

## RESEARCH

# Experiences of Visually Impaired and Blind Students in UK Higher Education: An Exploration of Access and Participation

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Drawing on a small scale doctoral research project that engaged a critical disability studies (CDS) lens and is rooted in a Grounded Theory methodological approach, this paper explores the experiences of visually impaired and blind students regarding their access and negotiation of inclusion within UK higher education (HE). The emergent research findings, which here focus on the process and practical application of Disabled Student's Allowance, accommodation within student living and, more broadly, social interactions within HE, reveal a liminal and bounded participation contrary to the ongoing processes and practices, within HE, which purport equity and inclusion.

By foregrounding the voices of these visually impaired students, whilst expanding upon existing understanding of the experiences of disabled students, the important discussions of day-to-day social interactions and identity as a visually impaired person and student reveal an important juxtaposition between the rhetoric of inclusion and individual experience.

**Keywords:** Visual Impairment; Blind; Students; Higher Education; Critical Disability Studies

## Introduction

This article draws on a recent doctoral study that explored the critical tensions experienced by visually impaired/blind students within higher education. Through the narratives shared by participants, a landscape is revealed that highlights exclusionary and often discriminatory responses to visually impaired or blind students.

The research participants were all visually impaired and blind students who had recently completed academic programmes or were currently studying at British universities. The research centred on a sequence of unstructured, participant-led interviews that broadly explored themes relating to daily life and participation in HE through a critical disability studies (CDS) lens. Participants were typically interviewed several times, allowing time for reflection between encounters, meaning their interests and concerns led discussion, so creating a unique reflection of their individual experiences.

Visually impaired and blind students represent a relatively small percentage of the total number of students. As of 2017/2018, there were 3,170 students registered and identifying as visually impaired (HESA 2019) across all levels of study. Disabled students totalled 307,975. The Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE 2017) report 'Inclusive Learning and Teaching in Higher Education as a route to Excellence' noted progress towards a more inclusive environment, a recognition that HE has not always been such a space. The report contended that many institutions required improvement of their organisational responses to disabled students as 'typically, policies cover assessment, teaching and learning and student support rather than the student experience and inclusive curriculum design' (HEFCE 2017: 2). The report also identifies a need for changes to the culture within higher education institutions (HEIs), especially staff becoming more proactive about promoting participation. This creates a continuity with what Barnes (2007) suggested was a disconnect between HE and the disabled community. Barnes notes that uniting the two was needful to ensure HE engaged with the experiences of disabled students to promote knowledge and understanding. As Hewett and colleagues (2017) significantly note in summation of their valuable work on the transitions of visually impaired students into, within and from HE, there still appears to be work to do to improve support for disabled students in HE.

Titchkosky (2003: 5) argues that to understand the wider societal conceptions of disability there should be a 're-appropriation' of disability, 'taking back, talking back, and staying with the experience so as to reveal the meaning that has already been granted to disability by culture, by others and by me'. This reveals the daily negotiations undertaken to negotiate and 're-appropriate' disability in terms of individual experience. The existing constructions

about being visually impaired remain prevalent, and to understand how these notions consistently and negatively underpin visually impaired and blind students' participation in HE, I draw upon Goodley's (2014: xi) helpful mapping of what he suggests are anchoring concepts around understanding disability through CDS. Goodley (2014: xi) suggests 'Disablism relates to the oppressive practices of contemporary society that threaten to exclude, eradicate and neutralise those individuals, bodies, minds and community practices which fail to fit capitalist imperative', suggesting disablism seeks to negate the presence of difference, and consequently disability, and breeds an ableist response to a disability identity. Goodley (2014: xi) further discusses the notion of ableism as a concept whereby if disability is not valued and is positioned as divergent and different to those who are 'capable, malleable and compliant', then disability is therefore seen as unwanted and unwelcome. Ableism questions ability and the value of ability. Goodley (2014: 22) summarises ableism in its wider form as

Ableism's psychological, social, economic, cultural character normatively privileges able-bodiedness; promotes smooth forms of personhood and smooth health; creates space fit for normative citizens; encourages an institutional bias towards autonomous, independent bodies.

