



EAP MATERIALS/EVENT REVIEW

Identity, Community and Belonging in EAP: Insights and Reflections on the BALEAP Professional Issues Meeting (PIM) Edinburgh 2025

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ABSTRACT

This event review examines the BALEAP PIM Edinburgh 2025, a gathering that used the theme of identity, community and belonging to provoke critical reflection on the evolving realities of EAP. Rather than reproducing familiar narratives of integration, the PIM unsettled them, offering a multi-layered analysis of how belonging is negotiated, resisted and reshaped in contemporary higher education. Across plenaries and presentations, belonging emerged as a contested process rather than an outcome, while identity was framed as relational, power-mediated and deeply intertwined with literacy practices. The event highlighted community as a relational - not structural - achievement, and foregrounded the complexities introduced by generative AI, displacement and global inequality. Through these interconnected themes, the PIM advanced a vision of EAP as a dynamic, intellectual and ethical space where agency, voice and critical awareness are central. This review argues that such perspectives point toward a more justice-oriented, reflexive and future-focused EAP landscape.

KEYWORDS:

Identity, Community, Belonging, EAP, BALEAP PIM

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Event Review

The BALEAP PIM held at the University of Edinburgh on 15 November 2025 marked a particularly timely and thought-provoking gathering for EAP practitioners and researchers. With a theme centred on identity, community and belonging, the event could easily have defaulted to comfortable, well-circulated discourses of integration and cohesion. Instead, it deliberately unsettled these assumptions, presenting a probing and multi-dimensional critique of how these notions function, and sometimes malfunction, across today's complex higher education landscapes. What emerged was a far more nuanced and intellectually ambitious exploration that encouraged participants to reconsider long-standing assumptions shaping our field. In doing so, the PIM positioned itself not simply as a venue for sharing practice, but as a space for reimagining the epistemological, relational, and ethical foundations of EAP in a rapidly changing landscape.

From the outset, the framing offered in the welcome and the opening plenary signalled a decisive shift away from linear, assimilationist models of student transition. Belonging was presented not as a static achievement, but as a continuous negotiation across languages, systems, and evolving selves. This reframing immediately invited the audience to adopt a more critical stance toward belonging, recognising it as a dynamic and contested process rather than a straightforward endpoint. Such emphasis on fluidity provided a conceptual anchor for the day, underscoring the idea that belonging cannot be treated as a neatly attainable outcome or a pedagogical commodity. Rather, it is produced, disrupted and reconfigured through students' interactions with peers, teachers, technologies and institutions. Crucially, the PIM made visible that belonging may not always be desired, and that the imperative to belong can risk smoothing over differences or compelling conformity. By foregrounding this tension, the event created space for more critical analyses of the kinds of belonging universities implicitly and explicitly promote, and the consequences these expectations hold for diverse learners.

This reconceptualisation prompted further reflection on how EAP imagines the role of identity in learning. Throughout the day, identity was positioned not as a fixed trait that students bring with them, but as an emergent and relational process shaped through engagement in academic practices and communities. Presenters highlighted that identity work is always mediated by power, particularly through institutional discourses that define what counts as legitimate participation or credible knowledge. Students' identities, as writers, speakers, disciplinary novices, multilinguals, or marginalised individuals, are constantly negotiated within structures that both enable and constrain them. What became increasingly evident was that identity in EAP is never solely about language proficiency; it is deeply intertwined with epistemic access, symbolic capital, and emotional labour. It involves students interpreting feedback, navigating disciplinary expectations, responding to institutional narratives, and negotiating relationships that either confer or withhold legitimacy.

As the programme unfolded, it became clear that academic literacies remain at the centre of this identity work, though they require more critical examination. Rather than being understood as neutral skills to be acquired, academic literacies were reframed as socially situated practices in which agency, recognition and negotiation matter as much as mastery. This shift was particularly pronounced in discussions around writing and authorship, where contributors urged practitioners to move away from treating academic writing as an exercise in compliance toward viewing it as a site of identity formation and epistemic participation. Students were not merely positioned as novices learning to reproduce conventions, but as potential contributors shaping knowledge, even if tentatively. In this sense, the PIM challenged us to imagine academic literacy work that foregrounds reflexivity, metacognition, and student agency rather than simple replication of established norms.

Parallel to these discussions of literacy and identity were compelling insights into community formation. Community, like belonging, was repeatedly portrayed as a relational achievement rather than a structural or administrative construct. Presenters collectively underscored that community emerges through practices of listening, recognition, and reciprocity, rather than through mandated events or institutional campaigns. Peer mentoring, intercultural dialogue and student-staff partnerships were not merely presented as effective strategies but as embodiments of a wider argument: meaningful community in EAP is not engineered; it is cultivated. This was particularly evident in sessions that reframed silence, not as disengagement, but as an alternative, culturally embedded and cognitively rich mode of participation. Here, the PIM provoked important questions about our pedagogical biases and the need to broaden our definitions of engagement and contribution.

These relational dynamics became even more complex when considered alongside the rapid technological changes reshaping higher education. AI, especially generative AI, emerged as a disruptive yet unavoidable force. Across multiple sessions, presenters demonstrated that while AI offers linguistic support and increased confidence, it can also destabilise students' sense of authorship and identity by blurring the boundaries of their own voice. Yet many also proposed that AI can be repurposed as a reflective tool, prompting students to articulate their decisions, analyse their writing processes, and engage more deeply with authorial intention. This duality illustrates an urgent pedagogical imperative according to which EAP must engage with AI thoughtfully, not defensively. Future-oriented EAP pedagogy will need to embed critical digital literacy, ethical reflection, and transparent authorship practices at its core. Only then can AI be leveraged as a tool for empowerment rather than a mechanism that risks undermining agency.

