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Research article

Searching for belonging: learning from students' photographs about their higher education experiences

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Abstract

Searching for belonging is the transformative individual process of developing connections, making homes and hoping in the ecologies of a community. Belongingness influences academic performance, confidence and well-being. Therefore, understanding how students embody and search for belongingness in their higher education experience provides insights into student agency during their learning and development. Through an arts-based method – photography – we facilitated postgraduate students' reflections on their higher education experience at a UK university during the Covid-19 pandemic. This method decentres the dominant role of (usually English) language in producing knowledge about student experience. Our findings suggest that belonging is constructed through a liminal space of making embodied, material, affective, aesthetic and mental

connections to a new environment and is grounded in the humanistic endeavour of being a connected person at a place. The students' photographic insights about belonging are not confined by essentialist boundaries of their nationalities or student status, which might be foregrounded in the existing narratives about ('international') students and their experience in UK higher education. Instead, they reflect a humanistic, holistic sense making of students' experience, in which the students are evident as agentive, confident, and capable of home-making and searching for belonging.

Introduction

In this study, we seek to learn from postgraduate students' photographs about their experiences at a UK higher education campus. Our data are situated in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which, as researchers have pointed out (see, for example, Jirásek and Stránský, 2022; Tice et al., 2021), provided a unique opportunity to reveal new ways of seeing and understanding everyday life when norms are disrupted or restricted. In the UK, norms around the delivery of teaching and learning, social relationships and student well-being were impacted substantially by the Covid-19 measures, such as stay-at-home orders, social distancing and lockdowns (Knight et al., 2021). However, our focus of learning here is not on how students dealt with the challenges of Covid-19, but, rather more transferably, on their search for belonging, as revealed in this unique opportunity for understanding the UK higher education campus and student belonging. Very often, the physical campus space features heavily in the student experience, and the experience of campus and the wider sociocultural space is often a significant motivational factor when embarking on higher education study (Shkoler and Rabenu, 2022). However, what did students find important for their belonging in a new higher education environment when campus access was disrupted? We use photography as an arts-based method to enable students' imaginative meaning making about their experience at a UK university. Our findings show students' capability in searching for belonging and making new homes in a changing higher education environment. The restricted access in their experience and their strong desire for embodied connections also suggest a significant role of physical sites (such as university buildings) on campus, materials (such as objects, things and places) and humanistic relationships in students' well-being and belonging.

In this article, we discuss our approach to understanding student experiences at a UK higher education campus. We then analyse the key concepts of belongingness and home-making. Later on, we explain how we used photography as an art method in the study. Finally, we present some photographic insights about students' searching for belonging, following which we offer a discussion and some concluding comments.

Student experience at a UK higher education campus

With students being key stakeholders, their perspectives and experiences at a higher education campus are crucial, and have been extensively researched since the 1980s (Mittelmeier and Yang, 2022; Quintal and Phau, 2014). Much of this literature has framed students by their nationality or student status, such as Chinese international students or home students. The default use of nationality-based categorisation of students is problematised by a critical turn in intercultural research (see Holliday, 2000, 2018), challenging an untested assumption that students with the same nationality or student status would develop their higher education experience in the same or similar way (Huang, 2022b). (See Jones's [2017] critique of the artificial dichotomy of 'home' and 'international' students.) This overgeneralisation can (re)produce stereotypes about certain groups of students, and their learning and experience in higher education (Jones, 2017). For instance, international students are often framed as deficit or passive (Huang, 2022b; Lomer and Mittelmeier, 2020) and stereotyped as lacking agency and having problematic learning and

language skills. These deficit-based stereotypes undervalue international students as active thinking agents in navigating the complexities of, and making homes in, a new academic environment.

