

Belonging in Curriculum

A Resource for Programme and Module Designers

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Belonging Learning Circle, University of Warwick, July 2026



♥ With thanks to all the colleagues across the University who generously shared their case studies, practice, and expertise – these have shaped many of the examples throughout this resource.

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Foreword

This resource is the result of a year-long conversation — sometimes challenging, often energising, always grounded in what students actually experience inside a curriculum.

In 2025–26, the WIHEA Building Belonging Learning Circle, established and convened by Inca Hide-Wright, Tom Ritchie, and Sarah Bennett, provided the home for this work. Within it, the Embedding Structural Change funded project, co-led by Jo Kukuczka, Amanda Lang and Amira Elasa set out with a specific aim: to make belonging visible and actionable in curriculum design at Warwick.

The group that shaped this resource brought together undergraduate students from every faculty, curriculum design specialists, belonging specialists, and colleagues from across academic and professional services. We began by inviting three undergraduate students to join us as co-creators. Together, staff and students designed and delivered a series of faculty workshops that did two things — raised awareness of what belonging looks like when it is designed into a curriculum, and surfaced examples of good practice already happening across the university. We also drew on case studies generously shared by colleagues in the period before these workshops took place.

We did not rush to create this resource. We read. We debated. We challenged our own assumptions about what belonging means, who it is for, and where curriculum design can — and cannot — make a difference. That process of questioning was deliberate: we wanted anything we produced to be rooted in evidence and honest about its limits.

After the workshops, the student leads took the driving seat. With the support of the project's academic co-leads and Learning Circle members, they led the creation of the resource you are now reading. Their fingerprints are on its structure, its language, and its insistence that belonging is not an add-on but a design decision.

We hope you find this resource worthwhile — whether you use it to rethink a single assessment, redesign a module, or spark a conversation in your team. If you do test it, adapt it, or use it in any way, we would genuinely love to hear about it. Please get in touch with Amanda Lang (amanda.lang@warwick.ac.uk).

Outline of the resource

Introduction

Why Belonging Matters: Letters from Students to Staff

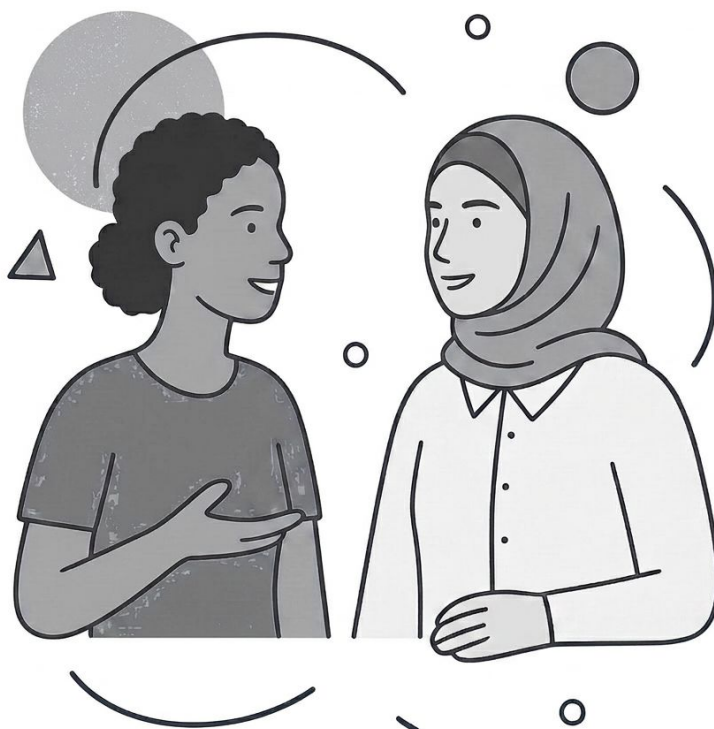
Section 1

What Is Belonging, How It Links to Curriculum Design, and Why It Matters at Warwick

