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Sense of Belonging and the Intercultural and Academic Experiences Among International Students at a University in Northern Ireland

Elida Cena
Stephanie Burns
Paul Wilson
Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions have a strong interest in attracting international students; however, there is little research on international students' experience while studying in the United Kingdom and how this relates to their adjustment and belonging. This research was conducted with 16 international students at an institution in Northern Ireland, using qualitative interviews to examine academic and sociocultural challenges they experience while studying and living in a country different from their own. Findings suggest that the academic challenges posed by a different educational system, issues affecting social relations within the campus, and living in a homogenous society have an impact on the international student experience. Adjustment challenges were primarily attributable to language and cultural barriers. These findings highlight that it is vital for institutions to better understand students' needs and tailor their services to enhance international students' learning experience. The study discusses possible areas for intervention that can be taken into consideration by higher education institutions.

Keywords: acculturation, belonging, international students, student adjustment, student experience

INTRODUCTION

International students are an integral part of higher education in the United Kingdom. Comprising 20% of the total student population—a doubling of the figure from 20 years ago (Migration Advisory Committee [MAC], 2018)—it is the second most popular worldwide destination for international students (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2020), making the United Kingdom a global leader in international education. Common reasons that influence international students to study in U.K. higher education institutions (HEIs) are as follows: positive employment prospects, quality of education, reputation of university, new experiences, and content of program and rankings (Bright Futures, 2018; Gatfield & Chen, 2006). Chinese students constitute 23.2% of all international students in U.K. HEIs (Stern, 2019); other top sending countries for international students in the United Kingdom are India, the United States, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. Despite concerns with Brexit and recent worries that the pandemic would lower the number of international students, U.K. universities have record admissions—HESA (2020) documented increased figures during 2017–2018, and Staton (2020) reported an increase of 3.5% from 2019. The international student population is not distributed proportionately throughout the United Kingdom, with Northern Ireland being the least popular destination, comprising an overall 2% of the whole international student population (MAC, 2018). HEIs in Northern Ireland are autonomous self-governing bodies; they have independence over the structure and design of their programs. They are not state-owned institutions but are dependent on state funding and are considered government-dependent private institutions (European Commission, 2019). Higher education in Northern Ireland is committed to attracting large numbers of international students, promoting internationalization for the financial benefits involved, and the taking advantage of the invaluable enrichment of a global alumni network (Centre for Educational Development, 2019).

To benefit from the economic and academic advantages that international students bring with them, HEIs should improve the quality of the experience that international students have and identify factors that impact their successful adjustment (Shu et al., 2020). The United Kingdom is ranked first by international students for overall satisfaction with teaching and learning (Douglas et al., 2006; Universities UK International, 2017); however, the literature suggests that academic literacy practices should not be separated from the totality of the university experience including social and emotional well-being (Sheridan, 2011). International education is a complex journey that can be both exciting and challenging for international students as they live in a foreign country for a fixed period (Elliot et al., 2016). Moving to a new environment can be associated with a harder time adjusting to university life both academically and socially (Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Research has shown that international students experience considerable levels of acculturative stress, which could be due to homesickness, cultural shock, or perceived discrimination (Russell et al., 2010). These in turn can lead to isolation and helplessness, and affect their sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, and

depression (Lee & Rice, 2007; Mori, 2000). Most research on the psychological adjustment of international students focuses mainly on acculturation (Slaten et al., 2016). More recent studies have highlighted the need for secure attachment and social support to effectively navigate difficulties and stressful situations in the process of adjustment (Chen & Zhou, 2019). Scholars examining different aspects of international students' adjustment have long recognized the challenges and the need to create a sense of belonging and its significance in improving the academic, social, and cultural experience of all students (Ammigan, 2019).

