Measuring self-efficacy and sense of belonging
Settling into King’s
What Works at King’s College London

What Works is a research and evaluation team embedded in the King’s College London Widening Participation department with the role of making society fairer in an evidence-based way. Our vision is that all King’s widening participation and student success initiatives are based on evidence and robust evaluation.

This report summarises our project monitoring students’ self-efficacy and sense of belonging at King’s.

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The six ‘Settling into King’s’ questions

Questions for first year students: ‘The Big 3’

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<tr>
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<th>Measure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I made the right decision in choosing to study at King’s</td>
<td>A measure of institutional commitment</td>
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Questions for second and third year students: ‘The Big 6’

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<th>Question</th>
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<td>1 I made the right decision in choosing to study at King’s</td>
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Executive summary

Each year students answer questions about their university experience when they enrol and re-enrol at King’s

In September 2018 King’s College London embedded three questions to measure self-efficacy every time a student enrols and re-enrols and an additional three questions that measure sense of belonging upon re-enrolment.

We measure self-efficacy and sense of belonging

The responses to these questions have been found to be highly correlated, suggesting that reported self-efficacy is closely related to sense of belonging.

Our questions are based on previous research

The questions are mostly drawn from a wide range of academic sources which includes the Bean’s Student Attrition Model, in addition to related work done at the University of Toronto.

We use Likert Scales and generate average responses

Students are asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Average responses are uniformly positive (> 2.5), but there are differences between key groups.

We have tracked a drop in our measures since September 2018

Final year students typically report the lowest sense of belonging and self-efficacy in comparison to first- and second-year students. Furthermore, in 2020–21 we were able to track students from enrolment in September 2018, through re-enrolment in 2019 and 2020. We found overall reported sense of belonging and self-efficacy decreased as students moved through the academic years.

We’ve also identified differences between key student groups

Each year that we have collected data Chinese and Asian students have reported significantly lower self-efficacy than white students, while Black students also tend to have directionally lower self-efficacy scores than white students (although the difference was not significant).

Prior to this year widening participation students had lower self-efficacy

When we tracked students from enrolment in September 2018, there were initially no significant differences in the feelings of self-efficacy between students from underrepresented backgrounds (also referred to as ‘Widening Participation background’s), and those from more privileged backgrounds. In 2019 however, a significant gap emerged in favour of non-WP students. This gap closed up in 2020–21 as the tracked students entered their third year, as self-efficacy decreased for both to a similar level. It is not clear the extent that changes to the student experience as a result of Covid-19 contributed to recent drops in self-efficacy and sense of belonging scores. We will continue to collect more data to understand this further.

We have many projects in place to enhance student’s self-efficacy and sense of belonging, which we can evaluate with these questions

In line with King’s Vision 2029 and the King’s Education Strategy 2017–2022, King’s has several projects aimed at increasing self-efficacy and sense of belonging, particularly for underrepresented students. Currently scores are quite high, and so it is difficult for individual projects to use these questions to show impact. We will consider how we can alter these questions in future to optimise their use as impact measures.
The extent that students feel confident and that they belong at King’s

Background

The What Works team has been measuring students’ reported self-efficacy and sense of belonging over the past three years using our ‘Settling into King’s’ questions, embedded into the King’s enrolment task. We have done this as part of efforts to improve services offered to students that support their wellbeing and belongingness. This research report draws together the past three years of the Settling into King’s reports. The report contextualises the work in this area and draws out key findings, in addition to including the latest findings from the most recent responses to our enrolment questions.

