Building Belonging in Fragile Contexts: HE and Community Partnerships

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Abstract

In contexts characterised by social fragmentation and structural precarity, universities are increasingly positioned as key sites for cultivating belonging and trust. For both staff who come from different parts of the world and the United Kingdom, and students who are often living away from home or independently for the first time in their lives, developing a sense of belonging helps to foster a greater sense of inclusion and a stronger connection to the local. This paper examines how higher education engagement with diverse, often disparate communities, spanning faith-based and secular contexts, engenders belonging by facilitating the co-production of knowledge, social cohesion and transformative change.

Drawing on practice-based insights, academics from different faculties in Lancaster University explore how partnerships between faculties and beyond the university reconfigure relationships between individuals, institutions and communities. These opportunities for interaction foster a sense of belonging by generating spaces for dialogue, mutual recognition, and shared purpose. Abraham and Talib use examples from their collaboration with a range of regional and local partners operating in challenging contexts to demonstrate how belonging is both a social and a political process. The term foregrounds power-relationships, and the process incorporates a system of building trust, promoting voice and advancing representation through a series of meaningful and cumulative activities that are coordinated over time.

The examples range from working on regional Black histories with local museums to using community radio sessions to dispel myths associated with higher education. These cases



illustrate how collaborative approaches can facilitate a sense of belonging by producing new relational networks, enabling innovative forms of engagement, and strengthening reciprocal ties between higher education institutions and their local communities. The paper interrogates how trust is built by negotiating understanding across differences and how community-engaged practices enhance the lived experiences of individuals and marginalised communities while also reshaping teaching, research, and civic practice. In doing so, the authors provide both critical and practice-oriented insights into strategies for bridging social divides and advancing more inclusive and sustainable forms of belonging within and beyond the university.

Introduction

From the Black Lives Matter protests in relation to George Floyd's murder in 2020 (Edwards-Bianchi et al., 2025) in the United States (US), to the more recent Operation Raise the Colours campaign which fanned anti-immigration sentiment in the United Kingdom (UK) in August 2025 (Smith, 2025) and the ongoing anti-migrant vigilantisms witnessed in different cities in Europe (Norman, K., & Micinski, 2026), South Africa (Rupiah, 2026), and Argentina (Al Jazeera, 2026)- questions of belonging, representation and discrimination continue to dominate both the news headlines and the everyday realities of marginalised groups and individuals in many countries. In an increasingly fragile context defined by social fragmentation (Theorin et al., 2026) and structural precarity (Shin et al., 2023), these questions also frame the lived experiences of students and staff based in Higher Education (HE) institutions especially those from marginalised communities (Blake et al., 2022), and individuals linked to local community and faith groups, organisations or civic entities (Abdul, 2026).

Belonging is often interpreted as a sense of connection to a local area or community and promoting inclusion (Blake et al., 2022). In this paper, Abraham and Talib define belonging as both a process and a sense of feeling welcomed and included which is engendered by participating in activities and initiatives that build a connection to the local community and place. They use examples from their collaboration with a range of regional and local partners that operate in challenging contexts to demonstrate how belonging is both a social and a political process. The term foregrounds power-relationships, and the process incorporates a system of building trust, promoting voice and advancing representation through a series of meaningful and cumulative activities that are coordinated over time.

Abraham who works in the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences and Talib who works in the Management School faculty draw on practice-based insights - like thinking local

and co-producing knowledge - to explore how partnerships between faculties and beyond the university reconfigure relationships between individuals, institutions and communities. These opportunities for interaction foster a sense of belonging by generating spaces for dialogue, mutual recognition, and shared purpose.

In this context of community partnerships and HE, belonging features as a key focus of this paper as the literature highlights how it can build a supportive environment, humanise HE systems, develop connections, improve awareness and career prospects, while also reducing potential barriers to inclusion (Cowal et al., 2026; Dickinson & Sivarajah, 2026; Jones, 2026). In HE contexts, for both staff who come from different parts of the world and the UK, and students who are often living away from home or independently for the first time in their lives, developing a sense of belonging can facilitate a smoother transition to university life while also enhancing everyday academic experiences and building resilience.

The authors draw on examples relating to fostering belonging which range from working on regional Black histories with local museums to using community radio sessions to dispel myths associated with HE. Against a background of global, national and local social divisions and structural inequalities these cases illustrate how collaborative approaches can engender belonging by producing new relational networks, enabling innovative forms of engagement, and strengthening reciprocal ties between HE institutions and their local communities.

