

The human impact of crisis in business schools in higher education: the role of belonging dissonance

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how business school academics experienced and navigated disruptions to their sense of belonging during the COVID-19 crisis. Responding to limited research on academic belonging in times of institutional upheaval, the study develops the concept of belonging dissonance to explain the tensions created when academics' expectations of collegiality, identity affirmation and institutional support diverge from crisis-driven organisational practices.

Design/methodology/approach – The study draws on 153 qualitative survey responses and 12 in-depth interviews with business academics across multiple countries. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identify the mechanisms that triggered cognitive dissonance during the pandemic and analyse how academics enacted "belonging work" to manage, repair or reorient their sense of belonging.

Findings – Three contributions emerge. Firstly, the study demonstrates that cognitive dissonance is central to understanding how academics evaluate and respond to belonging disruptions during crisis. Secondly, we introduce belonging dissonance, a relational and identity-based form of cognitive dissonance that arises when institutional actions undermine expectations of collegiality, recognition and shared governance. Thirdly, we show that academics employed varied forms of belonging work at classroom, organisational, relational and external community levels to sustain or reframe belonging, while others disengaged due to workload pressures and emotional strain. These processes produced divergent belonging trajectories, ranging from significant belonging loss to heightened forms of academic belonging.

Practical implications – Findings highlight belonging as a form of relational infrastructure that requires intentional institutional investment. Universities should prioritise relational connection, reduce crisis-driven workload intensification, strengthen recognition practices and design participatory decision-making processes. Supporting staff capacity for belonging work can enhance resilience, well-being and continuity in academic communities.

Originality/value – This study advances theory by conceptualising belonging dissonance as a crisis-specific manifestation of cognitive dissonance and by identifying belonging work as a key mechanism for dissonance resolution. It offers a nuanced, processual understanding of academic belonging and provides actionable insights for sustaining belonging in volatile higher education environments.

Keywords Business schools, Higher education, Crisis, Cognitive dissonance, Sense of belonging, Belonging work

Paper type Research article



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted higher education, exposing and exacerbating existing vulnerabilities within academic institutions (Alhusban *et al.*, 2023; Bolisani *et al.*, 2021; Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021). Business schools, often regarded as financial pillars of universities (Hogan *et al.*, 2021a), were particularly impacted due to their reliance on international student enrolments (Abdi, 2025). Amidst widespread redundancies, increased workloads and administration and a rapid shift to online teaching, the pandemic has raised critical questions about the sustainability of academic work and the psychological well-being of staff (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Gravett *et al.*, 2024). Central to these concerns is the concept of *academic belonging*, which is a fundamental psychological need that underpins job satisfaction, institutional commitment and overall well-being (Lewis *et al.*, 2016). While the importance of belonging is well-established in both psychological and organisational literature, its role during crises, particularly for business school academics, remains underexplored. Understanding how academics navigate disruptions to their sense of belonging is vital for informing institutional resilience and supporting academic communities in times of upheaval (Bone *et al.*, 2025; Yong *et al.*, 2024).

Existing research highlights that a sense of belonging is shaped by relational dynamics, professional identity and institutional support (e.g. Alvesson *et al.*, 2015; Bolisani *et al.*, 2021; Joseph *et al.*, 2021). Studies have shown that communities of practice and collegial relationships can foster belonging, especially during challenging times (Joseph *et al.*, 2021; Waddell *et al.*, 2016). However, the mechanisms through which belonging is disrupted, maintained or transformed during crises are not well understood. There is limited insight into how business academics, who often face unique pressures due to their schools' market-driven models, experience and respond to belonging disruptions. This study addresses a critical gap by examining the *mechanisms* through which belonging is questioned and reshaped during crises, using cognitive dissonance theory as a lens to explore the tensions between academics' expectations and institutional realities.

This study offers a novel conceptualisation of *belonging dissonance* – a misalignment between academics' relational and identity-based expectations and their lived experiences within the university during crisis. By integrating *cognitive dissonance theory* with the concept of *belonging work*, we reveal how business academics actively engage in relational and emotional labour to sustain, repair or reorient their sense of belonging. Our findings challenge static notions of belonging by demonstrating its dynamic, processual nature, particularly in times of institutional disruption. In doing so, this research advances theoretical understandings of academic belonging and provides practical insights for university leaders seeking to foster resilient, inclusive and supportive academic environments during and beyond crises.

Accordingly, this study investigates how business school academics experienced and navigated disruptions to their sense of belonging during the COVID-19 crisis. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, we explore the mechanisms through which business academics made sense of, responded to, and potentially resolved tensions between their taken-for-granted interpretations of academic belonging and the shifting institutional realities brought about by the pandemic. By focusing on the underexplored context of business schools this study addresses a critical gap in the literature on academic belonging. Our research question is thus: *How did business school academics experience and respond to disruptions in their sense of belonging during the Covid-19 crisis and what mechanisms shaped these responses?*

Below, we review the literature that helped us to frame the findings. We note that, while the theoretical framework of cognitive dissonance is presented upfront to provide scaffolding for the research question and contribution, it emerged inductively from the analysis and did not *a priori* guide the study design or data analysis.

COVID-19 pandemic and higher education

Universities were largely unprepared for the COVID-19 crisis, and in countries like Australia, the UK and the USA, their response focused on institutional solvency by rapidly enforcing changes such as remote work and online teaching. Cost-cutting measures led to widespread redundancies among academic and professional staff (Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021). For example, between 2020 and 2023, 4,760 university staff were made redundant in Australia, reflecting ongoing sector instability (Harris, 2024). In the USA, universities lost over 650,000 jobs, which is a 13% decline in the academic workforce, amid persistent issues such as overwork, limited remote options and stagnant pay (Bauman, 2021; Schneider and Bichsel, 2025). Canada saw nearly 10,000 college staff redundancies, with post-COVID policy shifts reducing international enrolments and triggering budget deficits (Abdi, 2025; The Economic Times, 2025). While exact figures for business academics in Europe are unavailable, an estimated 2.6 million jobs were lost across the EU, with higher education significantly affected (Gaebel and Stoeber, 2021). Despite some reporting increased productivity, many European academics faced stress, burnout and job insecurity due to rapid digital transitions (Filho *et al.*, 2024).

Impact of the pandemic on business schools and their place within academia

Described as the “cash cows” of universities, business schools are particularly vulnerable to revenue shocks during times of crisis. While still maintaining a relatively strong demand for its offerings, business schools suffered considerably because of the changing market landscape as well as the COVID-19 pandemic (Hogan *et al.*, 2021a, b). The latter acted as both a stress test and a strategic inflection point for business schools globally. Business schools experienced multi-dimensional disruption, with the most acute effects occurring in the financial, employability and executive education domains, while simultaneously accelerating digital delivery and intensifying demands for schools to demonstrate external impact (Kalika and Leighton, 2021; Laasch, 2022; Schoenfeld, 2021). At the same time, qualitative evidence from business academics (AACSB, 2025) indicates that the crisis destabilised established assumptions about academic work, affirming academic life and a lived reality characterised by transactional management practices, virtualised relationships and intensified workloads. These pressures repositioned business schools within academia: from “revenue engines” reliant on market-based income toward institutions required to justify their legitimacy through impact, resilience and contribution to societal and economic recovery (Hogan *et al.*, 2021a, b).

Kalika and Leighton’s (2021) global study, conducted through a cross-regional survey of business-school leaders spanning Europe, Asia-Pacific, Africa and the Americas, provides sector-wide insights into how institutions experienced and responded to the disruptions caused by COVID-19. Their survey, which includes responses from the “top-level governance” of 114 business schools globally, was administered during the height of pandemic restrictions, captured institutional self-assessments of employability trends, research activity and strategic priorities (Kalika and Leighton, 2021, p. 30). Evidence from Kalika and Leighton’s (2021) study shows that COVID-19 delivered substantial financial shocks to the sector: 43% of business schools that responded reported revenue declines and 46% of respondents experienced a drop in executive education, largely from corporate postponements and budget cuts. Private providers appeared more exposed than public counterparts (55 vs 35% reporting negative financial impact), underscoring the vulnerability of fee-dependent models (Kalika and Leighton, 2021). These findings are consistent with system-level indicators in high-exposure markets: in Australia, business schools historically enrol a disproportionate share of international students, about four in ten of all international students study business, management or commerce, magnifying the financial impact of border closures (ABDC & QS, 2021). In New Zealand, official audits record steep falls in international enrolments and fee income through 2020–2021, with institutions partly offsetting losses via domestic enrolment growth and cost controls (Office of the Auditor-General, 2022).