Student belonging has most often been discussed in terms of relational belonging (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Slaten et al., 2016) with a particular focus on interactions of students within the campus. The relational aspect, however, is not the only dimension of belonging, but it comprises of a variety of social and spatial levels. International students are part of the campus as well as the broader community where they live, but they also remain part of their home country, which creates multiple forms of belonging. This article extends the knowledge on belonging by including these considerations and responds to calls of scholars "to look more carefully at the plurality of scales at which belonging is articulated" (Antonsich, 2010, p. 653). The study further looks at the ways international students negotiate a sense of belonging and underlines the ways cultural differences may facilitate or complicate international students' belonging.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment and Belonging Among International Students

International students' cross-cultural adjustment is a complex process and it depends on several factors. Literature suggests that international students may be vulnerable to acculturative stress, which refers to the physical, social, and psychological impact of adaptation to a new culture (Berry et al., 1987). Indeed, empirical work has supported this assertion (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Literature suggests that during the process of cross-cultural transitions, international students experience homesickness (Dee & Henkin, 1999), social isolation (Mahmood & Beach, 2018), a lack of social support (Liu, 2009), and cultural distance (Searle & Ward, 1990). They also experience language difficulties (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), difficulties adjusting to different teaching styles and academic expectations (Liberman, 1994), racial prejudice (Constantine et al., 2004), feelings of not being respected (Van Horne et al., 2018), practical worries around finances and accommodation (Mori, 2000; Sandhu, 1994), and fear of academic failure and pressure from families (Wei et al., 2007)—factors that have been found to impede feelings of belonging. Literature from the United Kingdom highlights the transitory difficulties of the first-year international students, such as adjustment to educational customs used in higher education in the United Kingdom, language difficulties (Jones et al., 2016), and the barriers of securing employment while studying as well as a lack of understanding of the U.K. job market (Pimblett et al., 2016).

In addition to these challenges, cross-cultural differences in social interaction may impede forming social networks with domestic students, which in turn may contribute to acculturative stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). This cultural distance is

portrayed through personal interests, ways of communication, perceptions about friendship, and daily routines, which negatively influence social interaction with domestic students (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). According to the cultural dichotomy model, the differences between the collectivist and individualist cultural dimensions help illustrate some of the striking differences between Eastern and Western cultures (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Research has supported this by revealing that Asian students experience more acculturative stress than their European counterparts and Asians who mainly socialize with their co-nationals experience higher levels of acculturative stress (Leong, 2015). The different cultural contexts in turn construct hierarchies of belonging whereby not everyone belongs similarly or feels included (May, 2011).

Students who leave their home countries leave their important others and social relationships behind. These disconnections can be very stressful for international students, and to provide a healthy social environment, universities should support social connections within the university, which in turn may support international students' adjustment (Gautnam et al., 2016). Studies that explore social connections within the campus commonly adopt the notion of belonging. Belonging involves feeling connected and the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included, and supported by others in the educational social environment (Goodenow, 1993). The notion of belonging in psychology has become popularized by Baumeister and Leary (1995) and refers to the need for regular contact and the perception that personal relationships have stability and continuation. Belonging can be regarded as an intrinsic element of emotional resilience, which strongly predicts high educational attainment and student persistence (Nota et al., 2004; Yao, 2015). It has also been shown to positively predict subjective well-being (Sheldon et al., 2011). In educational research, belonging characterizes the perceived social support in a university's environment and the feeling of connectedness with others (Strayhorn, 2008). It is thus related to the concept of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) and the positive educational outcomes associated with higher levels of bonding social capital (Israel et al., 2001).

Although studies have emerged on educational and university belonging, there is little research that focuses on international students' sense of belonging in the university community. Belongingness is particularly unique for international students, partly because they are expected to handle similar academic demands as domestic students without social support (Glass & Westmond-Campbell, 2014). A quantitative factor analysis of a "sense of belonging" measure devised by Hoffman et al. (2003) identified five key elements of perceived belonging in students: peer support, faculty support, classroom comfort, isolation, and empathetic faculty. The composition of international students' friendship and social networks suggests that they are inclined to socialize more with their co-national students, followed by other international students (McFaul, 2016). Nonetheless, a substantial number of studies suggest that social interaction with host students and the host community is significant to their adjustment and acculturation process to the university community; however, they are harder to initiate and maintain (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004;

Hendrickson et al., 2011; McFaul, 2016; Ying & Han, 2006). In sum, these studies highlight the importance of social relations and social support for international students in their adjustment.

