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‘It’s Backdoor Accessibility’: Disabled Students’ Navigation of University Campus

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Abstract

This article shares disabled students’ experiences of ableism, discrimination, and exclusion while navigating university life. Drawing upon these experiences, we argue that many of the ordinary systems and assumptions that govern university life often materialise as barriers for disabled students. Introducing the concept of ‘backdoor accessibility,’ this paper examines exclusionary practices and systemic ableism to propose that disabled students are routinely offered a lesser quality service that is argued to be ‘better than nothing.’ In order to navigate these barriers, many students reported the additional expenditure of time, resources and energy. In this article, we explore these barriers and strategies within the framework of affect theory and pay attention to the diverse ways that university life can limit or enhance the affective possibility of disabled students. In conclusion, this article makes some recommendations as suggested by disabled students as potential avenues to overcome disabling structures in higher education.

Keywords

disability – higher education – ableism – students – discrimination – inaccessibility

1 The Changing Context of Higher Education in England

The landscape of higher education within England has undergone significant changes in recent years. Fees for university level study were first introduced in 1998 under the Teaching and Higher Education Bill. Following this, the Higher Education Act (2006), passed under the Labour government of Tony Blair, raised the previous £1,000 tuition fees to £3,000. Like many other countries, the introduction and increase of tuition fees was posed as the only solution to the burgeoning strain of funding the higher education system (Evans and Donnelly, 2018; Wilkins et al, 2013). In turn, 2006 onwards witnessed gradual increases to the £6,000 tuition fee in line with inflation. Findings from the Browne Report 2010 proposed the need for graduates to take on greater financial responsibility for their education. Following this report, it was announced that tuition fees for those students commencing their studies in October 2012 would be increased to a maximum of £9,000. More recently, the 'artificial cap' on student numbers was removed and it was announced in 2017 that tuition fees for undergraduate degree programmes could, in most cases, increase to a maximum of £9,250.

These changes have led to an evolving student body caught within the paradox of widening student participation and the creation of active future citizens. The number of students attending university within England has continued to steadily increase. Excluding those studying at further education colleges and alternative providers, figures show that there were almost 2.5 million students attending UK universities in the academic year 2019/20 (Bolton, 2021). Of this figure, an estimated 330,000 students in higher education have a known 'disability' with the most common being 'specific learning difficulties' and 'mental health conditions' (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). While, statistically, this represents a significant increase in the presence of disabled students within higher education (46% since 2014/15), many continue to be disproportionately impacted by continual reforms to the higher education system. We explore some of these barriers throughout this paper and in doing so, question the extent to which 'widening participation' attends to the issue of equality as it does to global economic positioning.

Heralded by the Browne (2010:4) report, all students should have fair access to higher education and it is for these institutions to 'persuade students that they should "pay more" in order to "get more." The money will follow the student.' Within this context, students are consumers and higher education, a financial investment. This conception of the individual consumer is underpinned by the rhetoric that 'learning equals earning' (Brown 2003 cited in Evans and Donnelly 2018). While there were plausible concerns that increasing

tuition fees might prevent young people from pursuing higher education, the reality for many graduates is that this financial debt is socially acceptable and part of wider self-investment (Evans and Donnelly 2018).

The understanding of education as an economic investment transcends the boundaries of individuals and reflects the need to respond to the broader global context. Within this, 'individual and institutional actors and their dispositions and responses are tied to the fate of the nation within the global economy' (Ball, 2008:15). Indeed, the overriding criterion by which we measure the value of higher education is placed within the remit of economic contribution to society. Universities are argued to 'have a paramount place in an economy driven by knowledge and ideas' generating 'the know-how and skills that fuel our growth and provide the basis for our nation's intellectual and cultural success' (Department for Business Innovation & Skills [DBIS], 2016:7). This understanding has, according to Molesworth et al (2009), constituted what is widely referred to as the 'neoliberal university.'

