Belonging to the university or being in the world: From belonging to relational being

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Abstract

In a world characterised by supercomplexity, in which higher education (HE) is in the grip of neoliberal market forces (Barnett, 2000), it is incumbent upon participants in this sector to ask; what does it mean to belong, and to what? 'Belonging' has become a buzzword used by institutions to seemingly demonstrate how they seek to include students and help them 'fit in' to specific cultures and contexts of learning. A sense of 'belonging' may be important for some students at an emotional level; however, in the context of the neoliberal university, we argue that focussing on this concept may have the effect of encouraging students to assimilate to the dominant culture. More subtly, it could be noted that this is part of an ongoing process of inculcating students to the beliefs, values and normative behaviours associated with neoliberalism, arguably reproducing and exacerbating many of the social challenges threatening education, democracy, ecosystems and ultimately our ability to survive on this planet. This theoretical paper challenges the notion of belonging, problematising it as a neoliberal construct of 21st century HE that insidiously invokes a particular notion of 'community' which functions to prioritise domestication and conformity to social and economic expectations of a higher education driven by an agenda of employability, entrepreneurialism, and acquisitive individualism. We propose a more meaningful conception of 'belonging'; based on engaging students in changing their world so as they may belong in the world authentically. We contend that belonging holds greater promise as a means of self-actualisation, liberation, and a way to develop authentic 'critical being' (Barnett, 1997) whereby students develop belonging and are not "…subject to the world but able to act autonomously and purposively within it" (ibid. p.4).

Practitioner Notes

1. Our critique of belonging centres on its normative portrayal of students as uniform within a massified system characterised by diversity of students, which favours the experiences of dominant social groups in society and can therefore exclude those not reflecting such groups and their related forms of social/cultural capital.

2. We hope to encourage colleagues to consider an alternative view that contests the idea of belonging and promotes a relational view of beings within an ecology. This relational view sees education as communicative rather than transactional, and therefore more democratic.

3. Our proposal for relational pedagogies recommends a move away from individualist views of learning and teaching to consider an interconnected, caring approach which views learning (and universities) as a complex ecosystem interrelated and interdependent upon elements beyond the human, and, therefore, anthropocentric views of the world.

4. Rather than seeking to belong to a university as a large whole, we propose universities should instead value students as the people, or beings, they are and value explicitly what they bring to the university and classroom. In doing so, our suggestion is to focus on supporting students' development as relational, not bounded, and critical beings able and prepared to negotiate an anxious and uncertain world.

Keywords

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Abstract

In a world characterised by supercomplexity, in which higher education (HE) is in the grip of neoliberal market forces (Barnett, 2000), it is incumbent upon participants in this sector to ask; what does it mean to belong, and to what? 'Belonging' has become a buzzword used by institutions to seemingly demonstrate how they seek to include students and help them 'fit in' to specific cultures and contexts of learning. A sense of 'belonging' may be important for some students at an emotional level; however, in the context of the neoliberal university, we argue that focussing on this concept may have the effect of encouraging students to assimilate to the dominant culture. More subtly, it could be noted that this is part of an ongoing process of inculcating students to the beliefs, values and normative behaviours associated with neoliberalism, arguably reproducing and exacerbating many of the social challenges threatening education, democracy, ecosystems and ultimately our ability to survive on this planet. This theoretical paper challenges the notion of belonging, problematising it as a neoliberal construct of 21st century HE that insidiously invokes a particular notion of 'community' which functions to prioritise domestication and conformity to social and economic expectations of a higher education driven by an agenda of employability, entrepreneurialism, and acquisitive individualism. We propose a more meaningful conception of 'belonging'; based on engaging students in changing their world so as they may belong in the world authentically. We contend that belonging holds greater promise as a means of self-actualisation, liberation, and a way to develop authentic 'critical being' (Barnett, 1997) whereby students develop belonging and are not "…subject to the world but able to act autonomously and purposively within it" (ibid. p.4).

Introduction

The concept of belonging is one that has been considered a great deal in the context of higher education (HE) over the last decade both by scholars and through institutional policy. The prevalence of such discussion has increased in recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social disruption, to say the very least, that this period has witnessed. In what seems to be a natural and entirely reasonable response to the isolation and alienation felt by many due to social-distancing rules, online learning 'solutions', and lack of human interaction, universities have revisited and reignited pushes for student 'belonging' to be central to our thinking and actions as educators. We, the authors, do not argue against the importance of attending to the mental and social wellbeing of our students, colleagues, and selves, in times of such disruption and difficulty, nor in the supposedly 'stable' pre-pandemic era. However, we do register significant concern at some of the conceptions of 'belonging', motivations for it being a central focus, and means by which this is enacted and experienced for many in HE. Belonging, as a 'goal' within HE seems almost ubiquitous in some areas of literature and institutional policy texts, but is almost always presented as a nebulous, pseudo-psychological phenomenon that universities should conjure as a panacea for the many challenges the HE faces in relation to increasingly diverse, and presently distant/remote, student cohorts, with retention and progression at the heart of many motivations. Whilst, on one hand, the term could be dismissed as a seemingly innocuous 'buzzword', we will argue that uncritical usage of the term is problematic on several levels and is antithetical to a vision of the university as a place of higher learning for all.

