Belonging as situated practice
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ABSTRACT
This article offers a rethinking of a fundamental area of higher education research and practice: the concept of belonging. Extending the considerable international research attending to belonging, we suggest that normative narratives often contain a number of omissions. Such omissions include a consideration of the experiences of those students who may not wish to, or who cannot, belong, as well as a questioning of the very boundaries of belonging. Crucially, our reconceptualisation occurs within the context of the post-Covid-19 times in which we now live. Such times have seen a rapid move to emergency remote teaching, and, we suggest, offer an opening in which belonging can no longer be taken-for-granted as uniform and, as located within fixed times and spaces. Engaging generative concepts from the work of Massey, and Braidotti, and drawing upon Adam’s notion of timescapes, we propose a reframing of belonging as situated, relational and processual. Within this lens, belonging can be understood as a sociomaterial practice that shifts within, across and beyond online and face to face timespaces. At the end of this article, we examine the implications of such a reframing for educators seeking to develop belonging, and we also offer suggestions for further research.

KEYWORDS
Belonging; sociomateriality; space; higher education; timescape

Introduction

The COVID-19 ‘pivot’ has led to disruptive and rapid changes in learning and teaching, instigating what has been described as an ‘enforced online migration’ to emergency remote teaching (Watermeyer et al. 2020, 9). Before this dramatic shift, belonging at least for face to face students could be contextualised through extracurricular activities (e.g. sports, culture, clubs), curricular belonging (e.g. engagement, peer friendship) and also the physical places and spaces of university campuses. With the shift online, however, these taken for granted spaces and places of belonging on campus have been displaced, and educators are increasingly preoccupied with questions pertaining to how to engage their students, how to foster a sense of community, and how to develop a sense of belonging within online and hybrid learning contexts. In attending to these significant questions, this paper also suggests that the move to emergency remote teaching may offer an opening: enabling us to trouble well-worn assumptions surrounding students’ belonging that may be limiting in their scope. In particular, we argue that an excessive focus on the social is limiting research and practice that also takes account of the material (e.g. learning spaces) in constituting belonging for our diverse students especially when they study online.

In doing so, we put to work Massey’s (2005) theory of spatial concepts to rethink ideas surrounding belonging, space and interaction. Massey’s (2005, 12) conceptualisation of space as ‘a
simultaneity of stories-so-far’ offers an irruption to notions of space and community as flat, neutral, and fixed. Instead, space is depicted as a rich and fluid constellation of interactions, a simultaneity of many stories, a multiplicity of experiences. Massey’s innovative perspective therefore enables us to understand higher education as ‘diverse and unfixed, with potential for multiple versions of imagined belonging’ (Thomas 2015, 41). Further, we also explore the value of Adam’s (1998) concept of timescapes. Timescape serves as a valuable metaphor that enables us to imagine time and space as intertwined, and as lived experiences and practices: a ‘lived generative temporality’ (Adam 1998, 33). As Bennett and Burke (2018, 914) explain, timescapes allow for the ways in which time is ‘caught within complex webs of social networks, relations and inequalities’. We ask: how might we see things differently if we understand time, space, and belonging not as fixed, uniform or discrete, but interweaving, experienced relationally, and as having a multiplicity of meanings, stories, and possibilities?

Furthermore, in this article, we also engage Braidotti’s (2019, 52) posthuman lens and particularly her notion of ‘process-ontology’. Braidotti (2019) defines process-ontology as understanding the subject as experiencing an ongoing and nomadic process of becoming. Individuals are always in flux, always evolving. Moreover, Braidotti’s posthuman lens also enables a focus on the role of matter, as well as a concomitant move away from the primacy of the human, proposing a distancing from ‘the rhetorical generalisations about pan-humanity’ and instead advocating a focus on ‘the situated and complex singularity of contemporary subjects of knowledge’ (Braidotti 2019, 48). Braidotti’s attention to the situated and complex singularity of knowledge resonates with other key thinkers, for example Haraway, whose influential work has argued for the need to move away from a ‘view from above, from nowhere’ and to attend to situated and embodied knowledges (Haraway 1988, 589). As Haraway (1988, 590) asks, what ‘connections and unexpected openings [do] situated knowledges make possible’?