Section 2

Principles and Practice: Designing Belonging Into Your Curriculum

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Why Belonging Matters

INTRODUCTION – Letters from students to staff

LETTER 1

Dear curriculum designer,

Belonging in academic institutions has always been something that I could never accurately put my finger on, but something I always ached for and knew was missing. That gaping sense of something being missing manifested across multiple vectors: not fitting in, not feeling like learning and teaching was directed to people who think like me, experiencing blatant racism and misogyny in the syllabi I studied. I am not singular in this feeling, but the lack of embedded belonging has impacted me uniquely, as it has all students who have unfortunately felt like they are not considered and do not matter in the institutions they are in. I was drawn to this project because I don't think it is right that any more students should feel the academic and social loneliness that I felt, and even as a soon to be alumnus, it is my responsibility to establish meaningful improvements in a community I was once part of, even if I didn't feel like I was.

What I want staff and module conveners to leave with is how important the smallest things are to shaping a curriculum and making students feel considered, included, and like they can trust the people providing them with the education they are supposed to face the outside world with. Small amendments to module resources, how modules are taught and assessed, how educators deliver education are all little things that can make a student who feels invisible gain confidence in their learning journey, and be proud to be an active and included member of the University of Warwick. The main aim of higher education is to develop curious, independent and analytical thinkers, mental muscles that can only be strengthened when students feel they are trusted to be mutual arbiters of their learning, by being given adequate chances to speak up for their own learning, and are intentionally involved in community-building learning activities.

I really want to urge module conveners and lectures to put themselves in the shoes of the students they are working with. Does this module plan accommodate for relevant independent choice and thinking? Will students feel involved in their learning journeys from start to finish with this module plan, and know why they are doing what they are told to be doing? It's small, frequent, and intentional questioning of impact that will create a more symbiotic learning process, and ensure that 'Belonging' is embedded in that every step of the way.

Yours sincerely,

Kabirah, UG student (Arts & Social Sciences)

LETTER 2

Dear curriculum designer,

The lack of belonging in an academic setting is subtle; it can manifest through dismissive body language, a lack of eye contact, or coded language. Initially, these actions leave students questioning their own perceptions, wondering if they are simply being overly sensitive. As someone who was raised to see the best in people, I dismissed these situations as unintentional bias. However, as these offences accumulated, I realised that this is a systemic issue of exclusion rather than isolated misunderstandings. I was drawn to this project because I want to tackle the microaggressions that many students, including myself, have felt.

One key takeaway that I want staff to get from this is how to make small group teaching inclusive and impactful. Many students stay silent out of fear of getting things wrong. It is easy to feel imposter syndrome in an academic environment, and the feeling that not getting it right the first time equals being a bad student. Staff should make classrooms a safe space to allow students to get things wrong. Staff should also ensure that attention is shared equally rather than just by the loudest in the room.

Yours sincerely,

Disha, UG student (Science, Engineering, and Medicine)

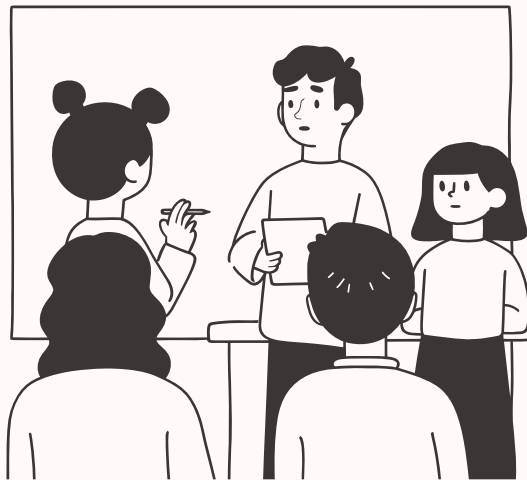
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SECTION 1

What Is Belonging, How It Links to Curriculum Design, and Why It Matters at Warwick

1.1 What belonging is – and what it is not



Belonging is the intentional creation of conditions — through ILOs, assessment, feedback, and learning activities — in which every student feels accepted, valued, and able to participate as themselves (Hide-Wright et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2019). It is not satisfaction, social life, or pastoral support — though it connects to all three.