The first section of this article provides the background context and situates the key terms, the second focuses on examples from six partnerships, the third section unpacks the key learning focusing on the cyclical process of fostering belonging, while the fourth highlights the challenges and key takeaways associated with building belonging by developing collaborations between HE and local communities.

Situating Partnerships

Abraham and Talib focus on Lancaster district and Lancashire County in the Northwest of England which has a rich history associated with both transatlantic slavery and the industrial revolution (White & Constantine, 2001). Lancaster is also a part of the UK where there have been attempts to address legacies of colonialism, slavery and empire through community collaborations in settings that are often politically charged and contested (Donaldson & Abraham, 2025).

Engendering a sense of belonging in this challenging milieu and in quotidian academic and community contexts has been recognised to be important by students and staff at Lancaster University for several years (Abraham et al., 2022; Abraham & Donaldson 2023; Akel, 2018;

Ahmed & Bharucha, 2020). This involves a process of acknowledging and addressing historical and ongoing unequal power-relationships in shaping knowledge production in diverse societal circumstances.

Abraham and Talib build on the work pioneered by students over the last decade, particularly since the height of the 'Why is my Curriculum White' campaign in 2015-16 (Peters, 2015). They draw on their learning from different partnerships (some partnerships date back to 2015) to demonstrate how equitable collaborations can foster a sense of belonging for student and staff communities and associated individuals by creating space for encounters, dialogue and shared experiences, whilst also promoting trust, representation and voice. In turn, the continued development and strengthening of this sense of belonging can help to counter some of the misinformation, disinformation, myths and misunderstanding associated with politicised topics such as immigration, culture wars and decolonisation that are often weaponised in the media and public discourse. It can also help to empower individuals by building their knowledge, skills and confidence, while also creating opportunities to identify new areas of dialogue, mutual recognition and social cohesion.

In this article, belonging is examined from the perspective of two different but inter-related 'communities.' First, it focuses on students belonging to the university community who come to Lancaster from other parts of the country or the world (including refugees) with the intention of completing a degree or programme of study. Secondly, it is examined in relation to traditionally recognised marginalised communities in the UK context – Asylum Seekers and Refugees (AS&R), Black people, South Asian and faith (primarily Muslim) communities – with a specific geographic focus on Lancaster and Lancashire County.

Furthermore, partnering with communities is understood to be a process of engagement which "covers a range of practices and processes whereby people come together to pursue common goals and act for public, rather than individual, benefit" (Harney & Morrison, 2022, p.2). In this paper partners include both regional and local organisations including museums, charities, community groups, radio stations and the county constabulary.

Cultivating Belonging through Partnerships in Fragile Contexts

Abraham and Talib draw on their experiences to highlight the different ways in which the process of cultivating belonging has been fostered for the two specified communities through different collaborations with HE and partners. This builds on existing scholarship

that sheds light on conditions to co-create strong relationships in these settings (Cowal et al., 2026).

Both authors responded to local concerns raised in the context of global and national events. From the supposed refugee 'crises' in Europe in the wake of the Arab Spring (Kaiser, 2023) to Black Lives Matters protests in 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd in the United States (Tyler, 2026) to the rise of anti-migrant rhetoric and 'neighbourhood nationalism' in the aftermath of the Southport riots in the UK (Bell & Abbas, 2026), Abraham and Talib have worked alongside others to identify partnerships and formulate connections with local stakeholders to counter misinformation and respond with targeted anti-racist activities and initiatives.

Abraham has worked with three key external partners – Lancaster City Museums, Lancaster and Morecambe City of Sanctuary (CoS), and Lancaster Black History Group. All of Abraham's partners are local to Lancaster district and she has worked with two out of the three of them since 2020 and with the local CoS since 2015. Her focus in terms of 'communities' are students (including refugee students) and people from minority groups (particularly those from Black and AS&R backgrounds).

She has collaborated with Lancaster City Museums and Lancaster Black History Group (LBHG) on the Slavery Family Trees Community Research project (Abraham, 2023) and the Abyssinia expedition repatriation and relabelling project (Brown & Abraham, 2026).

For the former project, this involved liaising with members of faith and voluntary groups, secondary school, university students and staff, and local museum personnel. This project took place during covid and required provision of additional support to members of the public and student interns in relation to using digital forms of communication like Microsoft teams and building their confidence and skills to work on research projects. The collaboration highlighted how involving local community members and LU students and staff helped to build greater awareness about Lancaster's Black history and the city's connected histories to other nations linked to transatlantic slavery and empire. It also fed into research, teaching and engagement opportunities for academic staff and student interns, reinforcing a sense of connection with the local.

