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NAVIGATING BELONGING BETWEEN SELF AND THE INSTITUTION:

*Unpacking Academic Belonging of Scholars from Non-normative Backgrounds
Through the Lens of Self-identity and Intersectionality*

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ABSTRACT

The thesis investigated how scholars from non-normative backgrounds navigate belonging in Dutch HEIs. Despite D&I being commonly utilized, belonging could be a more meaningful approach to understanding and fostering marginalized scholars' academic careers. I applied the qualitative personal narrative methodology and approached scholars' identity through the intersectional and self-identity lens, which captured a diverse set of identity expressions that explained how identities relating to privileges or disadvantages could manifest dynamic experiences with belonging. Respondents' narrative highlighted Dutch HEIs' competitive, hierarchical, and male-dominated culture that makes belonging challenging. Besides, the analysis showed that while junior scholars expressed struggles to belong, senior and former scholars refer to belonging to self instead of HEI. Meanwhile, scholars with multiple disadvantaged self-identities face more career barriers and priorities survival over belonging. Scholars also pointed out that the current D&I approaches can be non-relevant or foster more competition. Nonetheless, the various ways of change-making related to self-identities are vital for navigating belonging and feeling hope. The thesis concluded that belonging for scholars from non-normative backgrounds is complex as a stereotypical path exists for the typical type of scholar. However, participants' narrative indicates that belonging can be navigated in ways meaningful to selves, at a slower pace, and beyond HEIs, such as in the academic field. Finally, the intersectional lens highlighted that marginalization in HEIs could be intersectional. Hence, to make structural and meaningful changes, HEIs ought to move beyond D&I policies built around singular and binary identity categories.

KEYWORDS:

Academic belonging, Belonging, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), Higher Education Institution (HEI), Intersectionality, Self-identity

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dutch higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly promoted diversity and inclusion (D&I). However, the more steps up the academic ladder, the more diversity decreases regarding various social identities and behaviours (Handforth, 2022). While racial inequity persists in academia, gender representation in leadership remains imbalanced (Thomas & Arday, 2021). Nevertheless, academia plays a crucial role in shaping knowledge and empowering marginalized individuals. It serves as a platform for role models and hopes for students (Handforth, 2022; Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Therefore, this thesis emphasises that meaningful inclusion and belonging for marginalised scholars is a vital public issue.

1.1. Problem Definition

Despite HEIs' progressive reputation and attention to D&I, why has inclusion been an intricate topic to be meaningfully addressed, particularly at higher levels of the academic ladder? This thesis argues that, instead of structurally including individuals facing more challenges entering and surviving academia, the common D&I approaches are predominately symbolic and ceremonial, reinforcing the infrastructure of oppression and inequality (Ahmed, 2012). While diversity is often manifested in numbers for exhibition, inclusion is often a face-value practice that does not necessarily lead to meaningful changes for individuals marginalised in academia (Ahmed, 2012; Adejumo, 2021). To bring about meaningful policies and changes, listening to these voices and moving beyond surface-level displays of diversity is crucial.

In the context of academia, understanding belonging is vital to fostering meaningful change, since HEIs has sociocultural characteristics that determine who feels included and valued (Wekker et al., 2016). Belonging goes beyond mere inclusion and encompasses individuals feeling valued as their authentic selves (Brown, 2017). Since academic careers take decades to build, belonging could contribute to well-being and retention (Kondonijakos, 2021).

The long and, at times, steep career path also means belonging is a process of constant navigation, which also relates to how identities are situated in HEIs (Nygaard & Savva, 2021; Fisher et al., 2019). The stereotypical image of the "typical" academic excludes those who do not fit or conform, such as those who identify as non-white or non-gender conforming, making them feel like outsiders (Nygaard & Savva, 2021; Wekker et al., 2016).

Besides identity, institutional contexts could dictate experiences of belonging (Ahmed, 2012; Fisher et al., 2019; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018). Dutch HEIs are characterised by hierarchical culture and power imbalances. Consequently, the environment is not only disproportionately dominated by white and male scholars; it can feel unwelcoming to many, especially those who are relatively marginalised and those who embrace authenticity (Brown, 2017; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018).

In hindsight, the emphasis on belonging allows the investigation of mutual influences between self and societal spaces (in this thesis' context: self-identity and HEIs). While some may find belonging through navigation, some struggle and eventually leave academia (May 2011; Nygaard & Savva, 2021; Wekker et al., 2016). Through the following main research question, we aim to understand the embodied experiences and process of navigating belonging: *How do (former) scholars from non-normative positions experience and navigate belonging in Dutch higher education institutions (HEIs)?*

It is essential to note that identity is complex, situational, and often an intersection between multiple attributes (Hogg, 2000). Recognising that identities are not static, and that marginalisation could be related to the intersection of identities and oppression, this thesis emphasises self-identification and the intersectional approach to scholars' identities (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Hence, the first subquestion aids the understanding of how identities and belonging relates: *How do scholars from non-normative positions self-identify, and in what ways do experiences of belonging manifest in different forms of identification?*

1.2 Moving Beyond Diversity & Inclusion Towards Belonging

There are divided views on D&I despite it being a trending topic. Advocates argue that D&I can be meaningful when approached with good intentions (Koppelman, 2011; Tulshyan, 2022). Meanwhile, some criticise D&I as the mask of institutional homogeneity, upholding the power of the majority group and promoting competition (Ahmed, 2012; Ali, 2012). Common D&I practices, such as showcasing diversity, can be counterproductive and cause psychological distress (Ali, 2019). Hence, others claim that by emphasising belonging, D&I can move beyond superficial strategies and provide value for marginalised scholars (Adejumo, 2021; Handforth, 2022; Koppelman, 2011).

Since the thesis author, myself works at a Dutch HEI and identifies as a scholar from a non-normative background, I experienced and observed how HEIs' D&I approaches are viewed by those who do not fit into the typical scholar image remain poorly understood, despite that D&I policies are supposedly for marginalised scholars. Thus, the thesis's second sub-question: *How do scholars' experiences and navigation of belonging relate to Dutch HEIs' approach to diversity and inclusion (D&I)?* was utilised to contest whether or how D&I shapes the navigation of belonging.

1.3 Relevance

As argued, HEIs' societal role is indisputable. Meanwhile, the "who" that works in academic positions could dictate "to whom" in society HEIs are impactful. This thesis' aim of investigating scholars' lived experience with belonging could be socially relevant in various ways. First, providing scholars or aspiring academics from non-normative positions insights on how navigating belonging in a predominately white, male, and cis-gender environment

could look resemble—second, giving HEIs insights on ways to foster meaningful inclusion and belonging, and possibly, the argument of moving beyond D&I and towards belonging.

Although belonging is a well-researched topic in the academic setting, it mainly focuses on the belonging of university students, while the belonging of scholars is under-researched. Besides, belonging is predominately investigated through quantitative psychological inquiry, with less attention to the meanings attached to the concept (Täuber, 2022). Hence, this thesis fills the literature gap by extending the concept to a less researched or hidden group and co-constructing the understanding of belonging through sociological inquiry.

2. THEORY

2.1 Belonging through the Lens of Self-identity and Intersectionality

Scholars explored the link between identity and belonging and identified that belonging could be racialised and marked on the body with visible identity attributes, whilst also dependent on self-definition that can be invisible (Koppelman, 2011; Reitman, 2004). However, social identity is complex and ever-changing; depending on life stages and social settings, identity can be understood and expressed differently in different situations (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). Crucially, identities are embodied in power, privileges, or disadvantages depending on the situatedness of identities in a given social hierarchy (Hogg, 2000).

Intersectionality, which assumes that identities are formed in intersections - one identity could coexist with multiple other identity dimensions, is especially relevant (Hurtado, 2017). Significantly, intersectionality asserts that oppression(s) could intersect and be formed in the plural (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Since Dutch HEIs have visible imbalances in demographics and power, marginalisation and non-belonging could easily be experienced by having multiple disadvantaged identities, while privileged identities could neutralise marginalisation (Fernández et al., 2022; Hurtado, 2017). This could, for instance, explain why compared to women in academia from the majority group (white, cis-gender, high SES), women that identify with minority statuses (non-white, first generation, LGBTQIA+) feel less policy effectiveness from policies aimed at creating a safe and inclusive environment and psychological safety, such as policies aimed at preventing harassment (Hurtado, 2017; Täuber, 2022).

This thesis applies the self-identification and intersectional approach, refuting the static categorisation of identity most often seen in HEIs (Fernández et al., 2022). Self-identity could be an approach that gives individuals the autonomy to express a sense of self and self-categorisation to a social group (Hogg, 2000). Meanwhile, as noted by Collins and Bilge (2020),

intersectionality could be utilised as a conceptual lens, a language of discovery which rejects the binary, and explores oppression and privileges associated with identities in a relational way. Avoiding categorising and othering scholars based on visible identity attributes offers the opportunity to move away from recapitulating HEIs' common practice of exclusion (Ahmed, 2012; Ghorashi, 2021).