The Warwick Building Belonging Framework identifies four elements — Inclusion, Mattering, Connection, and Empowerment — underpinned by Trust (Hide-Wright et al., 2024). Belonging is dynamic — it declines across the academic year, sharpest for first-generation students (Gilani et al., 2026) — and curriculum is the primary lever because it is the one thing that reaches every student, every week (Thomas, 2012).

1.2 What belonging looks like at Warwick now

Warwick staff are already designing for belonging — often without naming it. An Economics lecturer already opens every module by explaining the rationale behind each ILO and assessment, uses varied formats to support different learning styles, and gives personalised feedback that names individual effort and achievement (Elasra, 2026). The Life Sciences Welcome Week+ programme, co-designed with nine paid student partners, shifted induction from information delivery to asset-based community building — and departmental belonging scores rose from 62% to 70% (Wilson-Thain et al., 2025). Echo Zhou's International Student Roundtable demonstrated that the act of listening itself fosters trust and belonging — especially for students navigating a new cultural and academic environment (Zhou, 2026). But gaps persist: students describe feeling dismissed in small-group teaching, isolated as the only representative of their background in a class, and unsure whether feedback is meant for them or for a generic student.



1.3 Why it matters

The examples above show what belonging-informed curriculum looks like in practice. But why should a busy convenor prioritise it? Four evidence lines converge:

- Students who belong engage more deeply and achieve better (Thomas, 2012; Strayhorn, 2019).
- Belonging predicts UK student retention more strongly than prior attainment (Thomas, 2012).
- It does not affect all students equally — first-generation, international, and disabled students consistently report lower belonging (O'Shea, 2016; Gilani et al., 2026), which is why Warwick's Disabled Student Champions Network is now evaluating belonging at department level using the same framework that underpins this toolkit (Pulsford, 2025).
- When students genuinely co-create curriculum, both belonging and curriculum quality improve (Simecek & Freeman, 2025).

SECTION 2

Principles and Practice: Designing Belonging Into Your Curriculum

2.1 Principles for designing for belonging

TRUST – THE OVERARCHING PRINCIPLE

Students ask 'am I safe here?' before 'what can I learn here?' (Flannery, 2025). Trust is built through curriculum-design transparency: explaining why a task is set, how it aligns with ILOs and assessment, and what 'good' looks like in this discipline (Baume, 2009; Biggs, 2003). Warwick students named this the single most important belonging move — 'the explicit rationale behind ILOs, assessment, learning activities, and how they all connect for student success' (Warwick Faculty workshops).

INCLUSION

Inclusion in curriculum design means refusing the "manufacture of sameness" (O'Shea, 2016) — asking whose knowledge is visible in your reading list, ILOs, and discipline examples, and whose is absent. It means making tacit academic norms explicit so first-generation and underrepresented students are not penalised for lacking inherited cultural capital (Strayhorn, 2019; Gilani et al., 2026), and designing for multiple ways of knowing, perceiving, and engaging (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2024).

CONNECTION

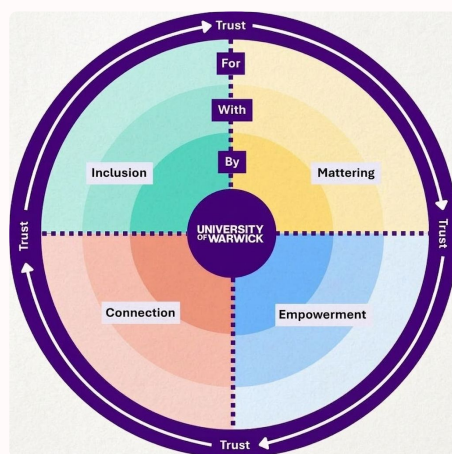
Belonging requires designing peer interaction into the curriculum, not leaving it to chance (Thomas, 2012). Because belonging declines across the year — sharpest for first-generation students (Gilani et al., 2026) — connection points must be distributed across modules, not concentrated at induction. This means ILOs that explicitly open space for collaborative learning, learning activities that build cohort identity, and feedback practices that develop peer trust (Kelly, Edmunds & Davis, 2025; Thomas, 2012).