Operationally, the sudden pivot online generated major pressures. Deans identified meeting student expectations, upskilling faculty and technology investment as the top near-term challenges (Kalika and Leighton, 2021). Contemporary accounts from institutional leaders echo these priorities; for example, Carioca (Dean of AESE Business School Portugal) describes coordinated training to help faculty “reinvent themselves” and deliver live-online learning, alongside the digitalisation of administrative processes (Carioca *et al.*, 2021, para.4). In parallel, schools reported fee pressure as students questioned the value of online delivery amid unplanned IT expenditure (AACSB, 2025; Kalika and Leighton, 2021). In curriculum and pedagogy, many schools expanded flipped-classroom practices to reduce reliance on long lectures during lockdowns, an adjustment consistent with broader higher-education evidence that flipped modalities scaled quickly in the pandemic and, where pre-existing, transitioned most effectively to online delivery (Divjak *et al.*, 2022; Setren *et al.*, 2021).

Lockdowns disrupted experiential learning and the employability pipeline that many business schools use as core market differentiators. Kalika and Leighton (2021) report that 54% of schools observed declines in graduate employability and 50% reported reduced internships and consulting projects, often seen as critical bridges between study and work. At the same time, research proved relatively resilient with 32% of schools reporting increased intellectual impact, even as external partnerships contracted; meanwhile, 40% of Deans identified impact-focused research as a major strategic challenge, reflecting expectations that research visibly contribute to societal recovery and legitimacy (Kalika and Leighton, 2021). Post-pandemic literature reinforces this strategic turn: Laasch (2022) and Laasch *et al.* (2022) argue that COVID-19, and future “grand crises”, are accelerating business-model transformation, pushing schools to couple technological capability with redesigned value creation and impact logics.

Sense of belonging, university academic staff and crisis

A sense of belonging is a critical factor influencing academic staff’s commitment to their institution, job satisfaction, well-being and retention (Wilson *et al.*, 2025). It is recognised as a fundamental psychological need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), essential to human well-being and mental health. Beatson *et al.* (2021) define belonging in academia as feeling connected to the institution and experiencing care, acceptance, respect and value from management, peers and the broader campus community. This need is fulfilled through frequent, positive interactions and mutual concern for others’ welfare (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

Communities of practice have long offered safe spaces for academics to engage, reflect and learn (Waddell *et al.*, 2016), and their significance was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collegial and co-caring environments fostered belonging and inclusion amidst crisis (Joseph *et al.*, 2021), while existing communities of practice helped members feel supported and connected through knowledge-sharing (Bolisani *et al.*, 2021). However, crises can both strengthen and undermine belonging. Although solidarity may emerge, factors such as reduced interaction, lack of organisational support, intensified workloads, rapid shifts to online teaching and job insecurity can erode this effect (Dutton and Sotardi, 2023). These stressors disrupt basic psychological needs – relatedness, competence and autonomy – leading to diminished belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2021). Lockdowns and social-distancing requirements intensified psychological strain for academics in many parts of the world. In India, for example, Bhatia and Joseph’s (2023) study of faculty across multiple higher-education institutions found that the abrupt shift to online teaching and the loss of collegial interaction heightened stress and feelings of disconnection during the pandemic. These experiences reflect broader international patterns: in the United Kingdom, where, according to Sibai *et al.*, 2019, multinational study on academic well-being found that 46% of researchers reported significant feelings of loneliness at work, a form of social isolation that materially affected their mental health.

While existing research confirms that crises affect academics' sense of belonging and highlight the need for responsive action, less is known about the mechanisms that challenge, transform or sustain belonging. This study, therefore, explores how business school academics navigated disruptions to their sense of belonging during the COVID-19 crisis, using cognitive dissonance theory to uncover the mechanisms shaping their responses.

Cognitive dissonance and responses to crises in the workplace

Cognitive dissonance theory ([Festinger, 1957](#)) captures how people respond to situations in which their beliefs and attitudes are found to be inconsistent. In such situations, the person experiences mental distress and is motivated to decrease such discrepancies by changing these constructs to achieve harmony ([Harmon-Jones, 2019](#)). Specifically, [Shah and Lacaze \(2025\)](#) used cognitive dissonance theory to gain insight into the impact of work crises on individual workers and management. They found that cognitive dissonance, triggered by role conflict, perceived injustice and unethical conduct, contributed to impairment in the mental health of employees and corresponded to low efficiency, withdrawal from participation and low productivity. While cognitive dissonance is found to be negatively associated with employees' mental health, it can at times be resolved through open, clear and respectful communication between employees and management, as well as ethical leadership and support ([Shah and Lacaze, 2025](#)).

Furthermore, other studies focused on understanding cognitive dissonance in groups ([Hillman et al., 2023](#); [Matz and Wood, 2005](#); [McKimmie, 2015](#); [Norton et al., 2003](#)). For instance, [Matz and Wood \(2005\)](#) found that individuals are more likely to experience dissonance when they experience disagreements with others in their groups, while [Glasford et al. \(2008\)](#) found that dissonance can be experienced when there are inconsistencies between a group member's personal values and the behaviour of the in-group. While these studies emphasise the source of cognitive dissonance to reside in social relations, cognitive dissonance primarily focuses on inconsistencies created from group expectations, intra-group behaviours, values and attitudes.

Methodology

In this study, we aimed to understand how business academics navigated disruptions to their sense of belonging during the COVID-19 crisis and uncover the mechanisms shaping their responses. This motivation was driven by our own lived experience as business scholars and our anecdotal observations and informal conversations with other colleagues. Our first-hand insights are well aligned with the qualitative orientation of our study and the unique position of the research team, being mostly comprised of business academics, to better relate and empathise with the lived experiences of other business academic participants. Thus, we chose reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as the appropriate methodology to discern patterns of meaning within participants' reflections, by identifying themes or shared ideas and enabled us to derive latent constructs from participants' responses ([Braun and Clarke, 2022](#)). RTA provided an interpretive lens and reflexivity focus allowing for research rigour through active researcher engagement ([Braun and Clarke, 2019](#)). A key feature of RTA is its ability to utilise various types of data, such as a combination of surveys and interviews ([Gupta, 2024](#)), its ability to provide flexibility to researchers, its versatility in data collection and its complementarity with various other interpretative frameworks ([Braun et al., 2018](#); [Braun et al., 2021](#)).

Data collection process

This study employed a two-stage convenience sampling approach, which is considered appropriate in specific research contexts ([Ellis et al., 2023](#)), particularly when targeting defined populations such as business school academics ([Núñez-Canal et al., 2022](#)). Leveraging data from the [International Association of Universities \(2022\)](#) and the research

team's professional networks and linguistic alignment with English-speaking contexts, academics from countries where English is the primary language (i.e. Ireland, United Kingdom, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) were invited to participate. Additionally, we sampled institutions in non-English-speaking countries that offer fulltime programmes taught in English (e.g. Finland, France). The survey was also shared among academics in other European countries through peer forwarding.

The first stage of data collection involved a survey combining quantitative and qualitative questions, a method well-suited to exploring under-researched topics like academic belonging during crises (Braun *et al.*, 2021; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2004). The qualitative component functioned as a fully qualitative survey, enabling access to geographically dispersed participants and captured diverse experiences. Open-ended questions supported rich insights into participants lived experiences, values and challenges (Braun *et al.*, 2017). The survey format also afforded participants anonymity and flexibility in when and how they responded, which was particularly appropriate given the sensitivity of the topic. From 4,140 academic contacts identified via public directories, the survey received 324 responses, with 153 complete and useable responses from business school academics being retained for analysis. As shown in Table 1_Panel_A, respondents were predominantly full-time, PhD-qualified, with balanced gender representation and half having over ten years of tenure. Most taught at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with the majority based in Australia and New Zealand.

