

activism as a form of caring: disabled students' activism to refuse ableism in higher education institutions

Francesca Peruzzo

Here I present some reflections from a project done at the onset of the pandemic when disabled students in the United Kingdom began to organise themselves in an umbrella organisation called 'Disabled Students UK' to fight against persistent marginalisation and endemic ableism in higher education. Disabled student officers, employed or volunteering in university student unions, describe to me and a colleague (Rille Raaper) their experiences and accounts of higher education, exposing the violence of neoliberal policies and the damage that its performative and economic aims were having on the disabled students' population. While denouncing and actively fighting against ableism in institutional and individual practices, disabled students showed the importance of nurturing the relationship that exists between the individual and the community in constituting disability activism and disabled activists. Their activism lays the groundwork for a higher education system rooted in justice, care, and accessibility.

Keywords: ableism, care, community, disabled students, neoliberalism

Introduction

I click on the Zoom link to connect to the online session in which Disabled Students UK (DSUK) will launch their 2024 Access Insight report, going through the major findings from the biggest disabled students survey ever conducted across British higher education institutions. After a few seconds in the lobby, I am let into the online meeting, alongside many other people. Some videos are on, others not, some microphones are muted, whilst others are open, and people are chatting. Mette Anwar-Westander, the founding director and CEO of DSUK, welcomes everyone and invites the attendees to wait for an additional five minutes to make sure all people who have signed up for the event have the time to log in and make themselves comfortable before starting the launch. They then begin to talk, introducing themselves and describing how they look like, their background, and stating their positionality, making sure that their presentation is accessible to blind and visually impaired participants. Once they start sharing their screen to show the slides supporting the presentation, one of the participants warns them that the British Sign Language interpreter cannot be seen on the screen. Before sorting the logistical problem, another ten minutes go by. Only when the problem is solved, the launch goes ahead.

The presentation of the report highlights persisting disparities and discrimination against disabled students in the UK higher education. The 2024 Access Insights Report shows how disabled students are still falling behind their non-disabled peers, with only 37% of disabled students seeing their rightful support (reasonable adjustments) implemented in 2024, out of 97% submitting evidence

towards it. The presentation focuses on the necessity and importance of listening to disabled students' experiences, embedding their wisdom in policy-making and academic practices and it ends with this (amongst others) question: *How can you use the statistics in your own activism?*

This question was used as a prompt to stimulate a debate among the participants, mostly students, to come up with concrete actions that could promote, enable and enact more equitable and inclusive practices in UK higher education, to inform policy at a higher level. It sought to provide an evidence-based approach to disabled students' processes of discrimination, speaking the language of accountability in an increasingly performative and neoliberal university (Peruzzo & Raaper, 2023).

Yet the care, the relativity of time and the active sabotaging of a fixed event schedule to make sure that everyone would be included in the launch of the report, are examples of different regimes of practices, the 'active' and activist practising of inclusion. In this short paper, I would like to present disabled students' activism as a necessary response to the exclusionary and ableist practices of a neoliberal university as well as an example, of a pocket of socially just practices that can actively enable more caring and inclusive ways of doing and being in higher education.

This paper emerges from a qualitative research project conducted between 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, a moment that intensified both the precarity and activism of disabled students in the United Kingdom. The research involved in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with eight disabled student officers. These participants, affiliated either with DSUK or active within their institutional student unions, reflected on their lived experiences of ableism in higher education and described the diverse ways they engaged in activist work.

Theoretically, this study drew on critical disability studies, Foucauldian notions of subjectivity and ethics of care (Foucault, 2000; Ball, 2015; Ball & Olmedo, 2013), and post-structural critiques of neoliberal education governance (Goodley, 2016; Peruzzo & Raaper, 2023). We understand activism not simply as protest or public mobilisation but as encompassing relational, embodied, and slow practices that are both personal and political. Our methodological approach was qualitative, narrative, and collaborative, seeking to honour participants' reflexive engagement with their own activism. The research aimed to explore the specific strategies disabled student officers use to resist exclusionary institutional practices, and how they cultivate alternative imaginaries of care and justice within the neoliberal university.

