



Belonging as a Post-Secondary Inter/National Student: Where do I belong?

Faisal Mohammad Ali Abdalla
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

ABSTRACT

The number of international students worldwide increased from two million in 2000 to more than five million in 2017. International students may experience one or more challenges, such as financial issues, language limitations, academic performance, social and cultural differences, discrimination and racism, and identity reconstruction. Many of these challenges affect international students' sense of belonging. The concept of belonging is multi-faceted. We can belong in different contexts, for example, to families, institutions, cultural or ethnic groups, and religions, and we belong at both concrete and abstract levels. As an international student, I used autoethnography to study my sense of belonging as an individual who is also a graduate student. Autoethnography allows the researcher to relate personal experiences to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. This enabled me to focus on interpreting my core personal narrative, linking my life and story to international students' lives and stories.

Keywords: autoethnography, immigration, international students, sense of belonging.

The number of international students worldwide increased from two million in 2000 to 5.3 million in 2017 (UNSECO, 2020), including Canada and other Western countries (Sohrabi, 2023). Although it may be viewed positively that the number of international students receiving post-secondary education has increased, international students may experience challenges, particularly when starting their stay in the host country. These challenges include loneliness and separation from family, financial issues, language limitations, academic performance, social and cultural differences, discrimination and racism, and identity reconstruction, any of which may lead to mental health issues (Khanal &

Gaulee, 2019). These experiences can negatively influence international students' sense of belonging, academic satisfaction, and success.

Altbach (1998) stated that "push and pull" factors influence international student mobility. International students are "pushed" by unfavorable home conditions and "pulled" by more favorable host country conditions. As a result, the global movement of international students from developing countries toward developed industrialized Western countries is increasing. According to Zabin (2022), international students from developing countries have always faced difficulties, and the pandemic has exacerbated the situation.

Many of these difficulties affect international students' sense of belonging. The concept of belonging is multi-faceted. We can belong in different contexts—to families, institutions, cultural or ethnic groups, and religions, and we belong at both concrete and abstract levels. To study my sense of belonging as an international graduate student, I used an autoethnographic design to enable me to focus on interpreting my core personal narrative, linking my life and story to international students' lives and stories.

My autoethnographic study evocatively described and systematically analyzed my experiences as an international student to help build an understanding of the sense of belonging for international students coming to Canada in hopes of a better education. I selectively wrote about my education story and experiences using memories that have impacted my life, growth, learning, thinking, and sense of belonging. These memories started at a small island in northern Sudan and moved with me to Canada, from a small village in a developing country to a city in a developed country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is an International Student?

International students, also known as foreign students, complete all or part of their tertiary education in a country other than their own and relocate to that country to study. The definitions of international students differ depending on the country's educational system.

An international student studies for credit at a recognized higher education institution. Internationally mobile students are defined by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and Eurostat OECD (2020) as students who have physically crossed an international border between two countries to participate in educational activities in the country of destination. For example, in the United States, international students are on temporary visas and are not immigrants (permanent residents with an I-51 or Green Card), illegal immigrants, or refugees. According to Statistics Canada (2015), international students are non-Canadian students who do not have "permanent resident" status and must obtain the Canadian government's permission to enter Canada to pursue an education.

Challenges of International Students

Push factors cause students to look for educational opportunities abroad due to limited access to education in their home country and political, social and economic forces in their home country. Pull factors are those that indicate desirable or compensating aspects in the place of destination. International students choose countries based on particular pull factors, such as a. expectation to raise the economic and social status, b. perception of high-quality education in the host country, c. intention to immigrate, d. recognition of host country qualification, e. job opportunities in the country, f. host country's local environment and lifestyle (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002)

International students still face many challenges. Difficulties include academic, social, financial, cultural, and technical issues; many of which affect sense of belonging. Wu et al. (2015) studied how international students deal with academic difficulties, social isolation, and cultural adjustment due to communication issues with professors, classmates, and staff. They found that students deal with social isolation even when participating in group activities. Culturally, they contest the various ways of thinking and acting in their new countries.

Khanal and Gaulee (2019) also addressed the challenges confronting international students and divided these into three categories: pre-departure, post-departure, and post-study. The findings revealed pre-departure challenges such as obtaining accurate information, understanding the admission procedure, and preparing documents for visa acquisition. When international students arrive in their host countries, they face language barriers, financial issues, and cultural adjustments as post-departure challenges. The main challenges during the post-study are an uncertain future and immigration paperwork.

