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# Navigating the 'unprecedented'? Understanding disabled people's experiences of higher education during the Coronavirus pandemic

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**Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract**

This presentation describes ongoing research investigating the experiences of disabled students and staff as they navigate the Coronavirus pandemic in higher education. Data for this research is being collected from an online survey and interviews with disabled students and staff, as well as from an expert panel of disabled researchers. Early findings suggest that participants are reporting positive experiences of pandemic higher education through valuing home working and studying, whereas negative experiences through feelings of isolation. Participants also express fears that positive learnings from the pandemic around inclusion may be lost as higher education begins its shift back to traditional ways of pre-pandemic working. I will conclude this presentation by unpicking the legitimacy of the Coronavirus pandemic in higher education as 'unprecedented', arguing that disabled people routinely experience crises in higher education, and this learned knowledge can help the sector respond inclusively in a post-pandemic world.

**Full paper**

The Coronavirus pandemic has undoubtedly led to considerable challenges for the higher education sector, such as around migrating from in person teaching and learning, to primarily or completely online. The speed and significance of these changes has led to fears

that disabled students and staff may be particularly disadvantaged, on top of the existing disadvantages and barriers disabled people already face in higher education (e.g., Hannam-Swain & Bailey, 2021; Parfitt et al., 2021).

This paper discusses an ongoing research project exploring the experiences of disabled students and staff as they navigate pandemic higher education. I will share initial findings from an online survey and interviews with disabled students and staff, and discussions from an expert panel of disabled researchers. These initial findings suggest that disabled students and staff are reporting a diversity of experiences as they navigate pandemic higher education. Positive factors that have emerged through the academy's response to the pandemic point to benefits of home working and study, such as improved physical health due to not having to commute into university as regularly. Common challenges that are being reported are of concerns around feelings of isolation and disconnection from other students and staff, and not feeling appropriately supported by their higher education institution (e.g., difficulties in accessing accessible technology and software for online working). Participants also share potentially deep fear and anxiety due to lack of certainty and clarity over study and work patterns. This anxiety is being felt particularly through narratives within certain higher education institutions advocating a shift back to 'traditional' ways of pre-pandemic working (e.g., in person teaching for students, and return to office working for staff). Participants worry that the positive gains made through the pandemic in terms of inclusive practice may be lost.

In demonstrating the perceived benefits, challenges, and fears that disabled people have reported in navigating pandemic higher education, I will explore the legitimacy of the potentially taken-for-granted narrative regarding the pandemic as being 'unprecedented'. I will do this by applying theoretical concepts of ableism and 'bio-meritocracy' to the data. Academic ableism refers to the perceived value that higher education institutions place on being 'able-bodied' and 'able-minded', and as such, how disabled bodies are routinely

disregarded (Dolmage, 2017). The value that is given to being 'able-bodied' affords privileges that are embedded and continually reinforced within academic systems and narratives. For instance, educational norms, or the physical structure of buildings, may appear relatively benign, but act to create environments in which being 'able-bodied' and/or 'able-minded' is valued (Taylor & Shallish, 2019). Consequently, individuals who are able to navigate the ableist landscape of higher education are perceived to excel due to their natural abilities and strengths, rather than because they accurately fit the normalised ideal of an 'able-bodied' and/or 'able-minded' student or member of staff – or what Taylor and Shallish (2019, p. 1202) refer to as the 'logic of bio-meritocracy'.

Responses from higher education institutions to the Coronavirus pandemic have revealed longstanding systemic ableism and bio-meritocracy that may have traditionally gone unnoticed by non-disabled people (Read et al., 2020). Because of this longstanding inequality, disabled students and staff may have routinely experienced, and may continue to experience, crises within higher education and broader society, requiring myriad learned strategies to navigate these crises effectively. By viewing the Coronavirus pandemic as 'unprecedented', there is a risk that higher education reinforces existing ableist structures which undermine and disregard the validity of disabled people's experiences, as well as the strategies disabled people enact to navigate challenges. If higher education is committed to developing more inclusive environments for its students and staff, both during and following the Coronavirus pandemic, it is essential that disabled people's voices and experiences are at the forefront of any 'building back' discussions (Brown, 2021; Read et al., 2020). Failure to do so may mean that higher education is at risk of continuing the ableist and bio-meritocratic mistakes of its past.

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