

# ABLEISM AND EXCLUSION: CHALLENGING ACADEMIC CULTURAL NORMS IN RESEARCH COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

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What is new?	<p>In the context of the drastic changes in UK Higher Education since the 1990s, and an increasing emphasis on equality and inclusion, initiatives such as Athena SWAN and the Race Equality Charter have led to more awareness of exclusionary practices. However, statistics on disability highlight serious issues in relation to staff disclosure rates, and the numbers of staff who report being stigmatised and their career choices undermined or invalidated. This can be particularly true for those who research into or around ableism.</p> <p>In this environment how can research managers raise awareness and empower all academics and researchers to ask for and gain adjustments to support their work? How has the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on higher education institutions and their finances affected this issue?</p>
What was the approach?	<p>Academic institutions are ableist. This, however, does not have to be the case. How do individuals involved in research management address this culture? In this paper we consider some of the challenges of conducting research on ableism in academia and what it can tell us. We then discuss the changes that can be made to research management that</p>

	would help address and challenge the ableist academic culture.
What is the academic impact?	Through raising expectations, placing inclusivity and accessibility at the heart of research communication, and encouraging, equipping, and challenging the academic community to embed these practices in the dissemination of their research, researchers can help address and challenge the ableist academic culture.
What is the wider impact?	Research managers looking critically at ableist systems will identify areas where they work and action they can take that will help address and challenge the ableist academic culture.
Keywords	Ableism; Research management; Exclusion

## BACKGROUND

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UK Higher Education (HE) has seen drastic changes to structures, funding, metrics and regulations over the last decades. It has become marketised and bureaucratic (Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2010). However, there has been a growing and welcome increase of emphasis on equality and inclusion. The summer of 2020, with the first Covid-19 lockdowns and the #BlackLivesMatter protests, brought issues of race and accessibility to the fore in HE, highlighting inequalities and systemic barriers, the need to decolonise the curriculum, and an 'unprecedented' turn to remote working. However, throughout this period there has been an ongoing requirement for researchers and academics to produce 'outputs' and the need for that process to be managed and supported has increased.

Research output (ostensibly quality, however quantity is also a factor) is measured within the UK through the Research Excellence Framework (REF): "the REF is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education" (REF, no date). A similar research ratings exercise happens in Australia (ARC, no date) and many countries have exercises that rate or judge the quality of research that academics produce. Academics face pressure to perform in order to retain their positions and to progress. This in turn creates a climate where overwork and burn-out are normalised if not expected (Gill, 2009). An anonymous academic wrote in the Guardian in 2018, "imagine working in an industry where entry-level jobs require 'world-leading' research records... [and individuals are] habituated to toxic and even harmful levels of overwork" (Anon, 2018). There is an inherent impact on mental and physical health (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). We can add into this mix the structural inequalities we know exist in HE around gender, race, disability, and age, and the result is that there is a normalisation of the neoliberal academic ground in a way that makes it hard to level out for those who do not conform (Navarro, 2017; English and Fenby-Hulse, 2019). These normalisations play out further if we look at progression within HE, as in order to achieve promotion individuals need to provide evidence against criteria on winning funding, producing quality (and quantity) of research, citation rates, and an international profile in a system that has been shown to be gender imbalanced and has bias against those who are

diverse. For example, in the UK the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data shows that within the professoriate there is an imbalance of gender, and a distinct lack of diversity that impacts on some disciplines more than others including for example the physical sciences (RSC, 2018; HESA, 2020b, 2020a). Such inequity has been a focus of union activities within HE (UCU, 2020; Unite, 2020) and wider protests within the community (BLM, 2020).

Initiatives such as Athena SWAN and the Race Equality Charter have led to more awareness of exclusionary practices, with the aim of changing policy and practice within HE to ensure equity. However, with a focus on gender and race, institutional ableism can be overlooked. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) brings together the seven disciplinary research councils, Research England (which is responsible for supporting research and knowledge exchange at HE institutions in England), and the UK's innovation agency, Innovate UK). Recent data from UKRI showed the breakdown of award applicants and winners (UKRI, 2020). Whilst the gender distribution seemed positive, women tend to apply for awards of a smaller total amount than men. The share of ethnic minority applicants is increasing with the largest share for co-investigators rather than as principal investigators. However when it comes to disability, only about 1% of applicants to UKRI declare they have a disability. Unfortunately it seems that ableism is rife in HE.

Ableism is "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human" (Campbell, 2001:44). Disability, as described within the 2010 Equality Act (UK, 2010) includes any condition that results in an impairment of ability to carry out every-day activities, or any condition where without an aid (be it medication or a physical aid) those everyday activities would be impaired. Not all disabilities or chronic conditions are visible. Not all are stable, and they may fluctuate over time (Finesilver, Leigh and Brown, 2020). In addition, many impairments that might affect those with chronic or invisible conditions such as brain fog, loss of hearing, fatigue and the like are also likely to affect staff as they age, as they progress through the menopause, if they encounter mental health issues, or if they undergo treatment for illness such as cancer. The impact of Covid-19 and Long Covid across the population may mean that the number of people experiencing mental health issues or chronic long-term illness increases.

