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## **What Does it Mean to ‘Belong’? A Narrative Literature Review of ‘Belongingness’ Among International Higher Education Students**

Dania Mohamad  
Concordia University, Canada  
Keenan Daniel Manning  
University of British Columbia, Canada

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Following the gradual post-COVID-19 return of international student flows, it is important to examine how higher education institutions and international students are reacting to their new environment and how they relate to each other. Central to this relationship is the concept of ‘belonging’; what it means for international students, as newcomers and temporary residents in their host environment, to feel as if they belong. To address this question, and as a springboard from which further research into the topic can be undertaken, we examined the question of ‘belonging’ within contemporary academic literature. We examined a broad range of literature to determine the key findings, as well as gaps in the implications for theory and practice. Our findings indicate that ‘belonging’ is seldom clearly defined in the scholarly research. We also found that a proactive approach to student integration was the most common thread across the studies examined.*

**Keywords:** belonging, higher education, international student, university

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### **INTRODUCTION**

‘Belonging’ is a buzzword that has been part of many a conversation in the field of international higher education (Akhtar & Kroener-Herwig, 2019; Cena et al., 2021; Curtin et al., 2013; García et al., 2019; Pearce, 2015; Rivas et al., 2019). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversation on this topic became

particularly pertinent, especially to those investigating the relationship between institutions of higher education and international students. With the gradual return to an in-person environment in most avenues of life, and as the major destinations for internationally mobile students reopen their borders, student recruitment campaigns and the revitalisation of funding schemes has begun (Abdrasheva et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Initially, our project was intended to examine the relationship between institutions of higher education and international students in light of the pandemic, and to understand the acclimatisation process for universities and international students during and, to a certain extent, post-COVID-19. It became clear that there was a need to more clearly define, or even to redefine, some of the terminology used frequently by actors in this field, most notably ‘belonging’. Despite its frequent appearance in formal and informal academic settings, (Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021; Curtin et al., 2013; Glass & Gesing, 2018; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Jones et al., 2020; Jones & Masika, 2021; Mwangi, 2016) there did not seem to be a consensus on what ‘belonging’ actually means. Therefore we seek to examine ‘belonging’ and ‘belongingness’ in an academic context within contemporary academic literature in order to illuminate this shortfall in the literature. This article will focus on investigating the following questions:

- 1: What is meant by ‘belonging’ in the existing literature within the field of international higher education?
- 2: What are the major theoretical frameworks brought to bear on the study of international students’ sense of belonging?
- 3: What factors are identified in the literature as having an impact on international students’ sense of belonging?
- 4: What are some of the implications of the extant research for the study of sense of belonging among international students?

These questions will be addressed in order through the major sections of this paper.

As a starting point, this article will review the definition of ‘belonging’, as it relates to internationally mobile students, in the contemporary literature in the field of international higher education. This article will then examine the factors that influence the ‘sense of belonging’, and the role that various stakeholders play in its increase and decrease. The article will discuss some of the recommendations for institutions of international higher education to help strengthen international students’ sense of belonging during their time there. Finally, the article will present some suggestions for future research regarding the sense of belonging for international students in international higher education. The purpose of this research is to provide an overview of the current state of the field so as to highlight gaps, and potential novel areas for future research.

## **BACKGROUND**

The impetus for this paper grew out of the desire to understand what was meant when scholars in the field of international education used the terms ‘belonging’ or ‘sense of belonging’. However, a cursory exploration of the field revealed that, in international education research, scholars often employed these terms, either as components of larger theoretical frameworks, or as central concepts in their own right, but without providing any clear definition of their meaning. More broadly, several scholars have presented frameworks for explaining different conceptualisations of belonging as a political (Calhoun, 2003) and social (May, 2013) process, and the ways it can be brought to bear in an educational context. Belonging, in its broad sense, can be examined in a number of ways, as relationships to social places, as elements of identity, as emotional attachments, or as ethical and political values (Fenster, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This is particularly salient for migrants as who seek not only a sense of social connection, but also a ‘longing to belong’ (Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2007).

