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Abstracts

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Exploring Belonging Through Dialogue: A Qualitative Study from the Ebelong Project Within the CIVIS European University Alliance

A sense of belonging is a crucial determinant of university students' academic, personal, and social success. This study aimed to explore how students within the CIVIS European University Alliance—specifically at the University of Bucharest (Romania), the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece), and Aix-Marseille University (France)—experience and construct belonging and inclusion within higher education settings. The research sought to identify institutional, social, and pedagogical factors that either promote or hinder a sense of belonging among diverse student populations. The study employed a mixed-methods design approved by the respective university ethics committees. Quantitative data were first collected via online surveys (N=752 across the three universities) focusing on inclusion, accessibility, well-being, and participation. In a second phase, qualitative inquiry was conducted through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 22 students (Master's and PhD levels) and six faculty members. Discussions were guided by a thematic interview protocol addressing personal experiences of inclusion, perceived barriers, and recommendations for enhancing student integration. Data were coded and analyzed inductively using NVivo software to ensure rigor and traceability. Analysis revealed four major themes: recognition, participation, support networks, and institutional responsiveness. Belonging emerged as a dialogical process—cultivated through opportunities for active engagement, fair communication, and mutual respect between students and staff. Students highlighted the importance of mentoring, inclusive teaching practices, and visible support services as key facilitators. In contrast, bureaucratic opacity, lack of information, and limited institutional flexibility were identified as barriers to inclusion. Overall, the findings suggest that belonging is not a static state but an evolving relationship between individuals and their academic environment. Fostering belonging through inclusive communication, collaborative governance, and sustained faculty engagement enhances both student well-being and institutional cohesion across the CIVIS Alliance.

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