Self-efficacy

Sometimes we fail before we even start because we don’t actually believe we can succeed at something. An individual’s belief that they are capable of performing behaviours that are necessary to achieve their goals is known by psychologists as self-efficacy. Two key elements of this theory are:

- Self-efficacy is a belief about one’s capability, which won’t necessarily match one’s actual ability.
- Self-efficacy is domain specific. That is, people judge their capability within the particular domain, or context.¹

Self-efficacy can be understood as task-specific self-confidence: our perceived ability to organise ourselves to achieve a set task.² It was first proposed as a concept by Bandura³ and has been applied to education by theorists such as Zimmerman and Schunk.⁴ Bandura summarised the importance of self-efficacy as:

‘People make causal contributions to their own psychosocial functioning through mechanisms of personal agency. Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Efficacy belief, therefore, is a major basis of action. People guide their lives by their beliefs of personal efficacy.’⁵ (Bandura, 1997)

Students’ confidence in their own academic ability has been linked to their educational trajectories, persistence and academic performance.⁶ It is a variable that can be assessed and potentially altered through interventions, such as providing regular feedback. An understanding of students’ self-efficacy as they move through university is therefore a potentially useful tool for universities in ensuring students are supported in reaching their full potential. This is particularly the case for those who have experienced social or economic disadvantage.⁷

Sense of belonging

A link between confidence and sense of belonging was found by Walton and Cohen. Students who have reason to believe that others hold negative expectations for them, for example because they are members of a stigmatised group, may scan their environment for evidence that they do not belong. This vigilance can make them more sensitive to any existing evidence that supports this hypothesis, and it can make them more likely to interpret ambiguous cues about their belonging as evidence that they do not belong.⁸

Walton and Cohen created an intervention that was intended to reduce Black students’ worries about

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belonging at an elite US university in which they would be a minority. They communicated explicitly and implicitly that concerns about belonging are universal, rather than confined to members of specific groups, and that they naturally pass with time. In this way, the intervention normalised individuals’ concerns.¹⁰

University students who experience a sense of belonging in educational environments are likely to be more motivated.¹¹, ¹² In this context, belonging can be described as: ‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment’.¹³ This ‘sense of belonging’ can be considered as both a psychological and sociological construct, related to an individual’s perception of whether they belong in university.¹⁴

A number of factors can influence students’ sense of belonging, including the extent that:

- students feel they have strong, reliable connections¹⁵ within the university
- there are people they know within the university that they feel they can relate to, and feel they fit in with¹⁶
- others are having a similar experience to them¹⁷
- they feel respected and included,¹⁸ for example able to give an opinion in class.¹⁹

These factors ultimately impact on students’ academic and non-academic engagements, and so their desire and ability to integrate socially and academically.

The next section explains how we have used these concepts at King’s to understand the experience of our students.

### About the Settling into King’s questions

The Settling into King’s questions are a set of self-efficacy and belonging questions that were added into the enrolment task that all enrolling and re-enrolling students are asked to complete from the 2018–19 Academic Year. This was to provide us with an insight into students’ sense of wellbeing and belonging, how this varies across different groups, and to enable the evaluation of initiatives aimed at influencing how students settle into the university. We can then understand the extent that our programmes are influencing these factors which, while important in their own right, have also been linked to overall student success.

New students are asked the first three questions (the ‘Big 3’) while returning students are asked all six (the ‘Big 6’). The questions are asked of all undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students.

Students are asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

As part of the exercise, they are also informed that the questions will be used to improve services offered to them, and that the questions are optional. This ensures the buy-in of the students in the exercise. Regardless of the questions being optional, response rates are high and have been relatively consistent across the three years. Each year only around five per cent of students decline to answer.

The first three questions measure self-efficacy, and the final three, asked only to students who are re-enrolling, measure the extent that students feel a ‘sense of belonging’:

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1. I made the right decision in choosing to study at King's
When enrolling, and in later re-enrolments, students are first asked if they feel they have made the right decision in choosing to study at King’s. Institutional commitment, the extent to which a student is attached to the university, is a good predictor of intent to persist and actual student persistence. Furthermore, this question ties closely with a Pascarella & Terenzini measure of institutional and goal commitments, similarly a survey at the University of Leicester for the HEA What Works project which included the statement ‘I think I chose the right university for me’ as part of a scale on expectations. This found significant correlations between their expectations scale and sense of belonging.