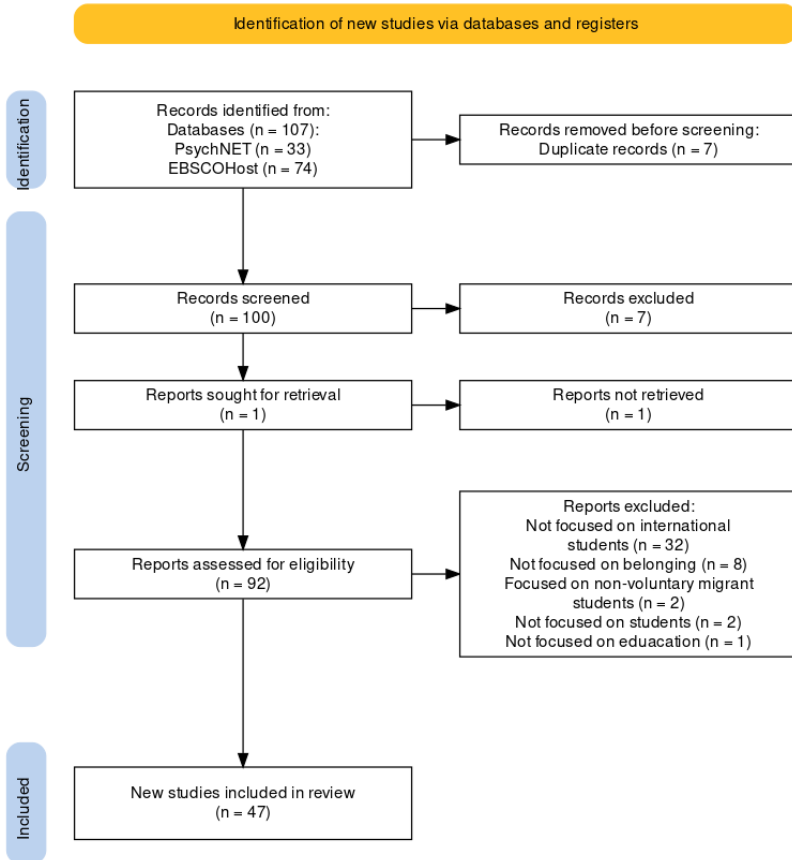
## **METHOD**

Papaioannou et al. (2010) notes that conducting literature reviews in social sciences can be problematic as relevant literature is often distributed across several disciplines. It is therefore necessary to ensure that appropriate sources are selected to ensure a broad reach across different fields when conducting a narrative literature review. As the purpose of the research was to provide a replicable overview of the extant literature, the criteria for the literature search were outlined prior to conducting the review (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022; Templier & Paré, 2015). The review protocol for this research followed the stand-alone, narrative literature review process outlined by Xiao and Watson (2019). In order to generate the body of literature for this review, the researchers conducted a conventional database search. To gain a broad coverage of material related to education, a Boolean search was conducted through the APA PsychNET and EBSCOHost academic databases, using the following search terms:

- belong\*;
- “international student\*” OR “non-local student\*” OR “foreign student\*”; and,
- higher education OR “post-secondary education” OR “tertiary education” OR “university”.

Since the goal of this manuscript was to present a review of the contemporary academic literature, the search results were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2012 and 2022. The search was conducted in August 2022 and returned 100 total unique results. The results were evaluated by both researchers, and manuscripts were removed from the list which were unsuitable (Petersen et al, 2008), such as manuscripts which were not focused on the topics of education or belonging, as well as book reviews, academic reports, and other media which did not fit the inclusion criteria for the study. This resulted in a final list of 47 relevant manuscripts for review. As this review sought to

provide a narrative exploration of the key themes emergent across a selection of the literature, rather than a comprehensive review of all available papers, no forward or backward search was conducted and the research relied on the 47 papers already gathered as its basis.