MATTERING

Mattering is built through curriculum decisions that show students their presence and work are seen (Strayhorn, 2019). In practice this means: feedback that is specific, timely and personal — naming the student and referencing their development (Warwick Faculty workshops); assessments that invite students to draw on their own experience and context; and ILOs that frame students' diverse backgrounds as an asset for learning, not a gap to be remediated (Wilson-Thain et al., 2025).

EMPOWERMENT

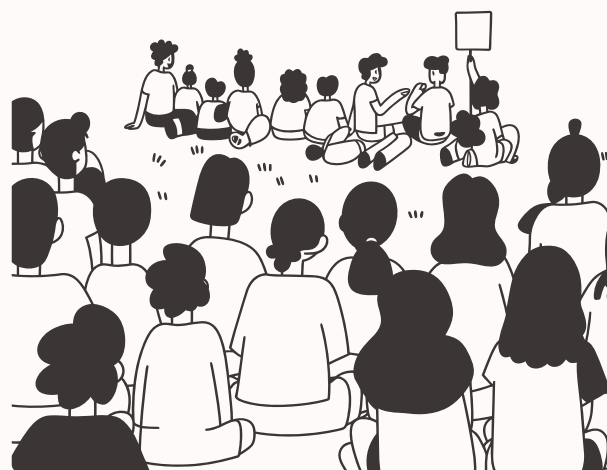
Empowerment is designed in through meaningful choice — in assessment medium and format, learning activities, and how students engage with content (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2024). Genuine co-creation builds belonging (Simecek & Freeman, 2025), but only where students are heard and acknowledged, not just consulted. ILOs should signal that students own their learning journey: phrased so students can see what they are working towards, why it matters, and how they will get there (Baume, 2009).



The Warwick Building Belonging Framework
(Hide-Wright et al., 2024)

2.2 Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

ILOs signal whose knowledge counts, whose ways of knowing are valued, and who is positioned to succeed (O'Shea, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019). Belonging-informed revision is rarely about adding a new ILO — it is about rewording existing ones so academic conventions become explicit, diverse perspectives are visible, and no student sits outside an unspoken 'default' (Wilson-Thain et al., 2025). Two checks should run together: is this a well-written ILO at the right study level (Baume, 2009; COGS framework)? — and what does it signal about belonging?



Four-element ILO design prompts

Adapted from the Warwick Faculty workshops.

Belonging element	ILO design prompt
Inclusion	Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are visible in your ILOs?
Mattering	How do your ILOs signal that students' diverse experiences are an asset, not a gap?
Connection	How could ILOs open space for relational or collaborative modes of learning?
Empowerment	How do your ILOs support students to take ownership of their own learning journey?
Trust	Underpinning all four: Trust — between staff and students, and among students themselves.

Worked ILO examples

Three illustrative rewrites, one per faculty, spanning UG Year 2, PG Level 7, and a generic UG Y1–3 case. The 'before' column uses real Warwick ILOs, anonymised. Some use verbs Baume (2009) warns against. Where that is the case, the rewrite sharpens the ILO and makes belonging visible.

