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Negotiating access and belonging in a higher education institution: a postqualitative narrative

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to foreground accessibility as a necessary aspect of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). We go about this by highlighting shared experiences of negotiating institutional ableism together, as a disabled scholar employed at a HEI in the UK, and a non-disabled, culturally and linguistically diverse individual employed to bridge inaccessible spaces. Drawing upon Wong's (2023) conceptual framework of spatial belonging in higher education, which traverses the intersecting terrain of physical, digital, relational and structural spaces, we develop a postqualitative narrative demonstrating the limitations of narrowly defined legal protections that fall short of implementing inclusive ideals. The narrative draws attention to the ways that 'access intimacy', understood as shared commitments to accessibility, develops informally, which excuses HEIs from taking responsibility to institutionalise it. We contemplate accessibility as a relational concern and build an argument for learning from our experiences to inform the development of key accessibility considerations into institutional ways of working and relating to difference. The paper is significant for engaging principles from critical disability studies as conceptual means by which to consider accessibility, and the relational account provided contributes a collaborative perspective frequently experienced but not widely considered in higher education research for strengthening EDI.

Keywords Equality/equity · Diversity and inclusion · Accessibility · Disability · Access intimacy · Ableism

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) UK-wide embed equality diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives in their strategic plans for “transforming lives, enriching society and developing the economy for the better” (Advance HE, 2023). These intentions have been amplified subsequent to the global COVID-19 pandemic, wherein ongoing uncertainties about environmental and economic sustainability, conflict and global mobility have also led to ideas around enhancing belonging for staff and students (Blake et al., 2022). Belonging in the context of higher education has been defined as the sense of connection, respect and support, which has a particular relevance to populations who have been traditionally marginalised from the sector (Wong, 2023). Although belonging for staff within business environments has been given some consideration (Kunde, 2023), the majority of conceptual and empirical research related to belonging in higher education (HE) has been related to students (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Raaper, 2021). Little attention has been paid to belonging for staff members within HE whose markers of identity set them apart from mainstream populations. This paper thereby contributes a unique perspective to these considerations by way of a shared narrative accounting the experiences of a male disabled scholar (Ben) employed at a HEI in the UK, and a non-disabled, female culturally and linguistically diverse individual (Priscila) employed to bridge inaccessible encounters in the workplace for and with him.

To frame this discussion, we draw upon a reconfigured approach to postqualitative narrative (Arndt & Tesař, 2019), linked to Wong’s (2023) conceptual framework of belonging in higher education, traversing the intersecting terrain of physical, digital, relational and structural spaces in which inaccessibility centres our experiences. Our intentions are twofold. First, we seek to contribute to the emerging literature on ableism in higher education affecting disabled staff from the sector (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Kwon, 2023; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022; Long & Stabler, 2021; Price, 2024; Rodgers et al., 2022). In keeping with the purpose of this scholarship, institutional ableism refers to organised ways of working that favour a specific, ability-centred ideal of an employee of a HEI, underpinned by principles of autonomy, self-sufficiency, progress and resilience that are difficult for disabled staff to engage. It is from here we mobilise our second purpose of the paper, to apply a critical disability studies orientation to EDI. Despite frequently stated commitments to EDI aimed at benefitting marginalised groups, knowledge about disability is entrenched in a medical viewpoint, leaving disabled students and employees of HE, be they academic, professional or otherwise, largely unaccounted for (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2023).

We offer this contribution via four interconnected moves. In the first, we offer a review of pertinent literature both empirical and conceptual, to which this paper is intended to contribute. Second, we develop the conceptual framework of our discussion, situating the postqualitative orientation to narrative and spatial belonging as the theoretical resources framing the paper. In the third, we present our shared narrative, whereupon we explain how everyday encounters within the institution regularly presents ableist barriers that we must negotiate together. In the fourth, we distil our experiences into practical recommendations for reorientating towards accessibility as a key relational concern. We thereby join other scholars (Bhopal, 2022; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Long & Stabler, 2021; Watson et al., 2023; Wilde, 2022) in advocating for a substantive shift in institutional cultures—one that strengthens EDI initiatives by actively challenging entrenched inequalities.