Taken together, these rich theoretical lenses enable us to explore the processual, evolving and situated nature of belonging. We consider what a troubling of the boundaries of belonging can offer us in rethinking how we interact with our students during this period of emergency remote teaching, and beyond. As such, we adopt an alternative perspective that departs from popular psychological theorisations about identity formation and belonging that pervade the higher education literature, which we explore in the following sections. Specifically, we argue that more nuanced, situated, conceptualisations of belonging are necessary if we are to develop a richer understanding of how students learn and engage in higher education.

**Belonging and higher education research and practice**

Student belonging has been part of the higher education discourse of policy makers, educators and researchers for many decades. In higher education, the notion of belonging has been defined as a human need (Strayhorn 2012), or as an emotional attachment, feeling at ‘home’, feeling safe and an act of self-identification or the identification by others (Yuval-Davis 2006). The assumption that students can and need to belong to a higher education community has become a taken-for-granted narrative within policy and practice, as explained by Ahn and Davis (2020, 622): ‘students’ sense of belonging is known to be strongly associated with academic achievement and a successful life at university’.

Today, fostering a sense of belonging is regularly recommended in policy reports from the UK’s Advance Higher Education and Australia’s National Centre for the Study of Equity in Higher Education, among others, exploring student wellbeing, success and retention in higher education for the past decades (e.g. Stone 2016; Burke et al. 2016; Thomas et al. 2017; Baik et al. 2017). How to ensure institutions create inclusive environments, remove ‘barriers to belonging’, and are able to promote a sense of belonging for marginalised groups is also a key preoccupation within research, policy and practice (e.g. Meehan and Howells 2019; Bowles and Brindle 2017). Many pedagogical models include belonging as essential to student success and retention (Kahu and Nelson 2018;
Certainly, for many students, belonging represents perceptions of acceptance and connection, and it is known to be ‘associated with student wellbeing, academic attainment and retention’ (Winstone et al. 2020, 2). Evidently, enabling students to develop a sense of belonging has become a fundamental thread within higher education practice and research. However, is this concept and its adoption as straightforward as it might appear?

**Troubling the boundaries of belonging**

We suggest that dominant conceptualisations of belonging in higher education often contain a number of key omissions. The first of these is the way that belonging is understood in the context of a diverse undergraduate population. Often developing a sense of belonging is assumed to be a universal and uniform experience rather than a classed, racialised, and gendered experience (Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003). The massification of higher education and funding policy changes has seen student numbers in Australian universities rise dramatically in the past three decades, from 420,000 domestic and international students in 1990 to over 1.48 million in 2016 (Norton, Cherastidtham, and Mackey 2018). In Australia, figures show greater diversity across age, studying part-time and start-stop modes of engagement (Harvey, Szalkowicz, and Luckman 2017). Widening participation initiatives (e.g. Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program) have seen unprecedented enrolment in higher education including from communities typically underrepresented such as students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, mature age, international and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, who complete at lower rates than ‘traditional’ students (DET 2017). Such diversification of student populations is an international phenomenon. Widening participation has become a central policy theme globally, and the landscape of higher education has fundamentally changed as a result of diversification and attempts to ameliorate the under-representation of certain social groups (Burke 2012). As a result, social inclusion and belonging needs to account for this student diversity in line with widening participation initiatives (Stentiford and Koutsouris 2020).

Given these changes in the global higher education landscape, there is an urgent need to question who can belong, how, and to where/whom? Belonging has a moral and ethical dimension, and simplistic assumptions as to how such a diversity of students should engage in higher education are problematic and overlook the complexities of contemporary studentship. Recent, exciting, work has begun to address this challenge. For example, Thomas who contends that greater attention is needed to explore, capture and articulate the spaces that ‘part-time, mature undergraduates occupy, strategically, geographically, physically, socially’ to better understand narratives of belonging (Thomas 2015, 46) and thus illuminate the subtle ways in which students may be marginalised. Likewise, we raise here the provocative questions offered by Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski (2019, 14) when attending to the concept of belonging in higher education, who asks ‘what are we wanting students to belong to? Why? When might belonging be undesirable? And, ontological questions: What does belonging do to/with students? What does it make possible? How might it constrain?’ These social structures may be inherently problematic for certain students. For example, ‘extra-curricular participation in sports, volunteering and politics are neither accessible nor necessarily of interest to those studying alongside a career, caring or family life commitments’ (Thomas 2015, 40). Similarly, Winstone et al. (2020, 3) explain that ‘many clubs and societies are inherently social spaces, with engagement in these activities forming a social practice that may be uncomfortable for some students’. Beyond the sporting arena, Thomas (2015) identifies that older, part-time students can be excluded from campus social spaces that emphasise alcohol, music and youth culture.