Critical higher education scholars (for example, Huang, 2022b; Jones, 2017; Mittelmeier and Cockayne, 2022) reject this stereotypical framing and argue the need for reimagining ('international') students through a more inclusive approach, recognising their capability and active epistemic agency as knowers who can navigate the complexities of, and contribute to, higher education environments. Huang (2022b) suggests that all students, regardless of their nationalities or student status, might face challenges of transition and transformation in a new academic environment. In this article, we adopt this critical reimagination of students beyond their labels of nationalities or status, and we see all students as new dwellers who can learn from, and are making their new homes at, a higher education campus.

The campus that we discuss in this study is one of the largest single-site universities in the UK, which is located in a well-connected, multicultural urban setting. The campus has a large number of so-called 'international' students and an agenda of internationalisation. The students have opportunities to engage with the rich academic, sociocultural activities, resources and support provided on the campus, within the city and beyond. However, much of the information about student experience at the university has been collected through surveys or class evaluations, usually focusing on the academic, intracurricular aspects of their experiences. There might be a missed opportunity for the institution to pay attention to its students' sociocultural occurrences beyond the formal curriculum, which can often have a significant impact on their learning experience (Hosein and Rao, 2019). In this study, we used an alternative, arts-based approach – photography – to develop holistic insights into students' personal learning journeys, and, in particular, their searching for belonging in these journeys, which we discuss below.

Searching for belonging

Education can be understood as the process of becoming a contributing person with a meaningful agenda (Stetsenko, 2012). This agenda could offer a holistic, personalised sense of purpose for creating meanings in life (Glass and Westmont, 2014). Searching for belonging is part of this holistic, activist process of being and becoming a meaningful person. Vivekananda-Schmidt and Sandars (2018) discuss searching for belonging as a process for individuals to develop connections to the ecologies of a community. They summarise belongingness as a sense of connectedness and (collective) esteem (Hausmann et al., 2007) (for example, being cared about, valued, respected and supported by others, while also providing these reciprocally to others). Hougaard (2013) argues that belongingness is not only a process of being accepted and identifying with an ecological context, but also a transformative process of participating in, and shaping the becomings of, the self and the environment. This understanding focuses on contribution and agency. It resonates with our position of students as new dwellers who can learn from, and contribute to, a new higher education environment as part of their holistic agenda of learning and becoming a meaningful person. This position decentres the, somehow, default focus of the marked differences of students (such as their nationalities or student status) and instead focuses on fostering a holistic learning environment for all students (Vivekananda-Schmidt and Sandars, 2018). By adopting belongingness as an alternative, inclusive lens, we seek to develop a holistic understanding of student experiences at a higher education campus.

Many studies discuss the positive influence of belongingness on students' academic performance, confidence and well-being (see, for example, Goodenow, 1993; Kivlighan et al., 2018; Vivekananda-Schmidt and Sandars, 2018; Yorke, 2016). Belongingness is usually positively associated with students' academic engagement, improvement and achievement in a group (Kivlighan et al., 2018), while a lack of a sense of belonging can lead to disengagement, reduced motivation and purpose for learning (Sedgwick et al., 2014). Vivekananda-Schmidt and Sandars (2018) suggest that belongingness plays an important role in students' identity development as learners and future professionals, especially when they transition into a new higher education environment. It could provide a protective factor as a stress buffer and a resilience mediator for students to cope with the challenges of navigating a new academic and sociocultural environment (Glass and Westmont, 2014). For instance, as Hausmann et al. (2007) discuss, belonging could enhance students' persistence, which might be particularly needed for staying committed and engaged with their study in a (post-)Covid-19 era.

Tice et al. (2021) argue that there was a unique opportunity to critically understand the higher education environment and student experience when students' connections to this environment were radically disrupted and restricted during the Covid-19 pandemic. They reflect on the significant impact of students disconnecting from the physical sites on campus during lockdowns, and how this impaired their sense of belonging, and the need for students and tutors to establish new strategies for making connections. The above studies move beyond the traditional focus on cognitive factors and academic study, and move their attention to the more humanistic, socio-psychologically and intellectually integrated fabrics of student learning and experience. These wider fabrics are what we believe to be usually missing or overlooked in the full story of student experience in higher education.