I write this paper from a situated position as a critical disability studies scholar and disabled people's ally, committed to educational equity and inclusion. While my primary role in this research is academic, I acknowledge the activist orientation of this work and the deep responsibility I feel to the communities and movements I am learning from. My engagement with disabled students and organisations like DSUK is informed by feminist and decolonial research ethics that emphasise co-production, solidarity, and reflexivity. This piece reflects a commitment to challenging ableism not only analytically but also structurally and affectively. As Sara Ahmed (2021) points out, institutions often resist transformation, and acts of complaint, either through formal channels or activist resistance, are themselves forms of institutional labour. The students in this study carry that labour, confronting ableism not only by navigating hostile systems but by making space for different ways of being.

The 'neoliberal university', as discussed here, refers to a modality of governing higher education that is shaped by market logics, managerialism, and individualised performance metrics. It is

characterised by an emphasis on competition, speed, audit, and efficiency, often at the expense of inclusion, care, and relationality (Ball, 2015; Borrelli et al., 2019). Within this context, disabled students are often required to conform to norms of able-bodied productivity while navigating inaccessible systems and limited accommodations.

The concept of ‘slow activism’, central to this paper, refers to forms of resistance that are relational, process-oriented, and rooted in care. Rather than relying on visibility, confrontation, or rapid outcomes, slow activism unfolds through practices such as building community, storytelling, mutual aid, artistic expression, and intentional deceleration. These are activist strategies that prioritise sustainability, accessibility, and emotional labour, often practiced in ways that remain under-recognised in dominant academic or political narratives (Kimball et al., 2016; Leigh & Brown, 2020). Drawing from Akemi Nishida’s (2022) work on ‘just care’, this form of activism is deeply relational, operating within and against systems of oppression that demand speed and disconnection. Disabled students’ acts of care are not supplementary to their resistance, they are the resistance.

In what follows, I present an account of disabled students’ activism as both a response to systemic ableism and as a form of caring labour that reconfigures what activism looks and feels like within higher education. These students are not only resisting oppressive norms, they are actively enacting alternative futures for a more just and inclusive university.

An Ableist Institution: Higher Education in Neoliberal Times

Ableism refers to the systemic marginalisation of disabled people and the cultural framing of disability as an undesirable or abnormal condition. It is embedded in societal norms that privilege able-bodiedness and neurotypicality, operating in tandem with other axes of oppression such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. As a discourse, ableism works through visible and invisible mechanisms: from discriminatory policies to everyday assumptions about competence, productivity, and normalcy (Campbell, 2009; Wolbring, 2008). It constructs disability not as a natural aspect of human variation but as a deviation to be corrected or contained, sustaining inequality across all areas of life, including education, employment, housing, healthcare, and public life (Dolmage, 2017).

Within modern institutions like universities, ableism is not incidental, it is structural. Following a Foucauldian analysis, disability is constructed through discourses that classify and regulate bodies based on their perceived utility and productivity (Foucault, 1975). Higher education, rather than resisting these logics, often upholds and legitimises them. Despite claims of equity and inclusion, the university system continues to view disability through a medical lens, treating it as an individual deficit that must be managed through accommodations rather than addressing the institutional barriers that create exclusion in the first place (Goodley, 2016).

These intersecting inequalities are compounded by rigid academic expectations that valorise speed, output, and cognitive exceptionalism, standards that exclude many ways of knowing, being, and learning (Titchkosky, 2011). Even when access measures exist, they are frequently framed through the accommodation model, which treats accessibility as an add-on rather than a foundational principle. This model typically requires disabled students and staff to provide formal documentation to receive support, reinforcing the notion that disability is a personal problem, rather than a systemic failure of inclusion. Instead of transforming the environment to be universally accessible, the onus remains on the individual to adapt (Dolmage, 2017). As Hamraie (2017) argues, these reactive practices entrench exclusion by normalising environments that continue to cater to a narrow

vision of the ideal student or academic, performative, able-bodied, able-minded, white, man and upper or middle-class (Borrelli et al., 2019).