(Haddaway, 2022)

All results were collected in a shared repository and reviewed by both researchers. The abstracts of each manuscript were examined to screen for inclusion according to the criteria mentioned above. As this is a ‘narrative’ review, the ‘quality’ of the manuscripts included for this research was less important than the themes emergent from the body of literature. As such, beyond the exclusion of non-peer-reviewed sources, this review did not conduct any evaluation of the ‘quality’ of the research conducted in the manuscripts examined (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The authors did examine the full-text of each manuscript to determine: the type of research conducted (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods), the geographic and demographic focus of the research, the theoretical framework used, and the major findings of the manuscript. These aspects were tabulated using a shared document service, and the results were compiled. Of the

manuscripts gathered for this study, 25 were qualitative, 15 were quantitative, 5 were mixed-methods, 1 was a theoretical manuscript, and 1 was a review manuscript. The review manuscript appeared in a peer-reviewed journal and was focused on the development of a theoretical framework, rather than on an examination of the field, and therefore the authors felt it was suitable for inclusion in this review. The geographic focus of the manuscripts examined can be found in Table 1 below. Discrepancies between the findings of the two researchers were resolved through discussion and consensus-building.

**Table 1: Geographic Breakdown of Studies**

Country of focus	Number of studies
Australia	7
Canada	4
China	1
Germany	1
Hong Kong	1
New Zealand	2
South Africa	2
South Korea	1
The United Kingdom	6
The United States of America	22

Table 1 demonstrates a clear trend in the currently popular host countries for research related to the relationship between institutions of higher education and international students. The United States stands out as the most frequently studied destination, with 22 articles focused on its higher education system and international student experiences, which is to be expected as the largest host country for international students. This suggests its continued significance and relevance in the field of international higher education. The presence of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United Kingdom in Table 1 suggest the popularity and significance of the commonwealth countries in the international education landscape. The lower representation of Germany, China, South Korea, Hong Kong, in comparison to the aforementioned countries may suggest either a smaller volume of research on their higher education systems or potentially emerging interests in these destinations as host countries for international students. This could suggest promising potential locations for future research into the experiences of international students, as well as a diversification of the existing literature away from the more ‘traditional’ receiver countries. Overall, the distribution of studies in Table 1 highlights the prominence of certain host countries in the current research landscape.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Among the research manuscripts examined for this review, very few outlined a clear theoretical framework. Of those that did, the majority were quantitative studies which relied on previously developed tools for the quantification and examination of various phenomena. These included the 'Sense of Belonging Scale' (Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021), Deil-Amen's 'socio-academic integration moments' (García, Garza, & Yeaton-Hromada, 2019), and Strayhorn's sense of belonging (García, Garza, & Yeaton-Hromada, 2019; Kaul, & Renzulli, 2022). However, across the studies included for this research, we found that there was no clear or consistent theoretical framework.

It is also worth noting that in some studies (e.g., Glass, & Westmont, 2014 and Latif et al., 2020b), sense of belonging was heavily associated with 'acculturation', often to the point that the two concepts were presented as synonymous. Other studies examined relied on frameworks which positioned students as lacking in some fundamental capacity, or as lacking the necessary compatibilities with the institution of study, for example Jones et al. (2020) use of Bourdieu's theory of capital. Furthermore, some studies, such as Li (2015), placed the onus on the student to adapt to the institution, rather than on the institution to accommodate the students being recruited. This was offset by more qualitative studies which relied on theoretical and methodological foundations which were more student-centred, such as Chinyamurindi (2018), which employed a social-constructivist narrative approach.

## **STATE OF THE FIELD**

A common issue in the literature regarding the sense of belonging in international students was the lack of definitions of key terms. In some cases where terms were defined, there did not seem to be a consensus in the definitions provided. This inconsistency made it challenging to compare findings across publications and to establish a clear understanding of what constitutes sense of belonging.

Out of the 47 articles reviewed, 42 focused on undergraduate students. While this is understandable since undergraduates comprise a significantly larger proportion of students, it also limits our understanding of the unique experiences and challenges faced by international students at different levels of the education system(s) (Phelps, 2016).