Neoliberalism is an ideological movement predicated upon the assumption that increased competition leads to greater access, movement, and quality of resources and services. Within this, neoliberalism assumes (and indeed, requires) negotiation between the self-interested individual and self-regulated marketplace by which goods and services are exchanged in enterprising and competitive ways (Olssen and Peters, 2005). A neoliberal marketplace transforms the way in which public services such as education and healthcare operate. Under this system, both individuals (consumers) and services (businesses) must compete with one another to secure the best possible outcome – and while the market configuration of higher education proposes to 'put students at the heart of the system' (Browne, 2010:25), the foundations of a market economy are built upon inequality and hierarchy. For one to compete and succeed, another must also lose and fail. The central tenet of neoliberalism (that of individualism) calls for independent and self-fulfilling subjects within which, ableism is a complimentary narrative.

In the following section, we discuss the entrenchment of neoliberalism within the higher education system through the values and expectations of ableism (Dolan, 2021) which continues to limit disabled students' engagement and participation.

1.1 *Neoliberal-Ableism, Higher Education and Disability*

Changes to the role of higher education within society has significantly impacted those working and studying within the university. For Goodley (2014), the pressures of neoliberalism mean educational institutions are run like businesses, measured by the creation of 'ideal' neoliberal citizens who are

able to achieve rigidly drawn out ability expectations. Ability expectations are rooted within the operation of ableism. Defined by Wolbring (2008:252–253), ableism is ‘a set of beliefs, processes and practices’ that produce ‘a particular understanding of oneself, one’s body and one’s relationship with others of humanity, and includes how one is judged by others.’ Ableism thus produces particular understandings of what it means to be a citizen, a human, and a student. In this way, it is suggested that ‘neoliberalism provides an ecosystem for the nourishment of ableism, which we can define as neoliberal-ableism’ (Goodley et al, 2014: 981). Indeed, neoliberal-ableism poses certain ability expectations, which, when embodied by higher education institutions, helps to ensure that the student body reflects and takes on the role of active, productive, and economically contributing citizens (Goodley et al, 2014). These ability expectations are wholly narrow and normative. The adoption of these within the context of higher education therefore constitutes a space (physically, symbolically and more recently, virtually) that is ‘for’ particular students; those who are able to adhere to the narrow boundaries of ableism.

Accordingly, much has been written about the failure of neoliberal narratives to attend to the lived experiences of disabled people both within and beyond the context of higher education. For example, Fritsch (2015:48) suggests that the ‘neoliberal hegemonic imagination’ defines disabled people explicitly negatively; as unworthy, inadequate and excessive. Such an imagination privileges those that are profitable and able to participate within the labour force (Fritsch, 2013). To adhere, one must commit to a work-regime that is gruelling, working to achieve measurable outcomes within specified (and often unrealistic) time-frames (Dolan, 2021).

Successful participation within the academy is measured by the ability to adhere to the ideas and standards of neoliberal-ableism. It is difficult to resist this regime and many of us who critique the neoliberal academy continue to work within, and according to, its requirements. According to Ball (2012:18), neoliberalism ‘gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relation with others.’ For example, in order to show that you are participating, the need to ‘overwork’ has become routinely normalised (Brown and Leigh, 2018). Rather than embrace difference as a natural reflection of our wider society, academic ecosystems are argued to normalise and homogenise ways of working within the university (Brown and Leigh, 2020). Indeed, while there have been aims to diversify the student body within higher education, these attempts are constrained by pressures to produce a particular type of citizen.

The Equality Act 2010 places a legal obligation on universities to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students. Despite this, disabled students

are understood to have 'worse' outcomes than non-disabled students, such as being more likely to leave university, attain lower degree results, and subsequently, hold lower employability rates (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). Research suggests that the level of support that disabled students receive is highly dependent upon individual tutors as well as course subjects and that many students do not seek support due to fears of stigma (Riddell and Weedon, 2014). Additionally, the physical environments of university campuses are argued to limit the ability of disabled students to engage fully with learning opportunities (Hannam-Swain, 2017; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010). For some, prior experiences of disablism within education hinders their confidence in further academic pursuits (Madriaga, 2007). These findings suggest that there are many barriers that contribute to the exclusion and marginalization of disabled students within higher education. As we will explore throughout this paper, these barriers grant disabled students 'backdoor accessibility' to higher education which can limit their sense of belonging. That is, experiences of higher education affect the ways in which students navigate and occupy their university campus. In order to explore these affects, the following section applies affect theory to disability, with a particular focus upon the affective possibilities of disabled students.