The second stage involved follow-up Zoom interviews with twelve business school academics across Australia, Ireland, Spain, the UK, the USA and South Africa (see Table 1_Panel_B). Participants had indicated willingness to be contacted, and interviews were transcribed via Otter.ai and reviewed for accuracy, adding depth to the survey findings. Using a semi-structured format, questions were shaped by themes from the initial data and contributed to the broader RTA dataset. Triangulation was achieved through an integrated analytic approach in which survey and interview data were analysed together using the same RTA framework. Applying a shared coding structure across both data sources enabled themes to be developed across the combined dataset, integrating breadth from the survey with depth from the interviews.

Data-analysis process

We followed Braun *et al.*'s (2018) six-phase RTA. In Phase One, we familiarised ourselves with the qualitative data by compiling open-ended survey and interview responses, reviewing each question and participant holistically to prepare for coding (Ayikoru and Park, 2019; Martin *et al.*, 2015; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2011). Phase Two involved inductive coding of the full dataset to avoid fragmentation (Braun *et al.*, 2018), generating semantic codes from participant language (Terry *et al.*, 2017). In Phase Three, latent codes were refined into three conceptual themes: Antecedents of Cognitive Dissonance, Cognitive Dissonance and Belonging and Reframing Academic Belonging, supported by "power quotes" (see Tables 2–4) (Pratt, 2009, p. 860). Literature was reviewed to position these themes, which were found to be underrepresented in existing research on academic belonging, particularly in business schools during crises (Martin *et al.*, 2015; Wilson *et al.*, 2025). Phases Four and Five (theme revision and definition) resulted in five candidate themes (see Figure 1), reviewed for coherence with the research question. Phase Six involved producing the final narrative aligned with these refined themes. Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic and evolving relationships among the key constructs, with cognitive dissonance playing a central role in reshaping and reframing academic belonging.

Findings

The themes discussed in this section represent the core contribution of our study, highlighting the role of cognitive dissonance, and more specifically, belonging dissonance, in shaping academic belonging during times of crisis.

Table 1. Survey respondents (n = 153) and interviewee’s (n = 12) demographic profile

Panel_A_Survey respondent’s profile			Panel B_Interviewees profile
Category	count	%	count
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	71	46.41%	7
Male	78	50.98%	4
Other	2	1.31%	0
No response	2	1.31%	1
<i>Age</i>			
25 < 35	11	7.19%	1
35 < 45	35	22.88%	4
45 < 55	49	32.03%	4
55 < 65	43	28.10%	2
65+	14	9.15%	0
No response	1	0.65%	1
<i>Highest qualification</i>			
PhD	138	90.20%	10
Masters/PG	12	7.84%	1
UG	2	1.31%	0
Other	1	0.65%	1
<i>Time at current workplace</i>			
<1 year	2	1.31%	0
1 < 5 years	42	27.45%	4
5 < 10 years	34	22.22%	4
10+ years	75	49.02%	3
No response	0	0.00%	1
<i>Academic Position</i>			
Full-time	143	93.46%	11
Part-time	6	3.92%	0
Tutor/Casual	2	1.31%	0
Other	2	1.31%	0
No response	0	0.00%	1
<i>Country</i>			
USA/Canada	36	23.53%	1
Africa	3	1.96%	1
Australia/NZ	65	42.48%	6
Europe	44	28.76%	3
Asia	5	3.27%	0
No response	0	0.00%	1

Theme 1: Antecedents of Cognitive Dissonance

Business academics in this study identified three key areas where their work changed in response to university leadership and management decisions during the COVID-19 crisis, as outlined below. [Table 2](#) provides additional quotes pertaining to the theme under discussion.

(I) *Moving from relational to transactional interactions:* Academics noted a shift in the nature of the relationship with their university, for example, Participant a97 stated: “*Feeling like merely a cog in the machine. Huge changes in management and real disconnect*”. Participants viewed universities to be operating as businesses, focusing primarily on increasing profitability and decreasing costs. This included decisions to make academics redundant, engaging in arm’s length, unidirectional, generic and non-personalised interactions with staff, and focusing on cutting costs and increasing profitability. These sentiments are reflected in Participant a53’s comment: “*Likely decreased my sense of belonging because of*

Table 2. Antecedents of cognitive dissonance

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Quote
Antecedents of Cognitive Dissonance	Moving from relational to transactional interactions	<i>Transactional managerial culture</i>	Lots of extra labour that is supposedly appreciated by the University BUT not accounted for in workload – so basically a type of “labour theft”. Makes it hard to meet research KPI targets. (Participant a67) Our president is laying people off and they gave him a raise. Now, what do you think? Good job. [They] pay him even more money to get rid of more of us now’ (Participant 6)
		<i>University prioritising profits/budgets</i>	When you move beyond the College of Business, to the entire university, I think it’s very fragmented. Having a sense of community with or a belongingness to the entire university. I think is strained this point. You know, budget problems (Participant 22) Universities are run like businesses. The business of business is to make profits and watch for their bottom line. COVID has made this fact more obvious . . . COVID reminded me of the transactional nature of this employment relationship (Participant a8)
	Moving from in-person to virtual interactions	<i>Staying quiet and lacking interactions</i>	Everything happens on email, people, people don’t engage that and even in if you would set up a meeting with a team of people, and you only get certain people who feel comfortable saying stuff, especially when you start recording meetings, people just keep quiet and don’t speak anymore (Participant 10) There are some faculty members that I simply don’t see anymore. (Participant a87)
		<i>Loss of conference networking</i>	The shift to online conferences has also made me feel more disconnected from the academic community in that conferences are a very important way in which to build relationships with those in my discipline (Participant a32) Less engagement with colleagues, particularly those outside of my institute – e.g. colleagues I would normally connect with at conferences (Participant a35) . . . You really miss those academic conferences, because, you know, they are really good to learn about your field, but also to establish connections, we cannot do it online. (participant 2) So that spontaneity has been compromised, that chance meeting has been compromised . . . So yes, there is a change, it is not all negative, but I think that chance, serendipity moments have been lost (participant 4) I do not see work colleagues face to face- miss the accidental hallway meetings for conversation (Participant a5) And so, sometimes I do not see colleagues for weeks because we are just like ships in the night. And so, you know, people are withdrawing, and they do less of that discretionary contribution, and all those other sorts of things, what I would call maintenance tasks, like having a chat with a colleague, maybe problem solving, you know, sharing, venting, you know, you might vent about a difficult student or a class that is not working well, or research that has not been progressing but you do not even get that now because it is very rarely that you, you know, interact (Participant 6)
		<i>Loss of serendipitous interactions and in-person catch-ups</i>	I think there’s just something really different in the way that we communicate via zoom, rather than maybe in person, or by, you know, extensive emails, which have been part of even more part of our lives over the past year or so. (participant 9) . . . But people were uncomfortable with zoom, people were not sure of how to even use the chat functions at that stage. I mean, a lot has changed (Participant 16)
	Shifting the balance and increasing intensity of workload	<i>Unsustainable workload intensity</i>	I think a lot of people feel really overworked . . . That is why I am working from home today because I will get a lot more done today and I have a lot of work, you know, semester’s about to start (Participant 6) So, it was quite hard, I guess. Performance wise, you know, those long hours, though, that kind of sense of isolation, you know that, because it does take its toll and really negatively impacts on your mental health, that then has repercussions on your performativity. . . you know, it’s, it’s this sense of constantly spinning plates . . . suffering from all this crazy workload (participant 9) So, when you are, like, overwhelmed with workload, this high teaching load, so I do not have it balanced, there is very heavy teaching load (Participant 2) We all struggled through it – extra work (prep), online collaborative engagement w students (v.hard, stressful), etc. (Participant a73)
		<i>Teaching versus Research</i>	

