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Belonging, Attachment and COVID-19 in Higher Education in the Netherlands: Results and Recommendations

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To cite this article:

Carl Hermann Dino Steinmetz, Dliman Salim. Belonging, Attachment and COVID-19 in Higher Education in the Netherlands: Results and Recommendations. *Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 10, No. 5, 2022, pp. 271-276. doi: 10.11648/j.hss.20221005.11

Abstract: This article is a fledgling exploratory test of the theoretical article we previously wrote, "Belonging a Key Concept to Explain Success in Higher Education in the Netherlands. This article reports on the beliefs of first year students at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences on the topics of Belonging, and Attachment. COVID-19 is an intervening variable in this study. The main outcome is that Windesheim University of Applied Sciences -in particular Social Work- has done well to establish learning communities. Students appreciate this approach. There they have the feeling to be heard and understood. They also have the idea in the learning community that they are cared about as people. Our conclusion is that learning communities contribute to belonging. Nevertheless, we suggest a number of improvements. Improvements that are badly needed because the students are mostly non-Western and the teachers are mainly native Dutch. Improvement 1 is to involve the extended family in the education, which is common in the non-Western world. An extended family can possibly help prevent students from dropping out. Improvement 2 is to give education a positive spin, by stopping focusing on a competition for the highest grades. Improvement 3 is to ensure that the teachers are a representative reflection of the students at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, social work. The likelihood then increases that students will be more seen and valued in their cultural identities.

Keywords: Belonging, Attachment, COVID-19, Learning Community, Students

1. Introduction

This article is based on the theoretical model developed in the article: Belonging a Key Concept to Explain Success in Higher Education in the Netherlands [1]. The core of this model can be found in Figure 1. An important note about this theoretical model is that belonging has a Western and non-Western version. After all, the students of the first year Social Work of the University of Applied Sciences Windesheim in Almere are mainly non-western and the teachers western.

In the aforementioned article, a model of attachment and belonging for students and their teachers is presented with a number of hypotheses. The intervening variable is COVID-19.

Figure 1 should be read from right to left. Hypothesis 1 is that the directors and board of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences have a positive influence on lecturers' Sense of Belonging. This can be deduced from the satisfaction of lecturers of Social Work with Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in 2021. The satisfaction score for Social Work is 8.3 in 2021 (4-17 October) on a scale of 0-10[1]. This score is based on a 46% response rate of an annual work experience survey of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Social Work Flevoland. This satisfaction score of teachers can possibly influence the satisfaction of students.

The second set of hypotheses that will be reported on here is that a positive attachment may have a positive influence on belonging of students, that satisfied teachers may have a positive influence on belonging of students and that possibly peers can positively impact peer engagement. A side note to both hypotheses is that COVID-19 is a disruptor of possible positive effects because at that time, students were mainly dependent on online education on their own.

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1 Young staff members at Windesheim under the age of 44 (8.0) score higher than staff members at Windesheim over the age of 44 (7.6).
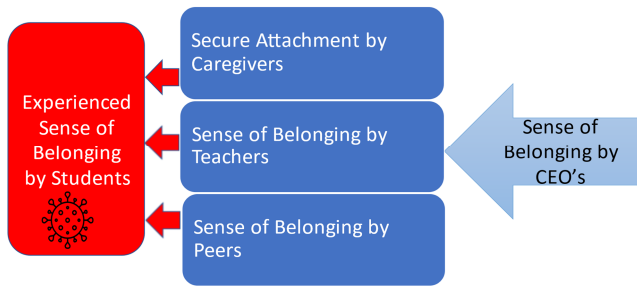
Figure 1. Model of Secure Attachment and Belonging.

2. The Population and Research Sample

This research focuses on the first-year students of Social Work Windesheim. The reason for this is the Dutch expression: "the first blow is worth a daalder". In other words, if first-year students feel at home at Windesheim right from the start, that is the seed that was sown in the very first months and that must be harvested in the following years. In September 2021, 142 students started the full-time bachelor's program Social Work Windesheim [2]. Of these, 103 students remained on March 1, 2022. Furthermore, the impression is that of the 103 students, 93 are still active. The official dropout rate is in 6 month 27.5%. The satisfaction scores of students of Social Work at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences Almere is 3.6 out of a scale of 1-5 points [3]. This is the same for the whole of the Netherlands [4]. Moreover, the throughput of students from the first to the second year of Social Work Almere is 69%. In short, another 31% drop out, have a spring delay or have to redo part or all of the year. According to Paulien van den Burg (27th of May 2022) [5] some of the students are still not coming to school.

