

'I'm just the nuisance cripp': postqualitative flows of un/belonging for disabled staff and PGR students across UK universities

Abstract:

Belonging is recurrently advanced as a significant measure of achievement, retention, and satisfaction among staff and students of higher education. In this article, we examine the politics of un/belonging from the standpoint of disabled academic and professional staff, and PGR students at UK-based institutions of higher education. Drawing on a postqualitative critical disability orientation, the study problematises dominant discourses of belonging that presuppose compliance with an assimilationist institutional culture. We present four postqualitative flows (Mazzei, 2013) that conceptualise un/belonging as affective; as divergent from inclusion; as relational; and as agentic and transgressive. Rather than treating the university as a fixed or neutral site to which one might belong, we mobilise *subscendence* (Morton, 2017) to challenge transcendence and the totalising logic of institutional coherence. Subscendence repositions the university as a porous, contingent assemblage shaped by the masked and embodied experiences of those navigating its norms. The value of this article is its conceptual interrogation of belonging grounded in the empirical accounts of disabled participants, highlighting how current conditions mediated by legislated 'reasonable adjustments' can inadvertently promote ableist practices rather than support meaningful belonging. By reframing un/belonging as a relational and political claim—not as a solely individual affective state—this study calls for a more comprehensive engagement with disability knowledge and experience. The study demonstrates that disabled people do not simply seek to be included within the university but are already co-constituting it.

Keywords:

Higher education; belonging; postqualitative research; critical disability studies; ableism.

Introduction

In this article we examine how disabled staff and postgraduate research (PGR) students grapple with the concept of belonging in higher education, treating it as a site of negotiation over accessibility, equity, and knowledge creation. Belonging emerged in the 1990s as a specific focus on improving student success, retention, and engagement (Tinto, 1993). Today, HEIs across the UK and internationally recognise the relevance of belonging to the experiences of all respective members of the institution, frequently attempting to evidence it either directly or indirectly through annual staff reviews (Wilson et al. 2025) and student surveys (Morgan, 2023). The UK sector organization, AdvanceHE (2026), is currently delivering 'Building Belonging', which is an 'online change impact programme' focusing on student retention, attainment, and wellbeing. Like others, it positions belonging as a universally attainable and quantifiable outcome, aligned with stated commitments to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) (Saloniki et al. 2024). Whilst previous studies have also offered insights into the nature and implications of belonging in higher education as it intersects with gender (Burke et al, 2025), relative disadvantage (Payne et al, 2025), indigenous peoples (Harrison and McLean, 2016), race (Hussain and Jones, 2021) or political status (Dereli, 2022), disability and belonging is relatively

unexplored. Moreover, belonging has not been considered in relation to subsistence, that is, the whole (university) being ontologically implausible without the sum of its diverse parts (Graham & Moir, 2022).

Disabled staff and students are facilitated to work or study at UK HEIs on the basis that legal protections, by way of reasonable adjustments, are their primary means to access (Equality Act, 2010). In other settings, these are sometimes referred to as reasonable accommodations; they relate to adjustments to education or the workplace that an employer is legally obliged to provide to enable a disabled person to work and/or study, which for auxiliary purposes, cannot otherwise be bridged (Department for Work & Pensions, 2026). For example, a blind student may receive lecture materials in accessible digital formats, while a staff member with a mobility impairment may be offered hybrid working and an adapted workspace. However, deploying the concept of institutional ableism (Campbell, 2009), it becomes clear that reasonable adjustments often operate within structures that assume a 'normal' subject, placing the burden on disabled people to 'fit' or reach parity with their non-disabled counterparts by way of the provided modifications (Garland-Thomson, 2011). To our knowledge, research has not yet examined how reasonable adjustments specifically shape disabled people's sense of belonging within HEIs. However, the ways in which these mechanisms can entrench ableism are well documented (Bunbury, 2020; McCandless et al 2024; Price, 2024; Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado, 2025), and the ways in which HEIs depoliticize disability further entrenches subjugation of disabled staff and students (Orchard & Jones, 2024).

This article engages with the tensions that are subsequently created, through a postqualitative, critical disability study involving both researchers and 19 disabled staff and postgraduate research (PGR) students who work and/or study in UK HEIs. A postqualitative orientation unsettles fixed meanings, envisioning belonging as fluid and contingent on lived articulations of difference (St Pierre, 2019). A critical disability studies (CDS) framing adds purposeful interrogation of the dominant notions of normalcy and the structural conditions that sustain ableism in spite of the focus on belonging that we have highlighted so far. It resists deficit-based narratives and instead foregrounds disability as a site of knowledge production and political action. Together, postqualitative inquiry and CDS facilitate an expansive, disruptive understanding of belonging—one that acknowledges its relational, contested, and exclusionary dimensions within institutions that may promote inclusivity but neglect to dismantle institutional ableism (Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado, 2025).