2 Affect Theory

Affect theory asks questions about the relationality of bodies; what they can do, be and become. Moving away from thinking about the body as a singular entity, affect theory considers 'how bodies are always thoroughly entangled processes, and [are] defined by their capacities to affect and be affected' (Blackman and Venn, 2010: 9). By engaging with affect theory we are therefore attending to the ways in which bodies interact with one another, and how these interactions are shaped by the spaces that they occur within (Burch, 2021a; Burch, 2021b). Within this understanding, it is important to note that the capacity of a body is never final, nor static, but 'is always aided and abetted by, and dovetails with, the field or context of its force-relations' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 3). By adopting this relational understanding of affective capacity, it is possible to take into account the different ways we shift and alter in accordance with those around us and the spaces we occupy.

As it has been noted, the context of higher education privileges particularly narrow ways of being. Occupying spaces within the university can therefore generate negative perceptions that shift one's sense of self, purpose and place.

Our sense of belonging is shaped by how we interact with the spaces and bodies around us (Ahmed, 2014). In this paper, we attend to the ways that disabled students position themselves within the context of higher education, and more specifically, to the spaces associated with their university campus. In addition, we note the need to consider moments of negotiation, resistance, and navigation. While stories of academic life can often be consumed by hierarchical practices, silences, and cramped and inaccessible spaces, there are also 'micro-moments where different atmospheres emerge' (Gannon et al, 2019: 49). Within these moments, alternative energies are released and cracks are opened to let in alternative responses. In this way, 'affective possibility can help to consider the ways in which precariously located bodies reshape and thus recreate formerly excluding or normative spaces' (Burch, 2021a). The relevance of affect theory, and more specifically, affective possibility, to this paper is as a means of exploring the ways in which disabled students come to negotiate their minds and bodies within the context of higher education.

2.1 *Disabled Student's and Affective Possibility*

Recent work within disability studies has called for more explicit engagement with affect theory (Goodley et al, 2018). Indeed, disability presents an opportunity to explore the diverse ways that our bodies and minds shape and are shaped by our surrounding world. Although not positioned within the theoretical framework of affect theory, previous work within disability studies has been attentive to such possibilities of disabled people. For example, Tobin Siebers' (2015) work on complex embodiment was fruitful in recognising disabled people's unique understanding of the social world. Similarly, Bolt (2015) proposed a tripartite model of disability in order to think about 'non-normative positivisms.' Indeed, helping to move literary analysis away from simplistic representations of disability, 'non-normative positivisms' recognise disability as an experience that is affirmatively deviant from social norms (Bolt, 2015). Finally, Bê (2019:2) has called for a greater understanding of disabled people as 'expert bodyminds developing intricate strategies that allows them to address a disabling world.' While different in focus, these works are united in their pursuit to share alternative ways of conceptualising disability. More broadly, they can be perceived to offer unique understandings of what it means to be located upon the peripheries of society, and the possibilities that can become as a result of this.

Disability troubles the normative, neoliberal imagination. To do so, disabled people bring something new into the world that can too often be dismissed or go unrecognised (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). In this paper, we take into

account the ways in which disabled student's affective possibility is limited and enhanced. We pay attention to the barriers that disabled students experience, and how these barriers manifest. Beyond this, we consider how the presence of disabled students within higher education helps to reconfigure and previously normative space to offer new ways of being and becoming.

3 Method

3.1 *Approach*

The data underpinning this paper comes from a case study approach undertaken at a British university. This research was commissioned by the institution to explore the nature and context of all forms of prejudicial behaviour that the student body might be subjected to. In addition to this, aims also included scoping disclosure, reporting and support needs as informed by students and self-identified victims and survivors. Of the 16 identities identified as being subjected to targeted hostility and/or discrimination and exclusion, three of these are elaborated upon in this paper: Physical disability, learning disability and mental health.

3.2 *Data Collection*

This project adopted a mixed methods approach consisting of an initial survey followed by qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Through its mostly closed-ended, quantitative questions, the survey generated important data about rates and trends of victimisation and reporting and support uptake patterns, however it also acted to advertise and promote further engagement with a follow-up interview (the data from which this paper is based upon). The following semi-structured interviews acted to gain a deeper understanding around victimisation, but also broader concepts such as feelings surrounding and experiences of barriers to belonging, inclusion and accessibility (the latter of which forms the basis of this paper). This focus guided not only generating a deeper knowledge of experiences, but also allowed for victims and disabled people to promote their priorities for future change.

