Introduction

A secure sense of belonging sits at the heart of student attainment in Higher Education (HE) (Guyotte et al., 2019; Pedler et al., 2021; Thomas, 2012). Different domiciled groups have different experiences of belonging within university contexts (Museus et al., 2018), with China-domiciled students studying in UK Business Schools often finding it more difficult to integrate into university culture than their UK counterparts (Yu & Moskal, 2019). The linkage between a secure sense of belonging and student outcomes contributes to a 10% awarding gap existing across the sector between China-domiciled and home students within Business and Management subjects (19/20 HESA data). The awarding gap is measured as the difference in what is termed 'good degrees' (firsts and 2:1s). The persistence of awarding gaps suggests that it is not simply enough to open up access to education, but that educational institutions must adapt to an increasingly diverse student body, rather than continuing to operate in exclusionary ways whereby non-traditional students are 'relegated to second-class courses or eliminated' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 139). In order to be truly equitable spaces, institutions must understand what makes students feel like they do (and do not) belong in HE.

To date, no prior literature has focused specifically on experiences of belonging and the awarding gap between China-domiciled and UK-domiciled students. However, previous studies have approached belonging from a number of perspectives, such as transitions into HE (Araújo et al., 2014; Meehan & Howells, 2019; Pedler et al., 2021), student retention (Thomas, 2012), motivation, and enjoyment (Pedler et al., 2021), and the value of extra-curricular activities (Sisto et al., 2021), amongst others. The research methods in these various areas of focus have been diverse, including surveys (Meehan & Howells, 2019; Pedler et al., 2021; Sisto et al., 2021), interviews (Pham & Tran, 2015), and focus groups (Sisto et al., 2021). This study adds to the literature on belonging by comparing the experiences of two different domiciled groups of students at one UK institution and is expected to be of interest beyond the context of the immediate study.

The students in this study were affected by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). This disrupted traditional campus-based activity across HE, amounting to a 'hysteresis' event (Graham, 2020). COVID-19 displaced the linkage between the campus and belonging (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021), moving the focus onto belonging in a predominantly online sphere (Chang et al., 2021) bringing the linkage between surroundings and academic confidence to the fore (Bartolic et al., 2022). By gaining a greater understanding of what helps students feel like they belong in HE, both in face-to-face and online learning environments, this research contributes to the evolving literature by extending domains of belonging to include the digital. Notions of capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) help illustrate that UK-domiciled and China-domiciled students may enter university with different digital capitals, with the latter often having had limited or no previous access to popular UK social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, which are banned in their home country. As social media platforms become increasingly integral to fully belonging in HE, this inequality needs to be addressed.

Literature Review

Belonging and attainment

Belonging in HE typically refers to students being accepted for who they are, included, supported, and respected by both their peers and the educational infrastructure. It has been found that a secure sense of belonging in both the social and educational spheres can increase attainment, retention, and wellbeing (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2021). A strong sense of social belonging can positively impact a student's enjoyment in class and in turn positively affect their outcomes (Sandstrom & Rawn, 2015). In addition to successful peer-to-peer interrelations, Goodenow (1993) stresses that support from teaching faculty is also a significant contributor to belonging meaning that students who perceive themselves as academically incapable within HE, will find it extremely difficult to experience a sense of belonging there.

A true sense of belonging does not exist in a vacuum, rather students must feel that they are accepted within the institution (Tinto, 2012). While extant research has prioritised social and educational belonging, Ahn and Davis (2020a) have extended the literature to include belonging in student surroundings, like geographical locations and living spaces, and personal belonging, such as self-esteem and self-identity. Further studies (Ahn & Davis, 2020a) have established that although these four domains are crucial to student outcomes, they must be treated independently, with social belonging not necessarily influencing feelings of belonging within the academic sphere..

The complexities of belonging: Bourdieu's field, capital, and habitus

The recognition that a student's ability to belong is influenced by how well their prior experiences complement the university environment is informed by Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus (Bourdieu, 2010). In this study, the concept 'field' relates to the HE sector whereby institutions are influenced by the field of power i.e. government policies, which determine university proceedings and circumscribe the boundaries within which they take place (Wacquant, 1993). In this space, individuals hold different levels of power, with some playing dominant roles while others are dominated (Bourdieu, 1998). The field, therefore, plays a mediating role between external factors and individual practice and institutions. Position in the field is defined by capital. Cultural capital incorporates ways of speaking, behaving, and interacting (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Social capital refers to the networks that form between the individual and other actors within the sub-field (the university) (Bourdieu, 1986). Social and cultural capital can ultimately be converted to economic capital, for example, graduates can access certain careers, converting the symbolic capital of the degree into a salary (Bourdieu, 1986). Certain demographics of students will occupy stronger positions of power within the field depending on these different forms of capital.