The article comprises four sections. The first sets the context of belonging in HE, drawing on literature from the UK and internationally. This review clarifies the prominence of belonging within the sector, noting its conceptual and empirical grounds, as well as its shortfalls in relation to disability knowledge and experience. The second section outlines the study's methodology, framed within postqualitative inquiry and critical disability studies. It details the study design, including participant recruitment, ethical considerations, and approaches to data collection and analysis. In the third section, we present four flows that explore how un/belonging emerges in relation to disabled experience in higher education. These flows engage with belonging as affective force; as converging from inclusion; as relational; and as a site of transgression and unravelling. The final section discusses the implications of these analyses, offering key recommendations for university leaders and policymakers. In doing so, it advances

subscendence (Morton, 2017) as a generative conceptual tool for reconfiguring how we understand institutional belonging—not as an endpoint of inclusion, but as a shared, uneven, and co-constituted process that unsettles the normative logic of transcendence and invites a more open, relational, and co-existent oriented university.

Belonging in higher education

To understand the significance of belonging to the HE sector, we turn to the prominent work of Vincent Tinto (1993). In the theory he developed of student attrition, Tinto emphasised the importance of social and academic belonging in post-compulsory education. He argued that students' persistence and success were shaped less by personal traits than by institutional environments and the actions of faculty. In a 1990 interview, Tinto (in Spann, p. 20) reflected on the motivation for his theory:

...when I constructed this theory or paradigm, I sought to emphasize the way in which the environment and the actions of institutions affect why students stay or don't stay, learn or don't learn. While my model contains the elements of personality, learning, and commitment, I was not primarily concerned with personality or psychological issues but with the character of that environment, especially the role of faculty in shaping that environment. The story I sought to tell through my theory reflected my own personal experience as a Peace Corps volunteer. As a product of the 60s, I very much believed in the importance of community to human development and the idea that institutions are really communities, not systems; that they are not simply organizations but groupings of people. The communities people construct, not the rules they write down in organizational charts, are really the basis for these institutions.

This view of belonging as situated and co-created foregrounds the importance of structuring higher education environments that foster relationality and community. Contemporary scholarship on belonging has since developed a range of frameworks to capture its emotional, social, academic, and institutional dimensions. Broadly, these can be divided into theory-led and empirically driven approaches.

Wright (2015), drawing on social geography and weak theory, characterises belonging as a processual act of becoming—an ongoing, affective interplay between people, places, and non-human agents. Belonging, in her view, is never static but always relational and contingent. Yuval-Davis (2011) distinguishes between belonging as emotional attachment and the politics of belonging—the power-laden mechanisms that determine inclusion. Her framework includes three key facets: social locations, such as class, gender, race, or legal status, which structure access to resources and recognition; emotional identifications, referring to how individuals connect with groups or communities and feel a sense of inclusion or exclusion; and ethical and political values, through which institutions and individuals make normative judgements about who is deemed deserving of belonging. These theoretical renderings together reveal belonging as a dynamic relationship shaped by both personal experience and broader political and structural conditions.

Recent HE-focused research has pushed for a more complex understanding of belonging. Raaper (2021), in a special issue on the topic, calls for an intersectional approach that considers how belonging is shaped by market-driven conditions and pre-existing inequalities. In

the same issue, Gravett and Ajawi (2021) argue that belonging should be understood not as a fixed state tied to place, but as a sociomaterial construct—emerging from the spatial and temporal contexts students inhabit. Wong (2022) advances this idea through the concept of spatial belonging, identifying four key dimensions: physical (campus spaces), digital (online platforms), relational (peer and staff interactions), and structural (institutional policies and practices). His findings echo indigenous people’s emphasis in place belonging, which can be both situated and diasporic but is always rooted in the physical space, its history, and their relation to it and others (Harrison and McLean, 2016). Collectively, these contributions highlight the need for reflexive and contextually responsive pedagogical and institutional practices that support belonging as a relational and processual concern.

Empirical studies support these conceptual shifts through the exploration of how students and staff of HE *experience* belonging. In a 2022 study, WonkHE and Pearson collaborated with 15 UK students’ unions to survey 5,233 students and 430 staff (Blake, Capper & Jackson, 2022). They identified four foundations of student belonging: connection (forming bonds within and beyond teaching spaces); inclusion (seeing diversity reflected in course materials); support (access to clearly articulated success pathways); and autonomy (students’ capacity to make informed decisions about their learning and institutional engagement). This resonates with Ahn and Davis’s (2019) previous work which, based on word association methods with 426 students, identified domains of academic and social engagement, surroundings, and personal space. In 2023, they refined these into survey categories encompassing academic and social engagement, life satisfaction, thoughts of leaving university, and demographic background. We might characterize these studies as following a ‘Connect-Four model’, positing a set of reductive, qualitatively interconnected categories and themes that supposedly reflect the broadening of the term ‘belonging’ with respect to its structural and relational co-constitutive elements.