Table 3. Cognitive dissonance and belonging transformation context

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Quote
Cognitive Dissonance and Belonging Transformation Context	Belonging Dissonance	<i>From relational to transactional</i>	In our department and our college, everything was about budgets. You could feel it. You could feel that things were being decided not based on people but on cost. (Participant 8) Have felt isolated from decision-making. Lots of uncertainty over long period of time. (Participant a71) So, they treat academics really just like a resource and so I call them intellectual pimps because really, they are just interested in you while you are teaching really hard for them, extraordinarily hard, or making them money through research and reputation and the minute you stop doing that, or you have trouble doing that, they can toss you to the curb. (Participant 5) The absence of physically being able to go into any of those places, is a key factor for me. I'm, I'm not a good online person, I, I work hard. But I find that when I can actually meet someone for coffee, and sit and chat with them, it changes my whole disposition. (Participant 12) ... the social isolation is difficult, not being able to see friends and family. Trying to work and also help children with remote learning from home is difficult (Participant a86) We were closer as a discipline group because instead of being spread across a multi campus university we could all meet together online. We don't need to physically be together to be together. (Participant a153) I do not have a sense of belonging to the physical institution since it has been so long since I have been there. Weekly meetings scheduled with colleagues in the department and in the discipline have helped with maintaining a sense of belonging to the department and to the discipline. (Participant a94) "Your research is the element of fit to have belongingness within an organization, there needs to be a fit ... everybody's teaching one more course per semester ... that was one of the first things that created tension is that route that research release time was taken away. So now everybody teaches an extra course, that makes you busier because we still have our research wreck, you know, our requirements and stuff. They didn't change that. And it Oh, a lot of people are upset, you can see it, I'm just grinning and taking it". (Participant 22) I think the universities can look at what is a win-win for the different participants, and taking time out to do a reflection, to do an audit on there, just asking, 'what was it like? What does an academic want? What does the researcher want?' (participant 4) ... And I usually want to see the sign from senior management that they [are] actually interested in us because every academic we want to be seen, like, it is a creative profession, right. So, you want to be seen as valued by the institution because of what you do, because of your individual achievements ... You see that other colleagues were just treated as a regular employee, and you think, well, they actually do some outstanding stuff, why their expertise, their individual achievements are not celebrated that much. (participant 2) I think COVID has brought to the fore the humane aspect of academic at staff/department level but it has shown the Universities' real inhumane face. I think globally (but especially in the UK) we are being forced to work long hours to cater to any requests from our students that have become demanding customers (and they know it). This may be the case only of Uni that are not in the Russell Group but it has created a major sense of detachment in the academic staff (and the academic services). (Participant c39) So, I think what universities need to do is to understand that, you know, educators have phenomenal capacity to be role models, but because leaders, they think of the end recipient, i.e. students, we begin to ignore ourselves as well (Participant 4) Huge changes in management and real disconnect and sense of being misrepresented/understood. (Participant a97) Or one of the worst things that can happen is that academics will feel like they can be easily replaced. Like, we take pride in how we develop our teaching and research, our publications, and they are like, 'Okay, so we have 10 academics, and we can basically just replace them with another. No, but I am special, like, academics like to feel special ... They [Management] are just interested in you while you are teaching really hard for them, extraordinarily hard, or making them money through research and reputation and the minute you stop doing that, they can toss you to the curb. So, it is like, you know, a bit like intellectual prostitutes in that we just kind of selling our wares around the place (participant 6) So, we've kind of created a bit of a team to be able to teach what I'm doing and why they're not doing it. And I've also incorporated those, one of the pros from u (sic). That's how being an expert around the module; we've started to cry a little bit of a sense of belonging to the module and understanding the module. And I think bigger into the university, there's not so much of a sense of belonging to the university, you, you get very eyes isolated, all you do get this silo approach happening especially when it comes to this type of teaching. (participant 10) I asked students to show us their home, introduce us to their family (and pets) and talk about the local impact of COVID where they live (subject to the students being comfortable with doing this). Have asked them to take their camera out into the streets to show up [sic] what is going on in their neighbourhood (some are deserted-like Victoria, others are packed with people, like Lahore) (Participant a75) Working from home can be lonely and while there are multiple meetings online, but the sense of connection was missing. Due to COVID we had to reinvent a lot of our online teaching mechanisms which was appreciated by students, most felt that they were feeling more connected than in face-to-face classes. [I use] breakout rooms, Teams chat, Kahoot, online activities (Participant a11) "I set up a community of practice of colleagues who are from different disciplines in academia ... whereby we use an opportunity for someone to share their experiences ... and slowly build up that community of practice". (Participant 4) Right, I've had to, I've had to search out my own niche of academics, who fit my values, who I align with ... And then, you know, you sort of have to be strategic behind the scenes with the people who are aligned to perhaps, you know, a new way of thinking arrowed way of thinking, to, you know, build some momentum in terms of having input into how policies are implemented and, you know, how practices are sort of looked at ... We've just had to champion and fight for that work-life balance in different ways. (Participant 21) It has brought human relationships to the forefront. Through social media I have made friends that I have never met face to face (Participant b2) Both positively and negatively. I have initiated a virtual platform for a community engagement project. (Participant a183) I think, everyday communication is important to maintain a good relationship. We are connected and is in good term through online as well. (Participant a165) There is just not enough time to consistently attend [belonging initiatives] due to publish or perish pressures. (Participant a33) I am happy not to come to campus, being vulnerable. (Participant b3) Homeworking that has been the norm since April 2020 has enabled me to avoid the isolation of an antisocial working environment (Participant c88) I am not best in interpersonal communication, so covid has given me a chance to get a new start (Participant a173) Reduced the angst about feeling I don't fit in/belong ... because no one was able to go anywhere, get invited anywhere, and doing things online was invisible unless you actively logged on so did not notice any extent to which I was not included (Participant a136)
		<i>From in-person to virtual</i>	
		<i>From workload balance to imbalance</i>	
	Belonging Work	<i>Classroom belonging work through engagement</i>	
		<i>Belonging work at the organisational level</i>	
		<i>Belonging work at the relational level</i>	
		<i>Refraining from engaging in belonging work</i>	

Table 4. Reframing academic belonging

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Quote
Reframing Academic Belonging	Sense of Belonging orientation	<i>Reframing academic belonging internally</i>	I think because that's where I form relationships—with students and colleagues . . . I don't feel it with the institution. (Participant 19) Maybe there is some positive to come out of it. Like there has been quite a lot of previous talks about the focus on academic performances and competitiveness in the academic profession. I mean, people are now a bit more caring for each other. So, focusing on more impactful teaching and research, rather than just trying to get the matrix and promotions and stuff like that. So that might be that would be a positive at some stage. (participant 2)
		<i>Reframing academic belonging externally</i>	So, by going virtual, I've developed some more or less international networks that I wouldn't have had the chance to unless COVID happened. (participant 21) Made me realize that my sense of belonging comes from a broader, international community. (Participant b18)
	Sense of belonging intensity	<i>Loss of academic belonging</i>	I feel more isolated from my colleagues. My department is very collegial, with most faculty in the office most days and a lot of daily interaction. Working remotely has caused us to become more isolated from each other and there are some faculty members that I simply don't see anymore. (Participant a87) And I think bigger into the university, there's not so much of a sense of belonging to the university, you, you get very isolated, all you do get this silo approach happening especially when it comes to this type of teaching. (Participant 10) But I think that's the real difference for me, between this closed door very isolated. That doesn't, for me, foster a sense of belonging at all. (Participant 9) It has become a little bit isolating, which also does not help with the sense of belonging (participant 6) It has probably meant that I have had to think through my teaching practice and beliefs in more detail esp. When thinking about what is important in the online space. And it has allowed for some forced innovation. So I feel reconnected to pedagogy and my wider research community because research has constituted the 'fun' part of the job. (Participant c96) Very little. If anything, the increased use of Teams has aided in connecting with diverse people across disciplines and schools. (Participant c20) I feel that I belong more (Participant b7) An increased sense of all needing to pull together and help one another out where possible. (Participant a168) It has increased my sense of belonging as the virtual environment has created more connectivity in spaces where I was not always involved. (Participant a101) I prefer to work off campus. The physical spaces (offices, teaching rooms) are not appealing to spend time in so I had no connection to them when I was physically present on campus. If anything, COVID has increased a sense of belonging and increased social interaction because I am online all the time (for work and social activities). Online interactions have enhanced belonging because they have removed physical boundaries associated with multiple campus locations. (Participant a92)