The student's position in the field is not fully determined, however, and is likely to change over time. This dynamism is generated out of habitus, which Bourdieu refers to as the socially ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that can serve to determine attitudes and behaviours (Bourdieu,

1990). Both individuals and institutions have a habitus that is in a constant state of becoming, as past experience coalesces with current situations, changing attitudes and behaviours to greater or lesser degrees (Reay, 1998). Despite this dynamism, institutional habitus is prone to stasis because it is often generated by the dispositions of dominant social groups for whom it benefits to continue the status quo (Thomas, 2002). While the composition of the student body has changed radically over the last thirty years, the institutional habitus has remained comparatively static. The institutional habitus shapes student identity over the duration of their studies, with finalists more likely to 'conform' than first years (Tett et al., 2017). As students' respond to the institutional habitus, their ability to belong will change accordingly. The multidimensionality and fluctuation associated with belonging (Strayhorn, 2018) presents a challenge for institutions as they attempt to foster a sense of belonging.

Differential experiences of belonging

Within a diverse student body, belonging means different things to different people (Read et al., 2003). Literature has foregrounded certain aspects of belonging as integral, such as a social connection with the institution, which is completely out of the question for some students who have caring responsibilities (Thomas, 2015), or other students who are uncomfortable in such environments (Winstone et al., 2020). Additional barriers to social connection arise from the notable increase in financial pressures on students, with many balancing studying and work (Baik et al., 2019). These pressures have led to a rise in commuter students, who typically retain prior local connections and therefore may situate their sense of belonging outside of the institution (Finn & Holton, 2019). Dominant conceptions of belonging, which focus on social engagement, may be reinforced by the university infrastructure, which caters primarily to a traditional, generally 'white student audience' (Cotton et al., 2016, p. 483). Universities are now challenged with recognising their current student composition and adapting their approaches to fostering student belonging accordingly.

The slow evolution of the institutional habitus in response to the changing student body, often leads to a restricted diet of engagement initiatives, running the risk of both ostracising some students and associating belonging with a necessity to conform (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). As the student body has diversified, so has the provision required to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging within the institution. Extant research finds that students from 'at-risk and non-dominant groups often feel a profound sense of both social and academic non-belonging when they arrive on campus' (Mauro & Mazaris, 2016, p. 9). This experience can persist and become exacerbated if peers, faculty, and others on campus respond to underrepresented students in negative or insensitive ways. Belonging uncertainty can 'prove acute if rejection could be based on one's negatively stereotyped social identity' (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 365). In developing a detailed understanding of belonging, it is important to see the individual student rather than assuming various groups of students are homogeneous. A detailed understanding of the drivers of belonging and non-belonging is important to ensure that institutions evolve their habitus in line with the changes taking place in the field of HE.

Hysteresis and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed rapid and unprecedented change in the HE sector. In this research, the pandemic is considered an example of Bourdieu's hysteresis (Graham, 2020) which arises in 'particular, when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160). For all campus-based students, the lockdown experiences of 2020 resulted in a sudden break with the physical university environment along with their term-time living arrangements.

As classes migrated online, there were few opportunities to socialise with others in the manner with which students had been accustomed, e.g. whilst waiting for class to start, or following class. Students were also forced to establish study spaces in their domestic spaces (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021), revealing financial and cultural differences between students that may not have been apparent in a shared physical learning environment. Pandemic related study conditions have also been linked with academic confidence (Bartolic et al., 2022). Emerging literature has started to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' sense of belonging (Tice et al., 2021; Reed & Dunn, 2021), affirming its fluctuating nature.

Research method

Research design

The research sought to answer the following questions: 1. Do experiences of belonging differ between UK and China-domiciled students? and 2. How has the pandemic changed experiences of belonging for both UK and China-domiciled students?