2.2 Belonging in HEIs - Institutional Mechanisms and D&I

The mechanism and dynamics of institutions bring about different experiences of belonging; this is interrelated to institutional mechanisms and culture, often constructed and deliberately or unintentionally maintained by dominant groups (Ahmed, 2012; Ghorashi, 2021). For instance, one of the barriers to belonging in academia is unwritten rules that bring out belonging uncertainty; another barrier is the rules and culture of the institution, for instance, competitiveness, power distance, rules on maternity leave, culture on identity expression (Handforth, 2022; Stead, 2016; Walton & Cohen, 2007). In academia, it could be argued that these barriers are deeply embedded in institutions, because the unwritten rules and usually made by those with academic backgrounds; the culture and rules are made by, for, and maintained by those of normative positions (Ahmed, 2012; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018).

Besides culture, relationality is also an encompassing lens to understanding how belonging is experienced and navigated, especially in HEI settings characterised by rigid hierarchies and group boundaries (Icaza & Vazquez, 2018). A more general way to look at relationality is through the forms of interactions between both normative and non-normative voices, such as whether there is discrimination or whether voices are valued and put into practice to create spaces of belonging (Icaza & Vazquez, 2018; May 2011; Wekker et al., 2016). Another way is through power and leadership that dictates who gets valued and could either deconstruct or maintain the culture of exclusion (Ghorashi, 2021). Since academic leadership

in Dutch HEIs is predominately occupied by white cis-gender academics, the barriers to belonging are reiterated or institutionalised since exclusion manifests in normalising behaviour by power forces and operates through repetition (Ghorashi, 2021; Wekker et al., 2016).

Finally, related to the hierarchical culture of HEIs, Handforth (2022) emphasised how belonging is especially relevant to power and, more specifically, career stages. Younger female and of colour scholars, especially those who just entered academia, often feel uncertain and have little confidence, followed by the feeling of not belonging in the predominately white and/or male culture (Handforth, 2022). Hence they go through the stage of negotiating legitimacy, in which the supervisors play a crucial role. How supervisors create the space for belonging could dictate young academics' perceived career validity (Handforth, 2022).

Many institutional mechanisms that may act as barriers to belonging are claimed to be addressed by D&I projects, such as dialogues and roundtables aimed at giving a space to address barriers. Furthermore, D&I policies, such as affirmative action, give, for instance, women dedicated opportunities (Handforth, 2022; Koppelman, 2011; Tulshyan, 2022). However, it remains unknown whether and how D&I actually aids the navigation of belonging or, rather, hinders it (Icaza & Vazquez, 2018; Täuber, 2020). Hence, scholars' views and experiences with D&I are crucial to understanding how HEI shapes belonging.

2.3 Scholar Identity and Belonging - Between Self and Institution

Nygaard and Savva (2021) emphasise the complexity of scholars' identities. Academics' sense of self is influenced by various factors, including their background, upbringing, and personal attributes such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and nationality. However, there is often an idealised image of the scholar based on Western values, which may not align with diverse sets of identities (Fisher et al., 2019). Additionally, the academic environment has unwritten rules that can be challenging for those unfamiliar with them, particularly first-generation

university students and scholars (Fisher et al., 2019; Nygaard & Savva, 2021). These factors create an environment where belonging is more likely experienced by individuals who conform to the dominant culture, such as cisgender, white, and male scholars (Ahmed, 2012; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018). Those who deviate from these norms may feel alienated and discouraged, leading to a struggle between personal identity and institutional expectations (Kondonijakos, 2021; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Consequently, navigating a sense of belonging in academia becomes a complex, non-linear process. At the same time, identity could be a primary factor that dictates belonging; to navigate belonging in the HEIs, some scholars also reconfigure their identity in ways that align with institutional context (May, 2011; Reitman, 2004; Stead, 2016).

2.4 Navigating belonging

As Stead (2016) mentioned, the navigation of belonging is a dynamic and relational process. This section will discuss specific strategies based on the theories of scholar identity and institutional mechanisms.

According to Brown (2017), **fitting in** is the opposite of true belonging. The former indicates seeking approval through giving up self, while the latter indicates self-acceptance and being accepted as the authentic self (Brown, 2017). Nonetheless, for scholars who do not fit into the academic norm, fitting in is arguably a strategy to navigate belonging. Double consciousness is a relevant concept to navigation and fitting in, coined by Du Bois (1903). Double consciousness is the feeling of constantly having to compare oneself to the dominant culture in society and being so aware of the dominant culture that individuals feel compelled to **downplay the components of their culture or identity** that set them apart (Du Bois, 1903). While this theory originated from black Americans' struggles in dominantly white American society in the early 1990s, it is also applied by theorists to describe the struggles of minority groups in the workplace (Bruce, 1992; Du Bois, 1903). Similarly, **concealment** is also a

belonging tactic (Essers et al., 2020; Stead, 2016). Belonging by concealment could mean masking identity attributes, values, and opinions (Brown, 2017; Essers et al., 2020).

Another belonging practice is **code-switching**, which entails changing one's manner of speaking, dressing, acting, and expressing oneself to maximise the comfort of the majority groups in exchange for equal treatment and opportunities (McCluney et al., 2021). In some institutions, code-switching is even perceived as a professional behaviour (Krasas, 2018; McCluney et al., 2021). Although code-switching is a way of navigating in institutions, some scholars suggest it is instead the **navigation for power and survival** rather than belonging (Krasas, 2018). For instance, women, particularly those in power positions, tend to apply significantly more code-switching than men in similar positions (Halley, 2020). However, code-switching comes with significant psychological costs accompanied by self-doubt and low esteem (McCluney et al., 2021). Besides, instead of fostering structural change and eliminating infrastructures of oppression, code-switching also reinforces the existing culture and practices of the institution (Krasas, 2018; McCluney et al., 2021). Concerning power, as a strategy to navigate belonging in the hierarchical HEIs and to feel valued, some strive for **power and leadership**. For example, academics of colour or women who, despite not feeling they belong, often devote their lives to their careers, overwork sacrifice work-life balance to break the glass ceiling (Berheide et al., 2022; Reitman, 2004). Nevertheless, power and leadership mean representation and the call to change, which is a way of navigation for many.

Regarding change-making, **scholar activism** is a crucial concept that refers to scholars with strong political standpoints toward HEI (Richter et al., 2020). However, especially in Dutch HEI, there is a lack of space for scholar activism, mainly because of the common belief that academics should remain neutral and non-critical (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018; Richter et al., 2020). A common approach to creating such spaces is through an **affinity group** composed of individuals with shared identities and goals (Lambertz-Berndt, 2016). It could be a pathway to

belonging by offering a safe space for meaningful connections and addressing issues around inclusion and belonging in meaningful ways (Lambertz-Berndt, 2016). Another practice related to change is being **tempered radicals**, who, despite not agreeing with the institution, experience non-belonging, stay, and quietly make incremental changes (Richter et al., 2020). Finally, a strategy Brown (2017) referred to as **braving** is prioritising self, including one's values and well-being. By choosing to stand alone and stand up for themselves and the marginalised, braving also means belonging but entails authenticity, having the space, and to some extent, the power and privilege to belong truly (Brown, 2017).

2.5 Operationalization

As demonstrated above, the interrelatedness of this thesis's main research elements, namely, *self-identities*, *HEI mechanisms and D&I approaches*, and the *experiencing and navigation of belonging*, is complex and situational. The perceived situatedness of self-identity within HEI may have dynamic impacts on belonging. To identify the concepts most relevant to the research question, based on the discussion in the theory section, the main theories and the indicators of the concepts are synthesized in the table below:

Table 1.

Operationalization Table

Theme	Concepts	Indicators	Sources
Institutional Mechanisms	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Us Vs them culture ▪ Culture built upon connection and humanity ▪ Unwritten rules ▪ Space for expression of self-identity ▪ Space for authenticity 	(Ahmed, 2012; Ghorashi, 2021)
	Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leadership occupied by dominant group ▪ Power distance ▪ Hierarchy 	(Ghorashi, 2021; Handforth, 2022; Kondonijakos, 2021; Stead, 2016)
	Relational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ interactions between both normative and non-normative voices ▪ voices are valued 	(Icaza & Vazquez, 2018; Wekker et al., 2016)
D&I - Views & Experiences	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ View D&I as a corporate strategy ▪ View D&I as a way to maintain status quo and power ▪ Exhibition of Diversity ▪ Only focus on female gender ▪ Approach too general 	(Ahmed, 2012; Ali, 2019; Barnett, 2003; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2022; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018)
	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefited from D&I policies ▪ Supports D&I related projects 	(Koppelman, 2011; Tulshyan, 2022)
Belonging Experiences	Non-belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Us Vs them culture ▪ Comparing self to the rest ▪ Little meaningful connections ▪ Feeling unsafe ▪ Encounter harassment ▪ self-doubt/low esteem ▪ Feeling un-fit to culture ▪ Cannot speak to truth 	(Brown, 2017; Fisher et al., 2019; Handforth, 2022; Nygaard & Savva, 2021; Stead, 2016; Täuber, 2022;)
	Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Innate desire to be part of the institution ▪ Culture built upon humanity/connectivity ▪ Have meaningful connections and allyship ▪ Feeling of being valued ▪ Feel free to speak the truth ▪ Identifies with the culture 	
Navigate Belonging	Fitting in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Actively assimilate ▪ downplay the components of culture or identity 	(Brown, 2017)
	Concealment/ downplay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conceal identity and/or values 	(Du Bois, 1903; Essers et al., 2020)
	Switching Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Express identity differently in private and in work settings 	(Brown, 2017)
	Code switching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Changed the way of speaking ▪ Changed the way of dressing 	(Krasas, 2018; McCluney et al., 2021)
	Relational Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seek allyship ▪ Attempt to establish meaningful connections ▪ Take part in Affinity group ▪ Support others with similar experiences 	(Lambertz-Berndt, 2016)
	Strive for power and position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Performance and competitiveness ▪ Overwork 	(Berheide et al., 2022; Reitman, 2004)
	Change Making - scholar activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not afraid of criticizing HEI ▪ Activism together with Affinity group 	(Brown, 2017; Richter et al., 2020)
	Change Making - Tempered radicalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ stayed despite non-belonging ▪ incremental changes 	
	Braving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not afraid of standing alone ▪ Not afraid of standing for others 	(Brown, 2017)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