Before	After (illustrative rewrite)	What changed and why
Engineering, UG, Year 2 Student should be able to explain overall concepts, process and need for a systems approach to engineering.	Students should be able to explain and discuss systems engineering principles using examples from diverse industries, collaborating to evaluate different systems approaches.	Added collaboration and context to engineering (Connection, Inclusion).
Psychology, PGT Critically evaluate contemporary psychological theories and methodologies.	Critically evaluate contemporary psychological theories and methodologies, including how research samples, cultural contexts, and intersecting identities shape disciplinary knowledge production.	Verb strong at Level 7 (Baume, 2009; COGS). Belonging move is epistemological: whose voices are included in research is itself a question for critical evaluation (Inclusion); students' own contexts are legitimate intellectual material (Mattering).
Philosophy, UG, Year 1–3 Engage critically with major traditions in ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and political philosophy.	Analyse, compare and evaluate competing positions across diverse philosophical traditions — including non-Western, feminist, and decolonial perspectives — in ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and political philosophy.	"Engage critically" replaced with assessable Bloom verbs (Baume, 2009). At Level 5/6 in COGS; would shift to Level 4 for Y1, Level 6 for Y3. Implicit canon made visible by naming traditions beyond the Western mainstream (Inclusion, Mattering).

The rewrites work across study levels and intervention magnitudes. Psychology (Level 7) leaves the verb untouched and adds an epistemological dimension. Philosophy (Level 4–6) is generic: the verbs would be re-calibrated per COGS level for each year.

2.3 Assessment and feedback

Assessment is one of the strongest belonging signals in a module (Thomas, 2012). What counts as legitimate evidence, how criteria are shared, and how feedback addresses the student all signal who is expected to succeed. Belonging-informed design starts with constructive alignment (Baume, 2009; Biggs, 2003): does the instrument match the ILO? It then asks the four-element belonging questions of task and feedback — and refuses single 100% summatives, which concentrate risk and undermine belonging for the students who need it most (Gilani et al., 2026).



Four-element assessment and feedback design prompts

Adapted from the Warwick Faculty workshops.

Belonging element	Assessment & feedback design prompt
Inclusion	How can assessments work for students with different backgrounds, needs, and ways of knowing?
Mattering	How does your feedback make students feel their work — and effort — is seen and valued?
Connection	Where does assessment create space for collaboration, dialogue, or peer input?
Empowerment	What meaningful choices could students have in how they are assessed?
Trust	Underpinning all four: Trust — between staff and students, and among students themselves.

Worked assessment examples

Constructive alignment first: every instrument must evidence a specific ILO. No single 100% summative: every rewrite uses a minimum of two instruments — up to three for larger modules.

Before	After (illustrative rewrite)	What changed and why
Engineering, Year 2 — UG Level 2 50% coursework, 50% online exam.	50%: Group systems engineering project with 500-word individual reflection. 50%: Online exam using scenario-based systems engineering problems.	Adds authentic assessment, student choice and reflection. Peer collaboration visible (Connection, Mattering, Empowerment).
Psychology, PGT — Level 7 Assesses §2.2 ILO: "Critically evaluate... how research samples, cultural contexts, and intersecting identities shape disciplinary knowledge production." 100% dissertation (15,000 words). Single supervisor; no milestones; feedback with final mark.	60% dissertation (12,000 words) with formative milestones at weeks 8 and 20; 25% research-in-progress symposium with peer Q&A; 15% reflective methodological commentary (1,500 words) on positionality.	100% dissertation = single point of failure. Three components evidence the ILO more fully (Baume, 2009). Symposium creates research community (Connection; Fung, 2017). Positionality commentary surfaces situated knowledge (Mattering, Inclusion). Milestones de-risk across the year (Gilani et al., 2026).
Philosophy, UG Y1–3 (Levels 4–6) Assesses §2.2 ILOs: "Analyse, compare and evaluate..." and "Apply philosophical reasoning... including those drawn from students' own communities." 100% summative essay (3,000 words) on tutor-set question. No formative component.	60% essay — choose from six questions or propose own topic; 25% dialogic response paper (1,500 words) responding to a peer; 15% reflective annotation of week-6 formative draft (medium chosen by student).	Three aligned components replace 100% essay. Topic and medium choice (Empowerment; UDL, 2024). Dialogic response creates peer dimension (Connection; Simecek & Freeman, 2025). "Propose own topic" invites students' contexts (Mattering, Inclusion). Medium-choice identified in the Warwick Faculty workshops.