Move 1: Setting the context

This paper joins a lengthening line of published scholarship that features the lived accounts of higher education staff—abled and disabled—who in partnership examine how ableism regularly permeates commonplace experiences (Long & Stabler, 2021; Michalko & Titchkosky, 2018; Mounsey & Booth, 2021; Olsen et al., 2020; Whitburn & Goodley, 2019). Significant to this body of scholarship is the emerging interdisciplinary field of critical disability studies which it both draws from and contributes to, in recreating disability and inclusion as relational concerns. By this, we take as our starting point Kittay's (2011, p. 53) conceptualisation of the relational self, which is "constituted in part by relationships important to a person's identity". A common thread through this work is its twofold commitment to an affirmative orientation to disability and difference, by anchoring personal experiences with conditions of marginalisation while simultaneously illustrating the ethical imperative of relational entanglement. It demonstrates, firstly, that in collaboration, connections may be created that draw attention away from individualist orientations to disability. That is to say, the concept of disability is difficult to define without giving consideration to the social, material, historical, environmental and biological contexts contributing to everyday encounters (Feely, 2016). Secondly, and core to the contribution we make in this paper, it mounts a related provocation for reframing how inclusion and belonging in education is as much a concern related to disabled students and staff whose intersecting markers of identity have traditionally held them to the periphery.

Employment for individuals with disabilities is an area of policy that has received lengthy considerations, both in terms of supporting disabled people and organisations to create meaningful employment opportunities (Morris, 2018). In the UK, the Disability Confident Scheme has become a hallmark of employer organizations committed to creating inclusive and accessible workplaces for disabled employees (Department for Work & Pensions, 2014). At the same time, underwriting employment for many disabled people is the Access to Work scheme, which funds eligible individuals to make necessary adaptations to aid employment (Department for Work & Pensions, 2014). The first author, Ben, is blind and makes use of screen reading and speech-to-text software, and braille. Additionally, he requires support to familiarise himself with physical spaces that are not familiar to him, such as a new classroom or workspace. Having taken up an offer of employment at an accredited Disability Confident Leader HEI, the appropriate assistive technology was sourced without issue as verifiable reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 (UK Public General Acts, 2010). A further 8 h per week of Access to Work funded support was obtained, and the second author, Priscila, recruited to the role.

Access to Work funding is strictly offered on the basis that it will not be used to cover reasonable adjustments that an employer is legally obliged to provide, but for auxiliary purposes that cannot otherwise be bridged (Department for Work & Pensions, 2014). It may appear on the surface that working with such an assistant is a transactional procedure for the disabled employee, set in place merely to address accessibility gaps. Yet collaborative work of this kind might be reframed as being more significant to building a sense of belonging for both parties. As researchers (Blake et al., 2022; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Wong, 2023) have observed, belonging is an important factor for promoting academic and social outcomes for staff and students. Accordingly, the synergy formed between a disabled scholar and their access to work support assistant is beautifully encapsulated by Mounsey and Booth (2021, p. 175) in their discussion about their own experiences of working collaboratively: "what is wholly positive about having an Access to Work partnership is that we complement each other, but more than that, we help each other to become more than we might have been if we were alone".

Accessibility is a significant thread of the current paper whose provision is rarely assured, in spite of the institution's status as a disability confident employer. Yet, gaining accessibility is necessarily aligned with an ethic of care (Kittay, 2011, 2021), which we will demonstrate through the course of this paper. Though the disability support assistant job description includes varied tasks related to supporting Ben, much of Priscila's employment has been given to helping to make sense of inaccessibility within the institution and to creating ways of working through it. This prompts us to consider our roles, the time we must allocate to shared work, and other practical reasons underpinning why and how we interact. We also urge, through this paper, reflection on whether these interactions could be formally recognised as means to ensure that disabled staff at higher education institutions feel a sense of belonging. As Kittay (2011, p. 57) astutely notes, "Dependence may in various ways be socially constructed, and unjust and oppressive institutions and practices create many sorts of dependence that are unnecessary and stultifying. But if dependency is constructed, independence is still more constructed. We cannot turn away from that fact and sufficiently rid ourselves of prejudices against disability". This sentiment echoes the broader theme of the paper, highlighting the positive, enriching outcomes that arise when diverse individuals work together, challenging stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive understanding of relational entanglements necessary to undertake research and teaching in a busy HEI. Let us now turn to a conceptual framing of the current contribution to this intent.