2. I feel optimistic about the year ahead
The Settling into King’s questions also ask students whether they feel optimistic about the year ahead, with the goal of measuring the emotional wellbeing of incoming students. The addition of this question is based on previous research conducted as part of a panel survey for the KCLxBIT project, which sought to explore new ways to support widening participation students at King’s by embedding behavioural insights and robust evaluation methods into student support projects. By asking students how they feel about the year ahead we get a picture of their confidence that they will do well in the coming year, and so their overall feeling of general academic self-efficacy.

3. I feel confident that I can cope with my studies
As well as asking about overall self-efficacy, we measure reported feelings of self-efficacy in relation to students’ academic work. Students are also asked each year if they feel confident they will be able to cope with their studies. This is particularly relevant as it is a potential predictor of student grades and one of the strongest predictors of students’ persistence. Although, it has been acknowledged that there are other academically relevant factors which feed into students’ persistence, such as course experiences or the extent to which their interests and degree align, determining the unique effect of these factors is often difficult.

The next three questions are only asked to re-enrolling students:

4. I fit in at King’s
When students re-enrol, they are asked if they feel they fit in at King’s, to measure feelings of institutional fit and belonging. ‘Integration’ and feeling of ‘fit’ have consistently been featured as common themes in student persistence-related research and theory. For example, Bean’s Student Attrition Model highlighted institutional fit as a key component in predicting student drop out. Feelings of integration into academic and student life also feature strongly in Tinto’s Student Integration Model. The HEA What Works? Student Retention & Success Programme also identified sense of belonging as a possible key factor in student retention based on research from surveys of non-returning freshman students at Ohio University conducted between 2003 and 2007. They found that ‘I do not fit in at OU’ was either the most, or second most, cited reason in every year for students who dropped out. Although we are not always good at accurately explaining the reasons for our own behaviour, this still suggests feeling of fit is important to students.

5. I feel supported by King’s
A meta-analysis of factors affecting college outcomes found perceived social support has a significant impact on persistence. Furthermore, the HEA What Works? Student Retention & Success Programme highlights the importance of both academic and wider support on student belonging and retention. Qualitative and quantitative research by the University of Leicester suggests that students also believe this feeling is important for their retention.
6. I participate in student life beyond my academic commitments

Students’ social involvement in university life has repeatedly been shown to affect student persistence. For example, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt conducted pre-enrolment and post-enrolment surveys which suggested social and emotional ‘adjustment’ predicted persistence as well or better than academic ‘adjustment’. Adjustment was measured using a modified version of the Student Adaption to College Questionnaire which measures satisfaction, social integration, and expectations for the future. Asking this question also allows us to measure the extent that students are engaging in activities which help with feelings of integration and fit. Integration also helps students build social capital (ability to gain support through networks), which has also been linked to student success.

Are self-efficacy and sense of belonging related?

In 2018–19 the first year we ran this analysis, we determined the correlation between the questions using Cronbach’s alpha, a measure of internal consistency and scale reliability which tests the degree to which a set of items are related. The internal consistency (or ‘alpha’) for the Big 3 was 0.91 and for the Big 6 is 0.96. Though the Big 3 look at self-efficacy and the Big 6 additionally look at sense of belonging, this supports our hypothesis that these questions are assessing aspects of the same construct. The chart below demonstrates the similar spread between the two items based on the average scores from the 2020 survey.

Figure 1 demonstrates that only a small proportion of students score less than 2.5 in our measures, and very few students report low self-efficacy or sense of belonging. Our analysis has therefore focused on exploring how the average score differs between groups.

Self-efficacy – year on year analysis

We first included these questions in the 2018–19 academic year. All students answered the first three self-efficacy questions (‘I made the right decision in choosing to study at King’s’, ‘I feel optimistic about the year ahead’ and ‘I feel confident that I can cope with my studies’). Only re-enrolling students (second year or above) answered the further set of questions measuring sense of belonging to the institution.

When looking at responses to the first three questions over the last three years (Figure 2) we found that:

- Students enter King’s with similar, highly positive expectations of their belonging and wellbeing.
- However, second years and students in subsequent years re-enrolling the same academic year tended to report lower self-efficacy than the newly enrolling first years.
- Although lower, the self-efficacy reported by those not in their first year of study is still above the middle mark of 2.5 which would still suggest high self-efficacy overall.

