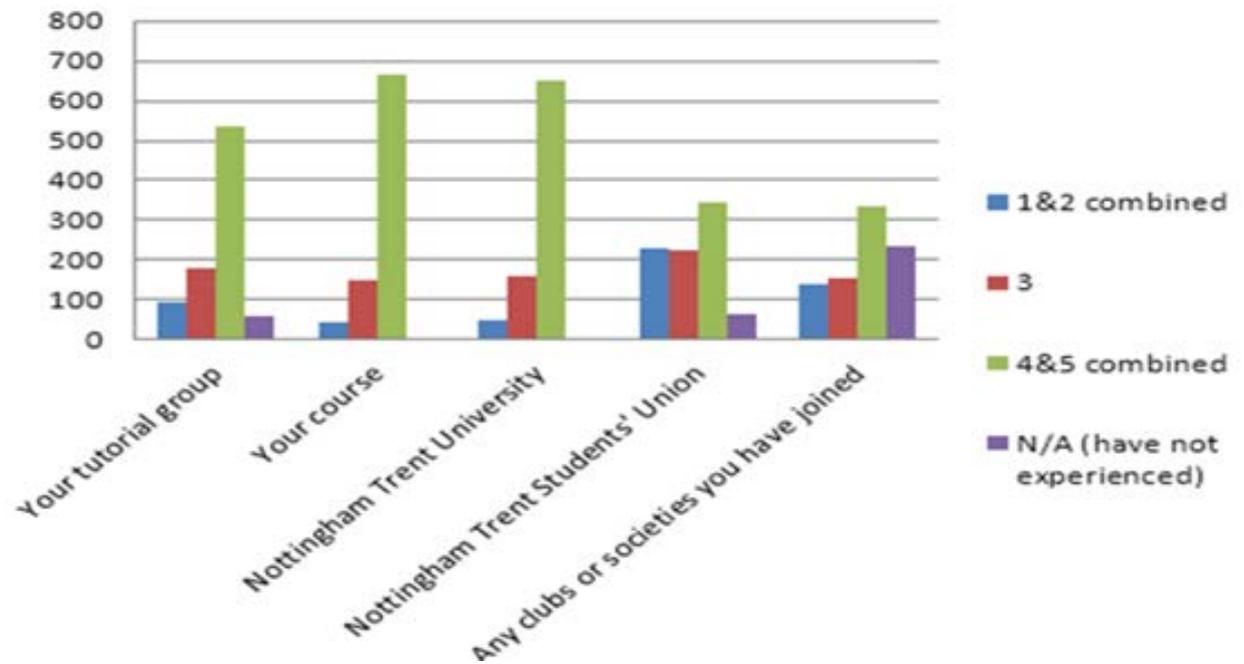


Belonging to course

Early belonging is to the course

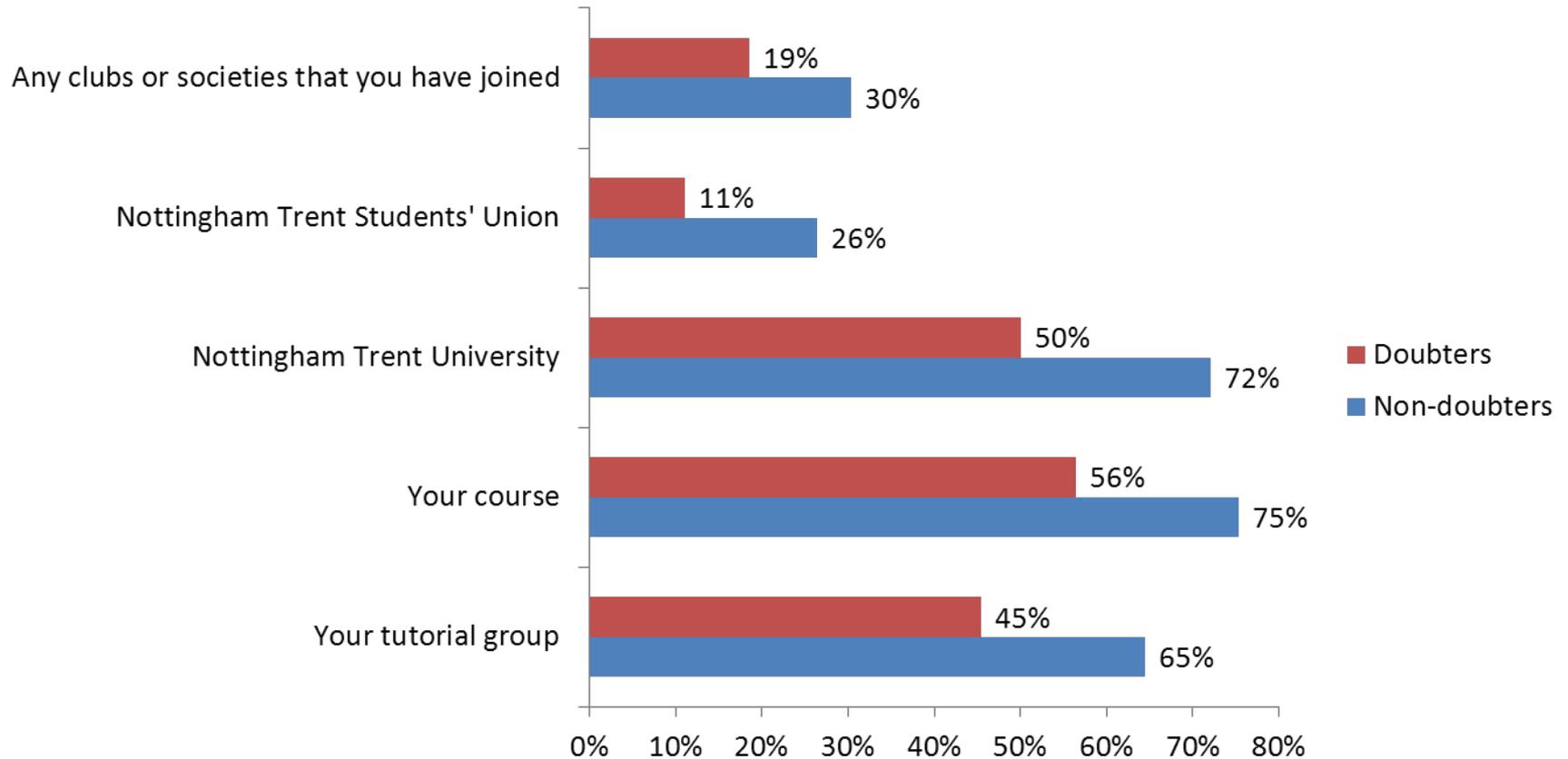
- Students feel they belong firstly to their course, then NTU, then to their tutor group

Now you have started at NTU, how much do you feel you belong to the following? Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "very much".



- Welcome Week Survey (2012)
 - 3 weeks into the first year

Belonging and doubting



How can we facilitate a feeling of belonging?

How much do you feel you fit in on your course?

Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "very much".

Why do you feel this way?

- Related questions
 - How interesting is your course?
 - How friendly are the people on your course?