A Qualitative research approach drawing on personal narrative analysis is applied to study the belonging of (former) scholars from non-normative positions. A qualitative inquiry is deemed appropriate, as the research sought to understand the experience and the dynamic process of navigating belonging in Dutch HEIs (Creswell, 2007). Besides, narrative research aids the comprehensibility of sensitive and personal issues through stories and narratives, which is crucial given that the research emphasises intersectionality and self-identities (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010; S). Above all, the inquiry into lived experiences and to co-create new themes and topics are the main objectives of this research, as narratives give participants autonomy and a voice to narrate their stories in their own words and pace, the method is both epistemologically and ontologically valid (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010; Creswell, 2007).

3.2 Participants

The selection of the participant group is theoretically motivated while considering feasibility. Scholars in early career stages and senior scholars in professorial or leadership positions are included; this aids in mapping out how belonging is experienced and navigated in different academic stages. Besides, former scholars who left academia were also included to understand barriers to belonging. Since the navigation of belonging is a dynamic and ever-changing process, the temporal factor matters (Stead, 2016). Thus, all participants approached have (had) at least three years of formal employment in Dutch HEIs.

Second, participants are from non-normative positions that do not fit the typical academic image. Considering that identity is not always visible, and recognising that the group of scholars with non-normative backgrounds is already small and thus easily identifiable, we decided not to focus on specific identities and kept the criteria broad to avoid identifiability.

Thus, only scholars associated with multiple privileged identity dimensions, namely white, male, and cis-gender scholars, are excluded (Hurtado, 2017; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018). The in-depth understanding of participants' self-identities was inquired through their expression and narrative during the interviews.

Ultimately, we reached and interviewed 10 participants from various Dutch HEIs that fit the abovementioned criteria. Their role and position range from professorship in leadership positions, PhD students, to former scholars working in public and private institutions. After the removal of two participants that requested to withdraw, the participants consisted of two senior scholars, three junior scholars, and three former scholars (See [Appendix A](#) for the complete list of participants and their generalised self-identification).

3.3 Sampling

Initially, a networked snowball sampling approach was attempted since the target group is characterised by its ambiguous boundary, thus a difficult-to-reach population (Heckathorn, 1997). Snowball sampling, through which initial participants refer to other scholars with similar experiences, offers the possibility of recruiting unknown participants. Besides, recruiting participants inductively through the snowball method's link tracing avoids selection biases (Creswell, 2007).

However, during the early research stage, it became evident that privacy and identifiability are significant challenges to the thesis topic (see [Appendix B](#) for reflection and explanation of the methodological shift). The trackable characteristics of snowball sampling make privacy and anonymity challenging. Hence, *convenience-based purposive sampling*, which in this case, targets scholars from the researcher's network and selects based on the author's knowledge judgment of these scholars' identity attributes (Creswell, 2007).

3.4 Data collection

Between May and June 2023, 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted individually with participants. Seven interviews were conducted in person, and three were through Microsoft Teams. The duration of the interviews ranges between 40-60 minutes (with one exception: an interview cut short to reduce harm). The interviews were only recorded after written (signed) and oral consent. Besides, memos were made during and after the interviews to record observations, such as tones, languages and emotions (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Creswell, 2007).

Since this thesis applies narrative research methods, the interview questions are broad and aim to stimulate participants' story-telling and self-motivated schema (Saint-Arnault & Sinko, 2021). The interference of the interviewer is thus minimal, although probing was applied to motivate in-depth information. The follow-up questions were asked depending on different responses, although some possible scenarios/responses and their subsequent follow-up questions were included in the topic list. Within each theme, sub-questions are ordered from more general topics to more personal/specific ones (Saint-Arnault & Sinko, 2021).

The interviews are organised in three blocks based on the three research questions and their subsequent themes (See [Appendix C](#) for the topic list) —the first block of questions refers to the self-identity of the participants. The question is intentionally designed to be broad to capture how participants would express self-identity, without preassumptions on what these questions are intended to investigate.

Block 2 focuses on the experience of belonging; first, they were asked whether they felt belonging or not, in what instances/situations, and with whom they felt belonging. Besides, they were asked about their position and hierarchy within HEI, and whether navigation of belonging is associated with power and position. Specifically, they were asked how their self-

identities relate to belonging; whether and how institutional mechanisms play a role in their experiences. Additionally, processes and strategies for navigating belonging.

Block 3 referred to views and experiences with HEI's D&I approach, whether or how the projects and policies impact their navigation of belonging, and whether they are involved.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analytical procedure followed Anderson and Kirkpatrick's (2016) description of narrative interview analysis, which focuses predominantly on respondents' stories to better understand lived experiences and behaviours. However, with patterns observed based on respondents' self-identification, it became clear that categorisation and comparisons were possible. Thus, Saint-Arnault and Sinko's (2021) comparative approach was also adapted. Although the approach was demonstrated as a cross-cultural analysis that allows both cross-group and within-group comparisons, it was mentioned that it could be utilised to compare diverse sets of identities, which is suitable for this thesis (Arnault & Sinko, 2021).

After obtaining the interview data, the recordings (excluding the two files removed from the data) were transcribed into text files through AmberScript. Next, through Atlas ti., the textual data were analysed through Axial coding, which includes deductive codes and themes based on the past literature and inductive codes that indicated new findings (See [Appendix D](#) for the complete code list).

Following Saint-Arnault and Sinko's (2021) approach, respondents are grouped based on their description of their position (Junior/senior/former). Respondents' expression of self-identification was also marked and sorted, for instance, identify as an academic or not; having multiple disadvantaged or privileged identities. The experiences of scholars of different positions and self-identities were then compared and analysed.

3.6 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study design. First, with qualitative narrative analysis focusing on perception, processes, and personal experiences, there may be low reliability. Especially since the ways narratives and stories are expressed could be influenced by spatial, contextual, and temporal factors (Saint-Arnault & Sinko, 2021). For instance, through reviewing the interview, it was noticeable that narratives were less in-depth through online meetings. It was also likely that recent life events influenced the narration, such as respondents who had just returned from holiday, and a respondent who had recently received a research grant may have narrated their experiences more positively. Meanwhile, respondents who recently missed a promotion or have a high workload may be more negative in their tone.

Additionally, in narrative interviews, despite having the potential to gain in-depth insights, the process could be harmful, especially concerning sensitive topics; the data collection process can be draining and possibly harmful (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). For example, during one of the interviews, a participant got emotional and visually upset when describing the lack of recognition and overworking. For ethical considerations (to avoid further harm), this specific interview was cut short and only partially analysed.

Next to harm, narrative research relies on the researcher's interviewing skills, with minimum nudging or influence (Saint-Arnault & Sinko, 2021). However, with the transition to purposive sampling came the unavoidable selection bias, that some participants were already acquainted with the researcher/interviewer. There were a few instances that the follow-up questions were asked based on the researchers' knowledge of the participant, or that participants' responses pertained to presumptions on researchers' positionality, which limited remit validity and reliability. Hence, in the analysis, participants' narratives that may be more valid were utilised more than the others.

Finally, with identity issues being a primary focus, the most significant limitation is ethics and privacy, which will be addressed below (Creswell, 2017).