The authors are both academics working in HE in the UK who are sceptical and mistrustful of the widespread use of the concept 'belonging', for a multitude of reasons. We believe that it is important to provide readers with an understanding of our specific academic and philosophical backgrounds from the outset as our positionality frames our discussion and contextualises our view of 'belonging'. *Author 1* is a Lecturer in Academic Practice, influenced by a transformative experience during undergraduate study in a Business School where he *chose* not to belong. He views HE as an empowering and enabling site where an educated citizenry is viewed as the basis of a just and democratic society. *Author 2* is an Associate Professor of Music and his main research area is Popular Music Education. He is deeply influenced by the critical pedagogy tradition and sees social justice, humanisation, and democracy as being inextricably linked to educational experiences and practices. We would describe ourselves as working class, and each of us has felt a strong sense of alienation and 'difference' at various points in our education and academic careers, that we attribute, at least in part, to our class identity and our upbringing being somewhat disconnected from prevailing cultures and behaviours of HE.

We argue that current understandings of belonging, and how to enact or foster it, lead to a culture of conformity and assimilation which perpetuates the injustices of those unable, or unwilling, to 'belong' due to their personal backgrounds, beliefs, or material circumstances. Our critique of belonging in this article focuses on the conception of this term which foregrounds and prioritises the institution as an entity to which it is assumed that students should aspire to belong, and align with, in the interests of institutional retention and economic advantage. We believe that the notion of belonging, and the push for this as an aim for students manifests in pressures to conform to dominant narratives of what it means to attend and be part of a university. Such a view of the university is not abstract and untainted by societal conditions – indeed, we argue that the role, function, and place of the university in society has been so infected by the 'common-sense' of neoliberalist policy which, amongst other things, particularly fetishises economic growth and free-market principles. Rather than simply disregarding the notion of belonging entirely, we argue for an alternative framing of the concept which prioritises the relational being of those involved in HE, embraces a heterogeneity of experience and values, and therefore does not simply enculture students to align with the dominant narratives of privileged groups.

We take particular issue with conceptions of belonging that relate to outdated, traditional considerations of homogenous student cohorts which marginalise and 'other' those without these characteristics, capital, or experiences (Read et al., 2003); view belonging as a means of ensuring conformity to the practices and norms of higher education and institutional expectations (Healey & Stroman, 2021); as well as considerations of belonging that negate the conspicuous and lasting impact of social class as an exclusionary factor in higher education (e.g. Ahn, 2020; Dittmann, et al., 2020). If then, 'belonging' results in conformity with or assimilation to the ideals, behaviours, and values of this system, then how should we consider or deal with those who do not - through circumstances, choices, or political convictions – belong? Does failure to belong result in an 'otherness' that negates their ability to engage and succeed in higher learning. Do those students who cannot or do not want to engage with the employment-focussed, marketized, instrumental norms of contemporary HE face a university experience that is doomed to be inferior, less rich, less rewarding, and less edifying than those who truly 'belong'?

In addressing the key theme of 'belonging' for this special issue, we are taking a contrary and critical stance regarding the concept as a 'solution' or 'response' to supercomplexity and uncertainty (Barnett, 2000, p. 2004). From personal experience, both as students and as academics within institutions, we have witnessed this situation occurring and believe that there is a strong risk of such oppression becoming the norm as a result of uncritical, and conformist views of belonging based on

neoliberal/capitalist ideologies of HE and what it means to be a student. This is antithetical to our view of HE as critical educators. Of key concern are the active conceptualisations of belonging across the sector and within institutions where belonging is enacted to shape compliant participants in the economic world, rather than critically, engaged citizens of the world capable of helping to address our existential crises as a society. We will suggest that students' development of critical being (Barnett, 1997), holds greater meaning and promise in tackling education and society's broader challenges in helping students to conceive of, engage, and empower themselves as active agents in a society characterised by uncertainty, rather than subjects of a given reality or world. As many of the current conceptions of 'belonging' and associated practices can be said to have a dehumanising and domesticating impact, as we argue below, and serve to assimilate students and align them with the *current* goals and values of an institution, how then do we facilitate the development of agents of change in the world?

In problematising proprietary and domesticating visions of belonging, we argue instead for a subscendent (Morton 2017), ecosophical vision that highlights the importance of interconnectedness and relational pedagogies within the ecology of the university (rather than belonging to it), and the importance of respectful human relationships, and solidarity. We suggest that through the lens of relational pedagogies, which view belonging as 'situated practice' (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021), we can offer a more meaningful, respectful, and equitable consideration of that which is currently referred to as belonging, that we propose might be better conceived of as 'being'. In doing so, highlight the importance of ecological thought in relation to 'belonging' that can precipitate a change in thinking that will allow us to flip the perspective and introduce an environment in which critical being is stimulated, fostered and central to HE practice. However, before mounting criticism of some of the ways in which the notion of belonging has been understood and acted upon within contemporary HE, we will begin by trying to develop a wider understanding of the term, by way of uncovering some of the key contradictions to which we would like to draw attention.