Transition Survey 2011



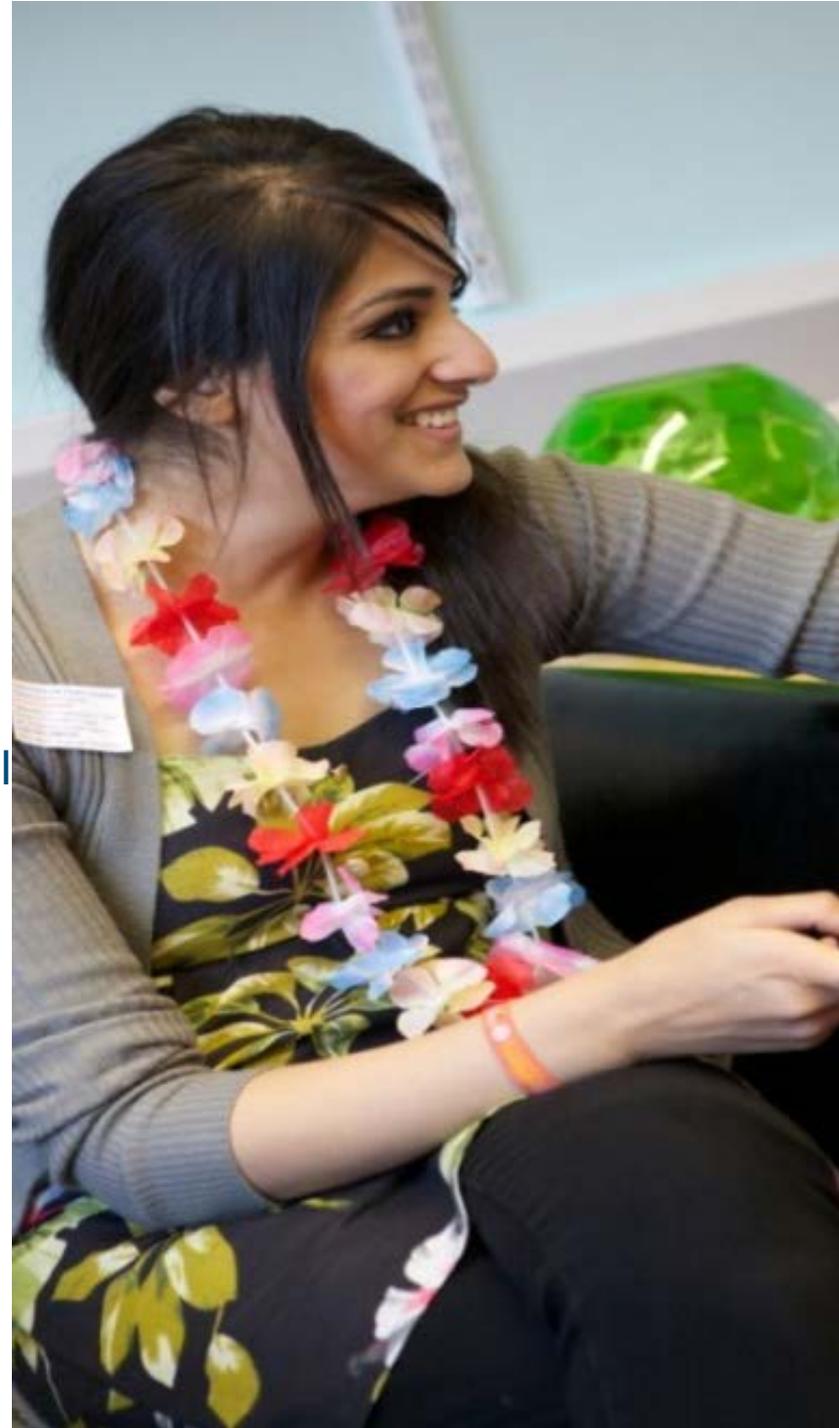
How much do you feel you fit in on your course?

- Mann Whitney U Test
- Strongest relationship (of the following) with student doubting was 'how much do you feel you fit in on your course'

Variable	Median scores (<i>Md</i>)	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
How much do you feel you fit in on your course?	Doubters (n=146) <i>Md</i> = 3 Non-doubters (n=306), <i>Md</i> = 4	1406 1.5	6.80 4	.000	.32
How interesting is your course?	Doubters (n=146) <i>Md</i> = 4 Non-doubters (n=306), <i>Md</i> = 4	1619 9	5.09 2	.000	.24
Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals	Doubters (n=146) <i>Md</i> = 4 Non-doubters (n=306), <i>Md</i> = 5	1766 9	4.05 6	.000	.19
How friendly are the people on your course?	Doubters (n=146) <i>Md</i> = 4 Non-doubters (n=306), <i>Md</i> = 4	1887 4.5	2.83 0	.005	.13

Why do you feel this way?

