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Learned words: how poetry can be used to reflect on staff belonging in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This research uses poetry as a form of data to explore a sense of 'belonging' for staff working in higher education. Poetic content analysis was explored as a research method and using poetry in this way has allowed for a nuanced exploration of questions of belonging in the context of individual intersectional identities. Following an analysis of eighteen poems submitted by staff working in higher education four major categories emerged: 'Community', 'Exclusion', 'Transformation', and 'Self'. These emergent narratives led to several recommendations that institutions and individuals might consider implementing to create a more positive sense of belonging for all staff working in higher education. These recommendations and emergent narratives are centred around a willingness for higher education as a sector to better recognise and nurture the deep-rooted commitment that is shared by many staff to the potential of higher education both now and in the future.

1. Introduction

This study seeks to explore how poetry can be used to reflect on questions of staff belonging in higher education. While there is much in the literature on higher education which explores the importance of a sense of community and belonging to students' learning and wellbeing, much less has been done on belonging in relation to university staff. This is nonetheless a key area if staff and student wellbeing, and student learning, are to be fully and effectively supported.

Pedagogies which are effective in fostering student belonging tend to be strongly relational in nature, involving staff as well as students. Gravett et al (2021, 10) argue that 'Enacting learning via pedagogies of mattering' - which situates relational pedagogy in its broader political context – 'can [...] lead to more nuanced understandings of student/teacher relationalities' enabling 'more productive teaching and learning relations for *both parties*' (our emphasis). The emotional engagement and investment of staff is implicit in discussions of student belonging, even where it is not explored (Wilson et al. 2022). Morieson et al, in their (2013) study, found that ensuring students developed a sense of belonging depended strongly on that sense being already present for staff.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to belonging for both students and staff, following the emergency move to online learning. Mulrooney and Kelly's (2020, 17) study found that 'staff were significantly more likely than students to recognise belonging as important' in this context. Similarly, Abu et al (2021) observed how staff, as well as students, found teaching online isolating, noting the reduction in social interactions and loss of a shared physical space as key factors in this.

Others have also explored the pressing issues of belonging and exclusion faced by those in positions of structural disadvantage. Arday (2021, 80), for example, draws attention to staff for whom 'experiences of mental illness are exacerbated by encounters of racism within the Academy'. Supportive environments in which these staff could discuss mental health were found to be lacking, but where present they facilitated a sense of belonging. Cox et al. (2012) highlight the complex role played by space in terms of how far academics identify with their university. Similarly, Bonner-Thompson, Mearns, and Hopkins (2021) explore how transgender staff are 'made to feel precarious in different moments and spaces' on an English university campus and highlight the value of 'precarity-as-felt' in understanding the emotional burden experienced by marginalised people.

Wren Butler (2021) also acknowledges the challenges faced by structurally disadvantaged groups. In this context, her concept of 'unbelonging' arises from her finding that a sense of exclusion or imposter syndrome is not limited to those in structurally disadvantaged positions, even though those staff experienced greater levels of challenge. This, Wren Butler argues, is because: 'the hegemonic academic is a theoretical construct describing the most valorised way of being an academic'. Because this construct is 'unattainable', English academia is 'inherently exclusionary due to its hierarchical competitive basis'.

The theoretical basis of this study is grounded in the sociology of belonging, with particular attention to the work of Yuval-Davis (2006), Antonsich (2010), and May (2011). These scholars explore the complexities of belonging, noting it as a dynamic, multifaceted, and context-dependent concept. Within the context of our study, belonging is understood as a psychological state wherein individuals perceive themselves as an integral part of the institutional environment. It involves feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and identification with a group, leading to a sense of personal involvement and commitment to the institution (Hurtado and Carter 1997).

In this study, the concept of 'belonging' is operationalised as the subjective experience of feeling at home within a higher education institution. It is viewed as a dynamic process, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Hagerty et al. 1996). The cognitive dimension refers to the individual's perception of their fit within the institution, the emotional dimension relates to feelings of comfort and acceptance, while the social dimension pertains to the perceived quality of relationships within the institution. This operationalisation is based on previous research in the field, which argues that a sense of belonging within an educational institution can enhance engagement, academic performance, and overall wellbeing (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007). It also ties to the broader discussion about the role of universities in creating inclusive environments that foster belonging among diverse individuals.