Most of this literature on acculturation and belonging focuses on integration in campus or university belonging (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014; Slaten et al., 2016). A more comprehensive analysis of the notion suggests that belonging is not only relational, but it is a need, an emotional feeling of feeling safe and being attached to a place, which is also known as "place-belongingness" (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Literature from diasporas and migration has distinguished levels of belonging that relate to "social locations" and "individual's emotional attachments to various collectivities" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is within this context that this article examines the sense of belonging as multiscalar and being constructed at the level of the interaction with other students (on campus) and the community in the host society.

Drawing on such conceptualizations of belonging, this article examines the sense of attachment and connectedness not only in the campus but more broadly in Northern Ireland and seeks to highlight the way such social spaces shape belonging in terms of inclusion and exclusion. Building further on theories of migration and globalization, previous analyses suggest that the construction of learning spaces is complicated as individuals negotiate between different cultures, societies, and educational systems (Dai, 2018). In the context of our current study, the third space theory by Bhabha (1994) is seen to offer a useful frame for the notion of "in-between" spaces. It is within these in-between spaces that creative forms of cultural identity are produced and negotiated. From this perspective, belonging is not static, but is a rather fluid state and a never-ending process as individuals negotiate their positions in their environment. More recently, Dai (2018), drawing upon changes that take place in the process of cross-system transition, illustrated the dynamic nature of belonging as international students actively engaged in constructing a sense of connection and adjustment within the new cultural context. Through experiences of positive and negative encounters, international students develop a sense of "placemaking" as defined by spaces in the new cultural context. As a society that is now 20 years into its peace process after decades of sectarian conflict, Northern Ireland, in contrast to the rest of the United Kingdom, presents a particular set of cultural and political conditions to international students that may have further impact on their feelings of belonging and their resulting adjustment.

METHOD

A qualitative study design was used to explore the experiences of international students and obtain a deeper insight into their perspectives of academic and social belonging. The main characteristic of qualitative research is that it focuses on the meaning and how people make sense of what is happening (Creswell, 2012). International students from Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in the capital city of Northern Ireland participated in the study. QUB is a large university with 15 schools (spanning three faculties) as well as research institutes, offering degrees

at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. There are currently 24,697 students in total (HESA, 2020), out of which around 4,000 students are international from over 80 countries (including European Union students).

Sixteen international students at QUB were recruited via opportunity sampling. International societies in the University were the first points of contact for recruitment. The students who participated in this study were studying across many schools within QUB, with the highest proportion of participants from the School of Psychology. Participants were selected using snowballing sampling, with the aim of reaching a varied set of students from the undergraduate (64.3%) and postgraduate level (28.6%). They represented a variety of cultural backgrounds which comprised participants originating from China, Malaysia, the United States, Australia, Greece, and Norway (see Table 1 for more details). Data collection took place from June 2019 to February 2020.

Table 1: Demographics of the Participants

No.	Participant	Country	Time at QUB	Year	Level of study
1	Chen	Malaysia	9 months	Level 1	BA
2	Chloe	USA	2 years	1st year	PhD
3	Heng	Indonesia	2 years	Level 1	BA
4	Lukas	Greece	9 months	1st year	PhD
5	Mathias	Norway	9 months	Level 1	BA
6	Henry	Burma	3.6 years	Level 3	BA
7	Anne	USA	2 years	1st year	PhD
8	Wang lei	Hong Kong	3 years	Level 2	BA
9	Liu Yang	China	3 years	Level 3	BA
10	Zhang Wei	Australia	3 years	Level 3	BA
11	Shu Fang	Malaysia	3 years	Level 3	BA
12	Rong	Malaysia	7 months	Level 1	BA
13	Ning	China	7 months	Level 1	BA
14	Emily	Argentina	1 year	1st year	MA
15	Yuh New	China	3 years	Level 3	BA
16	Chunhua	Malaysia	6 months	Level 1	BA