The persistence of ableism in higher education is inseparable from broader neoliberal and Eurocentric frameworks that dominate academia. These frameworks privilege individualism, competition, and quantifiable performance over community, care, and epistemic diversity (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Success is measured by standards that leave little room for disabled scholars and students, especially those whose lives and learning do not align with institutional norms. Under the current global emphasis on market-driven education, universities are incentivised to prioritise metrics and rankings over accessibility and justice (Peruzzo, 2022). As a result, disabled individuals are not just expected to navigate inaccessible systems but also to reshape themselves in line with the university's expectations, often at the cost of their health, identity, and autonomy. The logic is clear: access is conditional, inclusion is limited, and success is predicated on conformity. But critical disability scholarship urges us to challenge this logic, to move beyond accommodation, and to fundamentally reimagine higher education as a space that recognises disability not as a deficit, but as a vital and generative aspect of human diversity.

Disabled Students and Caring Activism: Another Higher Education is Possible

DSUK were established within this grim context. They describe themselves as 'a community research organisation run by current and former disabled students. We share disabled students' insights to inform policy and improve accessibility in Higher Education' [1]. They know that they stand on the shoulders of important figures in disability activism in the Anglo-Saxon world, both in the United Kingdom and the United States. Disabled people, in both the United States and England, have historically actively resisted the exclusionary structures of higher education and challenged its discriminatory practices. In the U.S., figures like Ed Roberts and the Rolling Quads led groundbreaking efforts during the 1960s and 70s to transform university campuses into more accessible environments. Their activism played a crucial role in the eventual passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, the first federal legislation prohibiting disability-based discrimination (Danforth, 2018). Meanwhile, in England, movements such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, alongside influential disabled scholars like Michael Oliver, Colin Barnes, and Sally French, reshaped the national discourse around disability (UPIAS, 1976). Their work laid the foundation for the social model of disability, politicising what had been predominantly medicalised understandings of impairment, and led to the establishment of the first iteration of the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) in 1974, whereby the state would support disabled students' material needs during their higher education experience.

Currently, the activism of disabled students in the UK's higher education enables us to address contemporary issues and the problematising what is happening within universities. In England, recent reductions in the DSA have led to significant delays in implementing reasonable adjustments for disabled students. These cuts have deepened pre-existing inequalities, intensifying the barriers disabled students face in pursuing their education (Gibson, 2012; Peruzzo, 2022). Justified under the guise of austerity, neoliberal reforms have ushered in new forms of ableist exclusion within an already strained higher education system. These intensified forms of discrimination have reignited disability activism within student unions and organisations. Initially, this took the form of investigative reports exposing systemic injustices, such as the reports by the UCL Disabled Students' Network (2020) and the Cambridge University Students' Union (2018). More significantly, these movements culminated in the formation of Disabled Students UK (DSUK).

DSUK coordinates activism on a UK-wide scale through efforts such as publishing reports, like *The 2024 Access Insights Report* and *Going Back is Not a Choice* (2022) and offering consultancy on inclusive practice to higher education institutions. This has created a unified platform for challenging ableism at a structural level.