Although the existing studies emphasise the positive impact of belongingness for students' learning and development, few studies explore how belongingness could be fostered for students. Levett-Jones et al. (2007) and Gilbert (2015) suggest that developing a welcoming, encouraging, inclusive and mentoring environment could foster belongingness, especially for students who are from minority background and/or who are studying remotely online. Activities could be provided for students, for example, to reflect on their individual experiences (Sedgwick et al., 2014), to participate in group academic and social activities at programme, institutional and communal levels, and to build relationships with peers and tutors (Thomas, 2012). Through sociocultural engagement, students, with an (aspired) identification with 'imagined communities', foster peer relationships, build staff–student rapport and nurture congruent values, which facilitate a process of searching for belonging (Trowler et al., 2022: 773).

Carter et al. (2018) discuss belongingness through the concept of *place-making*. This concept, central for understanding the relationship between people and their environment, explains how individuals could develop their identity as bonded with the biophysical surroundings and social relationships within an experienced space. Through the lens of place-making, 'going to university' could be seen as a lived experience of a place where students could individually construct their place-identities as associated with those biophysical and sociocultural features in a new higher education environment (Carter et al., 2018). Developing such an identity could be challenging for students, especially within the physical and social constraints of lockdowns and disruptions. There is a fundamental imperative for universities to provide an inclusive, respectful and flexible (for example, online) place to foster students' sense of belonging, particularly during challenging times (Bagnall, 2010).

Belonging can also be understood through the concepts of *home-making* and *hope*. Antonsich (2010: 645) discusses belonging as 'a personal, intimate, feeling of being "at home" in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)'. Citing hooks (2009: 213), he understands 'home' as a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security and emotional attachment, rather than the domesticated material space. Home, therefore, is a plural, layered, non-essentialist concept and process of making (Duyvendak, 2011: 27, 28), where someone can feel that they belong to a place with which they have developed familiarity. Joutseno et al. (2009: 24, 26) discuss a non-static image of 'homes in transformation' – that is, a process of homing, or home-making – which provides an active, creative and affective process of negotiating and (re)constructing meanings of homes through the movements between times and places, from material to immaterial spaces, and in the representations of thoughts, emotions, relationships, daily routines, habits, gestures and experiences.

Barut et al. (2016) discuss hope as a source for someone to develop connections with others and a new environment – that is, belonging – so that they do not feel like an outsider and experience loneliness and isolation. By hope, they refer to looking forward to the future with a positive expectation and intentionality, which could mediate stress and anxiety and allow coping with challenges with confidence and resilience towards goals. Hoping and belonging could be central to developing a sense of socio-psychological security and well-being for students (Kivlighan et al., 2018). Wise (2005) explores hope and belonging in an intercultural context. He suggests that hope represents an openness to the world, to others, to new possibilities, to new ways of thinking and doing, and to new possibilities of relationships and connections. In other words, a sense of belonging, purpose and security could allow someone to feel safe and comfortable and enable them to be open to mediate differences and uncertainties in a new, unfamiliar environment.

In this study, we use the term *searching for belonging* to discuss students' agentive process of developing connections, making homes and hoping in a new higher education environment. We now

discuss how we used photography to enable students' insights about searching for belonging in their higher education experience.