Academic challenges presented by a different educational system, social relations on campus, and living in a homogeneous society all impact the international student experience. Language and cultural barriers were the primary causes of adjustment difficulties. These findings emphasize the importance of institutions better understanding students' needs and tailoring their services to improve international students' learning experiences and sense of belonging (Cena et al., 2021).

Belonging as an International Student

The politics of belonging is a sensitive and complex issue about which to write. Despite my official permanent residency and enrollment as a Ph.D. candidate, I did not experience a sense of attachment to the Canadian community. My sense of belonging is increasing, but I still have doubts because there is always the possibility that my citizenship application may not go through. I have no reason for thinking this, but it is a feeling that stays with me.

During classes, I have been asked, "Where are you from". The underlying meaning of the question "Where are you from?" interpreted from an international student's perspective is frequently "Why are you here. Several times, I felt a sense

of not-belonging in the content of the question, "Where are you from?" Which implies a deeper connotation; you do not belong to this place (Glass, et al., 2014) People can belong in a variety of ways and to a variety of attachments. These can range from a single person to the entire human race and can be concrete or abstract. Belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others and can be stable, contested, or transient. Belonging is always dynamic.

As an international student, I used to connect with other international students who shared the same challenges to learn how they overcame these challenges and to learn more about their experiences in applying for permanent residency and citizenship. This does not mean I do not have friendships with Canadian students, but I sometimes want to connect with another who shares the same challenges. Potteet and Gomez (2015) discovered that despite their desire to become more integrated, international students negotiate a sense of belonging through a transnational process by forming multicultural friendship networks that primarily include other international students at the university while remaining somewhat detached from the local community and Canada.

Students' integration into a university's academic and social systems, perceived shared values with the institution, and dedication to the institution convey a sense of belonging and "fit" within the campus environment. Students are more likely to leave if they see a lack of fit with the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life or cannot establish personal bonds that are foundational for membership in the institutions' communities (Tinto, 1993),

Life satisfaction significantly influences immigrants' sense of belonging. While ethnic segregation was not found to be a significant model parameter, religious motivation and Hebrew language proficiency were. Amit and Bar-Lev reported that Hebrew proficiency and religious motivations influence life satisfaction positively (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015).

Salami et al. (2019) stated that employment barriers, language barriers, and discrimination are all barriers to immigrants' mainstream community belonging. They also noted that recent immigrants frequently feel a sense of belonging to their ethnic group within the host country before feeling connected to others in their new local geographic community. The lack of ethnocultural diversity in local community organizations in areas where immigrants live is a major contributor to this trend. According to Salami et al., the persistence of social exclusion and discrimination against ethnocultural minorities in Canada's multicultural framework is a source of ongoing worry. Their findings show that mainstream organizations should actively promote immigrant community belonging and combat discriminatory practices.

Garcia et al. (2019) proposed that enhancing international students' academic and social integration and socio-academic integration can lead to a greater sense of belonging, persistence, and decreased withdrawal. Earlier, Deil-Amen (2011) investigated the intersection of social and academic integration. These two worlds collide when students have good relations with their teachers and peers. The students feel appreciated and have a sense of belonging, which helps them perform better.

Yuval-Davis (2006) identified three levels of belonging: (a) social locations (country, academic, and community); (b) identifications and emotional attachments to groups (family, religion, academic, and community); and (c) ethical and political value systems that can be used to judge belonging (religion). Social belonging combines different categories like religion, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, language, and employment. People can identify exclusively with one category, for example, only as black or only as women. However, these three levels, while having discrete attributes, are interconnected. One may be a black Muslim male, for example. Using Yuval-Davis's three levels as a conceptual framework, I analyzed and synthesized how my sense of belonging has evolved as an international student working on his Ph.D.

According to Yuval Davis (2006), identity narratives are stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not). These stories can be about topics such as individual characteristics, body views, vocational aspirations, or even sexual prowess. These stories directly or indirectly relate to self or others' conceptions of being a member of such a grouping or collectivity (ethnic, racial, national, cultural, religious). Identity narratives can be individual or collective.

Are belonging and the politics of belonging the same? According to Yuval Davis (2006), belonging is about having an emotional attachment, feeling at home, and feeling safe. The politics of belonging consists of distinct political projects aiming at constructing belonging in specific ways to specific collectivises while also being uniquely built by these efforts. Any critical political discourse on nationalism, racism, or other current politics of belonging must distinguish between belonging and the politics of belonging.