In this study, we have used poetry written by staff from higher education institutions as a source of rich qualitative data, allowing for a nuanced exploration of questions of belonging in the context of individual intersectional identities. When exploring a topic as broad and potentially personal as belonging, inviting participants to contribute poems leaves decisions about length and form in their control. It permits a greater degree of freedom to explore individual emotions and experiences than is offered by a traditional interview or survey. In addition, while many researchers would acknowledge the constructedness of data gathered through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, a poem deploys language self-consciously, drawing attention to its own artifice. It signals to its reader that choices around the use of language, places and situations portrayed, themes explored, as well as the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of the poetic 'I', may not be interpretable as belonging to the poet's day-to-day experiences. For the participant, it enables the sharing of perspectives on matters which may be deeply personal in a way that offers increased possibilities for both openness and anonymity. For the researcher, there is less temptation to read this kind of data literally: the fact that participants – consciously or unconsciously – select and frame what they share with the researchers is made visible and explicit when this is done via the medium of poetry.
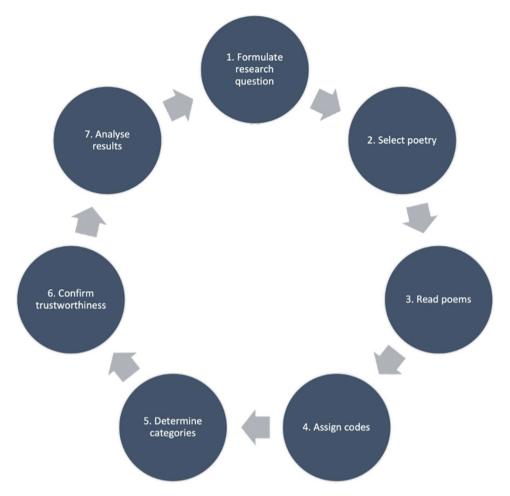
Figure 1. An overview of the poetic content analysis method. Adapted from Illingworth (2022).

2. Materials and methods

This research method uses poetry as a form of data to provide further insight into the interpretation of topics and how they are communicated. Any approach which uses qualitative content analysis should be guided by the following seven steps: formulate research questions, select sample to be analysed, define the codes to be applied, outline the coding process, implement the coding process, determine trustworthiness, and analyse the results of the coding process (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). For poetic content analysis, these seven steps have been adapted (see Figure 1) to make best use of poetry as a unique form of data (Illingworth 2022). The first six steps are described in the following subsections, with the seventh step (Analyse Results) discussed in Section 3.

In our poem selection and analysis, we were mindful of the various intersectional identities that could be present. These identities, be they related to gender, race, age, professional status, or other dimensions, were viewed as potential influences on the sense of belonging expressed in the poetry. This lens of intersectionality enriched our understanding and interpretation of the poems.

2.1 Formulate research question

Poetic content analysis is underpinned by an interpretivist perspective, i.e. it does not seek to find a singular truth, but offers a method for interpreting the diverse ways in which knowledge is itself perceived. As such, in constructing a research question it is important to be congruent with the interpretivist theoretical perspective that underpins this research method, thereby helping to ensure that there is consistency in the research methodology as a whole.

Given that this study was concerned with trying to better understand staff belonging in higher education (see Section 1), the following Research Question (RQ) was defined at the outset of this project:

RQ: How can poetry help to explore a sense of 'belonging' for staff working in higher education.

2.2 Select poetry

In creating poetry for this study, we first sought ethical approval to collect and analyse the poetry in this manner. This was approved by the Research and Integrity Committee at Edinburgh Napier University (ID: 2801040). We then advertised this research study via our social media channels and various mailing distribution lists, with potential participants invited to submit their poetry anonymously using a form prepared with MS Forms, where participants were invited to respond to the following:

> The prompt for this poem is 'Belonging in Higher Education', but other than that there are no restrictions on line length, style, or format.

This form also contained all the participation information and consent, a copy of which can be viewed in the Supplementary Materials. In total, nineteen poems were submitted by staff working in higher education to be considered for this study.

For this study, the selection process was straightforward due to the limited number of submissions. We received 19 poems in total, with one being excluded due to it being a duplicate of another submission. Therefore, our final dataset comprised 18 unique poems.

2.3 Read poems

Once the poems have been selected, they need to be read, so that the researcher(s) can become comfortable with them as a data set. When doing qualitative content analysis with any textual data, it is important that this familiarity occurs before the assignment of any codes (Dey 1993). Doing so helps to give confidence in handling the poetry, and it is also an essential step before beginning the next stage of the research method.

In reading these poems, SI first read all the poems that had been selected for this study and removed any potentially identifying information, to preserve anonymity. At this stage, one duplicate (that had been submitted in error) was also removed. As such a total of eighteen poems made up the data set for this study.