Photography as an art method

In this study, we used photography as an art method to enable postgraduate students' reflections on their higher education experiences at a UK campus. Photographs (also seen as photovoice or participatory photography) have been used in research to elicit and empower participants' voices (see Gotschi et al., 2009; Wang and Burris, 1997). Many such studies position photographs as visual tools to enable verbal insights, while the visual itself might not always be the focus of analysis. Our use of photography as an arts-based method distinguishes itself from these studies in the epistemological position of visuals. We see visuals as an imaginative, artistic space of knowing and as a legitimate source of knowledge, rather than merely as an elicitation tool for knowledge that is verbally articulated (Huang, 2021). Our intention is to challenge the hierarchical norm of positioning language as a privileged vehicle (Huang, 2022a), and, as Thurlow (2016) argues, the almost *god-like* central medium of knowing. Our approach echoes Howes and Miles's (2021) discussion of an opportunity for photography-based educational research to use the power of images to navigate hierarchies and injustices in research. We problematise the default practice of positioning the languaged (namely what is expressed by language, for example, visuals, emotions, embodied experience or other non-linguistic forms of knowledge) beneath (often English) language, which leaves them waiting to be accessed and (often) colonised by language (Harvey et al., 2019). Instead, we intentionally foreground the analysis of visuals as a valid form of knowledge, rather than mainly relying on the written texts generated alongside them. Our intention is not to reinforce the divide between the visual and the verbal, but to see them through a non-binary lens as they together provide sites of meaning making for understanding student experience and their belonging. This epistemologically more equal, inclusive positioning of photography can enable us to better understand and ask questions about the holistic, subconscious, embodied and ineffable aspects of subjective realities that are important to individual students (Eisner, 2006; Huang, 2021, 2022a; Leavy, 2015). It could contribute new insights into the research on student experience (Huang, 2022b), especially in terms of understanding students' sociocultural experience and well-being beyond the formal curriculum, and performing their epistemic agency in navigating the complexities and making meanings in new academic environments.

Photography, in Young's (2017) literal meaning of light drawing or writing, is the art of creating meanings through the power of seeing – that is, a sight of – the reality that is important to a person (Holm, 2008; Ruby, 2005). Thus, a photograph is not merely a reflection of objective reality, but a perspective of lived experience that one person chooses to identify and make meanings about (Huang, 2019). The process of being able to see mentally, and to feel heartedly, through photography might provide a starting point to know within and beyond words. Furthermore, the art of photography involves a process of searching for connections between oneself and an environment. The photographic process of connection-searching and knowing beyond language is methodologically coherent with our purpose for understanding students' searching for belonging by decentring the dominant role of (usually English) language in researching student experience.

The study was situated in a student experience event – a photographic showcase – organised for enhancing postgraduate students' experience of their programmes of education-related studies at a UK university. The event was hosted during the second semester, at a point when the students had a substantial amount (around six months) of experience within the new higher education environment and still needed to engage and develop further in their one-year journey of postgraduate study. The event was conducted during the academic year 2021/2, when the Covid-19 pandemic had significantly shaped the norms and environment of teaching, learning and student experience. Our student profile was largely 'international' in terms of their status of registration in UK higher education. We asked the students to take photographs (or to select from photographs taken by themselves) that showcased their learning experience. Each student could submit one photograph, along with a maximum of 100 words of written text, including a title and a description of the photographic image. We had a total of 47 voluntary photographic entries. All submissions were posted on a virtual wall via Padlet. The online photographic showcase was our response to provide an alternative space of social contact and community support for students when face-to-face contact among students and staff was restricted in UK higher education during the pandemic.

We embrace our ethical responsibility of using photography to navigate power hierarchies and injustices in the study, as reminded by Howes and Miles (2021). Our use of photography empowered students to discuss ideas that were important to them without the imposition of ideas and framings by the researchers or the institution (Silverman, 2013). It connected to the students' existing, lived experience of taking photographs with their smartphones, and possibly posting on social media in their everyday life, and it was potentially a tool more familiar to many of them than using the English language. As many of the students were using English as a second or foreign language to function in the UK higher education environment, the method also enabled them to use an alternative, shared, non-linguistic medium to navigate their potentially less powerful status with English language as the dominant medium of understanding and voicing their experience and belonging.

