

COVID-19 as a Catalyst to Inspire Learning and Create Fresh, Meaningful Interpersonal Interactions: A Case Study of Positive Psychology in Higher Education

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Increasingly, school curricula are embedding the principles of positive psychology to enhance wellbeing. To our knowledge, very few universities have taken this step. Since 2018, Heriot-Watt University Malaysia has offered a distinctive programme to develop students' personal wellbeing and resilience together with academic performance and personal effectiveness. This programme includes four workshops focused on identifying purpose and fostering social responsibility. To overcome the COVID-19 restrictions on teaching, these workshops were redesigned for small-group web-based coaching. This study tests two propositions: i) the workshops achieved wider unintended benefits to students' sense of belonging, and ii) the concept of belonging derived from research in secondary schools is meaningful in a university setting. Primary data was gathered using semi-structured interviews (n=8). Interview transcripts were analysed using a deductive approach informed by a validated construct of school belonging comprising ten factors. Results showed how the workshops cultivated belonging, especially through teacher support and students' personal characteristics, consistent with previous school-based research. Regarding their contributions to belonging, the pandemic situation seemed to heighten the importance of peer support and downplay the importance of extracurricular activities. Despite obvious challenges, COVID-19 has been a catalyst to inspire learning and create fresh, meaningful interpersonal interactions in higher education.

Keywords: positive psychology, interpersonal interactions, sense of purpose, belonging, social responsibility.

Universities are often the final staging post in the educational journey of a young person, and one in which where their understanding of the values of their culture and community become reinforced and authenticated. Academic staff are therefore influential stakeholders in the future generation. To the extent that a lecturer discourages and criticises, and conveys pessimism, disrespect, and a narrow-minded outlook on life, their students' perspective of the world will be thus tarnished. To the extent that a lecturer inspires and motivates and conveys

optimism, respect, and a broad-minded sense of the future, this will positively influence the students' view of the world.

Relationships are one of the central tenets of positive psychology. Social experiences are fundamental to wellbeing, and connections to others can give life purpose and meaning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive education refers to an institutional approach that purposefully seeks to enhance individual wellbeing as well as academic learning, and achieves this by instilling greater hope, trust, and happiness through

evidence-based pedagogical interventions (Seligman & Adler, 2018; 2019). Again, one of the concepts within the field of positive education is that of *connectedness* or belonging (henceforth referred to as belonging). Belonging in the positive psychology context refers to the sense of relatedness associated with positive, lasting, and significant interpersonal relationship. Belonging in the educational context is most often defined as “the extent to which students feel accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp. 80). Belonging has been shown to be an important determinant of student’s academic performance, and emotional and physical wellbeing (Sebokova & Uhlarikova, 2017). A positive sense of belonging is known to be particularly important for 15-17 year old adolescents where disconnection from schools and peers has frequently been reported (O’Brennan & Furlong, 2010). Belonging has also been found to facilitate the transition from childhood into adulthood (Tanti et al., 2011).

Belonging is a complex, multi-factorial construct that includes individual, interpersonal and environmental components (e.g. Allen, et al., 2018; Shochet et al., 2011). Examples of educational approaches that are known to promote belonging are as follows :

- Identifying and building student’s individual strengths and providing opportunities to apply these in a range of activities (Proctor, et al., 2011),
- Setting long-term aspirational career goals (Greco & Kraimer, 2020),
- Enabling students to get to know each other (Shochet et al., 2011),
- Enabling teachers to get to know their students (Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008; Shochet et al., 2011),
- Ensuring teachers demonstrate caring, respect, fair treatment and concern for students (Sakiz, 2012), and
- Promoting a culture of respect and inclusion (Shochet et al., 2011).