Yet our engagement with disabled students, emerging from a research project Dr Rille Raaper and I conducted between 2020 and 2021, based on in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with eight disabled students across different stages of study, documented a powerful and mostly not ostentatious way of doing activism. The disabled students we talked to were all either affiliated with DSUK or served as disabled student officers in their respective unions and reflected on personal experiences of ableism and the broader institutional dynamics affecting their peers. They shared with us the ways in which they were dealing with and facing ableist institutions and how they would relate to the relationship with their own self to strengthen their resistance in ableist institutions. The student officers described a range of activist strategies. Some worked to pressure senior leadership teams for quicker implementation of reasonable adjustments, while others sat on equality and diversity committees to push accessibility up the institutional agenda. Several developed online guides or campaigns highlighting inaccessible teaching practices and offering inclusive alternatives. Others ran workshops for staff and students about disability justice or created peer networks where disabled students could share experiences, find solidarity, and co-develop strategies for survival and resistance. As Akemi Nishida (2022) argues, care under oppression is never neutral; it is both a necessity and a political act.

This is especially significant given how disabled students often internalise the ableist logics of academia, a dynamic that Campbell (2009) describes as ‘internalised ableism’. The students in this study were not only resisting external barriers, but also negotiating the psychological costs of working within systems that consistently devalue their ways of knowing, moving, and being. Their activism, then, becomes a way of reclaiming space, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, from institutions that demand their assimilation. This relationship encompassed the ‘whole range of practices that constitute, define, organise, and instrumentalise the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other’ (Foucault, 2000, p. 300). Their activism reflected an ethics of care rooted in the self and extended toward the academic community, ultimately contributing to a broader civic transformation. Within this frame, their work as disabled student officers could be seen as fostering democratic, caring, and critically aware subjectivities and communities. Eventually, the work that disabled student officers (and DSUK) were doing highlighted how student-led communities can generate rich insights into improving accessibility, participation, and the overall quality of the higher education experience.

Through their activism, disabled students directly challenged the neoliberal and ableist logics embedded within English universities. They revealed how resistance can take on new forms, underpinned by ethics of care, creative expression, and collective solidarity. In being activists, these students were also political subjects, navigating the complex interplay between personal experience and systemic injustice. Their reflective processes lead them to reject the economic management of bodily difference, resisting reductive understandings of disability as a medical issue to be individually adjusted for.

Crucially, these processes of self-care and resistance were not isolated. They inherently involved engagement with others, including students, faculty, and broader university communities. As the work of Ball (2015) and Ball and Olmedo (2013) suggests, care for the self is always in dialogue

with care for others, and through this mutual engagement, students begin to see themselves and their communities differently. Acts of care, when practised collectively, foster new possibilities for inclusion and resistance. The disabled student officers interviewed exemplified a form of ‘slow activism’ rooted in creativity, collaboration, and attention to individual and collective needs. These countercultural practices presented a powerful challenge to dominant ableist norms. Their activism illustrated that alternative forms of resistance are both necessary and possible, provided there is a community willing to imagine and enact different ways of being.

Ultimately, disabled students’ accounts of ableism exposed how universities continue to reproduce a narrow ideal of the student, independent, able-bodied, and unencumbered by the need for accommodations. Through practices of care, critical reflection, and collective resistance, disabled students offer a compelling vision for rethinking diversity politics in higher education. Their activism promotes a more inclusive and democratic academic culture, one that integrates individual experiences with collective efforts for transformation. Organisations like DSUK play a crucial role in this work, helping to disseminate equitable practices across institutions and laying the foundation for more caring and socially just university experiences.

For a Nurturing University

Following the launch of the 2024 Access Insights report, DSUK and disabled student officers continued to disseminate its findings strategically. Quantitative data was paired with lived experience to open up institutional conversations, influence decision-makers, and make space for change within a university system that demands evidence, accountability, and market value. While these forms of engagement may appear to conform to the metrics-driven logic of neoliberalism, they were also subversive: disabled students were using the university’s own language to critique its exclusions. This echoes Sara Ahmed’s (2012, 2021) analysis of complaint as institutional labour, work that is often invisibilised, pathologised, or dismissed. Student activists, in this sense, are performing ‘diversity work’ by exposing the gap between institutional rhetoric and practice. Their tactical use of data, testimony, and policy language becomes a form of subversion, not co-option.