For the second project, this was done by supporting the recruitment and appointment of two LU student interns to work with an Ethiopian Heritage specialist and with museum staff. Members of the partnership were involved in activities that highlighted how restitution of items associated with colonial exploits could be done sensitively and democratically. The process also highlighted how power inequities and historical biases have shaped existing

narratives, and how facilitating spaces for dialogue with local Ethiopian communities and the Ethiopian national government can aid in mutual recognition and reparative justice.

Through both partnerships, LU students and local community members were able to develop a greater sense of belonging in relation to place and shared histories. The associated activities and co-production of knowledge also helped to create a more level playing field by encouraging members to take account of different voices and recognise the agency of marginalised individuals (for example, enslaved servants) associated with contested legacies. The actions also shaped the national and international engagement activities of the local museum and influenced the ongoing teaching and research initiatives especially those relating to promoting decolonisation and subaltern histories.



Figure 1: Abyssinia Expedition Repatriation Ceremony. Image, courtesy Dr Sunita Abraham

In relation to the third group Lancaster and Morecambe City of Sanctuary, Abraham has partnered with three sub-groups of CoS – East meets West (EmW), St Thomas' Church Asylum Seeker and Refugee Support Network, and LU STAR (student society working on supporting AS&R). The engagement involved supporting AS&R from various marginalised ethnic groups both directly and indirectly especially those connected to the African continent and West Asia (otherwise known as Middle East). This took the form of sharing information with partners, connecting students and community members with these organisations, co-organising events and festivals like the Autumn Fiesta, securing financial support, promoting and

publicising opportunities and events, and supporting weekly drop-ins. These initiatives have fostered a sense of belonging amongst different members of the community by challenging misinformation, building awareness and highlighting how 'integration' is a two-way process that requires humility and cultural understanding from both host communities and AS&R.



Figure 2: Autumn Fiesta 2024, Lancaster and Morecambe City of Sanctuary. Image, courtesy Dr Sunita Abraham

Talib has also worked with three key external partners. One has a strong local focus and the other two operate at a wider Lancashire County level. The local partner is 'Communities Together,' which is a council-supported community-cohesion forum bringing together diverse communities (especially faith communities) to build trust through shared understanding. At the county level, she works with Pendle Community Radio, where she co-hosts a fortnightly Education show. The third partner is Lancashire Constabulary, where she serves as an independent advisor providing constructive guidance to promote inclusive practice and build trust between the constabulary and the diverse communities it serves. Across all three settings, Talib has drawn on her lived and cultural experiences to represent the interests of local South Asians many of whom are Muslim.

Work on Communities Together included co-organising an annual Cultural Festival attended by nearly 1000 guests. The event provided an opportunity to connect locals/non-academic community from different faiths and ethnicities to the academic community (LU staff and students) and each other. It gave people from minority ethic and faith groups a sense of belonging and recognition as they saw their culture being represented and felt part of the wider community (Rouncivell, 2023). While members of the public saw themselves being represented in the university staff and students, the latter benefited from gaining connections and information on topics ranging from local places to shop and worship to

those relating to cultural and religious gatherings etc. LU has been a key stakeholder in the festival providing funding and offering use of university spaces as a venue to hold events.



Figure 3: Collage of colourful photographs from the Lancaster and Morecambe Festival of Culture, October 2025. The images show participants of all ages from diverse backgrounds, many wearing traditional attire, community stalls and cultural performances. Image, courtesy Joshua Brandwood.

The Pendle Community radio show has a focus on demystifying post-16 educational options. This is achieved by sharing key information about educational avenues with marginalised communities, particularly those from South Asian backgrounds. These avenues and HE institutions are often perceived to be non-accessible, so these connections serve to strengthen their understanding and trust in these institutions (Khan, 2023). Talib and her co-host, regularly invite the academic community (LU staff and students) as guests on the show to showcase their educational journey and subject expertise, many of whom share similar backgrounds as the listenership. In doing so, they foster a sense of recognition and belonging - a sense that the community can see people like themselves attending university, while the university staff gain valuable insights into concerns and inquiries raised by potential students and their parents or carers. These insights have informed changes to University's student recruitment strategies and communication channels, including the

production of promotional leaflets in languages such as Arabic and Urdu, invitations to speak at community events, helping to make engagement and access to education more inclusive.

Talib's role as a critical friend to Lancashire Constabulary was particularly valued at the time of the heightened community tensions in Southport in 2024 (Dearden, 2024). She helped the constabulary to address misinformation quickly through informal cultural networks and by representing the views of minority faith communities. At various points, Muslim communities felt anxious, intimidated and scared to leave their homes. Collaboration across institutional and community boundaries helped co-create opportunities to bring marginalised communities in direct dialogue with those involved in developing community policies so they could be critical contributors. More recently in July 2026, Abraham & Talib organised a public panel on facial recognition technology inviting contributions from the police, academics and the public. The strong turnout and diverse representation in the room, was a testament to the partner relationships that have been cultivated through the encouragement of open and honest conversations where decisions are shaped by all partners.