2.4 Assign codes

A traditional approach to coding data during qualitative content analysis would be to begin by identifying meaning units in the text, condensing these down to smaller units and then labelling these units with codes (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). However, poetic content analysis uses a different approach to its treatment of condensed meaning units, negating them in favour of broader labels. This is because poems, unlike more traditional qualitative data sets, have been crafted by the author so that every line has 'meaning'. As such each line of the poem could already be a meaning unit and should not be condensed further (Illingworth 2022).

Table 1. Codebook used SI in the initial coding exercise.

Code	Description	Example	Frequency*
Silos	Indicates a separation of staff according to e.g. subject area	My tribe is marked by subject, classmates, research group or department, (Poem 1)	3
Supported	Feels supported	Supportive colleagues keep you going when things are tough A shared mission and shared worries (Poem 5)	5
Community	Highlights a sense of shared community	Belonging is a feature of a meaningful relationship Where personal responses feature strongly. (Poem 7)	9
Uncertainty	Indicates a sense of uncertainty in security of job or delivery	Each day the countdown continues. Closer and closer to my contract's expiry. I grapple with the decision before me. (Poem 10)	8
Competition	Refers to competition amongst colleagues	Call it a jungle, line-up at watering holes, watch out for big beasts, the ones you need to review papers and performance; just remember you will need a hand-up (Poem 1)	4
Students as focus	Discusses importance of students	It's a privilege to teach I get to meet such bright mindsThis makes my brain reach further(Poem 6)	13
Need for change	Highlights a need for change and/or development across the sector	I want to belong to HE where people learn: higher level of integrity higher level of ethics higher level of morality (Poem 3)	7
Despondent	Expresses a sense of despondency	I board the train in menopausal mauve, spend the morning in a meeting of sighs. (Poem 4)	6
Failure	Explores notions of failure	We glide the full length of the nursing corridor into the Centre for Educational Development, where failed academics are kept locked in their own rhetoric. (Poem 4)	2
Stimulating	Discusses how working in HE is a stimulating experience	Belonging to higher education gives me ability and freedom to learn, think and write. An educational institution should not be affected by religion and politics. I am in love with antiquity as well as modernity. (Poem 17)	3
Belief	Explores a sense of self-belief and validation of experience	It makes me believe in myself and provides validation for my skills so that stopping would leave me on a shelf unhappy (Poem 6)	5
Doubt	Explores issues of self-doubt	I am an imposter. Likely to me and myself alone. Others praise me and my work, yet I feel like a fraud. Do I belong here? Am I good enough? Is my work of quality? (Poem 10)	9

*The number of occurrences is not limited to one per poem.

This process was conducted independently by both Sam Illingworth (SI) and Marita Grimwood (MG), the results of which are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. As each new code was realised, we each checked back through the poems that had previously been coded to see if these also contained any lines that could be labelled with any newly emergent code. After all the codes were determined, the poems were then read in full again to make sure that each of them had been coded

Table 2. Codebook used by MG in the initial coding exercise.

Code	Description	Example	Frequency
Community	Explores self and identity as relational	No academic is an island (Poem 1)	9
Distress	Feelings or behaviours expressing unhappiness	He was mentally down (Poem 2)	4
Imagined futures	Offers a vision, positive or negative, of belonging in the future	Do I … seek a brighter future beyond the 'ivory tower'? (Poem 10)	4
Care	Giving or receiving actions to help and support others	What was XXX to do to help Ted pull through? (Poem 2)	6
Transformation	Transformative changes in self or environment	I found a new me and then I never left (Poem 14)	8
Injustice	Violent or unpleasant treatment of one person by another	aggressively, condescendingly' (Poem 18)	3
Irreverence/ alienation	Disconnection from convention and propriety	I pull the stupid hair of that woman (Poem 4)	1
Cynicism	Disillusionment and suspicion of environment	Give it all away for free (Poem 18)	4
Appreciation	Recognising value of work/to self or others	belonging to HE gives me the ability and freedom to learn (Poem 17)	2
Validation	Self and identify are recognised and valued by others	Who gives you that first academic post (Poem 2)	8
Identities	Roles and self-understanding	when you move from student to staff (Poem 2)	5
Judgement	Hierarchy and judgement of value influence over others	who decides if you can and what you teach? (Poem 2)	4
Self-doubt	Uncertainty regarding own belonging	do I belong behind this screen?' (Poem 9)	4
Gender	Questions relating to biological or social identities as male, female or other	I board the train in menopausal mauve (Poem 4)	2
Happiness	Positive feelings of wellbeing or contentment	whose students were generally happy with the grades that they earned (Poem 3)	2
Conformity	Aligning behaviour and expectations with those of others	a one-dimensional path (Poem 12)	2
Family	Connections of kinship, and domestic relationships	married at 18, had 3 children (Poem 13)	3
Disability	Being in an environment that is not enabling	you tell me I don't belong/when I ask for a caption (Poem 15)	1
Exclusion	Being or feeling as if one is on the outside	Higher Education was not for the likes of me (Poem 13)	7
Failure	Difficulty in meeting expectations	His marks were terribly bad (Poem 2)	1
Competition	Competitive relationships with others	call it a jungle (Poem 1)	1
Luck	Chance influencing life	pull on the right straw (Poem 1)	1
Self-belief	Belief in own abilities, merit, or right to belong	I am capable (Poem 15)	1