Data were collected using in-depth, semistructured interviews. Questions for the interviews were developed by the researchers, and other studies were reviewed to compile the interview guide (see Slaten et al., 2016). Interviews encouraged an open and informal tone of discussion to create a comfortable context for interviewing (King & Horrocks, 2010). Questions were formulated in an open-ended style to capture a breadth of understanding and probed: (a) academic experiences, (b) the social connections and adjustment within the university, as well as (c) aspects of belonging in Northern Ireland. The issues of confidentiality of information, voluntary participation, and the right to privacy were fully adhered to for all the study procedures. To ensure anonymity, the names of participants were changed. In addition, ethical approval was obtained by QUB Ethics

Committee before data collection commenced. Interviews were conducted in one researcher's office or in a quiet coffee shop around campus depending on participants' preferences. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed, with recordings ranging from 25 to 40 min.

We used the method of thematic analysis to identify themes and capture patterns and complexities in respondents' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were coded using the NVivo software (Jackon & Bazeley, 2019). Analyzing belonging is compatible with a social-constructivist approach, which assumes that students' perceptions of belonging are not random, nor smoothly accommodating but instead depend on the context and the way belonging is constructed and experienced. The understanding of belonging as something that is fluid and as a process that changes (Antonsich, 2010) in constant interaction with others enabled us to acknowledge the role of the individual and the broader social context in influencing the construction of belonging. To ensure credibility of transcript coding, two researchers read the data several times and individually coded the transcripts to identify the meanings in relation to the research topic. Researchers then compared the codes and resolved any issues with coding. Analysis was conducted at a latent level, going beyond the semantic understanding of the data to identify the underlying reasons shaping the nature of learning and social challenges for international students in the context of higher education in NI.

RESULTS

The findings revealed the uneven experiences of studying as international students at QUB. Three key domains of learning and social experiences were identified, under which fell critical factors for impeding or promoting feelings of belonging: educational differences, on-campus social interactions, influences from the home society, and the wider off-campus environment. Some of these factors seemed particularly important in the initial phases of transitioning to a new learning environment. Each of the domains, the learning and social experiences, and the related factors that impacted belonging will be presented in turn.

The Multiple Sites of (Non)Belonging

On-Campus Belonging

The domain of on-campus social interactions in the data encompasses subthemes related to the desire of international students to create and develop social connectedness with people within the campus of the university. Respondents acknowledged that the central university worked hard to support students' adjustment by facilitating an inclusive environment. The International Welcome and Orientation program organized by the University was reported as having had a strong impact to establish friendships with other international students when they arrived on campus. As one of the postgraduate American students reported:

I feel like I am an international student at the University rather than a student at the University partly because the international week was so well-done, I mean a lot of my friends I made there. I mean here I have friends from all over the world that are coming here as international students. And obviously, that's good because you are sharing the same experiences, "oh you are away from home." —Chloe

The findings point to the common shared experiences that international students have with each other and the ease of communication. These socializing patterns are a source of social support as such students rely on each other to learn about academic and sociocultural practices in the new environment. There were, however, variations in socialization, whereby the majority of Asian students socialized with friends from their own country or culture. For Asian students who have stronger cultural differences from the host society, socializing with those from a similar culture can be described as students' active ways to construct a sense of adjustment within the new cultural context (Dai, 2020), or what can be known as "tactics of belonging." Nevertheless, forming friendships with co-nationals was not always a choice, but a strategy to avoid nonbelonging due to a common perception of being unable to socialize with domestic students. Participants preempted difficulties with socializing with domestic students, specifically due to language barriers and the ability to interact "normally" with them, which affected their sense of confidence and connectedness.