3.3 *Accessibility*

With victim, survivor and student voices driving this project, all stages of the research process were centred around accessibility for diverse engagement. As recruitment and data collection took place during the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring that awareness of and participation in this research was

flexible and supportive was further prioritised to protect participant access and wellbeing. Some steps that the research team undertook to prioritise accessibility included distributing participation communications through multiple channels including university email, social media, societies, wellbeing services and disabled student support teams. Furthermore, participants were offered a range of ways to enable their participation, such as choosing to complete the online survey verbally. Additionally, interviews could be conducted through writing, phone or video platforms. Interviewees could also take part through engaging in multiple short interviews, and were given prior notice of interview subject matter to allow for preparation and/or minimal anxiety. They were also able to add or remove data following their interview upon later reflection if they wished. Finally, all participants were given signposting information to support services, including disability specific support, with referrals made on behalf of individuals upon request.

3.4 *Participants*

Through awareness raising of this research through channels directed towards diverse student communities, the overall sample that engaged in this project accurately represented the university student body, including significant representation of minority ethnic students, international students, mature students and students of multiple genders. 64 (13%) of the total sample of survey respondents identified as disabled, with 38 of these identifying as victims to harassment on the basis of their disability whilst a university student. In total, 13 interviewees identified as disabled, with the analysis that follows drawing upon this dataset. 4 of the follow-up interviewees disclosed a physical disability, 3 disclosed a learning disability and 12 disclosed mental ill-health. Many of the disabled participants were subjected to co-morbid victimisation with their disability/ies targeted in addition to other identities, such as race, religion, appearance, age and transgender status.

It should be noted that whilst disabled students' engagement in this research was significant, quantifying the exact level of participation should be considered an indication, as opposed to a definite figure. This is due to this research relying on self-identification of identity status, whereby individual interpretation of disability status is subjective, with some disabilities such as invisible disabilities, learning impairments or conditions and mental ill-health in particular not being unanimously seen as disabilities by all (Watson, 2002; Whitaker, 2004). As such, it is likely that actual participation levels from disabled students greatly exceeded the number stated above when considering legal and broader social definitions of disability.

3.5 *Positionality*

Whilst this paper presents evidence supplied by a diverse range of disabled student voices, it should be noted that the authors of this work do not identify as disabled themselves, but as allies. The history of disability research raises a number of questions about who is doing disability research, and in what ways. In particular, the role of non-disabled researchers has been challenged (Barnes & Mercer, 1997). As such, it is important that we internally reflect upon and explicitly recognise how our interpretation comes from a privileged position, and one that is located outside of the lived experiences of disabled students. These reflections call attention to how our own personal and political commitments come into being within the research process (Goodley & Smailes, 2011) and how, therefore, we come to inform, shape and interpret the research findings based upon our own backgrounds and assumptions. Indeed, conducting this research within a culture of ableism increasingly highlights the need for ongoing reflection in order to address potential biases. Aligning with the ethical positioning of 'nothing about us, without us' (Charlton, 2000), we recognise that it is our role to centre and amplify the voices and priorities of the disabled students who invested their time, energy and trust into this research.

In order to ensure that this research actively serves the needs of the community that it addresses, the research team sought consultation with disabled students and university disability support services throughout the research process. Furthermore, in the analysis section of this paper we include direct quotations from disabled students as frequently as possible, and our final recommendations are informed by multiple disabled voices. Without each of their contributions, this paper would not be possible.

3.6 *Analysis*

The interviews conducted as part of this research underwent full transcription and were analysed using reflective thematic analysis. Through this analysis technique, the researchers were able to reflect upon their positioning when analysing the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and produced multiple codes spanning a range of areas relating to university students' experiences. In relation to the experiences of disabled students, these codes reflected some experiences that were mirrored by non-disabled participants, but also a range of unique experiences that discuss targeted hostility against their disability/ies (including intersectional experiences), and barriers to access, inclusion and participation, all of which are underpinned by the effects of ableism. These codes have been categorised into three main themes, which are expanded upon within the analysis and discussion of this paper.

