

Experiences of belonging: a comparative case study

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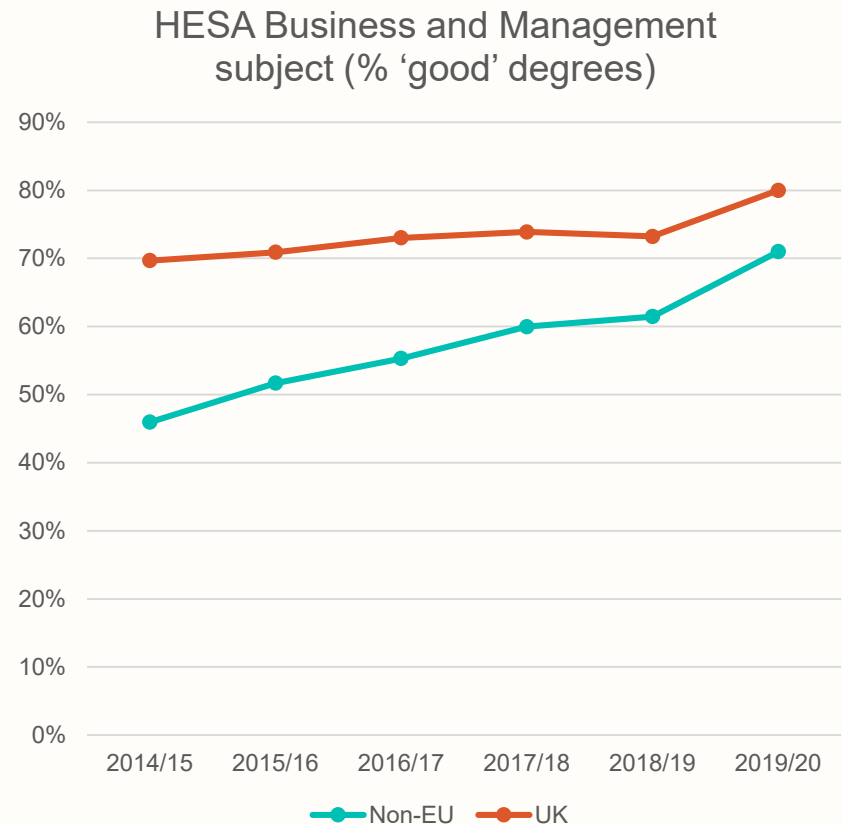
Outline

- Motivation
- Literature
- Method
- Findings
- Future work



Motivation

- Significant focus on awarding gaps in Higher Education
- Focus to date BAME (HESA definition) UK students
- International awarding gap largely unresearched (Crawford & Wang, 2015, Smith 2020)
- International students form a significant part of the B&M cohort (27% in 19/20)



Belonging

'the social infrastructure of the university caters primarily to a white student audience' (Cotton et al., 2016, p.483)

- A secure sense of belonging sits at the heart of HE student attainment (Pedler et al., 2021; Thomas, 2012).
- Belonging is framed around four aspects: academic, social, physical and personal (Ahn & Davis, 2020)
- Personal dimension which is context specific (Read et al., 2003)
- Current concepts may be based on the 'ideal student' rather than recognising the specific context of each university and its student cohorts (Thomas, 2015)
- Fluid and multidimensional (Strayhorn, 2018)

Belonging

‘students from at-risk and nondominant groups often feel a profound sense of social and academic nonbelonging when they arrive on campus’ (Mauro & Mazaris, 2016)

- Different domiciled groups have different experiences of belonging in university contexts (Museus et al., 2018)
- China-domiciled students studying in UK Business Schools often find it more difficult to integrate into university culture than their European counterparts (Yu & Moskal, 2019).
- Pandemic displaced linkage between campus and belonging (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021) – Bourdieu’s hysteresis helps to explain the dislocation (Bourdieu, 2000; Graham, 2020)

Method

Comparative study: UK and China domiciled finalist students studying Business and Management subjects at a UK Business School

Semi- structured interviews conducted by student researchers.

Interviews conducted in students' home language

Interviewees revealed the heterogeneity of the student body

16 UK domiciled students and 17 China domiciled students

Interviewees included:
China- domiciled students – students who had entered directly into the second year via articulation agreements

UK-domiciled students – disabled students, mature students, students who had undertaken a professional placement, students who had undertaken a Foundation year, commuter students, first generation students etc.

‘If no-one is talking no-one is going to come forward’ Participant 7 UK

Academic belonging



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*‘for example when my friends and I
watched a movie, other foreign
students would laugh when they
heard a sentence, but we just
wouldn’t get it at all’
Participant 8 Chinese*

Social belonging



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‘suddenly you're 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)

Social belonging



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*‘I felt a lot more connected with the
University this year [2021/22]. I stay
in the library’
Participant 4 UK*

Physical belonging



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‘communicating with them [home students] is not enough. There are a lot of things like customs that need to be learned’ Participant 7 Chinese

Personal belonging



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Findings



Pandemic: accelerated and exposed existing changes to HE environment



Academic: confidence interacting with others



Social: lack of physical presence led to isolation



Physical: secure accommodation critical to belonging



Personal: cultural differences can exacerbate feelings of exclusion



Digital: exclusionary effects of dominant forms of social media

Next steps for the University

- Introduce initiatives recognising the heterogeneity of the student cohort
- Engage with a continuous transition process, rather than just when students traditionally start in first year
- Develop a deeper understanding of digital belonging and the exclusionary effects of social media platforms for some students.
- Co-create the student experience with diverse groups of students
- Extend work to postgraduate taught cohorts

Any questions?



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