One might speculate about the possible explanations. What is certain is that this is, among other things, a COVID-19 effect. Possibly, this drop-out rate and throughput already says something about Sense of Belonging. After all, students of color need much more guidance and safe spaces ([6], p. 7) than white students [7].

"In the comfort zone, someone feels comfortable without anxiety or discomfort. There are no new challenges or reflections in this (figurative) space to start a learning process. The other extreme is the panic zone, a space that is overwhelming and far from comfortable. In this zone, students experience stress and anxiety. Learning is impossible because students are forced to expend all their energy on coping with stress and panic. In between is the stretch zone. In this space, things can be unknown and can become uncomfortable, but there is room for a learning process. A daring space (described below) is by definition a stretch zone. Daring spaces are spaces where co-creation in for instance learning communities takes place between teachers and students and where they constantly strive for the creation of stretch zones. In other words, daring spaces are safe spaces where there is enough delay and confidence to allow for friction and where discomfort is considered productive"

The 103 first year students can be seen as the population from which a sample group was drawn for this study on belonging, attachment and COVID-19. Sampling took place through random enrolment in two student workshops that the authors of this article organized at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences among Social Work students. A total of 24 students (23%) from Social Work Windesheim were reached.

Table 1. Population and sample data of Windesheim students (first year Social Work).

Population of students (103)	Average Age Total Students (21,6 years)	Gender
Male 20 years or younger (11)	19,3	11%
Male older than 20 years (13)	25,1	13%
Woman 20 years or younger (36)	18,8	35%
Woman older than 20 years (43)	22,4	42%

Sample 1 + 2 (= 24)	Average Age Total Students (22,32)	Gender (23,3%)
Male 20 years or younger (1)	19,90	4,2%
Male older than 20 years (6)	23,20	25,0%
Woman 20 years or younger (7)	22,16	29,2%
Woman older than 20 years (10)	22,55	41,7%

A total of 24 Social Work students (freshmen) were willing to participate in this study on Belonging and Attachment out of a total of 103 students (= population). This leads to a margin of error of 17.6% at 95% confidence for this sample. The following formula[2] (z-score) was used to calculate the error margin. It is also noteworthy that in the final sample, there are fewer male students aged over 20 and more female students aged 20 or over.

The mean age of this sample of 24 students is 22.43 and the standard deviation is 4.43. It is concluded that age of the sample does not differ from the population (mean age = 21,6). The average sex of the population is 1,76 (The average was calculated through the 'conversion': male = 1 and female = 2). The sample mean is 1.71 with a standard deviation of 0.46. Very tentatively, based on these calculations, we may conclude that the sample is a representative reflection of the population of first-year students.

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2 Margin of errors, in statistics, is the degree of error in results received from random sampling surveys. A higher margin of error in statistics indicates less likelihood of relying on the results of a survey or poll, i.e. the confidence on the results will be lower to represent a population

3. COVID-19

To determine COVID-19 effects in first-year students at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, the questionnaire of the Dutch municipal health service [8] was used. Many of these surveyed first-year students have had experiences with COVID-19 (91,7%). Those experiences are illustrated in table 2.

COVID-19 question: What did you experience during the COVID-19 period (more answers per person possible).

Table 2. Type of COVID-19 experiences.

Answer category	Number of students / percentage
I have had corona	11 (45,8%)
I have been in quarantine	18 (75,0%)
Someone important to me had Corona	17 (70,8%)
Someone important to me has been in the hospital	5 (20,8%)
Someone important to me died of corona	4 (16,7%)
Someone important to me died of something other than corona	6 (25,0%)
I've been in the hospital because of something other than corona	1 (04,2%)
Less work or income for (one of) my parents	6 (25,0%)
None of the above categories	2 (08,3%)

Many students have had their own experience with COVID-19:

1. Had her or himself corona (45.8%).
2. Being quarantined (75,0%).

Many students know someone with COVID-19 who is important to them:

1. Know someone who is important (70.8%).
2. Deceased from corona (16.7%).

The GGD COVID-19 questionnaire contains two subsets of questions. First, there is a subset with 8 questions about the impact of COVID-19 on 'Be part of a Group' versus 'Being Alone', like 'I feel like I get along well with the people around me', 'I miss having company' or 'I don't feel alone'. Each of the questions has a score between 1-5. All scores run from negative to positive. The maximum score per individual is 40 (extremely low COVID-19 impact). The minimum score is 8 (extremely high COVID-19 impact).

