

**SRHE**

*Society for Research  
into Higher Education*

**Disabled people's  
experiences of higher  
education during the time  
of the Coronavirus  
pandemic: Pasts, presents,  
and futures.**

**Research report**

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

## Definitions

**Disabled people** – Under the UK Equality Act (2010), a disabled person is an individual who has ‘a physical or mental impairment’ which has ‘a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (S6.1), such as when studying or working within higher education institutions. In this report, I use the terminology ‘disabled person’ rather than ‘person with a disability’, which is more commonly used internationally. This is because the UK interpretation of disability regards ‘disability’ as the consequence of problematic social barriers, which in turn means that disabled people are not ‘people *with* disabilities’ as disability is not something that can be owned by any one individual (i.e., it is experienced according to societal and social factors).

**Reasonable adjustments** – The UK Equality Act (2010) requires all higher education institutions to provide ‘reasonable adjustments’ (often referred to internationally as ‘reasonable accommodations’), which are changes to their standard ways of working in order to prevent disabled students and staff from being unfairly treated.

## Acknowledgements

To begin, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Society for Research into Higher Education for awarding me with the Newer Research Award 2021. As a disabled person in higher education, this project is very special to me, both personally and professionally because, as the forthcoming project findings will share, the higher education sector is a potentially difficult and frustrating environment for disabled students and staff to navigate – particularly in this pandemic era that we are all still facing. The support, opportunities, and trust that the SRHE has provided to me so that I can complete this research journey has been incredibly validating.

Second, I would like to thank my friends, family, and colleagues who have supported me before and during this project. I want to give particular thanks to Dr Anne Parfitt and Dr Mel Macer, who convinced me to apply for this funding, and for providing me with the reassurance I needed when I was experiencing my routine imposter syndrome and doubting my ability and worth as an academic researcher.

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## Executive summary

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of pandemic-era higher education from the perspective of disabled students and staff. Four research questions were explored, which focused on participants' experiences of higher education from the start of the pandemic until the time of their sharing of data for the project (RQ1); comparisons regarding how they were finding pandemic higher education to higher education before the Coronavirus pandemic (RQ2); what their hopes and fears were for a future higher education sector (RQ3); and their recommendations for making a 'post-pandemic' academia more accessible and inclusive (RQ4).

Data were collected via an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and 'expert panel' sessions. 45 disabled people completed the online survey, and 17 disabled people completed a semi-structured interview. Twelve disabled people/disability allies attended one or more of the expert panel sessions. Collected geographical data of participants is provided in the forthcoming report where available.

Findings demonstrate a mixed picture in terms of how disabled people are experiencing pandemic higher education, particularly in how they navigate changes in working practices; what this means for their health and well-being; and how opportunities for accessibility are evidenced in practice. For instance, changes in working practices encouraged the promotion of flexible working and working from home, which was valued by many participants. But, at the same time, such working was inaccessible for some participants, and promoted additional concerns regarding presenteeism and making

themselves visible to other students and colleagues. Recommendations and dissemination plans are shared in the forthcoming report.

## Introduction and rationale for the research project

Disabled people in higher education are routinely exposed to structural challenges and barriers, as well as associated stigma and discrimination, which impacts on their ability to work and study (e.g., Brewer, 2022; Williams et al., 2018, 2021). Much of the existing knowledge regarding disabled people's experiences of higher education has used academic ableism as a theoretical lens (see examples such as Brown, 2021a; Dolmage, 2017). Academic ableism refers to the systematic valuing of the 'able' body within higher education, and so in turn devaluing any body which does not meet the idealised version of 'ableness' (Dolmage, 2017). Academic ableism can manifest in myriad different ways, from the exclusionary nature of historical buildings and structures, to the neoliberal expectations within higher education that students and staff will work potentially significant and antisocial hours, without consideration of personal circumstances, such as fatigue, impairment or caring responsibilities (e.g., Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022; Dolmage, 2017; Merchant et al., 2020). For instance, research that colleagues and I have previously completed explored the experiences of disabled staff within higher education, from an ableist standpoint (Merchant et al., 2020). We found that disabled staff reported having to invest extra time and energy in navigating practices of higher education which did not consider diversities of people's needs.