3.7 Researcher Positionality

The author of this thesis works in HEI, specifically on D&I-related research and projects, such as being in the facility D&I team and working as a researcher assistant researching Rotterdam's Diversity and inclusion civil organisations and networks with published academic articles. The author also identifies as a queer person, a foreign-born migrant, and a first-generation student from low SES background. These identified attributes are shared publicly in lectures, social media, LinkedIn, and multiple university magazine articles. Based on the public nature of the researcher's role and identity, and the purposive sampling targeting participants from personal networks, interview participants are likely aware of the researcher's stance on the topic, meaning that participants' responses may be less honest. Acknowledging this risk, a memo was used for each interview to monitor the research process and record observations (Creswell, 2007).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This thesis explicitly targets scholars of non-normative positions, which is a relatively small group in Dutch HEIs. Besides the practice of masking/generalising identities in the write-up. The participants were made aware of the risks and their rights to their data. The following points are enforced to address ethical issues: (See [Appendix E](#) for the informed consent sheet)

- The data was processed and stored according to GDPR
- Participants' names were be pseudonymised, already in the transcriptions

- Voluntary participation is essential - Signed Informed consent with a clear indication of potential risks, rights to statements and data, and how the data is processed and stored (See [Appendix E](#) for the informed consent sheet)
- Full rights were given to participants regarding their data
 - Participants could choose not to answer any questions during the interview
 - Participants can request for their data (partially or the complete set) to be removed at any moment
 - The thesis will only be published with the consent of all participants

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Intersectionality, Position, and Scholar Belonging

How self-identities intersect and situate in HEIs plays a crucial role in shaping whether or how scholars experience belonging (Fisher et al., 2019; Fernández et al., 2022; Handforth, 2022). Participants were openly inquired about their self-identity through the broad opening question, "*How do you identify yourself?*" A general finding is that most participants expressed self-identities intersectionally; not only did they include expression of gender and/or sexuality, but they also mentioned their social roles, such as being a parent or mother. Besides, most participants mentioned how their identities are associated with disadvantages and privileges in HEIs.

However, international or foreign-born stated their ethnic background or country of origin. In contrast, most Dutch nationals (except those with migration backgrounds) did not mention ethnicity nor nationality. The differences suggest that scholars of colour and/or with international backgrounds may have contrasting experiences to white Dutch nationals that do not feel the need to "other" themselves (Ahmed, 2012; Ghorashi, 2021).

Besides, senior scholars identify as "*scholars*" or "*academics*", while most junior scholars did not instinctively do so. This may indicate that those in more stable positions feel comfortable with their scholar identity, while junior scholars may feel insecure and are legitimising their identity (Handforth, 2022). This difference was also observed throughout the interviewing process. As noted in the memo, younger scholars were cautious about their data; many, for instance, asked for a draft version of this thesis. At the same time, professors and those who left academia seem relaxed about how their data will be utilised.

The remainder of the discussion session will be drawn based on (but not limited to) comparing the experiences of different scholars grouped by their positions, and the intersections of disadvantaged and privileged self-identities.

4.2 Do I belong? Versus Do I need to belong?

As mentioned, the early stages of academic careers are often marked by insecurity or exploitation, while relative power and position make belonging in HEIs more effortless (Fisher et al., 2019; Handforth, 2022; Wekker et al., 2016). One of the main observations through analysing the data aligns with this notion. Young scholars from non-normative positions, especially PhD students, expressed struggles with belonging, while professors questioned the need to belong or demonstrated that belonging could be subjected to personal needs and preferences.

Regarding young academics' struggle to belong, one of the respondents, Clara, who also identifies as non-Dutch, non-white women, shared that she does not see herself as a scholar because she relates scholar identity with *"huge responsibility"* and regarded that the title has to be *"earned"*. She also shared that she has been questioning whether she belongs in the institution because *"no matter how much extra work and effort I put in, and I am talking about voluntary work without compensation... I do not get recognition from the top... I have little hope for recognition and to climb up"*. She then also relates her struggle to get a promotion to *"not being able to speak Dutch fluently."* Just like Faith, another non-Dutch junior scholar participant, Clara is also learning the Dutch language during her free time. However, they both pointed out that most opportunities are targeted at Dutch nationals, as Clara narrated, *"It's always another white Dutch male...surprising, right?"* when speaking about promotions, while Faith expressed the feeling of *"unfair"* and *"disadvantaged"*. The lack of recognition, not feeling valued are significant barriers to belonging (Handforth, 2022; May 2011). Besides, these narratives also highlight that belonging associated with recognition is particularly challenging amongst young scholars of non-Dutch backgrounds.

Regarding insecurities and struggles to belong, Irene, a PhD student identified as a first-generation scholar and a woman, stated that *"from the beginning of my PhD, and I think still sometimes...I do not feel like I fit in or belong"* She relates this feeling to self-identify as a first-generation student with little family or friends to look up to. When asked to elaborate on HEI mechanisms, she shared that this struggle may be linked to having a *"typical white male supervisor in leadership who is on top of the institution"*. Despite working with this scholar being beneficial to her career path, she says that *"it is only about performance, competition, success...there was so much pressure and very little opportunity to address my insecurities"*. More recently, she has been working with a supervisor who is also a woman and first-generation scholar; she sees her as a *"role model"* and described her as *"more human"* as the supervisor has been very open and provides more guidance and support. She is more confident about her career, saying, *"Now I also believe that I can make it!"*.

On the other hand, a tenured professor, Darcy, questions whether there is even a need to belong, as she stated, *"I do not want to belong because the institution doesn't belong in me"* and that she *"proudly does not fit in"* because she does not always agree or align with the institutional values. Another full professor Helen also shares that belonging is essential, but staying *"true to self"* and *"maintaining a good balance between work and life"* is more important than having to belong in the institution. However, both professors also recognise the privileges associated with their positions, that job security makes having to belong or to fit in *"optional"*. Moreover, When asked about their early academic career stages, both professors also shared that they struggled many times in the past.

These contrasting statements show that for young academics, especially those from non-normative positions with little social support or role models, whether or how belonging is experienced largely depends on HEI culture and how they are treated in HEI. As self-doubt, struggle to get recognition, overworking, and structural discrimination were observed, it is

evident that without caring mentors or role models, HEI may cultivate non-belonging (Fisher et al., 2019; Handforth, 2022; Nygaard & Savva, 2021; Täuber, 2022). Meanwhile, senior academics relate belonging to the true self, their values and goals, which aligns with Brown's (2017) mentioning of authenticity.

4.3 Navigating Belonging in Male-dominated Competitive Dutch HEIs

Another topic that emerged from the analysis that aligns with past literature is HEIs' competitive, performance-oriented and male-dominated culture and norm (Handforth, 2022; Kondonijakos, 2021). Many participants who identify as women used the term "*surviving*" to describe this culture, and they code-switch or conceal their identities (Essers et al., 2020). For instance, Helen also shared how when she was younger, as one of the only female academics, she didn't want to be seen as a woman, to be put into this "*outside box*". Thus, there was a period she avoided doing research related to feminism; she "*hid femineity*" dresses and behaved more like men.

Similarly, Evelyn worked as the only women professor in a STEM HEI department shared: "*Every morning on my bike to work, I think about how to start a conversation with my colleagues...what to talk about...*". She then explains how starting or steering conversations shows "*a bit of dominance*" and that only if she starts her male colleagues will talk about topics that matter to her. These examples confirm that women in HEI conceal their identity and code-switch to fit into a male-dominated culture (Essers et al., 2020).

While nearly all participants mentioned how they feel non-belonging due to the highly competitive HEI culture, Faith reflected on her own experiences and observation as a female non-Dutch junior scholar:

As women in academia, there is...insane amount of competition... it's obvious that women go through much more difficulties to climb the ladder...Just last year, our faculty appointed the first and only women full professor of non-western descent, which says enough about the hardship.

This statement describes how rare it is for women of non-western descent to be in HEIs, as Faith also stated that *"to survive is hard enough"*, let alone to belong.

On HEI norms and culture, as Darcy described, many participants also shared that there's a need to *"figure out"* the culture and adapt to it if they want to climb the ladder. This especially applies to women scholars who also identify as first-generation. As mentioned earlier, Irene, for example, shared how her male supervisor was all about performance and gave little guidance. This guidance needed is also for the unwritten rules, which Helen also encounters in different stages of her career. For instance, narrating her experience being promoted to professorship, there are many hidden rules, such as how to behave in certain types of ceremonies, that she didn't know *"because they are so subtle"* and that *"it's a room full of white guys...they help each other out"*. As women and first-generation scholar, it is especially challenging to navigate these rules (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Although she tries to ignore them, not adhering to these rules leads to *"subtle discrimination"*.

Meanwhile, Darcy, Helen, and Irene especially shared that women are often judged if they are competitive or ambitious. Darcy, for example, described how ambitious female colleagues *"as competitive as any other men"* often get bad names, but *"if it were a guy...they would walk with him...adore him"*. This demonstrates that even if attempting to fit in and code-switch, women get treated with double standards, discrimination, and hostility, which makes belonging nearly impossible, but to survive, a mission (Ahmed, 2012; Krasas, 2018; McCluney et al., 2021).

On competition in HEIs, Faith further elaborated how competition among non-EU scholars is prominent:

Because you have much less privilege working in the Netherlands...European people are usually going to be prioritised over you even if you have the same qualifications...with working visa and everything...the cost to be in the Netherlands is also much higher economically and socially...