International students also are often portrayed in the literature as a broadly homogeneous group who require additional support to succeed in their higher education journey. This essentialising can overlook the diverse skills, knowledge, and perspectives that international students bring to the learning environment (Jenkins & Boyd, 2020; Koehne, 2006; McKay et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2016; Van Horne et al., 2018). Furthermore, this framing impacts international students' academic and social interactions with their peers and the host country. As stated by Palmer (2015), the sense of 'otherness' experienced during initial encounters on-campus can further perpetuate this 'hegemonic / unilateral' framing.

Matheson and Sutcliffe (2017) argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between the learning environment and international student's sense of belonging. Whereas a positive learning environment can foster a sense of belonging, the lack of support or discrimination can have the opposite effect. Chinyamurindi (2018) stressed the significance of having diverse perspectives and experiences in the curriculum. The representation and relevance of the learning material and curriculum can influence whether students feel a higher or lower sense of belonging. In the following section, we will summarise the major findings affecting students' sense of belonging identified in the literature.

## **STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING**

One of the four questions this review set out to address was what 'factors are identified in the literature as having an impact on international students' sense of belonging'. From the literature, the authors identified five broad themes: *institutional engagement, social integration and support, cultural engagement, academic engagement, and intention to migrate / settle*. This section will break down the findings extracted from the articles examined within these themes.

### **Institutional Engagement**

Several scholars noted that one of the more effective approaches in improving students' sense of belonging was early intervention from the institution (Brunsting, Smith, & Zachry, 2018; Guo, & Chase, 2011); that institutions which took proactive steps to engage with international students early (prior to the programme, or within the first six months) were more effective at engendering a stronger sense of belonging. One approach was for institutions to provide introductory or onboarding programmes for new, and particularly for international, students (Ivanova, 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Metro-Roland, 2018). For example, Ivanova (2019) examined the positive impact of 'biopoems' for enhancing international students' sense of academic and social belonging, allowing them to reflect on their own journeys and minimise the risk of isolation.

These actions, on the part of the institution, could also be effective tools for minimising the risks to students' sense of belonging stemming from a lack of awareness of information (Naik, & Brown, 2017), a lack of (perceived or actual) institutional support, or from (perceived or actual) institutional apathy (Beatty, Clark, & Doherty, 2020; Guo, & Chase, 2011). These can lead to a sense among students, particularly international students, that they are 'tolerated' rather than welcomed (Campbell & Li, 2008).

Institutional support can also be instrumental for students to develop relevant 'life skills' during the course of their programme, which can contribute positively to students' sense of belonging (Becker et al., 2018). This support can also be critical in minimising the negative impacts on international students' sense of belonging stemming from low academic success (Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021). This can be particularly significant for students in programmes which require

supervision or mentorship where students can be further negatively impacted by low advisor support (Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021; Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013).

### ***Social Integration & Support***

One of the most recurrent themes within the research examined for this study was the significance of social integration of international students and the online and in-person support which would allow it (Fujita et al., 2017; García et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Kaul & Renzulli, 2022). This involved the degree to which students were able to involve themselves within the social organisations on-campus (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Kaul & Renzulli, 2022; Latif et al., 2020b). Off-campus institutional engagement may also have a positive impact on students' sense of belonging, including whether students engage in volunteering (Manguvo, Whitney & Chareka, 2013).

Beyond the institutional support, some scholars argued for the significance of cross-cultural interaction between international and domestic students (Glass, & Westmont, 2014). This was part of the broader significance of the reception international students perceived from the host society, including whether they were subjected to racism (Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021) or violence (Chinyamurindi, 2018). Aggarwal and Çiftçi (2021) indicate that:

[having] a sense of belonging to one's campus indicates that there is some level of integration, and this integration may have a positive effect on psychological outcomes. However, if there is a lower sense of belonging, this may put students at a higher risk for negative outcomes, as found in the present study in relation to racism-related stress. (p. 2264)

Some research has shown that students from Africa experienced more acculturative stress as a result of negative stereotypes harboured by their host community (Manguvo, Whitney & Chareka, 2013). More generally, students were shown to be negatively impacted by a lack of social support, and by isolation from the social environment during their sojourn (Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021; Brunton, Jeffrey, 2014; Cena, Burns, & Wilson, 2021; Kiang et al., 2021).