All three obey the same rule: no single 100% summative, ever. By study level: UG Level 2, PG Level 7, generic UG Y1–3. By magnitude: milestone restructure (Psychology PG); moderate split with meaningful choice (Philosophy).

2.4 Learning and teaching activities

Learning and teaching activities are where belonging is enacted week by week. Where ILOs declare what students will do and assessment evidences whether they can, activities are the daily fabric (Thomas, 2012). Because belonging declines across the year — sharpest in May (Gilani et al., 2026) — activities cannot concentrate at induction. They must be distributed across the module timeline, with deliberate join-up moments after teaching gaps (Kelly, Edmunds & Davis, 2025), stable peer structures (Cartledge et al., 2025), and meaningful choice in how students engage (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2024).



Four-element learning activity design prompts

Constructed for this toolkit on the same four-element logic, grounded in the literature.

Belonging element	Learning activity design prompt
Inclusion	Whose voices, examples, and ways of working are present in your activities — and whose are absent?
Mattering	How do activities make students feel their presence and contribution are noticed week by week?
Connection	Where are the deliberate connection points across the module timeline — not just at the start?
Empowerment	Do students have meaningful choice in how they engage with learning activities?
Trust	Underpinning all four: Trust — between staff and students, and among students themselves.

Worked learning activities examples

Examples work at the module-wide sequencing level — the scale at which convenors make decisions and belonging gets distributed across the year. Each maps to the same subject as §§2.2 and 2.3.

Before	After (illustrative rewrite)	What changed and why
Engineering, Year 2 — UG, Level 2 Explain overall concepts, process and need for a systems approach to engineering. 13 x 1hr lectures, 3 x 2hr seminars, 4 x 2hr practical classes.	Week 1: Introduction to systems thinking with group icebreaker and co-created ground rules (Lectures + Seminar). Week 2: Stakeholder needs workshop in small groups; peer discussion of engineering case studies (Seminar + Practical Classes). Week 3: Requirements writing workshop with peer review and formative feedback (Practical Class). Weeks 4–6: Systems modelling activities (Practical Classes). Weeks 7–9: Group project development, coding labs, weekly tutor drop-ins and progress meetings (Practical Classes). Week 10: Project presentations with peer feedback and individual reflection.	Structured collaborative learning replaces lecture-based delivery. Regular peer discussion, feedback and tutor support build Connection (Simecek & Freeman, 2025). Authentic group activities and project choice promote Empowerment, Mattering (O'Shea, 2020).
Psychology, PGT — Level 7 Twelve 2-hour weekly seminars. Independent reading. Recorded lectures. Individual supervision from week 6. No structured peer-research community.	Week 1: 'research community' launch (backgrounds, interests, positionality as intellectual context). Weeks 2–6: paired critical reading partners. Week 8: peer-led methodology surgery. Week 12: research-in-progress symposium (linked to §2.3 assessment).	Stable reading pairs sustain belonging mid-term (Gilani et al., 2026). Positionality session = diverse backgrounds as intellectual material (O'Shea, 2016). Peer-led teaching distributes expertise (Connection, Empowerment; Simecek & Freeman, 2025; Fung, 2017). Symposium anchors §2.3 assessment.
Philosophy, UG Y1–3 Weekly lecture + seminar (12–15). All topics tutor-set. Reading list week 1. Office hours by appointment only.	Week 1: co-created ground rules. Weeks 2–10: alternating tutor-led close reading and student-led 'philosophy in your world' sessions. Week 6: informal cohort coffee. Week 11: peer-review workshop (linked to §2.3). Drop-in office hours twice weekly.	Co-created ground rules = Trust, Inclusion (Simecek & Freeman, 2025). 'Philosophy in your world' enacts §2.2 ILO (Empowerment, Mattering). Drop-in hours address first-gen help-seeking barriers (O'Shea, 2020). Peer-review connects to §2.3 reflective annotation.