The second subset begins with the general question, "How have the COVID-19 measures, such as lockdowns, school closings, digital teaching, and 1.5-meter spacing, affected the following areas of your life, such as your health, how well you feel, relationship with your family?" This subset of questions is called the impact of COVID-19 on general well-being. This COVID-19 GGD questionnaire consists of 6 questions with a score between 1-5. All scores run (taking into account the question format) from negative to positive. The maximum score per individual is 30 (extremely low COVID-19 impact). The minimum score is 6 (extremely high COVID-19 impact).

Impact of COVID-19 on Be Part of a Group versus Being Alone. Mean impact COVID-19 on SOM Total 'Be part of a Group' versus 'Being Alone': 31.50 [73,4%; n = 24] and the Total 'Be Part of a Group' versus 'Being Alone' is 756

(maximum total score is 960 and minimum total score is 192). Standard Deviation: 5.54. The range of the total impact of COVID-19 on 'Be Part of a Group' versus 'Being Alone' is between 25.96 and 37.04 (CI 95%).

COVID-19 has had a little up to low impact on first-year students 'Be Part of a Group' 'versus Being Alone'[3]. Female freshmen (30, 41) experienced slightly more impact on 'Be Part of a Group' versus 'Being Alone' as a result of COVID-19 than male freshmen (34, 14). Age had no impact on social contacts and leisure time as a result of COVID-19.

Impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing, study results and estimated study points.

For the effect of COVID-19 on well-being, a total score the well-being items (a summation of 6 questions) has been constructed. Thereby 1 = very negative and 5 = very positive. Maximum score per individual is 30. Minimum score per individual is 6. Total maximum score is 720 and total minimum score is 144. The mean effect of COVID-19 on well-being is 20,92 (SD = 2.91 and CI 95%). The mean effect of COVID-19 on women's well-being (total score = 340) is 20.0 and on men's well-being 23.1 (total score = 162). The negative effect of COVID-19 on men's well-being is greater than on women's well-being. For the different age groups of students, there is no effect of COVID-19 on well-being.

The effect of COVID-19 on study outcomes panned out negatively for 15.7% of students.

Conclusion: Many first year students of Social Work Windesheim have personally experienced COVID-19 (91.7%). 45.8% of students have had COVID-19 themselves and 75% have been quarantined. The effect of COVID-19 on well-being, belonging versus being alone is greater for male than for female students. National Dutch research of the GGD region Utrecht [10] among adolescents in the Netherlands confirms our results. An important additional yield is the effect of COVID-19 on the estimated study points of Social Work first year students. That effect is 27,3%. This survey also found that during the COVID-19 period, 40,9% of Social Work first year students could have used help well.

4. Belonging

This section of the article presents the results of belonging among first-year Social Work students. The OECD belonging questionnaire was used for this purpose [10]. Belonging consists of 6 questions with four answer possibilities (1 – 4; 1 = very positive. 4 is very negative). For 6 questions, that will be a maximum of 6 (positive) or 24 (negative) per respondent. The average belonging score is 11.3 (SD = 2,23 and CI = 95%) and the sum of all scores (of all students) is 271 (the maximum negative score is 576).

Belonging shows no difference between female and male students and the different age groups.

Conclusion: Belonging could have had a maximum positive score of 6 and a maximum negative score of 24. The average is 11.3 and the median is 15. In other words, a

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3 8-16 high impact, 16-24 = impact, 24-32 = low impact and 32-40 is no impact.

substantial number of first-year Social Work Windesheim students do not experience belonging.

Parents and Belonging: The parent part of this section consists of the following questions: 1) my parents support my educational efforts and achievements, 2) my parents support me when I experience difficulties in school, and 3) my parents encourage me to be confident. Here we examine whether parental effort plays into the degree of belonging of their children in school.

The results of this part of the research on parents and belonging are below:

1. 19 (79%) of 24 parents support their child's educational efforts and achievements. The total belonging score for these students is 212/ 271 = 0.78. The score 1 implies no belonging.
2. 15 (63%) of 24 parents support their child with difficulties in school. The total belonging score for these students is 164/ 271 = 0.61. The score 1 implies no belonging.
3. 20 (83%) of 24 parents support their child in realizing self-confidence. The total belonging score for these students is 219/ 271 = 0.81. The score 1 implies no belonging.

The conclusion from this is that parents support their children (freshmen) in the absence of belonging at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Social Work.

Unsafe behavior from peers: There are a total of 6 questions with answer categories 'hardly ever' up to and including once a week or more. The conclusion is that unsafe behavior is hardly ever mentioned. 4 (17%) of the 24 students are shut out on purpose and 5 (21%) students indicated that other students make fun of them.