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis evaluated the results of 51 published studies testing over 67,000 secondary school students in Australia, New Zealand and USA between 1993–2013 (Allen et al., 2018). The aim of the meta-analysis was to determine what factors most influenced school belonging. The Pearson *r* correlation coefficient between each factor and school belonging was used as the indicator of effect size (Figure 1). Teacher support had the strongest effect ($r=0.46$) and within this factor, the constructs autonomy, support and involvement, caring relationships, fairness and friendliness were the greatest contributors to the effect. Next was personal characteristics ($r=0.44$), especially positive personal characteristics, such as conscientiousness, optimism and self-esteem. Peer support ($r=0.32$) seemed to make less of a contribution to school belonging, but here the authors suggested that it might be the quality of the interpersonal interactions that matter. The finding for parental support ($r=0.33$) was similar in effect size. Two confidence intervals crossed the zero line indicating non-significant predictors, and these were race/ethnicity ($r=0.11$) and extracurricular activity ($r=0.09$). For the latter, only five studies measured this variable leading to a wider confidence interval around the estimate, but it may also be that the type and frequency (or intensity) of activity matters.

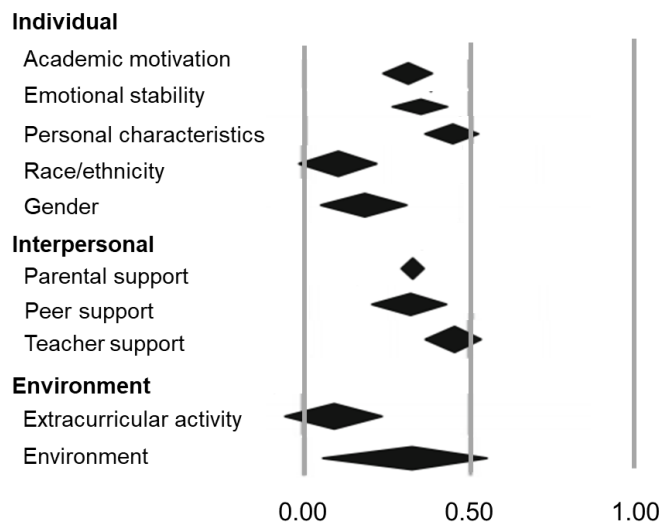


Figure 1 Factors that positively contribute to belonging (data redrawn from Allen et al., 2018). From a random effects model, the centre of the diamond represents the effect size, the width reflects the 95% confidence interval, and the overall size denotes the sample size.

Gap of the Study

The literature review presented here is primarily focused on the students in a (secondary) school setting. However, a number of important research gaps remain unanswered. The first gap is to confirm the content validity of belonging at the same time as to consider whether these factors influence sense of belonging at university. Universities not only represent a rather different educational environment, but their students are also at a later stage in their developmental trajectory into adulthood. The second gap is to consider the current global crisis. A sense of belonging can support students through particularly vulnerable times, but the COVID-19 pandemic has created substantial challenges to fostering those all-important feelings. The need for social distancing and web-based learning has disrupted the usual interpersonal interactions and isolated students from their peers and teachers. Since students often join academic classes without turning on their camera, the pandemic has removed opportunities for students and teachers to observe colleagues’ facial expressions, gestures and body language in the classroom, exacerbating the sense of social isolation. In this current situation, it takes more focused

intention and new strategies to encourage interaction and effectively support a sense of belonging.

The aims of this work are to test the proposition that the workshops achieved wider unintended benefits to students’ sense of belonging, and to explore whether the concept of belonging identified by Allen and colleagues (2018) in secondary schools has meaning in a university setting.

Significance of the Study

The present work represents a case study in higher education in Malaysia that illustrates a web-based approach to learning that seeks to inculcate resilience and wellbeing. This study is significant because it gathers novel insights about the impact of the pandemic on Malaysian university students’ sense of belonging. Rather than leaving students and teachers feeling dissatisfied with the experience of web-based learning, the perspectives shared here may highlight ways in which the classroom learning can be enriched to foster a sense of belonging. We anticipate that these positive feelings will in turn promote student resilience and well-being.