4 Analysis

4.1 *Institutional Ableism*

As has been discussed within the context of this paper, the university terrain has been constructed around notions of neoliberalism, performance and pace. Such practices stand in opposition with a supportive environment that many students would benefit from, including disabled students. As a result of an academic culture that centres around fast paced and measurable results, many university policies and practices have not evolved with time as their student population has diversified. As such, with ableism intertwined into the culture and construction of higher education, the physicality of campuses and normative expectations of student engagement stands in opposition with the needs of many disabled people.

“[T]he attendance policies are really ableist. They don’t take inaccessibility into account and whilst we don’t have perfect accessibility we can’t expect students to always be there.”

Beyond ableist practices, interviewees also discussed how an absence of necessary provisions further exemplified why some disabled students felt as though their needs were fundamentally not considered. During interviews, it was disclosed that not every lecture theatre was fitted with wheelchair accessible desks – an occurrence that was discovered through wheelchair-using students being timetabled to such spaces and publicly finding a lack of provision for them upon arrival. As it shown through the below statements, despite disabled students paying equal fees – and often incurring addition costs – for the same level of access to higher education as non-disabled students, implementation of appropriate support to enable full participation continues to be overlooked:

“Like in lecture theatres, disabled students are expected to sit without a desk. It’s not like suddenly now has it become needed. They’ve always been needed. Disabled students, for years, have been paying the same amount as everyone else and have been experiencing a completely different level of education. A completely worse level. And nobody speaks about it.”

“I’ve had to spend thousands of my own money because paperwork was not completed for my equipment... I looked into suspending my studies for a year, which is what the Department recommended”

Interviewees also shared that even in situations where help and support was directly asked for, they were met with formal responses that indicated that their needs were not fully appreciated or understood:

“[T]he message was ‘check our website for specific information’ – and the website isn’t very helpful anyway, not when you’re feeling overwhelmed. As a new student and also being disabled and in pain and working alongside.”

“Everything has been a battle, nothing has been easy, even getting them to agree to wheelchair desks in lecture theatres, sorting out accessible toilets...”

However, due to how commonplace and normalised ableist notions are, interviewees shared how they had also become subscribed to its messaging. Various interviewees drew upon examples throughout their university careers where they had dismissed the option of seeking support or asking for help due to them rejecting the label of ‘disabled’ for themselves, or being worried that others would not class them as ‘disabled enough’ to warrant validation. Whilst such perceptions hold important implications for how the university environment does not foster inclusive identity construction for disabled people, it also reinforces how there are likely more disabled students within this research, and education communities, than is formally recognised.

“I knew that I was really struggling, but I didn’t realise that the support was there for someone like me. I thought that help should be saved for people that are really disabled, people who really needed it.”

When summarising the overarching impacts of ableism, being subjected to systematic and repeated inflexibility and inaccessibility was common, despite numerous individual-level and collective requests for help and change. However, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how offering students flexible, online and supported learning environments is, in fact, possible.

“It’s the current climate that really shows the disparity. I had mountains of medical evidence to support my mitigating circumstances application and... it took so long to hear back I never actually received the support in the critical window. But now, it seems anyone can get an extension due to this pandemic.”

Despite lobbying for accessibility measures to be put in place prior to the pandemic, such as greater online learning opportunities, many students noted that the swift and deliberate move towards online teaching provision has reinforced a lack of care and respect for disability. Indeed, this transition left many disabled students feeling that their inclusion was an ‘add-on’ to that of their non-disabled peers.

4.2 *Backdoor Accessibility*

Coined by an interviewee, “backdoor accessibility” was used to describe how accessibility and accessible provision is often an add-on to pre-existing, inaccessible structures. This interviewee and others described how their access to their education regularly felt secondary to that of their non-disabled peers, with them needing to use side entrances and temporary accessibility aids, as opposed to being able to access all facilities freely and equally:

“It’s always the way. Like yes I can get into the building, but I have to go in through the side door down a dark alley.”

Furthermore, building upon the mention of ‘a dark alley’, students noted how disability specific provisions were usually hidden away, hard to find and unwelcoming in aesthetic:

“The guide dog pen is under a building... It’s where they keep the bins.”