Similar experiences are beginning to emerge in terms of how disabled people are experiencing the Coronavirus pandemic. For instance, colleagues and I have argued how responses to the pandemic by policy makers and higher education reveal, and may potentially be led by, longstanding ableist attitudes and privilege (Parfitt et al., 2021; Read et al., 2023). We showed how the frustrations and barriers that impact on disabled

people's ability to succeed in academia (e.g., those described above) may become exacerbated in the pandemic era (Parfitt et al., 2021). These issues may be compounded further for disabled staff when intersectional structural barriers are considered (Brown et al., 2021). Wagner et al. (2021), for instance, described the experiences of disabled academic mothers as they navigated dual pressures of their academic career, and their responsibilities as a parent. There are concerns too, that disabled students have been adversely disadvantaged by the pandemic (Sarju, 2021). Wilson et al. (2020) reported that neurodiverse students and students with sensory impairments may be experiencing barriers to their learning due to inaccessible online platforms or lecture presentation materials. This report also highlights how students with mental health support needs may be experiencing additional challenges to their health as a result of the pandemic, which in turn may affect their ability to study.

Notwithstanding this ableism, the higher education pandemic era presents a unique period to learn from the barriers of the past and build a more inclusive pandemic and 'post pandemic' higher education sector (Brown, 2021b; Read et al., 2020). For instance, while disabled students and staff may be experiencing considerable challenges in pandemic higher education, previous research has revealed clear benefits. Such an example is how working from home during the pandemic era may be, and may have been, a positive experience for disabled staff, due to feelings of improved health and well-being due to not having to commit to daily commutes into their higher education institution (Hannam-Swain & Bailey, 2021; Parfitt et al., 2021).

This SRHE project sought to progress this existing knowledge of the experiences of disabled students, disabled staff, and disability allies as they navigated higher education



during the pandemic era. To do this, the project qualitatively documented how disabled people and allies were experiencing pandemic higher education, and their hopes and fears for how a future pandemic/'post-pandemic' might be experienced. Where applicable, the project also recorded disabled people's experiences of higher education before the onset of the pandemic, so that possible comparisons could be made (e.g., regarding experiences of academic ableism). To consider the unique space of pandemic-era higher education, four research questions were constructed:

Research Question 1: What were the experiences of disabled students and staff within higher education from the start of the pandemic until the present (i.e., at the time of their data collection)?

Research Question 2: How do these higher education experiences compare to those before the onset of the pandemic?

Research Question 3: What are the hopes and fears of disabled students and staff for a future (potentially post-pandemic) higher education sector?

Research Question 4: What recommendations do disabled students and staff have for promoting a more accessible and inclusive pandemic and post-pandemic higher education sector?

# Methodology

## Overview of research approach

To address the above four research questions, there were the following elements of data collection: an online survey; in-depth semi-structured interviews; and the creation of an 'expert panel' to help develop an accessible qualitative methodology to measure disabled people's experiences of the pandemic era in higher education. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee, Bath Spa University.

## Online survey

The online survey began by asking participants to describe general job role/study information (e.g., whether disabled staff participating were academics or professional services; and for disabled students, what level degree programme they were studying etc.) Participants were then asked to provide free-text responses to the following thematic areas: i) what their general experience of pandemic higher education has been like for them as a disabled person; ii) whether they were aware of any particular barriers/positives that have emerged in pandemic-era higher education; iii) comparing their lived experience of higher education before and during the pandemic (if applicable); and iv) their recommendations for developing an inclusive higher education in light of the pandemic. In total, 45 disabled participants completed the online survey: 21 staff; 17 students; five staff who were also higher education students; and two students who were studying during the pandemic, but had graduated at the time of the survey. The majority of the participants were attached to universities in the UK (n = 29), though some were international: New Zealand (n = 12); Kenya (n = 1); and USA (n = 1); missing (n = 2).

## **Interviews**

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore the themes of the online survey in greater depth. 17 disabled participants were recruited: twelve staff; three students; one member of staff who was also studying; and one student who had studied during the pandemic, but had graduated when discussing their experiences. Seven participants were recruited after previously completing the online survey, but this was not a requirement to participation.