Crowley (1999) described the politics of belonging as "the dirty work of boundary maintenance." The borders with which the politics of belonging are concerned are those of the political community of belonging that classify the world as "us" and "them" (Crowley, 1999, p.30).

METHOD

Autoethnography

According to Adams et al. (2015), the term autoethnography refers to three core aspects that distinguish it as a distinct methodology: self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy). This definition can be expanded to three dimensions: (a) personal experience, (b) cultural practice, and (c) description and interpretation (Adams et al., 2017). Autoethnography is an appropriate methodology for scholars who want to connect with their readers consciously, emotionally, and reflexively (Jones et al., 2016). According to Rafi (2018), autoethnography is more important than ever for self-understanding and social connections as a sense of belonging.

I used autoethnography for my research design, as autoethnography allows the researcher to relate personal experiences to wider cultural, political, and social

meanings (Levy, 2020). Through this autoethnography, I investigated my values and behaviours in relation to other international students. I analyzed my experience to examine the phenomenon of belonging and provide meaning to insiders and outsiders.

To strengthen credibility, I used Anderson's (2010) autoethnographic framework of analytics with five key features: (1) CMR status (Complete Member Researcher), (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) researcher self-narrative visibility, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) theoretical analysis commitment. In autoethnography, the researcher must be a member of the cultural group under study. I was considered an international student throughout my education journey until I finished my second master's degree. I am currently an immigrant and a Canadian permanent resident since 2022.

Conducting analytic autoethnography requires analytic reflexivity. I consciously embedded myself in theory and practice and explained the phenomenon of international students. Autoethnography necessitates increased textual visibility of oneself as a part of the international student social world and as a researcher. I am visibly present throughout my narrative. I analyzed my personal experience and thoughts reflexively in relation to the cultural group. (Anderson, 2010, p. 383)

I demonstrated analytic insights by recounting my experiences and thoughts and connecting them to theories from the scholarly literature. In addition, I examined changes in my views and sense of belonging (Anderson, 2010). As Davies (1999) wrote, autoethnography should be seen “not in terms of self-absorption, but rather [in terms of] interrelationships between researcher and other to inform and change social knowledge.” (p.184). My autoethnography is grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it to gain insight into international students' social phenomena.

The fourth concept aims to move autoethnography beyond personal experiences. The main source of this autoethnography was my memories, which I connected to the larger culture of international students (Anderson, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

For my autoethnography, I adhere to Islamic ethics. I did not need Institutional Review Board approval for my research because my data are personal. Islamic ethics, or *khulq*, as it is called in Arabic, is unchanging because Allah sets the Islamic ethics code. Islam follows Allah's command; it is absolute and objective. According to Ebrahimi and Kamaruzaman (2017), ethics is essential in developing the ideal Muslim conduct and character as commanded by the almighty Allah in the holy Quran. Major characteristics of Islamic ethics include bravery, consideration, experience, fairness, justice, honesty and the pursuit of knowledge. Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him) in the form of chains of transmission (hadith) are the primary resources that inform legal and ethical considerations to Muslims (Brown, 2009). “God enjoins justice (and right judgment in all matters), and devotion to doing good, and generosity towards relatives; and He forbids you indecency, wickedness, and vile

conduct (all offences against Religion, life, personal property, chastity, and health of mind and body). He exhorts you (repeatedly) so that you may reflect and be mindful!" (The Qur'an, An-Nahl, 16:90)

When I started writing my autoethnography, thinking about my experiences and memories, I realized that I was not alone in these experiences. I did not live these experiences solely, which made writing difficult. How could I tell my story that involved other participants and not tell anything they would not want others to know? Both my parents have passed away. Is it ethical to include my parents in my story? How can I include my parents' story ethically? How can I include my siblings' stories, considering the ethical considerations and my Islamic beliefs?

Messenger of Allah Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) said a Muslim is a brother of (another) Muslim; he neither wrongs him nor does hand him over to one who does him wrong. If anyone fulfills his brother's needs, Allah will fulfill his needs; if one relieves a Muslim of his troubles, Allah will relieve his troubles on the Day of Resurrection; and if anyone covers up a Muslim (his sins), Allah will cover him up (his sins) on the Resurrection Day. I avoided any harm my writing could cause anyone in my stories by avoiding any information I felt they may not want disclosed and getting their consent when needed.