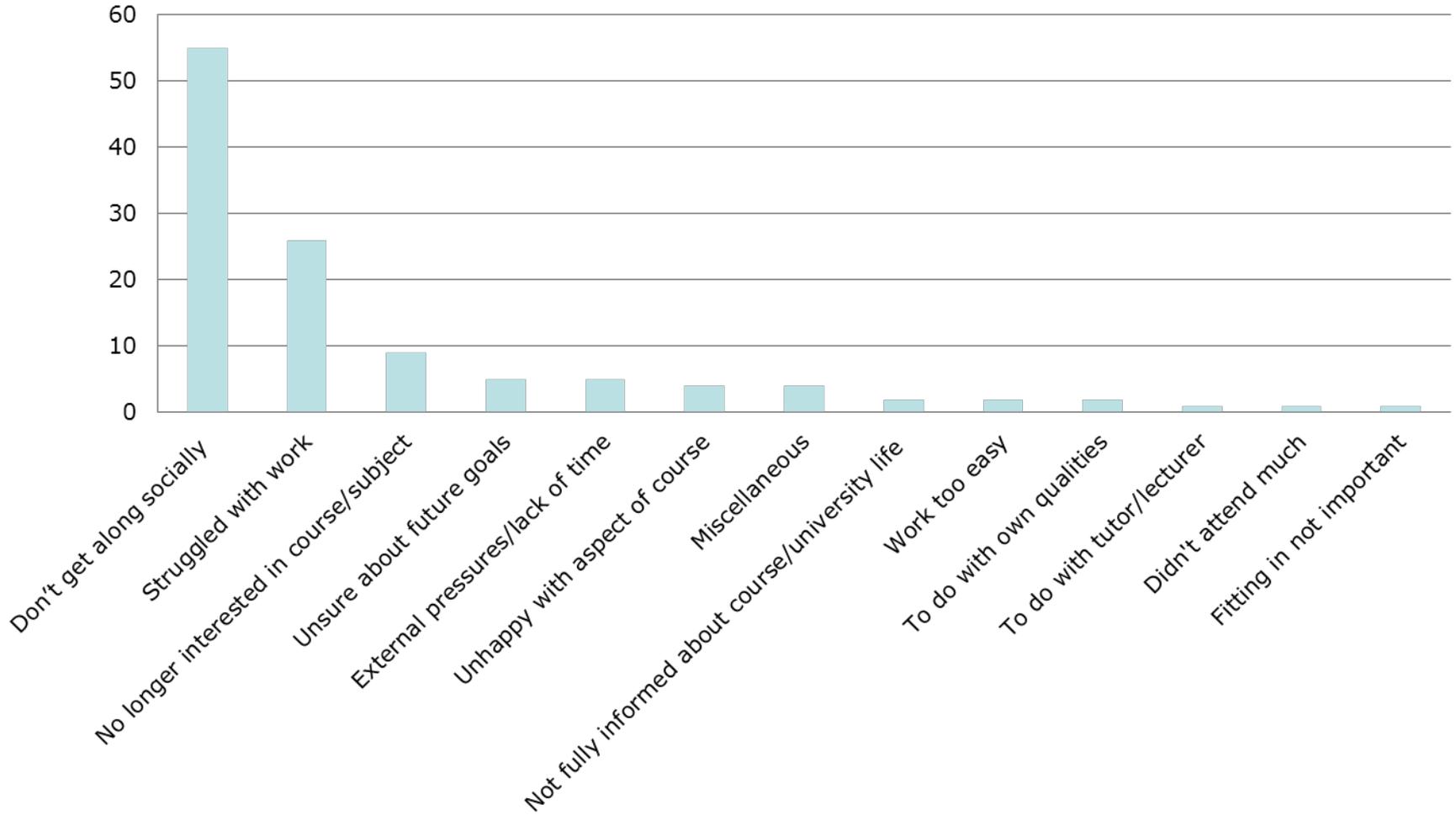
- 397 students answered this question
- Students gave 483 reasons in total for why felt this way
 - 366 why belonged
 - 117 why felt didn't belong
- Coded into themes 'data analysis spiral' (Creswell, 2007, p150)
 - Reasons why felt did belong
 - Reasons why felt didn't belong
 - If not sure which way then didn't code
- Figures are in total number of reasons (rather than students)