Collaborating with other students: support for a learning community: In order to capture this concept of "working with other students", 4 questions were asked with 4 answer categories from completely true to completely false. The outcomes are:

1. 58% of the students seem to value collaboration;
2. 62.5% of the students agree with the following statement: "It seems that students cooperate with each other";
3. 58% of students seem to share the feeling that working with each other is important;
4. 75% of students feel that they are encouraged to work with others.

The results of these support questions for a learning community can be added together. Together, they are an indication of how the learning community functions in practice. The average of these supports for the learning community is: 11.75 (minimum result = 4 and maximum result per respondent = 16, SD = 2.8 (CI = 95%) and Total Sum = 282).

The above outcomes related to support for a learning community raise the question, "Is there a relationship between a high score on support for a learning community and belonging?"

Conclusion: first-year social work students with high belonging scores experience more support from the learning community than students with low belonging scores: 'high' belonging = 13.0 total support learning community and 'low' belonging is 7.8 total support learning community.

Emotional profile of the students: The OECD (2018) questionnaire also included questions about the emotional profile of respondents. That key question is included below: "when you think about yourself, and how you normally feel, how often do you feel as described below". The response categories are always, sometimes, rarely, and never.

The results are (always and sometimes added together) for negatively and positively experienced emotions. Negatives are anxious (29.2%), miserable (29.2%), worried (79.2), and sad (58.3%). Positive are happy (100%), energetic (87.5%), proud (79.2%), cheerful (100%), and excited (87.5%). The response category sometimes is the most common (56.5%).

Conclusion: the profile of social work students consists of positively and negatively experienced emotions. Positively experienced emotions dominate the negatively experienced emotions. The exception to the rule is the negative emotions anxiety and sadness which are relatively common. Our interpretation of the above results is that the negatively experienced emotions may still need to be worked on in order to achieve more optimal belonging.

5. Attachment

The concept of attachment consists of two questionnaires of Brenning et al. [11], anxious and avoidant attachment (18 questions each). In total there are answers from 18 students. The results are standardized, as a deviation from the mean. A high score for anxious attachment means not anxiously attached (≥1.2) and a lower score for anxiously attached (≤0.8). A high score in avoidant attachment represents not avoidant attached (≤ 1.27) and a low score in avoidant attached (≤ 0.73).

Table 3. *Type of Attachment of students and the extremes (≥ SD and ≤1 SD).*

Type of Attachment	Average	SD
Anxious	1	0,20
Avoidant	1	0,27
	Number of students	
Not Anxious Attached	2 (11%)	
Anxious Attached	4 (22%)	
Not Avoidant Attached	1 (6%)	
Avoidant Attached	4 (22%)	

Male students (7) have an anxious attachment score of 0.93 and female students (11) a score of 1.05. Male students are more anxiously attached than female students.

Male students (7) have an avoidant attachment score of 0.91 and female students (11) of 1.07. Female students are less avoidant attached than male students.

Almost all students have a mother as their primary educator. In addition, 6 of the 17 students were also raised by a foster parent, grandparents, big sister and big brother. On both anxious and avoidant attachment, according to the questionnaires, this had no impact.

From the above data, it can be concluded that both anxious and avoidant attachment are present in about one-quarter of the students.

6. Student Statements on Belonging

Students also answered the following questions: 1) what is the sense of belonging in practice for you, 2) do you belong to your learning community or not, 3) how do teachers show you belong, and 4) how do you show your peers or teachers that you belong?

Total answers to these questions were given by 24 students. Three representative answers are selected for each question. Question 1 provided the following answers: a) that people show genuine interest in you as a person by asking questions, b) being able to be yourself, and c) feeling loved by those around you. Question 2 elicited the following responses: a) yes I belong because I get the feeling that I am listened to, my voice always counts, b) yes, I also belong to a learning community, I can express myself there, and everyone has respect for that, c) yes, help is actively offered. Question 3 yielded the following answers: a) teachers involve everyone, everyone's opinion is welcome, b) outside of class they also make time for us if there is something we are worried about, and c) teachers show interest in your school and personal situation. They try to support you where they can. Finally, question 4 yielded the following responses: a) smiling, b) engaging in small talk with everyone and interacting with teachers and fellow students, and c) actively participating during classes.

