

# **Sense of (non)belonging – international student life in times of crisis**

A case study of international degree students in Finnish university

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of the first year international Master's degree students in Finland during a global pandemic COVID-19. Since 2020, the outbreak has affected the rhythms of life and therefore, the international student's opportunities to socialize and be mobile have changed. The study draws attention on the question how physical isolation in the early state of studies effects the feelings of belonging.

This research is part of international students in times of crisis: EquallISM research project that has been launched in 2020. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted during the spring and summer 2021. The qualitative data was analyzed with content analysis. The phenomenon of sense of belonging is inspected through concepts of place, space and mobility which combined, allows to see past the general conception of students' sense of belonging as mainly academic engagement.

The findings indicate that international students develop sense of belonging through ways in which they engage with local practices and opportunities in the course of their everyday life. The students' mobilities were prompted by longing to be part of something. To cultivate attachment, the context or the place had to be experienced together with others, although socialization itself did not guarantee the development of sense of belonging. The emergence of emotional bond between the students and the social or physical context, was due to interpretation of experiences through the lens of relatedness (kinship) and mattering and care (presence).

To conclude, the pandemic limited students' access to places and opportunities to be mobile, which in turn affected their cultivation of sense of belonging. The higher education institutes should acknowledge the importance of mobility as a tool for cultivating sense of belonging. Additionally, more attention needs to be given for spaces that engenders sense of belonging during remote learning if the current situation continues or repeats itself driving people back to social distancing.

**Keywords:** International students, higher education COVID-19, sense of belonging, space, place, mobility

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## 1 Introduction

What defines whether we belong or not? What is the role of belonging in the everyday life of an international student? And regardless of limited mobility and physical isolation, how does one cultivate sense of belonging during the pandemic?

The outbreak of global pandemic COVID-19 has affected the higher education and international mobility by transforming the learning environments as well as the student's life in ways that we do not fully comprehend yet (Rumbley 2020, 10-16). Since the beginning of the first academic period of 2020-2021, University of Turku has outlined and updated several emergency measures to prevent the virus from spreading. Most importantly, contact teaching has been suspended and the maximum number of participants have been reduced to eight people in the university's facilities. (University's Instructions on Coronavirus Situation, 2021.) Due to these new policies, all students and the staff have been forced to adapt into new kind of learning environments in distance learning with limited interaction.

International students have been seen to embody more vulnerable positions in the times of crisis due to their non-permanent status and with no adequate language skills, social or capital resources, and therefore they are in risk of becoming marginalized (Firang, 2020). In Finland, remote learning, and the continuation of schoolwork during the first spring semester of the pandemic, was well established and achieved (Loima, 2020). Regardless of this, student engagement has thus changed. Peacock (2018) has addressed the issue of loneliness and alienation in online learning environments and hence, she speaks for fostering a sense of belonging through intentional promotion. Additionally, Tran and Vu (2018) discovered how closing the institute, the sudden uncertainty left the students temporarily abandoned therefore setting the students' wellbeing and sense of belonging at risk.

This leads me to the centre of the issue. As stated above, COVID-19 has affected the rhythms of everyday life as well as international student's opportunities to socialize and be mobile. In contrast to busy orientation weeks, weekend trips and campus lectures, international students have faced a new kind of reality in which the opportunities for homemaking and face-to-face interaction are very limited affecting especially the act of settling and moving. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to gain better understanding how the international degree students construct their sense of belonging amongst the daily practises of everyday life, and how restricted mobility is shaping these experiences during the pandemic. To understand the process

of belonging more closely, I examine mobility and sense of belonging side by side since one produces the other and is hence, a consequence and motivation for both to occur. I approach the subject by asking *how the international students perceived their sense of belonging*, what exactly are *the places or spaces where the sense of belonging develops* and *what kind of role mobility plays in the construction of sense of belonging*.

Considering the popularity and the future of international programs, I find the topic crucial to research as it offers important insight into students' individual experiences about belonging. As a former exchange student and current undergraduate of Education, I have been interested in internationalization of education meanwhile understanding the importance of student life and general contentment as motivation to study. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in spring 2020, I struggled to find my own place in my host university in Japan and eventually I decided to give up on my dream to study abroad and return home, because I was not motivated enough to continue under the new and very different circumstances. For this reason, I find it particularly meaningful to examine these similar, yet unique experiences of international degree students who have had longer time to adapt and find their place in a new learning environment. Perhaps through this research, it would be possible to gain information that helps the University to develop tools that assist future international students during their exceptional learning paths.

The Master's Thesis is structured as follows; in the first chapter I have introduced the issue and the purpose behind the research. Chapter two introduces the international students as mobile subjects. In addition, I examine the base of mobility, its practises, and transnational spaces along with establishing how I intend to adapt the term into this research. Chapter three unwraps the theoretical background of sense of belonging explaining how the concept is understood in today's literature regarding students. I then move on to examine how sense of belonging is developed and develops in the context of higher education. My aim is to illuminate what are the possible obstacles for it to formulate considering that the pandemic limits the opportunities for basic socialisation and the creation of a student life. In chapter four, I introduce the concepts of space and place,- the last two pieces that intertwine mobility and sense of belonging together as uniquely lived experiences.

Chapter five consist of more practical knowledge about the research methods and the participants. I implement qualitative research methods with a holistic view, aiming to emphasize the whole experience of a student life, to capture the complexity of belonging and non-belonging. To highlight mobility as part of the development of sense of belonging, I will

also introduce a walking method – a way to examine daily activities, feelings, and meanings in practise (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020). With eight semi-structured interviews of 30 to 80 minutes I have interviewed the participants in zoom or on foot, depending on the interviewee's choice of method. I have analysed the interview data with thematic content analysis.

Chapter six illustrates the key findings. Firstly, I present the ways in which the students perceived their sense of belonging. Secondly, I look more closely into the different factors that enable feelings of belonging. The spaces in which sense of belonging can be seen to be cultivated are spaces of *kinship*, *presence*, and *geographical space*. Thirdly, I focused on the factors that are related to pandemic and thus, are affecting the student's sense of belonging. In the last chapter I discuss about the findings, and I make suggestions for the necessary actions the higher education institutes should take, to preserve the student's sense of belonging during the times of crisis.

## 2 Student mobility

With the restrictions on local and cross-border mobility due to the spreading of virus, there is no doubt that the opportunities for internationalization and being mobile have changed. Yet mobility is inseparable part of everyday human life; we trade goods, seek better opportunities through migration, and take part in different daily activities to get food, education, and shelter. These movements determine what material resources we have available, and what social and emotional dimensions we can belong to. Additionally, in the context of international students, mobility can enable opportunities for desired abilities such as developing future skills, affirming personal identity, and forming supportive and intercultural relationships, to mention a few.

In this chapter, I will illustrate the basis of mobility, its meanings, and practises (2.1). I focus on mobility within a place and in space – within the world in which we live. As we move, meet people, interact with them, and then pause to reconsider our movements and our position within this sphere, we are constructing the space around us while it constructs us (Massey, 2005, 9). In part 2.2, I frame the international Master's degree students as mobile subjects. I introduce reasons behind post-graduate mobility and reflect the current mobility status of the University of Turku in the light of Pandemic. Finally, in part 2.3, I will wrap up the chapter by conceptualizing mobility as part of the development of belonging. Specifically, I will examine how transnational spaces and sudden immobility can affect the construction of sense of belonging. I will emphasize the importance of students' daily life by keeping in mind that mobility enables and constructs new spaces in which social engagement occurs and is possible.

### 2.1 Theorizing mobility

We are tied to the sense of ourselves through which we interpret and give meaning to the altering everyday mobilities: physical, virtual, and even the imagined ones. The scope of mobilities varies from barely visible movements of the body to the global level of migration politics, and more broadly to the societal spectrum of travelling (Cresswell, 2006). It could be argued that simply movement per se, whether big or small, is not mobility, but it becomes one when it is viewed through a subjective lens and thus given a meaning (Adey 2017, 63-64, 102., Cresswell 2010). Consequently, mobilities are in relation to politics and power because they are viewed through different human perspectives. (Cresswell, 2010.)

It could be said that our emotional needs and responses are tied to the act of movement. According to Adey (2017), motion intertwines with emotion in such a way that one produces the other. As we move in temporal or spatial context, the dynamic environment with its fragmented movements have an impact upon our response to it. (Adey 2017, 65, 68.) Going to a party or participating in a student organization for instance, can evoke feelings of connectiveness and belonging. Moreover, if we become a member of a sports team and happen to get the first prize, we might be exhilarated with pride and keep attending the practise. However, whether we refer to an actual or emotional membership, gaining access is not always possible. For example, feelings of neglection might affect our ways to be mobile and in turn encourage us to change our surroundings and seek acceptance from somewhere else. Consequently, the performance and practise of mobility engenders collectiveness. (Adey 2017, 192-206.)

Mobility as described above, is inseparable part of a human life: we transport goods, services, and ideas, and keep in touch with our friends through technology while things that are out of our control, move around us. To put it simply, our everyday survival is dependent on various and intersective movements that allow us to sustain our social, economic, and physical welfare. Even matters that might seem immobile or still, are entangled with the geographic flows of movements that in turn are delimited or constrained by other forms of mobilities. Following this approach, the community today as we know it is the sum of big and little mobilities that are composed among the daily practises. Mobility is the cornerstone of our existence and our mobile self the determinant of our life course. (Adey 2017, 1-10.)

## **2.2 International student mobility**

The internationalization of higher education has grown exponentially during the last two decades. The concept of student mobility in research has then expanded to concern not only those who migrate after their studies, but also students who study on branch-campuses or in their own country of residence, conducting a foreign degree remotely. (Brooks & Waters 2011, 161-162.) Especially during the 21st century, international student mobility has received increased attention in the higher education research field, with a significant focus on student's emotional adjustment into an academic and sociocultural context. The expansion of literature emerged after 2005. The leading publishing countries such as The United Kingdom, The United

States and Australia have collectively published most of the studies. (Gümüş, Gök & Esen, 2020.)

International degree student as mobile beings can be assessed and studied through the lens of diploma mobility. In the case of graduate students, Cairns (2014) talks about post-diploma mobility as transnational movement that takes place after completing undergraduate degree. This form of longer-term mobility differs substantially from undergraduate and short-term mobility such as Erasmus since it involves more specific decisions about the course of life. In most cases, student mobility for gaining a Master's degree takes place in early adulthood. This suggests that the post-diploma mobility is built upon previous academic and life experiences, and hence the graduate student will most likely have more academic capital as well as internalized hopes and expectations about the quality of the degree. (Cairns 2014, 18-21.)

Generally, in youth transitions, mobility has been associated mainly with the aspiration to move towards better outcomes, therefore combining spatial movement with socio-economic self-advancement (Cairns, Growiec & Smyth, 2012). The choice of being mobile and becoming an international student is thus driven by the desire to complete a better degree, for enhancing future job opportunities and securing qualifications and skills (Cairns, 2014). Anyhow, the reasons behind mobility are rather unsystematic, personal and vary in narratives when inspected more closely (Brooks & Waters, 2011, 163).

The role of social networks concerning student mobility is remarkable, placing much importance on the knowledge and encouragement that has been received from friends and peers (Beech, 2015). The international students may therefore have multiple motivators to go abroad other than academic aspirations and the degree itself. For instance, alongside with academic and professional motivators, Javed, Zainab, Zakai and Malik (2019) have recognized social determinants that enrich understanding of student's viewpoints and hopes considering their decision for mobility. Aspects such as opportunities for immigration, gaining cross cultural knowledge and connections, trying new lifestyles, and exploring one's own identity, are all equally valid motivations to study abroad. (Javed, Zainab, Zakai & Malik, 2019.)

From 2008, the number of international degree students have increased, and by the year 2018, the statistics of foreign students showed that more than 10 000 people studied at Finnish universities, which means that 7 per cent of all degree students were international. Of this proportion, 10.7% of students were enrolled for master's degree, whereas only 0.9% of the students studied at lower university level. (EduFi 2021.) In general, majority of the foreign

students studying in universities are enrolled for Master's or Doctoral degrees. The citizens of Asian countries such as Vietnam, China, and Nepal, accounted for the largest share of foreign students, followed by Russia and European countries. (EduFi, 2018.)

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2020, over 118 million confirmed cases have been recorded globally. So far, Finland has had almost 65 315 cases in total, the rate reaching its peak in March 2021. (THL, 2021; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Despite global security and new management actions in higher education, there has been emerging worry about meeting the needs of international staff and especially incoming students. The question has been asked about how higher education institutions should proceed now when the pandemic is still present. (Rumbley, 2020.)

Even though the current circumstances acquire social distancing and new ways and practises to stay safe, international student mobility is still popular, and University of Turku alone received 1467 international students during Autumn 2020. When compared to year 2019, the number of students decreased only by 149 people which indicates that the pandemic situation did not affect the ratio of incoming students remarkably. From the total of international students at University of Turku, 484 students arrived with a desire to complete master's degree of two years. (Utu: Ulkomaiset opiskelijat, 2021.)

### **2.3 Everyday mobilities and belonging**

Equally, for international students, and students who combine living away and living at home in regular and routines ways, sequential mobility is often integral to managing and maintaining participation, identity, and feelings of belonging. This highlights the need to explore mobilities as multi-scalar and as relative to other mobilities, movements and moorings. (Finn & Holton, 2019, 95.)

In recent years, researcher have become more aware of geographical context and its influence over belonging. According to Prazeres for example (2018), international students are actively seeking opportunities to adapt into the unfamiliar environment and construct their knowledge of the 'new' home by engaging in multiple mobilities. To develop their sense of place, the students participate in events and local practises to create and construct their lives according to the new social rules. (Prazeres, 2018.) Urry (2000) in turn, has summarised the importance of mobility by emphasizing how mobilities produce sociality and identities through networks of

people. International students as mobile subjects inhabit transnational spaces and networks as they move across state borders and in between social frameworks.