Evident in the above quotation, such ‘backdoor accessibility’ provisions were commonly less appealing and of a lesser quality than the systems destined for able-bodied and non-disabled users. Disabled students noted how their services were typically further to reach and less well maintained, all with the potential to cause physical harm or drain energy in navigating such terrain:

“It’s the only wheelchair accessible toilet on that floor and it’s inside the male changing room, like inside the locker room and urinals and showers... the non-accessible toilets are so much closer and are also big enough to convert into wheelchair toilets.”

In addition to the risks to physical wellbeing that ‘backdoor accessibility’ can cause, the impact upon emotional wellbeing is equally as significant. Typifying the additional emotional labour that ‘backdoor accessibility’ burdens disabled students with, interviewees described having to undertake large amounts

of planning, effort and organisation, expending both actual and emotional energy in navigating the temporary or add-on space that has been afforded to them, whether that be in-person or online:

“There isn’t a permanent ramp fixture, so if I want to get into the building I have to give advance notice of the time and date so that someone can know to bring a ramp to let me in.”

“They say that I can find support on the website but it’s so confusing and tiresome to navigate that I become burnt out and exhausted before I can find what I need.”

As a result of relying on backdoor entrances, hidden structures and second best provisions, interviewees described immense feelings of exclusion and a lack of belonging as a result:

“At every turn I’m reminded that I’m an add-on, that this education wasn’t built for me.”

Evidently, the additional labour that disabled students are required to expend in order to navigate higher education can cause the internalisation of oppression whereby exclusion becomes an accepted reality.

4.3 *Inaccessibility and Exclusion*

In addition to subtle forms of direct and indirect exclusionary practices, the occurrence of total inaccessibility and insurmountable barriers to engagement are also a prominent feature within higher education. Whilst it was evident that some efforts had been made in order to improve the accessibility of campuses for disabled students, the lack of routine monitoring and maintenance had left some provisions in a state that was unfit for purpose. Demonstrating the physical risk that an inaccessible and unmaintained campus can pose to visually impaired and blind students, staff and visitors, one interviewee explained:

“There was a blind woman and the braille was out of date and she walked into a tree because she was following the braille.”

Beyond accessible provisions becoming outdated, it appeared that other systems that were in place to aid disabled students, whilst believed to be accessible, were arguably unusable and unfit for purpose. Through consultation with disabled students, it became clear that even the disabled-friendly routes within campus, such as lift access, were inaccessible:

“There’s a door to the lift that’s so heavy I can’t physically open it by myself and the bell is at somebody’s head height if they’re standing up out of a wheelchair. How am I going to reach that? It’s like we have a lift, yes. But can anyone actually use it? No.”

Here, students note that the provision of facilities measures such as lifts and accessible toilets does not automatically grant accessibility. Through examples such as disabled toilets not containing emergency alarms or bins, not only is the safety of users at risk, but also their dignity with such absences symbolically reinforcing notions of a lack of belonging:

“There’s accessibility websites where you can check the accessibility of places... and this specific toilet had no emergency alarm, no hand dryer, no soap, no towel dispenser, no bin or anything like that... it wasn’t fit for purpose.”

In culmination of each of these risks and scarcities in accessible provisions, an interviewee explained that “[t]he campus, at this point, is unsafe.” In addition to facing exclusion from accessing the totality of their campus, interviewees also noted barriers to engaging in student life beyond simply accessing educational opportunities. Here, ‘backdoor accessibility’ functions not simply as an architectural issue, but one of belonging and opportunity to participate in university life. Referencing feeling held back from being able to fully engage in university life and not being able to partake in wider activities for wellbeing, enjoyment and bond-building that their able-bodied peers are afforded, some disabled students noted an absence of provisions including accessible sporting and exercise facilities:

“University discriminates and disadvantages disabled students constantly. Like we don’t even have an accessible sport on campus, not a single wheelchair friendly sport.”

As a result of numerous spaces, facilitates and provisions proving inaccessible, disabled students drew attention the emotional and educational impact of their exclusion, with the ripple effect of this likely lasting long after their degrees have finished:

“When something isn’t accessible, that’s not a small thing. That’s somebody’s entire life, their education, a key to their whole future that you make out of reach.”

In viewing these examples through an affective possibility lens, disabled students' experiences within higher education have the scope to shape their futures. However, through routine exclusion and marginalisation in a space that should be for growth and discovery, disabled students are potentially limited in who and what they become following university.