With this in mind, we might expect to find rates of staff declaring such conditions in line with the rest of the working population. However, statistics on disability highlight serious issues in relation to disclosure rates for academic staff in HE: where 16% of the working age public disclose a disability, neurodivergence, or chronic illness; less than 4% of academics working in HE do so (Brown and Leigh, 2018). Again this is particularly evident in the physical sciences (CRAC, 2020; Joice and Tetlow, 2021). We know that staff report being stigmatised, challenged and questioned, with some saying that they have been told they should not be trying to pursue a career in academia as they would fail anyway (Brown and Leigh, 2020a; Finesilver, Leigh and Brown, 2020).

In this environment, what is the role research managers can play in order to raise awareness and create an environment that empowers academics and supports their work in a non-ableist and non-exclusionary way?

### EXCLUSIONS

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There are multiple structural barriers across protected characteristics – Gender, Race, Sexuality, Age, and Religion. Within this article, the focus is on ableism, chronic illness, neurodivergences, and disability. However, experience is intersectional, and we recognise that individuals often experience multiple structural disadvantages where these issues are compounded and that experiences of this disadvantage are not equal. This experience of multiple exclusions also contributes to individual approach to risk, self-promotion, and rejection, all of which are part of daily life in academia. The changes in practice we set out here will benefit many structurally disadvantaged groups, however our focus is on ableism. We consider ableism from the point of view of how it impacts on academic staff and researchers, though any member of staff, including research managers and administrators can experience ableism in the university or research environment.

When we use the terms research managers and research administrators we are conscious that these roles, and the people who occupy these roles, are not always well defined. 'Research support' and 'Research management and administration' is a huge field, from PhD/Postdoc researchers to an administrator arranging room bookings for events, to a Director of Research Services. The field includes those based in a University, a Research Institution, individual contractors, consultants, and precarious workers. With this in mind, we have focussed on particular examples that will be relevant to some areas of research support and are keen to emphasise that by this we are neither excluding those for whom these examples are not directly relevant, nor attempting to allocate responsibility for these changes in practice to a particular role. Our intention is to illustrate the incremental changes that each individual can make that lead to a wider cultural shift.

It is important to acknowledge that research managers will have some factors within their control, and others that are not. Research managers are not able to control the decisions and rankings of reviewers for funding bodies, nor to ensure that they have adequate training around mitigation and bias (Brock, 2021). Bodies such as NADSN (National Association for Disabled Staff Networks) are consulting and working with funders in order to review their processes and procedures in respect of disabled researchers, in the hope of working together to produce guidelines and recommendations. Few foresaw a global pandemic that would alter habits and working environments at such short notice. Government responses and support of education, arguably a sector that was the hardest hit by lockdown (Partington, 2020) have varied across the globe. At the time of writing new guidelines regarding HE provision in the UK continue to be announced at short or no-notice, leaving institutions little time to formulate a response. Depending on seniority and influence, those in research management may or may not have the opportunity to influence policy around institutional practice.

## HOW ABLEISM IMPACTS ON RESEARCHERS

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Not all disabilities are the same, nor do they impact on academic work or research in the same way. Academic work and research is varied. Travel is an area that can be used to exemplify this. If a researcher has a physical disability they may find fieldwork more challenging if they have to address accessibility issues around travel in addition to data gathering. Likewise, they may find attending conferences challenging for the same reason, so decline opportunities to disseminate and share their work to the same extent as an individual without a physical disability. However, there may be a multitude of other invisible disabilities, chronic illnesses, or neurodivergences that also impact on travel or the physical processes of data generation. Academics with these barriers may not apply to attend conferences, as with the norms of minimising spends on travel and subsistence they may find the physical 'cost' of travelling long distances and back in a short time period too high. There is anecdotal evidence that researchers will shape their work to fit, not their interests and research questions, but their capacity to do fieldwork or to collect data.

Disabilities and chronic illnesses can fluctuate; they are not always "static and constant" (Finesilver, Leigh and Brown, 2020:148). In a discussion of the impact of invisible and fluctuating conditions, Finesilver et al describe how for an individual "one day [they] might need to use a wheelchair, on another day they may manage with crutches or a stick, and the next week they may need no physical supports to stand or walk" (ibid). This has implications for accessibility arrangements, and also on perceptions of that person. Stigma around disability and chronic illness is something that has been discussed at length (Brown and Leigh, 2020a). Some conditions are more 'acceptable' than others – for example mental health and chronic fatigue are more stigmatised and contested than multiple sclerosis and cancer. However, with the advent of Long Covid there may be more acceptance of and acknowledgment for chronic illness.

Every researcher who disseminates their work has to make choices around the kinds and types of outputs that they produce. Research managers can guide this in terms of promoting diverse outputs, and encouraging (or mandating) accessibility. These choices can include choices of 'REFable' papers versus practical or reflective articles; theoretical pieces, those aimed at gaining research impact or public engagement, and how or where to disseminate at conferences or symposiums. The accessibility of outputs is not always factored in at the early stages, and yet there is an argument that it should be. Creative work or work that uses creative methods such as art-based, visual, or practice-based research can result in additional decisions over outputs. Research that draws on subjective theorisations, such as feminism, crip-theory and critical race theory is more likely to take such an approach. Disciplinary norms and differences often dictate what 'counts' as research, how it is seen and valued by peers, and whether it can find an outlet. Innovative work can be seen as risky (Leigh and Brown, 2021).

