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I probably have a closer relationship with my internet provider: Experiences of belonging (or not) among mature-aged regional and remote university students

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Abstract

While fostering a sense of belonging among university students is an objective of many universities, the landscape of belonging is complex and multifaceted. It is worthy of deeper interrogation, particularly for "non-traditional" students. This article draws on data from a national mixed-methods study that explored proactive ways of supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia. One of the overarching findings was students feeling invisible, misunderstood and undervalued. While this theme was relevant for many participants, it was also the case that other participants reported feeling visible, known and a sense of belonging. These inconsistencies prompted us to conduct further analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data, which were collected from a cross-sectional online survey of 1,879 mature-aged undergraduate students in regional and remote Australia and 51 interviews. We employed Yuval-Davis's analytical framework for the study of belonging. In the quantitative analyses, several variables were found to have a significant association with inclusion/connection/belonging. They included: study mode; socio-economic status; having a diagnosed mental health condition; and supports. In the qualitative analysis, we explored students' experiences in greater depth to gain insights into why some students experience belonging and others do not. Connections and relationships with university staff; familiarity with university systems and places; and feeling included and "part of" a subject/course/campus manifested in students feeling understood, known and a sense of belonging. Due to certain entrenched institutional approaches, in many cases, students' experiences fell short of the supportive and caring learning communities that pedagogical approaches advocate.

Practitioner Notes

1. Students' experiences of belonging are varied and complex; belonging is a dynamic, multi-faceted, ongoing process. Know your students: understand and consider their diverse challenges, circumstances and strengths.
2. Check in with students: be approachable, supportive and caring.
3. Consider students' online environment in course and curriculum design, and delivery.
4. Facilitate student interactions and connections.
5. Relatively small actions by academic and professional staff are noticed and appreciated. They show students that staff care, contribute to them feeling known and connected to their course and university, as well as a sense of belonging.

Keywords

belonging, connection, inclusion, exclusion, mature-aged students, regional and remote students, pedagogy, higher education

Introduction

In higher education contexts, "belonging" is often tied to student retention (O'Keeffe, 2013; L. Thomas, 2012), and it is argued that experiencing a sense of belonging may help students to maintain their engagement with their studies and manage the accompanying challenges and difficulties. Belonging is often integrated into theories of wellbeing (Allen & Bowles, 2012) and widely accepted as an adjunct to wellbeing. For instance, Baik et al. (2016) identify "a sense of belonging" as one of five factors essential for "wellbeing, or positive mental health and growth". Viewed in this way, belonging is one factor that can be considered in the larger endeavour of supporting students' mental wellbeing – that is, for students to manage the "normal" stresses of university and life in order to thrive and reach their academic goals and potential. However, the landscape of belonging in higher education is complex and multifaceted, particularly for "non-traditional" students and is worthy of deeper interrogation.

This article draws on data from a national mixed-methods study that explored proactive ways of supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia (Crawford, 2021a). One of the overarching findings from this larger study was students feeling invisible, misunderstood and undervalued. While this theme was relevant for many participants, it was also the case that other participants reported feeling visible, known and experiencing a sense of belonging. This perplexing finding prompted us to return to the data to further explore "who belongs?", as well as the participants' experiences of belonging. We employ Yuval-Davis's (2006, 2011) analytical framework for the study of belonging. In doing so, we report on the findings from the quantitative analyses, including the important role of a student's study mode, socio-economic status, mental ill-health and supports for experiencing inclusion, connections and belonging. We explore students' experiences in greater depth in the qualitative analysis. We identify aspects and experiences in the learning environments that facilitate belonging, highlight university practices, attitudes and expectations that hinder belonging, and suggest pedagogical approaches to foster belonging.

Context and background

Mature-aged regional and remote students

In a recent analysis of Australian national domestic undergraduate student data, higher proportions of students studying in regional and remote areas were: older; female; studying part-time; studying online; from a low socio-economic area, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, compared to students studying in major cities (Crawford, 2021a, pp. 26-27). Mature-aged students made up more than half (52.8%) of all domestic undergraduate students in all geographical areas (Crawford, 2021a, p. 27). The proportion of mature-aged students was higher in regional and remote areas compared to metropolitan areas (Crawford, 2021a, pp. 26-27).

Mature-aged students arrive at university with life experiences and strengths, and research reveals that they often bring with them competing commitments as well as a strong sense of purpose, motivation and resilience. A study that tracked eleven mature-aged students through their undergraduate social work course emphasised the "great determination and organisation" demonstrated by the participants to accommodate study, family and work commitments (Heagney & Benson, 2017, p. 222). Challenges and obstacles faced by mature-aged students include managing multiple responsibilities, particularly in regard to work, parenting and caring (Kahu et al., 2014; Stone, 2008; Thompson, 2019). Such commitments and responsibilities mean that "lack of time" is a significant issue for this cohort, which results in many mature-aged students' lives being "a

constant juggling act", an ongoing endeavour to balance study, paid work, caring work and everything else (Stone, 2008, p. 277). Financial stress and the financial sacrifices made in order to study are another major concern for mature-aged students (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Heagney & Benson, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Thompson, 2019; Tones et al., 2009). The gendered nature of some of the challenges experienced by mature-aged students has also been highlighted (Crawford & Emery, 2021; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). For instance, in a qualitative doctoral study of 20 mature-aged students, Stone (2008) noted: "The women in particular were juggling the demands of study, housework, children, partners – and, at times, also paid work" (p. 278). In managing the multiplicity of roles, female mature-aged students in Stone's study also experienced guilt and talked of strain and self-blame.