In Finn and Holton's (2019) research about higher education student mobilities and belonging, they focus on everyday flows: the interactions, movements, and negotiations of students. To capture mobile belongingness, they have drawn out three dimensions. According to them, everyday life, mobilities and belonging should be examined side by side to understand the immediate, yet complex experience of student belonging. Within this framework, a sense of home, comfort, and attachment are a result of the dynamism between immobility and mobility. (Finn & Holton, 2018; Finn & Holton 2019, 66-74.)

Instead of being linear and predetermined, the process of belonging is defined as intersectional movements and social mobilities in form of becoming student in the multidimensional world. Holton and Finn (2019) argue that both mobility and immobility have a part in the creation of sense of belonging and the process of becoming; it's the social contexts and the emotions that you embody. Rather than moving from one place to another, you are constantly (re) building and reflecting the spaces around you as you keep positioning yourself within them. (Finn & Holton 2019, 196-198.)

Robertson (2021) also notes that the act of settling, and belonging are often linked to the imagined stability of adult life, yet this secure and so-called stable position is only temporal. In his research about Asian migrants, he highlights how the intertwining of dwelling and mobility influenced the experience about belonging and hence, allowed the interviewee to connect with the new location in less than a year. For example, one of the interviewees described how she felt out of place in a big, busy city for years, before moving to her new, much quieter hometown where she felt like home at last. This, as Robert emphasizes, reveals that the passing of time itself does not guarantee the development of belonging if the surroundings do not meet with the person's personal hopes and needs. (Roberts, 2021.) This in turn indicates that the act of mobility and social engagement is needed to create a sense of place, or as Walker summarizes: "movement prompts belonging; belonging allows for movement" (Walker 2011, 175).

Holton and Finn (2019) have developed empirically grounded theory of everyday mobilities and mobile belongingness that captures the diverse and multifaceted experiences of students. Their theorization is built upon three aspects: everyday life, mobilities and belonging. These three dimensions of mobile belongingness have explained the ways in which they reconcile the

immediate experience with the invisible aspects of mobile belonging. (Finn & Holton, 2019, 64-66.)

*Everyday life* includes all imaginable activities that encompasses routines and the ordinary, as well as everyday challenges and struggles that mingle into one overall experience about oneself, sense of home and belonging. In this sense, everyday spaces and movements shape and produce conscious actions and efforts through which students construct their identities and the place itself. Consequently, the dynamic exchange ensures that even within limited opportunities for mobility and belonging, the new and the familiar, will be reproduced in complex reflection processes. (Finn & Holton 2019, 66-69.)

*Mobilities* generate the second dimension of mobile belongingness. Mobilities comprises negotiations, interaction, and the lack of mobility as part of a set of interrelated process. Stillness and mobility can in fact, exist simultaneously, and therefore activity or immobility should not be opposites, but rather rhythms that constitute the everyday life. Thus, mobilities can be physical as well as imagined. Alongside with social and geographical mobilities, the more abstract spheres such as virtual interactions, bring fluidity and complexity to the contemporary idea about immobility. What was previously thought to be mooring, has now become time and space piercing - active mobility. (Finn & Holton 2019, 69-72.)

*Belonging* as the third dimension, is related to movement, identity, and home, and it is shaped through emotional attachment, formal structures, negotiations, and norms. Moreover, it has different forms, whether it is produced in relation to place, practises, or ideologies, - or within the tension of all these three. In addition, time plays a remarkable role in the formation of sense of belonging as it captures temporality and sets the limits for actions. Because of its relational nature, belonging cannot therefore be connected into one location and to be retained as time goes by. The lived realities will undoubtedly have an impact on the student's sense of belonging, and different experiences of inclusion and exclusion will eventually reveal how multi-layered concept belonging is. (Finn & Holton 2019, 72-74.)

Similarly, Ahn and Davis (2020) have identified student's surroundings and personal space as two of the four factors contributing to the development of sense of belonging. While they assess the importance of social engagement as the most noteworthy aspect of belonging, they state that student's natural surroundings, (location, everyday environment, and inhabited spaces and cultural context) and personal space (self-conception, life satisfaction and self-esteem), should also be inspected alongside with the academic and social engagement. Their four-dimensional

approach claims to understand the phenomena of belonging more profoundly, because it takes the varying complexity of experiences and the geography into an account. (Ahn & Davis, 2020.)

Dichotomy of student mobility and immobility has prevailed the discourse in education politics. For instance, stillness and immobility have been associated with negative features such as failure or being without a purpose. Immobility has thus been seen as something to be avoided. (Adey 2017, 12) The traditional belief about what means to be a student in and outside the campus and how the individuals reflect upon their sense of belonging, represents the realities and the lived experiences quite broadly. Rather than posing immobility and mobility as opposites of each other, these two concepts have become egalitarian and overlapping. The premise of the new theorization is that, whether the person is mobile or immobile, the social and geographical mobilities will occur and undoubtedly will play a great part in the student's understanding about sense of belonging and identity. (Finn & Holton, 2018.)

Foreshadowing the following chapters, what has been allegedly interpreted as immobile or fixed, may not be the whole truth. Things such as remote studies, online learning, and social isolation, could in fact, have a positive impact upon sense of belonging when all the dimensions discussed above are studied side by side. In other words, the idea of immobility or the act of stillness may not be an obstacle for creating a sense of belonging, because belonging does not develop merely in the context of the university.

### **3 Student's sense of belonging**

It is generally believed that all human beings gravitate towards a bigger group to experience sense of community and acceptance. Schools, education institutes, and even companies have aspired to find and recognise measures that support and encourage their students and employees to engage and feel included for better results. Especially in the field of higher education politics and research, there's a dominant conceptualisation of belonging which assumes the students have the need and will to feel socially attached to the education institute (Winstone, Balloo, Gravett, Jacobs, and Keen, 2020). In the context of university, the lack of sense of belonging inclines that it is challenging, almost impossible to dedicate your mind for learning and processing information, if the more exigent needs such as belonging and need for support are not met first (Stone and O'Shea 2019; Strayhorn 2019, 157). For this reason, the implementation of practises that foster and ensure the development of sense of belonging has been part of the higher education culture, for the sake of student's retention and wellbeing (Groves and O'Shea 2019). But the question remains, is the space of university the only cause and advocate of belonging?

In the following parts I will explain how student's sense of belonging has been characterized in the existing literature, and how the concept has developed from the desired objective of higher education into more temporal and situated on-going process. I describe sense of belonging as motivation (3.1) and as a basic human need (3.2). Then I move on to discuss sense of belonging in the context of international students (3.3). Finally, I address the lack of belonging, or when one does not, in fact, wish to belong (3.4). I intent to emphasize that the development of students' sense of belonging cannot be taken for granted during the pandemic, nor it should not be assumed that it would not develop among the everyday experiences and within the student's personal and academic surroundings and spaces.

#### **3.1 Sense of belonging as motivation**

The first impression when reviewing literature about sense of belonging is the fact that there is lack of clarity and consistency in the interpretation and research. However, in the Oxford dictionary for Human Geography (2013), belonging in its simplest form has been identified as “– A person's sense of attachment to, and rootedness in, a specific community, neighbourhood, place, region, or country. Belonging is subjective and usually reflects a person's long

immersion. Anyhow, their sense of belonging may also involve highly singular attachments that reflect a person's unique biography" (Castree, Rogers & Kitchin, 2013). In other words, to belong, means to have a context towards which someone has an aspiration to move and which to become a part of, eventually feeling confident enough to act as themselves (Riley, 2017, 4, 27-29). Gjøtterud and Krogh (2017) are in line with Riley by stating that the positive interdependence in the student body strengthens the sense of belonging, by empowering the participants to work together around the mutual interest.

Vaccaro, Daly-Cano and Newman (2015) have identified two characteristics, that summarize sense of belonging. Firstly, belonging includes feelings of acceptance, mattering and the belief that one is valued and needed. Secondly, belonging should encompass the idea of fitting in, and being connected to a group. (Vaccaro et al., 2015.) In research that conceptualized belonging as constantly negotiated practise, the students themselves defined sense of belonging as feelings of comfort and trust (Guyotte, Flint & Latopolski, 2019). However, according to multiple scholars, sense of belonging is a multi-layered concept, whether it is viewed in the relation to social relationships, physical places, or conceptualized ideologies about acceptance (Ahn and Davis, 2020., Marshall, Zhou, Gervan & Wiebe 2012).

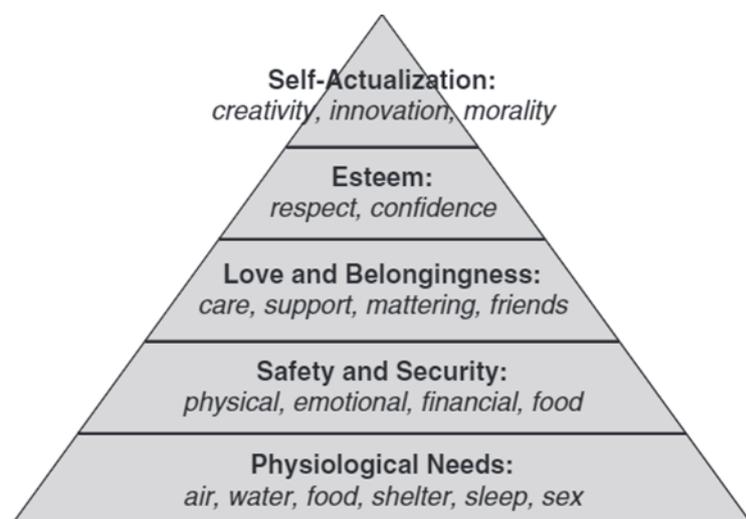
According to Strayhorn (2019), sense of belonging is believed to be created, constructed, experienced, imagined, and produced in reciprocal relationship with others. Regardless, whether we want the acceptance from another person, have a hobby to keep us entertained, or go to school for learning, we guide and change our behaviour in attempt to control our daily interactions. Mobility for the sake of belonging is thus like actions we would carry out when we need water, food, or shelter for instance. If we encounter rejection, negative circumstances or aspects that deteriorates our sense of belonging, it might cause detachment, desire for isolation, and decreased ability to function normally. Thus, it is important to acknowledge and recognize the power and importance that sense of belonging has in the students' lives. (Strayhorn 2019, 19-20.)

### **3.2 Sense of belonging as a basic human need**

If we move towards conceptualizing sense of belonging as a psychological need, as I will soon illustrate, it's easier to see why for instance, the humanity has originally created nations and established social institutions, or why some people have collectively sought mutual interests and organized themselves into religious groups, sports teams, or fan clubs. The simplest answer is that we *need* to feel cared and included part of something yet able to express ourselves to be

content. The cornerstone for satisfactory human life and psychological wellbeing is thus, to feel accepted and valued in the current context that we live in. Unarguably, and as Strayhorn in the following chapter elaborates, we are hence driven by our desire to fill this endless need to belong, - to have a sense of belonging.

Strayhorn (2019) has further thematized sense of belonging into seven different core elements that define specifically, how the term has been conceptualized in the existing literature. To begin with, the first element describes sense of belonging through a psychological lens as a basic human need since we are all universally inseparable from our need to belong and to be a part of something. This can be better understood in the context of student achievement. To pursue higher needs such as knowledge or self-actualization for instance, the students must first climb up the first steps of *basic human needs*-ladder to eventually reach their ultimate learning goals. (Strayhorn 2019, 29-31.)



Looking at the pyramid more closely, in the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), are social needs: *love and belongingness*. These interpersonal interactions are associated with affection, acceptance, and trust, and the need motivates us to create friendships and to be part of different groups. Depending on whether sense of belonging has heightened importance in different spaces and conditions such as later adolescence or residence halls, the need to belong can either be obvious or latent and unrecognised. (Strayhorn, 2019, 31, 43.)

Secondly, this embedded need functions as our motivator to act, therefore affecting our everyday decisions, behaviour, and principles both in good and bad. For instance, if a person feels like he or she has a marginal status in a school environment, the person might then decide unconsciously to work against the institutional aims. (Strayhorn 2019, 31-33.) Context, and

more specifically, a particular time and population (re) determines how much emphasis a person places on belonging. Adjusting into new environment and looking for assurance while trying to identify oneself as part of the social setting, acquires much more effort than trying to fit in, for example in a local, familiar setting. (Strayhorn 2019, 33-36.)

One might say that the third element also contributes to the ongoing pandemic situation and is in fact, a major role player in the process of belonging. Late adolescents are still in their journey of identifying who they are and figuring out which goals to pursue. While the new country, its norms and social order sets the international students into a challenging position, the pandemic can highlight the importance of belonging even further. Even though many of the Master's degree students are most likely familiar with higher education studies beforehand, online learning and its challenges might come as a surprise. In addition, the sense of belonging has a relative connection to, and is the outcome of mattering, - the feeling that one is needed, appreciated and important. This element encompasses the need to share emotions, thoughts, and experiences to have validation and to create purpose for oneself. (Strayhorn 2019, 36-37.)

The fifth core element in turn, involves different aspects of personal background. Contributing factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender, shape the social identity and in doing so affects the individual's feelings of belonging. Intersectionality and the multidimensional nature of belonging and identity naturally denotes, that everyone can and *will* experience belonging in different ways. (Strayhorn 2019, 37-38.)

To go back to the importance of belonging, the sixth element elaborates how by reaching and maintaining sense of belonging, the effort will consequently contribute to overall happiness and well-being as well as other positive results (Strayhorn 2019, 38-39). Lastly, the need to belong and be part of something, must be satisfied perpetually and that is why, whenever there is a change in circumstances, it in turn fosters or disturbs the already created sense of belonging. (Strayhorn, 2019, 29-39.)

In contrast for Strayhorn's hierarchic interpretation about human needs, Ryan, and Deci (2017) have created a self-determination theory (SDT) that claims to take environmental and interpersonal factors into account. They have examined the role of psychological needs and how the need-action relation explains human motivation, and development without the need to "climb the ladder". The psychological needs as stated by Ryan and Deci are need for *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* which when satisfied, can foster social harmony and identification. From the social-psychological perspective, to satisfy these three needs, individuals make active

choices in response to inner or outer conflicts that could prevent human functioning, thus growth, integrity, and well-being. (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 3, 10, 101, 647-650.)