Understandings of the Multifaceted Concept of 'Belonging'

'Belonging' has been explored as a concept in many varied and diverse fields with "little consensus" of its conceptualisation (Allen et al., 2021, p. 87). Evident from its attention in the literature and contested nature, belonging is hugely complex due to the multiple ways in which the term can be interpreted, the motivations for its usage, and the implications it can have in certain social, political, and institutional contexts. Although a full analysis of the literature on belonging is beyond the scope or purpose of this article, we will begin by giving some attention to some important considerations regarding the term and the ways in which it has been interpreted. This will provide a foundation for our argument that universities need to engage critically with the notion of belonging and how it influences our practice as educators in the context of HE, specifically within our uncertain, complex, and anxious contemporary world (Barnett, 2000; 2004).

Due to the complexity of the term 'belonging', and the ambiguity surrounding the way in which it is used within HE - both at policy level, and in everyday discussions - the authors feel that it would be valuable to begin by considering the notion from a psychological perspective. The reason for doing so is twofold: firstly, it helps to establish a basic understanding of some of the 'human' aspects of the term, and secondly, as it allows us to begin to introduce the notion of the supposed opposite term 'social exclusion' (see Baumeister and Leary, 1995, for example). From such a perspective, then, we could consider belonging as a subjective and individualistic/unique feeling of being integrated or integrating with the groups, institutions, and systems that surround us. Anant (1967), for example, describes 'belongingness' as that which is felt when an individual experiences their

personal involvement in a system or environment as being integral.[1] The feeling of belonging is associated with the desire that many people have for positive and satisfactory interpersonal connection with other people, but it is possible also to conceive of belonging as relating to places, particular moments in time, or events for example, relating to shared experiences (Allen, et al., 2021).

Belongingness is not only difficult to describe or understand because of the myriad ways in which it can be derived and fostered, but also because it is dynamic and can, of course, change frequently and significantly over short periods of time ranging from the course of a day, to a course of university study, and throughout one's lifetime (Allen et al., 2021; Cureton & Gravestock, 2019). It is also deeply personal and individual in relating to feelings and emotions, and the intangibility of it relating to a 'sense', rather than a strict categorical condition. Despite the difficulty in conceiving of the multitudinous ways in which this psychological construct can be understood, there seems to be a widespread belief among psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists that the need for belongingness is near-universal and essentially fundamental for human development and health (Maslow, 1954, Deci & Ryan, 2000; Allen, et al., 2021). We do not, of course, dispute the need for belonging at a human level, particularly as educators concerned with human development and empowerment. Rather it is the specific notion of belonging within the context of HE that we argue is politically motivated, potentially dehumanising, and which ostensibly seeks to enculturate students to a functionalist view of belonging *to* the university.

Given the broad psychological definitions of 'belonging' and the resultant feeling of 'belongingness', it would be patently absurd to suggest that we would argue for the perceived opposite, i.e. 'social exclusion'. We do, however, suggest that current pushes towards policies of conformist and proprietary notions of belonging do, inadvertently, have such an effect on considerable sub-groups of students. As Gravett and Ajawi (2021, p. 1) contend that:

> normative narratives often contain a number of omissions. Such omissions include a consideration of the experiences of those students who may not wish to, or who cannot, belong, as well as a questioning of the very boundaries of belonging".

Normative conceptions of belonging are problematic as they generally advantage prevalent groups in society and their social and cultural capital, experiences, knowledge, and resources (Maton, 2008, Thomas, 2012, 2015; Winstone & Hulme, 2019). As Healey and Stroman (2021, p. 2) posit:

> experiences of belonging or lack thereof are related to broader, underlying systems in our society that position certain groups, behaviors, and ways of being as superior or as the default along the lines of race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, language, class, indigeneity, or ability.

Belonging as it is routinely envisaged then clashes with the policies and practices of widening participation/access. Pearce and Down (2011, p.3) argue that "universities and academics should pay closer attention to the particularities of students' social histories — language, culture, experience and interests — in order to create a more participatory and empowering education (Shor 1992). Gravett and Ajjawi (2021, p. 2) note that:

> [t]he assumption that students can and need to belong to a higher education community has become a taken-for-granted narrative within policy and practice.