These questions were kept open to capture data grounded in the diversity of the student experience. Semi-structured interviews encouraged an open exchange between interviewer and interviewee, giving scope to tailor questions to the interviewee's personal experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide encouraged interviewees to reflect on the entirety of their personal student journey, from entering the institution to the final year and was structured around Ahn and Davis' (2020a) four domains of belonging, alongside concepts of belonging as both situated and temporal Gravett & Ajjawi (2021). The questions focused attention on the spaces where belonging exists within HE and how these spaces change over the course of students' undergraduate studies.

Data collection

Data was collected from 33 finalist students (graduating in 2022). In this group teaching (for students taking a traditional path through their degree) was initially moved online towards the end of the first year, with distance learning continuing throughout the second year and a return to campus for many in the final year. However, not all students had taken a traditional path and interviewees described different experiences of pandemic-related disruption to their studies dependent on their undergraduate pathway. Interviewing 2022 graduates provided insight into pre-pandemic experiences of belonging, the pandemic's impact on belonging, and changes to

belonging as face-to-face teaching resumed.

Interviews were conducted in accordance with the institutional ethical approval granted for the work (ER/SS706/19) and took place between November 2021 and January 2022. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews with China-domiciled students were conducted by a postgraduate researcher in Mandarin and then translated by the interviewer from Mandarin into English. The postgraduate researcher's fluency in both languages, and in-depth understanding of the research and its aims, helped ensure the accuracy of the translations. Conducting interviews in the interviewees' home language allowed for parity between the different domiciled students, who were both given the opportunity to express themselves with the ease and expansiveness of their mother tongue.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the data, generating an initial coding system implemented by the researchers using NVivo software. Codes were then clustered into themes influenced by Ahn and Davis' (2020a) four domains of belonging. Originally, the researchers included the additional theme of the pandemic. However, when it came to writing up an analysis of each theme, it was deemed more appropriate to include the pandemic within the four aspects of belonging, rather than isolating it as a theme on its own, which risked disrupting the narrative of the student journey. Through extensive handling of the data, patterns began to develop within the four themes, which generated new sub-codes. These sub-codes allowed organisation of the data at a deeper level, unearthing commonalities and differences between the student domiciles and between the individual interviewees.

Participants

The 16 UK students were diverse and included commuters, mature students, those with a disability, those who had undertaken a foundation year, and students who were the first in their family to study at university. The 17 Chinese interviewees included some students who had progressed from partnership institutions on a 2+2 degree arrangement. This means that students can study for two years at a partner institution, and bilateral agreements enable them to transfer credits equivalent to the first year of study, allowing them to enter the second year of study at the UK host. Students who had joined via 2+2 routes from partner institutions had not experienced the pre-pandemic period, limiting their ability to compare experiences.

Findings

The findings were disseminated under the four dimensions model of student belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020a); 1) academic, 2) social, 3) surroundings, and 4) personal. This model was selected because of its contemporaneity, its situatedness within UK HE, and its empirical approach, which provided a concrete dataset that could shape this current, comparative study.

Academic belonging

Feelings of academic belonging were organised into three sub-themes: learning behaviour, relatability to the curriculum, and teaching online.

All students, whether UK-domiciled or China-domiciled, mentioned that they preferred to ask questions privately rather than in front of others for fear of being humiliated or appearing 'stupid' in front of the teaching group. This lack of confidence, which would ordinarily be reduced by getting to know the cohort within a physical teaching space, appears to have grown during the period of online learning, creating barriers to interactions both with peers and the lecturer.

When questioned about pre-pandemic experiences, Chinese students typically expressed views that the acculturation to UK classroom norms took some time:

> People are reluctant to express their opinions when the teacher tells the knowledge. We felt it was impolite. However, there is no question of courtesy in the UK. If you have ideas, you can express them. This is not the same (Participant 10 Chinese).

This behaviour could lead to lecturers misinterpreting student silence as disinterest rather than a cultural difference signifying respect.

The relationship with the teaching faculty grew more distant and formal during the pandemic, when everything was online. Students did not report that teaching staff were inaccessible, rather that the enforced formality involved with sending emails and making Zoom appointments created distance, along with the uncertainty related to when the faculty member would respond (Participant 1 UK). This was in contrast to being able to ask questions at the end of a physical teaching session or drop into office hours (Participant 2 Chinese). Many students reported using office hours differently during the pandemic as a result of being unable to ask questions informally at the end of a teaching session (Participant 7 UK, Participant 3 Chinese, Participant 8 Chinese). Some students reported finding communicating with lecturers via email challenging. One Chinese student commented that it was time consuming and that they found it difficult to compose a message using the appropriate academic tone (Participant 9 Chinese), while a UK student said email composition was a skill that had to be self-taught during the pandemic (Participant 2 UK).

