

The COVID-safe university is an opportunity to end the default ableism of academia

Universities and academic institutions are making radical changes in an attempt to make their spaces and practices COVID-safe. In this post, Dr Stuart Read, Dr Anne Parfitt and Dr Tanvir Bush, put forward that this restructuring of academia presents a clear and present opportunity to expand inclusivity in academia and to redress the ableism currently present in academic life.

Academic institutions have been forced to fundamentally reform themselves in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, especially in ways that make them more receptive to health and safety concerns. In making these changes, we are presented with a unique opportunity to make universities more accessible and inclusive than they have been to date.

Tackling embedded ableism is one essential step that universities must take if this endeavour is to be successful. Ableism, within an [academic context](#), refers to how universities systemically perpetuate a value of the 'able-mind' and 'able-body', thereby viewing disabled people as less worthy or valuable than 'able-bodied' individuals. Disabled people have been and continue to be excluded from academia, and are required to navigate 'ableist' barriers in order to ensure that they can simply participate, let alone do so in ways that protect their health and well-being.

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Here, we identify three aspects of the pandemic university that help make visible just some of the ableist injustices that disabled people may encounter when attempting to work in academia. Examples are provided to encourage collective thinking about how to redesign academic practices in order to be more inclusive for all.

Providing COVID-safe AND accessible academic environments

Universities have undergone, and continue to undergo, significant change as part of their efforts to become COVID-safe. For instance, university buildings have been reconfigured to assist in maintaining social distancing guidelines. To do this, university managers have introduced one-way systems and redesigned teaching and seminar rooms. While these measures are welcomed as a means of making spaces COVID-safe, such modifications can intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate forms of ableism.



For example, one-way systems may become inaccessible for some people with physical or sensory impairments, in that service animals, such as guide dogs, cannot be expected to understand directional signage, nor as yet, have they been trained to support disabled people in locating hand sanitiser stations. We also know that disabled people may experience barriers due to others wearing opaque facemasks that do not allow for lip reading. Whilst the environment may become COVID-safe through the adoption of facemasks, the unintended consequences can be seriously damaging to communication, particularly in teaching and learning settings.

It is inevitable that compromises will need to be made, particularly if traditional ways of using university campuses no longer create a safe environment for students and staff. In making these compromises, it is important for us all to recognise that ensuring a COVID-safe environment does not result in the promotion of inaccessible spaces and ableist practices.

The need for permanent recalibration of university practices

For universities to tackle ableism effectively, students and staff need to recognise and endorse the value of recalibrating university practices. For instance, the use of technology has radically grown to accommodate a COVID-safe academic environment, whereby teaching and learning has shifted to be predominantly online. There are many benefits to this shift, in that all participants including disabled students and staff, are able to engage with universities in ways that they could not before the pandemic. We see, for example, how providing virtual learning opportunities and recording lectures allows students and staff to avoid making journeys onto campuses, particularly when they are concerned about putting their health at risk or when distances and transport arrangements are prohibitive.

We recognise that making changes to technologies are not infallible, nor a panacea, and so do not wish to minimise the challenges faced by academia in recasting its approaches to deploying them. However, it is important that arguments against their adoption are not used to deny the long-term viability of alternative ways of working and learning. We contend that statements that devalue technology, for example, those promoting perceptions that virtual teaching will only decrease student engagement and participation, are to be challenged. Advocates of such perspectives fail to understand the ableist exclusion embedded in traditional academic practices of many face-to-face learning contexts.

Maintaining and having equal access to new ways of working

The Coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated that academia can work in a radically different way when there is willingness and a pressing need to do so. For instance, we know that working from home and the opportunities for flexible working, can have significant benefits for both disabled and non-disabled people. What is important in addressing ableism is that these positives that have been made possible are not forgotten in the longer-term. In the post-pandemic university, all students and staff should maintain use of the accessible environments that have been made possible under these extraordinary circumstances. To slip back into the traditional ways of academia will be a retrograde step when there is still much that needs to be achieved in regards to equal access.

Essential to universities maintaining and even building on the positive changes that have emerged through COVID, is a continued dialogue and planning for the future alongside disabled staff members and students who are navigating the complexities of the environment on a daily basis

While it is right that inclusion of disabled students remains at the fore, we also need to consider and actively manage the inclusion of disabled staff, given the additional pressures that may be placed on them, such as those relating to the pursuit of the 'quality student experience'. As universities manage the transition to a post-COVID world, important decision-making processes must not be guided by ableist assumptions about who can and cannot 'be disabled' within academia. Essential to universities maintaining and even building on the positive changes that have emerged through COVID, is a continued dialogue and planning for the future alongside disabled staff members and students who are navigating the complexities of the environment on a daily basis.

To reiterate a comment we raised on our previous blogpost, [the unprecedented circumstances caused by the Coronavirus pandemic allows us all to consider how academia can function in a more inclusive way](#). But change does not stop at the three points we have described above. Ableism is broad and deeply entrenched within academic practices and systems. We all have a responsibility to consider and challenge academic ableism in our own work.

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