Where visually impaired students are situated within higher education and why they may experience HEI's as spaces of tension and 'risk being cast out by neoliberalism and hounded by ableism' (Goodley 2014: 29) can be understood from an ableist perspective. Examining ableism and disablism together suggests a reciprocal and cyclic relationship between value, ability, disability and difference is apparent; value placed on ability is highlighted, and concurrently by virtue of a binary opposition, disability is not. As Hughes (2007) argues, in a society built upon a hegemonic discourse, the qualities ascribed to being disabled will remain negatively positioned when contrasted with a position that values ability over perceived difference. Visually impaired and blind students by dint of their presumed difference are positioned within the negative underpinnings associated with disability, despite measures to address exclusionary and disabling barriers.

### **Literature Review**

Visually impaired students' experiences in HE is typically an underrepresented area in wider literature, with research around experiences usually focusing on disabled students more generally or on specific instances and experiences within the student learning experience. Whilst this latter area is of great importance, particularly around areas of engagement often identified as problematic, this paper drills down on ideas around the process of engaging with higher education as a visually impaired student and how this landscape is often both figuratively and literally inaccessible.

Contemporary HE can be argued to be consistently under pressure to provide educational opportunities to meet the demands of an increasingly neoliberal agenda. This shift has been implemented by successive UK Governments engaging with HE as a tool with which to promote economic growth and individualised notions of achievement and economic participation. Here HE simply equips the learner with the necessary tools and attributes to achieve employment and economic independence. Such expectations apply to every student's engagement and achievement. Consequently, HE is increasingly commodified, with Collini (2015: 29) arguing HE in the UK is being 'remodelled in accordance with so-called "free-market" ideology, in which students become "consumers" and the measure of universities' success becomes almost entirely economic'. As a result, HE today has moved away from

a vision of university education as functional in part, but as predominantly about personal growth, inherently good for wider society, fulfilling a kind of cultural work about identity, and not wholly about student employability or monetary profit for the institutions involved' Croft (2019: 58).

As Barnes (2007) contends, market forces have increasingly challenged the ways in which the knowledge produced by the academy is valued, and the increased pressure on universities to sustain economic viability and maintain a competitive opposition against each other has damaged the transformative facility of higher education.

Neoliberal ideology dominates the principles that dictate the value of participation in economic productivity and that have overseen 'public entitlements, such as welfare and education ... dismantled through an alliance with market freedom...' (Goodley 2011: 143). This ultimately creates a significant challenge to participation for disabled and other students who access higher education in ways typically understood as requiring significant changes to access and inclusion. This is reflected within the increased expectations of achievement of degree and higher-level qualifications as introduced in the Higher Education and Research Bill (2017), which states HE institutions should ensure they endeavour to offer positive outcomes for disadvantaged students and demonstrate a commitment to widening participation and fair access. Ensuring HE is accessible to all is posited as promoting opportunities for disadvantaged learners as well as developing reputational excellence and financial reward for the institution and the achievement of economic viability and employability (Higher Education Research Act 2017).

The implementation of a specific focus on levelling the playing field highlights existing inequality, with Madriaga (2007: 400) contending education is an arena that 'reflects wider societal attitudes disadvantaging disabled people'. Visually impaired and blind students' experiences within HE are often underpinned by broad and nebulous assumptions about disability, particularly visual impairment and blindness, nefariously informing interactions and creating a difficult

and uneven terrain to negotiate. These students are positioned within a disabling narrative that recreates underlying associations of deficit reinforced by the assumptions around requirements for significant changes to their learning environment.

The wider literature considering disabled students in HE recognises that specific across the sector are encountered as obstacles to participation. These are acknowledged as shared by many disabled students and can largely be identified as accessibility and participation issues (Bishop & Rhind 2011; HEFCE 2017; Tinklin & Hall 1999). They include but are not limited to access to buildings and rooms; access to equipment, such as specific accessible technology; Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and inaccessible environments. In this article, visually impaired and blind student juxtapose day-to-day encounters and practices with these previously identified obstacles, with the resulting synthesis indicating their critical understanding of visual impairment and blindness as unwelcome and misunderstood within HE. Their narratives indicate their experience of HE is permeated with frustration and ideas of both ableism and lack and shows them bound within a liminal space informed by negative constructions of visual impairment. This additional input means that this research offers a holistic understanding and adds to other work, such as Hewett and colleagues (2017) and Fuller and colleagues (2006) that explore experiences of learning within HE, and to research by Bishop and Rhind (2011), which touches on concepts such as identification of positive perspectives regarding visual impairment by participants, which also has a learning specific focus.