accurately and that a saturation of emergent codes had been reached, i.e. that there were no new codes to emerge. As will be discussed in Section 2.6, this saturation is also an indication that enough data has been collected to answer RQ. After both independently checking for saturation of our own codes, we each then read the individually coded segments again and made sure that they were appropriate for the code to which they had been assigned.

2.5 Determine categories

Once all the poetry has been coded, and data saturation has been reached (i.e. there were no new codes to emerge from the data), then the next step was to group these codes together into broader categories. These categories aimed to collect codes that contained overlapping issues with regards to RQ, to help identify emerging narratives that could then be used for the subsequent analysis.

Table 3. The combined categories that were used to classify the initial codes of SI and MG.

Category	Definition	Codes
Community	Explores self and identity in relation to others, positively or negatively.	Supported (SI), Care (MG), Community (SI, MG), Students (SI), Appreciation (MG), Validation (MG), Judgement (MG), Conformity (MG), Family (MG), Competition (MG)
Exclusion	Explores self as distanced and/or alienated from others.	Silos (SI), Uncertainty (SI), Competition (SI), Injustice (MG); Irreverence/alienation (MG); Cynicism (MG), Disability (MG), Exclusion (MG)
Transformation	Change within self, community, or relationship between the two.	Need for Change (SI), Imagined Futures (MG), Transformation (MG), Identities (MG),
Self	Questions of individual emotion and/or identity.	Despondent (SI), Failure (SI, MG), Stimulating (SI), Belief (SI), Self-belief (MG), Doubt (SI), Self-doubt (MG), Distress (MG), Gender (MG), Happiness (MG), Luck (MG),

Following our independent assignment of codes, we grouped these into broader categories, the results of which can be seen in Table 3. To improve the trustworthiness of our approach, following this joint classification, we both independently read all the poems again and made sure that the previously coded lines could be assigned to at least one of these four emergent categories. We both independently confirmed that this was the case, that all previously coded sections could be categorised as such, and that there were no newly emergent categories.

2.6 Confirm trustworthiness

We acknowledge that trustworthiness is a paramount concern in our study, particularly regarding the validity and reliability of our interpretation and analysis. Validity, in this context, is ensured by rigorous thematic analysis and consistent application of the coding scheme, which includes revisiting and refining themes as part of the iterative process of analysis.

Reliability is bolstered through the implementation of a robust and systematic approach to the poetic content analysis. This comprises reviewing each poem multiple times, cross verifying the themes identified, and achieving consensus among the research team.

In analysing the poetic data, we were mindful of the inherent challenge in interpreting the intended meaning of the poets. While there is always a risk of deviation from the poet's original intentions, several steps were taken to mitigate this.

Firstly, the analysis was performed by multiple researchers, enabling a range of interpretations and a collective decision-making process. This collaborative effort reduced the risk of individual biases affecting our conclusions. Secondly, we utilised established techniques of qualitative analysis, including iterative coding and theme development, to ensure our findings were derived from the data rather than imposed upon it. While our interpretations are inherently subjective, they are a product of a rigorous, systematic, and reflexive process, aiming to remain as true as possible to the poets' intended meanings.

Considering the subjective nature of our research, we made concerted efforts to minimise the risk of data misinterpretation. Throughout the analysis process, reflexivity was practised, as we constantly questioned and checked our assumptions and interpretations against the data.