Move 2: conceptual framework

Reconfiguring narrative

We frame this presentation in a postqualitative approach to narrative inquiry (Arndt & Tesař, 2019) woven around Wong's (2023) four interconnected dimensions of physical, digital, relational and structural spaces of a HEI within which belonging can take shape. Though it is conventionally at home in disciplines such as literary theory, psychology, anthropology and media studies, narrative inquiry has also gathered steam in educational research that centres the experiences of participants. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) drew emphasis to the storied lives of students and teachers—their claim being that together, different characters in a school inevitably interrelate. In turn, these interactions shape each other's meanings of schooling, with the idea that "the study of narrative…is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). This orientation holds much affinity with disability studies, whose alternative point of departure from rehabilitative research is to give emphasis to the lived realities of disabled people (Barton, 2005).

The traditionally narrative-driven approach to research inquiry is a taken-for-grantedness of reality. Belonging, by way of such an understanding, might be easily ascertained by a researcher who interviews a disabled participant, asking them to reflect on what makes them feel as though they belong or do not to an institution, and the necessary value a hired help provides to their work experiences. Assuming that reality is largely the same for all, a researcher might then analyse the collected data into a simplified, codable narrative and presenting it as unique knowledge emphasising humanist tendencies. As reasonable as such a proposition may be, narratives of this kind emphasise a normalised, human-centric point of departure connected to individualising theories of psychology. In Mazzei's (2016) view, this approach is drenched in a false sense of security that presupposes the essential or unique knowing subject, who has full control over his or her domain. Drawing on a postqualitative orientation to narrative inquiry, Arndt and Tesař (2019) advance a reconfiguration of the methodology. Most notably, this framework takes issue with the humanist grounding that has underpinned narrative approaches, which has tended to reify experiences into representations of perceived certainty. They suggest instead researchers account for discursive and material entanglements between human and non-human entities, embodied and situated knowledge, the agency of matter and the significance of affectation.

To draw these terms directly towards the purpose of this paper, we have selected to frame this work using a postqualitative narrative approach for two interconnected reasons. First, in keeping with postqualitative inquiry, which aligns closely with a philosophy of immanence (St Pierre, 2019), we intend to take seriously the ethical imperative to challenge the stability of knowable categories, such as disability, accessibility, disability support work and belonging. Philosophers of immanence, such as Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, undertook work that gave emphasis to the ontological—the way of being—that is characterised by co-existence, rather than fixed, categorizable and accurately representable wholeness. St Pierre (2019) explains that in this context, imminence implies that constitutive elements act and interact with one another on the same plane of immanence, and there is no external transcendent realm. That is to say, conditions of being are continually variable and contingent to the materiality of our entanglements (Zembylas, 2016). Our writings then are not attributable to any one individual, but to an assemblage comprising shared experiences encountering and forging a path through institutional ableism. The narratives we develop relinquish any false sense of our own agency, but instead detail how relational and affective entanglements, between ourselves, the physical, digital, relational and structural spaces of the HEI are enmeshed in the work we do. In the narrative, we speak as one; and when we do offer an observation in the voice of just one of us, we use our names.

The second and related reason we have chosen postqualitative narrative to frame this work is that to write together is to think, and to learn, as writing itself is a form of methodological inquiry (Lincoln, 2003). As St Pierre (2019, p. 3) puts it, “Post qualitative inquiry encourages concrete, practical experimentation and the creation of the not yet instead of the repetition of what is”. In keeping with the critical disability studies tradition from which we draw, the purpose is to demonstrate the affirmative conditions of potential in our shared work. Our intention is to interrogate our experiences through what Arndt and Tesař (2019) call an “intertextual encounter” (p. 141) or “an always evolving encounter, a dynamic emergence with a transformative ‘life’ of its own” (ibid). That is to say, we understand that “accounts are not things (i.e., stories that reflect experience); … [but] accounts [that] do things” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022, p. 6). What they do is to develop understanding of how a disabled researcher and an Accessibility Support assistant can come together in the creation of conditions of belonging of their own in a workplace where ableism continually lurks in the shadows.