Figure 4: An example of a university-community partnership event. Poster and photo from a public lecture on facial recognition technology (FRT) organised by the authors in July 2026. Image, courtesy Dr Sayjda Talib.

Abraham and Talib have also been part of each other's key partnerships, and this has helped to foster belonging for students and staff in networks that they facilitate or across faculties within the university as well as externally across faith and community divides. These six different partnerships provide a range of examples of how collaborating with communities

and partners has involved engagement on a wide array of fronts. Figures 1-4 provide some visual insights into these collaborations.

All six collaborations operated in contested and polarised contexts. Although there has been much support for decolonisation and anti-racism initiatives in the last decade (Edwards-Bianchi et al., 2025), in more recent years, there has been increasing push-back and disinformation campaigns from government representatives, organisations and citizens (Ahmed, 2024). At the same time, there is increasing recognition that responding to these concerns also links to recognising and addressing legacies of slavery, colonialism and empire (Donaldson & Abraham, 2025). In this context, challenges, setbacks and disappointments are to be expected. The authors argue that fostering belonging requires an understanding that this tension is part of the learning process, and the lived realities of the communities and partners. Contrary to expectations, these hurdles engender resilience and inspire innovative and sustainable solutions in the long run.

Collectively, these experiences listed above have highlighted some key learning about how to engender belonging in fragile contexts. This will be expanded upon in the next section.

Cyclical Mode of Practice

Abraham and Talib have drawn on their experiences to highlight a typology or model of how the process of cultivating belonging has been fostered for the two specified communities through different partnerships. They created the model (Figure 5) on the back of their experiences in facilitating the six collaborations. It continues to inform their existing work as well as future plans for new collaborative ventures. Flexibility and adaptation are features of the model as the focus is on enabling processes that are improved through successive rounds of practice. The model is aimed at anyone who is wanting to set up or build partnerships, but it is of particular relevance to staff and students in HE contexts as well as individuals associated with local community and faith groups, organisations, government bodies, charities and NGOs.



Figure 5: Cyclical Mode of Practice for Cultivating Belonging

In Figure 5, the authors underline the importance of approaching the challenge of fostering belonging by placing emphasis on the nature of the approach – that it is a process and that it is not linear but cyclical. Each new iteration strengthens the sense of belonging and builds the resilience of the partnership.

The first step involves identifying opportunities for engagement which requires an awareness about the existence of potential partners, the nature of the area they work in, their target communities, geographical focus, organisational make-up, mode of operation, how their work aligns with one's expertise, and their own track record of engagement. For example, the work with AS&R was informed by awareness about the existence and work of Lancaster and Morecambe City of Sanctuary partners. Furthermore, the growth of provision through these collaborations and new partnerships highlight that working with core partners over long periods of time can build trust and open avenues for connections with new partners.

Once a potential partner has been identified, the emphasis is on creating a positive and mutually respectful space for dialogue and sharing experiences and practice. This can be done by being flexible, open and respectful in terms of setting up meetings and conversations, discussing the content and mode of engagement, and drafting potential plans

for collaboration. For example, the success of the LBHG partnership in relation to the Slavery Family trees project depended on multiple preparatory discussions and plans with partners and associated individuals. Crafting this environment is crucial to building trust as it demonstrates that the partner is willing to engage with the other on equal terms, while also recognising and being open about existing power dynamics. It allows for a more genuine and open discussion about ways forward especially in relation to enabling innovative forms of engagement and mutual recognition, while also fostering a sense of shared purpose.

The next step is about building on the mutual respect and trust by providing opportunities for the partner to feel that they are valued and are working towards the co-production of knowledge and practice. For example, the work with Lancashire Constabulary and the local community required a strong degree of trust and mutual respect in relation to devising responses and co-produced solutions. The author's experiences have also underlined that collaborations can be strengthened by facilitating opportunities for partners to be equitably represented in the discussions and planning; demonstrate their agency and share ideas and practice; and promote their voice and expertise through various communication channels. Publicising the engagement work and supporting the initiatives through technical and organisational know-how, digital promotions and funding are some of the ways in which partners can feel that they are benefiting from engagement with HE institutions and their contributions are being valued, championed and showcased.