Rivas et al. (2019) found that international students tend to form in-groups with other international students from their home country or cultural background, making it easier for them to develop deeper social connections. However, this limits their opportunities to engage with the wider university community and develop cross-cultural skills. Chinyamurindi (2018) further reported that due to the negative framing of international students, they tend to see themselves as a distinct group from local students, which can create a sense of detachment from their lived reality. Gomes (2015) found that international students tended to perceive locals as a homogeneous group rather than recognise the diversity in their host society. However, the sojourning experience was also found to have had a transformative impact on students' sense of belonging in both their home and host environments (Wang, 2022).



### ***Cultural Engagement***

Research indicated that one of the factors which negatively impacted international students' sense of belonging was the linguistic and cultural difference between their home and host environments (Campbell & Li, 2008; Crowther, 2020; Latif et al., 2020a). This included not only the broad social differences, but also differences in institutional culture and in the structure of the education systems which international students may not be prepared or equipped to effectively navigate (Cena, Burns, & Wilson, 2021). This could be exacerbated when students assume that there will be a greater degree of cultural proximity than there is (Min & Chau, 2012), such as between culturally similar, but structurally distinct contexts.

### ***Academic Engagement***

One of the significant factors identified in the research was the degree to which students were, or felt, academically engaged (Kaul & Renzulli, 2022). This included active engagement from teachers in class (Beatty, Clark, & Doherty, 2020; Brunton, Jeffrey, 2014; Jones et al., 2020) as well as positive feedback, personal validation, and encouragement to take part in activities (Penner et al., 2021; Yildirim et al., 2021). One such factor is the level of support provided by their supervisors or advisors (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). As per the findings of Curtin et al. (2013), positive relationships with advisors were correlated with a higher sense of belonging and academic achievement. Curtin et al. (2013) also found that advisor support plays a crucial role in shaping the academic self-concept of international doctoral students in a positive manner. In fact, international doctoral students reported experiencing a stronger sense of belonging in their respective programmes or departments. These results indicate that advisor support is a critical component of the doctoral student experience, enabling them to feel capable and valuable members of the academic community. Researchers also found that this could be improved through staff development programmes (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014) to help teachers engage more effectively with students, particularly international students.

### ***Intention to Migrate/Settle***

The literature has also shed light on the settlement intentions of international students after graduation. According to research by Curtin et al. (2013), there may be a connection between advisor support, academic self-perception, and the intentions of international students to remain in their host country (in their research, the United States). Similarly, after the events of COVID-19, Kaul and Renzulli (2022) discovered that a sense of belonging, both academically and socially, can increase the likelihood of international students staying in the country following graduation. However, as Wang (2022) notes, this can be complicated by a number of other factors, including identity and attachment to one's home country. These studies emphasise the importance of institutional

support in enhancing students' sense of belonging and the potential impact on their plans for the future.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

One of the most crucial implications of the research examined in this study was the need for institutions to take steps to integrate international students (Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021), and that this must be a (pro)active endeavour (Andrade, 2008; Brunton, Jeffrey, 2014; Cena, Burns, & Wilson, 2021). Institutions can help to organise more activities to provide students with opportunities to engage socially (Pearce, 2015). However, researchers also found that inter-group interactions may not occur 'naturally' (Arkoudis et al., 2019) and therefore require encouragement from institutions and support organisations in order to promote student engagement and integration (Metro-Roland, 2018). Students learnt effective intercultural communication skills, but this did not necessarily lead to increased inter-group mixing (Brunsting, Smith, & Zachry, 2018).

Institutions can also provide more services to student parents (Rhoden & Kinchington, 2021), as well as other non-'standard' students. This suggests a need to rethink the idea of the prototypical 'international student' and to respond more directly to the actual needs of students' real needs on and off-campus. It is also crucial for institutions to ensure that social supports are established and communicated to students early in their programme to ensure their effectiveness. If this is not done, students may opt to rely on professional, rather than social, avenues for assistance (Becker et al., 2018).