Moreover, we recognise the influence of our positionality on our interpretive lens. Our research team comprises of two scholars from diverse backgrounds, each bringing their unique perspective to the analysis. Acknowledging this, we were vigilant in scrutinising our own potential biases. We worked collectively to challenge each other's views and interpretations, seeking to arrive at interpretations that were grounded in the poems rather than in our individual perspectives. In essence, reflexivity and a clear recognition of researcher positionality have been central to our methodology, supporting the integrity of our interpretative process.

As can be seen from Tables 1–3 and the surrounding discussions, there is clear documentation for all the steps that we have taken during the poetic content analysis in relation to RQ. This detailed

auditing means that other researchers could follow the steps that we have taken in arriving at the four emergent categories shown in Table 3 (Illingworth 2022). The interpretivist nature of this research method means that such researchers may arrive at different categories, but that does not invalidate the trustworthiness of the approach (Morse et al. 2002). As will be evidenced in Section 3, the analysis of the results and the contextualisation of the four emergent categories with additional research literature, alongside evidential segments of the coded poetry, help to give further confidence that the way in which we have answered RQ is a useful (and thus valid) interpretation.

3. Results

As can be seen from Table 3, four major categories emerged from the poetic content analysis: 'Community', 'Exclusion', 'Transformation', and 'Self'. We will now discuss each of these emergent categories, how they relate to the research question, and how they compare to other research that has been conducted in terms of staff belonging in higher education.

3.1 Community

The first category to emerge from these poems is one of 'Community', and with respect to RQ ('How can poetry help to explore a sense of "belonging" for staff working in higher education?'), this is broadly expressed as a mostly positive attitude with regards to feeling supported and enabled by both staff and students. The following lines are well representative of how collegial support creates a sense of community that increases staff belonging, acting as a positive enabler of belonging within a higher education environment:

> Supportive colleagues keep you going when things are tough
> A shared mission and shared worries
> (Poem 5)

> Belonging is a feature of a meaningful relationship
> Where personal responses feature strongly.
> (Poem 7)

These lines further echo the findings of Mulrooney and Kelly (2020), in that they suggest that staff feel part of a community when individual and collective goals are both described and shared. They also suggest that both a genuine diversity of staff experience and roles alongside the opportunity for personal autonomy help to motivate higher education staff, thereby potentially increasing their sense of belonging (Rowley 1996).

Community is also expressed in the poetry as the way in which colleagues and collaborators help to address feelings of isolation and loneliness within higher education:

> No academic is an island, knowing terms;
> global challenges require work in teams;
> (Poem 1)

> Our many
> perspectives
> unite us.
> (Poem 12)

These poems support collaboration, rather than competition, as a way of building both community and a sense of belonging; a direction of travel that was identified by Morrish (2019) as a key

component of offering meaningful support for staff across the higher education sector. Given that greater workplace loneliness is related to lower job performance (Ozcelik and Barsade 2018), it is to be expected that the poems and excerpts from this category so closely tie a sense of community with the capacity to both belong and succeed in a university environment.

As well as community being expressed through relationships with other staff members, these poems also highlight a mode of belonging via interactions with students:

> It's a privilege to teach
> I get to meet such bright minds
> This makes my brain reach further
> (Poem 6)

> Helping each other to get through when working with students who are struggling
> (Poem 5)

In addition to students contributing towards staff community, there were also several explorations of how these students themselves potentially both encountered and felt a part of higher education:

> The academic world has found a new aim for researching,
> We hope our students feel that they belong.
> We're even urged to clarify our thinking on the topic,
> Expressing thoughts in poetry or in song.
> (Poem 7)

Such observations were unprompted, and yet given that a student's sense of belonging is now well known to be strongly associated with academic achievement (see e.g. Ahn and Davis 2020), this is to be expected.

Finally, in relation to students and community, there was also expressed the idea that at times, students (and engaging with them) could undermine a member of staff's capacity to feel a sense of belonging within a university setting:

> but I am behind this screen
> those emails won't delete themselves
> those students don't grade themselves
> they grade us
> they grade me
> if I don't
> answer emails
> (Poem 9)

With lines such as those expressed here, highlighting the difficult relationships that exist between staff and students when the latter are viewed as consumers (Woodall and Resnick 2012). This category of poems lends further credence to the idea that exploring the relationships between students as partners is crucial in the development and creation of communities and with it an increase in belonging for both staff and students (see e.g. Curran 2017) and an enhancement in the communities and cultures within which both groups operate (Bovill 2019)

Finally, whilst most of the poems that belonged to this category tended to be positive in their observations of developing and maintaining a sense of belonging, several poems expressed frustration at a lack of inaction, and in particular the capacity to use this community to engender more

inclusive practices and hence a greater sense of belonging:

> When will we stand together
> When will we find we are strong
> Stronger than these fools in power
> Outnumbering a rotten throng
> (Poem 16)

> Now I'm here I hold space,
> For those next to take flight to themselves.
> (Poem 14)

3.2 Exclusion

In contrast to the mostly positive category of 'Community', 'Exclusion' was an entirely negative category to emerge from the poetry, centred mostly around feelings of uncertainty, injustice, and competition.