Autonomy includes feelings of self-endorsement and willingness to act instead of feeling alien or forced to do something. Hence, autonomy emerges from experiences that fit with integrated values and interests. This does not, however, refer to being independent and free from external demands or influence. (Ryan & Deci 2017, 79, 86). Take for example a degree; it might seem like you are compelled to do a certain number of credits each year, yet you don't feel forced to do so, because you already have integrated the idea of being a student and graduating on time. In fact, you might wish to take responsibility of your own actions because you are driven by the need to experience self-endorsement through personal choices and ownership.

*Competence* in turn, refers to being satisfied of one's interactions with the social environment. Self-initiated success and efficacy promote competence, whereas actions that lead to achievements that are not originated from oneself, will in fact, have the contrary effect. The need for competence and full engagement explains why for instance, we feel content when we have operated effectively within a personal life sphere that we find important. (Ryan & Deci 2017, 86, 95.)

*Relatedness* concludes the basic need for responsive relationships, that fosters connectivity and caring. These relations work in both ways; we expect to be involved with the social context and thus, be cared for, but we also seek ways to be sensitive and responsive towards others. Relatedness is important in terms of adaptation and survival because it offers a safety network through which we can reflect our position, thus, mattering and significance in the eyes of others. For this reason, we are driven to act in ways which could bring us group membership and acceptance. (Ryan & Deci 2017, 86, 97.)

Following Strayhorn's as well as Ryan's and Dec's interpretation, humans have a basic instinct and a need to belong and develop a sense of belonging. This in turn indicates that the need to belong should not be overlooked even within the exceptional circumstances such as the pandemic, because the lack of acceptance and trust may severely affect one's well-being. On a flipside, sense of belonging corresponds to motivation and self-determination which are crucial for student achievement and retention as well as their personal development and satisfaction.

### 3.3 International students and sense of belonging

Then why should we be concerned especially about international student's sense of belonging? What makes them stand out from the rest of the higher education student body, who also have been affected by the pandemic and the transformation of the learning environment? Firstly, when compared with the domestic student population, international students reported about weaker sense of belonging despite living under the normal circumstances (Singh, 2018). Moreover, Fincher and Shaw (2009, 2011) have examined international students' experiences about sense of place by approaching their social spheres in and outside of the formal studying environment, inclining that the location and the surroundings have an impact on student life and feelings about belongingness. Institutional practises such as separate housing and labelling as "international" were shown to work as a dimension of segregation that excluded international students from participating in the society. (Fincher and Shaw 2009, 2011.)

Due to the acknowledged importance of belonging, the concept has been researched broadly in higher education level. Both in quantitative and qualitative research, the feeling of belonging has arguably been related to the student's experienced well-being, academic success, and motivation to complete studies (see for e.g.: Osterman, 2000; Riley, 2017, 2019; Garza, Huerta, García and Lau, 2021). Furthermore, Gravett and Ajjawi have noted that more focus should be placed on where and when students belong online and offline. They suggest reframing of belonging as situated, relational and processual, that changes across face to face and online situations including the non-institutional spaces. (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021.)

Even though it is commonly expected that the international students will find their place and adjust into the new environment, Brooks, and Waters (2011) have shown that many of the students struggle with feelings of being out of place. The new host-country can feel exclusionary in various ways and many international students have felt that for instance, the separate housing has made it challenging to engage with the local community (Brooks & Waters 2011, 166, 171.) Additionally, Sinanan and Gomes (2020) found out that temporary migrants such as international students tend to feel more detached from the local society and as a response, they look for interactions in which they can share their diasporic identities and be understood. Friendships with people who have similar identities thus maintain and create feelings of comfort and being grounded, even though the community around the students would feel unfamiliar. (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020.)

Consequently, sense of belonging for international students might have heightened significance due to their graduate and foreign student status. In the transnational context of mobilities, Walker argues that those who have moved from somewhere else and thus do not share or are aware of the societal norms and practises, are only partially able to belong. The partial belonging applies also to local groups, who do not participate in any forms of mobilities. (Walker, 2011.) In other words, the international students are in danger of not being able to establish their sense of belonging. This is due to the reason that students enter a new learning environment without a knowledge of “- the values, norms and practices that predominate.” Additionally, in the graduate level, the role of a student changes to more individual, allowing more autonomous work and studying. The change from the more structured ways of learning does not only enable the students to develop competence, but also leaves them with greater responsibility to engage and develop relationships. (Strayhorn, 2019, 132-133.)

To pursue this further, Strayhorn (2019) has acknowledged the importance of belonging through the lack of it. In the absence of belonging, the feelings of alienation, loneliness and marginalization might emerge, even though the person would be keen to be part of the society or the community. If the context of the person's attachments resist or rejects the desired participation, it can have an impact on the person's decision to refrain from any involvement and eventually cause full social isolation. (Strayhorn, 2019, 28.) This in turn, is not an objective of the universities, that most likely wish to retain the students and maintain their motivation to study as well as care for their wellbeing.

O'Keeffe in turn, concludes that especially those in marginal positions such as students with mental health issues, disabilities or students from minority ethnic backgrounds are in high risk of feeling rejected by the new higher education environment and, thus unable to develop their sense of belonging. Therefore, the establishment of belonging and attachment into the university environment has been seen crucial to retain students and help them to find their place. (O'Keeffe, 2013.)

Following these approaches, one might ask, is sense of belonging then a struggle or a negotiation between the feeling of discomfort and comfort. Do international students have higher tendency to feel alienated from the student body due to their foreign status or is there, perhaps other perspectives that explain why for instance, one might have a good experience in a foreign country without the guarantee of fitting in?

### 3.4 Non-belonging

We cannot examine belonging without conceptualizing nonbelonging: what means when one does not belong, or alternatively, do not wish to belong into the “preferred” context, such as university or the program they are studying? There are growing appeals for stressing the other side of the coin. In terms of student engagement, sense of belonging has been seen as an ideal state towards which the individual should strive. The new emerging approaches have challenged this idea about belonging as a result of participation and engagement. Present studies suggest that sense of belonging is embedded and embodied in everyday, taking shape and sifting as we interact, move, and interpret daily experiences in relation to different contexts.

According to Groves and O’Shea (2019) the level of familiarity with the university practises and the preferred mode of participation formulates a certain “comfort zone” or a space, in which the student operates and wishes to participate. However, this does not mean that personal tendencies, interpretations, or aspirations would be in the way of belonging, but they are most certainly re-constructing the experiences of acceptance and inclusion. For instance, extracurricular activities have been considered as key factors of student well-being and development of sense of belonging, but the benefit of attendance and the positive implications for communality do not mediate equally amid broad spectrum of personalities and student identities. (Winstone et al. 2020.)

For this reason, alternative modes of engagement should be offered, because belonging and correspondingly not belonging, might appear and become visible in varying flows. Moments of insecurity, lack of support or intersecting encounters can induce feelings that simultaneously make it difficult to belong or enhance feelings of belongingness in another relation to the context. Guyotte, Flint and Latopolski (2019), for instance argue that for the sake of preventing marginalization, more focus should be given to these multiple overlapping perspectives of belonging that are in real-life vague and sifting, making it impossible to draw out a clear picture about student’s construction of belonging. (Guyotte, Flint & Latopolski, 2019.)

Walker (2011) suggests using the concept of *partial belonging* in a transnational setting. The dominant social and cultural aspects are not always shared collectively, and these aspects might function as boundaries for belonging. Face to face interaction or student activities not to mention on campus engagement, may not be desirable for all students. Especially people who combine studying with work or family life, might hope different kinds of means for connecting with the higher education institute, or think indifferently about their position as a student.

The ideal form of belonging from the university's perspective can also function as an exclusionary for those who do not appeal as ordinary, full-time students, or somehow are regarded as minority of the higher education institute (Gourlay, 2015). Gravett and Ajjawi (2021) have expressed their concern about the narrative form of interview that lacks proper attention of the experiences of those who do not belong or may not even wish to do so. Engaging with other students might enable some students to experience acceptance and sense of community, but in contrast some can find the purposeful agency of belonging alienating, even as a tool of cultivating vulnerability. Thus, the idea of belonging as desirable objective, belies other forms of student practise and narratives that interpret individual experiences diversely and differently from the focus of the institution. (Thomas, 2015.)

Thus, sense of belonging cannot be encapsulated through the question whether one belongs or not, because it is a relational concept that combines social setting with intersubjectivity and emotional aspects, which in turn are tied to interpretations (May 2011). Guyotte, Flint and Latopolski (2019) conclude that, belonging is not “- as simple as not belonging or belonging – static or measurable.” For this reason, when researching international students' experiences, a wider spectrum of factors that affect one's interpretations about belonging should be examined.

## 4 Space and place

So where does sense of belonging occur? When is it cultivated? What role could the pandemic situation play in the everyday life of international students? To understand the questions at hand more thoroughly, we must turn to the concepts of space and place. As already discussed in earlier chapters, sense of belonging is a construct of interpretations and intersective movements of daily life. Everyday mobility in turn, is connected to different places to which, the students have access. Within these places, people automatically create *ideas* of the social environments which they inhabit. These spaces are thus the key for understanding why some students are able to feel content in a certain place and environment, whereas others feel out of the place. For instance, being situated in what Smith (2005) refers as *translocal*, inclines that mobile actors are materially linked with the political and historical context as well as their own socio-economic prospects. For this reason, belonging should not be inspected through only one place such as the new host university, but multiple possible spaces that construct sense of belonging. In short, spaces are produced in combination of interpretation and discourses. (Smith, 2005.)

That being said, this chapter intends to illustrate how space and place in the current research has been interpreted in order to understand what role they play in the development of sense of belonging. My aim is to draw out a clearer picture about why the concept of belonging is such a nuanced and individual phenomenon, even though it could be said that all the international students have similar experiences: they have all migrated to Finland, they are all part of the university context and additionally they share the same goal of completing a Master's degree. In spite of similar experiences and life stories, their outcome of their belonging may not be the same. In the following part I introduce the concept of space (4.1), - an abstract yet explicable concept that helps to build broader understanding about the formation of belonging. Then I intend to discuss place (4.2) as an entity of multiple spaces.

### 4.1 The concept of space

Reflecting temporality and the spatiality of everyday experience, Finn & Holton (2019, 6) state that student's sense of belonging can and will vary, depending on the time, place, and space, where the students operate. Gravett and Ajjawi (2021) emphasize the fact that the post-period of COVID-19 has led to shifting practices when spaces of belonging have been reshaped through the transition to online learning. This in turn has diminished the opportunities for developing a

sense of community in real life situations, and more focus should be given to spaces where sense of belonging may occur. In contrast to universally accepted idea about belonging as positive, coherent, and indelible state, the scholars note that more focus should be placed on where and when students belong online and offline. They suggest reframing of belonging as situated, relational and processual, that changes across face-to-face and online situations including the non-institutional spaces. (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021.)

Many scholars have interpreted spatial space, place, and time through geographer Massey's work. Massey (2005) has characterized *space* through interrelations, referring to space as a product of human interaction, emerging from embedded and relational practises. Moreover, space is a dynamic dimension where people, their memories, their expectations, and interpretations intersect with each other and create new political and power constructs that in turn affects the agents and their behaviour. Space is thus heterogenous in ways that it allows multiple trajectories to exist side by side, and each element and actor of the space can be reconceptualised. Even though space is enabled with interaction, it cannot be viewed as finished product or closed concept because according to Massey, "space is an abstract subject." External and internal factors are constantly shaping and constructing the space and hence space should arguably be viewed as mobile and open. (Massey 2005, 9-11, 20).

In Massey's description of space, there's a constant element of social; interaction between identities whether we refer to the contact of subjects, nations, or places (Massey 2005, 10) is a constituent of space. To give an example of this rather indeterminate concept of space, Massey has referred to globalisation and internationalization as enabled space that's built upon "world of flows" (Massey 2005, 81). According to this interpretation, globalisation should not be thought as simply cross-borders movements of people and capital, but rather as making spaces within active practises and relations (Massey 2005, 83). Therefore, space making as its simplest form, can for instance refer to spatial, uncoordinated events that take place in a new country, neighbourhood and with new acquaintances. Additionally, by engaging in virtual spaces (social media platforms for example), the significance of physical, localised spaces might decrease and vice versa. (Massey 2005, 90-95.)

Additionally, transitions in time and in space whether we refer to academic or informal transitions, construct the student's perception of themselves. Marshall et al. further exemplifies how aspects such as personality, nationality, language, and race have significant importance in the formation of peer relations and belonging. These external factors are thus interrelated with

the sociocultural context, and consequently affect the individual's perception of themselves and their interpretation of their position in the context. Therefore, the role of all possible agents cannot be overlooked in the research of belonging. (Marshall et al., 2012, 116-142.)

To make space more understandable, one could think of it as *a room* full of people. If the room exists in the context of work, the social relationships within the room might be superficial and exist only for the benefit of the workplace. If the room is the only space for some people to form relationships and interact with others, they might hope to develop more profound relations. However, the function of the room is dependent of all the participants. Therefore, for those in need of "real" connections and sense of community, the room might feel exclusionary because the environment fails to correspond to their expectations. For those who interpreted the room as only a space for work and behave as such, the room functions as a space of productivity instead of a space of alienation. Different types of spaces exist within the same environment and place, so it is important to remember that even though something is *said* to foster well-being and the development of sense of belonging, it may not do so for everyone. In contrast, places that in general are viewed as isolating, can in fact, be the ones building sense of community.