In response to such views of belonging in which the benefits are taken for granted, Butler (2021, p. 17) introduces the notion of "unbelonging" to consider exclusion amid the phraseology of belonging and inclusion that permeates much discourse around the student experience. Butler suggests this term is used to consider the dynamics of exclusion and its subjectivities, rather than a "neat opposite" of inclusion. Given the subjective, differentiated, and emotive nature of belonging and its individuality (Butler, 2021; MacArthur, 2021), it may be that belonging as a uniform concept is, as Butler (*ibid*) suggests, "to some extent an illusion" applicable to some, though not achievable by all (Thomas, 2012; Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). Moreover, it is our contention that not all students will *want* or *choose* to belong, specifically when this may be at odds with their own sense of self, identity and values. Indeed, we are also mindful of the notion of 'belonging uncertainty' (Healey & Stroman, 2021) which is experienced by students from minoritized groups who "...are more likely to experience belonging uncertainty because they are aware of how their group may be perceived and treated in educational setting" (ibid, p.4). As Allen et al. (2021, p. 89) suggest exclusion and stressors related to belonging are more "intense for those who identify as outgroups".

Problematising Motivations for 'Belonging' Within the University

Neo-liberalism has encapsulated much of global society driven and facilitated by a globalised market economy that has now permeated HE, certainly in the UK, US and Australasia, driving the corporatist agenda reflected in much of the world (Holmwood, 2014; Beighton, 2018; Noble and Ross, 2019). HE is now tightly within the grasp of this neo-liberal agenda run for private, not public good (Noble and Ross, 2019) in serving the needs of the market economy (Barnett, 1994; 2000) or "new 'market-state'" (Ainley, 2004, p.498) rather than society and human wellbeing. Marginson (2011) proposes universities now maximise 'global public goods' (those which are non-rivalrous and available to all) such as knowledge and information, in order to re-dress what he views as HE's 'lost rationale' so as it can re-ground itself in the social' by making its contribution more observable, usurping the market and competition for status (often posed as 'excellence') which has hamstrung universities into competing towards private interests. Peters (2018, p.18) succinctly summarises the multifarious developments impacting contemporary HE:

> The university became a focus for mainly neoliberal reforms including the application of New Public Management reforms that emphasised a performance and audit culture, contestability of research funding, the introduction of student fees, the separation of management and council control with political appointments, and the realignment of the university as a service sector to the knowledge economy with its private/public partnerships, research parks, business start-ups and commercialisation of research. The transition to the neoliberal university represented a major shift from the traditional university based on the concept of the right to a free public higher education dedicated to student transformation and education for citizenship and democracy.

Sutton (2017, p.625) considers these same developments, stating quite plainly:

> the university economy is no longer structured by the moral norm of education as a public good. It has been restructured, commodified and marketized by neo-liberal capitalism.

A parallel development in HE, most notably in the UK, and a more welcome progression has been the expansion of access to and participation in university study, where the student corpus has seen seismic shifts in previously being the preserve of privileged classes to now accommodate a far broader demographic, more representative of society (Haggis, 2006). This extended access to

university for, arguably previously excluded, 'non-traditional' students, including females, mature and working-class students, those from ethnic minorities, and disabled students. Quite a different cohort to the 'traditional' "dominant white, able-bodied, male and middle class" students who characterised HE to that point (Hinton-Smith, 2012 cited in Danvers, 2016, p. 19). However, this expansion of access and participation is by no means complete and persisting challenges remain in ensuring equity of access, engagement and achievement, most notably among groups underrepresented in society and often marginalised, including those from lower social classes, or black and ethnic minority groups, for example (Russell Group, 2020; UK Government, 2021).

Within the context of Higher Education (HE), conceptions of belonging and are broadly framed around the developments in the sector (specifically in the UK) in widening access (Reay et al., 2001; Tinto, 2017; Thomas, 2002, 2012, 2019) student transitions (QAA, 2016; Meehan & Howells, 2019) and internationalisation (Zhang, 2020; Resch & Amorim, 2021). The uniting focus for the extensive discussions in these areas is student retention, which clearly has impacts for the development of students, but also on the financial viability of institutions. Tinto (2017, p. 4) states that:

> Sense of belonging can refer to smaller communities within the institution as, for instance, with students with whom one shares a common interest (e.g. students in the same discipline or program) or background (e.g. students of similar socio-cultural backgrounds) or more broadly to the institution generally.

Tinto (ibid.) argues that students who perceive their own belonging to a particular group or institution will be more likely to continue and persist with their studies due to increased motivation. Key to this 'sense of belonging' proposed by Tinto (2017), and permeating much of the literature, is the notion of 'fit' and how an individual is able to fit (or not) within a group, community, or institution. However, we contend, unlike Tinto (2017) and others (Reay, et al., 2001; Thomas, 2002), that belonging is not as simple and binary as 'inclusion or exclusion'. Like Butler (2021), we see such 'fit' to groups or institutions as complex and contingent replicating a continuum that accommodates the subjectivity of individual experience, belief and backgrounds which is likely to mediate one's feeling of belonging, and choice to belong. As such, we believe belonging in this sense, goes beyond the material in relating to physical spaces and behaviours, such as the four domains that Ahn and Davis (2020) suggest relates to student belonging in HE: Academic Engagement, Social Engagement, Surroundings, Personal Spaces. Considering such developments within HE with massification, widening access, internationalisation and the neoliberal grip upon universities, we follow Gravett and Ajjawi (2021, p. 4) in suggesting that "there is an urgent need to question who can belong, how, and to where/whom?".