Method

Participants

From the 510 feedback survey respondents, who were all undergraduate year 1 students at Heriot-Watt University Malaysia, eight volunteered to take part in an interview. Approval for this study was granted by the university Social Sciences Ethics Committee (ref: 2021-1056-4206).

Workshop content and delivery

The Malaysian Ministry of Education requires every private higher education institution to teach General Studies (Mata Pelajaran Pengajian Umum, MPU) as a compulsory requirement for graduation. The curriculum includes leadership, interpersonal communication skills, time management, and developing practical community-minded skills outside-the-classroom. At Heriot-Watt University Malaysia, a cornerstone of the MPU course is the creation of a personal impact statement that encapsulates each student's purpose in life. This statement is considered essential for creating the intrinsic motivation and drive to strive for success, impact and flourishing.

To enable continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic, although the key content was largely the same, the personal impact statement workshops were redesigned to be web-based instead of face-to-face. They comprised small-group web-based 2-hour coaching workshops delivered over four weeks, supplemented with offline personal reflections and parental feedback. Unlike in previous years, professional services staff were also engaged as coaches. The workshops were conducted between 11th January and 5th February 2021 over Microsoft Teams with a dedicated coach leading small groups of 6 to 12 students. The role of the coach was to facilitate the small group discussions, create high quality connections, earn

trust, create a safe space for students to learn and share, introduce materials for the week, guide students through prescribed activities, listen and role model openness and respect. An active listening conversation style was encouraged to create a group rapport.

Workshop evaluation

After the final workshop session, a web-based feedback survey was sent to all students. The survey included statements asking for a 7-point Likert scale response from *Strongly agree* to *Strongly disagree* (Table 1). All survey respondents were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview which lasted about 30 minutes and was recorded for offline transcription by LWLW and TR. Eight undergraduates were interviewed by DAH, CPL and SNN using Microsoft Teams. Interview questions asked about how the digital impact statement workshops were most effective, inspiring and beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether the experience changed their attitude to being a student.

We employed a deductive approach to analyse the anonymised interview transcripts, guided by the framework method (Gale et al., 2013). A deductive approach was used because we sought evidence for the ten factors associated with belonging identified by Allen and colleagues (2018) (see Table 1). For this method, data saturation can refer to the extent to which these pre-determined factors are adequately represented in the data (Saunders et al., 2018), and so 8 participants was sufficient to establish content validity. Two coders (LWLW and TR) worked independently to identify segments of text associated with the concept of belonging. A third coder (DAH) charted these data coding into the framework matrix.

Table 1

The analytical framework defined a priori according to the work by Allen et al. (2018)

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Academic motivation	The expectancy of academic success through goal setting and future aspirations
Emotional stability	Positive psychological functioning
Personal characteristics	The positive and negative aspects of a student, including personal qualities, attributes, abilities, temperament and nature
Race/ethnicity	How one identifies oneself based on social, cultural or historical factors
Gender	Male or female
Parental support	Providing social and academic support, open communication and supportive behaviours such as expressing gratitude and encouragement
Peer support	Trust and closeness with friends and peers
Teacher support	Promoting mutual respect, care, encouragement, friendliness, fairness and autonomy
Extracurricular activity	Activities that fall outside of the standard curriculum, including sports teams, clubs, leadership positions, band/orchestra, etc
Environment	Discipline procedures, fairness and safety policies

Results

The characteristics of the eight undergraduate interviewees are reported in

Table 2. Data from one postgraduate interview was excluded from this article because the student had had a different coaching experience.

Table 2

Characteristics of the undergraduate interviewees

Student#	Gender	Undergraduate programme
01	Female	School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences
02	Male	<i>Excluded from this study (postgraduate)</i>
03	Female	School of Social Sciences
04	Male	School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences
05	Female	School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences
06	Male	School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences
07	Female	School of Social Sciences
08	Male	School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences
09	Male	School of Social Sciences

From the quantitative survey, a majority of students strongly agreed or agreed that the

workshops were safe, conducive and engaging (Table 3).