### ***Access to the higher education environment***

Hewett, Keil and Douglas (2015: 6–7) indicate significant obstacles affecting access to participation in HE, including inaccessible forms and misinformation in relation to the application for DSA, existent from the outset of transition to HE. Van Jaarsveldt and Ndeya-Ndereya (2015) note disabled students face issues accessing the learning environment. Social experiences within the learning environment can, however, make a difference, as Fuller and colleagues (2004) and Jacklin and colleagues (2007) conclude. Such experiences can encourage a feeling of belonging. Bishop and Rhind (2011) and Beauchamp-Pryor (2012) discuss peer relationships influencing feelings of inclusion and belonging amongst disabled students and non-disabled students. Experiences around accessing technology and engaging with learning also shape a feeling of belonging (Beauchamp-Pryor 2012). Further, how lecturers respond to disabled students affects students' sense of inclusion within HE (Van Jaarsveldt & Ndeya-Ndereya 2015). Considering access holistically, as opposed to understanding it as physical navigation of space, draws out deeper understandings of participation beyond physical presence.

Understanding access on these terms shows that students' ongoing involvement with HE is experienced and shaped from application onwards. As Michalko (2002: 141) argued, our environments are constructed 'both literally and figuratively – on the basis of seeing, hearing and walking', and so can be exclusionary for those who are perceived as accessing and navigating them differently. This is rooted in understandings that inherently position disability as difference (Michalko 2002), imbued with socially constructed common sense notions about lack, deficit and disability. Michalko (1999: 18) contends visually impaired or blind people occupy socially organised meanings of understanding about 'what blindness is and who blind people are'. Such ideas and assumed knowledge, Shildrick (2009) suggests, are interwoven into experiences, knowledge and practices underpinning our interactions. Bolt (2005: 544) further argues 'individuality is displaced in favour of a jaded representational construct "the blind". This construct does not only imply the existence of a homogenous group, but one that is antithetical to the sighted, deviant in relation to a perceived normalcy'. Bolt (2005) also contends, given homogenised conventions and continuous assumptions about the likeness and sameness of all types of visual impairment, the experience of being visually impaired in an ableist society is itself disabling. Bolt suggests ableism is 'built into the literal landscape of inaccessible buildings and classrooms, but also occup[ies] the cultural landscape of faculty and administration' (2006: 557), so replicating negative societal constructions about visual impairment and blindness.

The ways in which visual impairment is constructed through antithetical renderings of sighted and non-sighted, the seeing and the blind, Bolt (2006: 550) states, is 'simplistic and erroneous', and 'within the dominant ableist discourse, the former takes political precedence over the latter'. Language around visual impairment draws upon an inherent and underpinning perception of difference and power. Visually impaired and blind students experience this in their participation, navigation and presence within HE, and this is the dominating influence upon their experiences.

### **Methodology**

This research focused on the accounts of a small sample of 10 students identifying as either visually impaired or blind, who were geographically spread across the UK. All had experienced statutory assessments around their vision, and whilst applying, transitioning and participating within HE engaged with organisational Disability Services (DS). Three had recently completed academic programmes and were moving on to postgraduate or professional qualifications aligned to employment. The remainder were completing their programme or currently studying.

Ethical approval for the project was agreed by the HEI of the researcher, including a detailed informed consent statement provided to all participants, right to withdraw, anonymisation, including pseudonyms, and use of data. All materials were available in a variety of formats. Participants chose what they considered relevant, with personalisation to their requirements. All expressed a preference for email and follow up phone calls to discuss questions. Participants

gave verbal and written consent prior to the research taking place and were consulted at many points to ensure awareness of their role in the research and its purpose. As agreed by participants, all data was recorded with participants offered the opportunity to engage with the subsequent transcriptions to ensure clarity.

Central to the development of ethically appropriate approaches in contemporary research have been the experiences of disabled people who have been subjects of research. Current approaches rightly challenge research 'done to' disabled people and instead champion enquiry co-constructed research, which places disabled researchers and disabled people at the forefront of research into their lives and lived experiences. The methodological framework underpinning this article and the research centred on the ethos of 'nothing about us without us' making a core commitment to the rights of the participant group, which ensured disabled rights were strongly championed. This also was intended to address the ongoing concern flagged up by Oliver (1990) that research carried out with disabled people may simply further the interests of the researcher. Further, emancipatory research serves as a benchmark, which politicises and demands the promotion of rights within the research process and is often discussed within disability research. Freire (1996: 44) states emancipation 'is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well'. Mercer contends that not only is emancipation hard to define (2004: 129) but that 'emancipatory disability research must continue to explore disablist views of social reality and contribute to debates about how this knowledge can be used to overturn the social exclusion of disabled people'.