We used a written text at the top of the Padlet page to obtain assumed consent by their submissions for using their photographic data (including both the photo-images and the verbal text) in future research. The students were also given an opportunity to inform us if they did not want their data to be used for this purpose. We were attentive to how the study might influence the relationship between us (as teachers and researchers) and the students. Thus, we ensured that the submissions were anonymised in order to protect the privacy of our students. The students were also advised that their submissions would be in no way linked to their studies or grades, but were an opportunity to share their experiences with others in the school. During the event, we focused on using the submitted photographs for the student experience purpose only. We did not formally analyse the data until after the graduation of the cohort, to avoid any working power relations.

The generated data set involves the photo-images and the written texts alongside the images. Following our instruction at the student experience event, the data set was explicitly about students' learning experiences, whereas the insights about belonging might be implicit, having students illustrating and performing their searching for belonging as part of their learning experiences, rather than talking with an explicit focus on belonging. In order to tease out these implicit insights, we did a holistic interpretation of the data set. Our interpretation involved commentaries about the photo-images and written texts, where we believed that we could identify anything about searching for belonging. Driven by our epistemological intention of decentring (English) language as the dominant medium of knowledge (Huang, 2022a) with the largely 'international' profile of students, we chose to be attentive to the semiotic meaning making of visuals in the photo-images, and used their written texts as notes and resources to support and/or add to our interpretation of their visuals. However, we see the visual and verbal data through a non-binary lens, as they are inseparable, and interrelated to each other in providing possibilities of knowing about students' experiences of searching for belonging. Thus, the focus of our analysis was on the key features, such as symbols and themes, of meaning making in either visual or verbal forms that we identified to be relevant to students' searching for belonging from the data set. We made notes specifically about the key metaphorical symbols that students used in their photographic data. The metaphorical meanings constructed through these symbols could provide a clue about the embodied experience (for example, touching of hands) that students engaged with, and about the biophysical sites, such as university buildings, that students sought to connect with in their searching for belonging. We exemplify some of these data and our interpretations in the following section.

Photographic understandings of searching for belonging

In this section, we present three main areas of searching for belonging, as illustrated by students' photographs: their desire for embodied connections; daily living and being; and relationships and contributions. These three areas were synthesised from our commentaries and interpretations of the data. The selected examples might not be able to cover all aspects and details of searching for belonging in our data set; however, we were able to identify similar insights from other students in the cohort across the data set (see our full data set online at https://photographicshowcase.wordpress.com/blog – the titles of the photographic data were provided by the students). These examples best represent the recurrent patterns, symbolic features and unique insights of our data set, which are directly relevant to our enquiry. Our purpose here is to exemplify what students found important in their searching for belonging in the higher education environment, as situated in a year of study affected by Covid-19.

Desire for embodied connections

A frequent pattern in our data set is seen in students' desire for embodied connections on campus. We use three examples to illustrate this aspect of the students' search for belonging, ranging from their hope and persistence during the lockdown to their appreciation of embodied connections after the lockdown.

In Figure 1, a student used a photograph of a dark night and an empty road in front of a university building to illustrate how they felt when embodied connections were restricted during the lockdown. The dark night and empty road at the centre contrast with the colourful, bright windows of the university building positioned on the right side of the photograph. The blurry beams of light at the top of the photograph add a sense of surrealness, distortion or somehow abnormality to the reality where the student was physically on campus but without full access to the university buildings.

In the written text about the photograph, the student used the words 'sad' and 'bittersweet' to describe their feelings, and particularly wished to 'physically attend lectures and to freely use libraries with friends'. To us, this reflects an important role of the physical sites perceived by the student in creating embodied connections with, and a sense of belonging to, the higher education campus. In contrast to the dark, surreal tone of the photo-image, the student also showed a sense of hope and persistence in searching for belonging by captioning the photograph with the title 'Hope'. The student explained that: 'I am hopeful for the future, and how this difficult time has brought everyone strength and collaboration online.' This seems to suggest that the shared experience of a difficult time and collective (as well as individual) persistence and hope could also provide a sense of belonging for this student.