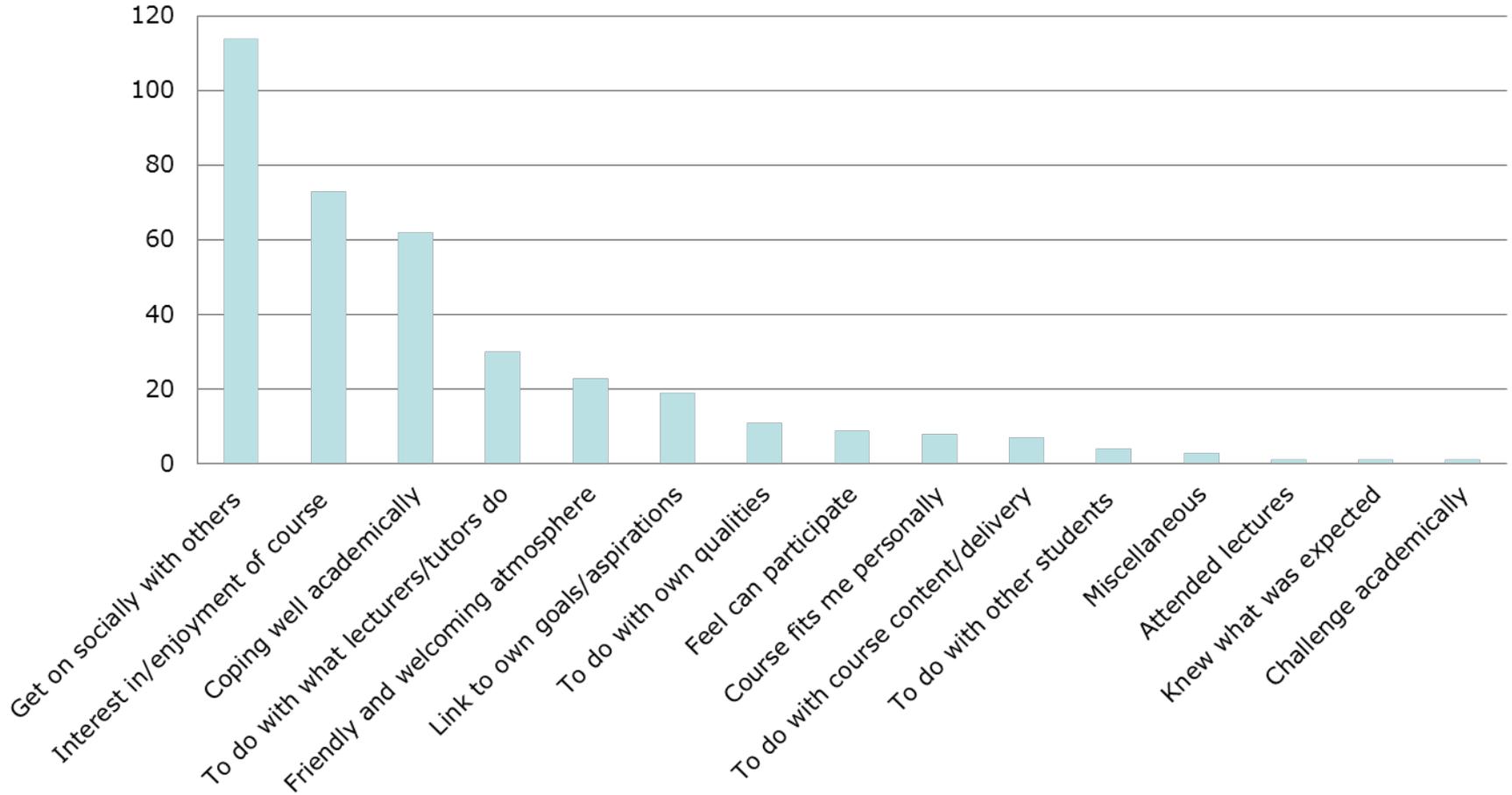
Why do you feel this way?

- Single reason
 - *Here I am, doing proper science. And science is a good thing. And that's nice*
 - *It's the only subject I ever considered doing at university, and as I mentioned is my passion. So I feel like this is where I belong*
- Multiple reasons
 - *Because I am passionate about the course and everyone is welcoming, lecturers are motivational*
- Belonging in one sphere and not another
 - *The course suits my interests and future aspirations, socially not as much people have already formed their own groups*

Reasons given for not belonging



Reasons given for belonging



Getting along socially

- ‘Different’ to the other students (older, male among females, working harder or less hard)
 - *A diverse yet mutually understanding mix of co-students (4)*
- Didn't have time or opportunity to socialise with their course mates
- Talking to others
 - *Not mixed No real discussion Not encouraged to meet up outside class time (2 – only reason)*
 - *Because I haven't managed to talk to everyone on the course (3)*
 - *As all the individuals are studying science, this allows for a good deal of conversation (both on and not on the course) to take place (4)*
 - *I participate in class and get along well with my course mates (4)*
 - *Still don't know all people in regular lectures by name (4)*
 - *I talk to everyone on my course (5 – only reason given)*