While we recognise that reducing belonging to four criteria may offer practical utility for some, they are indicative of the market centrism—student retention and satisfaction—that continues to drive universities (Ahn and Davis, 2023). Perhaps consequently, how institutional cultures shape experiences for both disabled students and staff is not considered in the discourse of belonging. Orchard and Jones (2024) provide a sharp critique of the relationship between disability and higher education. UK universities’ wellbeing agendas function as technologies of governance that recast structural harm as individual failure. The subsequent responsabilisation enforces a normative ideal of health as the condition for inclusion—“*wellbeing... is for the already well; disability becomes that which cannot be resolved or even spoken*” (p. 5)—producing belonging as contingent on bodily and mental legibility. Critical scholarship often compounds this erasure by framing disablement only as the fallout of overwork for nondisabled subjects, while critiques aligned with disability studies frequently cling to the fantasy of the university as a redeemable sanctuary. Such exceptionalism, the authors argue, obscure how universities collaborate with welfare and healthcare systems to police access and extract compliance. Their conclusion is uncompromising: “*both the university as it is now and the university as imagined and desired are disabling institutions*” (p. 12). Literature that examines the experiences of scholars and PhD students from traditionally minoritised groups has noted how participation in higher education is frequently conditional on conforming to dominant norms

of productivity, behaviour, and communication—leading to precarious or incomplete feelings of belonging (Allen et al., 2024; Haddow & Broadie, 2020; Merchant et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2020; Regiani et al., 2023; Rodgers et al., 2021). To take an anti-ableist stance, then, through this research is to recognise belonging as something that must be disentangled from institutional demands for bodily, cognitive, and behavioural conformity, and instead understood as something that coalesces through the shifting interplay of personal circumstances, institutional conditions, and human and more-than-human relationalities.

Methodology

This study is an intertwining of post-qualitative inquiry and critical disability studies. Starting with the 'post', our orientation to knowledge-making infers that meaning and reality are constructed within the world (immanence) rather than relying on external, transcendent sources. Researchers drawing on postqualitative approaches offer a flexible and context-dependent understanding to the study of existence, embracing uncertainty, ambiguity, and the open-ended nature of inquiry (Jackson and Mazzei, 2018). In so doing, rigid prefabricated traditions of methodological application are challenged for their tendency to reduce complex phenomena to simplistic explanations or predefined categories. Instead, emphasis is given to difference: not itself simply put as a hope to generate innovative, impactful research outcomes but understood holistically, using multiplicative concepts and researchers' reflexive positioning to constitute the inquiry from its inception. St. Pierre (2019) explains the significance of difference in expansive terms as follows:

It is an unlimited field of formless matter not yet individuated into subject or object, thought or practice. The plane of immanence encompasses everything because nothing can be outside it and so immanent to it. In this ontology, being is difference—everything is different, the plane of immanence is always differentiating, always becoming, never static (p. 3).

Thus, we do not pursue a predefined research question; instead, we examine how belonging becomes unsettled when it encounters disability knowledge and experience, challenging how the concept has been mobilised in higher education and redirecting it toward less ableist possibilities. In keeping with the postqualitative take on the study, we are compelled to position ourselves: Ben is a disabled researcher of inclusive education at a UK HEI, currently engaged in EDI work at the school and institution-wide level. He is a critical disability studies scholar who is taken by the affordances of conceptually re-thinking current conditions in order to create inclusive possibilities. Jonathan is a non-disabled researcher but the parent of an autistic child. His research spans various disciplines including education, psychology, sociology and disability studies. Mazzei (2013) reminds us that researchers engaged in postqualitative work cannot accept the primacy of the humanist subject and associated methodological limitations of seeking a single truth from participants' recorded words. Rather, together we form an "entangled flow of social relations, existing in the between-the-two of research-data participants-theory-analysis" (p. 736), co-creating knowledge in expansive terms.

To this end, we draw on critical disability studies (Campbell, 2009; Goodley et al., 2019) to orient this study toward the lived entanglements of institutional ableism and the ways these shape and reconfigure belonging for disabled staff and students. We also engage Graham and

Moir's (2022) extension of Morton's (2017) concept of subsistence—the view that wholes are less than the sum of their parts. Morton emphasises life's continuous ambiguity, such that “humankind is disabled in an irreducible way” (p. 2). In this view, to exist is to be imperfect and prosthetic, with fragility as the ontological basis for creativity. Accordingly, subsistence recognises disability experience and knowledge as central to reframing belonging. Rather than imagining universities as coherent entities, this perspective understands them as emergent from interdependent human and nonhuman relations, contrasting with transcendence, which assumes parity through reasonable adjustments that leave institutional structures intact. This framing guided our data collection and interpretation as explained below.

Participants and data collection:

Upon receiving ethics approval from both author institutions [Lancaster University and University of Southampton Institutional Ethics References], we promoted the study via public listserves including the JISC Disability Research email list, and on LinkedIn and X. Additionally, we produced a LinkTree site to host all project documents and to enable participants to review at their own pace.