When we looked at the responses of different ethnic groups to the first three questions, Asian students and Chinese students have significantly lower self-efficacy scores than white students, while Black students tend to have mostly close-to-significantly lower scores (Figure 3). There was no significant change when students were asked these questions again in 2019–20. Off the back of this finding, we conducted social research with Asian students (including Chinese students) in 2020. Unfortunately, we had to postpone this research due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However this difference has been found to persist in 2020–21 and so we will resume this research in Autumn of 2021.

Widening participation status

In 2019–20, we also looked at Widening Participation status. For the purposes of this reporting, we used the Acorn postcode profiler commonly used to define relative disadvantage. King’s uses Acorn Quintiles 4&5 as indicators of ‘widening participation’ background. The average score on the first three self-efficacy questions based on student’s WP status revealed that overall, students whose home postcodes are based in Acorn...
Quintiles 4&5 had significantly lower scores than students whose home postcodes are based in less-deprived home postcodes (4.18 vs 4.24). When we looked at this again in 2020–21 we found no difference, with both recording an average score of 4.16.

**Self-efficacy – tracking change over time**

In order to do longitudinal analysis, students who first enrolled at King’s in 2018 also had their responses to the first three questions compiled in 2019 and again in 2020. Matching was successful for 4,865 students.

The 0.21 difference between 2018 and 2019 and the 0.32 gap between 2019 and 2020 were significant. Overall, average scores have declined steadily from 2018 to 2020 and these year-to-year differences are significant. Figure 4 shows the results of this analysis.

Figures 5 to 8 provides the breakdown of average scores by the core Widening Participation groups. The analysis shows an overall widening of the gap in average scores in 2019 which eventually closes up in 2020 for most groups.

However, there has been a steady decline in scoring reported between the student cohorts enrolling in in 2018–19 and 2020–21. The gap has closed because the scoring of other groups has come down to meet the previously low scoring groups. This is explored further in the ‘Next steps’ section, including the steps we will take to address this.

**Gender**

The Big 3 scores by gender for the years 2018–2020 are shown below. Feelings of self-efficacy for both males and females have declined from 2018. However, on average, the score for feelings of self-efficacy was lower for females.

All differences between the average scores for males and females are significant.
Acorn

The Big 3 scores by WP category (using Acorn) for the years 2018–2020 are shown below. Students belonging to Acorn Quintiles 4&5 are categorised as WP students while all others are grouped as ‘Non-WP’ students (Figure 6).

Both groups have seen their feelings of self-efficacy decline from 2018, with WP students reporting a lower feeling of self-efficacy on average. There were no significant differences in the feelings of self-efficacy between WP and non-WP students in 2018. In 2019 however, a significant gap emerged in favour of non-WP students which has now closed up in the last year.

Ethnic minority students

For the purposes of this research, students belonging to all other ethnic groups except ‘white’ are classified as ‘BME’. However, we note this is an imprecise catch-all term, and any differences between more specific groups will be highlighted. Across all ethnic groups, feelings of self-efficacy have declined from 2018 with BME students reporting lower feelings of self-efficacy on average. There was a significant difference in the feelings of self-efficacy between BME and white students in 2018. In 2019 this gap reduced, but the difference remained significant with white students still reporting a higher feelings of self-efficacy than BME students (Figure 7).

When the BME classification is broken down further differences are very minimal, and not significant (Figure 8).

Sense of belonging – year on year analysis

We also asked all students re-enrolling into King’s (going into second year or above) questions to specifically measure their sense of belonging. The additional questions re-enrolling students are asked are ‘I fit in at King’s’, ‘I feel supported by King’s’ and ‘I participate in student life beyond my academic commitment’. Overall sense of belonging has dropped from 3.95 in 2019 to 3.75 in 2020. Students who do not re-enrol, for example most postgraduate taught students, are not asked these questions. As most students are only asked these questions twice – at the start of their second and third year – we can’t track the responses to these questions meaningfully.