The research employed a Grounded Theory (GT) methodological stance, which approached data analysis and knowledge construction by allowing theory to emerge as opposed to assembling concepts and delineating these as theoretical positions (Charmaz 2014). Constructing research in this way promotes insight and encourages understanding of a topic. Data is systematically gathered and analysed throughout the research process; thus, data collection, analysis and eventual theory are closely affiliated (Denscombe 2010). Analysis develops from the interplay between researcher and data, whilst maintaining rigour and creativity. Strauss and Corbin (1998) assert GT incorporates a recognition of a deeper understanding of the data, which is manifested through creative ways of asking questions, creating fittingly termed categories and making comparisons. Analysis of the data followed by moving back and forth amongst the collected experiences to familiarise and reflect on the emerging findings, ensuring concepts and ideas were rigorously ascertained. Construction of relevant themes (Charmaz 2014) drew out the key ideas participants shared within their interviews. Participants were invited to engage with their reflections to ensure clarity and to reflect on how well these consistently reflected their experiences.

Within a GT approach is space for self-reflexivity (Charmaz 2014), whereby the researcher is aware of the dangers of making assumptions about what it is being researched and the beliefs that may be present within the research focus. Goodley (2014: 23) argues for caution, however, when he asks to whom disability studies researchers are accountable. Charmaz (2008: 402) notes researchers need to account for their own positionality, as well as that of the participants, stating 'the researcher and researched co-construct the data - data are a product of the research process not simply observed objects of it'. Rather than the researcher holding the position of power traditionally associated with research 'done to' disabled people, the data discussed here was generated and understood in context, rather than as a decontextualized phenomenon. Braun and Clarke (2006: 9) contend this as 'a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society', a position that underpins the diversity experienced by the participants.

### **Sample**

Initially the recruitment of participants was broadly purposive (Denscombe 2010: 35), seeking to find 'the best information through focusing on a relatively small number of instances selected on the basis of their known attributes'. Participants were purposively sought due to being a visually impaired student within HE to understand their experiences, as Bryman (2008: 415) suggests exploring a specific 'social phenomenon'. Participants were drawn from an existing network known to the researcher and further expanded through snowball sampling, whereby participants shared the research amongst their wider network of visually impaired peers. Overall there was a diverse range of backgrounds and current life circumstances, with two students (male, later age range) identifying as from working class backgrounds, which they intimated had developed towards middle class as they progressed in their careers. However, all participants identified as white and from the UK, a constraint in exploring the experiences of visually impaired students in relation to diversity. Four participants identified as male, aged from mid-20s to mid-40s. The remainder identified as female, aged from 19 to mid-20s.

Breakdown of students

- Male participants: 4
- Female participants: 6
- Interviews carried out with each student: 2

Rather than draw on participants through a lens that focuses on impairment type and which would draw comparisons to an individualised perception of impairment, this research did not hinge participation on securing a significant spread of conditions; rather participants were able to identify as visually impaired, severely sight impaired or blind where they felt appropriate. As the aim of the research was not to develop an overarching theory or model, but to



provide a way for a typically under represented group to share their experiences, so reflecting its' co-constructive nature, the research engaged with broad research questions: In what ways do the paradigms of visual impairment and higher education intersect and interact? How do visually impaired students construct and describe their identity within HE? In what ways is the concept of participation played out in relation to accounts of the experience of visually impaired students in HE?

### **Data collection**

Rather than follow a strict interview schedule, and to allow participants to guide the direction of discussion and the research, prompts were used that were loosely structured around certain topics—such as accommodation, DSA, or access to course materials. Throughout, participants described experiences they felt were indicative of their own lives, reflecting Charmaz's assertion 'the participant talks; the interviewer encourages, listens and learns' (2014: 57). Participants were interviewed twice each, which due to their own time and work commitments was contained within a period of six months. Participants directed their own commitment with some opting for interviews closer together within a short timeframe and others preferring a longer pause between interviews. Discussions stayed within similar timeframes, mainly in two-hour slots. Time for reflection between encounters, again meaning their interests and concerns led discussion, helped to create a unique reflection of their individual experiences.