We interviewed nineteen participants from 11 higher education institutions across the UK. Of these, 16 were disabled staff members which included both academic (8) and professional services staff (8) and three of which were also completing doctorates. Additionally, we interviewed 3 full-time PhD students, all of whom had some additional paid responsibilities in their institutions; for example, as notetaker for disabled students or teaching on modules. Of our participants, 14 identified as female, 2 as male, 2 as queer/non-binary, and 1 preferred not to say. In respecting the manifold ways in which the subject is *made* (Youdell, 2009), we asked our participants to nominate how they wished to be referred to; this led to a variety of nomenclature including ‘Queer, non-binary, disabled, autistic PhD student’, ‘Female academic with MS’ or ‘Male disabled member of staff and a part-time PhD student’, which are reflected in the attributions of flows below.

Interviews

In advancing an approach to interviewing that she calls ‘voice without organs’ (VwO), Mazzei (2013, p. 735) reminds us that

interview methods in humanist qualitative inquiry oblige researchers to “center” the subject. We as researchers ask participants to be selective in (1) their telling, (2) their interpretation of experience, (3) their representation of themselves, and (4) the assumptions that they make about who that self is (during the telling).

Mazzei instead repositions interviews and their contribution to post-qualitative research as flows—decentering fixed notions of personhood and recognising that researchers and participants make meaning together through assemblages. These assemblages are shaped by entangled experiences of geography, policy, history, social custom, and familiarity with institutional procedures. In this spirit, we included disabled academic and professional staff alongside PGR students, not as categories to be compared, but as situated subjectivities enmeshed in dynamic institutional, affective, and material relations. This inclusion is also methodological. Research on belonging in higher education predominantly focuses on taught

students, leaving the experiences of PGRs relatively underexamined, despite their distinctive positioning within the university. Disabled PGRs often occupy a metaxic space—neither fully staff nor student—while engaging in knowledge production, and they have reported forms of ableism particular to negotiating reasonable adjustments (Spier & Natalier, 2023). Bringing staff and PGR perspectives together therefore enables closer attention to how belonging, contribution, and institutional recognition are navigated across the blurred boundaries of academic life.

Having some shared familiarity with the experiences of disabled staff and students of HE, we aimed to optimize accessibility for participants by adjusting various components of a conventional interview (Nind, 2017; Tomlinson and Vincent, 2025). Options included having access to questions in advance, posting questions in the chat during the interview, offering additional processing time, providing sign language interpretation, holding shorter interviews, and including movement breaks. In total, 18 recorded interviews were conducted via video call and one was conducted face-to-face. We loosely derived the questions from our reading of the above literature on belonging, and as well our knowledge and experience of disability inclusion efforts in higher education: reasonable adjustments, ableism and accessibility.

Data Analysis

In line with the postqualitative orientation of this study (St. Pierre, 2019), analysis was not structured around discrete, stable themes supposedly identifiable within the data. Instead, we embraced Mazzei's (2013) orientation towards flows—movements across affective, material, and discursive entanglements. This draws on the DeleuzoGuattarian (1987) concept of assemblage and Mazzei's notion of VwO, which resists the idea that meaning or subjectivity originates from a singular, coherent self—an entity always lesser than its ontological parts. Rather than isolating and coding "what was said" into thematic categories, the analytic process followed lines of intensity, disruption, resonance, and silence, letting meaning emerge through relational movement and affective charge. Our analytic posture is informed by critical disability studies (Campbell, 2009; Goodley et al., 2019) and a subscendent critique of the university, where narrowing concepts of belonging imagine the whole as greater than the sum of its parts. In our analysis, the whole—institutional knowledge about belonging—is lesser than the sum of disability knowledges and experiences when aggregated under ableist norms. Disability knowledge is treated as irreducibly situated and relational, refusing assimilation into a single institutional narrative of inclusion. While we acknowledge self-identified markers within the data (e.g., *female autistic PhD student*), our intent is not to assign categorical meaning but to trace how such markers interact with temporal, spatial, institutional, and sensory forces in the production of belonging.

The flows—Affective belonging; Diverging from inclusion; Relational belonging; and Un/Belonging as transgression—did not pre-exist in the data. They arose by attuning to how belonging was felt, negotiated, affirmed, or withheld across interactions and institutional contexts, and by reading those movements against the backdrop of institutional ableism and power. Affect, following Zembylas (2016), was understood not merely as emotion but as the embodied capacity to affect and be affected. For example, descriptions of comfort, masking, or being noticed were not grouped under "identity" but followed as intensities moving through institutional and discursive spaces where ableist assemblages deploy policies and technologies

to normalise participation. Moments of exhaustion or refusal were read as affective breakdowns—sites where belonging collapsed or was withheld—revealing the institutional conditions through which inclusion is promised yet constrained. Importantly, voice was treated as multiple and distributed—an assemblage of bodies, technologies, policies, histories, and encounters. A participant's struggle to secure captions, for instance, was not coded simply as 'barrier' but read as part of a broader flow of dis/affectation, shaped by digital systems, emotional labour, and ableist norms—a site where disability knowledge resists absorption into the whole. Similarly, engagement with Disabled Staff Networks revealed multiplicity—solidarity, frustration, safety, co-optation—underscoring how institutional power both enables and contains collective organising. Finally, refusals to engage were read not as disengagement but as subscendent disidentifications—posthumanist acts that resist the demand to contribute to a coherent institutional whole, exposing ableism while asserting disability knowledge as relational and irreducible.