Studying online often created a vicious cycle, where students felt an increasing degree of isolation yet at the same time felt intimidated to speak, leading to further reduced motivation: 'If no one is talking, no one is going to come forward' (Participant 7 UK). All students noted that either their social or academic engagement with the University had been negatively affected by the pandemic, particularly with regard to their motivation to belong. One UK student commented: 'I think for the first half of the semester I was the only one with my camera on and it just became like a teacher and a wall of silence' (Participant 10 UK).

Both the UK and Chinese students spoke of increased distractions when studying online. Students from China regularly commented that it was difficult to concentrate during an online lecture

delivered in a second language (Participant 12 Chinese). Additionally, Chinese students who had returned home during the pandemic had to contend with time zone issues, often starting their lectures at 8 pm, making it difficult to remain engaged in class (Participant 9 Chinese).

Social belonging

Social belonging was a significant contributor to the university experience (Ahn & Davis, 2020b), although its realisation differed across student groups. Four sub-themes were identified from the interviews relating to social belonging: online learning environment, social media, cultural barriers, and student societies.

It was universally the case that online-only studying during part of 2020/21 had significantly affected the ability of students to make social connections with others, leading to an increased sense of isolation and alienation from their studies. Students felt that the pandemic had affected the ability to build a course community: 'I feel like because the pandemic happened we never really became an international business unit' (Participant 10 UK). Students expressed difficulty making friends through the screen (Participant 1 UK), which created a barrier to understanding someone's personality (Participant 10 Chinese). The barriers to online social interaction have had a negative impact on the mental health of most students interviewed, who used words like 'lonely' and 'depressed' to describe their experience (Participant 2 Chinese, Participant 12 Chinese, Participant 9 UK).

There was evidence of students in both demographics self-organising WhatsApp or WeChat groups, and utilising other forms of social media, to develop a sense of student community. Students from China commented on barriers to using social media platforms that were banned in their home country e.g. WhatsApp and Facebook. One Chinese student explained that once you have arrived at the University 'suddenly you signed up for a foreign Facebook and other software, you have no friends, you shared but no one liked. No one interacts with you. You can only limit yourself to WeChat. Inside Chinese circles' (Participant 9 Chinese). This differential use of social media platforms created implicit barriers to student integration.

Although students from China mentioned a desire to integrate, many were reluctant because of language and cultural barriers. For example, one student stated that it was 'more comfortable to be in a Chinese circle' (Participant 1 Chinese), reflecting a sense of belonging derived by some from being part of a culturally cohesive group with shared norms. Several of the Chinese interviewees were very aware that their social cues differed from UK students, 'for example when my friends and I watched a movie, other foreign students would laugh when they heard a sentence, but we couldn't get it at all' (Participant 8 Chinese). There seemed to be an acute awareness of cultural differences in the Chinese cohort of students, resulting in them turning to one another for social support.

Student societies were not reported to be an important conduit to interacting with other students for either group of students. Interviewees suggested that the pandemic was a reason for this lack of

engagement (Participant 2 UK). In addition, the extracurricular nature of societies was reported to be an inconvenience to students who commuted to campus, were mature, or may had work commitments (Participant 8 UK, Participant 9 UK). Other reasons for non-engagement included societies not meeting interests and timetable clashes (Participant 3 UK, Participant 13 UK) and a perception that they were closed circles (Participant 3 UK). In addition, Chinese students cited a lack of confidence to go alone (Participant 2 Chinese). Others highlighted that they did not know much about the societies because the information was predominantly communicated via social media platforms that they did not use (Participant 9 Chinese, Participant 11 Chinese).

Student surroundings

Students' relationships with their surroundings and the physical University were found to have had a significant impact on feelings of belonging. This section has been organised into three sub-themes: the role of the campus, quality of living conditions, and lockdown.