Spatially belonging

We weave our narrative through Wong’s (2023) conceptual framework of spatial belonging in higher education. Wong advances four interconnected dimensions of belonging: physical, digital, relational and structural spaces, as influential environments that conceptually shape experience. To some extent, these dimensions may be particularly self-explanatory, and they are also not exhaustive. Nonetheless, Wong’s premise is that the multiple and entangled spaces of a HEI play a significant role in developing a sense of belonging. This is particularly salient in relation to developing an emotional connection to a HEI, and furthermore, when design principles account for accessibility requirements. The four spaces for Wong (2023) have particular relevance to belonging, because they can easily exclude if not deliberately designed with consideration to different ways of being and knowing. As he observes (pp.8–9), “space is not regarded as neutral but are recognised to operate in explicit and implicit ways that reflect structural inequalities of power and privilege”. Though Wong’s focus is specific to student belonging, we assume relevance for our own considerations as one of us (Priscila) was an international PhD student completing her studies, and the other (Ben), a new member of staff who has only very recently joined the institution also from another country. We will expand on the influence of each in the narrative in the following move, where we have selected some of many examples where institutional ableism draws to work in particular ways.

The physical space refers to the tangible and material aspects that comprise a HEI, including buildings, transport, as well as liminal spaces including hallways, paths, to signage doors on and lifts. The digital space refers to those forms of access that is typically the relational space mediated with technological devices including computers, telephones and online applications. The relational space may traverse both physical and digital spaces, referring specifically to the quality of relationships between human and nonhuman elements within the HEI. Finally, the structural space overarches the prior dimensions and refers to the broader picture, such as the role and purpose of higher education in society, the historical and political permeations that affect its operations and the traditions it upholds (Wong, 2023). As will become clearer in what remains of this paper, the narrative we present offer snippets of shared experiences that correspond with Wong’s interconnected dimensions of spatial belonging to the university.

Move 3: Narrative

As a consequence of the ongoing dynamic of compromised accessibility, between us we have developed what disability advocate Mingus (2011) calls “access intimacy”. As she explains it, access intimacy is the “elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs” (par. 4). Intuiting accessibility needs, for Mingus, has much broader implications than technical outcomes. As a disabled person herself, Mingus advances access intimacy as a necessary component of life, in which she and another work together to confront ableist environments with shared conviction. Valentine (2020) takes up the concept of access intimacy, marking it as a shift from what she refers to as the prevalent “accommodationalist perspective”, to one “wherein individuals have built or are building anti-ableist patterns of relationality” (p.83) in order to belong anew. Let us now move onto discuss how this has developed for us through our experiences navigating the spatial dimensions of higher education.

Navigating the physical dimension

Written into the job description, there is an expectation that an academic will turn up, make use of the office, meander the corridors and greet colleagues, attend and deliver classes and join in at work social events, including meet and greet sessions with students new and old. There are other activities one might like to engage as well, such as going to the university pool, meeting a new colleague at the campus bar or coffee shop, or simply deciding to walk to work on a crisp sunny morning. But all of this rests upon the important detail that the campus—the venue hosting these activities—is physically accessible. It complies, after all, with the relevant legislation that necessarily protects the institution against any liabilities that might arise because of a mishap associated with disability. For Wong (2023), the physical space of a university is significant to its capacity to foster belonging, because material structures and tangible, environmental objects shape sensory experiences. He goes on (p. 7) "the lived experiences of physical spaces within universities can often be exclusionary …, which may be reflected in both the architectural structures and designs of the campus as well as the social and demographic backgrounds of the individuals who occupy them". For Ben, it seems apparent that disability is an unexpected addition to the campus, whose implications are largely reduced to the individual level when physical barriers present themselves.

On arriving at the institution to take up his job offer, Ben was struck that physical accessibility considerations that might aid the orientation and mobility requirements of a vision impaired person around the main campus at which he would be situated were seemingly sparce: Neither a Braille sign nor a tactile wayfinding Tile on a path could be found, aside from the uniform dots installed by the council at road crossings. Physical accessibility considerations not only to support vision impaired individuals also seemed more of an afterthought, including placing accessible toilets behind heavy doors. A relatively new and important building on campus (built within five years of writing) lacks all of these things, including Braille that might indicate toilet locations and likewise in its many elevators, with large, echoing spaces replete with hard, noise-provoking surfaces. All of this has heightened Ben's reliance on sighted assistance from Priscila. Departmental leadership has played an appreciated role, reinforcing to University Timetabling that teaching rooms must be used where Ben would supposedly have familiarity, and obtaining Braille signage to adorn the doors of meeting rooms in the building he would mostly occupy. Yet accessing the physical environment remains haphazard at best. And so, it is within this environment we traverse the day to day together wondering if either of us belong, constantly aware that while the buildings, garden beds, roads and paths remain fixed—and will accordingly become familiar—the smaller, subtle minutiae within the physical environment are highly dynamic. Tables will be moved, scheduled sessions will be changed, physical infrastructure will require maintenance, and toilet pipes may get blocked. And Ben's capacity to manoeuvre through the everyday goings on of this kind will be continually diminished, owing to, in the main, the lack of inclusive, accessible wayfinding and spontaneous communication considerations.