It was in discussions of displacement, precarity and global inequality though that the political dimensions of identity and belonging surfaced most prominently. Presentations focusing on sanctuary learners underscored the extent to which EAP is entangled with structural systems far beyond the classroom. Here, inclusion was not framed as pastoral sensitivity or additional support, but as an institutional and ethical commitment requiring equitable assessment pathways, flexible structures and intentional dismantling of systemic barriers. These

presentations served as a reminder that EAP professionals are not only instructors but also advocates positioned within wider social, political and humanitarian contexts. This broader framing challenged the field to adopt a more justice-oriented identity, recognising the profound responsibility we hold in shaping educational access and opportunity.

Across the programme, a series of productive tensions emerged that now merit sustained attention: the tension between belonging and autonomy; between support and surveillance; between inclusion and assimilation; between voice and silence; between stability and precarity. Rather than seeking to resolve these tensions, the PIM encouraged participants to treat them as essential sites of inquiry, productive discomforts that propel the field forward. These tensions invite EAP practitioners to resist reductive narratives of student experience and to remain open to the complexity, nuance and sometimes contradiction inherent in multilingual academic life.

Taken collectively, the contributions of the PIM point toward an expanded and more ambitious understanding of EAP's purpose. Rather than simply preparing students for disciplinary study, EAP is emerging as a dynamic intellectual, relational and ethical space in its own right. Such a conception positions EAP as a place where identities are formed, contested and reimagined; where belonging is explored rather than prescribed; and where students develop not only skills but agency, voice and critical awareness. This reorientation demands pedagogies that foster curiosity, reflexivity and intellectual risk-taking. It also calls for research that attends more closely to belonging and identity as lived, affective and contextually embedded phenomena.

In light of the insights generated throughout the event, the future directions for EAP become increasingly clear. Practitioners will need to cultivate classrooms that treat identity as central rather than incidental; that treat belonging as an open question rather than an assumed goal; and that treat literacy as a practice of contribution rather than compliance. They will also need to engage more deliberately with the emotional dimensions of learning, interrogate the institutional discourses within which their work is embedded and imagine more relational, inclusive and critically engaged pedagogical futures. In doing so, EAP can position itself not only as a bridge into academic life but as a transformative force shaping the values, relationships and epistemologies that define higher education.

Ultimately, the BALEAP PIM Edinburgh 2025 stood out because it refused to offer easy answers or comforting narratives. Instead, it invited participants into a deeper, more critical and more generative understanding of who EAP students are, how they navigate academic worlds and how the field might evolve to support them. If the conversations initiated at this PIM continue to develop, and if the field embraces complexity rather than retreating from it, EAP is poised to become an increasingly powerful, imaginative and justice-oriented discipline shaping the future of global higher education.

Reflections: Questions, Omissions and Implications for Practice

This section reflects on unresolved questions and potential omissions that emerged from my engagement with the PIM and considers implications for EAP practice. Rather than presenting definitive critiques, these reflections highlight areas that prompted further thinking during and after the event. They should therefore be interpreted with caution. As is typical of BALEAP events, the programme featured multiple parallel sessions running throughout the day, meaning it was not possible to attend every presentation. As a result, some of the issues raised below may have been explored elsewhere in the programme.

The first unresolved question concerns the boundaries of belonging. If belonging is fluid, negotiated and sometimes even resisted, what should EAP do when students do not seek, prioritise or value institutional forms of belonging? How can we support students without prescribing a particular model of integration? The event compellingly unsettled assimilationist assumptions, yet the practical tension between institutional expectations of cohesion and students' diverse orientations toward participation remains complex and underexplored.

Related to this is a second question around dominant discourses of international student transition. Universities frequently frame belonging as both attainable and inherently desirable, positioning it as evidence of successful adaptation and academic flourishing. However, such narratives risk flattening the varied realities of mobility into a single storyline of adjustment and eventual success. They often overlook the structural, cultural and psychological disparities that shape students' experiences, and may inadvertently impose belonging as a normative goal. The PIM opened space to critique this rhetoric, but further interrogation of how EAP can resist reproducing it in curriculum design, support structures and assessment practices would be valuable.

In terms of omissions, one area that appeared less visible in the sessions I attended was the question of practitioner identity and belonging within EAP itself. While the conference explored student identity, community and belonging in considerable depth, there was less explicit discussion of how EAP professionals negotiate their own identity, status and sense of belonging within institutional hierarchies. Considering practitioner identity alongside student identity could enrich these discussions, as the ways in which EAP practitioners experience legitimacy, recognition and precarity inevitably shape the environments in which students learn and construct their own academic identities. Although this may have been addressed in parallel sessions, foregrounding the relationship between staff and student belonging could deepen conversations about power, community and the broader ecology of EAP practice.

In practical terms, the PIM has already begun to influence my teaching. I am rethinking how I frame academic writing tasks, positioning them less as demonstrations of competence and more as opportunities for contribution, voice and epistemic positioning. I am also more attentive to how classroom practices may implicitly reward particular performances of belonging, for example through privileging overt verbal participation. Finally, discussions around

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generative AI have encouraged me to embed more structured reflection on authorship and decision-making, treating AI not simply as a risk to integrity but as a prompt for critical digital literacy.

Overall, the event has reinforced the need to treat belonging not as an unquestioned pedagogical objective, but as a complex, uneven and sometimes contested experience. Even the unanswered questions, or those only partially explored in the sessions I attended, serve as productive prompts for ongoing reflection and practice development.

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