Data Sources

My memories were the main source of data. The following memories are the data sources I used:

- Grade 1 and grade 2 in Sudan.
- Social groups for my post-secondary education in Sudan.
- Social Sudanese groups for family, relatives, and Sudanese communities.
- My study and work in Saudi Arabia. My connection is through social media groups like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram.
- My Education in India. This includes the first letter I received after going to India. My parents requested my older brother write me a letter after travelling to India. With this letter, I received an attachment from my brother.
 - Connections by LinkedIn to my visit to the USA.
 - Connections in Canada.
 - My first visit back to Sudan after moving to Canada.
 - My first visit back to Saudi Arabia after moving to Canada.
 - My visit to Saudi Arabia to attend my sister's funeral.
 - Photos on my phone and photos I kept in Sudan and Saudi Arabia.

Analysis

According to Josselson (2011), qualitative data analysis focuses on interpreting the core personal narrative, linking my life and my story, and relating all this to international students' lives and stories. This paper represents most of my life stories within the context of international students' culture. While writing my stories, there was always something I did not want to write because of ethical considerations. Whenever I reread the stories, I looked into the unsaid and

unsayable part of my story and wondered how I could tell my story in a way that could lead to the most authentic understanding of my text, and hopefully provide an example from which international students may learn or make connections.

I analysed my data to connect them to Yuval-Davis's (2006) three levels of belonging. Some categories proved to be discrete; others were interconnected.

My Story

Family

I was born to parents who could not read or write. My parents' interest and encouragement in my education positively affected my attitude toward learning. My siblings, teachers, and friends also positively influenced my literacy. The environment, people, and places affected my learning and growth, sometimes positively and sometimes less so, and at times even negatively. I moved from Sudan to Saudi Arabia, India, the USA, and Canada. I had a different learning experience and sense of belonging in each country. When I moved from Labab, Northern Sudan, to Saudi Arabia, I had a strong sense of belonging mainly because of my family, as all my parents and siblings were in Saudi Arabia with me.

Language

Language is one of the important factors that can affect the sense of belonging. During my literacy journey, I learned five languages: Nubian, Arabic, English, Tamil, and Hindi (See Table 1).

I learned to speak Nubian, Arabic, English, Tamil, and Hindi, and I learned to read and write in Arabic and English. The first language I learned was Nubian. In my community in Labab, I started learning the local language (Dongulawi) from my parents, siblings, and the community. I felt I was part of the Nubian community because we shared the same language, culture, and religion.

At 4-5 years old, I started learning to understand and speak Arabic on the wooden board at the mosque to learn the Quran. My purpose of learning Arabic writing was to draft a letter to my father who was working in Saudi Arabia. After moving to Saudi Arabia at age 7, I felt a language barrier because I was not fluent in Arabic. In addition to my family connection, I felt connected to the place culturally and religiously, but I only achieved a full sense of belonging when I mastered Arabic, helping me form relationships with others.

At 13-14 years old, I started learning English in grade 7 in Saudi Arabia. My dream was to be a pharmacist, and I needed to learn English as it is the international communication language and medium of instruction in all health sciences institutions. Learning English was important because I wanted to have a sense of belonging to the healthcare professional community and use English to spread Islam.

During my post-secondary schooling in India, I started learning two Indian languages. The first was Tamil, mainly spoken in Tamil Nadu state in India. I learned Tamil for social communication, religion (Friday prayers), and commercial purposes when buying from the local market. I learned Tamil from

the community and my classmates. The second language I learned was Hindi. I learned the Hindi language by attending spoken Hindi classes and practicing while visiting cousins and friends in Delhi. I got the first community pharmacist position in Riyadh because I knew how to speak Hindi.

Table 1. The languages I learned throughout my education journey.

| Language | Country | Age began | Form | Purpose |
|----------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------|----------------------|
| Nubian | Sudan (Northern State) | First language from birth | Oral | Social communication |
| Arabic | Sudan | 4-5 years old | Oral | Reading Quran |
| | Saudi Arabia | | Reading | Schooling/Education |
| | Arabia | | Written | Social communication |
| English | Saudi Arabia | 13-14 years old | Oral | Schooling/Education |
| | | | Written | |
| | | | Reading | |
| Tamil | India | Post-secondary education | Oral | Social communication |
| Hindi | India | Post-secondary education | Oral | Social communication |

There is a strong link between languages and a sense of belonging. Languages are related to the three levels of belonging: social locations, individual identifications and emotional attachment, and ethical and political values. Languages signify identities and are used by people who speak them to signal identities. Others also classify people based on the language they speak. For example, I had a strong sense of belonging to the Nubian community because we all speak the same language, and when I moved to Saudi Arabia, my sense of belonging was less because of the language.