The majority of UK interviewees reported being attracted to the University due to its campus location and its proximity to a vibrant coastal city, often using language indicating they felt a sense of belonging 'I just got good vibes' (Participant 6 UK), 'it was really the kind of the vibe of the place' (Participant 4 UK). In contrast to the UK students, the majority of Chinese interviewees mentioned either rankings or entry requirements as a key reason for choosing the institution, rather than location. This may be attributable to the group's lack of familiarity with the UK prior to application, resulting in rankings and entry requirements playing a greater role in the decision-making process.

As a campus university, the majority of students tended to live on campus in their first year before living in the nearby town in their second and subsequent years. Those who had not been able to secure campus housing in their first year felt that it negatively affected their experience and had a negative impact on making friends in subsequent years (Participant 9 UK, Participant 14 Chinese). Students from both demographics mentioned that the travel between the town and campus made them feel remote.

All UK students, and most Chinese students, equated the physical campus with enhancing their sense of belonging: 'I felt a lot more connected with the University this year. I stayed in the library' (Participant 4 UK), 'Because some people don't come to campus very often. They feel like they're out of touch.' (Participant 6 Chinese). Students who were naturally less present on campus, as a result of their lifestyles or demographic, recognised that they experienced a different sense of belonging: 'belonging wise, it's really on my own terms.' (Participant 10 UK)

Many students mentioned poor living conditions, either due to the condition of the property or complications related to sharing accommodation, as having had a significant effect on them throughout their studies. This was predominantly related to private accommodation. Some of the accommodation-related incidents mentioned were traumatising and significantly affected the students' university experiences. For example, one student outlined living with someone who

became a drug dealer and the impact that had on their mental wellbeing (Participant 2 UK), and another moved home as a result of problems related to sharing accommodation (Participant 4 UK).

Students across both groups found the move to online study displaced their feelings of belonging: 'When I was at home [online], I didn't have any sense of belonging to school (Participant 12 Chinese). This led to a lack of motivation for many and a sense of remoteness from other students and the University. Chinese students who had remained in China during the lockdown expressed the added confusion related to the time difference, which created a barrier to engaging with live classes 'I felt that day and night are upside down, and I am in a very confused state' (Participant 5 Chinese). Most students who had joined via the 2+2 route in 2020/21 had studied in their home country for their first year at the University and had only just travelled to the UK in the autumn of 2021, for their final year, and therefore had little experience of face to face learning.

There was a mixture of experiences for students who returned home to live with family during the pandemic. A number of Chinese students mentioned that life at home was somewhat easier because food and household matters were taken care of (Participant 8 Chinese, Participant 10 Chinese). However, other students found moving back home with their parents similar to taking a step back in time: 'everyone is carrying on as they were three years ago' (Participant 2 UK). For the majority of students, studying from home had other downsides, such as a lack of differentiation between work and study: 'I know a lot of people struggled with sleeping, for instance, they associated their bed or that area with work' (Participant 3 UK).

Personal belonging

This section outlines how personal belonging relates to dominant social norms, and experiences of social anxiety, particularly during a global pandemic.

Both UK and Chinese students articulated feelings of not belonging socially, resulting from not following group norms, including social drinking (Participant 5 UK, Participant 4 Chinese, and Participant 13 Chinese). A number of students who did not participate in mainstream social practices were self-conscious that they did not fit in and compared themselves negatively to their more sociable peers (Participant 5 UK, Participant 14 Chinese). However, many students who did not identify as the 'typical' student located themselves happily within their own social circles, e.g., church (Participant 2 UK). These students were often more confident with their own identity in comparison to those who felt they had to conform to dominant group behaviours (Participant 9 UK).

The majority of Chinese interviewees recognised cultural differences as a barrier to integration: 'communicating with them is not enough. There are a lot of things like customs that need to be learned' (Participant 7 Chinese). Another student commented on feeling a sense of alienation from the local culture: 'I felt like I was in someone else's country and I was a foreigner. I didn't feel the local culture. I didn't fit in' (Participant 11 Chinese). While many of the Chinese students had the desire to integrate into Western culture (Participant 7 China, Participant 10 China), with such

integration being a key factor in choosing to study abroad, all Chinese interviewees stated that their support network existed within Chinese circles.

A recurrent reason for Chinese students remaining within Chinese-only circles related to feelings of anxiety around communication skills: 'we feel a sense of distance from others [non-Chinese students]. They chat at a speed and pronunciation that we don't understand' (Participant 11 Chinese). The majority of Chinese students expressed feeling self-conscious about language barriers, feeling worried that their English was not good enough, and that UK students may think they 'sound strange' (Participant 7 Chinese). Feelings of anxiety around deviating from the 'typical' student were also experienced by some UK interviewees (Participant 6 UK).