Figure 1. 'Hope' (Source: https://manchester.padlet.org/mzdiphn2/my-ma-learning-journey-photographic-showcase-2020-2021-agujnni0fpy7d7to/wish/1347696173)

A perceived significance for embodied connections and a sense of persistence and hope in a 'dark' time can be seen across our data set. For instance, in Figure 2, a student used the black-and-white tone of the photo-image to express a feeling of helplessness and disappointment in undertaking master's study during lockdown. The student verbally described the experience as being 'trapped', highlighting a strong desire for embodied connections with university sites and experience. However, an open hand

is reaching out towards a window looking on to the outside world in this photo-image. This contrasting element could visually represent the student's persistence in negotiating the physical constraints of the situation. As signposted in the title of the photograph ('Trapped in person but not in mind'), and in the written text about the visual elements of academic books and stationery items in the photo-image, the student sought to develop mental, intellectual connections with the new higher education environment. To us, the student seems to recognise both mental and embodied connections as significant and inseparable for building belonging to the higher education environment. Nonetheless, more research might be needed to better understand the significant role of embodied connections and the inseparable relation between the body and the mind in students' search for belonging.

The window, as shown in Figures 1–3, is a common symbol that students used to make sense of their searching for belonging in our data set. Artists usually use windows as a metaphor for hope, change, freedom and opportunity (Nastyuk, 2018) – for example, as seen in Grant's (2021: n.p.) words, 'through a window, a world is waiting'. Windows provide a liminal space of visioning possibilities for the new, unknown, wider world (Grant, 2021), and sometimes possibly a barrier between the visioner and the prospective outlook (Crenshaw and Green, 2009). It was this liminal space, and the paradox of hope and challenges/constraints, which the students used to make sense of their search for belonging in a new higher education environment.

Figure 2.   'Trapped in person but not in mind' (Source: https://manchester.padlet.org/ mzdiphn2/my-ma-learning-journey-photographic-showcase-2020-2021-agujnni0fpy7d7to/wish/ 1374715659)

While the removal of physical access during lockdowns provided a unique (although probably unfavourable) opportunity for students to articulate their strong desire for embodied connections on campus, the return of physical access to campus following the lockdowns also confirmed the perceived significance of physical sites as a central part of student experience and their search for belonging. For instance, Figure 3 illustrates the student's happiness about physically being on campus and seeing the 'beautiful view' of the campus and her journey. The photograph, with a gentle, soft, bright tone, and the

sunlight coming through the clouds, displays a beautiful feeling of hope and peace as empowered by embodied connections with the physical sites and people on campus.

As explained in the written text by the student, Figure 3 involves more than one person in the search for belonging: 'a strange schoolmate gave me his study space when I was looking for a vacant seat'. The student described this person as 'a beautiful man', fitting into the 'beautiful journey', used as the title of the photograph. To us, the student's aesthetic appreciation of embodied connection with others on campus might suggest a powerful, grounding role of being a connected person in a place in order to search for belonging.

Figure 3. 'Beautiful journey' (Source: https://manchester.padlet.org/mzdiphn2/my-ma-learning-journey-photographic-showcase-2020-2021-agujnni0fpy7d7to/wish/1451597131)

Daily living and being

Living and being in daily lives is another common theme across our data set, depicting students' practical approaches to searching for belonging and home-making. The students used a range of resources to develop connections in their new home, including food, drink, cooking, room decoration, university resources, walking in parks and on paths, nature and travelling. Many of their daily being and engagement activities with these resources demonstrated a position of 'making', rather than merely adapting in a new environment. For instance, they illustrated their making of a room into a decorated, personalised 'home' that could better support their aesthetic experience and well-being during their higher education study. They also highlighted their experience of visiting and travelling from their new home as a source of embodied living and being, through which they could become familiar and develop their place-identities with the new home.

