



# Building Belonging: How Peer Mentorship Transforms International Student Experience

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71957/wgnd2172>

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## Abstract

In the context of increasing international student mobility, higher education institutions face the challenge of fostering not only diversity but also genuine inclusion. A key component of this process is the development of a sense of belonging among international students, which directly influences their academic success, well-being, and overall integration. However, many students encounter barriers such as cultural differences, language difficulties, and social isolation, which hinder their full participation in academic and social life.

As international student mobility continues to grow, higher education institutions face the challenge of creating academic environments in which international students feel not only welcomed but also included and valued. For students adapting to a new educational and cultural setting, developing a sense of belonging can be difficult due to language barriers, unfamiliar academic expectations, differences in communication styles, and limited opportunities to establish social connections. These challenges may affect their confidence, participation in university life, and ability to build meaningful relationships within the academic community.

This paper explores how peer mentorship can support the academic, cultural, and social integration of international students in a university setting. Drawing on existing research on student belonging and peer support, it proposes a three-part mentorship model comprising an Academic Buddy, who helps students understand coursework and academic expectations; a Cultural Navigator, who supports their understanding of local customs and communication practices; and a Community Connector, who encourages participation in student societies, campus events, and other social activities. By addressing both academic and social dimensions of adaptation, the proposed model aims to help international students develop



relationships, navigate unfamiliar environments, and become more active members of the university community.

The paper argues that peer mentorship, when supported by institutional initiatives, can provide a practical approach to strengthening student belonging and fostering inclusive academic communities. It also highlights the importance of reciprocal learning and partnership between mentors and mentees, suggesting that mentorship can benefit not only international students but the wider university community. The proposed framework offers a basis for developing more structured and accessible peer-support initiatives in diverse higher education environments.

## Introduction

Hello, everyone. It's good to see you all, and welcome!

Today, I would like to discuss an issue that has become increasingly important in higher education: the experience of international students and their sense of belonging within academic communities.

International student mobility is rapidly increasing, making higher education more diverse and globally connected than ever before. Universities around the world are welcoming students from different cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, creating rich opportunities for intercultural exchange and collaboration. However, diversity alone does not automatically lead to inclusion.

Many international students continue to face significant challenges when adapting to a new academic and social environment. These challenges often include cultural differences, language barriers, unfamiliar educational systems, and feelings of social isolation. As a result, students may struggle not only academically but also emotionally, finding it difficult to establish meaningful connections and develop a genuine sense of belonging within their institutions.

Today, I would like to share some thoughts on why belonging matters for international students and explore peer mentorship as a practical approach to addressing these challenges. Peer mentorship refers to a form of support in which students with relevant experience or knowledge guide and support their fellow students as they adapt to a new academic and social environment. This presentation examines how peer mentorship can help international students overcome barriers to belonging by providing academic guidance, supporting cultural adaptation, and encouraging participation in university life. In particular, I



will introduce a three-part mentorship model designed to help students build connections, navigate unfamiliar environments, and become active members of their academic communities.

## **Lack of belonging is one of the key barriers to successful integration of international students**

Belonging is much more than simply being physically present in a classroom; it is the feeling of being accepted, respected, and valued within a community. In higher education, a sense of belonging plays an important role in students' academic engagement, motivation, and overall well-being. Research suggests that students who feel connected to their peers and institution are more likely to engage in learning, seek support, and participate in university life.

However, international students may face additional obstacles in developing these connections. Moving to a new country often requires adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms, communication styles, and academic expectations. Even students with strong language skills may find it difficult to participate confidently in discussions, understand cultural references, or establish friendships beyond their existing social circles. Research by Glass and Westmont (2014), for example, highlights the relationship between belonging, cross-cultural interaction, and academic outcomes, particularly for international students. Such findings suggest that integration involves not only academic adjustment but also opportunities to develop meaningful social connections.

From my perspective as a student, these issues are particularly relevant when considering the transition into a new academic and cultural environment, including experiences associated with academic mobility. Adapting to a different setting can involve learning unfamiliar academic practices, navigating new social expectations, and finding opportunities to connect with other students. Although my perspective is not based on formal institutional research or systematic interviews with international students, it provides a student-centred starting point for considering the challenges of belonging. These personal and observational perspectives should therefore be understood alongside existing academic research, rather than as evidence that all international students experience the same difficulties.