Self-Reflecting on competition, Faith sees competitiveness in herself and expresses "*the need to perform and stand out...because that's what's going to, at the end of the day...establish a solid career path...*". These difficulties and disadvantages to why instead of support, "*there is a very high competition among minority groups and people that share the same ethnicity.*"

Her narrative indicates some aspects of interethnic competition fueled by a multitude of institutional and social barriers to belonging. When asked to elaborate on this type of competition, Faith pointed out an experience not found in past literature:

Among women coming from minority groups...with all the f*cking hardships they cross over time...I think the competition comes from that they like being the only one...if that makes sense...they do not want another person to potentially override them...

Although not supported by literature, relating to other scholars' narratives on HEI culture, such as Helen's view that "*being seen*" is essential and Darcy's observation that "*creating a personality*" is part of the career, the phenomenon described by Faith is arguably a culprit of the competitive HEI culture.

These statements point out that the navigation looks different when adding relatively disadvantaged or uncommon identities into the equation (Berheide et al., 2022). Besides, the marginalization and the othering effect could be observed in intersections and plurals, manifested in not only gender and ethnicity, but also the types of passport scholars hold (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Ghorashi, 2021).

4.3 Belonging through scholarly work instead of HEIs

All participants, regardless of their positions, expressed that the main reason they somehow feel belonging is academic work, which is often related to their self-identity. As Helen, a professor who identified as a working mother, stated *"I just don't understand why work is organised in such a way that it's very hard to combine with family life or other valuable things in life"*, her self-identities and disadvantages in work relates to why she now enjoys doing research related to feminism and equality. On the other hand, although Clara does not identify as a scholar, she sees herself as a *"scholar-activist"* that aims to address social issues critically through teaching.

Meanwhile, Darcy shared that *"The kind of work I do, whether it be the topics I work with or teach, is central to my identity."* However, the work related to identities and values is sometimes inseparable from self-identities in HEIs, as she stated, *"I care a lot about politics and social justice...social justice means that you do see a lot of colleagues also struggling with belonging, especially women"*. Reflecting on the unjust she witnessed, she shared how she saw advocating for change as part of the work:

I have fought too many fights that I later on realised some fights are just not worth fighting...I mean, they're moments when I had hopes...but it's an ongoing process...to the point that I tell myself not to put energy into fighting anymore.

Consequently, for being critical, she has been labelled "*difficult*" and thus excluded from specific opportunities. This example magnifies how belonging to HEI is especially challenge for those who do not align or conform to HEI mechanisms crafted and reinforced by the majority group (Icaza & Vazquez, 2018; Täuber, 2022).

For some, to be able to do identity-related work without the constraint of HEI was, in fact, a significant motivation to leave. For instance, former scholar Bey explained that in their time in HEI, they could hardly get funding for LGBT topics because it wasn't regarded as relevant in their field. Hence, they left HEI to do research-related work at an NGO with "*more flexibility to do work on LGBT issues...which is meaningful to me.*" Similarly, Evelyn, who had a professor title and now freelances as a researcher, shared how she likes approaching topics related to inequalities in "*experimental*" ways, as she self-identifies as a "*creative*". While some at her former HEI regard her ideas "*crazy*", now, as a freelancer with more freedom, Evelyn shared that her work reaches more publicity and civil actors "*I think...maybe even more fundings.*"

These examples could explain why most former scholars still somehow self-identify as academics. They may have left because they disagree with HEI mechanisms, especially the norms and culture built around competition and the prioritisation of mainstream knowledge, but they still do academic work in ways most meaningful to them (Barnett, 2003; Wekker et al., 2016).

4.4 Belonging Beyond HEI

Despite leaving HEI could be a decisive move to belonging to self, others shared that belonging in academia or as an academic is not solely dependent on HEIs. Irene and Darcy shared that there are civil society groups they work with that value collaboration, communication, and connection, unlike in HEIs infiltrated with *"hidden agendas"* cultivated by the competition of ideologies and institutional politics. Helen also shared, *"There are multiple places you can belong because you have the department and university ... but you also have the field... I've always been recognised more in the field."* When inquired about why belonging is experienced in the field, which in her case is a specific discipline associated with a few international journals, Helen elaborated:

The field is more about content and what you bring as an academic in terms of knowledge... that's what I prefer ...where I feel that I have made a contribution that is recognised by others... where I feel welcomed and appreciated.

As her field mostly consists of non-normative scholars, she described it as a *"safe space"* for women, parents, and LGBT scholars. Younger scholars like Faith and Irene also shared that there are research communities where like-minded researchers gather. Faith explained that she is in an external community composed of primarily non-western academics doing work from non-western perspectives or focusing on non-western social groups, which is *"rare in my field"*. Meanwhile, Clara shared her experience in activist groups where many scholars like herself combine their academic expertise with activism, which Richter et al. (2020) referred to as scholar activism.

These could be examples of affinity groups, spaces created from the ground up when HEIs are absent in fostering belonging for groups (Lambertz-Berndt, 2016; Nygaard & Savva,

2021). Nonetheless, these statements show how allyship and meaningful connections crucial to belonging, is not limited to HEI's walls, and academic career is certainly beyond HEIs (Brown, 2017).

4.5 The everchanging navigation of Belonging

Despite senior and former scholars expressing that they prioritise belonging to self over HEIs, their narration on their navigation to where there are in their career today affirms that belonging is a dynamic process that changes through life events (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). While some attempt and learn along the way to navigate belonging, some prioritise survival or decide to stop navigating based on practical reasons. For instance, Alan rewinds his time at HEI and shares the struggle to belong *"As a single gay man, I never felt like I could relate to my colleagues...they talk about their family and kids..."*. However, he shared that he also doesn't feel belonging in the corporate world. The main reason to quit was practical, coming from a low-income household *"I still have a big study loan to pay"* Alan admits that he misses the meaning and substance of research work, but having financial struggles plus non-belonging was *"just not worth it"*. Alan's narrative exemplified how belonging is crucial for retainment (Kondonijakos, 2021; Nygaard & Savva, 2021).

Contrastingly, Helen, who feels belonging in her field rather than in HEI, decided to climb the ladder *"When I divorced...having to raise two kids and among other reasons, I thought I needed a little bit more money... it was necessary to become a full professor."* To become a full professor came the obligation to behave a certain way: *"I feel the pressure to present myself...or more like behaving in the way that fits the position and status."* When asked to elaborate on the pressure to behave a certain way, she shared that *"concessions"* were constantly made between how she works and how the HEI expected of her:

I try to navigate my way...to myself and, of course, fulfil my duties...Even after becoming a full professor, navigating is an everyday thing... there are more attention and judgement for what I do...perform...

Helen's experience contradicts the assumption that navigation would get easier once on top of the academic ladder (Krasas, 2018; McCluney et al., 2021). With more power and status, assimilating or code-switching becomes inevitable. However, Helen also shares that along the way, she learned when to engage and when to disassociate; more specifically, she learned to be selective in socialising and set boundaries:

A way of navigating for me is not listening to gossip...I prefer to pick my small talk with certain people... I can only be myself if I don't hear what people think of me ...if you start listening and worrying about how people think...It just tickles my boundary...

This show that choosing to stand alone sometimes and decide not to participate in unimportant things is a way of navigating, which to some extent relates to braving (Brown, 2017).

On the other hand, reflecting on duties and obligations, Professor Darcy shared that: *"the more women academics understand HEI's politics, the more disenchanted they are."* To climb up the ladder, there are *"long list of items"* from HEI to complete. As she narrated: *"Academics seen as successful often have a personal list that looks a lot like the institutional list"*. With different identities and values, women or scholars of colour's personal lists may look very different than HEIs'. While Darcy attempted to complete two *"competing lists"* simultaneously, along the way, she decided: *"not to waste energy on institution's values that don't matter to me...I would rather do something that makes me happy than doing something that makes my institution happy"* However, the precondition to this is to learn about

ways to connect with people and resources to realise her own projects, such as through teaching, research projects, and actors outside the university. Besides, she also reflected on having no desire to climb up, which is what she sees as a privilege:

We will never know if I will ever be promoted to professor because I don't want to be promoted...I think it's a very privileged position where I can say I don't need a pay rise...I don't need more cultural and social capital...I just want to do my thing and sleep well at night.

It could thus be assumed that how scholars navigate is not only related to personal circumstances but also to disadvantages and privileges associated with self-identities. Darcy also mentioned: *"My identity has changed a lot...and keeps changing because it always changes...also with age...motherhood...life experiences"*. Other non-Dutch scholars also shared how their self-identities are relatively privileged in their home countries in contrast to their position in Dutch HEI, which made them more *"self-reflective"* and *"empathetic"*. These narratives highlighted that self-identities are not static and are situational, the ways belonging is navigated (or not) move along with the everchanging identities and are simultaneously influenced by their experiences in HEIs (Reitman, 2004; Stead, 2016).

Nevertheless, there can also be autonomy in navigation; it depends on how the desired path looks like, *"what you want to achieve"*, whether to prioritise the speed of career path or life quality, as Helen shared:

If you want to be regarded as a successful academic...if you want a fast career, then you will have to fit in...and overwork...I only became a full professor after 50-something,

but I don't mind... I'd rather have a quality life... Being an academic is more than just work."