Table 3

Quantitative survey responses summarising the undergraduate students’ opinions about the effectiveness of their coach. The percentage is reported in parentheses.

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The workshops were safe and conducive	477 (93.3)	31 (6.1)	3 (0.6)
I was able to contribute constructively during the activities held within each workshop	453 (88.6)	56 (11.0)	2 (0.4)

Findings are summarised below in eight major themes that present insights from the undergraduate students on how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted on their education and how the workshops directly influenced those factors associated with belonging. The students’ narrative provided no insights on the contribution of race/ethnicity and gender for belonging and so these are omitted from further discussion. The full dataset is publicly accessible (Hall, 2021).

Academic motivation

Allen and colleagues (2018) included both cognitions (such as goal setting and goal planning) and behaviours (such as performance and achieving goals) in their definition of academic motivation. The 4-week workshops were intended to set students out on a purposeful path. The qualitative data illustrated students’ understanding of the importance of defining a personal goal and confirmed the pivotal role of the workshops in achieving this. Another emergent theme was how having a goal motivated learning, and a further theme was the realisation of the importance of identifying a goal that would be personally fulfilling, rather than simply following parental or societal expectations.

Student_03: “... during this digital impact statement session and only then I realised that which direction or what is my goal and in which direction I really want to go for my future. And right now, what I should do properly and then in the next year and in the in the future what I need to plan like properly.”

Student_04: “All those goals set, having a table and everything. I guess that was for me personally because I mean as a teenager, we all have done those, you know, online personality test. So, in those senses we have been able to understand ourselves in some manner. But [...] where you have to set a goal for yourself, which I feel is just a Malaysian culture. But as Malaysians we always say different, different things like, ‘Oh, we want to be ambitious’ [...] but at the same time Asian parents are like, ‘Oh, you can't be this, you cannot be that, go be a doctor or something like that.’ I mean, it's not so prevalent now, but it still happens sometimes, and it still exists in the culture. So it's kind of contradictory if you have like, ‘Oh, you need to be this’ but at the same time ‘You cannot be this.’ So, it's confusing and I feel that as a consequence many students maybe not so much nowadays, but still many students they don't know what they want to do, and maybe social media has a play in this as well. But having — like I was really struggling to fill in those boxes, but I realised that being able [...] to develop step by step goals — a simple concept but it's very effective.”

Student_07: “But through this impact statement workshop, I realised that instead of taking it in a bad way, it's actually helpful for me in the future. You know, I realise that by having this I can actually fulfil certain goals in my life. For example, maybe like one of the goals I want is I wanted to write a book about my experiences. And also, by

doing this, my impact statement I realise I can use that to my advantage to put my own insight in my book. [...] I guess I've a more like centred goal, how do I say it? Like I'm not taking it just for me to like, 'Oh, for the sake of the degree.' I now have like an end goal. The reason why I'm taking it, it makes me more motivated, I guess. [...] There was like these smart goals that we had to all of those things. It helped me breakdown the next small part like what I wanted to do, what I wanted to write in it."

Emotional stability

The concept of belonging presents psychological functioning in terms of ill-being such as experiencing depressive symptoms, emotional distress and psychoticism (Allen et al., 2018). In experimental research, these affective states would typically be assessed using a validated questionnaire instrument, but that measurement was not within the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the stress of the pandemic was clearly on students' minds because it arose in numerous conversations.

Student_09: "Maybe, uh, sometimes very alone and I feel like very, very, very, very negative, very down one or maybe some kind of stressful or what. And then we will become like very, uh, not so not so motivated, yeah. [...] become more negative in this MCO¹ situation."

Positive psychology emphasises the importance of positive emotions (Seligman and Adler, 2018; 2019) and this was an intended learning outcome from the MPU course, out with these workshops. Students did express a range of positive emotions, both during and after the workshops.

Student_06: "I'm very happy too."