Conceptualising belonging

The concept of "belonging" is prevalent in the higher education literature. May (2017) depicts belonging as "a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings", while Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) suggest belonging involves feelings of comfort and security, and can be construed as feeling a part of a place or institution. Lewis et al. (2016, p. 1) define "academic belonging" as "the extent to which individuals feel like a valued, accepted, and legitimate member in their academic domain". Burke et al. (2016, p. 47) found that "students feel best in a supportive pedagogical environment in which trust is established" and note that "feelings of belonging are complex and tied to social relations and inequalities". Kahu and Nelson (2018, pp. 65-66) point out that "viewing belonging as the outcome of both institutional and student factors recognises that belonging can manifest differently for each student depending on their background, their personality and other aspects of their experience."

Some researchers consider students' experiences of "not belonging" (Antonsich 2010; Lähdesmäki et al. 2016), acknowledging that university is not a place of inclusion and belonging for all students, which can particularly be the case for "non-traditional" students, such as students from low socio-economic status backgrounds who may feel they "do not belong" in the unfamiliar spaces of university campuses (Jury et al., 2017, p. 26). For Edgeworth and Santoro (2015), the term belonging is related to boundaries: "where to belong is to exist within the bounds of accepted difference. To 'not belong' is to experience exclusion on the basis of transgressing these same boundaries" (p. 415).

In noting that "people can 'belong' in many different ways", Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 199) explains:

> *belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way. Even in its most stable "primordial" forms, however, belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations.*

Yuval-Davis's notion of belonging is useful to the higher education context, particularly in regard to belonging being a dynamic process and bound up in power relations. In a theoretical article, Thomas (K. Thomas, 2015) problematises the concept of belonging in higher education. She highlights the limitations of the dominant discourse and institutional strategies employed to foster belonging, pointing out that the means and ways in which university students can belong to institutions privilege the identities of "traditional" students; that is, students who are school leavers, full-time and on-campus. Students who do not fit this homogenised and narrow student profile are "othered", on the periphery and are more likely to experience "not belonging". Like Thomas (K. Thomas, 2015), Gravett and Ajawi (2021) call into question the dominant, positive, normative narrative of belonging in a university, as well as the conception of it as a fixed state, arguing for more nuanced understandings that consider students' changing spaces and temporal aspects.

Focusing on mature-aged, part-time students in the UK context, Thomas (K. Thomas, 2015) notes that the students multiple commitments outside their university studies not only make them different to the "traditional" student, but also make it more difficult for them to access (participate in) the means of belonging – that is, to physically attend classes, extra-curricular activities and other such events where social integration (and, thus, belonging) is intended to take place. Winstone et al. (2020) make a similar point in regard to extra-curricular activities being perceived as sites where belonging can be fostered, arguing that not all students can participate in such activities due to other commitments. Crawford and McKenzie (2022) consider "belonging" from the perspective of mature-aged students studying online in low socio-economic status, regional/remote areas, where there are noted difficulties and feelings of "not belonging" to the "main" or urban campus. They propose fostering belonging in physical places in the students' local communities as a means of addressing this persistent issue.

Pedagogical approaches

Interest has grown in the field of higher education in the interplay between pedagogical approaches and belonging. A central question is what practices might teaching staff undertake to foster belonging and engagement, and to mitigate exclusion and not belonging. Here, we briefly introduce three inter-connected approaches: "enabling pedagogies", "an ethic of care" and "a pedagogy of belonging".

Some studies have found that belonging, support and care are core to "enabling education" (also referred to as pre-university preparation programs, bridging courses, transition and/or access programs). For instance, a supportive learning community and culture is key to Lane and Sharp's (2014) model of "enabling pedagogy", providing the conditions for belonging and trust to develop, which is required for self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence to grow. In two other studies of enabling programs, staff were found to take a student-centred, supportive and caring approach to foster a sense of belonging and a culture of care (Bennett et al., 2017; Crawford et al., 2016, p. 13). A relational approach to caring is espoused by two key theorists in care-focused philosophy, Noddings (2002, 2005) and Tronto (1993, 2005), who emphasise "receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness" (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 122). This approach can be applied to teaching and learning contexts. This student-centred approach requires a focus on the whole student; that is, an understanding that their academic and non-academic challenges are inseparable, and that one impacts on the other and vice versa (Crawford & Johns, 2018). Edgeworth and Santoro (2015, p. 423) propose a "'pedagogy of belonging' as a starting point for disrupting practices of teaching that can lead to unbelonging". From their research with students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in rural secondary schools, they attribute students experiencing "unbelonging" to exclusionary practices due to teaching staff not *really* knowing their students (p. 417).

While much research has engaged with students' perceptions and experiences of belonging at university, few studies have sought the voices of mature-aged students in regional and remote areas. Details of the present study are outlined in the next section.

Research approach and methods

This article draws on data from a recent national mixed-methods study that explored proactive ways of supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in, and from, regional and remote Australia (Crawford, 2021a). This project received ethics approval from the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee, reference number H0018332. The research approach, and the quantitative and qualitative methods of the larger project are detailed in Crawford (2021a,

pp. 17-24). A mature-aged student was defined as 21 years of age or older at commencement of their course.[1] The participants were in or from regional and remote areas all over Australia, in all states and territories. They studied in a range of fields and were spread across the year levels. All data collection was completed prior to COVID-19 arriving in Australia.

Framework for analysing belonging

The initial data analysis surfaced "belonging" as a strong central theme in relation to students' wellbeing, which prompted us to return to the extant datasets to conduct further quantitative and qualitative analyses with a focus on inclusion, connection and belonging. To conduct this deeper analysis, we employed the theorist Yuval-Davis's (2006, 2011) framework that encourages attention to belonging and the politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis proposes three levels of analysis, which encompass: i) social locations; ii) identifications and emotional attachments; and iii) ethical and political values. These three levels are briefly outlined below in the context of this study of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia.