Valentine (2020) observes that physical accessibility barriers often go disregarded, unappreciated and unreciprocated, which increases the emotional, cognitive and physical labour upon the individual disabled person. Ben can relate: The extent to which he encounters such barriers and has to explain his accessibility needs can well reach into the dozens of times weekly. Accordingly, being able to pre-emptively identify inaccessible environments has become a hallmark of Priscila's work, as a particular facet of her role that can certainly not be identified and measured in her performance reviews, and might not even exist if the physical environment did not provoke so many instances of difficulty. But as we encounter obstacles together and attempt to free up more time and energy for Ben to get on with the job rather than to countenance time negotiating around accessibility barriers, the significance of access intimacy has become to us, something highly significant to navigating all four dimensions of the institution, within and as well beyond the physical space.

Navigating the digital space

In navigating the user interface of the contemporary UK HEI, it is striking to what extent technological mediation shapes the experiences of staff, students and visitors alike. Interacting with digital platforms is necessary to achieve any number of day-to-day institutionally based activities, from filling in online request forms, making orders, engaging with Human Resources, accessing texts, marking assessments, communicating with students and paying for transportation, and we could certainly go on ad nauseum. The digital space, for Wong (2023), is a key dimension of HEIs significant to building a sense of belonging. Similar to the physical dimension of the HEI, presupposed within the electronic-mediated environment is digital accessibility, which the UK government promotes as a way of ensuring "people are not excluded from using something on the basis of experiencing a disability" (Duggin, 2016, para. 6). This commitment is reflected in the Equality Act 2010, which seeks to eliminate discrimination and promote equal opportunities for people with identified protected characteristics, which includes disability. The legal obligation for HEIs to ensure accessibility is reinforced by the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018.

On this basis, we might suppose access intimacy in relation to the digital dimension to be redundant, because any digital accessibility needs are accounted for institutionally. However, Ben was aghast that digital accessibility, in spite of all the legislated protective assurances, was not a given across the institution. Here, we continually encounter the tension between prescriptive guidelines, such as the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and Access to Work Scheme, and the imperative to cultivate access intimacy between us by way of an ethic of care. Let us explain. With its technicist and highly positivist approach to accessibility, the legislative backdrop seemingly imposes a particular way of orientating that frames disability as a deficit, medical condition, and deviant characteristic (Lewthwaite, 2014). Illustrative of this concern, Wang et al. (2021) note that the distribution of knowledge in higher education is predominantly achieved with pdf formatted documents. Of a survey of over 1100 published papers, they discovered that 2.4% had been correctly prepared with adherence to accessibility principles. Not surprising then, electronic documentation that Ben accesses in PDF format, be it prepared within the institution, from journal publisher sites, or even from the local authority and NHS, is frequently inaccessible. Ben will often ask Priscila to access these on his behalf, which he will then need to run optical character recognition (OCR) over to try to glean the text he requires.

In another example, we have both had to work very closely together to ensure that we could slot in with current preferred ways of doing things with inaccessible marking software through Blackboard. This has often taken up our leave time and holidays to meet key deadlines. Suggestions as to how we might get around inaccessible barriers are frequently made, such as to use the voice recorded feedback function, that bear little resemblance to the tasks to be undertaken. Similarly, compulsory on-the-job digital training modules have been declared accessible on the basis they include a voiceover function, which will read the contents of a screen at the touch of a key combination. As Ben already uses a screen reader, it is not voicing capabilities that are missing, but any capacity to move through training modules and respond to quizzes. Yet nuances of these kinds are rarely considered and formalised but are left to us to muddle through together while always remaining conscious of time restraints. With such experiences in hand, it may not be surprising that the nuanced and context-dependent nature of accessibility requirements in higher education can be easily relegated as an achievable end point for the accessibly compromised (Ben), legislated as a reasonable adjustment and made possible by way of the means—the job of—their support assistant (Priscila).