## 4.2 The concept of place

This is where *place* enters the picture: Massey argues that place is a collection of elusive space narratives. Place is not only a physical location to be inspected on a map or in a neighbourhood, but a broader concept that brings the changing (also temporal) storylines of people into one constellation. Place emerges through active material practises when interaction, human and nonhuman, is present. Without connections and familiarity, there are no place to be rooted into, because one lacks the knowledge about the place's character. Massey specifies his argument with an example about living in a city. A knowledge of the place is produced through mobility and making sense of the place itself. By moving, engaging, and living as part of the society, people are building their unique "foundations" to be imbedded into. (Massey 2005, 123, 130-131.)

Places offer an environment for formal and informal interaction. Oldenburg (1999) has conceptualized places through their different functions. According to Oldenburg, the so called *third places* such as public facilities, coffee shops and libraries, function as neutral fields, allowing people to meet and interact. Third places connect individuals with the surrounding society, offering people a platform to construct their sense of belonging to a place. Third places

can be distinguished from workplace (the second) and home (first place). (Oldenburg, 1999.). Soukup (2006) has extended the concept of third place into virtual communication platforms. He argues that virtual places that enable informal social interaction, function similarly to face-to-face interaction, thus corresponding to the people's individual needs and demands of socialization. In addition, the disappearance or closure of third places can significantly affect society's well-being and health (Finlay, Esposito, Kim, Gomez-Lopez, and Clarke, 2019).

Third places play a major role in people's everyday lives and therefore should not be seen as irrelevant. The importance of these places for the individual, however, can vary depending which population or a group is in question: some of the places might not have a significant role at all (Hickman, 2013). Because the places serve different purposes, individuals have unique ways of incorporating them into their lives. For instance, in the case of students, some of them might need more social interaction, moving from a place to place constructing their networks, whereas some might be content within a smaller circle. However, third places are needed for understanding oneself and the local environment as well as developing a sense of community.

Following these definitions of spaces and places, students with different backgrounds, identities, and life stories, interpret their surroundings and develop places differently. Take for example a new host country and a new university; Even though the physical location and mobility within the same environment would seem similar when compared between a few students, a sense of place and rootedness is never experienced the same way. Belonging and attachment to a certain place is experienced subjectively. Consequently, all narratives of international students should be examined individually, without overlooking any unique features they might disclose. To gain a picture about the unique experiences of belonging, the role of space, place, and mobility should be taken into consideration. How I intend to do so in this study however, I will demonstrate in the next part.

## 5 The study

Moving abroad and completing a full degree means an ongoing self-development process for international students. The new study environment, foreign language, and a new kind of social context not to mention the possible financial requirements of degree studies, can pose challenges to the development of sense of belonging and overall well-being. Anyhow, each new student is in principle, a member of their higher education institution; the student is enrolled in university, completes a degree there and is responsible as well as free to modify his or her own studies. This nominal membership, however, does not mean that the student feels part of the student community or experiences strong sense of belonging in the academic environment, let alone in the new country of residence. As it was shown in previous chapters, the position that the student places him or herself in and the commitment to the institution and its social community can vary, depending on what physical and mental dimensions the student in each case embodies, and what kind of external factors affect student's interpretations about belonging.

Before COVID-19 and remote teaching models, students were able to contextualize belonging through physical university spaces, extracurricular activities as well as engaging with peers, university clubs and local culture (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021), at least in theory. Now the question remains about how belonging of international students is formed while learning environments and everyday spheres of living has been transformed. The aim of the study is to find out how physical isolation in early state of study impacts the sense of belonging of international degree students.

The research questions are:

1. How the international students perceived their sense of belonging?
2. What are the places and spaces where the sense of belonging of international degree students is constructed in?
3. How mobilities shape the experiences about belonging?

In order to answer the research questions, I carefully considered the methods that are applicable in researching international student's belonging during the pandemic. To capture the full complexity and the relationality of the concept, I intend to implement qualitative research methods in the form of a case study (5.1). In the part 5.2. I introduce walking method as an

interview tool for gaining a more comprehensive data. The final part describes how I conducted the study. Additionally, I discuss about the possible ethical issues which are related to qualitative research. (5.3).

## 5.1 Data collection

Qualitative research is essential for mapping out research questions that aim to answer descriptive questions of a case phenomenon. Qualitative data has the strength to enlighten individual's experiences through their own perspective and pass over the limitations of quantitative research, because it answers the questions *why* something happens, and *what* is it exactly that takes place. The unique case orientation thus, allows better insight about the many ways people interpret and experience their lives. (Tuckman & Harper 2012, 387-389.)

Fundamentally, a case study will focus on small number of individuals, with the aim of creating a full understanding of this specific group (Silverman 2009, 138). In this research, as previously stated, my focus is on the first year Master's degree students and their experiences about belonging. Because I aim to understand the full scope of their different narratives, the experiences of the students cannot be simplified into re-designed factors, or linear relations. Therefore, I lean onto holistic interview structure that emphasises the whole environment and the contextual culture under which the phenomena itself is studied. With a qualitative view, I will observe the complex interdependencies and multi-dimensional characteristics of individual's life. (Tuckman & Harper, 2012 adapted from Patton 1990, 389; Rauhala 2005.)

### *Framing the interview questions*

Belonging from the perspective of the policy makers and the university's administration, refers to a student engagement, inclusion and the feelings of kinship and acceptance in relation to their university and peers (Vaccaro et al., 2015). In the light of the current research, the concept of sense of belonging has been grown more nuanced and is often associated with complex and interpretative aspects that are difficult to grasp only within the spectrum of university environment. Following the proposal of Ahn and Davis (2020) and Gravett & Ajjawi (2021) of reframing and rethinking student belonging as processual and contextual instead of ideal and achievable, I have included student's everyday spaces, as well as geographical and cultural location into the interview framework.

As Gravett & Ajjawi have acknowledged, space, place, and time as well as non-human actors (in this case the pandemic), are constantly affecting sense of belonging: changing, and

contrasting feelings of relatedness. Hence, I have thematized international student's everyday life and belonging into three main themes: *studies*, *free time activities* and *Finnish society* (Appendix 1). Each interview theme starts with descriptive questions and then move onto consider the more in-depth feelings and interpretations that are associated with that specific category. To gain more perspective about the interviewee's background and personal traits, I have also included *background information* as well as *plans for the future*.

The attempt to examine student's sense of belonging with qualitative methods, however, sets a challenge on the reliability of the interview. Because no coherent interview guidelines for researching belonging especially during the exceptional times exists, and many researchers have been open about finding it difficult to conduct comprehensive interview that would be knowledgeable of the different ways to belong (see for e.g., Finn. & Holton 2019, 97), I have approached the themes with a grain of salt, re-writing, and re-constructing the main interview themes several times. Eventually I aspired to choose the questions according to the purpose of the research, following the research framework and the knowledgebase of existing literature, in means to include the real-life events as they are experienced and interpreted. This way the interview structure offered a possibility for the students to self-reflect and bring out things, that were not included in the original question sheet.

### *Participants*

All the participants in this study were international graduate students from different Master's degree programs, from varying fields of study. As underlined in chapter 2, the post-diploma mobility takes place in a turning point of the adulthood and the need to belong is heightened for those moving into an entirely new social context. Moreover, the popularity of Master's degrees in Finland when compared with the Bachelor's degrees, makes the post diploma student cohort more significant to examine regarding sense of belonging. For ensuring the relevance of the participants, no second year Master's degree students were considered eligible for the interview. The research proposals (Appendix 2) were sent to three different universities in Finland during spring 2021. In total, eight first year students who had enrolled during the autumn term 2020, answered the open call and indicated their interest to take part in the interview. While conducting the interviews, seven of the students were still in Finland and one was visiting her home country.

All in all, the participant group was very heterogenous, having very little or a lot of knowledge about Finnish society beforehand. Some of them chose Finland, because they had heard about

the country from their friends; others because they were familiar with the society or already had some personal connections. A few of the students had already completed a few degrees or entered the working life, whereas some had no previous working experience, and the current studies were their first Master's degree. The average age of the participants was between 20 and 35. The students came from different backgrounds with different aspirations and goals, and therefore they should not be considered as a homogenous group.

### *Interview*

Following Hirsijärvi and Hurme's (2010) definition of a thematic interview, I have generated half structured interview base, that, emphasizing people's own interpretations and thoughts, allows more in-depth answers to emerge. As the name implies, the thematic interview proceeds based on pre-formed themes to more specific questions. The base of the interview is therefore same for every participant, but the overall structure of answers may vary substantially since people give meaning to things and new interpretations are born during the interaction. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2010, 47-48.)

For conducting the interviews, I offered the participants two choices: virtual interview or face-to-face meetings in the form of a walk. The online video platform Zoom has proven to be effective research tool for qualitative interviews for its advantages of being user friendly and convenient in terms of accessibility and time management as well as building rapport with the researcher. Compared to formal face-to-face interviews or other communication platforms, both the researcher and the participant had found zoom to be even better method to ensure a relationship of mutual trust and respect. (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019.) Face-to-Face interview on the other hand, might be preferable for some and can have the ability to enrich the narratives. In the following part, I will explain in more detail about the benefits of the walking interviews.

## **5.2 Method on the move – walking method as an interview tool**

The concept of belonging has been defined as complex, sifting and vague, yet important phenomena to examine throughout. Though there have been examples of multi method approaches, even unstructured in-depth interviews, the question remains, how to access the needed information, and how to combine and develop and understanding of something, that's not even understood consistently in the current research?

Anderson and Jones (2009) do not claim to offer a comprehensive solution to the issue at hand, but rather state that in order to grasp the potential of the research and discovering the complexity of experiences, a careful emplacement of research should be taken into an account. Their study shows that both physical and social aspects of the location can result into emancipation of the conversation and in doing so, can reveal insight and emotional tides while maintaining the casual encounter. Especially when conducting 'interviews-*in-situ*', aspects that were regarded as insignificant in more formal interview, were now given meaning and reflected through different angle. (Anderson & Jones, 2009)

By walking, we are simultaneously in relation to both conscious and subconscious reality. We use our senses to see, to hear, and to smell, and as we go along, we become more aware of our environment and the current social and cultural context that we live in. Moving can equally evoke unconscious emotions and already forgotten memories. What has been in the depths of consciousness in the past, may suddenly become the object of scrutiny, aroused by a certain place and object. As we experience our environment, we can critically examine our own position in it, and at the same time visualise and reflect upon life experiences. However, we are not dependent on the present, but through remembrance and passage, we can possibly perceive events that took place a long time ago or perhaps will in the future. (O'Neill & Roberts, 2019, 255-258.)

O'Neill and Roberts (2020) have examined the possibilities of walking as a tool for social research, and based on their exploration and studies, they have developed Walking Interview as a Biographical Method (WIBM). From the researcher standpoint, walking method offers theoretical, imaginative, and experimental platform for insightful research. Through dialogue, walking brings both the researcher and the interviewee into the landscape of the immediate social environment and the into the associative mind of the narrator. Moving within the context, to and from somewhere, in and through time, opens new sensory and visual dimensions that will in turn "feed" the memory and (re)imagination of experiences. Walking in contrast to traditional formal interview, offers therefore a more subtle way of thinking about research and lived realities. (O'Neill & Roberts 2020, 4-8.)

Walking method has potential in creating more vivid, more narrative, and informative descriptions of life, that encapsulates the student experience as well as the imaginative dimension of the thought process. While the interview is taking place, walking, and moving within the space, does not narrow down the focus merely on one thing at a time, but allows

thoughts and new interpretations to emerge as we go along. O'Neill and Roberts compare the method on the move with composing. When we walk (or compose), our mind opens to reflection; we reshape what we have experienced, empathize with the future, and recall our past, while (re)interpreting past, or current events and thoughts. To put it shortly, the stimuli of the environment make us work on ideas spontaneously as well as emotionally, thus giving new meanings to one's own experiences. (O'Neill & Roberts 2020, 258.)

As I have demonstrated above, I believe that the Walking Interview can add in depth layers to the participants' narratives in contrast to the formal question-answer-interview. In addition, Walking Method has the advantage of bringing the experiences closer to the researcher. On-site, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee enables the researcher to see and sense the instant reactions the interviewee has to the surrounding elements, which would not be possible in more formal interview situations. The interview should be conducted with rapport and through companionship to go beyond the formal conversation. (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020,19-20.) Rather than positioning myself as the researcher or the "interrogator" in the interview situation, I wished to create an interactive and engaging space where both parties would feel open for conversation, instead of just passing information.

### **5.3 Analysis and ethical considerations**

As previously stated, qualitative data is exposed for logic and reasoning of the researcher. To address the possible issues of qualitative analysis such as trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), evaluation of the research process should be incorporated into the study (Barbour, 2014). Barbour argues that consistency and transparency in terms of reporting and carrying out the research is the key to perceive the quality of the qualitative study. (Barbour, 2014.) To ensure transparency, I have attached the interview questions, the privacy notice, and the participation invitation letter to the end of this study.

The interviews were conducted based on voluntary participation in the location the participants had chosen. The privacy notice (Appendix 3) that includes general knowledge about the research purpose as well as rights of the research subjects, was sent beforehand. The same information was also explained in the interview session including remarks about who has access to the data and the recordings, and what would be done with the transcripts. Additionally, in the

beginning of each recording, the participants were asked verbally whether they would consent to the protocol of the research.

COVID-19 can be seen to be a sensitive topic that evokes different feelings. Especially anxiety, loneliness, and mental health issues have been related to long term uncertain situation and isolation. (Townsend, Nielsen, Allister, & Cassidy 2020). For this reason, I tried to avoid causing unnecessary distress for the participants by emphasizing their freedom to decide what they want to share. They had the right to withdraw from answering the questions at any point during the interview. Additionally, I gave them the opportunity to explain and add something in case they haven't had the chance to elaborate their experiences enough.

Each interview was conducted using a voice recorder and then stored in a cloud, secured by an access key. Because of the small number of participants, I guaranteed to protect the students' anonymity. For the safety of each volunteer, the interviews were assigned a number code. Although the participants' names, age, nationality, gender, and study major were discussed during the interviews, they were not included into the transcripts to ensure that personal identifiers would not be revealed during the analysis. Instead of giving the participants pseudonym names that would suggest a gender or nationality, I chose to refer to them as S(student) and the number of their interview.