Although Helen admits that it is unfair that male scholars typically have fewer barriers to cross to have a fast career, she reflected that "it's life...it's our reality...luckily it is slowly changing".

Overall, former and senior scholars with longer experiences in the academic world (either in HEIs or not) demonstrate that the path could be paved differently according to self-identities and values. They do so by living it and being open about their experiences.

4.6 Belonging and D&I

Similar to literature sources' contrasting views on whether HEIs' D&I approaches facilitate belonging, participants also have mixed views (Ahmed, 2012; Tulshyan, 2022). Younger Scholars recognise the increasing attention to D&I. However, most are unfamiliar with what D&I does, nor do they directly participate or are involved in D&I projects. While Faith recognises that D&I is "everywhere" in HEI, Irene expressed: "*There's much attention now...I think that is good...but there is more talking than doing*" and "*there's no time for it*" when efficiency is prioritised, especially not a priority for those not marginalised. When asked about whether D&I is attributable to belonging, she responded: "*No...not immediate, not directly*".

Despite younger scholars not seeing a link between D&I and belonging, Helen advocated for D&I and shared: "*A few years back...I think my CV was good compared to many others, but I didn't get any opportunities because I think they didn't see me...as a woman*". The increased attention to D&I is attributable to the recognition she deserves and thus has a direct link to her belonging. Besides, she highlighted HEI norms and how these norms are firmly attached to the majority groups' culture, thus creating biases. D&I, which in her opinion, embraces differences, helps point out these biases.

On the other hand, Darcy has learned to appreciate but remain sceptical on whether D&I contributes to belonging or, instead, more competition and assimilation. She shared: *"it is nice that D&I office is trying to be more critical...but in public discourses, we don't see this..."*.

When mentioning a policy specifically aimed at promoting women professors, she narrated:

I mean, if you are promoted, I'm convinced that you will not be able to change much. You will have to adapt to the given system and contribute to it...to this logic of competition or whatever, right?

Despite seeing D&I practitioners becoming more reflective, Darcy's narrative aligns with theorists' claim that D&I policies uphold institutional norms, reputation, and promote competition (Ahmed, 2012; Ali, 2012).

Faith, who also brought up the policy aimed at promoting women professors, shared how as a young scholar, these policies targeting professors seem *"far away"*. Identifying as non-Dutch and non-white, she also remarked that *"the women who participate are probably all white and Dutch"*. Similarly, but differently, Bey, who self-identified as queer, shared, *"LGBT topics were too sensitive...they won't go that far...or political"*. These statements indicate that the top-down visible policies often deny scholars' intersectional positions and non-normative gender identities. This echoes past literature mentioning that Dutch HEIs' D&I policies homogenise gender definition and decouple gender with race/ethnicity (Ali, 2019; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2022). Hence, D&I predominately contributes to Dutch white women scholars' belonging.

While former scholars see increasing attention to D&I, they expressed that a few years back, D&I was not as visible, as Alan narrated: *"Five or six years ago...at least in the Netherlands, it was not really a thing...but now it seems like all universities have to have*

D&I...". As Darcy also linked D&I to "*public discourse*", it is presumable that D&I is utilised to exhibit diversity to the public. Since younger scholars with more marginalised identities expressed how D&I is irrelevant to their belonging, it affirms that D&I upholds structures of dominance and avoids the rupture of workplace politics (Ahmed, 2012)

Nevertheless, some participants see the value of D&I despite criticising the current approach; as Faith narrated, "*It looks like a marketing strategy...but I guess it is better than nothing*". Irene perceives D&I as necessary for bringing "*awareness and pressure*" to those never marginalised. Especially in large bureaucratic HEIs with countless identity positions and voices, co-creating a space for belonging shouldn't solely depend on D&I policies; instead, it could be fostered through (inter)personal and incremental changes.

4.7 Belonging through Change-making

Beyond D&I, Participants narrated that making changes based on their own experiences, crafting a space more could feel at home, is a vital way of navigating and feeling hope. While younger scholars expressed that they may have less influence to make structural changes, they do their best to foster an environment to belong. Irene, for instance, shared that she checks on other junior scholars and supports them. She takes the relational approach, forming allyship and meaningful connections (Brown, 2017; Lambertz-Berndt, 2016). Meanwhile, Clara is committed to creating a safe space for students and implements practices and relevant guidelines in her classrooms. Besides, she actively participates in demonstrations if she encounters unjust, which relates to scholar activism (Richter et al., 2020).

By being vocal and critical, scholars like Darcy also make changes through scholar activism. Nonetheless, when asked about what she does to address problems related to non-belonging, she pointed out that "*spending time*" is essential "*So many people have had so many experiences of professors having no time*". It is a conscious decision for her to prioritise her

time for those who are marginalised and struggles, over the obligations imposed by HEI, which are not meaningful to her, as she shared: *"I have decided that I will have the time, and that means that I will not have time for things and I need to stick to"*. As she stays in HEI and supports the paths of those in more junior positions, this makes her also a tempered radical (Richter et al., 2020)

Besides having direct influences on D&I policies, Helen acknowledges how her position, which has some degree of power, allows her to do more; she always supports scholars who struggle, as she narrated, *"That's what I can do as a human...but also as a full professor"*. However, what is distinctive about the way she makes changes is *"slow changes"*, as she shared that she personally doesn't like to *"shout"* or *"protest"*. She opens up to white male colleagues being *"authentic, sincere and a little personal"*. Through dialogue about her struggles and being personal, *"they also open up"* and slowly but steadily become allies. Moreover, as Helen narrated, discussion around belonging is always among women; someone must share their experiences and point out the majority groups' biases. Her approach of making incremental changes through interpersonal relationships with relatively privileged male scholars in power aligns with tempered radicalism, which *"takes much patience"*, as Helen also acknowledges (Richter et al., 2020). These examples show how change-making could be done in various ways that relates to power, positions, self-identities.

5. CONCLUSION

Through analyzing qualitative narrative data obtained by interviewing scholars from non-normative backgrounds with experiences in Dutch HEIs, we observed dynamic experiences with navigating belonging. In general, all scholars did not instinctively express that they feel belonging to HEI; some question whether feeling belonging is even possible and have little hope; some others do not see belonging to HEI as necessary, while some relate belonging more to self and narrate that it takes constant navigation to belong.

Through the intersectional lens, it could be concluded that experiences with belonging are attributable to the intersections of self-identities associated with privileges and disadvantages (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Hurtado, 2017). While senior scholars with privileges associated with power positions could belong more to selves, junior scholars' belonging depends on legitimization from the top (Handforth, 2022; Savva & Nygaard, 2021). On the other hand, scholars with multiple disadvantaged self-identities, such as having non-EU passports whilst being women of colour, face more institutional barriers and thus navigate belonging differently. Hence, the analysis also highlights that marginalization could be intersectional in Dutch HEIs (Collins & Bilge, 2020)

Besides, we could be conclusive that Dutch HEI indeed has a male-dominated culture that's hierarchical and competitive (Ahmed, 2012; Essers et al., 2020; Täuber, 2022). Alongside unwritten rules and biased norms, many women and first-generation scholars assimilate to the competitive culture and overwork, and some code-switch and conceal identities to fit in (Essers et al., 2020; Krasas, 2018; McCluney et al., 2021). However, despite efforts to assimilate into this culture, women scholars face discrimination and double standards. An intriguing new finding is how multiple hardships faced by women non-western scholars may spark interethnic competition, as multiple disadvantages make survival more so a priority than belonging.

Nevertheless, through narratives of senior and former scholars, we also learned that navigation is a constant process that transforms along with life events and career stages (Reitman, 2004; Stead, 2016). To leave or climb the academic ladder could be associated with necessities, such as financial needs. However, along the way, scholars discover strategies to do academic work that is most meaningful to them, such as selective socialization and prioritizing personal goals, which makes scholars authentically belong "in" academia instead of "to" HEIs. Moreover, scholars also narrated alternative academic spaces they feel belonging, such as academic fields and civil institutions. Hence the analysis discovered that scholarly work is beyond the walls of HEIs.

While there are scholars like Helen whose recognition and belonging are directly attributable to D&I policies, some others criticize D&I for being too general, which predominately focuses on enhancing white female academics and promotes the logic of competition (Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2022). Besides, most junior and queer scholars do not find D&I relevant, while some associate it with public discourse or marketing strategy. Hence, the analysis showcased that the role of D&I in fostering inclusion and belonging remains questionable. For HEIs to question D&I's value and understand how meaningful the vast investment in D&I is to marginalized scholars is necessary to create structural changes and craft a space for belonging from the institutional level (Ali, 2019).

Nonetheless, scholars' narratives show that making changes could start small, slow, and personal, and the various ways of change-making are vital to navigating belonging. Junior scholars with less structural power create change by forming allyship and meaningful connections, while others do so by being scholar-activists (Brown, 2017; Richter et al., 2020). Senior scholars are more prone to being tempered radical that make incremental changes, such as being personal and opening to majority group scholars or prioritizing time to help students and young scholars who struggle (Richter et al., 2020).