As we ask all re-enrolling questions to all returning students we don’t yet have as much data on the responses as we do the first three questions which are asked to all students (Figure 9). We intend to interrogate these questions next year when we have more data.

Responses for key groups – all questions

In our final analysis, we looked at the combined responses to all six questions for key groups.

Ethnic group

When responses to all questions were compared across ethnic groups, we found a significantly lower overall reported sense of belonging and self-efficacy for students identified as Asian (excluding Chinese students, who are treated separately in the data) in 2018–19. However differences by ethnic group have reduced in recent years (Figure 10).
Figure 9: Responses to additional (sense of belonging) questions asked to all re-enrolling students (average score out of 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2018–19</th>
<th>2019–20</th>
<th>2020–21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I fit in at King’s</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel supported by King’s</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participate in student life beyond my academic commitment</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.61</td>
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Figure 10: All responses (‘Big 6’) by key ethnic group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018–19</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019–20</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020–21</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.10</td>
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Figure 11: All responses (‘Big 6’) – First Generation students

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018–19</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019–20</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020–21</td>
<td>4.05</td>
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</table>

**First Generation**

We looked at overall responses to the sense of belonging questions from returning students who are first in their family to go to university. The reported combined sense of belonging and self-efficacy is also generally high (Figure 11).

Although it is positive that groups we often associate with low self-efficacy and sense of belonging are showing high overall average score, the analysis set out above highlights important differences between key groups that need to be addressed. The following section highlights a selection of the programmes currently running to support student sense of belonging and self-efficacy.
How King’s is supporting sense of belonging and self-efficacy

That students feel a sense of belonging to their institution and feel positive about their ability to succeed on their chosen course are core priorities for King’s College London. It is a key aim set out in our strategic Vision 2029, to make the word a better place by providing transformative education for students and ensuring that all of our students are equally able to flourish. Below is a snapshot of some of the work related to sense of belonging and self-efficacy we have developed to address these issues and achieve our aims for and with our students.

Induction

Our findings demonstrate the importance of a good start at university. An effective induction and interventions that enable students to develop supportive peer relations are key to fostering a sense of belonging.

Induction and transition activities can have an impact on retention and success through:

- Socialisation and formation of friendship groups, which provide a support network and promote social integration;
- Informing expectations of higher education and helping students to be effective learners by developing their confidence and their academic skills; and,
- Developing relationships with members of staff, allowing students to approach them when they need to.

Welcome to King’s

King’s College London holds a series of activities to induct new students, known as ‘Welcome to King’s’. Due to Covid-19, we moved induction online in 2020, with the result that many new students didn’t get the full ‘Welcome to King’s’ experience. Whilst there has been a wide range of online provision, many of the skills and experiences students would have had at this stage rely on building connections. These have been nearly impossible to replicate virtually. King’s is therefore scoping a potential ‘refreshers’ programme to give both new and returning students access to opportunities that encourage a sense of belonging. We will be evaluating the effect of this increased offer.

Induction and the First Year Experience are a key part of the King’s College London 2017–2022 Education Strategy commitment to ensure all King’s students are equipped for success. The King’s College London Widening Participation team is also developing a module to help summer school participants with the transition to university to give our summer school students the best start possible. Our Marketing team also runs a survey of new entrants and students who have declined an offer at King’s to understand the reasons behind their choice and get a clear idea of their expectations. King’s Business School (KBS) have created ‘induction group leaders’ to help welcome new students to the faculty. Almost three quarters (71%) of participating students agreed that being part of a KBS induction group helped them to make friends.