5 Discussion

Spaces, including university campuses, are organised in hierarchical and categorical ways that shape the extent to which students are able to access, participate and succeed within higher education. As suggested in this paper, the organisation of higher education responds to the wider context of neoliberalism, and the role of the university to create self-fulfilling, independent, and economically active citizens. In turn, the university presents a number of barriers for disabled students that prevents equal access to participation both within and beyond higher education.

Like previous research, the students in this study highlighted the physical inaccessibility of a range of spaces within their higher education campus (Shpigelman et al, 2021). Indeed, many students have demonstrated the additional planning and labour that is required in order to navigate the structures and physical spaces of higher education. For example, students reflected upon having to spend significant amounts of time online searching for information about possible support, and having to plan their access into particular buildings in advance to ensure that a temporary ramp could be provided. Discussing her own experiences as a disabled PhD student, Hannam-Swain (2017) has equated such examples of additional labour as 'an extra workload that is equivalent to a part-time job.' Significantly, these experiences highlight the additional time and resources that disabled students must dedicate to ensure that they are able to access the very basic level of participation within higher education. Indeed, the need to dedicate increased time and attention to the very mundane aspects of higher education can similarly heighten the risk of disengagement. Importantly, these physical exclusions occur beyond the surface of the body, shaping the affective possibility of disabled students (Burch, 2021a). Indeed, the many examples of 'backdoor accessibility' meant that students reported an increased risk of burnout and the feeling that university is not for 'them.'

Beyond the physical exclusions, students shared negative experiences with university staff upon seeking additional support, describing this process as a 'battle.' According to Bunbury (2020), while many university lecturers would

like to implement a more inclusive curriculum, they question how achievable this is within the current university structure. This was evident in one students' identification of themselves as an 'add-on' and therefore, as a 'problem' to be addressed rather than welcomed. As suggested, the identification of disabled students as *the* problem has important consequences for the shifting of accountability away from higher education institutions, and onto individual students (Cameron and Billington, 2017). Moreover, such difficulties reinforce disability as an undesirable identity within the context of higher education (Shpigelman et al, 2021) which can implicate the extent to which disabled students can (and feel like they should) participate within university life. In this way, disabled students risk taking on the experiences of exclusion and inaccessibility as a reflection of their own lack of belonging which can, in turn, limit their affective capacity and subsequent engagement within higher education.

The experiences of 'backdoor accessibility' shared in this paper challenge the extent to which widening participation has enabled more disabled students the supposed equal opportunity to succeed within higher education. Indeed, while widening participation initiatives have brought more disabled students into higher education, this research suggests that institutional policies and cultures require significant transformation to afford equal access and educational opportunity to disabled students (Moriña, 2017; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). While the number of disabled students entering higher education continues to increase, the findings presented in this paper highlight that being granted access to higher education is not enough. Indeed, a plethora of barriers remain to prevent the participation of disabled students throughout their studies, which in turn, constitutes a very different university experience to many of their non-disabled peers. This experience can be characterised by the need to actively navigate and negotiate the spaces of higher education as opposed to non-disabled students who are often granted the privilege to simply *be* a university student.

The examples of additional labour shared by students raises fundamental questions about the opportunities that are being provided to disabled students in comparison to their non-disabled peers. Many disabled students reported feeling like they have to work harder than other students in order to manage their disability and studies together (Seale et al, 2015; Shpigelman et al, 2021). This suggests that disabled students can feel an increased sense of injustice, or as students in this research suggested, 'disadvantaged' and 'discriminated against,' as they are paying the same tuition fees as their non-disabled peers and are receiving inadequate support and an absence in usable provisions. Recent data on the outcomes of disabled students in higher education (Hubble and Bolton, 2021) would suggest that this feeling of frustration is valid and indeed,

reflected in the overall poorer outcomes of disabled students. Indeed, without leaning into the rhetoric of students as consumers, many students believed that they were receiving less support and opportunity than their peers, constituting the concept of 'backdoor accessibility.' This sense of financial injustice has become a prominent topic of debate for all students studying within higher education during the covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic witnessed widespread disruptions to higher education, and many students have questioned whether it is fair that tuition fees have remained the same, despite the significant changes. While this debate is not in the scope of this paper, it acts as a reminder for the ways in which the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled students remains to be a largely unchallenged and under-acknowledged issue.