Student_07: "I'm thankful that I got to be part of it because it was like aside from the academics, it helped me, I guess. [...] I always talk about it (the programme) like in a positive sense because I'm trying to like, 'Oh, how it helped me and how I'm like excited for it and all.'"

Student_09: "I know the situation, so never mind. I just like feel never mind, just leave it there because the numbers (of new COVID-19 cases) keep raising up."

Personal characteristics

According to Allen and colleagues (2018), a range of positive characteristics promote belonging, such as self-efficacy, conscientiousness, adaptive coping skills, hope, making friends, getting along with teachers and students, and having a balanced temperament.

Some students reacted in a very positive manner to the web-based interface to teaching, especially for those students who are naturally shy. Interacting online encouraged them to come out of their shell and speak to their peers.

Student_05: "As I mentioned, like — I like to talk and I like meeting new people, but I've always found it a bit intimidating to talk to them in real life because it's like in a group setting. You would need to first of all, talk very loud to get everyone's attention and you won't be awkward. But on Microsoft Teams because like you have the unmute and mute thing you kind of get — whenever you speak you already gain the spotlight in a way so that you don't need to feel like, 'Oh, I need to talk loud' or raise your voice. And so consequently, it made like meeting new

¹ Movement Control Order imposed by the Malaysian government to minimise the spread of infections in the community.

people and talking to them easier for me.”

Self-reflection during the workshops gave students an opportunity to recognise their study habits (both good and bad), as well as to start practicing new positive habits.

Student_03: *“This digital impact statement session affect me a lot in a positive way. Like first of all, for me I know how to do time management when it comes to online, plus normally for face-to-face classes I can just wake up the usual schedule and take a bus from Shaftsbury, attend the class and then come back come back to our hostel and shower and also, we study and then we sleep. But now when it comes to online study, sometimes we have to followed when it comes to the global campus session². So, like sometimes the whole day we don't have the class, but then like only at evening time we have the class. So yeah, the time management is very effective for me. It changed a lot for me personally.”*

Student_09: *“But after this impact statement, I will like try to jump out the box and then I try to look more not just by, but — because I have the bad habit already, lah. So, I will try to defeat my bad habits on thinking like, ‘Um, cannot lah’, like that. I will try to beat. And then out of the box that — using the third person, uh, to to to look at the thing that ‘Okay, how do I think?’ If impossible never mind, I will try to think on it first.”*

Parent support

Parents with a strong positive relationship with their child provide financial, emotional and academic support throughout adolescence. Nevertheless, university years are often viewed as a transition to greater freedom and

independence. These year 1 students seemed more ready to turn to peers and university staff for support than to parents.

Student_05: *“Hm, I find that it's easier to do it with strangers, actually, because your loved ones know you already, and then they'll be like, ‘You sure or not?’ [laughs] and that kind of thing.”*

Student_07: *“I don't really talk about this with other adults. For example I do talk about it with my parents. But I guess this Empowerment programme helped me find like, ‘Oh, it's fine to discuss with, you know, the coaches’ and how like everything’.”*

Student_09: *“If impossible never mind, I will try to think on it first after that only like, discuss with my friends, maybe with my, uh, my family about it.”*

Peer support

Trust and closeness with peers foster a sense of care and acceptance. Mentions of peer support were common among the students interviewed. They recognised the value of the workshops in building new friendships with peers and fostering a virtual ‘mini-community’ that was mutually supportive and encouraging.

Student_01: *“I think it's a very good opportunity for us to meet other students 'cause we're having online classes now, so we actually don't get to meet new friends. Yeah, and talk to each other, so I guess it's a good experience to meet students from other schools 'cause we are from MAC³ and we get students from other schools. So get to know more people. And get to talk to them. Share our experience. Yeah, and get to know each other more.”*

² Global campus sessions involve students in the UK, United Arab Emirates and Malaysia, and so for Malaysian students

these tend to happen in the late afternoon or early evenings.