With regards to uncertainty as a form of exclusion, and how it affected staff belonging, these feelings tended to manifest themselves in the poetry in relation to the tangible sense of uncertainty felt by finite contracts:

> Each day the countdown continues.
> Closer and closer to my contract's expiry.
> I grapple with the decision before me
> (Poem 10)

> Who gives you that first academic post,
> the secure one, not the temporary one,
> when you move from student to staff,
> who decides if you can and what you teach?
> (Poem 1)

As well as the uncertainty of what working in higher education was 'supposed' to look like:

> An invisible bubble
> Popping
> After five days
> Leaving four hats behind:
> Teaching Research Service Outreach
> Just one head

> To wear them
> (Poem 8)

Given the contemporary prevalence of casual and zero-hour contracts in higher education and the effects that this is known to have on staff wellbeing and belonging (see e.g. Lopes and Dewan 2014) the emergence of these feelings is not surprising. Similarly, the development of higher education from a public good into a global service (Pucciarelli and Kaplan 2016) means that for many staff working in higher education their roles are undoubtedly less clear than they were even half

a decade ago.

Injustice as a form of exclusion is mostly powerful expressed by the following lines:

I seek opportunities where I see myself happy.
I seek opportunities where I see myself valued.
I seek opportunities where cishet white men are not the sole decision-makers.
I seek opportunities where the foundational roots are not inherently racist, sexist, classist.
Surely they exist. Surely I will be welcomed. Surely I will feel safe.
I hope.
(Poem 10)

Here the uncertainty in the environment of higher education is not because of market forces, but due to inherent structural issues that fail to properly support and include all members of staff. An institution's ability to achieve a positive climate for diversity (and with it an inclusive sense of belonging) reflects not only the personal characteristics of its staff but also the perceptions of their immediate work environment (Mayhew, Grunwald, and Dey 2006). As such these poems further highlight the need for both a greater emphasis on recognitional forms and the pursuit of organisational diversity (Deem and Morley 2006) so that *all* staff might truly start to feel as though they belong.

With regards to competition as a form of exclusion, these poems explored ideas that were discussed in Section 3.1 ('Community') around the need for staff to collaborate, rather than compete, to build effective communities and with it a sense of belonging, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

Call it a jungle, line-up at watering holes,
watch out for big beasts, the ones you
need to review papers and performance;
just remember you will need a hand-up
(Poem 1)

Knowing that my passions are shared
Is a relief and a comfort
To someone who was always compared harshly
(Poem 6)

These poems also further highlight how different skills and even values are rewarded and the extent to which this is incongruent with the perceived 'place' or 'role' of the university in the wider society (Houston, Meyer, and Paewai 2006), i.e. if a university truly wants to define itself as a being a positive influence on society, then should staff be judged according to societal values rather than excluded because their employers take preference to other key performance indicators?

3.3 Transformation

The category of 'Transformation' features poems that encompasses questions of change within the self, the community, or in the relationship between the two. In some poems, these transformations belong in an imagined future. For example:

I want to belong to HE where people learn:
higher level of integrity
higher level of ethics

higher level of morality
(Poem 3)

The rest of the poem continues as a list in this way, playing on the idea of 'higher' by challenging higher education (HE) and those within it to aspire to better/higher standards of behaviour.

In other cases, more predictably, the poems describe the transformative role of higher education experiences on individual lives:

And so this is the story
Of a teacher who found glory
For a student who felt sad
And terribly bad
But rose above his knowledge a priori.
(Poem 2)

This situates the transformation in the teacher-student dynamic and positions the educational process at the heart of it. In doing this, it reflects some of the concern with values and ideals that is apparent in the examples of transformation we have already discussed. The difference is that it positions higher education itself as a transformative process, rather than a flawed structure in need of its own transformation.

Two further poems which explore education as a force for transformation are written in the first person:

I ran away from home to university,
It was an acceptable escape.