Many of the students used their daily living and being as a personal, metaphorical and reflective resource to make sense of their learning experience in higher education. Their agentive, creative meaning making between the formal and informal learning could situate their higher education study in the wider ground of personal and sociocultural experiences, contributing to their search for belonging in a new higher education environment. For instance, in Figure 4, the student likened their own personal experience to that of growing plants. The student wrote:

> I think my learning journey is like the growing of plants … the most challenging period for plants is from seed to seedlings, the most challenging time for me was also at the beginning.

The student highlighted how they faced challenges at the start of their learning journey, and how 'everything became much easier!' after navigating through the initial transition. The embodied experience of growing plants inspired the student with a sense of energy, hope and life, as illustrated by the green, spring-like tone in the photo-image, and as described in the written text in terms of how they were continuing to grow and persist, like the plants.

Figure 4. 'Growing plants' (https://manchester.padlet.org/mzdiphn2/my-ma-learning-journey-photographic-showcase-2020-2021-agujnni0fpy7d7to/wish/1444957347)

The photograph in Figure 4 exemplifies the student's *making* of a new home, in which their journey of learning and making were inherently associated with the strength of life. The metaphor of growing as seedlings from the plant embryo of seeds indicates a sense of patience, (self-)care and empathy for the development of new skills and place-identities.

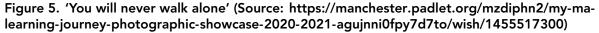## Relationships and contributions

In our data set, there were many photographs that depicted companionship and relationship as part of students' searching for belonging. This is particularly evident in Figure 5. The image itself shows two people on what appears to be a ledge. One person is kneeling down to grip the other person's hand, and possibly holding them, or even pulling them up to the ledge. The other person is also reaching their hand out for a firm, strong grip. There is a powerful sense of collaboration, trust and 'can-do' in the photo-image. Through the actions of helping and accepting help, the two people were making contributions to their experience and shared place-identity, rather than merely fitting into the new environment.

In the written text alongside Figure 5, the student highlighted the importance of humanistic relationships in coping with challenges (for example, depression, loneliness, isolation and anxiety) in their transitional journey of learning. The student exemplified that the humanistic moments of connecting with others could be in various forms, such as:

> the shortest chit chats with friends, feedback from tutors, motivation from family, advice from group mates, emotions from group travel, dances with the first-ever meet colleagues, late-night teas with housemates, endless conversations with soulmates and even the smile from complete strangers.

To this student, these humanistic connections could offer the 'best hand' and support needed for their search for belonging in the new, unfamiliar environment. The student said that 'you should never walk

alone on this journey!' This might be a self-reminder for the student, or an implicit intention to contribute to the higher education community by giving tips or advice to their peers or future students. In this way, relationships and companionship, as well as their contributions to student voices and student knowledge, could be part of their search for belonging in their making of a new home.

Figure 5. 'You will never walk alone' (Source: https://manchester.padlet.org/mzdiphn2/my-ma-learning-journey-photographic-showcase-2020-2021-agujnni0fpy7d7to/wish/1455517300)

Discussion

The photographic insights above have shed some light on what the students found important in their experiences of searching for belonging from a UK higher education campus. At times, these were from behind a window (Figures 1–3), from inside their own home (Figure 4) or through activities outside the formal learning environment of the university (Figure 5). As enabled through the artistic, holistic space of photography, the students seem to highlight their wider, rather than only their academic, experience of learning. Their photographic-mediated insights remind us that only paying attention to formal, classroom-based teaching and learning might not be sufficient for understanding the whole, or even the main, story of student experience in higher education as part of their personal, meaningful agenda (Stetsenko, 2012). However, the formal, academic learning might be more focused on studies of students' higher education experience, a focus which might be driven by the dominant structure and assessment of UK universities, and be shaped by the kind of knowledge accessible through traditional, language-based research tools, such as surveys and interviews.