The first level in Yuval-Davis's (2006, 2011) analysis of belonging involves examining the social location of the individual, for example, gender, age group, class, nationality. For this first level of analysis, we drew upon the quantitative data collected for the study, which gathered information from the survey respondents about their demographic and study characteristics. The second level of the analysis of belonging focuses on how individuals identify with social collectivities, understood here to be the university they attend and various subjects and classes they take as part of their university studies. This second level of analysis was undertaken using the interviews we conducted where the participants told us their stories about their experiences of their studies. The third level of the analysis acknowledges that belonging involves ethical and political values and the various ways that these "are assessed and valued by the self and others" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 18). In this third level of analysis of belonging, we identified two contemporary discourses evident in the interview data and shaped the discussion around these.

Quantitative methods

For the purposes of this article, the questions underpinning the quantitative analyses are: "Who belongs? Which sub-groups, if any, are more likely to belong or not belong?" Data from a cross-sectional online survey of 1,879 mature-aged undergraduate students in regional and remote Australia were analysed. Participants' levels of inclusion/connection/belonging (poor, low, moderate or high) were investigated for associations with demographic characteristics, study type and mode, remoteness, employment, socio-economic status, health status and peer/social supports.

In preparation for the quantitative analyses, the survey respondents' postcodes were matched to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018a) Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) decile scores.[2] The postcodes were also matched to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018c), which divides Australia into five categories: Major City (RA1); Inner Regional (RA2); Outer Regional (RA3); Remote (RA4); and Very Remote (RA5).

[1] For details, refer to "Defining mature-aged students" (Crawford, 2021, p. 18).

[2] As described in the SEIFA Technical paper (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018b, p. 7), "The IEO summarises variables relating to the educational and occupational aspects of relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. This index focuses on the skills of the people in an area, both formal qualifications and the skills required to perform different occupations. A low score indicates that an area has a high proportion of people without qualifications, without jobs, and/or with low skilled jobs. A high score indicates many people with high qualifications and/or highly skilled jobs".

Survey data were entered into Stata17 for analysis. A composite outcome variable, as a measure of inclusion/connection/belonging at university, was created based on three survey items: "I feel included in the teaching and learning environment (face-to-face or online)"; "I feel that I belong in my course"; and "I have social connections with other students in my course". Responses to these questions were recoded as: agree/strongly agree=1 and neutral/disagree/strongly disagree=0. The composite score for inclusion/connection/belonging was the cumulative total of the responses to the three questions, ranging from 0 (neutral/disagree/strongly disagree for all three questions) to 3 (agree/strongly agree for all three questions). The cumulative scores were categorised as: 0 – poor level of belonging; 1 – low level of belonging; 2 – moderate level of belonging; and 3 – high level of belonging. Crosstabulations were produced to explore the associations between independent variables and the inclusion/connection/belonging score. Frequencies within cells were investigated and chi-square statistics were used to determine whether differences were significant for bivariate data and Kendall's Tau for ordinal data.[3]

Variables that were significantly associated with the inclusion/connection/belonging at university score in bivariate analyses were entered into an ordinal logistic regression model. The Brant test was used to assess the assumption of parallel regression lines. As the Brant test was significant for employment, having children at home (p=0.02), having a supportive peer group at university (p<0.001) and having family who were unsupportive of them studying at university (p=0.01), a generalised ordered logit model was used to investigate multivariable associations with the inclusion/connection/belonging at university score and odds ratios were calculated. A p<0.05 level was accepted as significant for all tests.

Qualitative methods

For the larger project, a detailed thematic analysis was undertaken on the open-ended survey questions by two researchers who conducted the coding of the data. One researcher read the open-ended responses and mapped similarities and differences employing a situational analysis mapping approach (Clarke, 2003). The other researcher undertook a close read of the responses, inductively coding them using NVivo 12 software. From these coding methods, the two researchers discussed this inductive coding together to cluster similar codes into categories.

The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Exploratory qualitative analysis of the interview data (51 interview transcripts) was undertaken with the goal of developing in-depth descriptions of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia.[4] The analysis was iterative and occurred in stages. Each interviewer analysed the interviews they conducted with a set of guiding questions, followed by analysis meetings with the team of interviewers. The process of analysis was subjective and each interviewer interpreted the data from their perspectives as a teacher, researcher, equity practitioner and/or student. This process valued the multiple perspectives brought to the analysis by the four interviewers.

[3] The independent variables were: age (21-25 years, 26-30 years, 31-40 years, 41-50 years, or 51 years plus); gender; study mode (online, on-campus or mixed); type of study (part-time or full-time); employment (not in paid work, part-time/casual or full-time); children at home (no or yes); remoteness (RA1, RA2-RA3, RA4-RA5); IEO (deciles 1-5 or deciles 6-10); medical condition (no or yes); mental health condition (no or yes); disability (no or yes); having at least one person (staff or student) to turn to at university for support (strongly disagree/disagree, neutral or agree/strongly agree); having a supportive peer group (face-to-face or online) at university (strongly disagree/disagree, neutral or agree/strongly agree); having family who are unsupportive of them studying at university (strongly disagree/disagree, neutral or agree/strongly agree); and having friends (outside of university) who are unsupportive of them studying at university (strongly disagree/disagree, neutral or agree/strongly agree). The independent variables are also listed in column one in Table 2 (in the Appendix).

[4] For demographic information and characteristics of the interviewees, refer to Tables 11 and 16 in Crawford (2021, pp. 106-107, 110-111).

For the purposes of this article, we returned to the 51 interview transcripts and two open-ended survey questions to explore, in greater depth, students' experiences of inclusion/exclusion, feeling connected/not connected and belonging/not belonging, which were themes in the earlier analyses. We undertook reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022), interpreting and making meaning of the participants' experiences and perceptions of belonging.

Quantitative results

Of the 1,879 survey participants, there were 1,356 (72.2%) females and the most common age group was 31-40 years (25.1%) (Table 1). On the composite outcome variable, created as a measure of inclusion/connection/belonging, the respondents were spread across the four categories (poor, low, moderate, high), with 17.4 per cent in the "high" category and 16.6 per cent in the "poor".