When kept behind closed doors in this way, our need to work together to achieve digital accessibility is, for Kittay (2021), indicative that disability is constantly marked by precarity. In our shared experiences, Ben's increased dependence on Priscila to achieve simple accessibility outcomes takes place within stringent and predefined timeframes associated with teaching schedules, marking deadlines and mandatory training targets. That is to say, through our shared work, Ben is anticipated to achieve a level of objective productivity as per the terms and conditions of his job description. That Ben is made to depend on Priscila to achieve access heightens the precarity of his situation. But precarity is also given emphasis to Priscila's position within this exchange. Kittay (2021) simultaneously draws attention in such a relationship to the caregiver, whose own precarity is pronounced because their ability to provide the necessary support is contingent on their both meeting their own needs and having the level of skill and capacity to fulfil the caring role. This assumes that Priscila, who was forced at the time to work multiple jobs to make ends meet while completing her PhD, could spare the time required to experiment navigating the previously unchartered inaccessibility digital environments. It is within these shared exchanges in which an ethic of care emerges as both of us must mutually acknowledge the importance of empathy, attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of each other. Priscila's capacity to pre-empt digital accessibility barriers has certainly become an example of this, but so too has Ben's capacity to work collaboratively when Priscila's own workload is all consuming.

Belonging within the relational space

"Who was that?" Ben frequently asks Priscila, as we go about our work. People will regularly say hello—they're friendly like that. They might even start a conversation. For Wong (2023), the relational dimension of higher education focuses on the social interactions and networks that contribute to a sense of belonging. Social interaction though is frequently marred because in spontaneous conversation, people often stop short of identifying themselves. This typically leaves Ben uncertain as to with whom he is engaging. These conversations may be entirely mundane and hold little consequence, or else they may be relevant to operational decisions and therefore weighted highly. Priscila will often fill in the breach, either with a quick, pre-emptive, whispered explanation of who's approaching, or by explicitly stating their name in conversation. This simple act is certainly an example of access intimacy on Priscila's part. But she is not always by Ben's side, and we wonder why it seems so implausible for people to consider that they may need to state their names in order to be identified, so that verbal exchange can proceed on an equal basis. This might be construed as an example of what Brown and Ramlackhan (2021) refer to as academic marginalisation—a pervasive form of institutional ableism that assumes a functional standard of normality, whose pervasive effects in this case reach into the realm of extemporaneity.

The working week is frequently punctuated with social events, such as regular seminars with invited speakers, organised morning teas, lunches and student meet-ups. On the surface, this may seem relatively carefree: Attending in person means, mostly, spending time with familiar colleagues. Yet these frequent events have come to provide further shining examples of the access intimacy that has developed between us. Entering a noisy room full of loud voices in conversation, along with unknown and unknowable furniture arrangements, food when provided is generally laid out with the instructions to "help yourself". These words generally strike fear for Ben, who could not attempt to identify and distinguish food items, plates and cutlery, nor to make a selection to satisfy as lunch. Ben would also generally appreciate a chair when eating it frees up a hand. Yet this may be a luxury not easily attained. Priscila recognises the distress these events can cause and without question organises a heaped plate with Ben's preferred items and manoeuvres him to sit upon a chair near people he will be able to engage with. Yet again, Priscila is not always at these events—life circumstances get in the way. On these occasions, Ben has become well aware that he will be lucky to be handed a sandwich, as others rarely acknowledge his incapacity to identify what is on offer. He could ask, obviously. Yet repeated requests for reasonable adjustments to be acknowledged and implemented has become a hallmark of his day-to-day work, which he finds exhausting. Never had he thought this might extend to the simple act of getting a cup of tea and a biscuit. To this end, attending such events online whenever possible has become, for Ben, a much more accessible way of social engagement.