In this study, I have implemented qualitative content analysis. The process of a content analysis begins after the inquiry, selectively reducing the amount of data by classifying themes that emerged during the interviews into more specific categories. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). By following Schreier's simplification of the structure of content analysis (2012, 6-7), I have focused on parts that I considered to be relevant regarding the main research purpose. Topics such as personal background information, teaching methods, discussions about working life opportunities as well as plans for the future were left out from the analysis, since they reveal personal information and did not add anything to the existing knowledge.

Because the content analysis lacks a specific structure of theory-driven, concept-based coding, the process of the analysis is much dependent of the researcher's personal interpretation and thus decisions. (Schreier 2013, 10). Therefore, it is crucial for the researcher to remain objective, that is to say, a fair observant who examines the data and the experiences without a bias. To maintain credibility which has been seen to be difficult in the qualitative research (Mertens, 2014), I have included the tables of coding frames into each section that answers the research questions (Table 1; Table 2 & Table 3).

Within each research question frame, I identified relevant subcategories that represented the students' experiences. I then defined these categories by offering examples and citations to elaborate my decision-making process. I have taken the freedom to shorten these quotations and correct the grammar to change the transcripts into readable form. I have not, however, removed any relevant information. Therefore, the quotations do not represent my own views, although they are exposed to my interpretation.

I cannot overlook my own role as a researcher and as a student sharing a similar life situation with my participants. During the interviews, I found myself expressing my own feelings and thus responded to the things the interviewees were mentioning. This could be interpreted as leading the conversation. Additionally, language barrier might have affected the narratives: Were the interviewees able to express themselves clear enough? Did they use correct words and was I able to interpret them correctly? Did they leave something out, because they are unsure whether they can say it properly and comprehensibly? Additionally, I find it noteworthy to mention that the varying time of the interviews might have had an impact upon the mindsets of the participants. The interviews were conducted during the period of six-months: first in April and the last one in July. During this time, there was a change in season from grey and rainy spring to +28 Celsius summer. The ones who participated during the summer, seemed to be more energized. Although they described having similar experiences as the ones who I interviewed first, they appeared to be more optimistic towards their studies and everyday life. Additionally, my own style of asking questions developed, and I found it easier to conduct the interviews.

Lastly, the nature of case study although providing in-depth information about individual experience in the context of Finnish university, makes it problematic to apply the findings for further use. The small sample size and the accessibility to this kind of data precludes the practical steps of recreating the research as it was conducted before. (Silverman 2009, 139.) Moreover, COVID-19 sets up its own factors affecting and shaping the course of the study which makes it challenging to replicate. However, I argue that the interview guideline is applicable for circumstances when student mobility, or participation is hindered or not possible. Considering that the interview themes have been chosen based on current research about students' sense of belonging, the research frame is valid even though we would be able to leave the pandemic behind.

## 6 Findings

As I have stated throughout this study, students' sense of belonging is a significant determinant of motivation and well-being, and therefore the concept should be given importance. In general, teaching, orientation weeks, study groups and extracurricular activities on campus aim to strengthen the students' position within the higher education context. However, COVID-19 has affected the rhythms of everyday life and thus, the opportunities to socialize and be mobile for international students, have been changed. How does one then cultivate their sense of belonging? What exactly facilitates it? Are the students able to feel sense of belonging within the academic context regardless of online learning models and physical isolation or have they found another place to fit into? Following this, my aim was to study the student's feelings about their belonging assuming that the students would not be feeling entirely out of place.

In this chapter I will elaborate how the students perceived their sense of belonging within the context of higher education. The participants were asked to think about their current position in Finland as an international student and reflect their everyday life from the past year. Based on their narratives, I gathered three thematic tables that answer the research questions. The tables can be found from the beginning of each part. I start by explaining how the students experienced and understood sense of belonging (6.1). Then I examine what kind of spaces were involved in the students' experiences (6.2). Finally, I move on to discuss the effect of mobility regarding belonging (6.3). I conclude by discussing what kind of role pandemic plays in the cultivation of students' sense of belonging.

### 6.1 The students' perceptions of sense of belonging

To get a better picture about how sense of belonging is constructed in the ambivalent circumstances, we must start by understanding how the students interpreted this complex term. Following Massey's (2005) characterization, belonging and attachment is experienced subjectively. This can be seen in the participants answers because the storytelling intertwined with emotions and different explanations about how things happened, and how it made the subjects feel.

Table 1 (36) illustrates to which setting the students felt like they belonged the strongest when asked to specify their feelings. The most prominent group consisted of students who felt most connected with the study program. Two of the students reported feeling sense of belonging

outside from the University context. For them, international church and one's own home functioned as places in which they felt accepted and needed. The last participant wanted to present himself as a person who "he is loyal to and to whom he belongs". This, as he mentioned was due to the fact, that he only could provide autonomy to himself, make sure to fulfil the goals he was aspired to do, and to ensure his own well-being and complacency.

**Table 1.** Where do the students feel like they belong the strongest?

THEME	DESCRIPTION		
BELONGING	Where do the international students feel like they belong the strongest? (The study program / University, Finnish society, other?)		
Subcategories	Description	Statement examples	Themes
The study program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S2</li> <li>• S3</li> <li>• S5</li> <li>• S6</li> <li>• S7</li> </ul>	<p>"I have most experience with it and most interactions with the studies and the study group and the university and almost everything that I do has been around the university so also like events and stuff like that."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Academic success</li> <li>• Comfort</li> <li>• Familiarity</li> <li>• Similar interests</li> </ul>
Church Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S1</li> <li>• S4</li> </ul>	<p>"I think the strongest I belong with my boyfriend and family, like our little family. I don't know, I feel like I have difficulty (explaining) because most of my friends are in Germany and not, - not yet here."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affection</li> <li>• Mattering</li> <li>• Acceptance</li> <li>• Comfort</li> <li>• Kinship</li> </ul>
None / To himself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S8</li> </ul>	<p>"I know it might sound really selfish, but I belong to me, and I use this degree to benefit myself and so my loyalty remains to myself. I take all the good bits about Finland and add them to myself."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Loyalty</li> </ul>

### *The studies as a place of belonging*

Participants who felt the strongest sense of belonging in the context of the university, for most parts, had social interactions and engagement with their degree peers. Their free-time activities as well as discussions about their studies happened within the same social circle. The study

group functioned as a place to ask for help and complain about the studies, but it was also a safe social context to make sense about the foreign society. In other words, the program offered a platform for the participants to share the same experience with someone. As a result, peer relations strengthened their position within that context and thus, contributed to their stronger sense of belonging. The following quotation demonstrates, how the studies became the rallying point for the students:

“Probably at one of my friends’ place it’s comfortable to me. Study group’s friends. They are good people, and we can match with each other. I don’t know if it’s coincidence or something. I was connected with them through WhatsApp before I got here but when I did get here, they were welcoming to me.” (S7)

Undoubtedly the studies itself too, played a major role in the cultivation of these students’ sense of belonging. In the descriptions about the form of studies and everyday life, the students portrayed themselves as being the most confident within the university context: They were enjoying the familiarity of their own field and felt successful with studies even though online learning for most part, was considered as disadvantage. This suggests that because of the ability to actualize their own goals, the students managed to find their sense of purpose and a place through meaningful effort – that is to say, by living up to the expectations of a “real” student.

“I feel like I do belong, and I am confident about my position in my program because I am one of the most active students in my classes, so I feel like I belong with the whole program – “. (S3)

“I am doing quite good with keeping up with the program, the courses and the research thing and I feel like I’m getting prepared for the doctor studies so that’s what I feel really sure about. Maybe that’s kind of feeling of belonging? I think I belong to many groups. I don’t feel lonely.” (S5)

The final point worth noting for within this group, was the availability of student support, such as counselling, tutoring and general guidance. These students’ interest and loyalty towards their studies could not be drawn back to peer relations, but because of received support from the faculty, they implicated feeling sense of belonging in regards of the degree. These participants perceived the access to support as means to maintain their personal and academic development as well as an indication for being cared for and accepted as part of the university.

“I haven’t even seen anyone, like I didn’t see my coordinators in person. But because of this support, I feel like I do belong, and I am confident about my position in my program because I am one of the most active students in my classes, so I feel like I belong with the whole program” (S3)

“I am comfortable. I don’t feel like an outsider. I really appreciate it. I feel like everyone – well most of us anyway do feel that way because the teachers are

really helpful and you know even though the Finnish people are really shy, if you ask questions, they are really helpful.” (S5)

### *Church and own home as a place of belonging*

Turning the attention to the second group that consisted of the participants, who mentioned a sphere outside the university context, the interpretation of sense of belonging becomes more incoherent. In their case, church and one’s own home including a boyfriend and a pet, functioned as a place, where the participants were able to feel affection, safety, and love, thus, fulfil their need to belong. However, it cannot be argued that these students’ access to the social context of the study program was denied, but rather it did not meet their expectations and thus led them to seek belonging elsewhere.

One student feeling most comfortable in her home with her partner, stated that the lack of interpersonal interactions and peer support excluded her from the student community. Even though having participated in several informal student activities and being active during online lessons, the absence of feeling valued and cared about eventually caused her to wonder about her possibilities of ever feeling belonging towards her university. For this reason, she leaned on to the closest possible space that could offer emotional sanctuary – her home. Though her initial reason for pursuing a master’s degree was to gain new friends and to get to know the society better, the pandemic and the distance learning that followed, functioned as an obstacle for her capacity to relate with others.

“I think that from all these things, I really do belong the least to the studies. It feels kind of bad to say but maybe being in a role of a student in this form – Like there’s never this getting involved. (I hope) to meet with the people I’m studying with (face-to-face), because like I do think of myself as social person and I really like social situations and just talk and also for my learning process; I feel like I want to talk about the things I’ve learn in the subject and this talking about the things would also kind of make me feel belonging but also help me in my personal way.” (S1)

This points towards the fact that the online environment itself did not foster affective connectivity among the students. When she was asked to describe the relationship with other peers, she simply stated:

“I just picture my computer all the time. This is my relationship with everything – It’s me and my computer and someone inside, and it’s mainly things that are supposed to be said in this subject, it’s mainly subject based.” (S1)

She continued wondering about her prospects of feeling home in Finland. Here, she felt strong connection to the nature, and enjoyed living with her partner. On the other hand, all her friends and family were back in her home country, so her social circle was not complete without strong ties to the study group. This in turn brought up the absence of “fixed” place and home country which made her doubt her prospects of ever being able to cultivate sense of belonging. Even though she had found a few friends from her degree program, she recognized her temporal status as a student and thus, the eventual ending of the program kept her on her guard.

“Because I’m not maybe feeling so belonging here, I’m also a bit afraid that when I go back to Germany, I would also feel like I’m not really belonging there, that’s maybe something that could happen.” (S1)

Since in the context of the university these students experienced alienation, in their preferred social contexts however, the need to “fit in” and mattering was much easily achieved. In the student-founded, international church for instance, one of the participants was able to express herself and to be understood. Moreover, the membership of the church was not a result of long negotiation and social engagement, but a mutual understanding among the group which made her feel welcome. She further elaborated, how the church was much more than a place for interaction: The community offered emotional and practical support and additionally let her to cherish her identity.

“I would say the church is where I belong because there are English speakers and I can have conversations with them and most of them are an international students as well so they can tell you what challenges they have faced and if they are working or PhD students they might have advice to you so then you can kind of picture a life, based on their experience if you want to stay, like “this is what I should do”. I feel mostly welcomed into the church in Kuopio.” (S4)

### *Other*

Finally, the participant who chose not to mention a specific context to belong to, perceived sense of belonging through his own ability to facilitate his own life. By the time of the interview, he was working a nine-to-five job, studying in the evenings, and enjoying his free time during the weekends. For him, a membership to the study program, seemed to be more of a constraint, because the norms of Finnish Education system were forcing him into a role of a full-time student, taking away the flexibility. Even though he considered the degree to be beneficial for him in terms of future working opportunities, the significance of the social context itself was little. Instead of participating in normative student practices, he had made an active choice not

to seek belonging necessarily through the university context. In terms of belonging, he perceived himself as the facilitator of everything he needed: he had created alternative networks at work and during free time, and these connections functioned as a temporary space of sense of belonging.

“I know it might sound really selfish, but I belong to me. I’m not loyal to my degree program, I don’t feel the need to it, I don’t want to be loyal to it, and it’s a good course, but I’m not going to sit there and be like wow what an amazing course and I don’t think, I can’t work out if covid was making it better or not. – I take all the good thing about Finland; I take all the bad things about it, and I go like how’d you benefit from it as a person.” (S8)

Additionally, he recognized the fact that sense of belonging is not static, nor it should be examined as one. According to him, the lack of certainty and solid networks is present everywhere, despite how familiar or unfamiliar one is with the surroundings and thus, he had grown to accept it. Perhaps for this reason, his conceptualization of belonging as fluid and entangled with his identity, allowed him to feel sense of belonging in wherever social context he was inhabiting.

“I feel really comfortable around my friends and that’s why I feel like I could live here. You feel comfortable anywhere where you have friends, you can feel comfortable wherever you want to be, but how comfortable can you ever be in one place?” (S8)

In general, all the students described their experiences of belonging through events which made them feel comfortable and welcome into the social context. These descriptions included mentions about the people they interacted with, to whom they felt kinship, as well as the place where the event took place. Even though the students had similar experiences in terms of online learning and everyday life, they mentioned having multiple, possible spheres of belonging. Despite which group they belonged to, they also felt alienated from it from time to time. To conclude, it would appear that feelings of belonging were dependent on the available social relationships and the “quality” of these relations. The students’ narratives indicated that to cultivate attachment, the context, or the place had to be experienced together with others, although socialization itself did not guarantee the development of sense of belonging. Therefore, we must look more closely into the significance of the different spaces.