Lifecycle support

Our findings also demonstrate that sense of belonging is something that needs to be nurtured and maintained by universities over time. Research suggests that simply enabling students to acquire tokens that signify their identification (e.g. notebooks, clothes) can have a positive effect on sense of belonging. In research in the US, Hausman & colleagues found that a letter and gift from the university, such as a magnet with the institution’s name on, increased students’ sense of belonging. However, this effect was mainly for white students. Sense of belonging and persistence of African American students were unaffected by the intervention. This underlines a key caveat - these kinds of interventions complement, but do not replace, wider institutional reforms. In her research in schools, Goodnow highlights the importance that students feel supported and respected. Giving students opportunities to achieve meaningful shared goals with others at King’s is another way to potentially build both their sense of belonging and social capital.
Conversations about race
A key element of feeling a sense of belonging is feeling ‘respected and included’.43 We set up facilitated sessions to create safe spaces for the King’s community to talk about their experiences with race. Students and staff from all backgrounds are invited to share. ‘These discussions enable others in the King’s community to take action and see what individuals can do to be anti-racist.’

‘It was great to be a part of this and to hear everyone’s perspectives, learn from each other and an opportunity to have conversations about race.’ (Student)

As a result of one of these conversations the Faculty for Dentistry, Oral and Craniofacial sciences has set up the ‘Call Me By My Name’ initiative. Students and staff received emails encouraging staff to ask students to correct them and students to let staff know when their names are mispronounced. Students were encouraged to change the name on their name badge free of charge if it didn’t currently have their preferred name on it. These are examples of wider work that we are doing to fulfil our strategic priority to build a community of learners.44

Helping students build their networks
If students feel that there are people they know within the university that they can relate to, and if they feel they fit in with the wider student body,45 this can increase their sense of belonging. Creating connections with students from other years also has the potential to increase feelings of self-efficacy as students gain more insight into what is ahead of them and see models of successful behaviour. Campus Conversations is a project delivered using the philosophy and tools of community organising, working in partnership with Citizens UK. Citizens UK is a people-powered alliance who provide insight and training on relational one-to-one conversations, a widely used community organising technique. These one-to-one conversations establish trust and allow a safe space for the exploration of students’ values and experiences. Once trained in relational one-to-ones, Campus Conversations Student Ambassadors begin to have these conversations with other students as well as delivering relational training sessions to the wider institution.

‘Being part of the Campus conversations community is truly valuable and has given me an insight into better communication and building the bridges between a whole host of different people.’ (Student)

The aim of Campus Conversations is to increase students’ sense of belonging to King’s through the establishment of a relational culture on campus. In 2018–19, the Campus Conversations Student Ambassadors’ reported sense of belonging increased significantly while participating on the programme. In 2019–20, we found a similar pattern of increased sense of belonging for the Student Ambassadors and this data has resulted in substantial changes to the programme to further improve student success.

King’s Civic Leadership Academy
One way to help students build their self-efficacy, task specific confidence, is to help them gain experience of that task. King’s Civic Leadership Academy (CLA) is a development programme for second year undergraduates that addresses disparities in experience and outcomes for our most underrepresented students. Through paid internships with community organisations, students enhance their network and social capital by working closely with leaders in the community addressing some of London’s most complex social challenges. As a result, community organisations gain from the perspective, lived experience and insights King’s students bring to their internships. Alongside learning on the ground, students participate in a Leadership Development Curriculum designed by King’s College London in partnership with Citizens UK. Comprising masterclasses, workshops and mentoring the programme is designed to enhance students’ knowledge of diversity and social justice, as well as their self-efficacy towards service to society and civic participation. Combining classroom learning and front line experience, CLA empowers students from underrepresented backgrounds with the knowledge, attributes, skills and experience that enable them to become highly employable, civic-minded and engaged citizens.