One answer could be to research more into ableism and its impacts on academics. However, research around chronic illness, disability and ableism comes with its own challenges. Francesca Peruzzo (2020) explored tensions that she felt as an able-bodied

researcher exploring disability, and the questions it raised for her and her participants. Is it less credible to research into ableism if you have no personal experience of it? Is it fair that we leave the research of a marginalised group to that marginalised group? If we do this, then we leave the emotional labour of living with ableism *and* the work of combatting ableism to the same group. Kirstein Rummery described her own journey with chronic illness and disability that started after she had begun research into the area (Rummery, 2020). When we think about the implications of disability, neurodivergence, or chronic illness on a researcher we can do so from multiple perspectives. Fiona Kumari Campbell (Campbell, 2020) talked about the concept of technicism and how the very structures of academia create an environment that is unwelcoming to those with a disability. Her work on ableism and abledment in the academy, that is the preferential treatment of those with able bodies, explicitly looks at the detriment, the barriers, and the humiliation that those with disabilities can face. And yet, we live in a world where disability is used as 'inspiration porn' (a term coined in 2014 by the late comedian and journalist Stella Young) and the medical as opposed to the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013) is still widely used. This means that the disability is typically understood as physical or mental impairments that have substantial effects on a person's every-day life, entailing accessibility issues or accommodations. In contrast, the social model positions itself from the standpoint of the pervasive barriers in our society that exclude those with disability. The numbers living with chronic illness and disability are increasing. Long Covid with its symptoms of fatigue, breathlessness, and brain fog are similar to those experienced by sufferers of fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, and those living through chemotherapy and menopause. Long Covid is likely to sharply increase the numbers in the population who suddenly find themselves becoming aware of and experiencing ableism regardless of whether they choose to explicitly research into it or not.

For a researcher with a chronic illness, disability, or neurodivergence or one who wants to research into these areas or ableism there can also be personal implications. Beyond the additional burdens that may be associated with travel to national or international conferences (discussed below), there can be consequences merely around choosing to research in this area. The moment that an individual takes an interest in such matters it invites gaze and speculation. Regardless of the choice to 'out' oneself or not, merely writing and working in this area often invokes judgement and speculation. Choosing to disclose is an individual decision, and, if it follows an accident or illness, often has to proceed after a journey through acceptance and reconciliation with a 'new normal'. In academia however, disclosing a condition is not apolitical (Leigh and Brown, 2020). Researchers are invited to disclose and declare conditions that impact their ability to work not only to receive adjustments, but to enable the positioning of their department's research metrics. It can be advantageous for the metrics to have staff declaring disabilities or illnesses, but it does not mean that those staff will then receive support. Disclosure then becomes less about equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and inclusive practices, and more about the management of the university's research profile. It becomes impersonal. Although in an ideal world research management is inclusive and incentivises accessibility, it is not possible to ignore the need for robust EDI practices at a structural level.

## RESEARCH MANAGERS – QUIETLY COMPLICIT OR AGENT OF CHANGE?

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Recognising the need for systemic change and being able to make those change are worlds apart. As professional services, research support can be portrayed as powerless in a world driven by researchers, managers and external agencies, and policy drivers. As the role of Research Managers and Administrators has evolved, moving from an administrative support to professional service, the role of research administrators in relation to culture setting has also changed (Shelley, 2010; Kerridge and Scott, 2018).

*“Campus culture, like all cultures, is the integrated pattern of our knowledge, beliefs, values, structures, behaviour and products of behaviours that we can learn and pass on to others. A closer look reveals many aspects of cultures or subcultures on campus... How the overall culture or subcultures evolve is determined, to a degree, by institutional and personal expectations, standards and values.” (Byrne, 1998)*

With institutional culture, it is easy to maintain the status quo, doing things the way they are always done. The pressure to continually deliver on an ever-growing ‘To do’ list leaves little time for contemplation of how those things are done. The pressure for speed, accuracy, and increasing income being prioritised. New ways of working are often focussed on greater efficiencies, not on recognising and addressing the impact of that agenda.

Within Research Management there are four key areas of practice to challenge the culture of ableism and exclusion within academia. The first of these is as an individual, recognising the experiences, challenges and exclusion experienced by colleagues by the actions that we consider as standard practice – actions that are as routine as arranging a meeting location or sending a document. “Shall we meet in the coffee shop?” seems a straightforward, everyday suggestion – a question to which you are expecting a yes/no response, a nice accessible location, central, neutral. Pause for a moment and consider the thoughts this question generates in someone who finds crowds overwhelming, or has chronic pain, or finds hearing difficult. Yes, they could ‘Just say no’ but at that point they have already had to consider whether this is a situation where they are prepared to explain why, or whether it would be less draining to go ahead in the coffee shop. A useful explanation of this experience for those who do not have a chronic condition is ‘spoon theory’ by Christine Miserandino (Miserandino, 2003). Now consider the impact of a slightly different question – “Where is good for you to meet?” While this suggests a specific location, many people reply with a need – “Somewhere quiet” or “somewhere central” or “somewhere I can sit down” – which still allows for the person making the suggestion to also accommodate their needs.

While this practice is applicable to anyone within academia, research management has three more specific areas of practice – the community you work with, the encouraging of inclusive practice within research projects, and equipping researchers to embed inclusive approaches. For a research manager the community you work with requires reflection on your daily practice with an awareness of the inherent ableism in many systems. This will vary from phrasing of questions (as with the meeting location above), to responses to

research proposals, dissemination plans or impact and engagement of activities, through to investing time and deeply considered thought into quality impact assessments on new policies. It is easy to equate equal with equality - if every researcher has £500 to spend on conferences and travel, then that is equal. Everyone is treated the same. Factor in higher travel costs for an individual with chronic pain ("business class is a luxury"), or an individual with anxiety who needs an extra night before and after the events ("just there for a holiday"), or an individual who needs a carer accompanying them ("family trip") and it is clear how 'Equal' is disguising ableism.