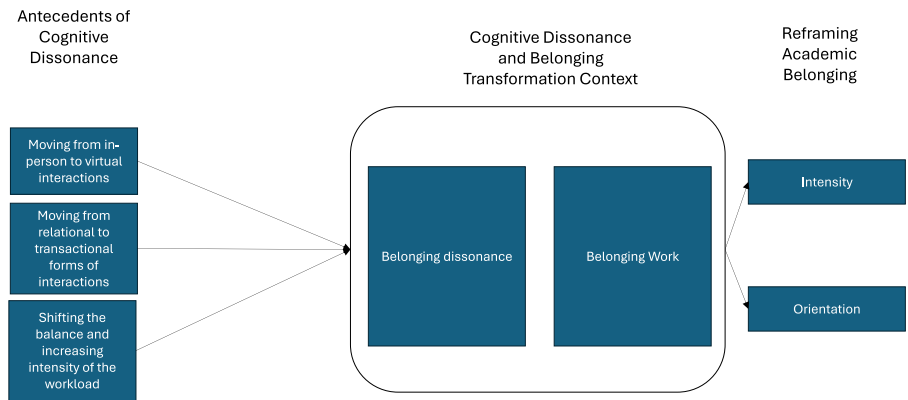


Figure 1. Belonging dissonance

the way the university has handled the crisis, making clear that it values investment in infrastructure over people, e.g. refusing to delay capital projects or taking other actions that might have saved jobs”. Another participant noted how their university’s response to COVID included the decision to make staff members redundant and reward those who led this initiative. Participant X states: *Our president is laying people off and they gave him a raise. Now, what do you think? Good job. [They] pay him even more money to get rid of more of us now’*. This quote also reinforces the hierarchical arm’s length structure of the university whereby the participant views executive leadership as not being “one of them”, as in, not being an academic faculty member, but rather a “business” president operating with a transactional managerial mindset and motivated by financial incentives.

Similarly, Participant a8 considers COVID to be a catalyst in this on-going transactional shift. For them: *Universities are run like businesses. The business of business is to make profits and watch for their bottom line. Covid has made this fact more obvious. What sense of belonging is meaningful if your organisation treats you merely as a digit on their balance sheet? Covid reminded me of the transactional nature of this employment relationship ... Covid has killed the golden era of academia and revealed the transactional nature of my employer.*

(II) *Moving from in-person to virtual interactions*: Academics transitioned to virtual communication platforms, introducing new ways to stay connected with their institutions. While some found online engagement efficient and conducive to maintaining collegial relationships, others felt it disrupted the authenticity and spontaneity of in-person interactions. For many, this shift signalled a broader move toward transactional relationships, weakening the relational fabric of academic life, which is echoed by Participant a161’s statement: *“Less informal discussions which are important for shared learning and for generating new ideas for projects”*. Similarly, Participant 4 viewed that the shift from in-person to virtual interactions impacted the authenticity and spontaneity of relationship building and maintenance. Participant 4 indicates: *“... spontaneity has been compromised, that chance meeting has been compromised ... So yes, there is a change, it is not all negative, but I think that chance, serendipity moments have been lost”*. Others described online communication to be different or sometimes lacks interaction altogether. The two following quotes illustrate this finding:

I think there’s just something really different in the way that we communicate via zoom, rather than maybe in person, or by, you know, extensive emails, which have been part of even more part of our lives over the past year or so (Participant 9).

Everything happens on email, people, people don't engage that and even in if you would set up a meeting with a team of people, and you only get certain people who feel comfortable saying stuff, especially when you start recording meetings, people just keep quiet and don't speak anymore" (Participant 10).

In addition to interactions with work colleagues, participants noted the impact of the crises on their ability to engage in conference networking. For instance, Participant a32 notes: *"The shift to online conferences has also made me feel more disconnected from the academic community in that conferences are a very important way in which to build relationships with those in my discipline"*. Some participants, however, viewed it as a practical and effective alternative or felt that there was no negative impact, such as Participant b6 who said, *"It does not really change anything, since we are still in touch with each other through MS-Teams or other means of communication"*.

Participants also noted reduced engagement in virtual classrooms, citing one-sided interactions and a lack of immediacy often exemplified by students turning off their cameras. Participant 13, for example, said that *"... everyone shut off their camera's due to bandwidth issues. That was horrible, because we couldn't – the teachers – see any of the students". The only time we get any feedback is when we ask "do you have any questions" ... and then two or three will type "Yes" in the chat box. And that's all the feedback we get.'* These changes challenged traditional modes of connection and contributed to a growing sense of disconnection within academic communities.

(III) *Shifting the balance and increasing intensity of the workload:* Academics indicated that enhanced teaching load or restructuring of existing courses, and the added administrative responsibilities, increased their stress levels as well as having impacted their ability to dedicate time to engage in their research, interact with colleagues or spend time with family and friends. Participant 4 reflected on the unsustainable workload and said, *"Now we have all got too busy ... the workload has just been horrific. And so, the work-life balance has not been good at all this year"*. Participant 4 further stated the impact on their research by saying that *"... often research is secondary because the teaching load is so high"*.

Taken together, the findings and quotes in Table 2 show that shifts to transactional management, virtual modes and intensified workloads each constrain the everyday practices through which belonging is ordinarily created and maintained. These disruptions bring academics' sense of belonging to the surface and prompt them to question it.

Theme 2: cognitive dissonance and belonging transformation context

Crisis management practices during COVID-19 and the resulting tensions in academics' role appraisal triggered cognitive dissonance within their professional identities. These experiences gave rise to what we term "belonging dissonance", which in turn prompted engagement in "belonging work".

(I) Belonging Dissonance:

The study identified four key instances of belonging dissonance arising from shifts in university leadership and management during the COVID-19 crisis, as discussed below and further supported by quotes given in Table 3.

(I-i) *Belonging Dissonance – From relational to transactional:* While participants associated academic belonging with collegiality and relational engagement, they felt that a managerial approach that prioritised financial metrics over human needs. Decisions such as staff redundancies and rewarding those who implemented them led to feelings of disengagement and devaluation, with academics perceiving their worth as tied solely to profit generation. This was evidenced by Participant a8, who said: *"COVID has killed the golden era of academia and revealed the transactional nature of my employer. This is just a job to me from now onwards"*. This reflects broader concerns about the erosion of the "golden era" of academia, where relationships and connections were central. Participants reported

exclusion from decision-making, clashing with expectations of inclusion and shared governance. Instead of collaborative structures, they encountered top-down, bureaucratic systems that eroded their sense of agency and belonging, for example, Participant 15 said: *“There was no sense that anyone was looking to protect or defend them. And the message that sends is that we’re numbers, and if your number’s up, that’s it”*. Many also described receiving generic or inadequate support, with leadership perceived as prioritising student needs over staff wellbeing. Some felt reduced to institutional resources – one participant (Participant 6) even referred to academics as “intellectual pimps” – highlighting a shift toward market-driven performance metrics.

(I-ii) *Belonging Dissonance – From in-person to virtual*: We observed that the shift from in-person to virtual interactions further amplified academics’ experiences of belonging dissonance. Moving online disrupted the nature of collegial relationships, which is evidenced by Participant 9’s comment: *“... going back to the issue of around belonging, it felt like those, you know, those conversations that you don’t really typically give much weight to, you know, the chat in the kitchen, while you’re getting a coffee, you know, those kinds of things, accidental conversations, I think you realize the importance of those when it was taken away”*. This comment highlights how informal and spontaneous interactions, which are often taken for granted in everyday academic life, play an important role in sustaining a sense of collegial connection and belonging. When these interactions disappeared in the shift to virtual work, participants became more aware of how such seemingly minor encounters contribute to maintaining relational ties within the academic community.

This, of course, has not been the case for every participant. While most participants struggled with this transition, others found it more efficient and suited their way of working and building positive relationships with their colleagues. For example, Participant a118 noted: *“I feel I have better working relationships while working from home. All contact is for professional purposes or chosen social purposes”*. Similarly, Participant a94 highlights the role of consistent online communication in helping them maintain a sense of belonging, reducing the experience of belonging dissonance: *“I do not have a sense of belonging to the physical institution since it has been so long since I have been there. Weekly meetings scheduled with colleagues in the department and in the discipline have helped with maintaining a sense of belonging to the department and to the discipline”*.