Education

Elementary to Secondary

I started my elementary schooling in Sudan. I finished grade 1 and was about to finish grade 2 when we moved to Saudi Arabia, but my school certificates from Sudan were not accepted. Thus, my journey as an international student started when I rejoined grade 1 in Saudi Arabia. This change in the education environment impacted my learning; we moved to a place where there were people from all over the world, unlike the island where I was born.

I faced several challenges as an international student in elementary, intermediate, and secondary school. First, I missed two years as I rejoined grade 1 in Saudi Arabia because of the complicated school enrollment processes. Second, there were language limitations as Arabic was my second language, and I needed to be more fluent in Arabic. Third, we were discriminated against in the registration process. The registration for international students was after national students. Fourth, I faced racism because of my skin colour.

I was young when I moved from Sudan to Saudi Arabia, and I believe I did not acknowledge my sense of belonging. I did not explicitly think about belonging. Even though both Sudan and Saudi Arabia are Arabian countries, I was not fluent in Arabic. I tried to find a friend who could speak the Nubian language but could not find one. This left me isolated for a period until I became fluent in Arabic. Isolation from people because of language is related to belonging.

Post-Secondary

After finishing secondary school, I explored different university options in the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Sudan. I studied for 12 years in Saudi Arabia as an international elementary student. Although I was considered an international student in Saudi Arabia, I had a sense of belonging because of my social location and emotional attachment. I had a good family contact in Saudi Arabia. I could perform all the prayers in time and visit the holy places in Makkah and Madinah.

However, there were limited resources for international students to join post-secondary education in Saudi Arabia. So, I applied to a university in Sudan. When I started filling out the application, I learned I would be considered an international student because I had studied at a secondary school outside Sudan. I felt I was neither Sudanese nor Saudi; I was lost between the two countries. I did not have an answer: Do I belong to Sudan or Saudi?

India and Saudi Arabia. I decided to move to India's second-most populous country, with different languages and cultures. I joined the School of Pharmacy for my undergraduate degree. I did not have any sense of belonging at the beginning, as getting used to the local language, food, and culture was not easy.

Things changed when I became familiar with the culture and found the mosque to perform my prayers. I stayed in India for about ten years. After learning the language and making friends, I felt I belonged to the place.

After finishing my Bachelor of Pharmacy, I returned to Saudi Arabia, worked for one year in a community pharmacy, and returned to India to complete my master's degree in pharmacy. After finishing my graduate studies, I returned to Saudi Arabia and worked in a pharmaceutical company as a director. Then, I worked as a lecturer in pharmacy and nursing schools. During this time, I started thinking about continuing my education and finding a university to do my Ph.D. in the United States of America, Canada, or the United Kingdom.

Canada. I went to the United States in 2016 for a short stay and decided to move there or to Canada. I applied for a Master of Education at a Canadian university and moved to Canada in May 2019. When we moved to Canada, my wife and I wondered how we would fit into the new country's system, culture, and language and consider this our new home. Where did we belong: Sudan, Saudi Arabia, India, or Canada?

After finishing my Master of Education, I applied to become a Permanent Resident through the Provincial Nominee Program. I was eligible and was advised to apply with a request that I submit a job offer valid for two years. My employer delayed preparing the document, and when submitting my application, the regulations changed, and my application was rejected. Because the Post Graduate Work permit is not renewable as per government regulation, my wife and I started considering leaving Canada to return to our previous lives. Our daughter heard our conversation and said, "I do not want to go anywhere; I want to stay here". When we came to Canada, she was only three years. Trilokekar et al. (2014) claimed that the student visa, work visa, and post-graduate work visa policies and processes were efficient and effective. However, they were not effective or efficient in my case.

In Canada, at the beginning, I had an issue with the local English, as many speak fast. Another thing that affected my sense of belonging was that there was only one place to pray, there were limited resources for Muslims to buy Halal food, and I was on a temporary permit. I am now familiar with the language; there are more places for prayers and shops selling Halal food. Also, I am now a permanent resident. My sense of belonging has increased in terms of social location, but not family, as I wish to bring my siblings to Canada to feel more supported.