Challenging ableism in your community will be determined both by your area of work and those you work with. It can include the accidental 'outing' of researchers, creating specific support for individuals, leading systemic changes, or reframing what 'research' looks like. Creating a community where ableism is not the expected norm requires both individual change and those with increasing awareness to challenge the practice of others – not accepting that a researcher who looks at issues relating to chronic illness should be subject to scrutiny in their personal lives any more than a researcher studying insect migration. Not accepting that articles are the only or best form of research output. Particularly important for early career researchers, is not accepting that their field of study should be dictated by their personal circumstances.

Encouraging inclusive practice in research happens throughout the lifecycle of research, from research idea, through ethical approval, to funding application, through to dissemination and real world change. Research managers and administrators are also uniquely placed to equip researchers to embed inclusive approaches. The very nature of research management enables input into research practice, whether that is costing events to be accessible; with funding available for extra nights in hotels for those with difficulty travelling, sign language interpreters or extra room hire in order to provide a quiet place for those who need space to recharge during a conference. It is also asking for a machine-readable version of outputs or accessible versions of documents. Whilst working with a researcher, at any stage, questioning how those with chronic illness, neurodivergences and disability will be able to participate not only encourages a change in practice locally, it also has a much wider reach within projects, collaborations and engagement.

### CASE STUDY OF WORK AT KENT

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A note on the case study: this is an illustration of some of the steps we have taken in the Office for Scholarly Communication (OSC) at the University of Kent to counter the structural challenges to diversity in research communication. It is our sincere hope that in a few years those reading this will wonder why we felt it necessary to write this. It is also not intended as an exemplar – the more we change, the more changes there are to make and the authors would like to pass on their sincere thanks to all who have challenged their approaches with a 'Could do better' and shared their personal experiences. We would like to emphasise that all of the changes outlined here can be achieved with minimal extra cost, including those needed to ensure a conference or event is inclusive.



Founding a new office is a fantastic opportunity to embrace new ways of working and to challenge accepted norms. The Office for Scholarly Communication (OSC) at the University of Kent also sat outside of traditional University structures (Bass and Slowe, 2018), with a dual line management, and a cross-departmental remit. From its creation it was clear that new approaches were needed – system-based structures and departmental-level approaches had led to missed opportunities and intermittent support for researchers – by adopting a researcher-based approach, we were able to begin to see where ‘the system’ was failing. Initially, it became clear that although articulating that Kent valued all forms of research output, the systems in place did not back up that assertion. We had a wide range of item types in the repository, but there was a clear difference between the support available for publications and that for performances, practice-based research, and portfolios. The repository was also the main system used to report on research outputs for promotion and REF outputs, creating a self-reinforcing bias towards publication. Recognising and addressing this, through specific specialist support for non-text-based outputs was vital.

The use of metrics to evaluate research outputs has been shown to have inherent bias towards white men (Chakravartty *et al.*, 2018; Dion, Sumner and Mitchell, 2018) as well as reinforcing the reliance on publications as research output. Although software citation (Jackson, 2020) and data citation (UKDataService, 2021) are becoming more common, they are not used as consistently as publications, particularly articles, where the infrastructure is more developed. Recognising that the use of metrics was reinforcing systemic biases, we adopted a policy on the responsible use of metrics, encouraging researchers to challenge the inappropriate use of metrics about their work, and providing training and advice so that they felt empowered to challenge assumptions. This also formed part of the creation of an Academic Career Map, which also specifically recognised the wider variety of research outputs and forms of contribution to academia that an individual can make.

Research outputs added to the repository have many external requirements on them – from open access requirements, to document versions, to the time at which they are added. Many publisher versions have digital rights management (DRM) embedded in the PDF making them non-machine-readable. In addition, pre-DRM application, many publishers were not considering accessibility, with accessibility scores as low as 6% from major academic publishers (Watson and Caplehorne, 2020) mainly due to untagged PDFs, no language set, and insufficient contrast. This means that the documents are both inaccessible to those who use screen readers and also unable to be read by machines harvesting research. Through a policy to provide an accessible version (for more details, see Duffy, 2021) we created a more inclusive system that was also more effective in disseminating research at Kent:

- Accessible version requests: Adding a button to all openly-available documents in the repository meant that an accessible version could be requested. The original document would then be edited to improve its accessibility so that it could be understood by screen readers and other assistive technologies (for more details see Caplehorne, 2020).

## Ableism & Exclusion

- Blackboard Ally modules:
  - To check the accessibility of documents before and after editing for accessible version requests
  - Setting up of a module to check conference presentations were accessible before an event, and before they are shared on a repository.

In May 2019, Kent hosted a Scholarly Communication conference for practitioners (Caplehorne, 2019). Building on the expertise and experience of many staff, we ran the conference in a way to make it welcoming to all. The primary purpose of the event was scholarly communication not accessibility, but through the evidence from the feedback it was clear that the small considerations we put in place made a considerable difference to participants. We have since worked with researchers creating events as part of their research to include these considerations as standard (further elaborated in Caplehorne 2019) – a small change that passed the burden of adjustment from the individual to the sector. For the purpose of this case study we have reflected on ableism within a single event. However, these practices, and wider EDI practices, are increasingly incorporated across all events at Kent.