In conclusion, analyzing respondents' narratives highlights the importance of the intersectional lens, as experiences and ways of navigating belonging could be linked to disadvantages and privileges associated with self-identities and the plurality of marginalization (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Hurtado, 2017). The self-identity and the narrative approach allowed comparisons between dynamic identity expressions and contributed to new findings, such as belonging in academic spaces beyond HEIs, and competition among scholars facing intersectional oppression. Nevertheless, the thesis's emphasis on self-identification makes it challenging to understand in-depth how scholars face intersectional oppression. Besides, experiences of belonging may differ between different academic fields with distinctive cultures. Thus, to gain insights into phenomena like interethnic competition and belonging in academic fields, future research could emphasize groups of scholars with more specific sets of marginalized identities and consider analyzing the belonging of marginalized scholars in specific disciplines.

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APPENDIX A. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

	Interview Date	Online/In-person	Participant (Pseudonyms)	Position	Self-identity	Note
1.	09/05/23	Online	Alan	Former Scholar- currently in consultancy firm	Gay Men, First-generation	
2.	12/05/23	N/A	N/A	Junior	N/A	Data removed by request
3.	16/05/23	N/A	N/A	Junior	N/A	Data removed by request
4.	31/05/23	Online	Bey	Former Scholar- currently works at an NGO	Queer Women, LGBTQIA+ activist	
5.	07/06/23	In-person	Clara	Junior	Women, first-gen, mother, non-Dutch, scholar-activist	
6.	08/06/23	In-person	Darcy	Prof	Women, mother, non- Dutch, non-white	
7.	09/06/23	In-person	Evelyn	Former Scholar- currently freelance researcher	Women, parent, first-gen, creative	part-time external lecturer at HEI
8.	10/06/23	In-person	Faith	Junior	Women, non-Dutch, first- gen	
9.	23/06/23	In-person	Helen	prof	Women, mother, first-gen	
10.	24/06/23	Online	Irene	Junior	Women, first-gen	

Note:

- Information on *self-identity* is entirely based on participants' descriptions rather than author's observation.
- Unique identifiable characteristics, such as specific nationality and migration background are either removed, or, generalized as the description below:
 - **Junior** position: all positions below professorship, including PhD, post-doc.
 - **Prof** position: all levels of professorships
 - **Non-Dutch**: All expressions of being international/foreign-born.
 - Expressions of race ethnicity generalized as: **white** or **non-white**.

APPENDIX B. Reflection: The Methodological Spiral

While Denzin and Lincoln (1998) mentioned that research processes are non-linear, Creswell (1998) described how methods "spiral" throughout the process. Especially in researching sensitive topics, reflexivity and improvisation are essential when facing adversity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

With the snowball sampling method proposed initially, a couple of mutually connected respondents were reached through an affinity group specifically for staff at Erasmus University. However, approximately a week after both interviews were conducted, the participants jointly requested data removal - as they had concerns regarding their statements and identifiability. They fear their association with the thesis project, which they perceive as critical to HEI, may harm their careers. Concerning privacy and ethics, the collected raw data (interview recording) were deleted from hard drives and cloud storage spaces before analysis.

These scholars match the participant's criteria and are in the early stages of their careers, meaning they are not tenured and thus not in the most established career paths. The incident substantiated how the research topic is sensitive and, to some extent, political. Since fear of power and the fearing of not surviving HEI was observed, it shed light on an aspect of non-belonging HEI, which is that staying authentic and speaking to truth could be challenging to those of non-normative positions, whilst also with less power position (Berheide et al., 2022; Krasas, 2018; Hurtado, 2017). Thus, the incident highlighted how belonging could be associated with relative power and position in hierarchical HEIs.

Through this reflection, a few methodological adjustments were made. First, the shift from snowball to purposive sampling through the researcher's network - The incident shows that trust in the researcher is essential concerning sensitive topics. However, trust building

was not an option given the time constraint of this project. Hence purposeful sampling targeting personal networks with already some trust was deemed feasible. Second, considering the importance of power in academic belonging (or power and survival precede belonging), in block 2 of the topic list, we added questions focusing on positions, power, hierarchy, and survival. Finally, expressions of self-identities are generalised in the write-up of the thesis to avoid identifiability. For instance, mentioning race/ethnicity was presented as white or non-white; nationality as Dutch or non-Dutch. PhD and post-doc are labelled as junior positions. Besides, unique attributes were removed. Although this approach could limit the richness of the analysis, it ensures anonymity and privacy.

APPENDIX C. TOPIC LIST

Introduction

- Briefing on the research project
- Oral informed Consent

Block I - Self-identity

Without mentioning intersectionality yet, and without asking about their role in academia, start with a very broad question:

- **How do you identify yourself?**
 - Observe:
 - Whether they express being a scholar
 - If yes: follow up on their position and experience in HEIs
 - If not: ask if they also identify as a scholar, why and why not?
 - NOTE: for ex-scholars, ask if they still see themselves as aacademic
 - Response more prone to self-definition or, self-categorization based on existing social groups
- **Would this description be the same in social settings and professional settings—And why?**

Block II - Belonging

NOTE: Important to relate back to their expression of self-identity when asking follow-up questions

Conceptualization/Meaning

- **what Belonging means to you personally?**
- **What is the ideal situation/space/environment?**

Experience

- **Do you feel belonging in HEI?**
- **In what ways do you feel belonging or non-belonging at work?**

Identity and Belonging

- **What role do you think your identity play in this (your experience)?**
- **(If applicable) would this explain why they express identity differently in social vs work settings?**

Identity, Institutional Mechanisms and Belonging

- **What role does the institution play in your experience of belonging:**
- **How do you feel about/experience the institutional culture? (e.g., hierarchy, power distance, competitive, domination)**
- **Do you have meaningful connections, with whom?**

Navigate Belonging

- **Do you see the need to feel more belonging, if so, what do you do to feel more belonging in HEI (in relation to how they describe what belonging means to them described earlier)**

Or

- **(if applicable) Rather, you have tried and you do not see the point**
- **(if applicable) you see survival and power more important than belonging**

Depending on their academic positions:

- **if in power position: ask question regarding belonging prior to professorship and after**
- **If not: ask whether they navigate belonging through striving for power**
- **Do (did) you see fellow academics struggling with belonging? If so:**
 - Who struggles/some examples...
 - Do they do anything (attempted) to help?
 - Limits of power
 - Or their power position allows them to do s

Block III - Role of D&I

- **How do you see D&I in general, and why?**
- **Do you know and can they give examples of policies/projects that fosters belonging?**
- **Do they feel that these policies contribute to their belonging or not -and why?**
- **Are you involved in any D&I related projects/policies?**
 - *If so: what is your motivation?*
 - *has it been challenging?*

APPENDIX D. CODE LIST

Colored = inductive codes

Theme	Categories /Codes	Subcodes
SELF-IDENTIFICATION	APPROACH/EXPRESSION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identifies as a Scholar ▪ Intersectional expression ▪ Combines personal and professional identities ▪ Separate personal and professional identities ▪ ▪ Refer to personal traits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Motherly ▪ Creative ▪ Emphasis on Intersectionality (specifically used the term)
	PERCEPTION ON SITUATEDNESS OF IDENTITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify as minority in academia ▪ Mentions privileged identities ▪ Expressed oppression(s) intersectionally/in plural
SELF-IDENTITY(IES) CATEGORIES	POSITION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Full Professor ▪ Associate professor ▪ PhD ▪ Post-doc ▪ Left academia ▪ NGO project manager ▪ Consultancy firm ▪ freelance researcher
	GENDER & SEXUALITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Men ▪ Women ▪ Non-gender conforming ▪ Queer ▪ Queer Women ▪ Gay man
	RACE & ETHNICITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ White ▪ Non-white
	CULTURE & NATIONALITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ International ▪ Dutch ▪ Non-Dutch
	SOCIAL ROLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pregnancy ▪ Parent ▪ Non-work-related roles
	OTHER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First-generation ▪ Migrant ▪ Privileged Social economic background ▪ Scholar Activist
INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS	CULTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Us Vs them culture ▪ Unwritten rules ▪ Western biased values ▪ Space for authenticity ▪ IM credit stealing ▪ IM Hidden agendas