³ Mathematical and Computer Sciences

Student_04: “So, it's more of a 'Let's do this together. Have you done this? What seems to be the issue here?'.”

Student_05: “My group was like kind of supportive also, you know. We would like 'heart' each other's messages or like the guys would 'like' each other, the girls will 'heart' each other. Normal, lah. So, it was very nice to see strangers do that for me and like, yeah, another person also.”

Student_06: “Yeah, luckily to be honest I know like I can get along with my teammates in the coaching group better than with my classmates [laughs]. Yeah, 'cause actually we often interact with each other, right? [...] Yeah, because of the interactions I know them better than my classmates to be honest.”

Teacher support

Teacher support is felt when students experience a sense of connection with their teacher. Again, expressions of teacher support were common among the students interviewed. An emergent theme was the value of mutual respect. In addition, individual coaches seemed to have made a lasting impression on the students by creating a learning environment in which students felt safe and able to voice their own opinions, and in which they felt cared for in terms of their learning needs and emotional wellbeing.

Student_01: “To a certain extent, where I think our uni cares about us students' personality or thinking, or us as a person, instead of just focusing on the academic.”

Student_03: “First of all, for me it is really — personally, it is really important for me, the university to get to know the students. And also, from my point of view our Heriot-Watt University they really take care of student mental and physical health a

lot, especially now things — because of this pandemic that they changed everything, they have changed the online study. So, ever since then I realised that and then all of the students, we realise that like, including the lecturers and also students they take care of each other and then they respect each other times a lot.”

Student_04: “My coach has been really like — she makes sure that no one is falling behind even though we're online and it was really difficult for all of us to, especially in the first round to turn on our cameras. But the following week, she's like “oh, let's all just turn on our cameras” and it has made it better. Like everyone was more focused. But yeah, she was generally very patient with us [...] So, it's more — you feel more included.”

Student_05: “It's like very humbling for me as a student to see like, 'Wow, even my instructor who is pretty high up and accomplished, is willing to like go this low to interact with us' has really affected like my connection with uni. To see that these people are actual people and to really appreciate them [...] because like Mr [name withheld] also like emailed me back and like congratulated on my project — community project — and I think that that has made me feel as a student that my voice matters, and he actually listened and cares. So, it made me feel more loyal to the uni also like, 'Wow, there really is no hierarchy,' like you say lah, which really touched me as a student.”

Student_07: “It's like, um, it goes beyond the four weeks programme. Like I have like my impact coach like talk to me if there's any problem or anything. And she left the channel in the Teams also open if we want to chat with her on the Teams channel.”

Extracurricular activity

Participating in activities that fall outside of the standard school curriculum provide additional opportunities for students to feel cared for, supported and emotionally connected. The COVID-19 pandemic has deprived students of many of those activities that require a physical presence. However, some activities can transfer to a web-based platform and one student talked about their role in supporting their peers.

Student_03: *“Because I’m one of the member in some student communities, like in HWUMSA⁴ I’m also a [title of extracurricular role], at the same time with Ms [name withheld] I join with them for — I’m in the like marketing session. So, what they do in marketing session, what I have to do is I need to motivate the student and then whenever they have free time, they can join our online session. We can study from online together, and if they want to play game or if they want to chit chat, they can join the session so we are there. We are not their tutor, but then we are friends so we can help to study each other.”*

Environment

Based on the findings of the systematic review conducted by Allen and colleagues (2018), little is known about institutional-level influencers of belonging. The research to date has mostly focused on discipline procedures, fairness and safety policies. However, the pandemic situation has radically transformed the learning environment and created many novel challenges for students and staff. From our data, the most noteworthy adversity was the loss of interpersonal interactions and the subsequent sense of isolation.