## **6.2 Spaces constructing sense of belonging**

The previous part with the emphasizes on belonging through the rather “strict” classification of the social contexts, undoubtedly guides to think the students’ belonging as narrow. This sort of

categorization may hide problems underneath, leaving little space for temporal unsettledness and discomfort. Thus, it should be noted, that all the students despite their designated group, engaged in complex practices in and outside of the academic context. One could therefore ask, what are the experiences that can cultivate sense of belonging? What situations evoke positive feelings, making people relate with one another?

This gets me to the importance of different spaces. The abstraction of space as seen in chapter 4, allows more comprehensive perspective into belonging. Based on the student's statements, I have categorized the findings into three different factors: spaces of *kinship*, *presence*, and *geographical* space. In short, within these contexts sense of belonging can be presumed to be engendered. The categorization helps to understand, why for instance, one does feel belonging during some interaction or social engagement, and why other type of interaction might function as exclusionary. I understand the categories as overlapping, indicating that multiple spaces can exist within the same sphere and experience.

### *Spaces of kinship*

Let us begin by examining the spaces that fostered kinship – experiences during which the participants felt like they could relate to other people and understand the norms of the social

**Table 2.** Spaces that construct sense of belonging

THEME	DESCRIPTION		
SPACES	The role of different spaces regarding sense of belonging		
Subcategories	Description	Statement examples	Themes
Kinship	Relationships or interaction with people in mutual life situation or who have similar identifications that foster connectivity and acceptance.	“You know when we come to a foreign country, we try to find the people from our own country. We have a telegram group like where anybody applying or coming to Finland can ask any kinds of questions - .”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-nationals</li> <li>• Church</li> <li>• Peers</li> <li>• Finnish society</li> </ul>
Presence	Relationship or interaction that enables positive feelings about being seen, heard and cared for.	“We had one opportunity to like to talk to with the head of our program, that we had such an intermediate talk, that was quite nice to also like – I had the feeling afterwards that I really talked to someone like about more than just the study content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The University</li> <li>• Faculty members</li> <li>• Mentors / tutors</li> <li>• Internship</li> <li>• Colleagues</li> </ul>
Geographical space	A physical place or location that includes positive interaction, feelings of autonomy or/ and comfort.	“Compared with Turku-- I prefer Kuopio. I studied at the University of Eastern Finland in a campus there's a lake, that's really beautiful and that's why I love that. And there's one cafeteria where I really like to go with my friends.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature</li> <li>• Public places</li> <li>• Summer cottage</li> <li>• Campus</li> <li>• Home</li> </ul>

context or learn to understand them with the help of others. These spaces referred to relationships with people who shared a mutual life situation or with whom the participants had similar identifications. Take for example their status as “international student”. Only one unifying factor was enough to connect the students with one another even prior moving to Finland.

“Most of them (friends) are foreigners. We have one foreign friend who’s really active and he was like ‘come on foreigners let’s crap a group and have fun’. And that’s really nice to have somebody to study together -- (The people that I do meet in real life) we meet every week. Yesterday we went swimming and in during the Mid-summer we will go to some cottage and celebrate together.” (S5)

Followed by this, we can see how the social bonds emerged naturally. The students shared mutual life situation: all struggling with language barriers and navigating between cultural differences, yet all of them strived to complete a degree in Finland. Having people around with similar identifications, the students were able to cultivate a sense of community, and thus it provided them a context of attachment and mutual trust.

“Even before I came to Finland, this Telegram, and WhatsApp group were wonderful because I could reach out to them, and we were even talking about our personal life before I came to Finland. When I arrived here, one of my friends who was on a trip to Helsinki, he offered me his apartment key so I can go to his apartment. And now after couple of months, we know each other, actually we are a group of people who go out with each other and – we are good friends.” (S7)

To emphasize the role of kinship, more attention should be given to the student’s foreign status which also functioned as exclusionary. Most of the participants expressed feeling confused by the Finnish student’s indifferent attitude towards international students. Though many of them wished to be closer with the local students and learn about the Finnish culture and language, they failed to establish deeper relationships with their Finnish peers. According to the participants, language barrier and alienation from interacting with other cultures could have been behind the behavior they encountered.

“The Finnish students they – I don’t know if they are shy or, - they don’t like to hung out or they wouldn’t show up to have dinner but if you asked them academic questions like if you have an assignment, they will respond to that. Maybe they just don’t like hanging out with – Most times when we planned to do something the Finns don’t show up.” (S4)

Even though the students shared the same interest in terms of the major, the lack of kinship between the Finnish peers and the international students eventually drove them away from each other. Consequently, by being rejected by the Finnish peers, a few participants had relayed on

their co-national group when moving to Finland. These co-nationals, sharing the same language and upbringing, offered a safe space to operate. The co-national group also acted as a support network, providing tips and help about how to navigate in the new social environment and in a new country.

“When – you know when we come to a foreign country, we try to find the people from our own country. -- We found each other from Facebook. At the weekends I spend time with that Iranian friend mostly. But sometimes I also meet with my classmates.” (S6)

Similar phenomenon is also visible in one of the participants’ narrative about attending to international church at her campus and finding refugee from the unfamiliar society. The church provided a welcoming, understanding space, that was created by people who she was able to identify with. Even though the church members included people from all ages and nationalities, the shared religion and international status helped her to gain sense of community. In addition, she pointed out how the informal groups, - in her case the church - provided more support than “official” facets were able to give. Like the group of co-nationals, the church offered kinship to her. In there, she could expect understanding from people who have shared or were currently in the same situation and who could also understand and help her with her future struggles.

“(The groups) They give me a sense of reality. Like I said, when you talk with the students you get the real picture, not like the university gives you. Because the students – if you tell them your problem, they try to be like “okay do this or do that, it might work” so you kind of have options.” (S4)

Lastly, in terms of Finnish society, it is noteworthy to mention how most of the students, felt kinship with Finland without having much social engagement with the Finns themselves. The students described liking the “Finnish mentality” and feeling at ease with the society. With this, they meant having resemblance with the Finnish, sharing the citizens mindset about the importance of the nature and common trust in people. Additionally, the students connected Finnish culture with appreciation of equality, a balance between work and free-time and most importantly trust and faith in society. They further elaborated how this kind of mindset, whether it was imagined or just “an ideal”, matched with their own view of what their overall everyday life should embody.

“It’s a bit quieter and it’s a bit more admiring nature, but that’s also why I moved here: for the nature and the quiet nature of Finnish people as well.” (S2)

*Spaces of presence*

In short, spaces of presence can be described as relationships or interpersonal interactions and experiences that enable positive feelings of being seen and heard while being yourself. Even though the social dynamics of these spaces – or experiences – did not necessarily foster genuine, long-term relationships, the interaction itself enabled feelings such as mattering, security, support, and acceptance that in turn contributed to the cultivation of the sense of belonging. Spaces of presence explain for instance, why some of the participants were able to feel sense of belonging without “meaningful” relationships with peers. It also explains why some students mentioned their degree program as the place fostering belonging, even though their friendship group did not include peers from the same degree.

“We had one opportunity to like to talk to with the head of our program, that we had such an intermediate talk, that was quite nice to also like – I had the feeling afterwards that I really talked to someone like about more than just the study content.” (S1)

Within spaces of presence, the students felt accepted without condemnation. That being the case, these spaces were more about *being* rather than establishing a connection based on mutual interest. Consider the student councillor or a homeroom teacher for example, as a professional of the higher education institute, they could not offer kinship nor relatedness for the students. What they could offer, however, was respect and certainty that someone will listen and care for them. This sort of promise of support and the base of mattering was the very reason why some of the students were comfortable about their position within the studies. For example, one of the students described feeling uncomfortable in relation to his degree peers, but at the same time comfortable with the faculty members.

“The only situation or hypothetical atmosphere where I think I can belong is the program and that’s because the very support that I’ve received even though I haven’t even seen anyone, like I didn’t see my coordinators in person. But because of this support, I feel like I do belong, and I am confident about my position in my program because I am one of the most active students in my classes, so I feel like I belong with the whole program.” (S3)

The same phenomenon is also visible in the context of the Finnish society. For instance, the significance of acceptance was emphasized in one of the students’ narrative. Her interpretation about belonging could not be explained through kinship because she associated the concept with experiences of security and egalitarian treatment. She, as a black woman, had faced discrimination and racist treatment in the past which had affected her expectations about white societies. However, after arriving to Finland, she felt welcomed by the people who

acknowledged her as an international student, rather than as a person of color. In her narrative, the local people embodied presence that reflected the elements of sense of belonging.

“When I came here, the immigration officers at the border were very nice to me which is not something that black people or Africans are used to. They just checked my residency card and told me to go out and I was like “is that all?” People were very helpful to explain to me where to stand and where to take the train. The people make it interesting to stay. So, people give you a sense of belonging I would say. They treat you like an actual human being, you feel accepted when you come to Finland so yeah that’s my experience.” (S4)

### *Geographical space*

In the same manner, the geographical location can function as a key for enabling the development of sense of belonging. We can consider it as a physical place, that includes all the previous spaces, *kinship*, and *presence*. Along these lines, geographical spaces are a continuum and a factor of spaces in which sense of belonging develops. Consequently, the students were able to familiarize themselves with their surroundings, carry out their goals and organize their everyday life through a geographical location. In time, the students gathered more experiences and became more secure about the environment which can be interpreted as the development rootedness.

“In the beginning, it’s usual that when you move, it takes a while to recognize this place as your home instead of where you came from. But now I do feel like this is my home. And I was quite happy to return after the holidays as well. It made me feel like “oh, I’m just going home now.” (S2)

Moving forward, sensing the geographical space was an act of identifying with the location affirming one’s identity. The most plausible explanation for this can be found from the students’ narratives of how they created and constructed the space based on individual reflection. Geographical space for them, was a physical place that included feelings of autonomy and comfort. Whether the students talked about the central city, the surrounding nature, or a more specific place such as a summer cottage, the connecting factor between the narratives was the emotional bond that the students had created between them and the place within the location.

“I feel most comfortable close to the nature. That’s the best part for me. Comparing to Shanghai, it’s really different.” (S5)

“I think I might like Helsinki more because you’ve probably know my interest better – I like the traffic in the streets, I like it to be busy, I like the night life in Helsinki for example, so I can say compared to other cities in Finland like Jyväskylä or Lapland, no-one is out there.” (S3)

In contrast, geographical space made social interaction possible. Even though sensing the place itself did not necessarily acquire social interaction, being engaged with others within that location allowed more profound personal landscape to be evolved. For instance, one of the students recalled his past semester through his acts of mobility. He continued by expressing how a bond between the local city and himself developed naturally due to “experiencing” the environment. By mapping out the city - alone and with others – changed his relationship with the new country and the place of residence.

“I’ve explored places, different parts of the city sooner or later, you make memories of those places and intentionally or unintentionally you get attached. -- Especially if you have a friend of yours with you, if you’re chilling and enjoying, even if you’re alone, some memories are made, so you’re attached. (S7)

In short, the conceptualization of spaces explains why for instance, the participants were able to develop sense of belonging despite different interests, and why some participants could establish meaningful relationships even without having physically met. Broadly translated, these findings indicate that inhabiting spaces that enabled dimensions of sense of belonging led to feeling connected and accepted by others. On the other hand, geographical space contributed to the development of the students’ personal landscape. The emergence of emotional bond between the students and the social (or physical) context, was due to interpretation of experiences through the lens of relatedness (kinship), mattering and acceptance (presence) as well as the location.

### 6.3 The experiences of belonging during the pandemic

“I feel like I’m still kind of a visitor and the time goes so fast that I’m already in the end of my first year. This is kind of frightening that maybe things just stay like this, and I will never really get into the studies -- Like there’s never this getting involved. Yes, I do wish to belong to university -- And it’s not like needing to have people but maybe just having this place open.” (S1)

This quote from one of the participants summarizes the complexity of sense of belonging during the pandemic. Isolation, whether long term or short term, impacted the development of students’ sense of belonging negatively. The COVID-19 restrictions and the school’s safety measures which led to a whole year of online studies, diminished opportunities for social engagement and self-actualization. The isolation and limited mobility exacerbated feelings of loneliness and frustration with the current safety measures. To feel autonomous and connected with people and the local environment, many of the international students arranged their own meetings in public places, travelled and studied on campus.

Three points were highlighted in the students’ narratives regarding sense of belonging and the pandemic. Firstly, the *online studies* functioned as a barrier for the development of sense of belonging for most students. Although the virtual model brought freedom and flexibility into the students’ everyday life, it did not foster the right kind of social interaction needed to build deeper connections. Secondly, *mobility* played a major role in the participants’ lives. Between online studies and free time, physical mobility was a significant factor in the development of attachment, and in building and maintaining social networks. Additionally, mobility functioned as a tool to familiarize the local environment. Even though the mobility within a university context was indeed controlled and limited, the students described other ways of being mobile and interacting face-to-face on groups. Thirdly, different *places* determined how the students viewed their opportunities to be autonomous and experience “real-life“. Access to multiple places was seen as valuable source of well-being and sense of belonging.

**Table 3.** The experiences of belonging and (im)mobility

THEME	DESCRIPTION		
(IM)MOBILITY	The role of the mobility in constructing sense of belonging		
Subcategories	Description	Statement examples	Themes
Online studies	Experiences regarding online studies which are related to the development of sense of belonging.	“I usually get distracted when I have a lot of people around me, but for like discussions or group work, then you do miss social interactions. And also now, usually I would talk with lot of people after class or between classes.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of connectiveness</li> <li>• Lack of trust</li> <li>• Lack of mattering</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Time difference</li> <li>• Unstable internet</li> </ul>
Places	The emphasized role of places: The experiences about living in first, second and third places.	“I haven’t had the chance to meet Finnish people or hung out with them or have like even – there’s no bar open, there’s no restaurant open now, there’s no – even saunas are closed. So, I don’t really feel like I belong to this whole society.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to be active</li> <li>• to socialize</li> <li>• to familiarize with the local</li> <li>• to rest</li> </ul>
Mobility	The act of being mobile, events and experiences that occurred only by moving and being active.	“And the school (of internship) well, - sometimes I wish I could just stay there, because it’s a place where I can go, and be there, and I’m active there, I actually do like I belong there, -“	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migration hardships</li> <li>• Engagement with the society</li> <li>• Exploration</li> <li>• Gaining friends</li> <li>• Gaining knowledge</li> <li>• Feeling connected</li> </ul>

### *Online studies*

Online studies were major determinant of the students’ everyday lives. Through the study program, the students wanted to be part of the student society, fulfil their study goals, get new experiences in a foreign country and to be part of the student community. However, online studies seemed to reduce students’ connectiveness and motivation to be engaged. Even though the students interacted with their peers and faculty members on daily basis, they were not able to build meaningful and supportive connections solemnly through virtual platforms. Building trust and understanding between people, - thus comfort and sense of safety, were not able to emerge through the computer screen.