It is important to note, albeit briefly, that the experiences shared within this article have centred upon the exclusions and laboured navigation that disabled students can experience when navigating higher education. What is missing, therefore, are their stories of increased knowledge, understanding, and everyday resistance. Indeed, although negative encounters can shift relations and behaviours of disabled students in capacity-limiting ways, they can also have positive, capacity-enhancing affects (Wilson, 2017). The task for future research is to thus pave the way for recognising these affective possibilities as they exist to shape, and be shaped by, encounters within everyday life.

6 Recommendations

Building upon the themes presented within this paper, in addition to wider conversations about disability, this paper proposes three main recommendations, namely: Acknowledging ableism within higher education, improving accessibility and inclusion, and centring disabled people's contributions in constructing change. These areas have been directly suggested by those with lived experiences of disability that took part in this research.

6.1 *Acknowledgement of Ableism and its Impacts in Higher Education* *"We don't need more gaslighting, we need acknowledgement and accountability"*

The first stage towards any and all progress is through recognising the pre-existing barriers and issues in any given area. The call from disabled people's communities for recognition and a response to the systemic exclusion that they are subjected to within higher education is not new (Shaw, 2021). This paper has directed attention to the ways in which some students have not only

been subjected to exclusion, but also the additional emotional labour that is taken on in order to navigate and survive the university space. When attempting to ask for individual help or call for institutional level change, students described multiple encounters in which they felt that their realities were being questioned, undermined and dismissed. As such, in order to not only progress, but to restore the harms caused by exclusionary and inappropriate practices, and to address the currently skewed power dynamic, overt acknowledgement of the damage caused by systematic and structural ableism is necessary. It is only through this recognition that it is possible to forge a transparent approach and a commitment to meaningful change that consciously deconstructs ableist approaches and disabling structures.

6.2 *Inclusive and Accessible Practices, Provisions and Expectations*

"I'm done being an inconvenience in a place that I deserve to be"

This paper has presented several examples of university practices and provisions that are, at best, inconvenient, and at worst, exclusionary to disabled students. Whilst this research has focused upon the experiences of students, it is likely that disabled staff are also subjected to these disabling practices, and potential future students and staff could be deterred by entering such spaces entirely. Indeed, such a hypothesis is supported by government data that shows a continued underrepresentation of disabled students' access and participation in higher education (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). As such, there is a need for transformation at an institutional level as well as within classroom practices in order to move towards a more inclusive university (Moriña, 2017). These changes are fundamental to move away from the current provision of 'backdoor accessibility' noted by students in this paper. Tangible examples of necessary changes include: A commitment to or plans for fully physically accessible campuses and facilities, disability friendly extracurricular events such as parasports, a zero-tolerance approach to the use of ableist language, disability specific support services, minimal use of attendance policies with support for synchronous events that cannot be attended, and user friendly processes for services such as mitigating circumstances.

6.3 *Change Guided by Those With Lived Experiences of Disability*

"If you don't know, how can you possibly know?"

Under the most recent Office for Students (2021) guidance, engagement with all student groups is not only encouraged, but is actively expected in order to guide and shape meaningful change. As such, we support the need for greater representation of disabled people in positions where they are able to enhance understanding of current needs and to advise on areas requiring change.

Actively listening to the experiences of disabled students is vital to being able to guide meaningful change, and importantly, to converting previously disabling spaces into more empowering spaces (Pritchard, 2021; Shaw, 2021). Research conducted by Moraña et al (2020) has similarly found that where university lecturers do engage with disabled students, it can lead to enriched professional development particularly in relation to the inclusivity of teaching practice. Creating more empowering spaces requires more than the typical (and often poorly implemented) reasonable adjustment, it requires us to call out 'the alienating tendencies of educational institutions that actively resist the contributions of students who fail to fit the normative human' (Goodley et al, 2020: 137–8). In doing so, we can break free from the neoliberal and ableist processes that govern higher education, and consider alternative and more inclusive practices. Importantly then, while we begin here with an analysis of the experiences of disabled students, engagement with lived experience opens up an opportunity to reimagine the spaces of higher education, and the limits that such spaces impose upon all students.

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