Belonging, then, can be understood ‘as a relational concept, as a practice and a product of the relations of power embedded in the field of HE, constructed around the privileged identities of the ‘typical’ or ‘authentic’ student: young, full-time and residential’ (Thomas 2015, 41). Similarly, in her critique of the concepts of engagement and participation, Gourlay (2015, 403) warns of a
‘reification of the notion of ‘participation’ which ... may serve to underscore restrictive, culturally specific and normative notions of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ student practice’. Research consistently shows that students from working-class backgrounds are less secure in their belonging in higher education, whilst fearing that they have lost touch with their original communities, resulting ‘in an ongoing sense of belonging nowhere’ (Bunn, Threadgold, and Burke 2019, 427). Belonging can therefore be understood as a normative category that can be potentially exclusionary and even harmful: appeals to ‘belonging’ and ‘participation’ can create structural distinctions and inequalities among different students that are discordant with the ‘day-to-day unfolding of higher education as situated social practice’ (Gourlay 2015, 402).

Secondly, dominant discourses surrounding belonging often fail to consider a space for those students who may actively choose not to belong. In recent work, Gravett and Winstone (2019, 7) explore how students’ diverse backgrounds and specific interests may lead them to actively identify themselves as ‘outside the bubble’ of dominant university communities. Instead, students’ experiences are depicted as a breadth of micro-experiences that are often unique and singular. Indeed, the rise in juggling of roles has arguably led to acceleration in the pace of life that has changed how students engage with higher education. In Australia, students are working longer hours, attend face to face classes and campus less, and report having fewer university friends (Baik et al. 2019). Part-time students, mature age students over 25 years, and full-time students in paid work of 16 or more hours per week were less likely to feel that they belonged to their university community (Baik et al. 2019). Across all student groups, there was a rise in students reporting that they kept to themselves at university (Baik et al. 2019) and increased reports of stress, anxiety and depression (Orygen 2017; Ibrahim et al. 2013). Similarly in the UK, there has also been a significant growth in the number of ‘commuter’ students – students who choose not to leave the family home to attend university (Finn and Holton 2019), and who may retain more close local connections. This is a trend that Finn and Holton (2019) explain has led to problematic associations of nonconformity to be attributed to these students, marking them out as different or disadvantaged.

Even before COVID-19, online learning was the largest growth area in the higher education sector (Stone 2016). Improved educational technology and access to the internet have changed how many students participate in their education, and how they interact with their teachers, improving flexibility and access whilst potentially leading to more fluid and complex student experiences. In 2016, one in five Australian students studied off-campus, and of those on-campus, approximately 45% undertook half their studies online (Norton, Cherastidtham, and Mackey 2018). Blended and flexible approaches and large class sizes can reduce opportunities for communication between students and educators, and make the need for students to monitor their own progress and success even greater (Bennett et al. 2018). Such technology-mediated approaches change the very nature of how, and where, people relate.

The complexities of belonging have been examined by Guyotte and colleagues who contend that for some students, un-belonging may be a positive, active, choice where students construct their identities in relation to their experiences: ‘belongingness is not inherently positive’ (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2019, 14). Similarly, as Mann suggests, for some students, the notion of belonging suggests a requirement to ‘homogenise one’s identity, purpose and value in order to be a member ... What seems at first glance to be an inclusive and welcoming term contains within it the very opposite’ (Mann 2005, 45–6). Thomas (2015, 44) considers how students’ ‘multiple identities mediate their engagement with HE and impact not only upon their capacity to meet normative criteria for belonging, but also, arguably, upon their need to belong’. Times of not belonging can indeed be productive, they might spur students to question their choices looking back and moving forward. For multiple reasons then, some students may resist institutional or normative conceptions of belonging, or community, and may prefer to form informal alternative connections and networks.
Belonging as sociomaterially constituted