Language and communication were identified as key to successful interactions with domestic students and how they formed belonging. This was unsurprising, as language evokes a sense of community and generates feelings of being at home (Antonsich, 2010). International students, however, described how they struggled to understand the accent, the colloquialisms, slang, and local jokes, as the participant below explained:

Talking one to one is fine but if it's a group of people and we're all talking to each other and there is the accent… people have different accents. Just responding in time, like in a way that it flows, even though my English is pretty good, there is always some phrases that I'm not used to... and I was sort of left out. —Emily

The inability to fully understand and interact with locals was especially stressful for Asian students. Findings correspond with other research that suggests language barriers can cause anxiety, which impacts the way individuals cope in both academic and social settings (Chen & Zhou, 2019). Language barriers generate a feeling of being outsiders and nonbelonging particularly for Asian and non-English–speaking students. Further, and worryingly, incidents of negative in-class experiences resulted in some Chinese and Malaysian students having a perception of an unwelcoming learning environment and a lack of interest from domestic peers, as recalled by one of the students below:

Our lecturer shared a funny video about a Chinese person whose English is quite fluent for us Malaysians and Chinese. But maybe it wasn't easy to understand for domestic students, so they were quite reluctant, and

they just left the class. For us, Chinese, even if it's not funny we show respect, but they just left. —Chunhua

Chunhua's narrative highlights the way small incidents make students feel unrecognized and unaccepted, as opposed to an integral part of the campus environment. This finding adds contextual nuance to notions that fostering a sense of belonging is not only self-defined, but also set by others' boundaries of who belongs and who does not (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

A handful of those who interacted more with domestic students and other international students reported to be more familiar with the local culture. They subsequently perceived that as a growth experience in terms of expanding their cultural horizons, which in turn signaled a stronger sense of social inclusion. Other international students from non-Asian cultures reported broader multinational networks and also more socialization with domestic students. Mixing with other students is perceived as a growth experience to help them expand their cultural horizons:

I feel very accomplished when meeting new people, because like, I get to know the world better, like from communicating with them, get to know their culture, and get to think from a new perspective. Sometimes you are so comfortable with your friends from home, and then you forget that there are so many other perspectives in life. —Liu Yang

While Liu Yang was one of the few Chinese students who reported actively socializing with students from other multicultural backgrounds, associating their belonging with an international context enables students to create new spaces of belonging, which allowed them to navigate through challenges and experience new cultures.

The Different Educational Systems

Concerning standards, one issue reported by international students was the level of critical evaluation required in academic writing, a finding similar to another qualitative study with international students (Shaheen, 2016). The international students interviewed here appeared to have little prior experience of doing critical writing, which is an essential skill at higher education level and a key criterion for the assessment of students' work:

The first time I got my course grades, and it wasn't as good as I expected. So, I found out that the university is looking for something different from what I learned in Hong Kong. Because in Hong Kong it's more focused on like... you have to memorize something, and then you put in the exam. Here they are more focused on how you apply your knowledge and how to analyze things critically. —Shu Fang

This interview echoed many other participants' accounts, depicting the differences in cultural educational learning systems that focus on memorization and require them to adapt to an unfamiliar way of learning and new teaching

styles. Many highlighted that learning expectations in the current institution are different from their previous learning experiences, and they struggled to meet the demands of learning or knowing how to improve their work. A few first-year students expressed the need to have a domestic "academic friend" to discuss their work and to ask questions about academic standards that they felt embarrassed to ask others.

Studying in a nonnative language appeared to be one of the main impediments to international students' academic performance, their social relationships, and, subsequently, their feelings of belonging. Findings suggest that students from China and Southeast Asia experienced more difficulties in understanding lecturers, having to constantly translate the lectures, than other international students from Europe and English-speaking countries.