Getting along socially

- Helping others

- *I can help someone, but also need help if I do not understand something, so it is friendly (3)*
- *I feel I get along with people, I can approach people if I need assistance and feel as a group member I can contribute a great deal which is a benefit to those I work with (4)*
- *Everyone helps each other, its an overall friendly atmosphere (4)*
- *Can help or advise others. I feel I can ask for help off others if I need it (4)*

- Similar interests

- *I was concerned initially that I wouldn't fit in as I am a good few years older than most of the others but we all have a common goal and a shared interest in working with children so we've bonded well (4)*

- Links to common goals

- *We are all working towards the same goal (4)*

Friendly and welcoming atmosphere

- Friendly and welcoming atmosphere often mentioned in addition to social aspects of course
 - *My lecturers and course mates make me feel welcome (4)*
 - *It has been made very welcoming (4 – only reason)*
 - *Felt welcomed by the people that were also in my group (4)*
 - *Not accepted by the "clique" groups. However the other people make me feel welcome and like I belong (4)*



Coping with work

- I have struggled to get back into education and studying, ... the fact that I struggled, makes me feel like I don't fit in (1)*
- Because there are times that I feel part of a group that understands and enjoys science like I do. Other times I feel detached from the group because they'll start talking about something that I don't understand and seem to understand what they're talking about straightaway (3)*
- All the seminar tutors and lecturers speak in a way I can follow and I find myself able to keep up with the work (5)*
- There has been nothing yet to really doubt my ability to be there (5 – only reason)*



Interest in course

- Because I do not enjoy my subjects and I do not feel they are interesting (1)*
- I do not find my course very interesting, challenging or compelling. I don't feel like I belong or have a future in what I choose to study ..the one thing that makes me go through it and find hope are my friends and seminar mates. I am so grateful and happy I have them (2)*
- Because I have an interest in the course and have met students with similar outlook / interests (4)*