Table 1

Demographic characteristics and inclusion/connection/belonging at university

Variable	Frequency	Per cent
Gender		
Female	1356	72.2
Male	414	22.0
Non-binary	7	0.4
Prefer not to answer	9	0.5
Missing	93	4.9
Age		
21-25 years	259	13.8
26-30 years	244	13.0
31-40 years	471	25.1
41-50 years	410	21.8
51+ years	388	20.6
Missing	107	5.7
Inclusion/connection/ belonging		
Poor level	400	16.6
Low level	442	18.3
Moderate level	618	25.7
High level	419	17.4
Did not apply*	530	22.0
Total	*2409*	*100.0*

*Excluded from further analyses

The bivariate analyses found that age, gender, remoteness, having a diagnosed medical condition and having a disability were not associated with inclusion/connection/belonging (refer to Table 2 in the Appendix). Variables that were significantly associated with inclusion/connection/belonging were: study type; study mode; employment; having children at home; SEIFA IEO; having a diagnosed mental health condition; having at least one person (staff or student) to turn to at university for support; having a supportive peer group (face-to-face or online) at university; having family who are unsupportive of university study; and having friends (outside of university) who are unsupportive of university study.

The results of the generalised ordered logit model indicate that employment; study type (full-time vs. part-time); having children at home; and having friends (outside of university) who are unsupportive of university study were not significantly associated with inclusion/connection/ belonging at university (refer to Table 3 in the Appendix). Having family who are unsupportive of university study was not significantly associated with a low level or moderate level of inclusion/connection/belonging at university. However, having family who are unsupportive of university study is significantly associated with a poor level of inclusion/connection/belonging OR 0.77 (95% CI 0.64, 0.93). Participants not studying on-campus OR 0.73 (95% CI 0.64, 0.84) and those with a diagnosed mental health condition OR 0.65 (95% CI 0.53, 0.81) were less likely to have a high level of inclusion/connection/belonging. Participants in higher SEIFA IEO areas OR 1.32 (95% CI 1.06, 1.64), those with at least one person to turn to at university for support OR 1.71 (95% CI 1.50, 1.94), and those with a supportive peer group at university (either face-to-face or online) had higher levels of inclusion/connection/belonging.

In the quantitative analyses, several variables were found to have a significant association with the composite outcome variable that was created as a measure of inclusion/connection/belonging. These demographic, health and study-related variables included: study mode; socio-economic status; mental health; and variables related to support. Participants in higher SEIFA IEO areas were more likely to have higher levels of inclusion/connection/belonging, as were participants who reported having "at least one person to turn to at university for support" and/or "a supportive peer group (on-campus or online)". The variable, "My family is unsupportive of university study" had a negative association – that is, those who agreed/strongly agreed with the statement were more likely to have a poor level of inclusion/connection/belonging. Participants not studying on-campus were less likely to have a high level of inclusion/connection/belonging. Participants with a diagnosed mental health condition were also found to be less likely to have a high level of inclusion/connection/belonging.

Many of the variables included in the analyses, such as demographic and health characteristics, were found not to be significantly associated with the inclusion/connection/belonging measure. A student's age is one such variable; however, it needs to be noted that students of school-leaver age were not targeted in the original data collection, so no comparison was being made between school-leaver and mature-aged students. What these analyses reveal is that there was no significant difference between the age bands (21-25; 26-30; 31-40; 41-50; 51+) within the mature-aged student group. Another variable of interest was remoteness; respondents' locations were found not to have a significant association with the inclusion/connection/belonging measure.

Aligning with Yuval-Davis's first level of analysis in her framework, the results of the quantitative analyses show that students' experiences of inclusion, connection and belonging are influenced by their "social locations" and backgrounds. Furthermore, as Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 199) notes, it is not just the influence of the different categories, but also that the categories have "a certain positionality along an axis of power" (and not just one axis of power); these positionalities, she adds, differ in different historical contexts and can be fluid and contested. While the quantitative results indicate which sub-groups of students were more likely, or not, to experience inclusion/ connection/ belonging, in employing Yuval-Davis's second level of analysis, "identifications and emotional

attachments", in the next section, we explore the participants' experiences of belonging via their stories and narratives presented in the qualitative data to gain insights into the conditions that facilitated belonging or not belonging.

Qualitative findings

The preliminary/familiarisation phase of the qualitative data analysis revealed that the participants' perceptions of belonging ranged from a strong sense of belonging to a complete absence of belonging, such as isolation and even alienation. In between, there were participants who described neither "belonging" nor "not belonging" or who said they experienced a bit of both. These findings are unsurprising; they also reflect the quantitative results in that some sub-groups of students reported experiencing belonging, while others reported experiencing not belonging.

In this section, we focus on three major themes identified in participants' experiences of belonging and not belonging: i) social-relational-emotional aspects; ii) university aspects; and iii) spatial-temporal aspects. The three themes are addressed, in turn, using students' comments. The themes are inter-connected in many participants' experiences. Pseudonyms are used to maintain participants' anonymity; when cited, the student participants' gender, age-range, geographical location, study mode and course are also provided.

Social-relational-emotional aspects

Social-relational-emotional aspects encompass students' connections with staff and peers, as well as their feelings about university. Interviewees made explicit references to feelings of pride, excitement, safety, comfort and support. For example, the interviewee, Liza, described feelings of love and excitement:

> *You know, I tell this to everyone, I love the university ... when uni starts up again and you drive down around the roundabout, and you get to that big sign that says the University of [de-identified] and you go up to the main roundabout, I get really excited.* (Liza; female; 51-60; Inner Regional; on-campus; Development Studies)

Liza also identified feeling "a sense of safety" in being able to express herself and be listened to, which, she implied, was not typically her experience in communications with her family members:

> *Well, I think I feel safe there because I can say what I like, within reason, you know, but you know when you're in a tutorial and you give your opinion, and you say stuff, nobody shuts you down like my brother shuts me down or my husband says, "Well, we talked about that," ... all that patriarchy shit they put on women, and I started to realise, wow, people listen to your opinion here.*