Parental Expectations as Home Factors Affecting Belonging

A unique cultural factor that appeared to negatively affect belonging (as reported by the Chinese international student respondents) was the pressure and the expectations of families back home. Oftentimes, the parents of these students were described as being involved in students' major academic decisions by deciding for them to not only study abroad but also where and the degree choice. Parents could also assert an influence by insisting on particular career choices after university or by setting particular expectations for achievement, as expressed below:

> For us [international students], I would feel like we have more burden.... our parents spend more money for us to get a university, to get a good education, so we feel like there is more responsibility on our back, and we have to pay that back. So, I would say that, we are probably more pressured than domestic students because our parents have to pay so much. —Ning

That this sentiment was not shared by international students from other cultural backgrounds reveals an additional barrier for students originating from China to attain unrealistically high results. This finding is similar to other studies highlighting parents' pressure on academic performance and choices (Tang, Collier & Witt, 2018). The feeling of guilt to pay back with high results was seen to impact student adaptation and negatively influenced their sense of belonging in the new society.

Belonging on Campus but not in the City

Lack of Diversity Outside of the Campus. Participants felt that adjustment to university life and living in Northern Ireland are distinctive experiences. Living in Northern Ireland was described as a special experience for participants who highlighted the hospitality of local people and welcoming culture. Small actions of prosocial behavior, which characterizes the local culture, such as helping in the streets or opening doors, were well-regarded cultural practices that enhanced

feelings of place-belonging. As one student explained, "I've enjoyed the fact that I can see the same person, buy something, and we know each other's names and faces," alluding to the advantages of living in a small city. This impression, however, was not shared by all participants. Many participants reported feeling like outsiders and out of place, describing Belfast as a homogenous city with a small minority population and a lack of exposure to intercultural competencies, reflecting research that suggests newcomers may experience less acculturative stress in culturally diverse societies (Van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013). An overall perception of Northern Ireland as nondiverse is described in the following excerpt:

> Because of the culture, they will not understand you, or because of the history, people here tend to have not been exposed to international people, while in England they are more diverse. People here are not used to getting along with international students. —Wang Lei

Participants tended to draw comparisons between Belfast and London when highlighting the lack of diversity. Disturbingly, some examples of racist abuse were related by Asian students who had experienced incidents of name-calling in the streets, such as "ching chong" or similar comments. Although participants felt labeling could be dismissed, they also described experiencing structural forms of discrimination that were harder to brush off. Some students struggled to find employment as a way to acquire experience in their field of study in the United Kingdom, and during their job search, they experienced some form of discrimination. One Chinese student who was close to completing his placement year, narrated:

> I had so much trouble looking for placement last year. I applied for like 30–40 placement roles and… and yeah, I got rejected by most of them… because, because of the fact that I am international. They would rather choose domestic people because it's less paperwork and less stress for them. Erm, even though I've got the visa to cover my placement, but they don't. —Henry

This sentiment was shared by other participants when they discussed securing private accommodation; often they are treated differently from domestic students as they are required to pay 6 months' rent in advance, in contrast with domestic students who are not required to do the same. Others expressed a simple financial need (or desire) to work in a local business while studying. Many felt that working was an excellent way to increase feelings of belonging, but they felt anxious about searching for a job in the domestic job market due to their perception of lack of local cultural competency.

Understanding and Living in a Postconflict Society. Many of the students had no previous knowledge about the history in Northern Ireland and its status as a postconflict society. However, many believed that they needed to be aware of what they could (or could not) say in many situations: "Sometimes I feel afraid. You don't want to say the wrong thing, when you say the wrong thing, you can potentially get into trouble." For some of the participants, Northern Ireland was

perceived as a conservative country. When asked whether they felt a sense of belonging in the community, as shown below, participants reported to have a sense of belonging only to the extent that they feel part of a university with international students:

> Hmmm, to be honest, it's a very conservative nation. I feel a sense of belonging automatically because there is a university with international students, but if you want to remove the university from Belfast, then I'd feel out of place. —Shu Fang

The salience of religion appeared to be one of the main barriers to international students who were nonbelievers. As one of the students commented, "There is a gigantic issue. I don't do religion and there is a lot of religion here." Such challenges are likely to influence students' feelings of belonging and engagement with the wider community outside of the campus.