Participants were keen to talk more widely about their experiences of being visually impaired rather than solely about their experiences of HE. It became apparent the wider experiences helped them explain how they experienced their daily lives as both visually impaired and blind people and as visually impaired and blind students, when both inside and outside the university, and how these identities intersected and conflicted. These wider discussions shifted the scope of the research and so did justice to the importance of participants' stories and experiences.

### **Data analysis**

Analysis of the data took the form of a back and forth reading of the key ideas and issues as identified by the participants. This meant that for each participant there were several key themes explored and mapped against other data to identify commonalities and themes. Themes were re-evaluated against the research questions. The final themes created the basis for the analysis of the data, with some themes showing commonality and others distinctiveness to individual experience. This chimes with Braun and Clarke's (2006: 20) suggestion 'data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes'. Analysis of the themes highlighted the complex nature of the participants' experiences, leading to a combined findings and discussion section that highlights the unique voices of the participants and shows how their experiences are enmeshed and immersed in contextual issues regarding HE and, in turn, how these enmeshed experiences influence participation through their contextualisation.

### **Summary of findings**

Analysis of the data provided several themes; however, the following themes are discussed within this paper to provide a basis to exploring their experience from their early participation in HE:

- Disabled Student's Allowance – process and practical application.
- Accommodation within student living
- Social interactions

All of the aspects discussed by the participants show a link between these processes and experiences as having significant influence on the shaping of their experiences.

### **Discussion**

As the sequence of interviews with each participant progressed, narratives of *not* belonging, rather than belonging, emerged. In particular, the research participants' accounts of day-to-day navigations of the social environment indicate this can have such an impact the result is liminal participation. These narratives were typically framed by participants as both problematic and as offering opportunities to challenge disabling attitudes and practises in HE.

#### **Accessing Disabled Student's Allowance and general support.**

Currently within UK HE students undertake a Disabled Students Assessment (DSA) upon application to university to access financial provision for specific support. Applicants are required to undergo an assessment that details impairment and medicalised needs, accompanied by medical information from health professionals. This informs the types of support students may potentially access regarding academic study. DSA is undergoing significant changes after the introduction of the Higher Education Research Act (HERA 2017), which the Office for Students (OfS) (2019) suggest re-shapes DSA provision from a medicalised to a social model. Typically, a social model position would suggest support is built around the acceptance society positions significant physical and social barriers, which create disability as a social construct, rather than as a limitation of the individual (Oliver 1990). However, as their experiences typically pre-date this development, the participants describe a medicalised, bureaucratic process. For instance, Georgia, a recent

graduate who describes herself as visually impaired, stated DSA took an administrative approach to her participation and applied a standardised response to her access requirements:

The whole DSA assessment was a joke but you know... You have to go through it, and it is, like, a good two and a half hours long and I had to wait 'til February to get it, anyway! So, it was really late, anyway and I just felt like it wasn't particularly helpful to what I needed, it was more like and this is what a blind person gets, so this is what we are going to give you. In the end, I didn't really use the equipment

Georgia identifies here, in relation to her assessment, an exclusionary process devoid of personalised requirements for equipment that she, as expert in her own life, deemed specific, a process maintaining, rather than removing, barriers. Georgia suggests allocation of equipment provided her with unnecessary and unwanted equipment. Georgia also relays the lack of input was afforded in terms of choice about equipment.

I got a printer and software, a scanner, and a voice recorder for lectures and loads of stuff like that. I used the printer, but I did not use the specific software, as it was too awkward and took me too long to get used to.

Similarly, William, who considers himself a blind student contends

Sometimes I think they were trying to help too much, in a way. I came up with a list of equipment that might be quite useful and then they added to it and it was just overkill, like I got a mouse! I can't see a mouse on the screen, what use was that!

I had only just learned Braille and they gave me a Braille display that just gathered dust. All this equipment, brilliant but I just didn't need it.

William's account here highlights how the process excludes personal preference and knowledge of one's own needs.

William's interviews indicated his willingness to engage with the process, given that he had recently had a significant change to his vision:

I think it might be a case of not leaving any stone unturned, like this guy has just lost his sight, does he really know what is out there for him?

He reflects on this as a positive attempt to offer support to someone who had not previously navigated the process. Emily's DSA assessment resulted in receiving unfamiliar and un-requested aids:

I remember my DSA assessor thinking that a Braille 'sense' would be really useful for me to have and pushing for me to have one and me saying well I have seen them before, and I am not really that keen. Then it just turned up and I was like, oh, they bought it anyway, yeah, great.