“I feel that the pandemic has really taken away these small talks, informal talks, like when the seminar has just ended, and you used to have a question and there’s no barrier like you can just talk.” (S2)

In spite of that not everything was online, the virtual interaction had already left its mark on students when opportunities for face-to-face interaction occurred. The lack of trust towards the faculty and the absence of mattering is also visible in the following quote. Even though the student appreciated the University’s attempts to engage the students and make them feel welcome outside virtual platforms, he wasn’t entirely happy with the way it was arranged. To him, this one-time event was an indication of a lack of effort and genuineness on behalf of the University. He emphasized hoping, that if the university really wanted them to feel connected and part of something, these sorts of events should have carried on.

“Before Christmas we had a really nice event. They could have kept it going forever. The session was about Christmas, we played games, and everyone was fun, - and you know when these things you enjoy them and it’s funny and they don’t really continue to be there, you feel like okay it was just a sake of being, - it was just something they had to do, they are responsible for making us feel like home.” (S3)

Additionally, and perhaps the reason why the dimensions of sense of belonging were not activated during remote learning, was because the interaction in a virtual environment, was not considered “real” nor personal. A few of the students explained that online conversations tended to focus more on school related subjects, excluding informal topics such as personal interests, hobbies, or well-being. The process of getting to know each other was thus, overshadowed by the idea of an online environment as a learning tool. The following statement resembles how the association with university turned the casual discussion into a formal event.

“- but suddenly, the coffee sessions would be professional sessions. People were talking about master thesis or how can we get a job, how can we search through the library website. There’s no space for us to get to know each other. (S3)

Another point worth noting for was the lack of care and thus, the lack of mattering during the lectures. The narratives explicate how the teachers failed to establish a connection between them and the students. This contributed to a knowledge gap and general frustration with the faculty. One student explained how she did not know how to address the teacher in the position of a student. To quote her words she was left to “survive on her own” and she did not know how to ask for help. A few others acknowledged being aware of the available support, but according to them, it was not visible during the virtual classes. In terms of well-being and belonging, the students were wondering did the faculty members really care about their

concerns if they were not related to academic topics. In the following quote, one of the students elaborated his feelings on the little support and care they had received through online platforms.

“No-one’s have asked how we are feeling. And even when we had this called teacher-mentoring thing – we had it four times throughout the year – and even though we said that this is shit and this is how we feel, nothing changed. Like “Thanks for letting us know”. If you will ask, then do something about it.” (S8)

Lastly, the online learning model brought up an issue with scattered inequality. Those who already studied on the spot in Finland, had different basis to participate in student life than those who had trouble migrating due to COVID-19 restrictions. Although the studies were mostly available online, these students studying from their home country did not feel included in their study programs due to time difference, remote locality, or unreliable access to internet. Even after being able to move Finland, their need to catch up with others and to arrange their living spaces was a prominent factor causing stress and anxiety. For instance, the following quote sheds light to the barriers of sense of belonging for one student. In his case, he was not able to get a visa on time before the beginning of the program and had to remain home until the end of the first semester.

“I was little bit stressing because things were like half online or semi online and remotely, you are sort of like missing out, you know there’s FOMO with the situation, the fear of missing out. When things got worse with Covid, the University announced that the whole year will be online and I was much more relieved in terms of stress, because I knew that it would all be the same, all students would be the same and then everything went much more smoothly.” (S3)

### *Places*

Notwithstanding coronavirus restrictions, the students fulfilled their need to leave their apartments, be active and meet others in real life. In general, different physical places functioned as a platform for social interaction as well as gaining knowledge about the surrounding society. For instance, coffee shops, libraries and shopping malls functioned as a meeting place and a place to pass time. In contrast to online environments, the actual physical places seemed to contribute stronger to the development of sense of belonging because they were described through feelings of being close to other people, affirming one’s identity, and, understanding and “sensing” their living environments.

“I have lots of, not lots of but a couple of Finnish friends, I met them from the program, from the lab actually. So those places where I had the chance to interact with people I hadn’t expected to make Finnish friends but now I have made some.” (S7)

Second places such as workplace, were mostly viewed through self-actualization. Four of the students mentioned having a job or an internship to which they were commuting at least weekly. Even though these places did not serve the purpose of being social, they gave the students a sense of purpose. In contrast to unstructured online learning at home, workplace offered a chance to be more autonomous. The following statement is from a student, who was tired of studying at home and being in her own “bubble”. After getting an internship in a primary school, she was happier about the way her everyday life was composed. Now, she had the opportunity to separate work from school and studying from free time, because the existence of another place allowed her to reflect her time and life from a different perspective.

“And the school (of internship) well, - sometimes I wish I could just stay there, because it’s a place where I can go, and be there, and I’m active there, I do like I belong there, -“(S1)

Interestingly, the students above, did not mention studying on University’s premises during their free time unlike the other participants who were not working. To fill in the gap that the online learning had created, these students created a habit to study together on campus whether it was allowed or not due to restrictions. By studying together in several places, these students were able to gain real friends, maintain already existing relationships and ease the feeling of loneliness. The restrictions were thus overlooked, because virtual interaction was not perceived compatible with physical places in terms of socializing. As a matter of fact, one of the students stated, that it was unhealthy to just be by yourself.

“And for studying I prefer Educarium the building. In winter we just went there with masks. But yeah, with friends, because sometimes I was getting a bit tired of staying at my home. I would go there for friendship purposes.” (S7)

Another student elaborated the benefits of living in the same place with the other students during the pandemic. The student village, consisting mainly cheap student housing for international students, had brought her and her peers together. So, events and student life that could have taken place within campus before the pandemic, were now happening outside the academic context. Socialization and orientation into the new school context became reality in common kitchens, hallways, and public spaces.

“At least like, we foreigners’ kind of have a group and we sometimes like, - because most of us live in the student village and we manage to grab a coffee together and have dinner and it’s fine, but we don’t really interact with Finnish students.” (S5)

Finally, mobility and the access to several places emphasized the role of a current home. The apartment that served the purpose of a temporary home, seemed to function as a place to rest and pause for those who actively engaged with the society outside. Although during their free time a few of the students remained at home due to COVID-19 restrictions, some of them chose to stay home because they wanted to enjoy the break from everything, talk with their family members, or simply relax. This already indicates a certain level of rootedness in which the students did not have a constant need to “experience and engage”. One of the students who was working for a delivery company while studying on campus due to her work in laboratories, mentioned spending much of her free time at home, because it gave her a piece of mind.

“I also said about the darkness, - it gives you time to stay in your flat and give you time to do anything you want to do like, - free time only with yourself. It is not a bad thing, it’s an opportunity also. “ (S6)

### *Mobility*

Through mobility, interaction that was not considered real in the online environments, took form, and became tangible. Movement to, - and in between places brought the much-needed structure and reality into the everyday of the students. Mobility was also a way of relating with the surrounding society and reflect one’s own place within the new environment. Even though the national COVID-19 measures slowed down the regular mobility and in addition online learning diminished the students’ possibilities for face-to-face interactions, the students did not settle for “the new normal”. In fact, they wished to maintain the idea of a life of an international student, including meetings with friends, new experiences, as well as self-actualization through hobbies, work and travelling. It could be said that the need to feel part of something actualized in the form of mobility.

“I like to go shopping. I like to see people in general. The purpose is not to shop or a buy anything, just a - I like the noise and the people.” (S3)

Because of the newness of a foreign country and the lack of support systems, mobility took heightened importance in terms of socializing and building networks. Especially those students who were able to go to the campus due to courses that acquired laboratory work, formulated their own study groups, and arranged their own meetings after the lectures. These students, having more face-to-face meetings with each other and consequently more possibilities to feel

comfortable in a group, kept meeting outside the University context and found ways to experience mobility together, as can be seen here:

“We’ve done a lot of group work together as well, but on the flipside of that we have also spend a lot of time outside of it. Done skiing together (only cross-country haven’t done downhill). We do like hiking rounds, we’ve done a fair bit together and it’s nice. We’ve done like mökki-weekends.” (S8)

The significance of the mobility in terms of making the unfamiliar into familiar, was most prominent in the descriptions that focused on the Finnish society. For most part, the community was not considered as a sphere that evoked feelings of belonging. As new restrictions and recommendations were imposed, affecting public premises, events, and other activities, the students were not able to engage with the society. This in turn, impacted their feelings about the society. Rather than living as “one of them”, the students positioned themselves as living among “them”, so to say, not as part of the society.

“I haven’t had the chance to meet Finnish people or hung out with them or have like even – there’s no bar open, there’s no restaurant opens now, there’s no – even saunas are closed. So, I don’t really feel like I belong to this whole society.” (S3)

Though this might seem cynical, it must be pointed out, that a few of those who had been able to go to the campus and to socialize with Finnish students in person during the lectures, had warmer attitudes towards the local people. In their interview, instead of expressing how difficult it was to talk with Finns or get in contact, they focused more on describing how helpful and kind the people were. One participant explained, that if it wasn’t for the organized lectures on campus, he would have never had the chance to get to know the Finnish people.

“I have lots of, not lots of but a couple of Finnish friends, I met them from the program, from the lab. So those places where I had the chance to interact with people I hadn’t expected to make Finnish friends but now I have made some.” (S7)

This moves us towards the fact that mobility functioned as a tool for learning. Engaging with the environment was a way for the students to get to know the norms of the society, reflect their stereotypes, and to make sense of what was the result of COVID-19 and what’s rooted into the local culture. For example, one of the participants elaborated the role of mobility through the reasons he had become an international student in the first place. To him, it made no sense to stay home, because part of the reason for internationalization was to gain more knowledge about foreign societies and their ways of interacting and making business. He also noted that it was impossible to really understand something if you had not been able to experience it yourself.

“In Finland, what I found out was that I can achieve a lot more by doing things like going out – like education can only teach you a little but it won’t do the real-life stuff that you need actually, - you can learn so much from the book but until you actually do it like in a real setting you can understand what’s going on.” (S8)

To conclude, international students develop sense of belonging through ways in which they engage with local opportunities in the course of everyday life. Even though the pandemic limited students’ access to places and opportunities to be mobile, they found ways to get past the restrictions and increase their knowledge about the surrounding society and their own positions within them. The most prominent consequence of the pandemic was the remote learning model. Online platforms were not able to replace face-to-face engagement, because virtual interaction tend to only serve the purpose of learning, leaving out the informal communication that normally could have led to deeper relationships. This was due to lack of trust and support and consequently, the online learning environments were considered unwelcoming and alienating. Take for example the narrative of a student who mentioned about attending to a Christmas party that was arranged by his faculty. Though the event itself was enjoyable, the feeling did not carry for long, because the arrangement did not evoke feelings of mattering, acceptance, and respect.

Not having enough opportunities to meet officially on the university’s premises, the students turned their attention to whatever place was open. Therefore, the importance of public places such as coffee shops and libraries, became more profound in terms of making friends and being autonomous. The mobilities as already stated in the forms of places, were prompted by longing to be part of something. Whether the students referred to their degree peers, Finns, or their co-nationals, they exemplified their need to see in person and to engage in what they called “real life”. To further emphasize the meaning of mobility, those who had the opportunity to study on campus and attend for example laboratories as part of their studies, seemed to have built stronger relationships with peers and the faculty members.

## 7 Discussion

Since 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak has affected the rhythms of everyday life. Higher education institutes have moved their teaching into online platforms and student activities have been postponed. Therefore, the students' mobility has been more or less restricted and in consequence, the international student's opportunities to socialize and participate in the academic context has been weakened. Especially first year international students who lack social connections and knowledge about the local society, faced a real challenge while trying to build their daily lives according to the "new normal". Nonetheless, the journey from outsider to insider was something they all yearned to do. Regardless of the higher education institutes' safety measures, the students stayed mobile and explored alternative ways to belong.

That being said, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of the first year international Master's degree students in Finland during a global pandemic. The study drew attention on the question how physical isolation in the early state of studies effects the feelings of belonging. I focused especially on concepts such as place, space, and mobility, which combined allows to see past the general conception of students' sense of belonging as mainly academic engagement. I started this study from the basis that it is in fact possible to feel sense of belonging with peers or within alternative contexts, even though the life for most parts had transferred into online environment. However, after inspecting the students' narratives I had to admit that reality was not so black and white as I thought. This comes down to the fact that the concept of belonging is more nuanced phenomena than simply about inhabiting one place or the other for a certain amount of time as stated by Grawett and Ajjawi (2021).

I addressed the complexity of sense of belonging by asking how the international students perceived their own, subjective sense of belonging. To begin with, sense of belonging was described as an important aspect of life, which brought certainty and comfort and was linked with relatedness. The students talked broadly about multiple spaces in which they felt content and thus, a sense of purpose. Additionally, and as Sinanan and Gomes (2020) have demonstrated, most of the students were able to feel sense of belonging through friendships with other international students, for the reason that sharing similar circumstances with others created feelings of attachment. On the other hand, some of the participants had found communities of kinship outside the academic context. These groups such as a church and co-national, offered them a safety net that provided support and acceptance.