Student_04: *“Given the whole pandemic thing, online is the only thing you have, but it does take off some, like*

the interactiveness and all those things [...] I would say because we are at home and we are alone I think that we get to be more of ourselves, and especially after that like, you know, we’re just alone. So, I guess in that sense, finding yourself, understanding yourself more is more effective. But I would say for people like me who wishes to interact with like people face to face, it takes up some part of like, to me like the interactiveness. You know, it’s because it’s just on a screen and everything. Some people may feel the experience taken out of it. Like something you hear from people talking out of the screen, it doesn’t feel the same as talking to you in real life.”

Student_09: *“Yeah, because I nearly one years, no no go to a university. I just go two times only. Yeah. So, far I have go two times and then MCO. Until now I still haven’t go to campus. So, actually, I feel very far already. I feel like so, so down and then not meeting so many people like that. I will feel like that sometimes.”*

In contrast, one of the perceived benefits of the small-scale web-based workshops compared to large-scale web-based academic lectures was that it was highly interactive. Students were actively encouraged by their coach to activate their audio and video in order to mimic a face-to-face classroom, and to supplement this interaction by exchanging chat messages and emojis.

Student_06: *“But, in this impact statement workshops, it’s like there’s a two-way interaction between the coach and the students, right? We turn on our cameras, we unmute, we talk to each other and it’s just more lively than usual online classes, yeah.”*

⁴ Heriot-Watt University Malaysia Students’ Association

Student_07: *“But in the impact workshops, they will open their cameras and they were like talking and interacting. It's — I guess because it's been a while since I actually interacted with people. I find it very like fun. So, it's more exciting to just, you know, to share. [...] I guess, um, when we're doing it on Teams, the — so, when somebody is talking, you can write comments to this side, so it doesn't bother them talking. But you can react to it, so it's more like interactive, I guess. If it's real life I think it'd be quite awkward to get like to know each other.”*

Student_09: *“... small groups small group, we can have the chance to talk each other and then we can meet new friends. So, in in this situation, I feel like I have like more, more, uh, have more — how to say ah? Relation with university like that.”*

Discussion

This research adds to the literature on positive education with a case study of year 1 undergraduates enrolled in a Malaysian university programme. The principal findings from the qualitative data indicate the broad influence of multiple factors on the overall sense of belonging, even though students had rarely set foot on campus due to the pandemic restrictions.

Our findings based on the interview data showed how the workshops cultivated belonging, especially through teacher support and students' personal characteristics, consistent with previous school-based research (Allen et al., 2018). In summary, we propose that the school-based conceptualisation of belonging seems have validity in the tertiary education setting, although this requires confirmation through more direct evaluation. Despite similarities, we noted some differences. Compared to the findings of Allen and

colleagues (2018), our students seemed less likely to turn to parents for support, at least with regards to the topics being discussed here. Moreover, the pandemic situation seemed to heighten the importance of positive interpersonal interactions with peers to belonging, and downplay the importance of extracurricular activities.

The work by Allen and colleagues (2018) was based on research conducted in Australia, New Zealand and USA, not Asia. Thus, cross-cultural differences are a major caveat to any comparisons drawn. A number of general observations in the present dataset highlight potential cultural factors to consider when making comparisons between universities in Asia and those in Western countries. Even though Heriot-Watt University Malaysia is a British institution, its students are predominantly drawn from the local population and thus have an Asian outlook. For example, when reflecting on those interactions with peers and teachers in a classroom setting, our students referred to feeling *“scared”*. They described talking to new people as *“intimidating”* or *“awkward”* and labelled the UK students as *“brave”*. Similarly, even though the interview asked about personal experience, students' narrative style tended to evaluate experience less from their own personal perspective and more from their perception of others. Psychologists consider the self as a cultural construction and it has been argued that Asians, compared to their American counterparts, are less likely to describe themselves in abstract trait terms, less likely to attend to their emotions and more likely to focus outside of the self to explain behaviour (Heine, 2001).

Despite obvious challenges, we propose that in this case study COVID-19 has been a catalyst to inspire learning and create fresh, meaningful interpersonal interactions between students and teaching staff across the university.

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