Interviewees conveyed their insights into what contributed to them feeling a sense of belonging, such as the importance of being known – relationships and connections with staff and peers, as well as learning environments in which they were listened to non-judgementally. For instance, Andrea, an on-campus student on a small regional campus, spoke about the importance of staff having connections and relationships with students:

> *I think if you're a teacher that has the ability to connect with the students, build a relationship, get to know the layers. You know, everyone has their own story, everyone has their own struggles, and I think when you know that as a teacher, I think that's when the teacher can be really empowering because, you know, once they know a student they can then start to pitch their teaching*

> *that's relevant to that student.* (Andrea; female; 51-60; Outer Regional; on-campus; Nursing)

Don also highlighted the role of teaching staff, specifically his tutors, in regard to their openness in discussions and in not belittling students:

> *I had some really good tutors. Really good. [Out of 28 tutors] I would say I only had one who I didn't really get on with... And they were quite willing to discuss anything. Problems, good things, bad things, ideas. And they never put me down for any of it. And I never saw them put any other student down for it, either. Yeah. They were very good.* (Don; male; 61-70; Inner Regional; on-campus; Arts)

By contrast, David described having no sense of connection or feelings of belonging to his university:

> *Basically, I go online, I do what I have to do. I interact with other students only when I have to. I find I have very little in common with nearly every other student I've dealt with in the course... So, I feel disconnected. I can't go to university and do any of the things on campus. There's nothing online to do that really appeals to me. So, to me, I pay my money, do my homework, get a grade, go to the next subject. So, I sometimes feel like I'm going it alone. If I'm having issues, I don't feel like I've got anyone I can speak to, and, yeah, I think my issue is that. Being isolated and being older, and having a very different life experience to a lot of these people. I feel I am not part of the university.* (David; male; 41-50; Outer Regional; online; Arts)

David's comment evokes isolation. Without connections, support or a sense of belonging, his experience was solitary. It was also transactional; David said he paid his money and moved onto the next subject.

University aspects

University aspects include familiarity with and being prepared for the university environment, as well as university expectations of students. The interviewee, Melanie, attributed her sense of belonging to undertaking an enabling program (that is, a university preparation program) prior to commencing her education degree:

> *I think that doing [a university preparation program] took any sort of scary feeling out of uni, or feeling like I'm too old or daggy for this place. It just made it feel like a safe space... I knew where everything was at the library. I knew how to work [the learning management system], all of those things I could start without having to think about.* (Melanie; female; 41-50; Inner-Regional; on-campus; Education)

Through the university preparation program, Melanie gained familiarity with the physical place and academic expectations, both of which contributed to her feeling "safe" and prepared.

The on-campus student, Paula, noted her practical challenges around timetabling and placements, and attributed them to her being a parent and needing some flexibility, for which the university did not cater:

> *I feel that I definitely have the right to be there. I guess I just don't feel that I am particularly cared for by the university. I don't know if that would go*

> *towards belonging. But it just, they don't seem to have a lot aimed towards, you know, older students, mature-age students. All the things they organise seem to be for younger students, especially with class allocations and placement and all that sort of thing,… childcare and child carers' responsibilities aren't really big in their list of things that they'll be flexible about.* (Paula; female; 31-40; Inner Regional; on-campus; Radiography)

Spatial-temporal aspects

The spatial-temporal theme includes aspects relating to geography and psychological distance, as well as to time. In her interview, Meggy, an online student, said: "I probably have a closer relationship with my internet provider. Like, [laughs] [I have] no relationship at all [with staff or peers]". She actively avoided interactions that might have helped her foster connections with peers, such as group work, because of the "tyranny of distance" and the "time difference". That is, being an online student located far from her institution, she experienced difficulties associated with being at a geographical distance and in a different time zone.

Meggy highlighted multiple roles and commitments that compounded her challenges and that also contributed to her feeling isolated and not understood:

> *It's those complexities of things where, you know, being a distance student is one thing, being a mature-age student is another, and then being a working student is another, and then being a parent who is a student is another. Like, you pile those things on and it just becomes harder and harder to actually kind of find people who get the situation they're in.* (Meggy; female; 31-40; Outer Regional; online; Social Sciences)

Meggy's depiction of her multiple roles points to the lack of time she had for all of her commitments. However, she mentioned one example of a lecturer who "got" her challenges because she had been in a similar situation of going on maternity leave herself:

> *I was on maternity leave at the time, and when she replied [to my email], my "out of office message" automatically generated to say, you know, "I won't be in contact because I'm on maternity leave" ... when I got back to [her] and she was like, "Oh my God, I can't believe you're studying while …"... she was just friendly and was just nice, like, that's probably literally the only time in all these years where I actually kind of felt that I clicked with someone a little bit. It was because she was in the exact same situation, like, where she'd returned to the university that year having been on maternity leave, and had completed a PhD, like, as a parent. So she got it.*

Carlo described a dire experience of isolation:

> *I really feel very alienated from it [his university]. I have no particular desire to chat with anybody else in my course. I have no solidarity with the university whatsoever. In fact, honestly, because of the troubles I've had... and due to corner cutting and... because I don't get lectures three times a week from a lecturer. I get lectures three to 17 times a week through some dude in America... Basically, I just feel like, well, what's the use of the university? ... Like, if anything, I feel a bit of scorn, frankly, for the lack of ethics involved with the university. So I feel, yeah, very little solidarity.* (Carlo; male; 51-60; Inner Regional; online; Design)

Carlo expressed having no connections with the university or his peers. He attributed the former to having the content delivered not by the teaching staff in his discipline/faculty in his university, but, rather, by a third-party overseas service provider. This depersonalised the learning experience and limited opportunities for Carlo to meet and connect with staff; furthermore, it had a ripple effect on his feelings towards the university. Carlo went on to suggest that studying online and his age were also barriers to forming connections with other students, drawing comparisons between himself and his daughters, and younger students, who, he said "would be fine just being in relationships with people over text". He observed: "the younger students have a lot more sense of connection, because they're used to that. Whereas my cell phone, it just leaves me cold, really distant."