Linking belonging to inclusion within the context of the massification of UK HE specifically and widening access initiatives is inarguably largely positive, however we suggest viewed in such a one-dimensional way masks wider inequalities that stem from society which are also transferred and enacted within higher education, notably, class, ethnicity, age, culture (social/cultural capital) and ability, for example. There has admittedly been success and progress in widening access to university education amongst under-represented and disadvantaged groups in society, for example, students from the most under-represented groups are now "60% more likely to enter university now than they were ten years ago" (Russell Group, 2020, p. 2). However, disparities still exist and continue to persist notably by way of "social and geographical background and by ethnicity and disability" (ibid). As Mullen highlighted over a decade ago "to date, it has been difficult to demonstrate clearly a direct impact from public investment on widening access to FE and HE" (2010, p. 3). It may be contended that this is due to focusing on statistical measurements of widening access initiatives success which cannot account for the experiences and 'unique realities' of

individual students (Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p. 21). As such, they are failing to identify and comprehend the barriers to university which persist and discourage certain individuals from entering and succeeding within HE.

HE curriculum (overt and hidden), learning and teaching methods, and assessment practices as situated in the past and reflective of dominant culture within society in terms of the knowledge, skills and social/cultural capital required to successfully engage with these. Healey and Stroman (2021, p. 12) argue that "there is no such thing as culturally neutral teaching", rather they state that "instructional resources and pedagogy communicate to students what—and whose—knowledge, practices, contributions, and perspectives are seen as valued and legitimate". As such, these resources and pedagogies often reify certain beliefs and assumptions that reflect the dominant culture that then marginalise certain groups related to gender, race and class. Healey and Stroman (ibid.) introduce the idea of mirrors and windows, which helps to consider scenarios of perceived inclusion or exclusion from HE. Describing the mirror metaphor, the authors suggest that:

> Students need to see themselves in "mirrors" in their education to know that people like them are valued; when they can't see themselves, or the representations that are available are distorted or negative, students receive a clear message that they are outsiders, both in school and society (p. 7)

Curriculum and pedagogy do not reflect the current diversity or the students learning in HE settings, but instead mirror the dominant culture and their favoured competencies and practices, which others must conform to in order to succeed. For example, by contrast, those of the dominant culture who the curriculum and pedagogy 'mirror' are privileged. For diverse others, the curriculum and pedagogy present 'windows' whereby these students get an insight into and learn from the backgrounds, experiences and lives of their traditional peers that reflect the dominant culture (Healey & Stroman, 2021). As such, some students seek to belong and find that they have to align with normative practices, ideas and behaviours of the academy - where some transform and see new possibilities, others feel excluded and do not belong. In this sense, the power structures of HE are revealed by discourse and matter which are "shaped and constituted by the politics of location and relations and connections between bodies" (Gravett, et al., 2021, p. 4). To draw again on Healey and Stroman (2021, p. 3), it is undeniable that students' evaluation of their belonging "is based upon reasonable inferences about what is expected of them in a given setting and society. Some educational practice and policies send conspicuous signals that certain students do not belong".

As we have demonstrated, the notion of 'belonging' is multifaceted, not usefully reducible to a simple binary, and subjective in its affect. However, as educators faced with sector-wide imperatives to engage with (and possibly even demonstrate the impact of) 'belonging', it is incumbent on us to continue to critique both the meaning and application of this term. Specifically, as critical educators, we need to ask ourselves to whom or what the verb 'belong' pertains.

Subscendence, Interconnectedness, and Ecological Conceptions of the University

When considering the notion of 'belongingness' we can see that there is a psycho-social bias linked to the supposedly 'human' desire to be a part of a social group in some way, that is, to not feel excluded or isolated. However, when dealing with 'belonging' we need to ask ourselves what it might mean to belong to something, to whom/what we are said to belong, who or what dictates our 'belonging-status', what the effects of such 'membership' or 'belonging' are, and how they impact

on notions of self. We argue that uses of the term 'belonging' in the context of contemporary HE are often specifically related to 'belonging *to* a university', i.e. being enrolled in, and therefore a part of, the organisation as one of its constituent parts. While we acknowledge that this could be read as functional or even cynical, when considered alongside evidence that 'belonging' is part of financially-motivated student retention campaigns then the implications of 'belonging' can be seen as problematic in many ways. As Thomas (2002) notes:

> Educational institutions favour knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups… to the detriment of other groups. (p. 431)

As discussed above, the privileging of the experiences of dominant groups over others is one key way in which the notion of belonging has become problematic. If an institution favours one way of being, one set of experiences, one set of values over others, then what does it mean to 'belong' to this institution if your knowledge, experiences, and values do not align with that which has been deemed appropriate by the dominant group? To, again, draw on Thomas (2019), it is clear that:

> the notion of student belonging in HE is associated with particular kinds of 'student' behaviour enacted within campus boundaries and/or outside contact hours … Living at home, combining study with employment, and entering HE later are identified as ways of engaging which 'make it more difficult for students to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE, which can impact on their retention and success' (p. 12)

We would also add to this list the many international students who come to participate in HE institutions with different cultural experiences of education, many of which are markedly different to that which the host institutions regard as normative. We would also add students who are the 'first in family' to enter HE who inevitably lack family connections to HE practices and associated behaviours, values, and practices. For many of these students, belonging becomes an act of conformity and one which may be pragmatic, psychological and physical in its form, but which may be construed objectivity as an act of violence and oppression that dehumanises those who do not fit the dominant culture. In this sense having to belong and fit to a particular view/conception of an 'ideal student', that may reflect the view of the 'hegemonic academic' which "is a theoretical concept describing the most valorised way of being an academic…and can refer to physical characteristics and/or behaviours, practices, and values" (Butler, 2021, p. 18); is a "distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire, 1996, p. 26).

Belonging, in the sense that we would like to critique, assumes the primacy of the institution to which one belongs. In this sense, we are led to infer that the whole (i.e. the university) could be seen to be greater than the sum of its parts. That is, we all *belong to* the university, rather than that we are all constituent components of the university, or that the university is an emergent phenomenon in the face of our collaborative involvement. Timothy Morton (2017), writing from the perspective of ecology introduces the term 'subscendence' to deal with this very issue; clearly not in the context of HE, but we believe the logic applies and is useful here, conceptually in much the same way Barnett appropriates/employs/adopts the term 'ecological' to argue for a self-sustaining, relational and enhancing university (Barnett, 2018). If we take it for granted, as many do, that a 'whole is greater than the sum of its parts', then it is of little concern or consequence if the parts are replaced – we will still have the whole. So, to follow Morton and use an environmental example, if a species cannot thrive in a world dominated by the behaviours of other species and goes extinct then something else will fill its place – we still have 'the world' (i.e. the whole).

It is not a particularly large leap of the imagination to relate this directly to the HE context and say that if the 'whole' is the university and the parts are (amongst other constituents) the students, then the inability of some to thrive in an institution guided by the values and experiences of dominant groups, is somewhat inconsequential unless the existence of the whole is threatened, of course. Institutional pushes for 'belonging' could be seen as ways in which to enculturate component parts of a system to the dominant narrative, thus reducing the potential for threats to the whole (attrition, non-completion, lack of applicants etc. which have clear financial implications for institutions). We believe and are concerned by the potential for dehumanisation through imposed unity and the invocation of a particular notion of 'community' which functions to prioritise domestication and conformity to social and economic expectations of a higher education driven by an agenda of employability, entrepreneurialism, and acquisitive individualism.

To continue to draw on Morton's (ibid) notion of subscendence, we believe that this is a useful way in which to reconsider the issue of belonging. We can still consider the idea of 'wholes' and 'parts' but, as suggested by Morton, the concept of subscendence allows us to consider the idea that some wholes are *less* than the sum of their parts. A university is, after all, ontologically less than all those parts (students, academics, support staff, buildings, equipment etc.) of which it is comprised. Morton (2017) notes that 'wholes *subscend* their parts, which means that parts are not just mechanical components of wholes' (p. 102). If 'belonging' can be expressed in terms of parts playing their roles within a whole, as we argue is one critical reading of the current trend towards the use of this 'buzzword' in contemporary HE, then this is hugely problematic for the reasons noted above. If however, we can look at this issue using the lens of subscendence, then we begin to see a way in which we reconsider student belonging to relate to the way in which all those involved in a university essentially comprise 'the university', rather than components that belong to it who need to act in specific ways in order to perpetuate a particular vision and form of the university as an institution. We argue that the university can and should be seen as an implosive whole, less than the sum of its parts. This refocuses attention and importance on the parts, each of which is important, consequential, irreplaceable, and valued for what it is and can be, rather than how it combines, aligns, and conforms with other parts to form a whole.

As such, we argue for a subscendent vision of belonging in which we see the sum as less than the whole of its parts. This, we believe, will allow us to consider the university as an important ecosystem of diversity, difference, and multiplicities in which the supercomplexity of the system allows for interconnectedness, rather than simple proprietary belonging to be central to our endeavours, relationships, and ethos. As Thomas (2019) notes:

> if an institution is accepting and celebratory of difference, students from diverse backgrounds will see themselves better reflected in the institution and be more likely to persist (ibid, p. 439).

Echoing this, a recent report by the Russell Group (2020, p. 3) emphasises the need to recognise difference stating:

> Under-represented and disadvantaged students are not a homogenous group. Different groups have different needs and a person's background and identity often intersect in complex ways.

HE should therefore embrace such difference and work to best support these specific groups and individuals in ways which allow them to develop, progress and achieve success in their studies. To do so it is imperative that universities look for the human amongst the data and identify, and support

their diverse needs (Taylor, 2021), that are unlikely to reflect that of a homogenous offering, or a one-size-fits-all approach often seen in outreach programmes (Russell Group, 2020). Following Gravett and Ajjawi (2021, p.8), we believe that belonging is "not merely a pathway to retention" but instead can be viewed in a more nuanced way as "a constellation of relations, intimately entangled with identities, becoming and learning".