Flows of un/belonging

The four flows outlined here reflect affective intensities, material-discursive entanglements, and the co-constitutive nature of participants, researcher/s, theory, and context.

Flow 1: Affective Belonging

We asked participants how they conceptualized belonging within their higher education institution, and whether or not their experiences aligned with their given definitions. To this end, participants primarily articulated belonging in affective terms. As one put it,

I don't think belonging is...it's not a structure, it's not a policy, it's a feeling. (Female neurodivergent and physically disabled member of staff)

Drawing on Gorton (2007) we recognise how these outcomes are always negotiated *in* and *through* the body in the public sphere. Our participants described the affective experience of belonging using words like 'comfortable...validated', 'happy', 'closeness', 'care, consideration... thoughtfulness', 'safety', 'reassuring', 'respected', and 'a little bit of joy'. Such felt expressions reflect the active potential for belonging, at times, for disabled staff and almost ontological impact that this might have at a personal level, signaling a sense of institutional value and connectedness. However, we suggest that whilst affects do have an emotive dimension, they are not *just* feelings. As such we are wary of an overly aspirational denotation (Ahmed, 2007) and consider affective belonging to be better understood as a force influencing a body's modes of existence.

These affective capacities were related in the ways in which other participants described their experiences of higher education, with an emphasis on fitting within restrictive 'spaces' without additional labour or having to alter oneself.

It's a sort of forgetting I think for me, a forgetting of the physical space I'm occupying. (Autistic male professor)

Patience and that kind of like... it's just about being somewhere that's where you're comfortable to be yourself. Rather than feel like you're masking all the time, in order to like make everybody else feel more comfortable, rather than actually belonging somewhere where you feel comfortable (Female disabled member of professional services staff)

I guess belonging then is just feeling comfortable. Like you can be open about stuff and ask for stuff and live your daily experiences without having to, like, put up this mask of like, “Well, yes, I am a totally, like, a physiotypical and neurotypical person and I want to work eighty hours a week with no breaks.” (Queer, non-binary, disabled, autistic PhD student).

Here the participants reflect the reciprocal nature and the complex contingency of others' roles in enacting belonging. As such they echo Zembylas' (2016, p. 399) rendering of affect, expressed as both processual in the sense that a body acts upon another and are thus 'processually enacted'; and concrete, in that affects are also products of one body affecting and being affected by another in a material sense. In the instances described above, belonging then is the (often transitory) outcome of embodied encounters with another, generating material environments where it was not necessary for participants to mask and/or discipline their stigmatised bodyminds (Price, 2015). As noted here, belonging was only possible within the context of both concrete and affective institutional infrastructures, as one female disabled PhD researcher relates,

systems can be in place but autistic people don't necessarily know they're there or won't automatically find those systems. And I think sometimes it's about somebody in the organisation supporting that engagement and enabling the autistic person to feel part of those systems, and I think that's where the belonging comes in. That it's scaffolding... an awareness of systems and awareness of the support elements. The awareness of how the university [scaffolds] and maybe a willingness even for the university to support you. And therefore that then brings in the feeling of, “Okay, they're willing to support me therefore I feel like I belong a little bit more.”

Thus, disabled staff and PhD students relate an affective belonging as conceptually possible but contingent on colleagues, and indeed whole institutions, to “become otherwise” (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012:116). Subscendence offers explicative possibility, showing that belonging cannot be located within a coherent institutional whole (Morton, 2017) but emerges across the many partial, relational encounters that exceed it. Just as importantly, disabled staff and students can be invited to co-create belonging when their embodied ways of being and knowing are engaged generatively.

Flow 2: Inclusion as divergent from belonging

As noted above, belonging necessarily includes official policies, institutional architecture, the rewarding sense of achievement when the disabled experience is affirmed rather than denied, all intra-acting to produce fleeting but significant affects. To this end, we invited participants to consider belonging in relation to inclusion, and they were largely unanimous in distinguishing the two, as one female neurodivergent member of professional services stated:

'You can't make someone feel like they belong. You can provide measures to be inclusive, but I think belonging only happens from the inside.'

In this way, inclusion was perceived as simply a managerialist and institutionalised procedure that 'ticks all the boxes' (Female neurodivergent and physically disabled member of staff) and often charitable: 'we're letting you in because we're nice' (Female disabled member of staff with physical impairment); whereas belonging, was more affectively meaningful as articulated above. Inclusion was described as being “*allowed to play,*” but not necessarily “*part of the game*”

(Female disabled PhD researcher). As she went on to explain: “*I’m included because they’ve put captions, but... I don’t feel like I belong.*”

This flow exposes how affective belonging can be undermined by the very mechanisms designed to ensure access. Reasonable adjustments were often described as the means by which inclusion is achieved, though also individually negotiated, exhausting, and attention-drawing in unwelcome ways (Corcoran et al, 2022).