From the outset we wanted to feature underrepresented voices in scholarly communication. We actively encouraged submissions from colleagues at all stages of their careers; from individuals who had never presented at a conference or event before, to more experienced voices from diverse communities, and we left the format up to them to decide. This crucially allowed delegates to request a length of time on the programme that they felt was achievable for the content they wanted to deliver. In order to reduce the burden on those who submitted proposals, we asked applicants to include the word “priority” where they identified with an underrepresented group or had never presented at a conference before as a prefix to their submitted title, and without the need to explain why. The programme committee reflected the ‘voices from diverse communities’ highlighted in the call for papers. They gave regional perspectives, were diverse in their attributes, and brought an extensive range of experiences from across the scholarly communication sector. The diverse committee was key to the reading of proposals, mitigating for unconscious bias and discriminatory cultural norms.

The conference programme was created in a fully accessible format. This included making it fully navigable, easily assimilated, and inclusive in its content by providing information about venue accessibility, prayer spaces, food and drink venues for different dietary requirements, conference quiet space, arrival instructions, sustainability, Wi-Fi options, and a local pharmacy. We did this through:

- Navigable headings and subheadings. This was the most significant part of creating a fully accessible conference programme as it enabled people with print impairment to easily skim the content as the hierarchies were readily assimilated.
- Creating meaningful hyperlinks and giving them unique and descriptive names, avoiding terms such as ‘click here’.
- Keeping images to an essential minimum, such as the cover image, maps of the venue and wider campus, and adding alternative text (Alt Text) to convey the

context and meaning of each image. We made sure that images did not pixilate when magnified, and avoided using moving or flashing images in any of our content that could cause photo-epileptic seizures.

- Using Plain English to communicate information clearly and effectively to everyone, which is inclusive and accessible (around 10% of people have dyslexia – for more information, see <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexia>) and benefits people whose first language is not English. We achieved this by keeping paragraphs short and easy to scan, put key messages first, limited acronyms as much as possible, and created meaningful hyperlinks.
- Using 'camel case' (in formal terms known as medial capitals) in the conference hashtag: #ScholComm19 instead of #scholcomm19. By doing this we ensured that screen readers, chiefly used by people with a visual impairment, heard the individual words being read aloud rather than a single, incoherent word.

## REFRESHMENTS

Asking for dietary requirements ahead of any event ensured that everyone had something they could and wanted to eat. People with food allergies, medical needs, religious dietary practices, or just personal preferences, could feel left out or potentially be put at risk if this was not managed in advance. We asked for this information at the point of booking, and contacted delegates directly where we needed clarification. We clearly labelled all foods, their ingredients and allergens, so delegates were well informed, and also offered advice about catering options on and off campus in the conference programme.

Lunch at conferences can often mean standing for an hour trying to graciously balance a plate and cup whilst eating food and striking up new conversations. We used spaces with a substantial provision of tables and chairs to avoid this problem and provide an inclusive experience for all. It is easy to forget that not everyone finds it comfortable or possible to stand for an hour, and the environment we provide throughout the duration of our conferences should form part of our decision making when designing inclusive events for all.

## WELLBEING, VENUE ACCESS AND INCLUSIVITY

Push button access to and from the main building and lecture theatre, hearing loop facilities in the lecture theatre and breakout rooms, accessible toilets, and step-free access all helped make our event accessible and inclusive.

Whilst offering new networking opportunities, potential collaborations and lots of new information, conferences can feel quite full-on, particularly for neurodivergent delegates or those with social anxiety. The conference 'quiet room' was available throughout the event for delegates to use as a quiet, safe, reflective space, free of meetings, telephone calls, and the like.

### SIGNAGE

We included a map within the programme, and labelled the breakout rooms, quiet space, foyer, lecture theatre, toilets, cafe, and building entrances and exits. The map was made accessible by embedding alternative text to ensure that it would work with text to speech software. Providing this information in advance of the conference also helped those with social anxiety. High contrast and oversize fonts were used where we created signage for breakout rooms and the quiet spaces.

In planning our future events we will continue with this practice, and, based on the anonymous feedback we sought from delegates at the conference to ensure the adjustments we made met their needs, we will also add in the following amendments:

### LECTERN

We will ask speakers to use the lectern for the duration of their presentation, give the instructions below, and explain to them why this supports inclusive practice:

- Hearing loop: transmits an audio signal from the lectern directly to hearing aid devices.
- Speak directly into the microphone, clearly and at a moderate pace.
- Avoid turning away from the lectern to face the screen as this interrupts the audio.

### MOOD CARDS

Communicating with lots of new people at a conference, or any event, can be difficult for many of us, particularly for those who are neurodivergent and those with social anxiety. Mood cards offer a portable way for delegates to provide “clear, to the point descriptions and instructions to break down barriers, challenge preconceptions, promote understanding and acceptance, and facilitate communication” (for more information, see <https://stickmancommunications.co.uk/>) and enable delegates to share written information that they ‘cannot talk right now’ or that they are ‘okay to talk’, to promote positive communication and inclusivity.

### NAME BADGE VERSUS LANYARDS

Pin-based name badges are not inclusive as they can be difficult to attach and are not practical for all styles of clothing. Instead, we would opt to use double-sided badges with adjustable lanyards.