The three rewrites share a common architecture: Week 1 community-building (Trust); stable peer structures across mid-term (Connection, Mattering); reconnection after teaching gaps (Connection); peer-led activity distributing expertise (Empowerment). They also align with §2.3 assessments — activities, ILOs, and assessment work as a single system (Biggs, 2003; Baume, 2009).

2.5 Bringing it together

Subjects at a glance

The previous sections walked through ILOs, assessment, and learning activities as separate curriculum elements. This section brings them together for each subject, so you can see how a belonging-informed curriculum design works as an integrated whole. Only the revised versions are shown — for the rationale behind each change, see §§2.2–2.4.

Subject	ILO (revised)	Assessment (revised)	Learning activities (revised)
Engineering UG, Year 2	Collaboratively elicit and negotiate diverse stakeholder needs to develop traceable requirements and justify systems engineering decisions for authentic engineering problems.	50% group systems engineering project — student-selected or menu-choice case study, including stakeholder analysis with evidence of how conflicting needs were negotiated, and a 500-word individual reflection on the student's contribution to and experience of inclusive collaborative practice. 50% online scenario-based exam applying systems engineering principles to requirements and decision justification problems.	Week 1 systems thinking workshop and team formation; weeks 2–3 stakeholder and requirements workshops with peer review; weeks 4–6 collaborative modelling, failure analysis and V&V labs applied to project stakeholder conflicts, with structured team role rotation; weeks 7–9 project development with weekly tutor drop-ins; week 10 project showcase with peer feedback and reflection.
Psychology PGT	Critically evaluate contemporary psychological theories and methodologies, including how research samples, cultural contexts, and intersecting identities shape disciplinary knowledge of production.	60% dissertation with formative milestones (weeks 8, 20); 25% research-in-progress symposium with peer Q&A; 15% reflective methodological commentary on positionality.	Week 1 research community launch; paired critical reading partners weeks 2–6; peer-led methodology surgery week 8; research-in-progress symposium week 12.
Philosophy UG, Year 1–3	Analyse, compare and evaluate competing positions across diverse philosophical traditions — including non-Western, feminist, and decolonial perspectives.	60% essay (choose from six questions or propose own); 25% dialogic response to a peer; 15% reflective annotation of formative draft (medium chosen by student).	Co-created ground rules week 1; alternating tutor-led and student-led 'philosophy in your world' sessions; informal cohort coffee week 6; peer-review workshop week 11; drop-in office hours.

2.6 Evaluating your curriculum

Use this matrix to evaluate your own module or programme. Each cell is a design question — read it against your current practice and identify where belonging is present, emerging, or absent.

	Intended learning outcomes	Assessment & feedback	Learning activities
Inclusion	Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are visible in your ILOs?	How can assessments & feedback work for students with different backgrounds, needs, and ways of knowing?	Whose voices, examples, and ways of working are present in your activities — and whose are absent?
Mattering	How do your ILOs signal that students' diverse experiences are an asset, not a gap?	How does your feedback and assessment make students feel their work — and effort — is seen and valued?	How do activities make students feel their presence and contribution are noticed week by week?
Connection	How could ILOs open space for relational or collaborative modes of learning?	Where does assessment create space for collaboration, dialogue, or peer input?	Where are the deliberate connection points across the module timeline — not just at the start?
Empowerment	How do your ILOs support students to take ownership of their own learning journey?	What meaningful choices could students have in how they are assessed?	Do students have meaningful choice in how they engage with learning activities?

- ☐ Trust — the foundation. Between staff and students, and among students themselves. Underpins every cell above.

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