Even if one's sense of belonging to the social location changes, your family connection and relationship will not change. This year, when my younger sister called me about our older sister's death, I explored the flight tickets to Riyadh to join my family for the funeral. I thought of how close it was for me to travel from Saudi Arabia to Sudan, which takes about two hours, or from Saudi Arabia to India, which takes about five hours. The earliest flight I could get from Canada to Saudi Arabia took about forty-nine hours. This made me question whether I still belonged in Canada if I could not join my family as quickly as I wanted. The distance from your location to your loved ones can impact your sense of

belonging, which could be why I had a stronger sense of belonging to previous countries.

DISCUSSION

According to Yuval Davis (2006), the three levels that form belonging are interconnected and not completely discrete. My analysis of my story is based on these three levels: (a) social locations, (b) individual identifications and emotional attachment, and (c) ethical and political values.

Social Locations

Belonging is feeling at home and safe. Social locations such as country, academics, and community are interconnected. Feeling part of a larger group or community will impact the sense of belonging to a community related to the country and academics. Do I belong to Sudan, Saudi Arabia, India, or Canada?

I had a strong sense of belonging to Sudan before I tried to start my post-secondary education in Sudan. The reason for this strong sense of belonging was because (a) I was born in Sudan, (b) I shared the same language, culture and religion with my community, (c) We were all from the same location, and (d) I was not an immigrant. However, my sense of belonging was impacted negatively when I considered applying to a university in Sudan, where I was seen as an international student in what was supposed to be my home country.

In Saudi Arabia, I had a sense of belonging similar to Sudan. However, being an international student, discrimination, immigration, and employment status negatively affected my sense of belonging. As a student, I was on a visitor permit based on my father's work permit that was renewed yearly. When I started working, I got a work permit. There was always the possibility that my work contract would not be renewed, and if I did not get another job, I would have to leave the country. This negatively affected my sense of belonging. However, Saudi Arabia is only a two-hour flight from Sudan, which positively impacted my sense of belonging to both locations. Thus, my sense of belonging in Saudi Arabia was complex.

In India, I had a strong sense of belonging after mastering the local language and making friends. My immigration status was part of my sense of belonging as I was on a study permit, which could be easily renewed if I was studying. I could easily travel between India, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, which was part of my strong sense of belonging. After finishing my studies in India, I frequently visited India because I wanted to visit my friends.

My sense of belonging in Canada has gradually increased, especially when my immigration status changed. Considering my employment status, I felt a strong sense of belonging because I could stay in Canada even if I were not employed, which was not the case in Saudi Arabia and India. I wrote part of my autoethnography in Montreal and Frankfurt airports on my way back to Saudi Arabia to attend my sister's funeral. While waiting for my flight, I lost my sense of belonging to Canada because of the distance from my siblings and because

there was no direct flight to Saudi Arabia. So again, complexity infiltrated my sense of belonging due to physical and social locations.

Individual Identifications and Emotional Attachments

Identifications and emotional attachments to groups such as family, religion, academia, and community will influence the sense of belonging. I am a black Muslim. Regarding family and religion, I had the strongest sense of belonging to Sudan and Saudi Arabia as I had good family connections. However, my sense of belonging was negatively impacted in Saudi Arabia as I faced discrimination. It was also negatively impacted in Sudan because I was considered an international student despite being Sudanese. Complexity again played a central role in my sense of belonging.

In India, my sense of belonging was boosted by becoming familiar with the mosque's location and becoming part of the Muslim community. However, my skin colour was an issue in India, and I was far from my family. Both negatively impacted my sense of belonging in India.

When I moved to Canada, I faced difficulty with the resources for Muslims. Now, more places exist to perform prayers, and more shops sell halal food. My sense of belonging has increased. I do not have family connections in Canada, and it would be very difficult if any of my siblings wanted to visit me in Canada. They would be unable to because of the visa restrictions, so the family connection has negatively impacted my sense of belonging to Canada.

Ethical and Political Values

Religion can impact one's sense of belonging. My ethics is based on the Islamic religion. I had a strong sense of belonging to Saudi Arabia because it is the birthplace of Islam, the location of the two holiest mosques, and the centre of Islamic devotion and prayer. In Saudi Arabia, the Muslim community is the majority group. After moving to Canada, I belong to the exact social location of the Muslim community, but we are considered a minority group. I think this has impacted my sense of belonging to Canada, which has recently increased because of the increase in Muslim community size and the availability of more prayer places in my area.