### RESEARCH MANAGEMENT POLICY

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The impact of getting research management policy and practice in place that address issues of ableism and exclusion in academia cannot be overstated. On an individual level, the difference it makes for someone with a chronic illness, disability, or neurodivergence to be seen, recognised, and supported as a researcher could be the difference between them remaining in academia and producing ground-breaking research or contributing to the loss of talent from the sector (Brown and Leigh, 2020a). Within the culture of HE it is similarly vital that students see that work is produced by and is accessible to those with

disabilities, chronic illnesses, and neurodivergences. If we want to change the horrifying statistics that only 4% of academics disclose a condition as compared to 16% of the general working population (Brown and Leigh, 2018) then we need to ensure not only that the working conditions support them to disclose (Brown and Leigh, 2020a) but that there are role models for the next generation of researchers coming through. On a societal level we need to ensure that our knowledge is generated from a diverse group of academics, and is accessible to a diverse audience. If not, we eliminate a proportion of academics and a proportion of their audience through not building in accessibility. We can consider the implications of excluding academics with the same logic that applies to gender imbalance in STEMM (Colwell and Bertsch McGrayne, 2020). If we want to get the best out of the greatest minds then we need to be looking at *all* the minds, and not exclude some just because they are women, people of colour, or because they have a disability, chronic illness, or neurodivergence. What world-changing work could we lose if we are so short-sighted?

How proactive should research managers be? This is a difficult question. There is not an 'acceptable' degree of ableism. There is also not time or resources to make every decision fully considering all those around you. There is, however, an easy commitment to make – to continue to consider more. To actively reflect on your practice. To put in place processes that embed active consideration of policies that protect ableism and exclusion. To use appropriate language:

*"'Ableism' names a subtle and pervasive bias that assumes nondisabled people are 'normal' and that people with disabilities represent an undesirable deviation from this norm. The disability is seen as a personal dilemma to be privately endured and we've placed the responsibility to adapt on the individual with the disability." (Kujawa-Holbrook and Montagno, 2009).*

Should research managers be proactive in reducing the responsibility burden? Absolutely. Can they remove it entirely? Not yet.

What is inside and outside a research manager's control when it comes to inclusion is also difficult to call. Whilst clearly responsible for our own practice, we can influence, but rarely control those we work with. As much as we can encourage consideration of accessible events, appropriate costings, and machine readable outputs, we are not the ones doing the work. If we bring inclusivity into every area of influence we can, and research managers have many, it will be another area or intervention that another may welcome. Raising accessibility and making ableism and accessibility part of the conversation around research and research management will help to create a climate of acceptance. It is easier to ensure that an environment is accessible for others because it is 'the right thing to do' than to disclose, and demand it for oneself when also dealing with a challenging condition (Leigh and Brown, 2020). Using influence to create an environment that caters for academics and audiences with a chronic illness, disability, or neurodivergence as an accepted occurrence rather than the exception, means that those resisting accessible events and outputs

become the outliers. Equally, awareness of the ableist environment aids a more inclusive approach. For example, the problematic nature of metrics lies in their reduction of people to a number. Whether citations, research income, research awards, or number of supervisees, the reduction to a number invites a direct comparison. In direct comparisons, it is easy to see who is 'achieving' and who is not – beyond the numbers lie complexities, which need questioning before any conclusions are drawn.

With the rise of remote working in the light of Covid-19 and the increased use of the virtual environment, it is tempting to think that there is a technical solution. However, technology does not solve everything. Whilst it clearly has reduced the implications for travel, this is offset against non-optimal working environments, screen fatigue, inadequate breaks, and frequent, if not continual, multi-tasking in order to 'stay connected'. The fear of missing out is exacerbated and the pressure to contribute increased. Awareness of these and associated issues are crucial to avoid recreating previous disparities in a different way of working. Norms relating to, for example, camera use present a barrier for those most comfortable standing, lying down or walking for meeting. 'Brain fog' and the absence of non-visual clues makes it hard to stay focussed.

## RESEARCH MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

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The neoliberal climate of academia (Davies and Bansel, 2005; Bottrell and Manathunga, 2019) has put pressure on academics and budgets alike. Universities and research institutes are in competition with each other in order to produce ground-breaking research outputs, win funds, attract students, and provide the ultimate student experience. With challenges in the UK including low birth rate, Brexit, and Covid-19, university finances for the most part have come under increasing pressure. Many of the recommendations of Brown & Leigh (2020) to combat ableism in academia require funds – such as money for travel, carers, child care, interpreters and the like. However, not all do. A top-down and bottom-up approach with a 'pincer' of policy and practice coming together requires much more in terms of leadership, time, and prioritisation than cold hard cash. However, time, like money, can be in short supply. Covid-19 has put immense and unexpected pressure onto HE institutions (Estermann *et al.*, 2020). Teaching loads, already high, have been increased with the need to reorientate to remote learning (Müller *et al.*, 2018), and budgets for hourly-paid and visiting lecturers slashed. This, combined with ongoing restructuring and reorganisation of universities in line with Office for Student priorities (Office for Students, 2020) has led to a wave of redundancies and voluntary severance packages across the sector (Anon, 2020; Bodin, 2020). Fewer staff with no reduction in work-load has led to increased pressures. With fewer staff to teach, time for research has been affected, and anecdotally many staff are actively being discouraged from applying for fellowships and grants that would mean a teaching buy-out, as universities are not willing to support these. In addition, funding bodies are also re-prioritising and assessing budgets (Nature, 2020), and so opportunities for researchers to apply for funds are decreasing.