Our experiencing the relational space of the HEI in the ways described typifies the uncomfortable existence of disability when it appears as an unexpected entrant into the room. In their efforts to disrupt how ableism manifests a given denotation of normalcy within higher education, disability scholars have contemplated for some time the potential affordances when the disabled subject is given room to create knowledge rather than being its object (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Long & Stabler, 2021; Michalko, 2009). As Michalko writes, "How disability is made to appear to and for us influences greatly how disability will participate in our individual and collective lives" (p. 66). To this end, both Ben and Priscila attempt to make disability appear, if fleetingly, in the lives of our colleagues in such a way that leaves them no option but to engage. Our collective task then—Ben's, Priscila's, and our colleagues combined—is to recreate how we orientate towards disability and difference in ways affirmative to our diversities. From these encounters, it appears that this is not an easy task. Nevertheless, over time, both Ben and Priscila have noticed significant changes in how accessibility considerations have come to underpin the events we have described, gradually transforming into something less ableist and more equitable as a welcome consequence.

Belonging to the structural space

The structural dimension of the HEI considers the societal and systemic factors, such as internal and external policies, historical and political priorities, that shape the way a space influences belonging (Wong, 2023). There is no mistaking it; matters related to EDI are strategically significant to UK HEIs at the present. Alongside governmental efforts to increase, for example, workplace participation for disabled workers, the charitable organisation Advance HE (2023) is a salient force in the sector. Advance HE has implemented several equality charters with the goal of empowering higher education institutions to maximise their potential by promoting representation and creating opportunities. These charters focus on various identity categories, including women, ethnically diverse individuals, racially diverse individuals and technical workers. They provide benchmarks supported by levels of awards (gold, silver and bronze medallions) that indicate that they have been met, in relation to equality issues and research that are experienced by particular staff and students within the sector. The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has also launched a strategy to enhance research cultures, and it takes improving representation among previously unrepresented groups as a matter of priority within this broader framework. We cannot help but to recognise that as we wander the campus, undertake our respective research projects and teach, together, we epitomise the image of a diverse and inclusive HEI as a disabled individual and an international student. That is to say, we represent diversity. Accordingly, we acknowledge the value that has been placed on opening HE to previously ignored and slighted populations, without which we likely would not be here ourselves.

While we do not want to stand in the way of the pursuit for charters, we sense that rather than making meaningful cultural changes, taken alone, they force HEIs to adhere to an aesthetic of representation and neoliberal ideals of talent mobility; medals of achievement emblematic that efforts are being made to ensure those who are underrepresented are represented (Wilde, 2022). But we caution, not necessarily appreciated for the potential of their perspectives to contribute to knowledge. The structural space of the HEI has necessarily been prised open to admit more diverse faces. But rather than to attend to ableist assumptions embedded in its ways of working, it entrenches them. For instance, arriving to a new country to take up work or study requires a number of bureaucratic tasks to be undertaken, such as opening a bank account, securing long-term accommodation, buying furniture and in Ben's case registering disabled with the council, orientating around frequented areas and learning the way to the local shops. Acknowledging that these tasks are entirely outside the purview of our workplace, they are nonetheless related to accessibility, and they assume that Ben can undertake them independently, or that he has someone who will help him to complete those tasks outside of work. But he cannot; and would be lost without support. Extending the access intimacy developed between us, Priscila has had to step into the breach, to support accessibility for Ben both within and externally to the workplace.

Move 4: final remarks—practical recommendations

What we have offered in this paper is a way of reframing how HEIs orientate to EDI by working with the idea of belonging—a significant cultural development relevant to both staff as much as it is for students. We have highlighted in particular both the significance of relationality in the workplace and accessibility for those of us who readily do not have it. We have gone about this by presenting our shared narrative, one that explains how the access intimacy developed between us—a disabled researcher and an accessibility support assistant—enables us to navigate the physical, digital, relational and structural dimensions of an HEI which present ongoing barriers to accessibility in their current configuration. Not only does Ben benefit from our interactions, but Priscila too has felt empowered, and she has identified skills to create, advocate and negotiate that had not been recognised throughout her time studying at the institution. In short, she has observed that accessibility is a much broader proposition than it is recurrently considered to encompass cultural sensitivities and an appreciation for diverse ways of working.