(I-iii) *Belonging Dissonance – From workload balance to imbalance*: Participants experienced further belonging dissonance when referring to disruptions in their intellectual work. They stated that they had less time to do their research or connect with others to discuss their academic work. As evidenced in Table 3, Participant 22 reported that increased teaching and administrative duties negatively impacted their research, leading to a diminished sense of belonging. This shift created a form of belonging dissonance, prompting them to realign their connection with their university and department. Others found that the increased intensity of work during the pandemic created a sense of belonging dissonance as they felt more isolated and pressured to catch up and meet the rising teaching demands caused by the crisis. Belonging dissonance in this context was also experienced due to academics’ inability to attend conferences and be physically present to interact with other people and discuss their intellectual work, as highlighted by Participant a167, *“... inability to go to conferences has impacted feeling of belonging in research”*.

(I-iv) *Belonging Dissonance – Self-reflected role appraisal*: Participants viewed academia as a “creative profession” centred around “individual achievements” reinforcing the view that being an academic goes beyond the handling of operational and repetitive tasks. For them, belonging implied being recognised as an academic faculty member rather than an employee within their university. Participants felt that their achievements, expertise and status had not been recognised by higher management during the pandemic. The failure of university leadership to mirror this appraisal led to a loss of role affirmation. The absence of symbolic recognition, awards or inclusion in decision-making processes contributed to a growing sense that their work and professional identity were being devalued (Alvesson et al., 2015). As a

result, participants experienced a form of dissonance related to how they were being treated at their university. For instance, Participant 2 captures the experience of belonging dissonance by reflecting on the lack of recognition and symbolic affirmation from senior management, which undermined the sense of being valued as an academic professional rather than treated as a regular employee: “... And I usually want to see the sign from senior management that they [are] actually interested in us, because every academic wants to be seen, like, it is a creative profession, right. So, you want to be seen as valued by the institution because of what you do, because of your individual achievements ... You see that other colleagues were just treated as a regular employee, and you think, well, they actually do some outstanding stuff, why their expertise, their individual achievements are not celebrated that much”.

As such, academics felt that universities failed to maintain their professional identity as academics and instead treated them in the capacity of a “customer service” representative by pushing them to perform rather than care and nurture knowledge. This created feelings of apathy toward students, as these responsibilities did not align with participants’ definition of what it means to be an academic and researcher. Participant c39 and others outlined in Tables 2 and 3 were scathing of their institution, stating, “We have been forced to become clowns to entertain them, and I have been forced to become students’ mothers and listen to dead cats, suicidal thoughts, and breakups. And I am not the only one. The University has ‘taught’ us how to become clowns basically ... I think COVID has brought to the fore the humane aspect of academic at staff/department level but it has shown the Universities’ real inhumane face. I think globally (but especially in the UK) we are being forced to work long hours to cater to any requests from our students that have become demanding customers (and they know it). This may be the case only of Uni that are not in the Russell Group but it has created a major sense of detachment in the academic staff (and the academic services)”.

(II) Belonging Work: In this study, we observed that following the experience of dissonance in how belonging was defined, sourced or enacted, participants either engaged or refrained from participating in belonging work (Kuurne and Vieno, 2022). These efforts reflected attempts to navigate and manage dissonance at relational and organisational levels.

(II-i) Belonging Work – Classroom belonging work through engagement: A small number of academics engaged in belonging work to create and maintain a sense of belonging within their classrooms, as evidenced by the quotes in Table 3. They mostly did that through online means by being more present, changing their delivery approach and providing more tools to enhance engagement and interaction. For instance, Participant a75 focused on encouraging students to share their surroundings which helped bring in a more personalised and friendlier environment for teaching and learning: “Have asked them to take their camera out into the streets to show up [sic] what is going on in their neighbourhood (some are deserted – like Victoria, others are packed with people, like Lahore)”. Others used technology to enhance communication between students and re-create a more conducive environment for working and belonging. As per Participant 11, “Working from home can be lonely and while there are multiple meetings online, but the sense of connection was missing. Due to COVID we had to reinvent a lot of our online teaching mechanisms which was appreciated by students, most felt that they were feeling more connected than in face-to-face classes. [I use] breakout rooms, Teams chat, Kahoot, online activities”.

(II-ii) Belonging Work – Belonging work at the organisational level: While many participants engaged in belonging work as a means of mitigating their own belonging dissonance, others engaged in belonging work to re-create and maintain the sense of belonging at the organisational level. This involved work aimed at creating or maintaining a sense of belonging within their discipline, department(s) or classroom(s). These participants largely focused on establishing a collective sense of connection. For example, Participant a152 said: “In some ways it [my sense of belonging] is stronger – our department (and discipline group) has a WhatsApp group that is in constant contact and mimics some of the hallway chat that we used to have regularly – it is both formal relating to work but also fun and informal”. This comment illustrates how participants actively sought to recreate informal collegial interactions

that were disrupted during the pandemic. The use of digital communication tools allowed participants to maintain both work-related exchanges and informal conversations, thereby sustaining a collective sense of connection within the department.

Similarly, Participant 4 focused on setting up a community of practice for academics to share their experiences and work with others: *"I set up a community of practice of colleagues who are from different disciplines in academia . . . whereby we use an opportunity for someone to share their experiences . . . and slowly build up that community of practice"*. This passage highlights how participants engaged in deliberate efforts to create structured spaces for collegial interaction and knowledge sharing. By establishing a community of practice, the participant sought to foster ongoing relational ties and support a shared sense of belonging across disciplinary boundaries within the academic environment.

(II-iii) *Belonging Work – Belonging work at the relational level*: At a relational level, belonging work was mainly perceived in how participants tried to maintain and strengthen existing relationships with colleagues. In the absence of formal successful attempts to maintain collegial relationships, participants described actively reaching out to new colleagues, reconnecting with peers or drawing on long-standing professional friendships. The following two quotes and others contained in Table 3 help illustrate our finding: *" . . . but there is just not enough time to consistently attend due to publish or perish pressures. I have worked VERY hard on the personal front to stay connected to friends. That's been important"* (Participant a33) and Participant 9 who said: *"So, I have managed to interact with a few you know, we've had a meeting or we've met and gone for lunch and things. And that's been brilliant. Like say my wellbeing rocket[ed], [I] just looked at actually interact[ing] with People again"*.

(II-iv) *Belonging Work – Refraining from engaging in belonging work*: While some academics responded to belonging dissonance by actively engaging in belonging work, others refrained from participating in this type of relational work. For instance, as evidenced in Table 3, Participant a33 blamed work pressure as the main factor stopping them from engaging in belonging initiatives, stating, *"There is just not enough time to consistently attend [belonging initiatives] due to publish or perish pressures"*. Some participants felt their university failed to foster academic belonging, holding it responsible for this shortcoming, as Participant a94 said, *"No encouragement to have a sense of belonging at the university level"*. Others, however, experienced a sense of relief as the pandemic disrupted traditional expectations of academic belonging and helped them feel less vulnerable. As indicated by Participant b3 *"I am happy not to come to campus, being vulnerable"*.

These findings reveal the emotional labour involved in belonging work, which can become too burdensome, especially when academics already feel exhausted or excluded. In such cases, disengaging from belonging work becomes a form of academic survival.

Theme 3: reframing academic belonging

Drawing on survey and interview responses, we found that the context and dynamics of belonging transformation led academics to reframe their sense of belonging in terms of its intensity and orientation, and this is supported further by the quotes provided in Table 4.

(I-i) *Sense of belonging orientation – Reframing academic belonging internally*: For several participants, academic belonging became oriented toward their colleagues and students, rather than the university as an entity. Participant b6 said, for example: *"I don't feel [belonging] with the institution. I feel that with my colleagues and my students"*. Others reframed their sense of belonging by holding on to shared struggles or mutual support among colleagues. Despite the disruptions brought by COVID-19, one participant (Participant 2) noted that the crisis had unexpectedly prompted a constructive shift in their sense of belonging. They explained that the pandemic softened the competitive edge traditionally associated with academic life, where performance metrics and promotion pressures often dominate professional identity. Instead, they observed colleagues becoming *"a bit more caring for each other"*, with conversations and collaborations increasingly centred on *meaningful*

teaching and research rather than on meeting numerical targets. For this participant, the pandemic created space for a more humanised, value-driven academic culture, suggesting that, amidst the challenges, COVID-19 also encouraged a renewed orientation toward collegiality, mutual support and shared purpose.