A further omission within the prevalent discussions surrounding belonging in higher education is their recurrent positioning within a humanist, individualised, understanding of experience. Many of these representations of belonging adopt the assumption that belonging can be achieved, that it is a fixed state of being, and centre on the human as agentic individual. Such conceptions fail to consider the impact of space, place, time or of a wider assemblage of non-human actors upon students’ engagement, and they also omit a discussion of the multiplicity of experiences, values and connections that constitute belonging. Such omissions are starkly problematised by the move to remote learning instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic. No longer can we rely on the campus to automatically foster a space of belonging. Students’ experiences have become diverse and multiple, and students’ entanglement with a breadth of non-human actors is made more visible within a digital context, raising new questions about how connections might be experienced virtually.

Braidotti’s work enables us to broaden our understanding of learning and experience to reach beyond notions of human exceptionalism. Braidotti (2019, 31) suggests that, ‘the posthuman knowing subject has to be understood as a relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity’. Indeed, posthuman, sociomaterial and spatial turns in educational research have highlighted that understanding the role of materials in learning is crucial; that is, how objects and artefacts transform and modify people’s learning trajectories (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk 2011). Education systems have spatial and temporal orders (Nespor 2004). Space is ‘a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out … always in the process of being made’ (Massey 2005, 9). For Massey (1994, 154), space is understood as a ‘particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus … they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings’. Mulcahy’s (2018) conceptualisation of learning space, derived from her work with school students on a field trip to a museum, rejects the dichotomy of space as either neutral background or deterministic (thinking particularly prevalent in online learning) arguing that by ‘thinking [of] the term learning spaces as something we do (stage, perform, enact), rather than something we have (infrastructure) affords acknowledging the multiplicity, mutability and mutual inclusivity of spatial and pedagogic practices. It also invites attention to the politics that play out in them’ (Mulcahy 2018, 13).

In her work with school committees, for example, Mayes (2019) shows how space, far from being a neutral container, constituted disability and exclusion of a student in a wheelchair due to the spatial and material arrangements present preventing wheelchair access. In addition, not all spaces can be converted into places for productive learning. For example, Marshalsey and Sclater (2018) show how participants might not feel a great sense of belonging in their community–sanctioned spaces, fostering feelings of vulnerability in their learning, lack of confidence and sense of identity. Whilst unexpected spaces can be productive as highlighted by Burford and Hook (2019), where a doctoral student commandeered a walk-in wardrobe (nicknamed ‘the bunker’) as a dedicated space to write her PhD thesis in, enabling her to avoid parental care-work elsewhere in the house. These examples highlight how fluid movement, home bases, connection and identity are important in doctoral students’ experiences of learning (Carvalho et al. 2018). These authors show how students connect multiple sites, people, tools and resources in networks to support their personal learning.

However, there is a perceptible shift with recognition of belonging as more-than-human. Preliminary research of undergraduate student descriptions of belonging identifies four domains of belonging: academic (e.g. curriculum, lecturer); social (e.g. participation in communities, societies, friendships); surroundings (living space, geographical and cultural location); and personal space (life satisfaction, life attitudes, identity and personal interests) (Ahn and Davis 2020). The domain of surroundings highlights that spaces and places matter to students’ experiences of belonging in higher education. Engaging with the work of Braidotti (2019), as well as Massey’s (2005) critical
spatial theory, we therefore imagine belonging as a relational and situated process: we are always renegotiating our sense of belonging depending upon our context and what interaction we are having. A similar, more nuanced, view of belonging is examined by Thomas (2015, 41) who explains how belonging can be conceptualised as a ‘lived, complex process, shaped by the power relationships inherent in social structures, continually renegotiated in contested space’.

Such a lens echoes and extends a reading of belonging that has been recently offered by Guyotte and colleagues (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2019). They argue for the need to move beyond conceptualising belonging as a fixed state that individuals achieve, instead examining ‘the modulations of belonging’, contending that ‘as nomadic subjects, students are perpetually in motion, in transition, and in relation, which shifts our analysis from the fixity of being, to dynamic narratives of becoming in higher education’ (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2019, 1). Belongingness becomes not a bounded or achievable state, located in stable or neutral places and spaces, but a nomadic process through ‘nebulous, multiplicitous, and shifting places and spaces of higher education institutions’ (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2019, 14). Likewise, Finn and Holton (2019, 6) surface students’ everyday lived experiences of mobilities and belonging, and contend that ‘assumptions of rootedness and fixity glosses over important issues around power and contestations over which students have the right to belong in higher education in particular ways.’ According to this view, students may experience belonging at some times and not others, in some places and spaces and not others, and belonging becomes an individual, situated and sociomateral experience. Like space, belonging can be understood as a constellation of relations ‘meeting and weaving together’ (Massey 1994, 154).