According to Strayhorn (2019) the students' individual needs for a sense of belonging vary, but are particularly acute in times of flux, stress, and transition. This was also visible in the students' narratives which brought up individual tendencies to seek social networks or to refrain from active engagement. However, online platforms seemed to be a common stumbling block for all. Cultivating feelings of attachment and mattering through virtual interaction seemed to be something not even the most active students were able to do. The lack of trust, the absence of positive response from others and the uncertainty whether teachers cared about their students, appeared as the most prominent barriers for the development of belonging. This in turn demonstrates how mere social relations do not guarantee the development of sense of belonging. Take for example the students' narratives: All participants had studied online or on campus and working over shared tasks that involved discussion and social interaction. Nevertheless, three of the participants chose not to mention the degree as a space that could have reinforced their sense of belonging.

The findings indicate that by occupying spaces that enabled dimensions of sense of belonging, the participants were able to cultivate connectivity and thus, the feeling of being accepted by others. This got me to look into the roles of spaces more closely. I wanted to examine what are the spaces where sense of belonging is constructed in. As an outcome of this study, I classified three themes to which I have referred as spaces as kinship, presence, and geographical space. Kinship fostered connectivity and acceptance and it consisted mostly of relationships with people who shared a mutual life situation. Spaces of presence in turn explained why some of the participants were able to feel sense of belonging without "meaningful" relationships: The interaction itself enabled feelings of mattering, safety and being cared for. Geographical space contributed to the development of the students' personal landscape and in turn strengthened the students' identity. By experiencing, engaging, and reflecting the world around them, the students were able to make sense of their own positions within the new society. However, these spaces seemed to occur more frequently in face-to-face interaction which gets me to my third question about the role of mobility.

By following Adey's idea of a mobility, an act that ties together multiple types of relations such as social, material, and cultural processes (2010, 31), it is easy to see why students' sense of belonging was tied to acts of movement. The encounters with others whether it took place in public places, their apartments or on campus, were considered meaningful unlike interaction that occurred online during the lectures. Those who mentioned occupying mainly first places like home and interacting with peers only virtually, seemed to struggle more in terms of

belonging and relayed on faculty's support. On the other hand, students who worked or studied on campus or actively looked ways of being social outside their home sphere, were more confident about their position within the academic context. Thus, it could be said that sense of belonging is a combination of movement between all these three places, because in a wider perspective, and as already emphasized, mobility offers a space of reflection and socialization.

To recall what we have learned, the pandemic limited students' access to places and opportunities to be mobile, which in turn affected their cultivation of sense of belonging. As Urry have importantly noted, ongoing mobility is a way to produce sociality and identity through networks (2000). Social relationships and identity in turn, are linked with sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Nevertheless, it is essential to know what kind of socialization really has an impact. In this study, the narratives highlighted a need for space in which the informal, yet crucial "social bonding" could occur. Teaching modes such as pre-recorded lectures, voluntary coffee sessions and even zoom based group-work did not enable connectiveness between people. Still, it was evident that majority of the students wished to be more engaged with their studies, receive support and feel like they mattered and were cared about.

Now I turn to the role of universities. What could the university do to enhance the opportunities for developing a sense of belonging, if remote learning model tend to exclude feelings that create attachment? Whose responsibility is it to care for the students' wellbeing and sense of belonging? To answer these questions, I lean on to the idea of spaces. To generate sense of belonging for students within safety measures and social distancing, special attention needs to be given for spaces that engenders it. Spaces such as kinship should foster connectivity and acceptance among the students. This can be achieved by encouraging informal interaction that connects the students with one another. To makes sure that the conversation is in fact easy going and not related to formal topics, a separate time should be arranged for those who struggle with study related things.

Creating an environment that contributes to the development of sense of belonging does not have to be rocket science. For instance, the schools can establish small "home groups" for those who would like to be more engaged. The purpose of the group would be to meet with the same combination of pupils throughout the studies. To start with, the group should focus on getting to know each other under the guidance of a teacher, instructor, or a tutor. Alternatively, and considering the university's resources, the group can also arrange their own meetings if desired. With a few simple questions, the groups can begin by discussing what they have in common.

What could they learn from each other or from this society in which they now live in? To prevent passivation in online environments, the meetings should be established around a mutual goal. What do they want to discuss in the next meeting? What is the plan for the next spring (should they perhaps arrange a canoe trip together)?

Spaces of presence in turn highlight the role of the teachers and the university. Sense of belonging is not just something to do with the students; it is also a relationship between the university and the student. As I have stated, the act of presence refers to the practice of accepting another person by supporting them without condemnation. In order to build a solid base of trust for the students to turn to, the university should commit to support the students and find solutions if something is out of their hands. Teachers should endeavour to turn words into action and offer help in continuing basis, not just at the beginning of the studies. Pursuing this further, the higher education institutes should acknowledge the importance of mobility as a tool for cultivating sense of belonging. Additionally, more attention needs to be given for spaces that engenders sense of belonging during remote learning if the current situation continues or repeats itself and students are driven back to social distancing.

There are two major limitations in this study that could be addressed in future research. Given all the uniqueness of the current pandemic affecting all people regardless of country of origin, it may be impossible to repeat the study in the same way once the situation has improved. In addition, the study focused on a small cohort of international students whose unique experiences only shed light to the lives of students in a few universities in Finland. Therefore, it should be noted that to generalize the outcome of this study to other higher education environments, more investigation about student's sense of belonging during online learning is needed.

Now, that mobility has been proven to be a significant factor of sense of belonging, I must address my own attempt to use it as a tool for interviews. My aspiration for bringing the Walking Method into the study was to gain a wholesome picture of the participants everyday life that includes their natural surroundings as well as places in which they interacted and operated. While the zoom interviews assessed the need for social distancing and safety measures during the pandemic, I wished to utilize walking as it has been said to enrich the interview narratives by offering sensory stimulus during the actual conversation (O'Neill & Roberts 2020, 258). However, interviews on the move did not differ significantly from the ones conducted on zoom. Both methods, in terms of time and descriptions about the student's everyday life, were equally fruitful. Therefore, I cannot judge the method based on only a few

interviews, because the little cohort did not allow any nuances to occur, but I recommend it for those, who are interested in creating a deeper connection with the participants.

Currently, as I am finished with writing this study, the third year of COVID-19 has begun. Yet, we have not been able to move back to contact teaching. Many argue that the pandemic's impact on education and societies can be generally far-reaching. However, life must go on and the world cannot stop for good. We need to learn to find workable solutions that can guarantee a good starting point for learning without compromising anyone's well-being by ignoring the importance of sense of belonging. The institutes need to be aware of the transformative nature of human behaviour and consider the students' subjective experiences equally important. Some students need structured guidance and encouragement in terms of sense of belonging whereas some are content having the freedom to regulate their own mobility and relationships. Whatever the future holds, one thing is clear: We all need to be seen and heard, as we yearn to be accepted in order to continue our daily lives and see the purpose of it all. Therefore, I strongly want to believe that the role of sense of belonging will be given more significance in the future.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1: Interview guideline

#### Student life in everyday context and sense of belonging

- Introduce the research project
- Privacy notice
- Record permission

#### Background and time prior studies

- Introduce yourself. How are you?
- Could you tell me a bit about your life before the degree?
- Have you done any previous studies?
- What do you study now?
- Has this been your first time in Finland?
- Why did you decide to study in Finland?
- How has the COVID situation affected your decision to move abroad?

#### Studies

- How do you feel about studying abroad during pandemic?
- What expectations did you have about the studies before coming here? Have these expectations been met?
- How have the studies been so far? Please describe modes of teaching, negative, positive aspects etc.
- How could the teaching be improved?
- What are your goals related to your studies?
- What things have encouraged you to go towards them?
- What things have discouraged you from them?
- Do you feel like you belong to this program? Why?
- How would you describe your relationship with your peers?
- How would you describe your relationship with the teachers and the members of the faculty?
- How comfortable are you with interacting with them?
- How have you been supported through your studies? By whom or which facet?
- How would you like to be supported?

#### Free time activities

- Please describe your daily life during the semester
- Who do you interact with?
- How do you stay connected?
- What kind of activities you have?
- Where do you spend your time?
- What do those places mean to you?
- Where do you feel most comfortable outside university?
- Have you travelled somewhere during your stay?

**Finnish society**

- What did you expect about living in Finland before you moved?
- Was something very different? / Did something surprise you?
- How do you feel about being abroad during pandemic?
- How do you feel about living in Turku?
- How involved are you with the society outside university?
- Could you describe events when you have felt comfortable living in here?
- How have you been supported while living in Finland?
- Do you follow the local news?
- Can you describe how your attachment to this place has changed during this period?

*Following what you have told about your student life, your free time activities and your everyday life in the Finnish society,*

-Where do you feel like you belong the strongest? Where the least? Why is this?

**Plans for the future**

- What are your plans for the future?
- Where would you like to live?
- Is there something you would like to add?

**Something to end the conversation positively.**

Have you been skiing?

Any plans for the weekend?

What is your favourite Finnish food?

**Thank you!**

## Appendix 2: Participation invitation letter

“Sense of (non)belonging – international student life in times of crisis”

Dear first year student of -- program,

My name is Fanny-Sofia Tarkio, and I am conducting interviews as part of a research study to increase the understanding of how physical isolation in early state of study impacts the feeling of belonging. This research is part of international students in times of crisis: EqualISM project that has been launched in 2020. You can find more information about the project here: <https://sites.utu.fi/equalism/> As an international master’s degree student you are in an ideal position to give valuable first-hand information from your own perspective about the everyday experiences and studying during COVID-19.

As part of my research, I am also examining physical and imagined mobility. Therefore, I would like to offer the opportunity for a walking interview in Turku area (you can think about 1 to 3 three places to go). If you prefer to have an interview via online platform zoom instead of walking, I would be happy to arrange the meeting. In case you are not familiar with the central area, but still wish to go for a walk, I can walk as through the most common spots.

The interview takes about 60 minutes, and all the responses will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to the research and findings could lead to greater public understanding of student’s well-being and belonging. If you are interested to participate and you are available during the weeks 11, 12, or 14, (whether in zoom or on foot) please do not hesitate to contact me or ask further questions.

Please note that the “Privacy notice for participants” is attached below.

Thank you!

Fanny-Sofia Tarkio

Master’s degree student at the Faculty of Education

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[fstark@utu.fi](mailto:fstark@utu.fi)

and postdoctoral researcher Suvi Jokila

The thesis supervisor: Piia Seppänen

## Appendix 3: Privacy notice

### PRIVACY NOTICE FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

#### International students in times of crisis: Sense of (non)belonging, EqualISM

##### The data controller

Turun yliopisto, University of Turku  
FI-20014 Turku

##### Researchers in charge of the research

Postdoctoral researcher: Suvi Jokila, [suvi.jokila@utu.fi](mailto:suvi.jokila@utu.fi)

Postdoctoral researcher: Kalypso Filippou, [kalypso.filippou@utu.fi](mailto:kalypso.filippou@utu.fi)

##### Data Protection Officer

[dpo@utu.fi](mailto:dpo@utu.fi)

##### Implementers of the research

Postdoctoral researcher: Suvi Jokila, [suvi.jokila@utu.fi](mailto:suvi.jokila@utu.fi)

Master's degree student: Fanny-Sofia Tarkio, [fstark@utu.fi](mailto:fstark@utu.fi)

Postdoctoral researcher: Kalypso Filippou, [kalypso.filippou@utu.fi](mailto:kalypso.filippou@utu.fi)

Postdoctoral researcher: Xingguo Zhou, [zhou.xingguo@utu.fi](mailto:zhou.xingguo@utu.fi)

Postdoctoral researcher: Nina Haltia, [nina.haltia@utu.fi](mailto:nina.haltia@utu.fi)

Thesis students under the supervision of the researchers in charge of the research project

##### Contact Person

Postdoctoral researcher Suvi Jokila

University of Turku, Department of Education, Assistentinkatu 5, 20500 Turku

[suvi.jokila@utu.fi](mailto:suvi.jokila@utu.fi)

##### Name of the research

Sense of (non)belonging – international student life in times of crisis

##### Purpose of processing personal data

Interview data is collected to study the impact of COVID-19 pandemic to international students in Finland.

##### Legal basis for the processing personal data

EU's General Data Protection Regulation, Article 9, Paragraph 2

Performing a task in the scientific or historical research

##### The type of personal information

Interview data collects international students' experiences, feelings and views. Interviewees are asked to talk about themselves, which may include gender, age, family relations, field of study, parents' educational background and nationality related information.

We ask a permission to save interviewees' contact information for the purpose of inviting them for a follow-up interview.

**Source of personal data**

Interviewees contact information is accessed from the international student survey conducted in the project and through the first stage of the interviewees through snowballing method. Personal data is asked directly from the interview respondents.

**Transfer of personal data outside the research group**

The personal data will not be transferred outside the research group.

**Transfer of personal data across borders outside the European Union**

The personal data will not be transferred across borders outside the European Union.

**Automated decision-making and profiling**

The personal data will not be used for automated decision-making or profiling.

**Protection of personal data**

The personal data is confidential.

Processing the data is protected by:

User identifier

Password

Results are reported in a way that no single respondent can be identified. The results will be published in international and national journals and in the Master's thesis.

**Processing of direct identifiers**

Direct identifiers including interviewees contact information are removed when the research project ends.

**Storage and archival of personal data**

The data will be archived without direct identifiers.

**Estimated storage period of personal data**

Direct personal data including interviewees' contact information will be permanently erased in 12/2023. After the removal of direct personal data, interview data is archived for 20 years.

**Rights of the research subject and deviation from them**

A research subject has the right to lodge a complaint to the office of the Data Protection Ombudsman if the research subject considers that the processing of personal data relating to him/her infringes the valid data protection legislation. (Read more at <http://www.tietosuoja.fi>).

Rights of the research subject:

Right of access by the data subject (Article 15).

Right to rectification (Article 16).

Right to erasure (Article 17). This shall not apply to the extent that processing is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes in so far as the right is likely to render impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the objectives of that processing.

Right to restriction of processing (Article 18).

Right to object, that is, to prevent the processing of the subject's personal data (Article 21).