Contrastingly, Luke, a mature student undertaking a postgraduate qualification, notes having a powerful position in the DSA process, which he believed offered more influence and privilege than others might have regarding the process and outcome.

Where I did have a fairly positive experience, was with ...the DSA experience... the guy that I was working at the time was good and I was able to write out a bit of shopping list and just tell him what I need and why, and all the funding was in place before I started.

I don't know, maybe it was that this guy didn't know and looked towards me for guidance!

Luke's reflection illuminates a relationship element within the process that was absent from the other accounts. Luke felt the assessor willing to engage with Luke's knowledge and expert position within his life, which directed the assessment outcome. He positions this as a collaboration, despite noting he thought the assessor was unsure of his needs. Luke's age may have made a difference, and his comments do highlight the lack of autonomy reported by the previous, younger participants who were typically positioned by the process as the passive receivers of a common-sense approach. However, Luke still experienced, even as a mature student, the imposition of infantilization onto disabled people (Slater 2012), which positioned him as in need of help.

In relation to his specific support requirements within the learning experience, Luke notes his preferences were often unavailable. Luke required information be made available prior to the lectures, preferably on a disc, and this did not occur, leaving him frustrated and consistently 'playing catch up'. This suggests two different kinds of support in tension within the institution to the detriment of Luke as student, pointing to issues of inconsistency of provision not only across HE, but also within individual institutions.

### **Accommodation**

Georgia's feelings about her lack of autonomy over the processes of HE and DSA are also reflected in her interviews about allocation of student housing in university accommodation. From Georgia's first open day tour onwards, her chosen university directed her solely towards accommodation earmarked for disabled students. Georgia states 'the advisor showed us round the accessible accommodation when we came for open day so we could make a choice'. The choice on offer was between a small selection of flats deemed by the university as appropriate for disabled students. Georgia and her partner moved into this accessible accommodation, noting there were two flats within that specific block, the other one of which was occupied by a young wheelchair user. Georgia's initial portrayal of her accommodation suggests positive environmental adjustments:

It also had a lift, so the university had made it accessible in that way. Plus, it was really accessible for us. It used to take 10 minutes to get around the campus and there was a shop right next door.

However, she and her partner still needed to make changes to suit their needs, such as raised 'bump-on' stickers, with Georgia stating, 'We made it quite accessible in terms of putting tactile things on the cooker.' In this example, the accommodation seemed to reflect a standardised requirement, something which Titchkosky (2011: 81) suggests is the 'conflation between the radical diversity of embodiment and the single iconic figure of the wheelchair user'. This means access is often limited to adjustments that focus on the removal of physical barriers, such as placing ramps or using disabled 'friendly' signage.

Whilst recognising there are costs associated with making accommodation less homogenous, it is now the duty of universities to make reasonable adjustments within the remit of the Equality Act (2010), which promote the access rights of disabled students (OfS 2018). This tension between what an HEI is willing to offer and what might be best practice for all students is a clear indicator of the ambiguity surrounding what a reasonable adjustment may constitute.

As Georgia's account showed, adjustments positioned as for the benefit of disabled students may take an homogenous approach rather than meeting individual requirements. The likeness of impairment (Goodley 2014; Michalko 2009) draws out this concept of similarity, which influences how people react and act towards impairment and brings with it a misconception that all disabled people require the same physical alterations to an environment. As budgetary constraints increase alongside the responsibility lying with universities to implement reasonable and anticipatory adjustments (UK Equality Act 2010), closer examination by HEIs of what should and will be provided would be useful to address this.

Georgia's experience, where she identifies largely positive yet homogenising assumptions, contrasts with Naomi, who had similarly requested accommodation within the university halls of residence.

They put me somewhere outside of the campus, down a road, where bits had boulders and potholes in. It was all gravel, there was no lighting, and it was pitch black, and I was the end house!

My bedroom was at the top of the stairs, like literally near the step, where you would walk down. It was like the least blind friendly place, ever!

Naomi's experience shows a breakdown in communication regarding her expertise in her own life, her expectations, and the university offer, which involved an unsuitable location along with poor lighting and pathways. Her account suggests this was both a missed opportunity and an issue for the HEI to address. Further, this detrimental experience of access shaped Naomi's participation. Participation is not just the physical act of being on campus, it is the preceding and following assumptions that are made about the spaces visually impaired students should inhabit on campus as reflected in participants' interviews.