Furthermore, engaging the concept of timescapes (Adam 1998), enabling us to think of time and space as intertwined, is also useful for our thinking about belonging. As Burke and Manathunga (2020, 663) contend, timescapes provides ‘a powerful metaphor that extends the imagery of landscapes to enable an understanding of time as entwined with space, conceptually drawn and constituted experientially. Space–time is deeply relational, contextual and experiential’. Building on the exciting work that is emerging in these areas, then, we offer a new reading of the concept of belonging, contending particularly that it may be helpful for educators working within the complex current times, and suggesting that it may generate a deeper understanding of students’ situated experiences within higher education.

The timescapes of online learning

Learning online has been sold as anywhere, anytime. But even a cursory reflection on learning online would suggest that the student must be somewhere when accessing remote education (even if that somewhere is mobile) and that access must also occur in time. The notion that online learning can happen anywhere, anytime, has been found to place additional stress and burden on students who cannot seem to find the time or space, eliding issues of equity and disadvantage, to cast the problem as that of the fault of the individual student (Bayne, Gallagher, and Lamb 2014). Education does not occur in a vacuum, it is spatially configured and entangled with the material world and where ‘place and the material qualities of things matter’ (Flynn, Thompson, and Goodyear 2018, i).

Acknowledging that belonging is fluid and situated enables us to examine the ways in which students relate in less rigid ways defined by being online or offline. In a recent article (Networked Learning Editorial 2020), the authors mount an argument that learning can never be fully face to face (as the digital is a fundamental of the world today) or fully online (as learning is embodied and situated). Rather, learning involves ‘complex entanglements of students, teachers, ideas, tasks, activities, tools, artefacts, places and spaces’ (Networked Learning Editorial 2020, 2), and so the ways in which students relate are equally entangled.

Students must carve out learning spaces from within domestic spaces (e.g. bed, desk, dining room table, or wardrobe) (Burford and Hook 2019; Gallagher, Lamb, and Bayne 2017). This again might cut along equity lines, where students sharing spaces with many other students and/or family might struggle to create such a productive space where they might seek to engage with their university
work. This adaptation might lead to them to work late through the night when there might be some peace and quiet. Access to internet at home, when the loss of library and café spaces typically commandeered for study then also becomes an important issue. Furthermore, potential loss of income, renegotiation of what it means to be a university student, shift in student identity, life identity and personal interest all intersect with their belonging. Hence, belonging is also about access – internet, private digital spaces, machines, geography, and social networks – give access to digital spaces.

Of course, studying remotely can be a positive experience, for some students it might reduce travel time, alleviate social anxiety, prompting a levelling of the interactional playing field in some ways. For those who are used to studying online, this shift might prompt more interaction and foster camaraderie with students who previously may have been studying primarily face to face through a sense of shared experiences. At the same time, the labour of home schooling and caring for others might detract/distract from the experience of belonging and participation in higher education. These multiple experiences of belonging and un-belonging might exist for students at the same time.

Students may move fluidly between the bed, dining table, desk, café and public transport when studying creating new routines and rituals in the timescape. They may or may not have a favourite place to study. They are likely to be engaging in a multiple of different tools and platforms. Similarly, belonging is fluid and dynamic. In our view of space, as social, relational, political, diverse and unfixed, there is potential for multiple versions of imagined belonging. This, some may argue, dilutes the value of the term. However, we suggest that, rather, a more nuanced theorisation enables us to support students to better express the ways in which they feel included, and/or why they may choose not to belong as expressions of their becoming, as well as to attend more closely to the situated interactions of learning. Our critique is not aimed at discarding belonging, instead we ask: what do richer understandings of belonging enable us to do?