The pandemic exacerbated Chinese interviewees' feelings of anxiety when it came to socialising with their UK peers. They commented that UK students didn't take the pandemic seriously enough, with UK housemates still going to parties and not wearing masks. One student commented on the discrimination friends had experienced at the start of the pandemic: 'I heard from friends that someone scolded Chinese. They think wearing a mask is over-stressing.' (Participant 9 Chinese). One UK student also expressed health concerns around catching COVID-19 but downplayed these concerns by commenting: 'I think I just got a little bit caught up in the pandemic' (Participant 10 UK).

Discussion

The study confirms the importance of belonging for all students and highlights differences in how students from the comparator groups experience belonging, supporting prior findings that social belonging has a limited impact on academic belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020b). The hysteresis triggered by COVID-19 (Bourdieu, 2000) led to an unprecedented displacement of the field of HE, challenging traditional conceptions of belonging and surfacing underlying challenges to belonging in the student cohort. The dislocation from the physical university and prior modes of learning challenged both the institutional and the student habitus. Findings highlight how all four domains of belonging were affected (Ahn & Davis, 2020a). Within this volatile context, the study further supports the temporal and shifting nature of belonging (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018) charting changes over the course of a student's study. The remainder of this section outlines the study's findings.

Academic belonging

Students in both groups expressed a sense of academic belonging at the University. However, there was a reticence to engage publicly with both peers and the lecturer, reflecting a lack of confidence and feelings of being judged by others. While this self-consciousness was present in the physical environment, it was accentuated by a lack of cohort cohesiveness during online teaching (Watermeyer et al., 2021) and affected student enjoyment of the learning process (Tice et al., 2021).

Findings also support prior literature that found that adaptation of international students to new classroom norms takes time (Matsunaga et al., 2021). This was particularly true for the 2+2 group of Chinese students, who commenced their studies remotely during the pandemic and who reported a difficult transition, finding it hard to form relationships with lecturers and their peers. This finding underlines the importance of developing positive instructor-student relationships in the learning environment (Thomas, 2012; Tice et al., 2021). Once again, the pandemic accentuated issues that students had already been experiencing. As transition pedagogy develops, it is important not to lose sight of the issues the pandemic has highlighted and consider non-traditional student transitions and their impact on student belonging. Differential student learning environments created by the pandemic led to Chinese students facing the additional challenges of focusing on online lectures in a second language and studying a UK timetable while living in a different time zone, leading to a heavy reliance on the recording of sessions.

Social belonging

As Ahn and Davis (2020a) suggest, social engagement is the most salient factor in student belonging, and therefore the disruption of the pandemic to belonging should not be underestimated, with many interviewees expressing a sense of isolation and a negative impact on their wellbeing during the pandemic-related lockdowns. Experiencing feelings of isolation in online study environments is consistent with prior findings related to online distance education (Ross & Sheail, 2017). While digital social connections were not the perfect substitute for face-to-face interaction, they went some way to maintaining a sense of social belonging within the University during the pandemic (Reed & Dunn, 2021). Chinese interviewees mentioned using WeChat to socialise with Chinese circles of friends, however many had difficulty with more widely-used social media platforms that were illegal in their home country, such as Facebook or WhatsApp. This finding confirms claims in extant literature that China-domiciled students are 'less likely to diversify their social networks compared with students of other nationalities' (Chang et al., 2021, p. 10). However, we find that the inability to diversify is not necessarily because China-domiciled students do not want to integrate with their UK peers, but because they have not been given adequate support to successfully use new social media platforms. Barriers to Facebook and WeChat caused a sense of division and online ostracism for the China-domiciled students and this digital inequality (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017) directly threatened their 'psychological need to belong' (Allen et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2017). In particular, inequalities surrounding social media prevented students from joining societies and other social events hosted by the University.