I’ve had issues with getting adjustments, as well with the whole adjustments process, and my occupational health assessments were... just a series of bad experiences. I needed to get a rollerball mouse..., and I emailed my line manager about it. It was about seventy quid. And she sent a one-line reply saying, “That’s really expensive.” And it’s all of those things that kind of like mount up. ... But you just feel like you’re constantly fighting... so I think it’s difficult to feel a sense of belonging when you’re constantly coming up against barriers and having to fight for just basic things that help you to do your job (Male disabled member of staff and Part-time PhD student).

Inciting subsistence (Morton, 2017), these experiences illustrate that participants of this study experienced inclusion as a provisional condition, because multi-scalar decisions about reasonable adjustments mediated their contribution to the whole. From a DeleuzoGuattarian (1987) perspective, this particular positioning operates as a territorialising force—attempting to stabilise difference but failing to enact the relational intensities that generate belonging as becoming, rather than a fixed status. These responses are significant for understanding how disabled staff and students experience the world on a visceral, embodied level, actively mediating experiences, in conjunction with important aspects that supposedly facilitate their engagement with the HEI, such as physical, digital and cultural accessibility, reasonable adjustments (Equality Act 2010), and interactions with colleagues.

Flow 3: Relational Belonging

In working through questions about what belonging might mean for participants, many highlighted relationality as central, evidenced through staff networks, supportive management, and collegial or peer connections. The theoretical work informing our study similarly positions coexistence as vital, especially in what Braidotti (2019) terms an era of ‘contemporary exhaustion’, characterised by posttruth rhetoric, rising individualisation, anonymised digital relations, and environmental degradation. For Braidotti (p. 19), ‘the answer is in the doing, in the praxis of composing “we, a people” through alliances, transversal connections and in engaging in difficult conversations on what troubles us.’ For participants, such points of connection with others who shared aspects of their experiences appeared to foster a sense of belonging.

Like relational, so not necessarily like being in the same room, or being near someone, but sort of more, I think maybe like psychologically or emotionally, or something that you can’t physically necessarily measure. For example, I work from home, and I might work with someone that, like, lives in [city]. That doesn’t necessarily mean there’s not a closeness between us because I would define it as physical...sort of the communication we might have like through teams or something like that (Autistic woman in professional services).

While this may exemplify an informal, spontaneous network with which to connect for emotional support, others expressed their feeling of belonging via the formalised disabled staff network (DSN) at their HEI:

Well, there's definitely an affinity...the neurodivergent staff group seems to have a large percentage of women in it. There are men in it, I think, but I think there's a high proportion of late diagnosed women and maybe people who aren't diagnosed yet who are seeking diagnosis. So, there's a bit of a feeling of solidarity which, yeah, it's definitely a contributor to belonging. (Female neurodivergent member of staff).

I think more recently a neurodivergent staff network's been set up, and people can people can join, they advertised. And when I joined I saw just how many people were in that group, and how many members of staff are neurodivergent. And it kind of shocked me initially, because I kind of always felt like it's just me, like, I'm just the only neurodivergent person here. I know it probably wasn't true, but I was the only person I knew that was neurodivergent. And then seeing all these members of staff from different departments. Some that I actually knew as well. It was very nice, and it was something that I didn't realise I needed to sort of see or know about. But, just seeing that and then seeing sort of people introduce themselves, and talk about themselves, it just felt really nice because it felt like it was true like the group of people that I belonged with. And like, the experiences were very similar to me, and any issues that people had maybe overlapped with things that I'd had. And it felt like truly like my people. It was really nice, it just, I feel a lot more comfortable being autistic at work now, because I know there's so many other people around me that are the same as me, or have similar experiences to me (Female, neurodivergent member of professional staff).

These comments relate a sense of belonging made possible by the solidarity felt through shared experiences and conditions, the forums for 'difficult conversations about what troubles us' that Braidotti (2019) urges. At the same time, they express something more – a reframing of understanding that disabled staff are higher in number than might be assumed, potentially adding to their affectual impact. These are not stories *about* belonging, but enactments of subsistence, where collective solidarity provides disabled staff and students the means to belong. They are flows of recognition, shared narratives, and the affective labour of connection—produced in entanglements of bodies, technologies, neurotypes, and institutional norms.

However, not all DSNs were experienced positively. One participant described the group as politically muted and structurally co-opted:

They're getting very much used as a shield... 'we consulted with the chair of the disability group, therefore we don't need to ask any other disabled people' (Female dyslexic and PhD researcher)

This participant has summarized well some of the paradoxes HEIs might encounter when creating networks associated with identity groupings, particularly when there are such divergent understandings of how identities are co-constituted. As Yuval-Davis (2011) reminds us, belonging is necessarily political and all actors are relatively and intersectionally positioned with respect to class, gender, race, or legal status, which structure access to resources and recognition. Given the importance of disability politics and the significance of collective action rooted in experience, we might consider further how DSNs could provide spaces of political action for belonging. Such counter-flows demonstrate that relational belonging is always

precarious and contingent, capable of being both nurtured and undermined through the same institutional mechanisms.