In addition, institutions could provide more support to assist in the integration of students into the social life on campus (García et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020). However, this is also reliant on the positive efforts at integration by local students and representative student organisations (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Latif et al., 2020b). Likewise, both institutions and student organisations could explore ways to mitigate (perceived) cultural differences between local and international students, although how this could be achieved requires further research (Campbell & Li, 2008; Crowther, 2020; Latif et al., 2020b). There should be an active effort to establish support mechanisms as early as possible to ensure social integration beyond the vacuum of the educational and professional realms. By organising activities, events and initiatives that include and cater to a diverse student body including those who have families and children.

Some of the findings concerning the intention to migrate or settle down in the host country could have implications on policymakers and university recruiters. By understanding the trends and intentions that influence international students' desire to return to their countries or remain in their host country, strategies for post graduation talent retention and career development that allow these students to foster connections and experiences that will ease their integration into their new home.

### ***Future Research***

The reviewed literature indicates that there is a need for more research on international students' belonging in higher education. Throughout our review, we have identified several implications for future research. In terms of the international student population, it is crucial for researchers to understand and acknowledge the diversity of these students. Only then will it be possible to challenge and complicate the historical narrative that has normalised the essentialising of international students (Mwangi, 2016). As for research pertaining to international students belonging in higher education institutions, we have identified four possible areas of investigation. These areas include investigating the types of student-advisor relationships that international students find beneficial (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013), examining how international students can use their linguistic and cultural backgrounds to enhance their learning (Davies & Gonzalez, 2017), and emphasising the significance of campus language policies in promoting international students' attachment and sense of belonging (Choi, Tatar, & Kim, 2021; Li, 2015).

### ***Research Gaps***

As the field remains under-researched, there are several areas which present avenues for further examination. Of the manuscripts that were examined for this research, some identified explicit areas where future study could be undertaken. For example, while most of the research output tends to focus on universities, there is little examination of other institution types, such as community colleges, within the academic literature (García, Garza, & Yeaton-Hromada, 2019).

Some authors also noted the lack of research regarding issues of culture, cultural fit, and adaptation between students and their institutions. For example, how students' previous education experiences prepare them, or fail to prepare them for their sojourn experience. This can include the location (geographic and cultural proximity) of the students' high-school experience to their sense of belonging at their higher education institution (Brunsting et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020) and ability to adapt to the academic culture (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). Arkoudis et al (2019) noted that there is little research into the degree to which institutions owe a duty of care, particularly with regard to funding and financial matters, for international students who travel for study and are therefore physically separated from support networks which are enjoyed by local, mainstream students.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this literature review, we aimed to examine how 'sense of belonging' is portrayed in contemporary literature in the field of international higher education. Our review examined the literature produced in the past decade on the subject of international students sense of belonging. Through the literature surveyed, we provided a brief depiction of the field, the factors that affected international

students' sense of belonging, and its impact on their relationship with the host institution and society. We have also highlighted some of the challenges and gaps we have encountered and provided some suggestions for higher education institutions to help improve sense of belonging for international students both on and off campus. We predict that student belonging will become even more critical as international higher education recovers from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that our literature review can serve as a springboard for further research into the topic of belonging.

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*Author bios*

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**DANIA MOHAMAD**, is a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Concordia University. She has completed her Masters in Educational Studies from the same university. Her research focuses on the experiences of international students from the Global South studying in Quebec universities that use English as the medium of instruction. Her interests include studying the effectiveness of both government and university services in helping international students settle in Quebec post-graduation, the intersection between education and immigration of international students from the Global South, and the role of education in the settlement of such students. Email: [дания.mohamad@mail.concordia.ca](mailto:дания.mohamad@mail.concordia.ca)

**KEENAN DANIEL MANNING**, is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. He holds masters degrees in Business (Strategic Advertising) from the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, and Education (Higher Education) from the University of Hong Kong. His research foci include identity, belonging, and citizenship among minorities in Hong Kong; international student mobility; internationalisation of higher education; and, higher education policy. Email: [kdm852@student.ubc.ca](mailto:kdm852@student.ubc.ca)

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