These student responses to the concept of belonging show that they have a sophisticated and implicit set of instruments by which they put flesh on the bones to belonging. At the heart of this is all parties-teachers and fellow students-need to use visible interest, reflection, and contemplation to bring about belonging. In short, belonging comes out better when teachers and fellow students are interested in the students as persons well-being.

7. Discussion

The data analysis into the associations between Belonging, COVID-19 and Attachment did not yield any results. One possible reason is that the number of students is too small to conduct such analyses. Furthermore, the questions on attachment were answered by only 18 students and not by 24.

This analysis has shown that belonging is a valuable concept for education. Windesheim University of Applied Sciences has given substance to this with learning communities. This is proving to be a good intervention. It may make sense to elaborate on the group dynamics of learning Communities. In short, which method best suits the student. Students differ in learning style. Now the emphasis is mainly on collaboration, learning together and debate. Other methods of working can be realized by using VR glasses to introduce the student to the unknown world.

Apart from the above, it is wise to move away from the competitive method of working in education [12]. Every student can learn but is not automatically suited to rise to the highest conceivable social, academic and/or commercial position. This can be achieved by making learning in the learning community a positively colored experience. A fixed component here is the 360 degree feedback method where the students are first asked how she / he thinks the learning (content and social) has gone recently, etc. Furthermore, the learning community could make use of the method Rembrandt van Rijn (a famous 16th century Dutch painter). This is the learning model: master, companions and pupil (in ratios of 1 to 3). Finally, it would be wise to involve the extended family more in the learning process of the students as well as ensure that the teachers are a representative reflection of the non-western students. In this way, Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in the Social Work component may be able to prevent the alarming dropout rate of students.

8. Conclusions

This research on belonging and attachment is an exploratory study among first year students of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Social Work. This research was further conducted during the between-post COVID-19 periods. During COVID-19, there were multiple lockdowns. The consequences for students are online or no education. No education may be a bold statement. However, figures from Windesheim show that out of 142 full-time Social Work students, a total of 45 students completed the second year of Social Work with at least 50 credits out of 60 credits [13]. This is 32% of the 142 students enrolled in September 2021.

The population of first-year Social Work students in this exploratory study consists of a total of 103 students. Twenty-four students participated in this study (23% of the population). In total, more female (17) than male (7) students participated in the study. This representation by gender is also found in the population of 103 Social Work students. The same representation was found for the age of the students. This sample is representative of the population of first year Social Work students.

COVID-19: Before discussing belonging and attachment, these students' experiences with COVID-19 will first be explained. Many first-year students of Social Work Windesheim have personally experienced COVID-19 (91.7%). 45.8% of students have had COVID-19 themselves and 75% have been quarantined. The effect of COVID-19 on general well-being, be part of a group versus being alone is greater for male first year students than for female students. A Dutch study by the GGD region Utrecht [9] among adolescents in the Netherlands confirms our results. An important additional yield is the effect of COVID-19 on the estimated credits of first-year Social Work students. That estimated effect is 27.3 (0 = no effect and 100 = maximum effect). This study further shows that 40.9% of first-year Social Work students could have used good help during the COVID-19 period.

Belonging: The OECD questionnaire of belonging questionnaire was used for measuring belonging [11]. The average results of belonging among first-year Social Work

students is 11.3 (SD = 2,23 and CI = 95%). Per respondent a score of 6 is the maximum and the score of 24 the minimum. The impact of belonging is 29,4 (0 = maximum negative impact and 100 maximum positive impact). A substantial number of first-year Social Work Windesheim students experienced no belonging. Belonging shows no difference between female and male students and the different age groups.

Parents furthermore support their children (freshmen) in the absence of belonging at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Social Work. Unsafe behavior (shutting out and making fun) is hardly ever mentioned.

First-year social work students with high belonging scores experience more support from the learning community than students with low belonging scores: 'high' belonging = 13.0 total support learning community and 'low' belonging is 7.8 total support learning community.

Social work students profiles consist mainly of positively and negatively experienced emotions. Positively experienced emotions dominate the negatively experienced emotions. The exception to the rule are the negative emotions anxiety and sadness which are relatively common. Our interpretation based on the above results is that possibly the negatively experienced emotions still need to be worked on in order to realize a more optimal belonging.

Attachment: Both anxious and avoidant attachment are present in about one-quarter of the students.

The overall conclusion is that for the hypothesis component (see Figure 1), COVID-19 had a much greater impact on students' mental well-being and study success. Not much can be said about attachment and its correlation with belonging because 25% of the data are missing. However, this part of the study does show that more may need to be done about the consequences of a 'disrupted' attachment at the start of the study than has been done so far.

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