For many interviewees, such as Meggy, Carlo and David, not being geographically or physically proximal to teaching staff and/or peers contributed to their experiences and perceptions of not belonging. Despite some positive experiences with her online peers, Simone stated: "I can't say that I feel as though I'm part of the university". Michelle made a similar point:

> *But I think really as a distance student, the only time you really feel part of universities is when you [go to] schools, or at exam time. You know, you're actually travelling to the university. I think otherwise it's quite hard to feel like you're part of it because you're doing it by distance. You're not talking to other people. You're not part of it.* (Michelle; female; Inner Regional; online; Environmental Science)

Gertrude, an online student, shared an example of feeling that she was "missing out" when she received emails sent to the whole cohort that were only of relevance to the on-campus students:

> *I found it frustrating that we got emails about that this amazing thing was happening and that was happening and these prizes are being given out and you should meet here and you should go there, and we couldn't. We were online and they were students that were actually there. Yeah, that made me sad sometimes. It was like, aww, I want to be there and be part of that.* (Gertrude; female; 61-70; Inner Regional; online; Dementia Care)

For Gertrude, the geographical distance was exacerbated by hearing what she was missing out on, which made her feel that she was receiving a lesser experience than her on-campus peers. Several online students noted that they missed out on incidental communication and opportunities to foster relationships or receive answers to questions or clarification on tasks, which they perceived took place more easily in the face-to-face learning environments.

Ambivalence about belonging

For some online students, while they did not necessarily feel a sense of "belonging", neither did they experience "not belonging". For instance, as Simone explained:

> *I think it's hard, being that I'm fully online, to feel like I'm part of the university. I don't feel completely opposite to that, but I kind of feel as though, because I'm online, it's sort of like, well, we don't really … not belong, but, yeah, I don't really know how to word it. I guess we're separated, because we're not face-to-face, and I'm not going to lectures, and I've not seen the other students.* (Simone; female; 31-40; Outer Regional; online; Education)

This type of response prompted us to consider whether feeling "part of" the university or belonging matters to all students. Bridget, an online student who had studied previously, reflected on the idea of belonging:

> *I think it's nice. In some ways I do. But I think if it was ... my first time studying I think it would be really, really important, but because I have studied before, several times, it's not as important. But I do miss it a bit, but it's something that would be nice to have as opposed to essential.* (Bridget; female; 41-50; Outer Regional; online; Psychology)

Christopher, another online student who had also studied previously, commented:

> *I sort of see myself as just myself. I don't really feel like I'm part of a class or anything like that. I don't spend a particular amount of time trying to interact with the other class members or anything like that, because it's part-time. Where I have had group work or they're trying to do group sessions, I've tried to participate occasionally, but I find I work better on my own anyway.* (Christopher; male; 31-40; Outer Regional; online; Business)

For Bridget and Christopher, a sense of belonging was not core to their student experience nor deemed essential. From their prior experiences, they were familiar with the university expectations and systems, and expressed being satisfied studying independently and online.

From the findings presented above, connections and relationships with university staff (e.g. academic and professional staff who are open, welcoming, helpful, supportive and/or caring); familiarity with university systems and places (e.g. with Learning Management Systems, the library); and feeling included and "part of" a community within a unit/subject, regional campus or university, all feature as aspects that fostered belonging. These aspects manifested in feelings and experiences of "excitement", "love" and "pride" in the university, and in "comfort" and "safety" (for example, to express oneself and be listened to in the learning environment). A sense of belonging, for some students, was attributed to these feelings and experiences.

The students who experienced "not belonging" reported not having connections or relationships with university staff, which manifested in them not being understood or known. They also did not feel "part of" the institution. For these students, studying online was typically cited as the main barrier to belonging, with its associated challenges of physical distance from campus; difference in time zones; and challenges with technology. The online students also reported not having opportunities to form relationships with staff and peers, or to be able to ask questions and seek clarification via incidental communication (for instance, before, during or after a face-to-face lecture or tutorial).

In addition to the influence of the online study mode, experiences of "not belonging" can be attributed to students perceiving that they are not understood or catered for due to their age (being older) and having commitments related to their life stage, such as juggling parenting with studying. As illustrated above by the students with children, Paula and Meggy, university cultures and expectations can be exclusionary to parents, particularly mothers who juggle their studies with parenting. "Not belonging" can also be attributed to being treated like or perceiving oneself as a customer in a university, in which the educational experience is depersonalised and transactional.

Discussion

The themes we identified in the qualitative findings feature in the literature on student engagement and belonging in higher education. The importance of students' emotional wellbeing, their connections and relationships, and particularly the role played by staff echo earlier research findings and arguments (Burke et al. 2016; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Kahu & Picton, 2019). The familiarity with university systems and places is a feature of enabling education and transition

programs, which endeavour to introduce and prepare students for their new educational environment, so they can commence their degree on a more level-playing field, with greater understanding of the academic culture and its expectations of them (Crawford, 2014).

We now consider the themes in the qualitative findings from the broader perspective of pedagogical and institutional approaches in order to identify where improvements can be made to foster belonging. "Enabling pedagogies" and an "ethic of care" have the potential to create the conditions – the teaching and learning environment, the setting and the community – for students to feel comfortable and safe to be themselves, to connect, and, thus, to belong – these are also conditions that are conducive to engagement, learning and mental wellbeing (Baik et al., 2017; Crawford, Kift & Jarvis, 2019). The findings related to the role of connections and relationships, and to feeling "part of" something, resonate *in part* with elements of "enabling pedagogies". That is, there was some evidence of teaching staff extending support to mature-aged regional/remote students; however, it appeared to fall short of the enabling pedagogies' ideal of creating supportive and caring learning communities to foster belonging (Bennett et al., 2017; Crawford, Kift & Jarvis, 2019; Lane & Sharp, 2014). Similarly, the students' experiences of connections and relationships, and support from university staff align *in part* with an "ethic of care" as espoused by Noddings (2002, 2005) and Tronto (1993, 2005). One example of a relational approach is of teachers listening to students (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 122), which was articulated by a couple of interviewees, who praised teaching staff for being welcoming, open and for listening.