**Insights and implications for practice**

A key argument we raise in this paper, is that to understand belonging, we need to think about time and space, not as neutral, binary, concepts, but as a dynamic and sociomaterial assemblage. Learning spaces are (co-)constructed by learners, emerging through learners’ practices, interactions and activities, and facilitated by pedagogical arrangements (Damşa, Nerland, and Andreadakis 2019). This richer understanding of belonging, we suggest, can offer potential to drive forward more nuanced practices within learning and teaching, to greater understand a diversity of students’ experiences, and to avoid perpetuating normative assumptions of belonging.

A whole tranche of students might be starting their university experiences online, or experiencing online learning for the first time, whether that was their initial choice or not. This complicates the ways students might come to feel their way at university; who might typically ‘learn about the community [through] … a period of ‘walking around’ and becoming immersed in it’ (Groves and O’Shea 2019, 51). Instead, the ‘campus’ is constituted in multiple ways by people, technologies, spaces and networks that are enacted globally and with a fluidity which makes the boundaries of campus space permeable (Bayne and Ross 2016). There are more fundamental questions here about the role of the campus post-COVID-19 and in particular how students come to relate to the university, the course and the discipline.

What then happens when we think about belonging as situated and sociomaterial? Arguably, belonging can never be experienced if there is no access for the student to the timescape. Access is a necessary first step to belonging and this requires looking beyond the social to include the social and material. Beyond this, belonging should attend to difference through a recognition of belonging as ongoing, fluid, partial and processual, across spaces. An awareness of the complexity and diversity of the student experience, and in particular of belonging as a processual experience, might prompt greater attention in how we choose to connect and to reconnect with students. Crucially, an attunement to the situated and the relational focuses
the gaze to encourage educators to attend carefully to our interactions with students, and to avoid generalised assumptions regarding how belonging might be experienced. Belonging is not merely a pathway to retention, it is a constellation of relations, intimately entangled with identities, becoming and learning. Such a perspective promotes an active consideration of how belonging may or may not be experienced within each learning and teaching encounter, encouraging educators to engage in regular dialogue with students, overcoming assumptions we might make about students’ experiences.

Insights and implications for research

In 2014, Delahunty, Verenikina, and Jones (2014, 244), explained that ‘in terms of online pedagogy, rapidly changing technologies have outpaced research on how to appropriately address the intangible social space of the virtual classroom’. This situation has significantly worsened in view of the acceleration of change instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and as such many educators are seeking further information about how students experience online learning. A more nuanced reading of belonging as sociomaterially constituted opens up avenues for an exciting new research agenda in higher education. Research might explore the ways in which students experience productive learning spaces. Furthermore, we might seek to better understand the conditions that give rise to discontinuities (Lehmann 2007) for diverse students.

Promoting inclusive spaces in the higher education system requires better understanding regarding the nuanced, situated and contextualised accounts of students’ belonging in the learning time-spaces of the university including the non-institutional spaces. Further study exploring students belonging and the overlaps and tensions between these transient states, across time and space is necessary. We do not know how non-institutional spaces are experienced and how these foster belonging, and it would be useful to examine how the material, temporal, and spatial dimensions of online education influence belonging, for diverse students. Emergency remote teaching in some respects reproduces the usual lines of disadvantage as to belong in the university one needs to be able to access it remotely. But emergency remote teaching also creates new modes of disadvantage/exclusion that need to be explored. The current disruption has enabled ‘space’ for us to question the notion of education spaces, less as containers, and more empathically as curated for learning that take account of caring, life and family responsibilities – they were always entangled but we see them more clearly now. Further research may also seek to explore the issue of teachers’ own situated belonging, in these precarious times, through a similar reframing.

Conclusions

In this article, we have troubled the dominant discourse surrounding the concept of belonging, where belonging has traditionally been understood as a universally positive, uniform experience, and as a fixed state of being. One of the many unfolding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the crisis has exposed institutions as characterised by fluidity and flux, and the sudden move to emergency remote teaching has created an opening for a more nuanced conception of where and when students belong. Engaging a breadth of temporal and spatial concepts, we have reimagined belonging as situated, fluid and sociomaterially constituted. Crucially, such a conceptualisation offers us new insights for our practice, enabling us to think differently about the ways we support students to engage and to belong, both online and offline. We hope such a rethinking will also stimulate further debate and new conversations about the broader concepts of time, space and engagement within contemporary higher education.

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