Flow 4: Un/Belonging as transgression

So far we have considered how disabled members of UK HEIs of this study experienced belonging in mostly affirmative terms. This was possible when specific requirements were consistently provided; however, in many instances such provisions were fleeting. We listened to participants who explained that the need to individually negotiate for accessibility and recurrent compromises in this regard adversely affected their sense of belonging in their institution:

I think it's probably [sighs] the thing I deal with most on a daily basis in terms of the issues I've faced—the barriers I face, and I've faced throughout my career. And it's something that I just can't ignore because it's.. I need reasonable adjustments in my workplace (Female disabled member of staff with physical impairment and PhD student).

For ten years, I've worked here, I've been asking and asking and asking for somebody to do this for me, to be able to offload the administrative parts of organising my own access, but they won't or they can't or whatever. So I have additional, maybe a minimum of 25% extra work to do because of my, you know, so-called disability to deal with access to work, and all the associated admin, which is just a nightmare... Every time I ask, it's a different story that I get back. And who's responsible? HR? Is it an admin thing? Is it somebody else? You know, they know it must be their responsibility, It just gets passed around. (Deaf academic).

I really really felt very very awkward and unwelcome, as if I'm just the nuisance crip who wants to make a fuss about something that "us normal people, we don't need to make a fuss about this, so why the heck are you?" (Female disabled PhD researcher)

These experiences elevated participants' sense of precarity, or – as Berlant (2011, p. 200) puts it – 'crisis ordinary' where structural barriers are normalised and disabled people become at once 'hyperaware of potential threats and exhausted by the constant management'. For some this was specifically connected to a perceived lack of capacity to attain support, on the basis of the individualization of reasonable adjustments.

Quite often in academia we work on the basis of, "if you ask for the help, we'll give it to you." And I think it's really important to acknowledge that quite often autistic people can't ask for the help (Female neurodivergent and physically disabled member of staff)

Building on Bosworth (2023), these experiences point to the importance of affective infrastructures of un/belonging. Rather than simply thinking of infrastructure in terms of roads, buildings or networks, in this context, we understand them as a dynamic kind of conditioning where material relations and flows facilitate some other social and/or material activity or set of activities (Ballesterro, 2018; Larkin, 2013). What adversely affects the sense of belonging here is the individualisation that occurs within HEIs, made particularly salient for disabled staff and PhD students whose experience is exacerbated through the need to push for reasonable adjustments.

While for many this outcome was framed negatively, for some creating space for unbelonging was perceived as a transgressive disruption of the supposition that belonging is 'inherently positive' (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski, 2019, p. 14). Like Goodley et al (2019), we follow the

feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2010:589), who critiques the concept of un-happiness. She writes, 'I want to think of consciousness of the *un* in *unhappy* as consciousness of being not... Consciousness of being not involves self-consciousness; you recognize yourself as the stranger.' In application to *un/belonging* then, we read this as an active *self-conscious* choice which can in fact generate 'solidarity in recognizing our alienation' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 592). Some participants explained their own experiences of un/belonging along similar lines:

And then sometimes there's an emotional disconnect. Things just get too hard. Access is just too frustrating. And that makes me just withdraw. You know, to help myself remember that it's not me being useless, to remember that it's other people. It's them who won't make things accessible for me. So, again, I can kind of withdraw at that point. I can unbelong, choose to unbelong. But that's when I really, really feel stuck. And it's just, you know, situations where I feel like, fuck it, I just can't cope anymore. It's, like, fine, enough. You know, draw the line. (Deaf academic)

I guess I don't want to feel like I belong to the, like, structures of the university, if that makes sense. Like I don't want to be complicit in reinforcing barriers or any kind of discrimination to the students that I work with (Female dyslexic PhD researcher).

Butler (2021:19) articulates unbelonging in the context of higher education as the simultaneous presence and absence: 'not antithetical to belonging or a position of inherent deficit but the experience of disconnection, dislocation, [and] disjunction between the self and one or more aspects of the immediate or wider environment'. When jostled in the ways accounted here, un/belonging appeared the most appropriate option to some participants, whose experiences were recurrently marred by inaccessibility and continual negotiations for access. Drawing on subsistence (Morton, 2017), what we can take from this flow is an understanding that HEIs may actively prevent disability knowledge and experience from co-existing in their midst, to the detriment of their engaging feelings of belonging.

Discussion

In developing the above interpretations, we acknowledge a tension: while we have traced four key flows centred on un/belonging as affect, divergent from inclusion, relational, and transgressive, our aim is not to present these as definitive themes or generalisable findings. Instead, we approach them as entangled traces—material, affective, and conceptual resonances of shifting academic realities. These traces are not merely data to be interpreted; they are generative forces with which we think, feel, and move.