## **Expert panel sessions**

The expert panel consisted of a group of twelve individuals with significant experience of disability in higher education: eleven university staff/support workers, and one student who had studied early during the pandemic, but had graduated at the time of the project. All participants were attached to universities within the UK.

The purpose of the expert panel was to oversee the development of the qualitative research methodology, and to use this methodology to describe their own experiences of pandemic-era higher education. Five expert panel sessions were completed over the project. Two were focused on the theoretical underpinning of the methodology, and what the methodology would 'look like' in practice. The final three sessions involved expert panel members using the created methodology to describe their lived experiences. Expert panel members were able to attend as many of the sessions as they wished to (e.g., several of our members joined later into the project).

For the first two sessions, expert panel members discussed how their experiences of navigating higher education barriers could be explored methodologically in an accessible

way beyond the more 'traditional' routes of data collection (e.g., surveys and interviews). We anticipated that discussions around crises in higher education would be sensitive and personal, and potentially difficult to put into words (e.g., if participants discussed abstract and subjective concepts to explain their experiences.) We sought to address these potential ethical issues in two ways. First, through our previous work (Parfitt et al., 2021), creation of compassionate/safe spaces for disabled people and allies in higher education, where all participants share a collective solidarity and understanding, can allow for openness and vulnerability about our experiences. We continued this same approach in the current project with each expert panel session being a compassionate/safe space. Second, to help navigate difficulties in putting abstract experiences into words, we decided to use creative and tactile 'play' materials: plasticine, building blocks, and drawing (e.g., Brown & Leigh, 2018).

For each of the final three expert panel sessions, there were two periods of play. In the first period of play, members chose a creative material(s) that was most accessible for them, and then created a piece that described their lived experiences. Members were encouraged to focus on their lived experience of higher education, but were welcome to include other experiences too. Once each member had made a start on their creative piece, they discussed it with the rest of the members at the session(s), and then listened to other members' interpretations. The chosen materials were tactile and malleable, as it was expected that people's creative pieces would be revised considering the new knowledge or insights shared from other members at the session(s). Individuals made revisions/redesigns to their creative pieces if they wished to during a second period of play once all members had provided their interpretations. An academic paper will be written to explain the process of the expert panels in greater depth.

## Findings and Discussion

**Research Questions 1 and 2: What were the experiences of disabled students and staff within higher education from the start of the pandemic until the present, and how do these experiences of higher education compare to those before the onset of the pandemic?**

Several themes emerged regarding participants' experiences of pandemic-era higher education, however, these themes generated both positive and negative accounts. Three examples of these mixed themes are as follows:

### Changes in working practices

Participants spoke of the benefits that the pandemic era had afforded them in terms of flexible working, and the ability to work and study from home using online platforms. Many of the participants in the project considered themselves to be vulnerable/clinically vulnerable to infection, so the opportunity to work and study from home made them feel safer due to them not having to worry about possible contagion by attending in person. Participants also reported a better work-life balance that may have been lost in the high-pressured nature of academia. However, participants were aware that this greater freedom in working and studying also promoted concerns over presenteeism and feeling that they had to be visible and seen to be productive to their colleagues.

### Health and well-being

In addition to the better work-life balance and feeling safer, participants reported positive changes to their health and well-being. Many participants spoke of how the changes in working practices described in the previous theme negated the need for traditional

actions that caused stress and fatigue, such as in managing the daily commute to university. However, while acknowledging these benefits, participants were aware of the costs to their mental health in terms of feeling isolated or excluded from other colleagues and students.

### **Opportunities for accessibility**

Participants appreciated that the pandemic era had promoted an acceptability for alternative forms of working, teaching, and learning, and how opportunities for improving accessibility appeared to be recognised (e.g., recognising the benefits of online learning). However, this opportunity for accessibility was coupled with considerable challenge, due to such factors as: inaccessibility of working and studying online for people with certain impairments; lack of accessible options/software for working and studying; and limited understanding or willingness from colleagues to provide reasonable adjustments. In other words, while *opportunities* for accessibility were evident, barriers emerged in how these opportunities were enacted in practice within higher education.