Redundancies and swingeing budget cuts have not only affected academics. Professional services, including research support services, have been hit hard. These roles are often by

held by staff who have themselves had experience of research and have chosen (for expediency, security, or interest) to move into research support rather than direct research. Whilst minimal support services may be somewhat protected, the 'nice to have's, are often vulnerable and it is these services where the benefit is felt disproportionately by those already marginalised. The expertise of these services is vital for those that have to be most focussed in the use of their energy and time.

Adopting practices and attitudes similar to that of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Bracken and Nocick, 2019) towards accessibility for researchers would have an immediate and positive impact for staff and audiences of research. A UDL-inspired approach would include: building in accessibility so that templates lead to PDFs and outputs that are screen-readable; costing in not only open access, but accessible outputs; ensuring conferences and dissemination events have quiet spaces and adjustments as a matter of course rather than only when requested (Brown, Thompson and Leigh, 2018); having a fund where researchers can easily request and obtain extra money to pay for additional nights' accommodation, childcare and the like (Brown and Leigh, 2020b).

The outputs from research are inherently visible and form much of the basis on which researchers judge each other and their work, to determine whether future engagement, networking, and collaboration would be worthwhile. Output profiles contribute to funding applications, promotion, research assessment, interview and job applications, conference paper acceptances – the list goes on. Equally, outputs have a purpose, from changing academic debate to changing the world, and the form of communication varies according to the audience. The tension this creates is one between purpose and reward – where publishing a high-profile academic article is going to be well-received when an academic record is being judged, while community blog posts may change the life of the people affected. It is an easy message to find 'balance' or to have a 'range' of outputs but the reality is very different. Academic judgements of others are often formed on a public record and although there is an increasing move towards a wider variety of research outputs, a wider appreciation of the value of different forms of communication and increasing investment into the infrastructure that means creative works, grey literature, and engagement pieces 'count' in the scholarly record, the historic bias towards publications is entrenched. This exacerbates the experiences of those who are conducting research, but focussing on outputs that reach the community rather than alter academic thought; their work may appear infrequent according to disciplinary norms. When this is combined with potentially attending fewer events due to the impacts of disability, chronic illness, or neurodivergence, the challenge of collaboration and building networks is multiplied. On the other hand, concentrating energy, including the emotional energy inherent in reviews and unsuccessful submissions, means that the resource available for facilitating change has been used up, and communities will suffer.

Costings and financial management is another key area of practice for research managers. With hard-pressed institutional budgets and tight award guidance there is little scope to address inclusive needs after award. Whilst an investigator on a grant may feel able to discuss particular needs, co-investigators, networks, and advisory board members may

need costing in of childcare, interpreters, or accommodation for extra nights and not raise this until after award when the relationship with their colleagues is more established. They are also more likely to pay to cover these costs from their own pocket for fear of losing the opportunity to be involved. Adding travel bursaries or costs to cover support costs helps to mitigate these choices.

Research managers looking critically at ableist systems will identify areas where they work and action they can take. Often, even straightforward mitigations such as accessible documents are seen as an 'extra step'. No-one would consider submitting a handwritten article to a publisher. No-one would submit a report without running a spell checker. Yet routinely documents that we create are not accessibility checked. Everyday software packages (including Word and PowerPoint) make this straightforward, with in-built stylesheets that embed accessibility and a function to check a document on completion. As with any new skill, the first time will be enlightening and take a little time to address the flagged issues, but, as with spell-checking, altering as you write becomes routine and this benefits not just those with print disabilities, but anyone who would benefit from having the document read to them. This might be due to a need for a positional change, screen break, or a different form of input. Print disability can be due to many things including physical disability (inability to hold the page), specific learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia), and visual disabilities (Watson and Leigh, 2021).

## PROACTIVE ACTION

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This section is a brief summary of some concrete actions exemplified by our experience and practice. Addressing ableism in academia is not a 'tick list' that can be accomplished and moved on from, but a shifting of cultural attitudes and norms to a more inclusive environment. It is not work that will be 'finished', but the actions below highlight some approaches and behaviours that can begin this journey.

- Understanding the challenge ableism presents is key, and we recommend the following as starting resources:
  - Nicole Brown & Jennifer Leigh (2018) Ableism in academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?, *Disability & Society*, 33:6, 985-989, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2018.1455627
  - Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh (Eds) (2020) *Ableism in Academia - Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education*, UCL Press
  - Nicole Brown, Paul Thompson & Jennifer Leigh (2018) *Making Academia More Accessible*, *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 6:2
  - Nicole Brown (Ed) (2021) *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia- Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education*, Policy Press
- Accessible documents: Accessibly-formatted documents 'enable equality of access' (for more information, see <https://stickmancommunications.co.uk/>) because they are designed to be consumed in many ways. Their structure means they can be easily navigated by screen readers and the files can be meaningfully converted to



alternative formats such as Braille or audio files. This subsequently promotes a widening of the reach and impact of the content produced and creates an inclusive working and learning environment for staff and students because no extra provision needs to be made as documents are already available in an accessible format (Caplehorne and Watson, 2018). Whilst it is ultimately the right thing to do it is also now legally required by all public sector organisations in the United Kingdom (The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018).

At Kent Research administrators across the Office for Scholarly Communication, Research Support, and Learning and Research Development teams developed a workflow to respond to requests for accessibly-formatted documents from the institutional repository, and enhanced the accessibility of the platform. The University's OPERA team (Opportunity, Productivity, Engagement, Reducing barriers, Achievement) delivered digital content accessibility training and the team developed guidance to support their work. Further enhancement is being planned for accessibility of theses, repository cover sheets, practice-based research, and the Open Journal System where we publish Open Access journals. More information about this will be available in a forthcoming reflective case study that will be published with the *Advanced Journal of Professional Practice*.