(I-ii) Sense of belonging orientation – Reframing academic belonging externally: Several participants described re-orienting belonging beyond the university, towards communities of practice that include non-academic collaborators (e.g. artists, designers, sector practitioners). For example, Participant a111 explained: “*I feel more and more connected with a collective I have been developing with colleagues who are not necessarily from my business school and who are not necessarily academics (e.g. artists, designers, art mediators ...)*”. Similar accounts were given by Participants 21 and b18, who described substituting institution-centred belonging with interest- and practice-centred ties. Taken together, these accounts indicate that reframing belonging toward people, shared practices and professional identity rather than toward the university *per se*, helped recalibrate academic belonging under crisis conditions.

(II-i) Sense of belonging intensity – Loss of academic belonging: Participants who witnessed high levels of belonging dissonance and who were less likely to engage in belonging work experienced a loss in their sense of belonging. They felt isolated and abandoned. According to them, and more specifically Participant a113, the pandemic broke the “office culture” within their department and institutions, “*It [the pandemic] just breaks up the culture in a department because many are working from home. Hence that sense of belonging is diminished*”. With no active participation in maintaining a sense of academic belonging, they struggled to feel connected with other colleagues. As per Participant a87, “*I feel more isolated from my colleagues. My department is very collegial, with most faculty in the office most days and a lot of daily interaction. Working remotely has caused us to become more isolated from each other and there are some faculty members that I simply don't see anymore*”.

(II-ii) Sense of belonging intensity – Heightened academic belonging: The findings collectively illustrate varying intensities of academic belonging, with many respondents describing a noticeable strengthening of their connection to their professional, pedagogical and collegial communities. Their narratives highlight, as shown in Table 4, how the shift to digitally mediated work during the pandemic created new forms of engagement, reconfigured existing academic identities and reduced structural barriers to participation. Several participants articulated a deepened reconnection to academic identity, particularly in relation to pedagogy and research. Participant c96, for instance, described engaging in renewed reflection on their “*teaching practice and beliefs*”, noting that the online environment necessitated “*forced innovation*”. This reflective process not only encouraged a more intentional approach to teaching but also facilitated a sense of renewed alignment with the “*wider research community*”. Such expressions demonstrate an intense form of academic belonging rooted in intellectual re-engagement and professional purpose.

In other cases, belonging was enhanced through expanded cross-disciplinary connectivity enabled by digital platforms. Participant c20 reported that the increased use of Microsoft Teams improved “*connecting with diverse people across disciplines and schools*”. Here, the sense of belonging emerges from broadened professional networks, suggesting a shift from localised departmental affiliation toward a more distributed and relational academic community. Some participants conveyed a more generalised but nonetheless meaningful increase in belonging. Participant b7 stated simply: “*I feel that I belong more*”. Although succinct, this response reflects a clear shift toward stronger identification with the academic environment, pointing to the cumulative effect of digital engagement and evolving collegial structures.

A recurring theme across several responses was an intensified sense of collective effort, where community cohesion was strengthened by shared challenges and mutual support. Participant a168 emphasised an “*increased sense of all needing to pull together and help one another out where possible*”, signalling a heightened communal belonging grounded in solidarity, collaboration and shared responsibility during periods of institutional disruption.

For other participants, belonging was shaped by changes in the spatial dynamics of academic life. Participant a101 described increased participation in previously less accessible spaces, observing that “*the virtual environment has created more connectivity in spaces where I was not always involved*”. This indicates a high-intensity form of belonging enabled by digital inclusion, where virtual environments mitigate barriers to engagement and widen opportunities for academic involvement. A particularly strong example of digital-first academic belonging arises in participant a92’s narrative. They noted a preference for working off campus due to the unappealing nature of physical workspaces and explained that “*COVID has increased a sense of belonging and increased social interaction because I am online all the time*”. Here, online interactions are framed as enhancing belonging by removing “*physical boundaries associated with multiple campus locations*”. This response reflects a transformative reorientation in which virtual environments create a stronger sense of community than the physical campus, signalling a shift in how belonging is constructed and experienced.

Collectively, these accounts indicate that, for participants in this study, academic belonging during the pandemic was often maintained or strengthened despite the transition to virtual modes. Participants described reconnecting with pedagogical values, expanding their networks, experiencing greater inclusivity and developing stronger communal bonds. Several also noted that digital environments reduced physical constraints and enabled wider participation in academic interactions. Taken together, these narratives summarise how participants recalibrated their sense of belonging within hybrid and crisis-shaped working conditions, as documented in the preceding themes.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how business school academics navigated their sense of belonging during the COVID-19 crisis, a period marked by unprecedented organisational disruption and uncertainty. Our findings reveal how perceived changes in the taken-for-granted relational ties, expectations and identification with the workplace put into question one’s sense of belonging and the need to resolve it. Thus, we outline four contributions that advance our understanding of sense of belonging and, more specifically, academic belonging during crises.

Firstly, we foreground the importance of cognitive dissonance in informing how individuals experience, evaluate and resolve their sense of belonging in the workplace in times of crisis. While existing studies link sense of belonging to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Gravett *et al.*, 2024) and highlight engagement in belonging work as a means to maintain and foster belonging, they pay less attention to the role of cognitive dissonance in how individuals interrogate and make sense of their own belonging, and in turn, enact corresponding behaviours. Specifically, we observe that questioning one’s own sense of belonging is manifested through cognitive dissonance. Like Shah and Lacaze’s (2025) work, we found that, in the case of academic belonging, role conflict (e.g. changes in workload model, role-based appraisal tensions), injustice (e.g. redundancies, students over staff preference) and workplace ethics (e.g. online presence, shift from relational to transactional) acted as primary triggers of cognitive dissonance.

Our findings further suggest that, in some instances, these triggers may intensify one facet of cognitive dissonance over others. In this study, it was the relational dimension that became particularly salient. This heightened emphasis on the relational aspect led us to identify our second contribution, which we term “belonging dissonance”. Belonging dissonance is not conceptualised as a separate or competing construct to cognitive dissonance, nor as a distinct form of identity conflict. Rather, it refers to a specific manifestation of cognitive dissonance in which relational and identity-based cognitions that underpin belonging are brought into conflict. It captures the discomfort individuals experience when their sense of belonging

toward their institution is misaligned with how belonging is enacted, recognised or reciprocated in practice.

In the context of this study, belonging dissonance reflects the misalignment between academics' expectations of collegiality, professional identity and recognition and the perceived transactional, efficiency-driven practices adopted by universities during the COVID-19 crisis. This finding is aligned with [Festinger's \(1957\)](#) definition of cognitive dissonance as discomfort arising from inconsistency between cognitions. It also reinforces subsequent work emphasising that dissonance can be experienced and resolved through multiple pathways beyond attitude change alone ([McGrath, 2017](#)). Importantly, rather than reframing identity conflict as a new construct ([Horton et al., 2014](#)), belonging dissonance specifies the content domain through which cognitive dissonance is experienced, namely relationships and identity-relevant practices that constitute belonging.

Moreover, belonging dissonance, as conceptualised in our study, differs from vicarious and group dissonance ([Hillman et al., 2023](#); [Matz and Wood, 2005](#); [McKimmie, 2015](#); [Norton et al., 2003](#)) in both its locus and its mechanism of resolution. Whereas vicarious and group dissonance involve attitude adjustment in response to misalignment with group norms or observed behaviours, belonging dissonance emerges from disruptions to identity-relevant relationships and practices. Thus, we suggest that belonging dissonance focuses more on experiences tied to identity-relationship tensions rather than cognitive or attitude-behaviour inconsistencies.