DISCUSSION

This article has discussed the complexity of belonging for international students at a university in Northern Ireland. The current study extends a body of research that focuses on international students' academic and social experiences that influence their sense of belonging (García et al., 2019; Leong, 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Tang et al., 2018). The vast majority of studies have detailed comparisons between domestic and international students (Van Horne et al., 2018), while literature on international students has mostly focused on on-campus belonging (Rivas et al., 2019; Slaten et al., 2016). We have contributed to the literature by examining the construct of belonging and adjustment within the multiple social spaces and intersectional negotiations, which focus on on-campus belonging, pressures from home country, and the broader community influences in Nothern Ireland. These conceptions suggest that individuals develop a sense of belonging into different spaces of belonging—the spaces where they fit in or can be themselves and the spaces where they do not feel a sense of belonging (Butcher, 2010, p. 523).

Within on-campus social spaces, such as the classroom, relationships with others shape belonging and determine which relations are possible and which are not. Interviews suggest that international students' friendships are mostly with co-nationals and other international students. These friendships provide social support and a stronger sense of connection due to shared common experiences and cultural understandings (Rivas et al., 2019; Slaten et al., 2016). The presence of orientation activities tailored to inform international students was conducive to forming initial friendships, but there were no similar efforts made to create proactive programs to initiate meaningful social interactions with domestic students. Friendships with domestic students were perceived as important to reduce feelings of loneliness, to help with navigating and understanding new academic and social expectations, and to enhance their sense of growth in a global world. Findings support previous calls for greater facilitation of the integration of

international students and domestic students, especially in relatively homogenous communities (Poteet & Gomez, 2015).

When students are studying in a country different from their home country, they have to continuously negotiate different academic systems and learning environments, which impacts their perceptions of academic success and, in turn, their sense of belonging. Students originating from China and Southeast Asia were found to experience more difficulties than students originating from other countries in language, homesickness, and adjustments to both academic and social life. These findings support the cultural dichotomy model, which suggests that cultural dissimilarities are a stressor that impacts student belonging (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The educational experience of international students coming from Asian countries may mean they find it particularly difficult to adjust to the style of learning in U.K. universities that emphasize critical thinking and independent learning. Our findings align with previous literature identifying that different teaching and learning styles and language proficiency appear to impact students' academic achievement (Liberman, 1994; Nailevna, 2017). Several participants suggested the need for "academic friends" to help them as they adjust to the new learning environment. Particular factors were found to have different impacts upon students' ability to form attachments and navigate through different spaces of belonging.

Belonging and academic adjustment are also shaped by influences from home countries. Home pressures in this study refer to the parental influence on academic decisions and expectations. This finding was reported only by students originating from Asia and Malaysia, and it is consistent with other studies that suggest parents' expectations to succeed may be influenced by the Chinese sociocultural norms that emphasize the importance of academic achievement as a necessary investment in life (Tang et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2007). These expectations can in turn have drawbacks of putting pressure on students and exasperating their adjustment and belonging in the host society.

In the wide spectrum of factors and realms, the macro spaces of the local community impacted students' ability to form attachments and their ability to fit in. Our findings demonstrated that certain cultural aspects of locals being friendly and talkative to strangers, and the familiarity of the surroundings, positively impacted feelings of belonging among many participants. Yet, within these notions, the current study suggested that belonging is dynamic and within these spaces our participants identify strongly with the institution and being an international student and identify less with the broader community and the city. International students appreciate the ability to gain intercultural learning experiences and engage with other students. This is consistent with research (Dai, 2020) drawing upon changes that take place in the process of cross-system transition, which has illustrated the dynamic nature of belonging as international students actively engaged to construct a sense of connection and adjustment with the new cultural context. Relating to these experiences of positive and negative encounters, international students develop a sense of "placemaking," which is defined by perceptions of adjustment and feelings of acceptance in the new cultural settings.