Through this orientation, we created flows or movements that emerged with and through the experiences shared, data considered and theories consulted (Mazzei, 2013). These flows trouble the idea of belonging as a stable endpoint or as a state that individuals can attain through institutional acceptance. Instead, they signal ongoing negotiation, refusal, and reconfiguration. What we have called '*affective belonging*' speaks to the intensities of hope, frustration, ambivalence, and desire that move through participants' narratives (Berlant, 2011) and resist containment within institutional norms. '*Belonging as divergent from inclusion*' disrupts the assumption that access alone ensures belonging. Inclusion here is revealed not as an end, but as a contested terrain that many participants actively resist or rework in relation to their own subjectivities. '*Belonging as relational*' embodies the mutual and interdependent nature of presence in the university. It is not about being granted space through legislated

adjustments, but about being recognised as a co-creator of that space. Finally, 'Un/belonging as transgression' indicates the marginalizing experiences for many disabled members of HE institutions, especially for those on more precarious contracts or in dual roles as PhD students and members of professional services (Bruce, 2020). It also, however, opens up space to consider how disabled staff and students 'self-consciously' (Ahmed, 2007) navigate and transgress institutional binaries of insider/outsider, legitimate/illegitimate as they *unbelong*.

Across these flows, what emerges is a deep and insistent desire not only to be present, but to be valued—specifically for the knowledge, labour, and lived experience grounded in disability. Yet participants' accounts show how the logic of transcendence endures. Belonging often required masking, over-performance, or the disciplining of the bodymind—strategies that reinscribe ableist norms and reaffirm the idea of the university as something complete and ideal. These performances of belonging are not neutral; they come at a cost, obscuring the need for deeper transformation. By thinking with subscendence then, we challenge these normative demands and instead foreground belonging as a collective and political project.

At a practical level, our postqualitative flows operate as a provocation; an invitation for university assemblages – including policymakers, HEI leaders, and colleagues – to refigure un/belonging not as a stable condition but as an open field of potentiality. We encourage resistance to the instrumentalist impulse that ties belonging to the logics of outcome, metric, and comparison, wherein it becomes something to be achieved, audited, and secured. Instead, what must be foregrounded is the epistemic, affective, and political labour of disabled people, not as supplementary to the university but as constitutive of its ongoing becoming. Such affirmation ought not be reduced to the procedural gestures of committees, working groups, or institutional review cycles but demands, rather, a disentangling of belonging from the normative regimes of bodily, cognitive, and behavioural conformity. In this reorientation, inclusion is tethered to assimilation, yet belonging can emerge through the creation of spaces where one might both belong and unbelong. The task of middle and senior leadership, then, is to co-construct policy frameworks that account for knowledge and experience of disability, over adherences to equality.

Conclusion

The language of belonging has become increasingly prominent in higher education. While often mobilised with good intentions—such as promoting inclusion, equity, and student engagement—it also warrants scrutiny for the ways it is frequently assumed, depoliticised, and flattened into a vague aspiration that neglects whole swathes of people involved in the machinery of higher education. In many institutional settings, belonging is framed as an emotional state or outcome: a sense of comfort, confidence, or connection that individuals are expected to attain. Whilst there is some evidence of this in our own study, this framing sidesteps the deeper structural and relational conditions that shape whether—and on what terms—people are recognised and supported. When belonging is presented as something one must cultivate individually or despite the odds, rather than something produced collectively through institutional transformation, it predetermines that disabled students and staff will adapt, assimilate, or mask in order to 'fit'. This reinforces rather than dismantles existing inequalities that have been well documented in relation to the experiences of disabled staff and students of HE (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Haddow

& Broadie, 2020; Merchant et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2020; Price, 2024; Rodgers et al., 2021; McCandless et al 2024; Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado, 2025).

By way of a postqualitative study of the accounts of un/belonging for disabled staff and PGR students across UK higher education, what this article has argued for is a rethinking of belonging as a critical development of *subscendence*. This moves us away from inclusion into a pre-existing, idealised institution and towards recognition of the multiple, situated, and often under-acknowledged ways that people already constitute the university. Disabled staff and students are not simply seeking access; they are already co-creating the institution through their presence, practices, and political claims. Subscendence foregrounds the interdependencies that make up higher education and enables us to resist the logic of transcendence—the ideal of a complete, coherent, and normative university. This reconceptualisation brings us face to face with the workings of ableism in higher education. Ableism not only manifests in inaccessible environments or discriminatory attitudes—it is also embedded in the epistemic and institutional logics that govern what counts as knowledge, whose contributions are valued, and whose presence is legitimised. When disabled people are compelled to perform normativity or suppress their needs to be accepted, the institution sustains an ableist order under the guise of inclusion. Subscendence challenges this by unsettling the ideal of the transcendent university and foregrounds the messy, lived, and contingent realities of those who animate and un/belong to it.

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