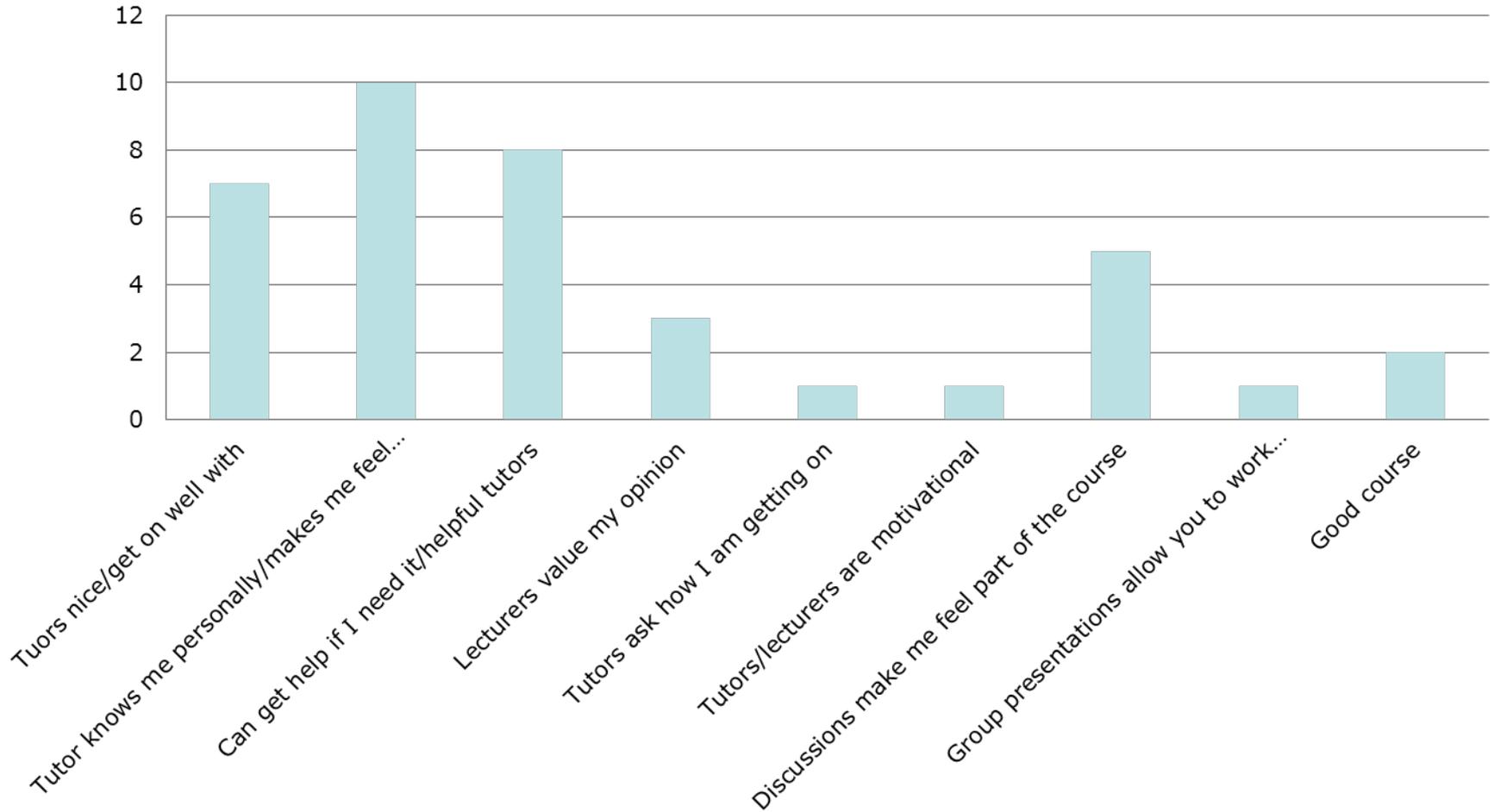


Future goals

- I don't feel I fit in with fashion anymore, mainly because I've realized it is not what I want to do as a career (1)*
- I thought Psychology was wanted to have a career in, but I'm not sure any more (3)*
- This is definitely a course in the industry I want a career in but ...I find it hard to relate to the people on my course so can sometimes feel I don't 'fit in' ...I don't have as much experience as them in the subject (3)*
- I feel as though I fit in with my course as I believe that I am achieving my goals and also engaging with the course and other people who are like minded (5)*

What lecturers/tutors do

What do tutors do to help feelings of belonging?



What lecturers/tutors do

- You are known personally by tutors and are able to see them whenever you need help (4)*
- I feel engaged in ...lessons and feel that the lectures and students value my opinion (4)*
- Because of shared views and discussions (3 – only reason)*
- Everyone knows everyone - even the tutors (4-only reason)*
- Tutors are also very helpful and make us feel like we are doing the right thing, giving us confidence (4)*
- I know what is expected from me I knew at the beginning of the year what topics would be covered in the future weeks (4)*
- Because the course is great and the lectures made me feel worthy of their time but also I feel my opinion is valued (4)*

What students do

- Participation and discussion
 - Own qualities - motivation, engagement, passion
 - Helping others and asking for help
- *I am often engaged in the discussions and work (4 – only reason)*
- *The amount of time I spend is good and I enjoy working towards the targets set (4 – only reason)*
- *I feel I can participate in seminars quite a bit (4)*

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Summary

Summary

- Students who described that they didn't 'fit in' to their course were more likely to have doubts about being at University
- Belonging - academic and social reasons and links to future goals
- Belonging with others – tutors and other students

“Belonging is achieved through: supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; an HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals” (Thomas 2012, p14-15)

HERE Project Recommendations

- Manage factors that lead to doubting
 - Identify and respond to students at risk
 - Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university
 - Improve communication and relationships with staff
 - Help students make more informed choices about the course

- Support students to stay
 - Improve social integration
 - Improve a sense of belonging to the programme
 - Foster motivation and help student to understand how the programme can help them achieve their future goals
 - Encourage students' active engagement with the curriculum
 - Ensure that there is good communication and access to additional students support.

On a smaller scale...

- Feeling known and accepted
- Knowing others in group by name
- Discussion
- Able to ask for help
- Welcoming
- Opinions valued by tutors and other students
- Early identification if struggling with work
- Encourage participation
- Sharing passion





Any questions?

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