After being more terrified than I thought was possible,
I found a new me and then I never left.
(Poem 14)

25 years on and I'm still in Higher Education . . . now a Doctor, Senior Lecturer, Course leader
Sole Bread-winner, house-owner, proud to be me – but still . . .
Higher Education is not for the likes of me
(Poem 13)

This narrative of personal transformation through becoming part of a higher education community is also echoed in diverse ways in other poems. Such transformation involves successfully overcoming limiting social expectations, and caring roles. However, the final line of the above quotation – which is also a refrain at the end of each stanza – implies that the internal narrative, or self-perception, of whether the poetic persona belongs in higher education has remained static.

This is one of several poems in which transformation is linked closely to questions of selfhood, similar in many ways to the Confucian thought of selfhood as creative transformation (Wei-Ming 1985). The following lines explore this from different angles:

I board the train in menopausal mauve,
Spend the morning in a meeting of sighs.
Lunch is a spat on lentil bacon soup
marked as vegan and Halal.
(Poem 4)

This poem was also given a title by the author of 'Menopausal mauve', thus referring to a life change, one which has been shown to affect women's experience of work (Atkinson et al. 2020), and hence

belonging, within a workplace setting such as higher education. The rest of the poem lists a slightly surreal set of irreverent and anarchic actions:

I throw the cutlery tray skywards
Send the coffee jug hurtling
Bespattering Prof XXX's bald patch.
[. . .]

swing from the drapes out into the quad,
scatter students in Ugg boots,
Me and the anatomy skeleton dance the lambada
through the Faculty of Health.

This is self, but set free of social prohibitions, dropping all pretence of belonging, and disrupting its surroundings. It is humorous, but nonetheless implies that only in such an anarchic version of reality could this person fully be themselves in the university. It thus suggests that 'belonging' is not a real possibility.

The following lines use a similar disconnect between behaviour and environment to represent an almost inverse situation. The poem is written from the point of view of someone envisaging the transformation that will take place when the self is removed from an academic context:

Will you miss the stink of sweat, tears, blood, or formalin?
Will you buy paintings of the cerebrum, cushions shaped like an anatomical heart?
[. . .]
Will you diagnose bus passengers from a library of pathologies? [. . .]
Will you move through days, languid as shifting sunlight in a vacant room?
(Poem 11)

In contrast with the previous poem's sense of higher education as a restraint on selfhood and expression, this foregrounds a personal identity which may depend to a considerable extent on an academic one. In this case, the poetic persona questions whether removal of the day-to-day habits and rewards of academic work will render their life purposeless and empty. Transposing the specialised medical terminology of their work into everyday domestic settings highlights the redundancy of their skills and knowledge outside its context, instead of seeing freedom from academic work as liberating. Here, the transformation is in the shift to a new environment. But the individual has not transformed, creating a self out of step with its surroundings, and stuck in a social identity that no longer has context or purpose. This juxtaposition between changes within the sector and changes in one's own practices and identification has previously been shown to have a significant impact on staff wellbeing and belonging (see e.g. Graham 2012; Mathany, Clow, and Aspenlieder 2017).

3.4 Self

The 'Self' category addresses questions of individual emotions and identity. Many of these poems deal with conflicted or multiple identities. For example, the following lines contrast personal and professional identities, self-perception, and the perceptions of others:

They say I'm perfect for this job
I think I'm perfect
for the couch . . .
(Poem 9)

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Just one head to wear them.
(Poem 8)

This multiplicity of identities demanded by work in higher education is also reflected elsewhere:
Entrepreneurially
Proactively
Statistically
Independently
Create the perfect employee.
(Poem 18)

By way of contrast, the following poem – like poem 13 (see Section 3.3, 'Transformation') – considers how a professional self might fare poorly beyond academia:

…what else can I do?
Overqualified, underqualified, and rarely well-qualified for other careers.
(Poem 10)

Whilst other poems also deal with the fit of the self with the higher education environment, highlighting the reinforcement and stabilisation of self that comes from belonging to a university community:

It makes me believe in myself
And provides validation for my skills
So that stopping would leave me on a shelf unhappy.
(Poem 6)

Belonging to higher education gives me ability and freedom to learn, think and write
(Poem 17)

Such internalised exploration and encouragement of self is a feature of several other poems and has previously been shown to be positively correlated with job satisfaction and belonging amongst some university staff (Ahmed 2012).