If the students' experiences fell short of the supportive and caring learning communities that "enabling pedagogies" and "an ethic of care" advocate, what might have hindered this from occurring? Here, Yuval-Davis's third level of analysis of the "ethical and political values" concerning belonging is of relevance. As she explains, belonging "is not just about social locations and constructions of individual and collective identities and attachments but also about the ways these are valued and judged" (2006, p. 203). Now, we focus on two contemporary discourses evident in the interview data that hinder students from experiencing a sense of belonging: i) institutional approaches; and ii) the student treated/perceived as customer.

Firstly, institutional approaches, including expectations and practices, can hinder belonging for "non-traditional" students. The experiences of many of the participants in this research of studying online and/or juggling other responsibilities, such as parenting, support Kahu and Nelson's (2018, p. 66) point that "academia still reflects traditional students". The students' experiences also reinforce our argument made elsewhere that many universities (but not all) do not *really know* who their students are and, thus, design courses, curriculum and supports for a particular student profile – the "ideal" and "traditional" students straight out of secondary school, studying full-time and on-campus, and with few caring responsibilities to compete with their studies. The result is (perhaps unintentionally) excluding students who do not fit that profile (Crawford, 2021a; Crawford & Emery, 2021; Crawford, Emery & Stone, 2022; K. Thomas, 2015). In other words, curriculum design and course delivery, and, in the case of this article, the ways and means of belonging, do not always cater for the needs, strengths and circumstances of a diverse student cohort. This was a finding of Thomas's (K. Thomas, 2015) research conducted with mature-aged part-time students in the UK. It also applies to Edgeworth and Santoro's (2015) study of exclusionary practices by teaching staff, as well as to mature-aged regional and remote students in Australia.

Secondly, the positioning of students as *customers* in the neoliberal university sector also hinders belonging. For example, Carlo and David, two online students cited above, did not feel connected or supported and, in their interviews, there was no evidence of any "ethic of care" from staff or students in their experiences. Carlo said he felt "very alienated" from his university and highlighted the "corner cutting" in the university's processes. David said: "I pay my money, do my homework, get a grade, go to the next subject". For Carlo and David, university was depersonalised and

transactional. Their experiences resonate with the student experiences under neoliberalism as described by Symonds (2021, pp. 626-627): "The depersonalisation of the undergraduate student body, though, is arguably the most toxic for pedagogical relationships based on collaboration or partnership, because they hinge on trust and relationality". Neoliberalisation in higher education, and the resultant strain on budgets and casualisation of the university teaching workforce are at odds with an "ethic of care", with the consequence of staff not being resourced to undertake the tasks that would provide an improved experience for students (for instance, who studying online) and a quality learning experience for students in all of their diversity.

From the findings and discussion points, there are several implications for teaching and learning, particularly for staff working as tutors, lecturers and/or in support roles. To be inclusive, to create connections and to foster belonging, it is crucial to know your students – to understand and consider their diverse challenges, circumstances and strengths.[5] Then it is possible to respond appropriately and teach for diversity, and to be inclusive in curriculum design and delivery. Relatively small actions by academic and professional staff – such as replying to a student's email or responding to a post on a discussion board – are noticed and appreciated (Crawford, 2021b). Such actions show students that staff care, contribute to them feeling known and connected to their course and university, as well as contributing to a sense of belonging.

Acknowledging that cultural change in universities is slow (L. Thomas, 2002), staff working "on the ground" can resist the dominant narratives around belonging (that exclude some students and groups of students and favour others) by fostering "other" ways of belonging. "Belonging locally" is one such example (Crawford & McKenzie, 2022); mature-aged regional/remote students who study online, for instance, could be encouraged to connect with a peer or two locally: in a café; at school pick up; in a local library; on a regional campus; or in a regional study hub. Such efforts at the edges will also contribute to broader cultural change over time.

Conclusion

The findings and discussion reveal that "belonging" in/to/at university (on-campus or online) for mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia is complex. Students' experiences of belonging are varied; experiencing belonging is a dynamic, multi-faceted, ongoing process. As the adoption of Yuval-Davis's analytical framework illustrated, students' experiences of belonging (or not belonging) are influenced by their social locations and backgrounds; emotional attachments; and broader societal ethical and political values. One of the contributions of this study is that it presents a plurality of students' perspectives of belonging, which goes some way to addressing Raaper's (2021) warning against homogenised views of students and their experiences of belonging. Another contribution is that it highlights the disconnect between university expectations of students and who the students really are in all of their diversity. Until this disconnect is rectified – which will take time and a cultural change – it will continue to be difficult for many "non-traditional" students, such as mature-aged regional and remote students, to *really* belong as they otherwise might. In the meantime, we – staff "on the ground" – can encourage students to belong locally and/or at the edges and influence the change from pockets within or outside of universities, and from satellite campuses and regional/remote places.

[5] This point may sound obvious, yet it continues to appear in research project recommendations, guidelines and principles, such as: Crawford (2021), Devlin et al. (2012), Pollard (2018) and Stone (2017).