### **Social Interactions**

Where the previous section focused on accommodation, this one moves to social interactions, community and belonging and brings together the ways in which participation is imbued with expectations once one is identified as a visually impaired student. Here Maddie describes her experience of moving into a shared flat with peers she did not previously know:

I was very keen to be nice and friendly but... they didn't know about blindness; I was obviously the first blind person they had met.

I would say things like if I have been cooking and have made a mess of the kitchen I am not meaning to be messy, but I cannot see the mess, please just tell me and I would always clean up after myself; but I saw it more as a please open that dialogue with me.

One day I did make a bit of a mess and one of the girls I asked to check the kitchen said, 'oh, it's fine it's clean and everything' and then I left the kitchen. The other girls were like "oh my God, you are so disgusting, you have made a mess and you are so lazy and so disgusting". They went and put it on social media. I was horrified. I talked

to the disability department about it but they, well, were not that great! They did suggest getting someone in to do some visual awareness training... we all moved out before anything happened.

Maddie's account shows how upsetting she found this event in terms of the reaction of her housemates and that of the university. Here she is bullied, excluded and socially isolated by her housemates' accentuation and publication of their negative notions of her 'difference'. The institution only latterly recognised it could develop a better understanding amongst the student cohort and came to a perhaps overly simplistic, reactive response to the situation by offering awareness training to her peers. To cast a 'critical gaze to university policy and practices', which despite legislative and policy directives drawing upon equality and diversity 'still fail to make their environments accessible' (Lourens & Swartz 2016: 248), is to cast a critical gaze over the underpinning notions about disability in HE that these policies and legislative positions are built upon.

Peter shares a similar story regarding the bullying behaviour of housemates:

They sort of determined that they shouldn't be told how to behave and that includes being considerate of other people, so basically, yeah, they used to leave out stuff. Like, one of them left the iron out in front of the microwave and it was still hot; someone else had left a tin opened and all the sharp serrated edges were just here on the side and you know, when people sort of asked them to look at it, they went on the defensive and said stuff like we weren't told we were living with a blind person, we should have been warned!

Whereas Maddie describes the use of social media to exclude and humiliate and personally criticise, here Peter's peers resorted to intimidation. Peter states continually microaggressive incidents, which Wing Sue (2010: 245) suggests are 'insults and invalidations' that 'make their appearance in interpersonal and environmental encounters'. Additional to the danger inherent in their actions, the sense of threat and their unity in the face of both Peter's need for safety and requests from others to behave more supportively shows them to be forcibly excluding someone they consider as 'other' and liminal to, or outside of, the student community. Their defensiveness around their actions and insistence on being 'warned' positions Peter, or the university, as at fault. Again, organisational responses to the situation indicated problematic perspectives within the HEI regarding visual impairment. In effect, the system served to support the aggressors. This is particularly evident in Peter's account when he exclaims

They wrote a letter to the next group, that's what they [the university] did! So, the Uni pre-warned the next group! It wouldn't have changed who they were, not in the slightest, they may have just decided not to live there.

He also reflected on specific critical incidents he felt illuminated the wider aspects of student life, especially when socialising. In one incident, he talks of his long cane mobility aid going missing when at a nightclub.

My cane went missing. I always put it on the table in front of me, so I can locate it easily, however this time it vanished!

I had to eventually get the lights put on, so I could get help to find it, I literally was trapped in my seat, couldn't move. I mean this was a bunch of students I didn't really get on with, they were my housemates, but they were always doing silly tricks.

Peter also recounted a separate incident where he was forcibly made to inhabit a space:

We were out with another group of friends and there was this lad who was out, I wouldn't count him as a friend.

He was very overconfident, goes to the gym, physically strong and to show off in the club he thought it would be hilarious to pick me and my friend up at random without us knowing or wanting it to happen.

He only picked on us two because we couldn't see him coming to do it and every now and then, without warning, we would find ourselves lifted in the air and paraded around as if we were some sort of trophy.

No matter what we said or what we tried to do to stop it, there was nothing we could do. I am pretty sure if we could have seen him then at least he wouldn't have got away with it, 'cos we could have tried to avoid him but instead we spent our whole night not knowing what was going to happen next.