Thirdly, we found that belonging work ([Kuurne and Vieno, 2022](#)) emerges as a distinct form of dissonance resolution. Academics engage in belonging work to initiate, maintain or repair collegial relationships or strengthen organisational belonging ([Afshari, 2023](#); [Gravett et al., 2024](#)). Thus, the strategies of resolution are therefore not limited to cognitive realignment or conformity ([Matz and Wood, 2005](#); [McKimmie, 2015](#); [Norton et al., 2003](#)) but extend to relational labour aimed at sustaining, repairing or redirecting one's sense of belonging within or outside the organisation. Additionally, while our findings point to the importance of belonging work in resolving relationship and identity-based dissonance, we equally highlight the associated costs required in such work. We found that belonging dissonance may at times lead to a form of paralysis whereby academics refrain from engaging in any work.

Lastly, our findings contribute to organisational and academic belonging research ([Gravett et al., 2024](#)) by demonstrating how belonging work provides avenues to reframe one's sense of belonging, and in turn resolving belonging dissonance. Our findings suggest that the process of resolving belonging dissonance might not be limited to intra-organisational belonging work ([Harlow, 2003](#)). We found that some academics re-oriented their source of belonging away from their intra-organisational context toward external communities of practice (academic and/or non-academic) or personal environments. Our finding is aligned with existing studies on group dissonance, whereby individuals may seek to join other groups to resolve dissonance ([Matz and Wood, 2005](#)). We also suggest that, in some instances, individuals might attempt to resolve belonging dissonance by both joining other groups (i.e. non-academic communities of practice) and maintaining their presence in the existing in-group (i.e. same university).

Implications for practice

Our findings suggest that the erosion of academic belonging during a crisis is not simply an individual well-being issue but an organisational design problem. When universities shift rapidly toward transactional logics, virtualised interaction, intensified workloads and limited recognition or voice, staff experience belonging dissonance, whereby an acute misalignment between expected collegiality and identity affirmation and the institutional realities they encounter exists. Importantly, academics respond not only through attitudinal change but through belonging work: relational and emotional labour enacted in classrooms, peer networks and organisational spaces or, when depleted, through withdrawal from such work as a form of

survival. For leaders seeking resilience beyond operational continuity, the practical implication is clear: belonging must be treated as relational infrastructure that requires intentional investment, protected capacity and explicit accountability.

Firstly, institutions should rebuild relational infrastructure by creating protected, low-burden spaces for collegial connection that mimic the “accidental” interactions lost in remote/hybrid settings. A scalable model is the establishment of small cross-disciplinary micro communities (6–10 staff) that meet briefly but regularly, supported by institutionally protected calendar time. This shifts belonging work from discretionary labour performed by a few to a routine, legitimate practice. Effectiveness can be assessed through (1) participation rates, (2) short belonging pulse items capturing perceived collegial connection and informal interaction opportunities and (3) network indicators (e.g. average number of colleagues staff report they can approach for support). Because participants also emphasised the role of informal interaction in shared learning and idea generation, institutions can add collaboration proxies (e.g. cross-unit teaching/research initiatives initiated per semester) as downstream signals of renewed relational capacity.

Secondly, universities should implement a belonging-sensitive workload reset grounded in the principle of “capacity, not heroics”. Our data show that intensified teaching and administrative burdens crowd out research, collegial engagement and recovery time, conditions that both undermine belonging and reduce the likelihood that staff will engage in belonging work at all. Practically, this means revising workload models to recognise crisis-related labour (e.g. online redesign, heightened pastoral care, additional administration) and establishing explicit trigger points for relief (redistribution of service tasks, teaching support, reduced discretionary demands). Evaluation should combine (1) workload exceedance trends (self-reported hours above model), (2) time use indicators (hours available for research and collegial engagement) and (3) well-being proxies such as sick leave/FTE or short validated strain measures, interpreted carefully to avoid punitive use. This intervention is pivotal because it targets the mechanism through which belonging work becomes untenable: exhaustion and role overload.

Thirdly, leaders should re-establish professional identity affirmation through recognition systems that are specific, visible and inclusive of the full spectrum of academic contributions. The study indicates dissonance intensifies when academics feel replaceable and when their scholarly identity is not mirrored by institutional appraisal, especially when work is framed as generic service delivery rather than creative, expert practice. A lightweight recognition architecture (regular “impact moments”, peer nominations and short showcases of teaching/research craft) can restore symbolic recognition and signal that people, not only metrics, are valued. Metrics should include recognition coverage (number and distribution of staff recognised across level/discipline/contract type), perceived recognition items (“my contribution is noticed and valued”) and retention intention trends (e.g. likelihood to remain over 12 months).

Fourthly, universities should formalise participatory governance for disruption so that major crisis decisions are made with staff rather than to staff. Our findings link belonging dissonance to top-down change, generic communications and perceived exclusion from decision making, which collectively reinforce a transactional employer-employee relationship. Instituting a standing advisory mechanism with documented consultation loops (e.g. “you said/we did/why we can’t”) and requiring a brief “relational impact statement” for high impact changes makes relational infrastructure a legitimate decision criterion. Evaluation should track consultation integrity (percentage of major changes with transparent consultation and response loops) and procedural justice/trust pulse items, alongside organisational indicators such as formal grievance rates and turnover.

Finally, because belonging is “flickering” and processual in crisis contexts, institutions should adopt continuous measurement and capability building that treats belonging work as a *learnable practice* and an *accountable* outcome. A short quarterly pulse (5–7 items spanning connection, recognition, inclusion in decisions, workload sustainability and identity affirmation) paired with team-level action commitments (“one improvement per quarter”) can prevent belonging from

becoming an abstract aspiration. Complementing measurement with leader toolkits (inclusive hybrid meeting practices, respectful communication, relational repair) aligns with the study's implication that clear, respectful communication and intentional connection practices can mitigate dissonance and strengthen belonging. Core metrics here are response rates (to manage bias), belonging index trends by subgroup (including contract type), action completion rates and downstream indicators (absenteeism, retention intent, voluntary turnover).

Taken together, these interventions reposition belonging from a “soft” culture initiative to a strategic resilience lever across multiple crisis types including (1) public-health emergencies and their aftermath (Laasch, 2022), (2) geopolitical shocks that disrupt international mobility and policy settings (OECD, 2024), (3) climate-related disruptions that constrain physical access to campus (Laasch, 2022), (4) technology-driven upheavals (e.g. rapid AI adoption altering work and learning models) (GMAC, 2025) and (5) economic/market shocks that destabilise enrolments and revenue portfolios (Dickler, 2025). By investing in relational infrastructure, protecting capacity for belonging work, affirming academic identity, enabling voice and measuring what matters, leaders can reduce belonging dissonance and strengthen the conditions under which academic communities remain connected, productive and sustainable during and beyond such disruptions.

Limitations and future research

While this study offers important insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the focus on business school academics in predominantly English-speaking contexts limits the generalisability of our findings to other disciplines, cultural settings and non-Western higher education systems. Future research should explore whether similar patterns of belonging dissonance and belonging work emerge in more diverse global contexts. Beyond “diverse global contexts”, we see immediate relevance in primary and secondary educational settings, vocational education, public sector and non-profits, healthcare/clinician-educator settings, corporate R&D and creative industries and remote-first organisations, where hybrid roles, performance systems and distributed work similarly produce belonging dissonance and call forth belonging work. Future research should compare these sectors to test boundary conditions and identify sector-specific relational infrastructure that sustains connection and performance.

Secondly, the cross-sectional design captures experiences at a single point in time, which constrains our ability to assess how belonging dissonance and belonging work evolve throughout different phases of a crisis. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to examine the durability and effectiveness of belonging work overtime, as well as comparative studies across disciplines and institutional types. Most respondents were full-time academics, and a limitation of the paper is that casual staff's voice was not reported. Future research could explore the experiences of casual and part-time academics, particularly in business schools where casualisation is prevalent, such as in Australia (Smithers *et al.*, 2025) and the UK (Mozzachiodi, 2023; University and College Union, 2023), to better understand how belonging and identity are shaped under conditions of employment precarity during crises. Additionally, exploring organisational-level interventions that foster belonging during crises, and their impact on academic well-being and retention, represents a promising avenue for further investigation. We also suggest that the exploration of belonging dissonance in other contexts might help test the generalisation of this construct and its application to other phenomena.

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