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Appendix

Table 2

Associations between independent variables and the composite measure of inclusion/connection/belonging

Variable	Poor level belonging	Low level belonging	Moderate level belonging	High level belonging	p-value
Gender					
Male	92 (24.3)	90 (21.9)	139 (23.7)	93 (23.5)	0.86
Female	286 (75.7)	321 (78.1)	447 (76.3)	302 (76.5)	
Age					
21-25 years	41 (10.8)	71 (17.1)	77 (13.2)	70 (17.7)	0.88
26-30 years	58 (15.3)	53 (12.8)	74 (12.7)	59 (14.9)	
31-40 years	113 (29.9)	131 (31.6)	127 (21.8)	100 (25.3)	
41-50 years	90 (23.8)	92 (22.2)	133 (22.8)	95 (24.0)	
51+ years	76 (20.1)	68 (16.4)	172 (29.5)	72 (18.2)	
Study type					
Part-time	228 (59.7)	235 (56.4)	332 (56.7)	170 (43.0)	<0.001
Full-time	154 (40.3)	182 (43.6)	254 (43.3)	225 (57.0)	
Study mode					
On-campus	50 (13.1)	79 (18.9)	138 (23.5)	147 (37.1)	<0.001[±]
Mix campus/online	67 (17.5)	87 (20.9)	147 (25.1)	126 (31.8)	
Online	266 (69.5)	251 (60.2)	301 (51.4)	123 (31.1)	
Employment					
Not in paid work	96 (25.1)	111 (26.6)	167 (28.4)	104 (26.3)	<0.001
Part-time/casual/self-employed	146 (38.2)	176 (42.1)	273 (46.4)	200 (50.6)	
Full-time work	140 (36.6)	131 (31.3)	148 (25.2)	91 (23.0)	
Children at home					
No	219 (57.3)	227 (54.4)	372 (63.5)	237 (59.7)	0.03
Yes	163 (42.7)	190 (45.6)	214 (36.5)	160 (40.3)	
Remoteness					
RA1	71 (19.8)	71 (17.8)	92 (16.4)	80 (20.9)	0.84[±]
RA2-RA3	271 (75.5)	312 (78.4)	439 (78.3)	287 (75.1)	
RA4-RA5	17 (4.7)	15 (3.8)	30 (5.3)	15 (3.9)	
SEIFA IEO					

Deciles 1-5	269 (75.1)	298 (75.1)	385 (68.8)	258	0.02
Deciles 6-10	89 (24.9)	99 (23.4)	175 (3)	124	
Diagnosed medical condition					
No	253 (68.0)	281 (68.7)	406 (70.4)	285 (73.5)	0.35
Yes	119 (32.0)	128 (31.3)	171 (29.6)	103 (26.5	
Diagnosed mental health condition					
No	224 (61.2)	260 (63.6)	419 (73.1)	277 (71.9)	<0.001
Yes	142 (38.8)	149 (36.4)	154 (26.9)	108 (28.1)	
Disability					
No	321 (86.5)	353 (86.9)	506 (87.1)	355 (90.6)	0.28
Yes	50 (13.5)	53 (13.1)	75 (12.9)	37 (9.4)	
At least one person (staff or student) to turn to at university for support					
Strongly	237 (61.4)	175 (40.6)	143 (23.8)	19 (4.7)	<0.001[±]
disagree/disagree					
Neutral	58 (15.0)	58 (13.5)	91 (15.2)	31 (7.6)	
Agree/strongly agree	91 (23.6)	198 (45.9)	366 (61.0)	357 (87.7)	
Supportive peer group (face-to-face or online) at university					
Strongly	312 (83.2)	246 (57.7)	247 (42.4)	56 (13.9)	<0.001[±]
disagree/disagree					
Neutral	45 (12.0)	85 (20.0)	139 (23.8)	47 (11.7)	
Agree/strongly agree	18 (4.8)	95 (22.3)	197 (33.8)	300 (74.4)	
Family is unsupportive of university study					
Strongly	228 (72.4)	327 (76.2)	437 (74.2)	299 (74.8)	<0.001[±]
disagree/disagree					
Neutral	67 (17.5)	44 (10.3)	55 (9.3)	43 (10.8)	
Agree/strongly agree	87 (22.8)	58 (13.5)	97 (16.5)	58 (14.5)	
Friends (outside of university) are unsupportive of university study					
Strongly	225 (79.2)	311 (75.5)	437 (74.7)	308 (77.4)	<0.001[±]
disagree/disagree					
Neutral	78 (21.5)	53 (12.9)	77 (13.2)	46 (11.6)	
Agree/strongly agree	59 (16.3)	48 (11.7)	71 (12.1)	44 (11.1)	

[±] Kendall's tau-b. All other tests Chi-square.

Table 3

Results of the generalised ordinal regression model for inclusion/connection/belonging at university

Variable	Odds ratio	95% CI	p-value
Study type	1.03	0.84, 1.28	0.78
Study mode	0.73	0.64, 0.84	<0.001
Employment	0.92	0.80, 1.06	0.26
Children at home*			
Poor level of inclusion/connection/belonging	1.18	0.89, 1.57	0.25
Low level of inclusion/connection/belonging	0.92	0.72, 1.16	0.48
Moderate level of inclusion/connection/belonging	1.24	0.94, 1.64	0.13
SEIFA IEO	1.32	1.06, 1.64	0.01
Diagnosed mental health condition	0.65	0.53, 0.81	<0.001
At least one person (staff or student) to turn to at university for support	1.71	1.50, 1.94	<0.001
Supportive peer group (face-to-face or online) at university*			
Poor level of inclusion/connection/belonging	2.86	2.25, 3.65	<0.001
Low level of inclusion/connection/belonging	2.03	1.75, 2.36	<0.001
Moderate level of inclusion/connection/belonging	3.09	2.58, 3.71	<0.001
Family is unsupportive of university study*			
Poor level of inclusion/connection/belonging	0.77	0.64, 0.93	<0.001
Low level of inclusion/connection/belonging	1.03	0.87, 1.23	0.73
Moderate level of inclusion/connection/belonging	1.09	0.89, 1.34	0.39
Friends (outside of university) are unsupportive of university study	0.86	0.73, 1.02	0.08

Note: inclusion/connection/belonging at university is the dependent variable in the model. *Parallel lines assumption not met so results reported for each category. All other variables met the parallel lines assumption of the generalised ordinal regression model. Note: where parallel lines assumption is not met, high level of belonging is the reference category so not reported.