Peter, and his friend are subjected here to what Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011: 602) describe as 'the violence of disablism', whereby their experiences are bounded within 'responses that are perfectly compatible with a culture of disablism that pathologises difference, individualises impairment and maintains ableism' (Goodley & Runswick-Cole



2011: 609). This act additionally serves to portray Peter and his friend not as humans but, as Peter states, as trophies. This is a telling articulation of disablism. Peter continues:

I was very angry!

I kept trying to shout at him, but you are in a club and that is it. You don't know when it is going to happen until you are being lifted up...there is nothing you can do about it except sort of try and struggle and probably look ridiculous in the process... It was a night out; I guess he was just 'letting off steam'. Maybe asserting his male alpha-ness. It is idiocy though; he was just being a prick.

It was astounding and humiliating. I don't actually think I could stop it though, that's the thing there was nothing I could physically do, he was physically stronger than me, he could see, I couldn't hear anything 'cos I was in a club, there was nothing. I was totally defenceless.

Peter used this critical incident to reflect upon his perceptions about the beliefs present within wider society about visual impairment and disability, stating

I don't think someone is walking around having prejudicial thoughts constantly, it's something that happens in the moment because it is driven by a stereotype, predetermined, something they are not necessarily aware of.

When you start challenging these behaviours and thought processes in your own head is where you realise where they are coming from. Most people don't have time to question the situation and not many people have the situation to question their own beliefs.

Rather than negotiate tricky and ableist notions of access that attempt to change the person to fit the environment, participants suggest recognising the effect that environment and community have on their experiences within HE. Promoting their comments about their experiences can benefit the agenda to challenge disabling barriers that may prevent or inhibit participation and may ultimately increase a sense of belonging and inclusion. Participants' accounts indicate there were differences between their experiences across varying universities, but all noted a lack of recognition of their requests as individual students. Instead, the expert opinion of the visually impaired student was, if considered at all, treated in a tokenistic way.

## Conclusion

This article concludes that for these recent and current students, experiences of HE are typically positioned within a medicalised deficit model of disability regarding access and accommodation. As may be extrapolated across broader global experiences, the adjustments within the UK made through the implementation of the DSA process are necessary, yet often provision is based on a homogenous, universal approach that ignores the individual requirements of students in favour of a traditional notion of professional knowledge and existing practices. For visually impaired and blind students to access specific, personalised equipment and to engage with a system that positions them as experts in their own lives is crucial to their experiences and expectations and also in ensuring HEI's are meeting legal duties in line with HERA (2017). Organisations are required to ensure they develop their practices in accordance with alignment with a more social modelled understanding of the experience of being a disabled student, to promote positive outcomes and to demonstrate a commitment to widening participation and fair access (HERA 2017). Whilst this suggests 'cautious optimism' (Barnes 2007: 140), given the increasingly challenging circumstances in which HE is sited, there is a tension inherent in what is offered and how it is experienced. This tension remains crucial as a point of investigation in relation to the ways that visually impaired and blind people navigate the post-HE labour market. Taking a student-led approach potentially tells a different story, which could add to the body of work specifically on the experiences of blind and visually impaired students and possibly move away from notions of identity regarding oneself as a visually impaired and blind student and towards being simply a student. This would potentially challenge misconceptions about the spaces visually impaired and blind students should and can occupy. Access, from this standpoint, is immediately and irrevocably different and values diverse student groups' participation. Research centred on the voices and experiences of individual students acts as a counterbalance to other types of accounts that either medicalise or demand change. The focus on individual experience is not intended to replace collective action, instead it is intended to inform it.

Additionally, these students give evidence of resisting practices rooted in medicalised, ableist dialogues appearing under the banner of participation. Their interrogation of ableist notions about the places and spaces that disability should exist within troubles the common sense and disabling practices inherent within HE. Whilst these external factors often construct perceived identities of visually impaired or blind students, the participants raised a challenge by making apparent their perceptions and understandings about how they are envisaged by those within their HEI, whether staff or student peers. By laying out what disabling practices and expectations they encountered, and discussing

and analysing what they experienced, these students offer unique insights into tackling the beliefs underpinning their interactions with HE, providing a knowledge base with which to proceed, not only in the future, but also in the now.

### Acknowledgements

With thanks to all participants.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Croft, Emma. (2020). Experiences of Visually Impaired and Blind Students in UK Higher Education: An Exploration of Access and Participation. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 22(1), pp. 382–392. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.721>

**Submitted:** 20 March 2020

**Accepted:** 22 November 2020

**Published:** 23 December 2020

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