Using the concept of ecology, Jackson and Barnett explain:

> The act of learning is an ecological phenomenon that brings forth new meanings and understandings of the world and of one's own being and identity in and with the world. The very act transforms us and the world around us. It is a learning ecology. (2020, p. 1)

Viewing learning as an ecology we should consider ecological philosophy or 'ecosophy'. Guattari (2000) suggests that ecosophy encapsulates three interconnected ecologies that consist of environmental, mental and social worlds, each being discernible within the context of the university but also within the view of belonging outlined previously, and each of these can be impacting factors on one's belonging in university (Anant, 1967; Ahn & Davis, 2020; Allen et al., 2021). Barnett (2011; 2018; 2020; 2021) adopts Guattari's conception of ecological philosophy to consider the ecological university – "a university that takes seriously both the world's interconnectedness and the university's interconnectedness with the world" (2011, p. 451).

Both massification and internationalisation significantly altered the demographics of students from the traditional corpus which has subsequently not been reflected in the pedagogies or practices of the university where traditional forms remain dominant (e.g. lectures, individual essays) – arguably this may be viewed an ecological impairment impacting 'learning' and 'human subjectivity'. Barnett (2018) himself uses the example of contemporary internationalisation strategies and practices of universities to exemplify how - as we have hitherto argued in relation to the current broad and diffuse student demographic in HE – these activities impact upon five of his seven ecologies (knowledge, culture, social institutions, the economy and human subjectivity) and therefore have implications for how universities develop and enhance their ecologies in response to this. For example, "the presence on campus of students from perhaps one hundred countries or more poses nice questions about inter-culturality, about the intensity of those students' cultural scripts and the rights of those students to be heard in their own cultural voices" (p. 579).

From Belonging to Being: The importance of the 'relational'

Having chartered the inadequacies of normative, prevalent perspectives of belonging and surveyed what alternatives ecological and subscendent concepts offer, we now move to reconceptualise belonging as what we believe to be a more meaningful notion, namely, 'relational being'. Drawing on Gergen's conception of relational 'being' rather than relational 'self' (which can be seen to evoke individualist ideals), the use of 'being' is important as 'in being, we are in motion, carrying with us a past as we move through the present into a becoming' (p. xxvi).

As Biesta et al. (2004, p. 5) stress, education is "primarily about human beings who are in relation with one another". We agree entirely and believe that our vision of a subscendent ecological university can champion these relational pedagogies (Bingham and Sodorkin, 2004; Hinsdale, 2016; Bovill, 2020). A key contribution here that converges with core aspects of our subscendent ecological idea of the university is posthumanism. Gravett et al. (2021, p. 2) explain that the unifying aspect undergirding the various theories "considered as posthuman, is the notion that

posthumanism decentres the 'human' as a separate, bounded, individualistic category in order to situate the human in relation – with other humans and nonhumans". Moving beyond anthropocentrism to an ecological, biocentric view, posthumanism can be seen to provide hope pedagogically. Gourlay (2021 cited in Gravett et al., 2021, p. 3) establishes this connection, which clearly links to our use of Morton's (2019) work above:

> A posthuman perspective potentially allows for a more focused, and accurate, account for what actually goes on, in the day-to-day of educational processes…it allows for the questioning of the fundamental assumptions underlying agency and the unfolding of epistemic practices in higher education, both digital and analogue…it allows for a move away from ideological assumptions and stereotypes, towards a profoundly ethnographic, observing, noticing stance towards practice.

This development presents an ideological, ontological, epistemological, axiological, and practical shift from the prevailing perspectives of HE. Most notably this shift takes us away from a humanist view of the world and our centrality and uniqueness within it to make it a world to one that sees humans in relation with the world and its multitude of actors (human and non-human) to consider it more as an ecosystem of entanglements, where humans and the university are inseparable as distinct groups or entities. A concerted goal of posthumanism views is this rejection of human centrism and the damages it has wrought through acquisition and exploitation to unite with cognate approaches like feminism, postcolonialism, and anti-racism to create more inclusive epistemological practices (Gravett et al, 2021). In this way, posthuman theory provides a lens to consider student belonging and connectedness though beyond ideological assumptions and stereotypes of homogenous cohorts and the 'ideal' student that reflect the traditional view of successful university learning, reflective of the dominant culture.