The study also highlighted the varied social experiences of belonging for all interviewees, with some of these experiences sitting on the margins of university life or outside university life altogether (Thomas, 2015). The majority of UK commuter students had accepted a level of estrangement with the University, engaging with it on their own terms while belonging to a familial or social network beyond the institution. For Chinese students, making connections both inside and outside of the institution often proved challenging, despite the desire for intercultural engagement (Yu & Moskal, 2019). This was particularly true of the students who joined via 2+2 routes, who sought to assimilate into an established cohort. Chinese interviewees were generally in

a closed Chinese circle not out of choice, but because of both perceived and real barriers to communication and cultural differences (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Wang et al., 2012). The post-pandemic challenge is for the sector to reflect on its role in creating dominant conceptions of the ideal student and alienating those that do not or cannot, conform.

Student surroundings

The relationship between students and their surroundings (Ahn & Davis, 2020a; Antonsich, 2010) had a profound impact on academic belonging across all student groups. These findings support and go beyond those of Bartolic et al. (2022) who assert that pandemic living conditions had a significant influence on academic confidence. Those who had experienced challenging living conditions found that this overshadowed their university experience. The campus structure created a close sense of physical belonging in the first year for most students, when they typically lived on campus with those who did not live on campus citing a negative impact on their ability to make friends. Physical belonging became increasingly remote once students moved into the nearby city, but was potentially compensated for by an increased sense of academic and social belonging that had developed across the student cohort over time. During the pandemic the campus became virtual for the majority of students, resulting in a significant change to this dimension of belonging (Bartolic et al., 2022).

The dislocation from the campus also resulted in many students expressing feelings of having regressed, as they returned to their pre-student living arrangements. Many struggled to reconcile their student habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) with their pre-student surroundings. With each student forced to construct an individual space from which to study, COVID-19 brought the heterogeneity of the student body to the fore, challenging previously dominant narratives of what it means to be a student.

Personal belonging

At first glance, findings support the deficit model, which presents Chinese students as passive and unwilling to adapt (Bartlett & Fischer, 2015), as Chinese interviewees used words like 'passive', 'shy', and 'unadaptable' to describe themselves. However, the deficit model can be brought into question when we consider that passivity and inadaptability contradict the challenges of studying abroad (Wang et al., 2012). It can be argued that the Chinese interviewees internalised their negative stereotypes (Ryan & Louie, 2007) and their responses form part of a narrow feedback loop that perpetuates deficit without considering HE as a 'value-imposing' institution that celebrates certain virtues while defaming others, disadvantaging students who do not fit within the bounds of its 'legitimate culture' (Bourdieu, 2010, p.15). By focusing on what Chinese students' 'lack', it becomes easy to overlook the institutions' responsibility to acculturate students, the individual differences within student demographics (Gravett & Winstone, 2021), the potential for learning approaches to change over time (Heng, 2018), and the value of different learning cultures (Wu, 2015). If the HE environment frames Chinese cultural background as 'baggage' rather than

potential (Heng, 2018), then how can students feel that they belong within the community (Strayhorn, 2012)? Whilst the internalisation of deficit narratives was most marked in the Chinese interviewees, it was also clear in interviews with UK students from non-traditional backgrounds, some of whom had sought to change their habitus whilst others accepted a different form of belonging.

Taken together, the findings create a challenge for the contemporary university habitus that typically caters to a static and 'ideal' student identity (Cotton et al., 2016), assuming students will change themselves in order to belong (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Mann, 2005). As the sector exits the pandemic and the field of HE stabilises once more, there is the opportunity for institutions to recognise the permanent changes in their habitus and serve the full student population.

Conclusion

The study contributes new insights into differential experiences of belonging through a comparative analysis, highlighting commonalities within a heterogeneous student demographic, alongside emphasising the importance of a contextual approach to the student experience. It should therefore be of interest beyond the immediate context of the study. Promoting belonging across all student groups is a critical contributor to reducing awarding gaps between different student groups. In light of the findings, universities must devote consideration to addressing the needs of a heterogeneous student body through continued work on transitions into HE and embedding inclusive curriculum practices. In addition, institutions also need a deeper understanding of digital belonging and the exclusionary effects of social media platforms for some students.

The findings also support the facilitation of a broader range of social experiences, beyond the traditional, campus-based, university societies. Future work could interrogate the relationship between the physical campus and student belonging in the post pandemic environment to understand the permanency of changes to the conceptualisation of student and university.

Care should be taken in generalising from this study, which draws on interviews with students in the final year of one UK Business School. Further studies could take a longitudinal approach to evaluate how belonging changes over time. In addition, the pandemic may have distorted students' sense of belonging in various ways, limiting the ability to apply findings to future cohorts.

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