Consequently, fostering belonging should not be viewed merely as an additional service provided by universities, but as an important part of creating inclusive learning environments. Peer relationships, opportunities for meaningful interaction, and accessible support can help students feel more connected to their academic communities. This



provides the rationale for exploring peer mentorship as a practical approach to supporting international students' academic, cultural, and social integration.

## **Peer mentorship is one of the most effective and practical tools for fostering belonging among international students**

One potential way to strengthen a sense of belonging among international students is through peer mentorship. My interest in this approach stems from the broader question of how students can be supported when adapting to unfamiliar academic and cultural environments. While institutional services can provide formal guidance, students may also need everyday support with questions that arise during their studies, from understanding academic expectations to establishing social connections (Thomas, 2012). Peer mentorship offers a possible response by connecting students with peers who can share their experiences, offer practical advice, and help them navigate university life. Rather than viewing mentorship as a solution to every challenge international students face, this paper considers it a practical approach to addressing some of the academic and social barriers that can make integration difficult.

Existing literature on student belonging and peer support provides a foundation for exploring this approach. Peer mentorship generally involves a more experienced or better-informed student supporting another student through guidance, shared experience, and informal communication. Its value lies not only in providing practical information but also in creating opportunities for students to develop relationships and feel more connected to their academic community (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Building on this general approach, I propose a three-level model designed to address different aspects of international students' adaptation. The first role is the Academic Buddy, who helps students understand coursework, navigate academic expectations, and adjust to unfamiliar learning methods. The second role is the Cultural Navigator, who helps students interpret local customs, communication styles, and cultural norms that may not be explicitly explained. The third role is the Community Connector, who encourages students to participate in student societies, university events, and other activities that create opportunities for social interaction. These three roles represent a proposed framework rather than an established programme that has already been implemented or evaluated.

The model is intended as a conceptual proposal that could be adapted to different university settings, particularly those welcoming students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. For example, an international student who is unfamiliar with a university's



expectations for seminar participation could benefit from an Academic Buddy who explains how discussions are usually conducted. A student who finds it difficult to establish friendships outside their existing social circle could receive support from a Community Connector who introduces them to student societies or informal campus activities. Meanwhile, a Cultural Navigator could help a student understand unfamiliar communication conventions and feel more confident interacting with peers. These are illustrative scenarios rather than documented cases from a specific mentorship programme; they demonstrate how the proposed model could respond to common adaptation challenges. Its practical implementation would require consideration of mentor training, student participation, accessibility, and appropriate institutional support.

By combining academic guidance, cultural understanding, and opportunities for social connection, the proposed model recognises that successful integration involves more than academic achievement alone. It also treats mentorship as a reciprocal partnership in which both mentors and mentees can learn from one another. Digital platforms and online communities could further extend access to peer support, particularly for students who face geographical, scheduling, or social barriers to participation. Although the effectiveness of this particular three-level model would need to be assessed through future implementation and evaluation, it offers a structured starting point for universities seeking to strengthen belonging and foster more inclusive academic communities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, belonging is not something that happens automatically — it must be intentionally created. If higher education institutions aim to truly support international students, they must move beyond administrative solutions and invest in meaningful human connections. Peer mentorship can help address challenges such as difficulties adapting to unfamiliar academic environments, cultural differences, and social isolation. However, for this approach to be successful, students need appropriate guidance, clear communication, and institutional support. Those considering peer mentorship should also be prepared for challenges, including differences in students' needs, limited mentor availability, and the importance of respecting cultural differences and personal boundaries.

From my perspective as a student, I believe that even small acts of support and sharing personal experiences can help others feel less isolated and more confident in a new environment. In the future, I hope to continue sharing my experience as an international student and use what I have learned to help other students navigate their academic and social journeys. Although peer mentorship alone cannot solve every challenge, it can be a



meaningful step towards creating more inclusive, welcoming, and connected academic communities.

Thank you.

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