Working with King’s What Works Department to evaluate the impact of the programme, CLA implements pre- and post-programme surveys for students to identify progress against key aims. These include self-efficacy, social capital, civic engagement, belongingness and career readiness. In 2019–20 CLA was able to demonstrate that it had a statistically significant impact on its participants’ reported self-efficacy and social capital (Figure 12 overleaf).46

For this project we used a larger number of questions and looked at amalgamated responses across all questions. This meant we could see the effect of the project more easily. This is something we will take into consideration when we next update the SiTK measures. Social capital is another core element of a student’s academic and social integration, commonly linked to retention and success47

44 King’s Strategic Vision 2029. Available at: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/assets/pdf/Kings-strategic-vision-2029.pdf
and is something we could include in future years. This project is an example of how King’s is fulfilling its commitment, as part of our Education Strategy, to expand learning opportunities to embed civic engagement and service learning across King’s.48

**Personal tutor support**

We recognise that the onus on improving sense of belonging and self-efficacy shouldn’t just be put on students. It should also be embedded within university support. We have developed guidance and resources to support personal tutors in contributing to our students’ sense of belonging.49 All taught students are allocated a personal tutor who is there to discuss academic progress, general welfare and future plans. This role therefore presents an ideal opportunity to build a meaningful relationship between students and a member of academic staff. This is supported through guidance for staff on key conversation topics and holding group meetings, designing training to help staff understand the needs of the student body and sending out monthly communications to personal tutors including prompt messages for them to share with students.

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49 Thomas, J. 2012 Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme
The overall message from this analysis is that students generally start at King’s with high self-efficacy, but that those levels drop as they move through the student lifecycle, with their responses to later sense of belonging questions highly correlated to their reported feelings of self-efficacy.

Each enrolment question measuring sense of belonging and self-efficacy uses a five-point Likert scale for measurement. Average responses of between 3 and 4.5 are therefore very high. So, though there are significant differences between some key groups, no group has, on average, low sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Though average self-efficacy and sense of belonging scores are high, they have been declining. One reason for this could be the impact of Covid-19, which has increased levels of anxiety and kept students away from campus. Only by continuing to collect this data as universities re-open can we understand if this decline is part of a more general trend, and by using targeted analysis of programs such as those listed above to understand which are having a positive effect. King’s College London has also been collecting data on the extent that students were struggling during the academic year 2020–21 with a four-wave pulse survey (the institutional ‘Checking-in Survey’). There is scope for exploring if there is any correlation in responses, though the survey had a far lower response rate. We are also considering the following next steps:

1. Linking the Settling into King’s data with attainment

We have found these questions helpful for understanding where we should target our efforts, as for some groups we have seen consistently lower average responses across the three years. For example, in 2018–19 Asian students reported significantly lower sense of belonging. In response we began further research to understand how we can support this group more effectively. Female students are consistently reporting lower self-efficacy throughout their time at university. Third year students also consistently have the lowest reported sense of belonging and so these are both potential areas of future focus.

A further step is to compare enrolment responses to degree outcomes. This will be the focus of our analysis for 2021–22. When performing this analysis, we will also need to differentiate between those students who finish in their third year and those who continue (such as medics and dentists), which will also provide important insight.

2. Including additional questions

Overall, the majority of students report higher self-efficacy and sense of belonging. Although this is good news for the students, it has raised some issues for us in evaluating whether the projects above are having a positive impact on sense of belonging and self-efficacy. A key reason that we added these questions to our annual enrolment questions was so that we could evaluate projects’ effectiveness in a consistent way. We could, in turn, reduce that the number of times we survey students to understand the impact of different student success projects. In practice, average responses have been so high they’ve proven quite difficult to influence. We will therefore consider how we can expand these questions further to gain a more nuanced understanding of the student experience. From looking at how project teams have used these findings, building students’ social capital has been a main focus (for example for the King’s Civic Leadership Academy). We should therefore consider measuring this more explicitly.

3. Asking the questions further into Year One as well as when students first start

One limitation of our analysis is that students are first asked these questions as they are enrolling in King’s. They are not then asked again until they enter their second year. However, a lot of change occurs for a student in their first year. One possible next step could be to ask first year students all six questions in January of their first year.

If you would like to know more about our experience with the project and our further work please email whatworks@kcl.ac.uk.

51 Ogundipe Akinbode, H. (2021) Digital learning in Higher Education – more flexible, but also more lonely. Available at: https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/behaviouralinsights/2021/02/24/digital-learning-in-higher-education-more-flexible-but-also-more-lonely/