Politics also influence one's sense of belonging. I was considered an international student in Sudan even though I hold a Sudanese passport. I am a permanent resident in Canada, but there is a possibility that I may not become a Canadian citizen because of political values. I had a strong sense of belonging to India and have visited frequently. However, this year, I was invited by a classmate to attend our get-together after twenty-five years of our graduation from the Bachelor of Pharmacy program. I sent my passport for the visa, and my application was rejected because they suspended the Indian visa for the Sudanese passport. This was the first time I felt my sense of belonging to India declining.

Even though I am a permanent resident of Canada, I do not have a satisfactory sense of belonging, partially because of the politics of belonging. My citizenship application may not be processed if there is any political change in the regulation.

CONCLUSION

Do I belong to Sudan, Saudi Arabia, India, or Canada? Thinking about an answer to this question, I realize how the three levels of belonging are interconnected. I do not have a clear answer for where I belong. Considering my family and relatives, I may belong to Sudan. Thinking about my religion and Islamic ethics, I would belong to Saudi Arabia. Thinking about social attachment to my friends, I may belong to India. However, political values affect my sense of belonging to Sudan, Saudi Arabia, India and Canada, Considering Yuval Davis's definition of feeling at home and feeling safe, what does feeling at home mean, and what is the definition of safety? I am not sure if I had the sense of feeling at home before. This makes the answer to where I belong more complicated. I cannot return to Sudan because of the current situation in Sudan, and it is not safe to return. The same applies to Saudi Arabia and India, as I do not have a residence permit or visa to return to Saudi Arabia or India. I can stay in Canada as long as I want, and there is a strong chance of becoming a Canadian citizen. This may be the reason for me to think I may belong to Canada. That being said, I still do not know where I belong. I am unsure if becoming a Canadian citizen may change my feelings. I can say I belong to Canada by feeling at home and safe, but what about the social attachment to my family, which will never change?

I was considered an international student throughout my education journey from grade 1 to my second master's degree. I was an international student in Saudi Arabia, India, the United States, and Canada. Even though I am a Sudanese national, I was considered an international student in my post-secondary education in Sudan. The one part of my education for which I am not considered an international student is my Ph.D. in pharmacy. I started my Ph.D. after I became a permanent resident of Canada. Not being an international student in my PhD program increased my sense of belonging to Canada.

According to the definitions, an international student is a non-immigrant student who studies outside his or her home country and in a host country with a student visa or student permit. In Sudan, I was considered an international student when I studied post-secondary. Most definitions for international students share the idea of being outside your home country and needing a visa to study. I hold a Sudanese passport; I did not need a visa to enter Sudan when I moved from Saudi Arabia for my post-secondary education. However, I was considered an international student in my home country.

A sense of belonging is a subjective feeling of deep connection with social locations, individual identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political values. However, a sense of belonging is a complex, sensitive, and not a singular concept. Sense of belonging is not only about being accepted in the community, nor is it being excluded from the community. It is also about the

feeling of inclusion in social interactions. At the same time, some factors may increase the sense of belonging, and some may decrease the sense of belonging. And sometimes, the same factor may increase or decrease depending on the person and the context, for example, family being near or far.

International students' sense of belonging is not one size fits all. But it is a real, even though abstract part of the international student's personal and academic life. Universities have to recognize the international students' sense of belonging as part of their being because the sense of belonging has been demonstrated to influence motivation, tenacity, and success in degree achievement. Students who lack this sense of belonging frequently endure alienation, isolation, and poor academic performance.

I used Yuval Davis's framework in my autoethnography. The three levels of belonging are interconnected; for example, social location strongly influences my emotional attachment to family. Social location also intersects with my religion, as in the availability of mosques. Yuval Davis's framework is ideal for examining belonging as it recognizes the entangled components that comprise a sense of belonging.

International student enrollment at higher education levels will keep increasing. Understanding the elements that foster a sense of belonging linked to student academic accomplishment might help faculty and administrative personnel better serve the expanding number of international students. Specifically, increasing academic, socio-academic, and social integration activities might contribute to a greater sense of belonging and persistence while minimizing college withdrawal (García et al., 2019).

The number of international students is increasing worldwide. More research is needed to shed light on international students' sense of belonging, understand their challenges, and provide possible solutions and support to easily integrate them into the host country system.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, I did not utilize Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation. I also received Humane Grant Support for this publication.