None of our photographic data mentioned students' nationalities or labels (for example, 'international' or 'home'), which might reflect the students' instinct that these dominant, essentialist framings are not so useful in making sense of their personal experience. The students showed that searching for belonging is a creative, personal process of connecting, making and growing, on and off campus. They highlighted the significance of developing embodied connections with physical

sites, people and things from the wider environment of the university, including university avenues, student accommodation, windows and skylines, nature and weather, friends, teachers, strangers, objects, materials, local places, and food, drink and cooking. The ideas of persistence and hope were also recurring patterns across our data set (as exemplified in Figures 1, 2 and 4). While persistence provides an effort for commitment (Hausmann et al., 2007), hope provides a positive source of energy and confidence to cope with challenges and unfavourable situations (Barut et al., 2016). Together they support students in searching for belonging and making new homes. As home-making might be a vulnerable, challenging, self-conscious experience in a new, unfamiliar environment, the students emphasised the need for patience, empathy and (self-)care (as indicated in Figure 4), and companionship and relationships (as seen in Figure 5) in order to take care of their well-being in developing new skills and place-identities for belonging.

The students were not merely seeking to adapt to, or identify with, the new campus, but were actively driving and shaping their learning experience. They performed their contributions to the 'making' of new homes in the UK higher education environment in various ways, including hoping for the better (see Figures 1, 2 and 4), recognising shared experience of challenges as a source of developing collective identity and belonging (as discussed in the text that accompanied Figure 1), navigating alternative strategies for belonging (see Figure 2), (self-)care and well-being (as exemplified in Figure 4) and voicing themselves and giving help and advice to others (as discussed in the text that accompanied Figure 5), as well as accepting such from others in the higher education community (see Figure 3). This might resonate with Hougaard's (2013) discussion of belongingness as a powerful transformative process of participation and shaping to the self and the community, where individuals could feel familiar (Antonsich, 2010), respected (Booker and Lim, 2018) and hopeful (Barut et al., 2016), and where they could grow and flourish as meaningful persons.

Concluding comments

In this article, we have explored students' searching for belonging in their higher education experience at a UK university, as evident through their artistic, photographic meaning making. Our findings suggest that belonging is constructed through a liminal space of making embodied, material, affective, aesthetic and mental connections to a new environment, and grounded in the humanistic endeavour of being a connected person at a place. As exemplified in Figures 1–5, the students' photographic insights about belonging are not confined by essentialist boundaries of their nationalities or student status, which are often foregrounded in existing narratives about international students and their experiences in UK higher education. Instead, they reflect a humanistic, holistic sense making of students' experience, in which the students are evident as agentive and confident, and capable (rather than deficient and passive) of home-making and searching for belonging. As shaped by the holistic, artistic space of photography, the students paid significant attention to making sense of their experience beyond the formal curriculum, perceiving this to be an important part of their personal story of higher education experience in the UK. However, how does the extracurricular experience interlink with the intracurricular one for students' personal learning and search for belonging in higher education? What are the important stories for students in their holistic landscapes of higher education experiences? How do the body and mind maintain an inseparable connection for students to make links with their new home? What could universities and institutions do to fulfil their imperatives in supporting students' search for belonging? Our findings prompt us to consider these questions, which could be further explored by future research.

The photographic study provides a creative example of what many higher education researchers (for example, Huang, 2022b; Mittelmeier and Cockayne, 2022) have advocated conceptually about developing a critical, inclusive reimagination of (international) students. Although none of the students used the words *belonging*, *belongingness* or *belong* explicitly in their written texts in our data (produced according to our instructions in the photographic student event), they all organically demonstrated their searching for belonging in their photographic meaning making in a new home which they are learning about and contributing to. However, our findings are based on individual insights with a small number of students, and generated for a student experience event that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas the students' insights might be situated and cannot be overgeneralised, our findings about search for belonging might outlive the particular moment of crisis, and be transferable to the wider context of UK higher education.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with University of Manchester research ethics standards.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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