### **Comparing pre-pandemic and pandemic higher education**

Participants who had experience of both pre-pandemic and pandemic higher education reiterated the above themes. Participants described how in the pandemic era, the following positive changes had emerged: (i) a positive shift in the acceptability of flexible and online working; (ii) a greater focus on people's individual health and well-being; and (iii) an increased awareness of the importance of accessibility. However, there were students and staff who reported finding the pandemic style of working incredibly difficult (e.g., studying and working online when compared to being in person). For instance,

some participants reported experiencing significant challenges in coping with the demands of the sector, coupled with feelings of considerable isolation and exclusion.

**Research Question 3: What are the hopes and fears of disabled students and staff for a future higher education sector?**

Hopes and fears described by participants often were opposing dimensions of a similar theme. A particularly common theme was around the permanence (or perceived impermanence) of working practices that had been enacted during the pandemic era. For instance, participants hoped that the progress that had been made in higher education with regards to disability inclusion (e.g., flexible working practices and online learning) would continue, as these changes had been positively received outside of disabled communities (e.g., non-disabled people have recognised the benefits of flexible and online working). However, a particularly strong fear was the belief that the higher education sector would revert to pre-pandemic ways of working that were inaccessible for many participants, due to institutions not considering the different needs of its students and staff. Should universities revert to traditional and exclusionary working practices, a fear raised by many participants was that the inclusive progress that had been made over this pandemic period would be lost, and that disabled people would again experience ableist exclusion in higher education.

**Research Question 4: What recommendations do disabled students and staff have for promoting a more accessible and inclusive pandemic and post-pandemic higher education sector?**

Participants described numerous recommendations, but which typically related to the following themes:

**1. Wanting pandemic practices that have benefitted disabled students and staff to remain into the future.**

Participants wanted to ensure that the above fear regarding the higher education sector reverting to pre-pandemic ways of working was prevented.

**2. Listening to the needs and experiences of disabled people, and having disabled people's voices at the centre of decision making.**

Participants were concerned that they often did not know what support/reasonable adjustments were available for them in pandemic higher education, or felt unsupported or challenged if they were to request reasonable adjustments. Added to this, additional concerns were raised that higher education pandemic decision making was taking place without sufficient disability representation, nor awareness of the barriers that disabled people face. Recommendations suggested providing disability awareness training, information sharing on available support, and having disabled representation on senior planning committees within individual institutions.

**3. Rhetoric of valuing inclusion and diversity being backed up with tangible action.**

Participants expressed frustration that while the higher education sector may overtly state commitment to furthering inclusion and diverse representation of students and staff, concrete and tangible action was less forthcoming. Participants wanted to see a synergy between equality rhetoric and practice going forward.



# Conclusions

## **Take home messages and reflections on the work**

The research has revealed a mixed picture in terms of how disabled students and staff are experiencing pandemic higher education. While there are clear positives described in terms of how flexible and online working has promoted improved health and well-being, this is not a universal finding for all participants. It is essential that as academia progresses into a 'post-pandemic' way of working, disabled people are not ignored in conversations, nor are they viewed as a singular group with identical needs.

Considering this latter point, as is common with disability research, the findings only describe the stories of the participants, and so the experiences of people who did not participate in the research may be different. While this cannot be evidenced from the project, it may be anticipated that disabled students and staff who did not participate in the research may be experiencing particular barriers through the pandemic era, such as navigating hardships with inaccessible technology or limited access to the higher education support necessary for them to feel included.

## **Next steps/dissemination**

I have completed several outputs for this project, which include:

1. Developing on recommendation item 2 (listening to the needs of disabled people), I planned and coordinated an internal research showcase to disseminate disability research that is being completed within the institution, along with sharing support that is provided for disabled students and staff.

2. I presented conference papers on the research, including a paper at the 2022 SRHE International Research Conference: Mobilities in Higher Education.

For future outputs, I am in the process of writing academic papers on the project, as well as blog entries. This work will cover some of the topics raised across the research in greater depth than I have been able to provide in this report (e.g., around academic ableism, presenteeism etc., and the expert panel methodology).

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