Some not-so-positive reflections stemming from a lack of diversity in the community outside of the campus, and from a small city that offers little exposure to intercultural competencies, increased feelings of being out of place. Shared perceptions of being discriminated against, not being able to get local jobs, and so on contributed to lessening international students' sense of belonging outside of the university, which aligns with assertions that belonging is not only an individual affair, but it is granted and distributed by others (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Northern Ireland's divided history along religious and sectarian lines, coupled with the relatively low immigration rate, have led to immigrant communities remaining in the margins of mainstream society (Crangle, 2018). Our findings reflect the challenges of other young people in Northern Ireland (McAlister et al., 2013), in that international students have to endure the impact of living in a postconflict society, experiencing a culture of fear and an inability to work, which impacts their sense of safety and sense of belonging.

In sum, the current study has discussed that international students' belonging is a multilayered phenomenon. The multiple aspects that determine the totality of belonging for international students are shaped by social and spatial dimensions. On-campus belonging comprised the perceived social relations of international students with local students and the acculturative experiences influencing these relations, as well as the academic experiences of studying in a new learning environment. Off-campus belonging, however, consisted of the perceived experiences of life in the host community as well as the family pressures influenced by home factors that contributed to students' sense of belonging.

Implications

This study informs higher education institutions, in Northern Ireland and beyond, that if internationalization is truly the goal, more consideration should be given to the experiences of international students, Results from this study can assist HEIs in providing support for international students in their transition and adjustment process. Institutions do not simply expect students to adjust or adopt to the university's educational system and the social life in the campus and the city. These experiences highlight that educators and institutions need to understand the diverse and unique challenges of this group of students in order to help them adapt to what can be substantially different cultural and learning contexts. International students represent a myriad of countries and cultures, and to create an inclusive environment, support should be tailored based on realizing the different needs and cultural differences. For example, students who do not have English as their first language or whose notion of belonging is based on collectivistic values may immediately face additional challenges. Further, campus induction could provide opportunities for domestic and international students to meet immediately after their arrival. HEIs should also encourage domestic students' interest in understanding cultural differences and experiences, promoting cross-cultural competence and communication to help bridge the gap between international and domestic students. For a more inclusive classroom climate, the internationalization of the curriculum needs to be considered by

developing course materials and content that have in mind a globally diverse student population.

International students contribute to the economy and the cultural diversity of the university and the region; therefore, it is vital that the local community cultivates an inclusive atmosphere and accessible services. Widening participation and public engagement teams at HEIs should take deliberate steps to connect the local population to the work and contribution of international students. These implications are particularly crucial during the wake of coronavirus as international students sense of belonging in our institutions and communities can be challenged.

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ELIDA CENA, PhD, is a lecturer of psychology (education) at the School of Psychology of Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests focus on exploring international migration, belonging and ethnic identity, and international student experience. She can be reached via email at e.cena@qub.ac.uk.

STEPHANIE BURNS, PhD, is a lecturer of psychology (education) at the School of Psychology of Queen's University Belfast. Her research focuses on issues of social identity, multiculturalism and respect for diversity, inclusivity in education, and shared and collaborative models of education. She can be reached via email at stephanie.burns@qub.ac.uk.

PAUL WILSON, PhD, is a senior lecturer of psychology (education) at the School of Psychology of Queen's University Belfast. His research interests focus on investigating perceptions, expectations and experiences of higher education study, university readiness and transition, and the relationships between dispositional traits (personality, intelligence, etc.) and educational outcomes. He can be reached via email at p.wilson@qub.ac.uk.