As with our critique of belonging, embracing an ecological, posthuman relational pedagogy demarcates a shift from the prevailing "global discourse on education [that] is built on the concept of individualism" (Aspelin, 2011) which mirrors our contemporary society of late-stage capitalism but also the neoliberal managerial university which measures 'learning' and success upon individual attainment and measures of satisfaction. In this sense "transactional language" (Bovill, 2020) of universities as enterprises and students as consumers is at odds with the development of meaningful educational practices and approaches that seek to support learning and the creation of meaningful caring relationships (Noddings, 2010). We contend as per our ecological, subscendent vision of universities that we need to move beyond such a view of individualised learning where learners compete with and are judged in comparison with others, who are seen as needing to belong to a university in their successful pursuit of learning for individual and economic gain, one centred on humans as "bounded beings" and "relational beings" (Gergen, 2009). Gergen (2009) contends that as individuals we are not separate but rather, we exist in relation to others in a series of relational processes, to the extent that the self as we know it is entangled within relationships. In this view, Gergen states relationships may be seen as "a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self" (2009, p. xv) whereby, rather than separate individual entities or bodies, "we exist in a world of co-constitution" (ibid).

The notion of relational being as an educational aim allows us to proceed beyond present pedagogies focussed primarily on generic skills which remain bogged down in fixed, binary humanist traditions in seeking to "provide fixed ontologies for an unknown world" to a move to a pedagogy of being that provides "open ontologies for an unknown world" (Barnett, 2004, p.255). As Aspelin (2011, p.10) suggests, relational pedagogy is centred on the belief that relationships are the core aspect of education where it "presupposes that the human being is constituted in and through a relational

process". Relational pedagogies "position meaningful relationships as fundamental to effective learning and teaching and explore ways of fostering connections, authenticity and responsiveness" (Gravett et al., 2021, p. 5).

This view shares commonalities with Gravett and Ajjawi's (2021, p. 10) reimagined view of belonging as "situated, fluid and sociomaterially constituted" within practice.

As Healey and Stroman (2021) remind us:

> Instructional activities that welcome students' uses of language, utilise more collaboration and exploration, and further communal goals can create cultural continuity for students who are disadvantaged by and may otherwise feel disengaged by practices that reflect the stereotypically masculine and Western values of independence and competition (p. 13)

Pearce & Down (2011) implore us to consider the need for tutors to reveal embedded activities of HE which are seen as normalising practices which can obstruct positive relationship development. Echoing Healey and Stroman's call to action, Barnett (2021, p. 4) claims it is not academics role to teach students but rather:

> to set up pedagogical situations such that students come to take on wide perspectives and generate their own will to go on. This is a pedagogy of planned and safe anxiety; of troublesomeness. (It is nothing other than living in the world today).

In doing so, we make the same connection Barnett (2021, p. 4) does to a founding tenet of university education, and one arguably at risk and subdued in scope and intensity within the neoliberal university (Graham, 2021), critical thinking which he states should be "reinstated" at the "heart of higher education…and total rethought". We contend that such a re-thinking is available to us in form of Barnett's (1997) earlier thesis of critical being, which enfolds a pedagogy of being centred on criticality in seeking to support students' development as critical beings in the world where students are empowered to be themselves and engage meaningfully and constructively with the world. This connects with Freire's (1970) vision of education for humanisation though does not stop there, it incorporates being in and with the world beyond human actors to think, reflect and act critically in the world. In this view, critical being adopts an implicit ecological sensibility that advances beyond normative notions of student belonging that privilege dominant ideologies, values, practices and identities and the current focus of HE learning as preparation for economic life centred on individualism, competition and exploitation of the natural and social world for human gain. Connecting to Gergen's (2009, p. xvi) vision of relational being this allow us then "to consider the world in terms of relational confluence" and thus to move away from current oppressive notions of belonging in which the one's relation to the university, merely as a part of the whole, is paramount.

Concluding Thoughts

Belonging is a problem when viewed as a panacea for issues related to retention and progression. Not because we have any issue with the psychological need for belongingness, but because the ways in which it can be enacted, and the motivations for doing so, stem from prevailing neoliberal agendas which seek to instrumentalise education and, in doing so, favour the experiences and values of dominant groups. It is this normative and uniform notion - most commonly framing belonging in literature, policy and practice - that we have sought to problematise in unpacking salient assumptions inherent in this view.

We would like to, following a range of other scholars, register our concerns with current issues stemming from the prevalence of pedagogies of belonging, and feel that a truly valuable and meaningful experience for students and educators alike, is not one that prioritises belonging to the university, but one that sees the university as an emergent construct growing out of and existing through the interrelationships of those involved in the ecosystems and communities associated with our praxis. In doing so, we hope to encourage colleagues to consider a subscendent view that contests the idea of belonging and promotes a relational view of beings within an ecology. This relational view sees education as communicative rather than transactional (Bingham & Sodorkin, 2004) where students and teachers are "*equals negotiating the educational space together*" (Adams, 2018, p. 137). Viewing teaching as a "forum for genuine, interhuman encounters", the essence of teaching then is realised when the student *"has broken through a protective shield to meet the world as another living being"* (Aspelin, 2021, p. 595). From this in-depth engagement with what it means to belong, or more pertinently to 'be' in HE, it is clearly incumbent upon educators to critically consider their adoption of a relational pedagogical approach that embraces open communication, interaction, and care for and valuing of students as complex, situated, knowledgeable beings in their own right.

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