REFERENCES

- Adams, T. E., Ellis, C., & Holman Jones, S. (2017). Autoethnography. In J. Matthes, C. S. Davis, & R. F. Potter (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. Wiley.
- Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S. L., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. OUP.
- Altbach, P. G. (1998). *Comparative higher education: Knowledge, the university, and development*. The University of Hong Kong.
- Amit, K., & Bar-Lev, S. (2015). Immigrants' sense of belonging to the host country: The role of life satisfaction, language proficiency, and religious motives. *Social Indicators Research, 124*(3), 947–961. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0823-3>

- Anderson, L. (2010). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449>
- Brown, A. C. (2009). *Hadith: Muhammad's legacy in the medieval and modern world*. Oneworld.
- Cena, E., Burns, S., & Wilson, P. (2021). Sense of belonging, intercultural and academic experiences among international students at a university in Northern Ireland. *Journal of International Students*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i4.2541>
- Crowley, J. (1999). The politics of belonging: some theoretical considerations, In A. Geddes, & A. Favell, *The politics of belonging: Migrants and minorities in contemporary Europe*. Ashgate.
- Davies, C. Aull. (2002). *Reflexive ethnography a guide to researching selves and others*. Routledge.
- Deil-Amen, R. (2011). Socio-academic integrative moments: Rethinking academic and social integration among two-year college students in career-related programs. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 82(1), 54–91. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2011.0006>
- Ebrahimi, M., & Yusoff, K (2017). Islamic identity, ethical principles and human values. *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2(6), 325–336. <https://doi.org/10.26417/ejms.v6i1.p325-336>
- García, H. A., Garza, T., & Yeaton-Hromada, K. (2019). Do we belong? A conceptual model for international students' sense of belonging in community colleges. *Journal of International Students*, 9(2), 460–487. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i2.669>
- Glass, C. R., Gómez, E., & Urzua, A. (2014). Recreation, intercultural friendship, and international students' adaptation to college by region of origin. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 42, 104–117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2014.05.007>
- Jones, S. H., Adams, T. E., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Handbook of autoethnography*. Routledge.
- Josselson, R., (2011). Narrative research: Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing story. In F. J., Wertz, K. Charmaz., L. M. McMullen, R. Josselson, R. Anderson, & E. McSpadden (eds.), *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry* (pp.224-242). The Guilford press.
- Khanal, J., & Gaulee, U. (2019). Challenges of international students from pre-departure to post-study: A literature review. *Journal of International Students*, 9(2), 560–581. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i2.673>
- Levy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (3rd ed.). Guilford.
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). “Push-pull” factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(2), 82–90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403>
- Poteet, M., & Gomez, B. (2015). “It is both ways”: How international students negotiate belonging in local and global contexts. *Journal of New Brunswick Studies*, 6(1). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JNBS/article/view/23061>
- Rafi, H. (2018). *Natural spirituality as an educational process: An autoethnography*. Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from

- https://figshare.com/articles/Natural_Spirituality_as_an_educational_process_An_autoethnography/6873857
- Salami, B., Salma, J., Hegadoren, K., Meherali, S., Kolawole, T., & Diaz, E. (2019). Sense of community belonging among immigrants: the perspective of immigrant service providers. *Public Health, 167*, 28–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.10.017>
- Sohrabi, T. (2023). An Autoethnography about being an International Student. *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 15*(1), 112–124. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy29899>
- Statistics Canada. (n.d.) Definition of "International students". <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-004-x/2010005/def/intlstudent-etudiantetranger-eng.htm>
- The Qur'an (M.A.S Abdel Haleem, Trans.). (2004). Oxford University Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922461.001.0001>
- Trilokekar, R. D., Safdar, S., El Masri, A., Scott, C., (2014). *International education, labour market and future citizens: Prospects and challenges for Ontario. Canadian and international education.* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270761513>
- UNESCO. (2020, December 15). *The global flow of tertiary-level students.* Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.
- Wertz, F. J. (Frederick J., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L. M., Josselson, R., Anderson, R., & McSpadden, E. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis : Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry.* Guilford Press.
- Wu, H., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International, 5*, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice, 40*(3), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>
- Zabin, R. (2022). International student challenges further amplified in the era of a pandemic: A tale of a Bangladeshi graduate student. *Journal of International Students, 12*(S2), 193–211. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12iS2.4315>

Author bio

Faisal Mohammad Ali Abdalla, B.Pharm, M.Pharm, M.Ed., is a PhD scholar in the School of Pharmacy at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. His major research interests lie in Pharmacy Education, teaching and learning, assessment, licensing exams, research methodologies, and educational leadership. Email: fmohammadali@mun.ca