Finally, the last stage is about being proactive in relation to developing channels for disseminating the co-produced knowledge and understanding. This also includes sharing practice with the view of strengthening social cohesion. For example, hosting the facial recognition technology event was an avenue to share co-produced knowledge as well as challenge racial biases. The findings and discussions also influenced teaching and research content and facilitated new engagement opportunities. In the cyclical mode, this process then repeats itself, but the new iteration builds on the previous learning and helps to further foster a sense of trust and belonging for all involved. In addition, an important way in which partners can feel valued in future iterations is if HE partners are transparent and coordinated in their approach to dealing with challenges and are inclusive in their stance towards identifying ways to address issues as well as devise ways of moving forward.

All community partnerships face challenges in one way or the other. Abraham and Talib have endeavoured to highlight how this is a normal feature of the process of engendering belonging in fragile contexts. Although the nature of the challenge is important, they argue that to foster belonging and improve social cohesion, the key learning relates to how the challenge is approached and dealt with in association with partners. This involves

acknowledging that the process can appear slow and messy but that in the longer term it promotes voice, representation and trust while also fostering sustainable and inclusive practice.

Challenges and Key Takeaways

Abraham and Talib share a few key challenges and takeaways in this section, but in doing so they seek to highlight that the takeaways are connected to the process of identifying challenges and undertaking the cyclical mode of practice for building belonging in contentious and uncertain contexts.

A key challenge is that this engagement is resource intensive – it takes time to build effective, resilient community partnerships and foster a genuine sense of belonging. From organising public lectures and diverse community events to navigating sensitive conversations, building trust and promoting voice requires both patience to face setbacks and a commitment to persevere alongside others. For those involved in this work, it is a challenge to balance these engagement activities with competing academic or professional responsibilities. This can be further complicated by gatekeepers in organisational settings who create artificial barriers and obstruct progress.

Communicating effectively and meeting the evolving, diverse needs of community members, staff and students is also vital. For example, the radio show partnership enables key educational topics to be covered through a cultural lens and assumes little prior academic knowledge. The impact is visible in the regular call-ins from the listenership which indicate that they are gradually feeling empowered to use their voice. In addition, it is important to consider that communities have different perceptions, knowledge, politics and understanding of what belonging means. These differences are in part shaped by legacies of colonialism and the continued impact of racism.

Furthermore, those working in HE institutions need to address perceptions of HE institutions as ‘ivory towers’ and recognise the power dynamics around whose knowledge is valued. Investing time in building relationships and co-producing knowledge reduces chances for extractive engagement. Success relies on maintaining trust particularly when engaging on sensitive or contested issues, coupled with sustained engagement over time involving authentic relationship-building and ongoing support rather than focusing on one-off events (McVicar et al., 2025; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012).

See Figure 6 for a short overview of the key takeaways. These different suggestions have come out of the process of facing challenges and discouragements, and observing how

different communities, organisations and individuals navigate these often-contested processes.

Building trust to discuss contested topics and express differing points of view takes time
Recognising how fostering belonging is linked to understanding legacies of colonialism, slavery and empire
Building awareness and education as a means of challenging racism and facilitating belonging
Identifying power inequalities for partners- navigating issues of representation and voice
Thinking local, ideas for building belonging are all around us
Language is important - getting the balance right between less academic (theory and jargon) and more community speak and action
Sustaining relationships beyond individual projects and funding cycles.
Designing collaborations to facilitate genuine reciprocity rather than extractive engagement
Recognising how co-producing knowledge and understanding strengthens social cohesion and promotes trust

Figure 6: Key Takeaways

Conclusion

In this paper, Abraham and Talib have highlighted how collaborative approaches can foster belonging by producing new relational networks, enabling innovative forms of engagement, and strengthening reciprocal ties between HE institutions and their local communities. Using examples from six partnerships, the authors highlight how building belonging is both a social and political process. They develop a typology to illustrate the cyclical nature of this process and underscore how setbacks and challenges are a normal feature of the process of engendering belonging in fragile contexts. Although identifying and addressing these challenges is crucial, they argue that to foster belonging and improve social cohesion, it is vital that this process be undertaken in association with partners.

These findings continue to inform the authors ongoing work with community groups and organisations like Lancaster and Morecambe City of Sanctuary and Communities Together. It

aims to strengthen a sense of belonging for all involved by building more inclusive, anti-racist and resilient local communities. The cyclical model highlights how trust and belonging are built by negotiating understanding across differences. It also shines a light on how these community-engaged practices can reshape teaching, research, and civic practice. In doing so, the article provides both critical and practice-oriented insights into strategies for bridging social divides and advancing more inclusive and sustainable forms of belonging within and beyond the university.

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