To this end, there are two points to be made that comprise these final remarks, which we make as practical suggestions for strengthening EDI. First, institutionalise accessibility. Compliance with legal equality frameworks stops short at individualising accessibility needs as reasonable adjustments, which is complicit in entrenching ableism. As Price (2024) also makes clear, the ways that access needs are frames as necessarily accommodated tends to exacerbate inequity for disabled academic staff rather than promote inclusion. Second, take creative risks. Rather than contenting ourselves with what Wilde (2022) calls staged diversity, through increased representation of underrepresented groups on campuses, efforts ought to be made to legitimately account for diverse knowledges and experiences to inform strategic activities. This requires a cultural shift that acknowledges institutional responsibilities for enhancing accessibility across multiple domains (Marom & Hardwick, 2024) on the basis that disabled members of staff have much to offer the sector based on their specific knowledge and experiences. We expand on these points below.

Institutionalise accessibility

In our shared narrative, we have demonstrated how time and again the access intimacy that has developed between us is critical to Ben's capacity to work as a productive academic and to sense belonging, however fleetingly. Mingus (2011) refers to access intimacy as interdependence in action: as the necessary component of one person understanding and pre-emptively addressing another disabled persons' access requirements. Such an intuitive action is resonant of an ethical orientation to caring, as Kittay (2021, p. 292) writes: "The disabled person who depends on another's care and the caregiver alike exist in an economic, social, and political order that relegates 'inevitable dependencies' to the private domain". This might seem appropriate—it sets the conditions for work to be done and bills to be paid. Yet the inevitability of dependency is born out through continual encounters with inaccessible physical, digital and social dimensions of the HEI, which are subsequently left to us (relegated) to resolve privately. We recognise here that for staff of any organisation, many things may be kept private, and we have no intention of countering that. Our purpose has been to put forward our own experiences of navigating the spatial dimensions of belonging to a HEI and demonstrating that it frequently comes up short in relation to accessibility.

Having to contend privately with overcoming inaccessibility in the workplace is unacceptable for organisations who pride themselves on their disability confident leadership. But furthermore, it depoliticises the matter of accessibility, absolves the institution from its responsibility to decisively address inaccessibility in its material and cultural structures and adversely affects any sense that a disabled employee of a HEI might develop as a consequence. It is absurd to us that accessibility might be ever understood as a reasonable adjustment—it is after all what everyone, abled or disabled, counts upon implicitly to make their daily contributions. This argument is not dissimilar to other recent studies with disabled academic staff (Kwon, 2023; Price, 2024; Rodgers et al., 2022) which highlight institutional harm arising from persistent inaccessible university environments. To politicise accessibility across the sector, we insist that its significance is made more institutionally salient, acknowledged by leadership and understood as situated and context specific and that EDI strategies respond accordingly by emphasising how addressing inaccessibility is central to institutional efforts to reduce ableism. Accessibility support assistance, like that which Priscila has provided for Ben, might be key to these strategies. However, institutions would do well to acknowledge and respond to the conditions of inaccessibility that are their making and take efforts to address these.

Take creative risks

Relatedly, to ensure that equity and inclusion are given more emphasis in their EDI efforts, we implore HEIs to take creative risks that centre knowledge and experience over representation. Alison Wilde (2022, p. 985) explains "Perhaps part of the problem in the inefficacy of such efforts is that the separate components of EDI are usually collapsed into each other; Diversity the most salient amongst them". Here, we draw towards postqualitative narrative inquiry with which we have framed this paper, noting in particular that knowable and identifiable categories of diversity are far less able to represent themselves as presupposed, simply because the structural order in which these take shape constitute their existence. Relating this to EDI strategies, this would mean moving away from an adherence to representationalist logic, to more action or process orientated ideals.

Re-imagining EDI in this way takes seriously the difference that disability can make (Michalko, 2009). As Zembylas (2016, p. 395) explains, "the meaning of things comes less from the structure of symbolic order and more from their enactment in practice; action is conceived less in terms of individual or collective willpower and more via embodied and contextual affordances". Price (2024) adds that explaining how one inhabits the academic space as a disabled staff member is more than putting forward a dissenting voice: By focusing on experience over representation, the scholarly community must learn how to confront the barriers of its making. As we move, then, into the second quarter of the twenty-first century, we reject having to go about gaining a sense of belonging on our own terms. We instead urge institutional and shared responsibility for creating accessible spaces in which knowledge, experience and co-existence are given room to create and re-create evidence of belonging.

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