- Conference considerations: As outlined in our case study, the Scholarly Communications Conference was intended to be a model of best practice for inclusive conferences (details available here <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/osc/files/2019/02/Full-Scholarly-Communication-Conference-Programme.pdf>). The programme was intended to be fully navigable, easily assimilated, and inclusive in its content. It provided information about venue accessibility, prayer spaces, food and drink venues for different dietary requirements, conference quiet space, arrival instructions, sustainability, Wi-Fi options, local pharmacy, and much more. With the intention of featuring underrepresented voices in Scholarly Communication, we actively encouraged submissions from colleagues at all stages of their career and the programme committee reflected the 'voices from diverse communities' highlighted in the call for papers. Delegate conference rates were charged at cost so that individuals or those from smaller institutions could take part in the event without being penalised or excluded because of expensive conference rates. We promoted use of accessible social media hashtags using 'camel case' text; #ScholComm19 instead of #scholcomm19. Poster display boards were provided at table top height to ensure they were accessible for everyone, and pronouns stickers were provided with information for everyone about the importance and value of wearing these. We asked for dietary requirements ahead of the event so that anyone with food allergies, medical needs, religious dietary practices, or just personal preferences, did not feel excluded or potentially put at unnecessary risk. Adequate seating and tables were provided for all delegates during break periods to remove assumptions

about anyone's ability to stand, eat and engage with others for up to an hour. We also provided adequate signage and access to event spaces including accessible and gender-neutral toilets.

- Understanding and challenging (your own) stereotypes and preconceptions of disability (Disabled Peoples' International, Undated): This is an on-going process of reflection and begins with asking yourself hard questions. What do you think of disability? What do you think of as a disability? What does (dis)ability look like? Who does the menopause affect? How can you tell if someone has Long Covid? What behaviour do you make adjustments for, and what comes across as 'awkward' or 'not professional'? How would you respond differently if that person had told you of their diagnosis? Why is your behaviour dependent on knowing someone's medical history? When you know someone has a disability and is successful at what they do, do you immediately think of them as 'an inspiration'? Asking yourself difficult questions and understanding your learned responses is a critical first step to changing your behaviour.
- Doing the work and advocating for change: In this article we have covered the 'burden of adjustment' and how this systemically falls onto the individual to disclose and then advocate to effect change. Some of this burden can be shifted through research managers becoming proactive agents of change. We can initiate conversations and encourage researchers to be more inclusive. Are you regularly asking for accessible documents to be made available? Or step-free access? Inclusive conferences? Flexible working as a default option? Or a quiet working environment? Through fully considering the ableist aspects of processes, systems and regulations it is possible to mitigate the effect of these through design, meaning that there is less need to make individual adjustments, and there a smaller burden to share.
- Becoming an 'Active bystander': Everyday events unfold around us; circumstances in which we play no part and it is in this that we are all bystanders. There are times that as bystanders we notice behaviours that make us feel awkward, uncertain, uncomfortable, and particularly in this instance such incidents can be related to behaviour that is inherently ableist. When this happens we can choose to say or do something, that is to be an active bystander, or simply let it go and remain a passive bystander. An active bystander chooses to take steps that make a difference. It takes time, skill, and courage to decide when to step in – there are many Active Bystander resources available, including many training courses that create a safer space to learn these skills.
- Supporting those highlighting the need for change: Supporting people involves letting their voices be the majority when having discussions where a question or topic is related to background or circumstances that is not yours, but is theirs. This can be as passive as not speaking or contributing where you could overpower the message of the people at the centre of the situation, or amplifying their voices when they are not being heard. This is a more active role in validating the input of those within the affected community, in recognising their contribution and ensuring

others in the discussion do likewise, so that their views can be heard by more people. There are also key practical steps here – those who are not at the table cannot contribute to the discussion, and we can do our best to ensure that those who are marginalised have a seat.

- Valuing and participating in Equality Impact Assessments: These can easily be seen as box ticking, but exploring users' journeys to understand the lived experiences of those affected is key to successful integration of new processes and systems. Often an incomplete impact assessment raises questions after the fact, and remedial work to mitigate the unequal effects is harder (or, in some cases, impossible). Being proactive in understanding the wider needs of colleagues means that appropriate mitigation can be established from the conception of a project.

This article began with an abstract and idea for a paper that was to be presented at the ARMA (Association of Research Managers and Administrators) 2020 conference. We decided that we wanted to write up our ideas for publication, and began work on this paper in earnest after the ARMA conference was cancelled due to Covid-19. Since then two authors have moved jobs, and we have lived through three lockdowns (to date) with school-age children. We are aware professionally and personally of the additional pressures the pandemic has placed on research managers and academics alike. The burden of care has fallen harder on women (Gabster *et al.*, 2020), with a consequential impact on their productivity and publications (Flaherty, 2020). However, the long-term impacts on progression are yet to be seen. The effects on mental health are increasing, and along with the pressures on finances generally in higher education, burgeoning work loads and reductions in the work force, it is likely that a growing proportion of the workforce will recognise the symptoms of fatigue, brain fog, and anxiety. An approach to research management that factors in and tries to diminish ableism towards all staff and not just academics and researchers can only have positive effects.

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## CONTRIBUTION INFORMATION

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