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ IM Politics ▪ IM No Safe space ▪ IM See no collaboration but competition ▪ SURVIVE
	POWER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leadership occupied by dominant group ▪ Hierarchy ▪ IM Mentorship ▪ IM Need for validation from top
	RELATIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ voices are valued ▪ IM NAVIGATE THROUGH COMPETITON ▪ IM Sees Role model
EXPERIENCES OF BELONGING	NON-BELONGING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Us Vs them culture ▪ Little meaningful connections ▪ Encounter harassment ▪ Encounter unequal treatment ▪ self-doubt/low esteem ▪ Uncertainty ▪ Feeling un-fit to culture ▪ Cannot speak to truth ▪ Do not feel valued ▪ Not recognized by the top/leaders ▪ Giving Up ▪ Interethnic Competition ▪ BN Challenges of balancing work and personal life ▪ BN Desire for independence ▪ BN Insecurity ▪ BN Trust issues
	BELONGING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Desire to be part of the institution ▪ Have meaningful connections ▪ Have allyship ▪ Feeling of being valued ▪ Feel free to speak the truth ▪ Identifies with the culture ▪ Balanced power dynamics ▪ Being authentic self ▪ Personal exchange on feelings ▪ Helping others be themselves ▪ Be able to be vulnerable ▪ BE Emotional openness ▪ BE Empathy ▪ BE Empowerment
NAVIGATE BELONGING	FITTING IN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Actively assimilate ▪ downplay the components of culture or identity
	CONCEALMENT/DOWNPLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conceal identity ▪ Conceal values ▪ Conceal goals/ambition ▪ hide femineity
	SWITCHING IDENTITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Express identity differently in private and in work settings

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Change behavior in different cohorts
	CODE SWITCHING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Changed the way of speaking ▪ Changed the way of dressing ▪ Act more masculine/dominant
	RELATIONAL APPROACH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seek allyship ▪ Attempt to establish meaningful connections ▪ Support others with similar experiences ▪ Take part in reshaping culture & norms ▪ Be personal ▪ Relation with majority group members ▪ More relations with non-normative scholars ▪ Institutions Outside HEI ▪ In academic field instead of HEI
	STRIVE FOR POWER AND POSITION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Performance and competitiveness ▪ Overwork/ Sacrifice work-life balance to stand out
	CHANGE MAKING - SCHOLAR ACTIVISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ vocal on standpoint ▪ not afraid of criticizing HEI ▪ Activism together with Affinity group
	CHANGE MAKING - TEMPERED RADICALISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ stayed despite non-belonging ▪ incremental changes ▪ Time and devotion ▪ Open up
	BRAVING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not afraid of standing alone ▪ Not afraid of standing for others ▪ Prioritise time for marginalized ▪ Critical
D&I - VIEWS & EXPERIENCES	NEGATIVE VIEWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ View D&I as a way to maintain status quo and power ▪ Sees no value in D&I ▪ Not prioritized ▪ Too general
	NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exhibition of Diversity ▪ More competition ▪ Too much attention
	POSITIVE VIEWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ See true meaning and values ▪ Starts dialogue ▪ bring attention
	POSITIVE EXPERIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Belonging fostered by D&I policies/projects ▪ Benefited from D&I policies/projects ▪ Finally got recognition ▪ Helps address Bias

APPENDIX E. INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM



Information and Consent Form

Information

Introduction

At Erasmus University ESSB faculty (Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences), Yu-Cheng (Alex) Huang, enrolled in the Governance of Migration and Diversity Master's Programme, is working on a master's thesis project that aims to understand the ways current and former scholars perceive(d) and navigate(d) their belonging in academia, in connection to how they understand diversity and inclusion, and their positions within it. This thesis project wishes to provide a meaningful understanding of what belonging means in academia, hoping to foster the inclusion of scholars and potential scholars from various backgrounds. This is why this project particularly focuses on lived experiences of scholars from non-normative positions in the Dutch context. For instance, women scholars, scholars of colour, and scholars with non-normative sexual orientation or fluid gender identities. The research will also serve as a basis to provide an alternative understanding of the term diversity, inclusion, and also belonging, which are increasingly popularised terms often used theoretically and practically.

If you have any questions about the research or would like to get in touch for any other reason, you can contact us by email as follows:

- (Thesis Author) Alex Huang: <495130yh@student.eur.nl>
- (Thesis Supervisor) Willem Schinkel <schinkel@essb.eur.nl>

Data collection

As the central part of the research, several current or former scholars from non-normative positions will be interviewed in-depth. That is why we would like to ask if you agree to an interview. The conversation will take place in person and will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and it will be recorded and transcribed into text for analysis.

Potential risks and voluntary cooperation

No physical, legal or economic risks are associated with your participation in this research. However, your statements regarding your personal experiences may be linked to institutions you formerly or currently work in. It is optional to answer all questions. Your cooperation is voluntary, and you can withdraw it at any time by contacting Alex Huang and Willem Schinkel.

v. 1.2 (March 2023)

Classification: Internal

Data protection and data confidentiality

The collected data will be used in an aggregated analysis, and your name will be pseudonymized. However, your position in academia may be mentioned, and above all, your identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, may also be mentioned in the final research product. The data is stored securely and is kept until the thesis project is completed.

Consent form

By signing the form, I acknowledge the following:

- I have been informed about the purpose of this research and the data collection.
- I have read the information form, or it has been read to me.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research.
- I voluntarily choose to participate in this research.
- I understand that I can withdraw my consent and/or cooperation at any given time without consequences.

I give permission:	YES	NO
I give permission to record the interview (audio/video)		
I give permission for the use of quotes (with anonymized name)		
I give permission to mention my career stage (e.g., early, late, professorship)		
I give permission to mention my race and ethnicity (general terminologies)		
I give permission to mention my gender or sexual identity		

Further notes you would like to mention (if any):

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

v. 1.2 (March 2023)

Classification: Internal

APPENDIX F. Researcher Reflection Note

The research process was insightful and full of surprises (pleasant and unpleasant). It offered empirical insights and valuable practical lessons for the researcher, which is what this reflection note intends to address.

The rocky research process

After getting the thesis proposal feedback, Theoretically, I very much agreed with the identified approach of putting all minority groups in one big othering box can be problematic. Hence, through affinity groups and a networked approach, I attempted to approach scholars with specific sets or identities (such as BIPOC), scholars that may be more marginalised (beyond white women) and/or those who are associated with multiple disadvantaged identities (junior/BIPOC/women and/or non-cisgender). It soon became apparent that this approach is not feasible in practice (at least for a project with time constraints).

First of all, there are clearly not many potential scholars that I could reach out to. Besides, a scholars I approached subtly hinted that they felt offended and declined the invitation. Moreover, as described in the methodology section - after finally reaching and interviewing (former) participants that fit these attributes, they jointly requested to withdraw from the project with the assumption that the thesis could be critical (this is associated with their perception of the thesis supervisor and their research approach). The communication was not too pleasant for me; their expressions were accompanied by noticeable fear of the more powerful they work with/for. Besides, they also brought up my role in D&I work and suggests that I should be more neutral in approaching identity issues.

Although frustrating, I understand that for the more marginalised, surviving in such a hemogenic and hierarchical institution could be challenging enough, let alone to belong and speak their minds. It was a moment of realisation that making the identity aspect of the thesis more general and unidentifiable general (especially in sampling and writing-up) is the most ethical approach. Moreover, perhaps, in the Dutch context, HEI environments are not built nor ready for inquiry on sensitive identity-related topics.

In addition to this incident, most (but not all) young scholars showed negative emotions (visibly and in tones) when narrating their experiences during the interview process. There were multiple instances in which I felt I should have intervened to comfort them. This

also indicates that these vulnerable groups may not get enough support to address their struggles and concerns.

A Lesson for Self and Aspiring Academics

As an aspiring academic with intersections of marginalised identities (*foreign-born migrant from Taiwan - queer person - disowned by some family members for being queer - low SES - remittance sender - 1st generation student*) - the research topic is partially motivated to realise whether I can also belong in Dutch HEI; whether I can build a life in a foreign country and an academic career that could not only be meaningful but also offers "stability" (something that I haven't been able to experience since my teenage years).

Undeniably, choosing a topic that is quite personal is a risky move, especially for a Masters thesis project that primarily aims at examining students' ability to conduct scientific research. Through various interactions with scholars from marginalised backgrounds, I got a clearer picture of how Dutch HEIs operate, and a close look into its culture and norms. A striking and perhaps most frustrating observation is the culture centred around us versus them ideology, the need to label people, and the politicisation of issues as simple as a sense of belonging. Besides, the polarisation and competition of ideologies create a toxic culture of non-belonging. For instance, being labelled as 'too critical' or 'woke' together with the thesis supervisors. These observations made the thesis process challenging, making me question my aspirations.

Nevertheless, other interactions showed different perspectives and ways to navigate, for instance, by switching HEIs, finding allyship and safe spaces outside HEI (such as in academic fields/conferences/research institutions), and finding one's purpose and rhythm in academic careers.

This reflection is a note to self and other aspiring young academics from non-normative positions that an academic career can be challenging, yet, unique and rewarding. It is a reminder to constantly reflect and navigate my own positions and goals, a reminder that being an academic is more than work and that there are various ways and spaces beyond HEI to connect, learn, and belong. Lastly, a reminder that we are not alone in these struggles - it is necessary to look after ourselves and care for and connect with those who face similar struggles, to cultivate a safe space for belonging.

Acknowledgement

Lastly, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Willem Schinkel, for guiding this thesis process. Willem's dedication to students, openness, and invitation for students to think critically motivated me to finish this thesis. Despite the challenges and gaining an understanding of how HEIs operate, Willem shows and inspires students from marginalized backgrounds like myself that there is hope and that many scholars are fighting for change together - for HEIs where more could feel belonging!