In contrast to this, other poems focus on the demands and personal toll of the job on individual lives:

do I belong behind this screen?
They say I'm perfect for this job
I think I'm perfect
for the couch …
and a cup
of hot tea
(Poem 9)

Robustly
Critically
Ethically
Pedagogically
Working Collegiately'
(Poem 18)

For Poem 18, the cumulative effect of reading twenty-one stanzas of these adverbs, each drawing out a quality related to working in higher education, induces a sense of become engulfed, reinforced by the negativity of many of the words:

Reluctantly
Stubbornly
Aggressively
Condescendingly
Just not my cup of tea.

This stanza implicitly describes and criticises the frustrating and unacceptable behaviours of others. The poem concludes:

Diligently
Expertly
Skilfully
Sanity
Is this the job for me
Personalise with your own punctuation or emoji
? :! *; @ ' # ""& → 😌😌😟

The ending reminds us that diverse experiences of working in higher education are made up of any combination of these qualities and different feelings about them. Despite the mixture of words with positive and negative connotations, the overriding effect of the poem is one of overwhelm at navigating the vast number of different qualities needed to fulfil a role in higher education. Such feelings of being overwhelmed have previously been linked to poor wellbeing in the workforce and with it a lack of belonging (Woolston 2018), especially amongst staff that are relatively new to working in higher education (Hollywood et al. 2020)

4. Discussion

In this study we sought to use poetry to explore some of the challenges that staff in higher education face with regards to their sense of belonging. In conducting our analysis and considering the four emergent categories in the context of the RQ ('How can poetry help to explore a sense of "belonging" for staff working in higher education?'), it is clear that poetry creates a reflective space for staff working in higher education to explore their own positionality within both the individual institution and the wider sector, and that this space perhaps enables them to 'say' or express feelings, values, and beliefs in a way that is not always possible through other qualitative instruments, e.g. surveys, interviews, and ethnographies.

Our analysis uncovered a rich tapestry of intersectional identities conveyed through the poems. These identities, interwoven with the theme of belonging, brought unique perspectives and nuances to our understanding of belonging within the context of Higher Education. These findings underscore the complex interplay between intersectional identities and the sense of belonging.

While the way this study was conducted means that we are confident in the trustworthiness of its findings, there are still several limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, this study was limited to a single sample of poems ($n = 18$), and further research would be needed to confirm the extent to which these emergent narratives might be representative across the wider sector. Secondly, only English-language poems were considered. This means that there is likely a bias towards certain attitudes or behaviours. Future research could include poetry written in multiple languages to account for this limitation, as doing so would reveal a broader understanding

of how participants might use poetry to explore their sense of belonging within higher education, as well as potentially revealing any differences based on country of work and/or nationality.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the findings from this study will be of benefit to the wider community, and that in addition to establishing poetic content analysis as an effective methodology within higher education research there are several recommendations that emerge from these poems that institutions and individuals might consider creating a more positive sense of belonging for all staff working at higher education institutes:

(1) Focus on nurturing a sense of community and with it the capacity to engender action.
(2) If higher education institutes truly seek to be places of positive societal benefit that uphold inclusive values, then they should also seek to celebrate (and reward) these same values amongst their staff.
(3) In addition to celebrating these values, higher education institutes should also provide support in helping staff to effectively navigate the substantial number of different qualities that are needed to fulfil a role in higher education.
(4) Meaningfully recognise and encourage the deep-rooted commitment that is shared by many staff to the potential of higher education for transformative impact.

We hope that this study has been of interest and would like to note that our method of poetic content analysis has a complementary digital component, embodied on the website www.learned-words.com. This online platform is an open-access repository that brings our research data to life. It serves not just as a digital anthology of the poems we have analysed but also as a vivid representation of the raw data that underpin our study. At the time of our analysis, eighteen poems, submitted by higher education staff, were considered. It is important to note that only seventeen of these eighteen authors granted permission for their poems to be included on the website. We have respected their choice in preserving their anonymity, and this factor is an important consideration in viewing the data presented on the Learned Words website. The Learned Words website, since the commencement of our research, has continued to grow with further poetic submissions. While these additional poems were not part of the original data set and thus not included in the current study, their presence suggests an ongoing dialogue on the theme of 'belonging' in higher education institutions. Future research might take these new submissions into account, further enriching our understanding of belonging in diverse higher education contexts.

This commitment to ongoing data collection and openness further reinforces the potential of poetic content analysis as a continually evolving research method. We welcome poems from anyone working in the higher education sector; there is no gatekeeping regarding aesthetics or reputation. Rather, we want to create a space where everyone is welcome to use poetry to revisit, contextualise, and learn from their experiences.

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