Crucially, these activist practices were not limited to formal representation or data-driven advocacy. Students also described slow, relational, and community-based forms of resistance: building supportive networks, fostering a distinct disability culture, and adopting artistic and affective strategies to reclaim agency. Rather than rejecting dominant norms outright, they nurtured alternatives, modes of care, solidarity, and presence that directly challenged the high-speed, output-driven culture of academia. Their practices resonate with Foucault’s notion of the ethics of care (Foucault, 2000) and with more recent feminist and disability scholarship that recognises self-care as collective and political (Ahmed, 2021; Nishida, 2022).

In this way, disabled student activists enacted a distinctive and potentially transformative kind of activism. They showed that it is possible to push back against neoliberal rationalities not only by confronting them directly, but by embodying alternative values. Their reflections make visible the narrow and exclusionary model of the ‘normal student’ and open space for more capacious, interdependent visions of learning and belonging.

This paper has traced how disabled students are enacting activism within and against the ableist logics of the neoliberal university. Their practices reveal that activism does not always announce itself loudly; it can emerge through slow, persistent acts of care, through storytelling, peer support,

lobbying, and relational presence. These students offer a vital reimagining of what it means to resist, centring sustainability, interdependence, and lived expertise.

Rather than conforming to the myth of the hyper-productive, independent student, they foreground forms of ‘slow activism’ that make space for those who have historically been excluded. In doing so, they do not simply critique the academy, they actively remake it. As Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh (2021) have shown, ableist academic cultures extract labour while erasing those who do not conform. The students in this study push back through refusal, creativity, and mutual care.

This contribution adds to critical disability scholarship and research on student activism by making visible the nuanced and strategic ways disabled students resist marginalisation. Their activism is both outward-facing and inwardly sustaining. As Sara Ahmed (2012, 2021) reminds us, the labour of challenging institutions often falls to those they exclude, yet in this labour lies the possibility of imagining otherwise. Ultimately, disabled student officers do more than navigate oppressive structures. They transform exclusion into solidarity, complaint into collective insight, and marginalisation into a shared platform for justice. As Garland-Thomson (2007) writes, these narratives reshape institutional structures, and as this paper argues, they also shape more caring, inclusive, and democratic futures for higher education.

References

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822395324>

Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint*. Duke University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478022336>

Ball, S. J. (2015). Subjectivity as a site of struggle: Refusing neoliberalism? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(8), 1129–1146.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1044072>

Ball, S. J., & Olmedo, A. (2013). Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentalities. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(1), 85–96.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.740678>

Borrelli, D., Gavrilu, M., Spanò, E., & Stazio, M. (2019). Another university is possible: Towards an idea of meridian university. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(3), 16–39.

<https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2019-3-2>

Brown, N., & Leigh, J. (2021). *Ableism in academia: Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education*. UCL Press.

Cambridge University Students’ Union. (2018). *Substantial disadvantage: Reviewing the implementation of disabled students’ academic adjustments at the University of Cambridge* [Report].

University of Cambridge.

<https://www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Substantial-Disadvantage-Report-on-Academic-Reasonable-Adjustments-web.pdf>

Campbell, F. K. (2009). *Contours of ableism: The production of disability and abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230245181>

Danforth, S. (2018). Becoming the rolling quads: Disability politics at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s. *History of Education Quarterly*, 58(4), 506–536.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2018.29>

Disabled Students UK. (2022). *Going back is not a choice: Higher education accessibility lessons from the pandemic*. Disabled Students UK.

Disabled Students UK. (2024). *The 2024 access insights report*. Disabled Students UK.

<https://disabledstudents.co.uk/dsuk-launches-the-2024-access-insights-report/>

Dolmage, J. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press.

<https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9708722>

Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (2000). On the genealogy of ethics: An overview of work in progress. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Essential works of Foucault 1954–1984* (Vol. 1, pp. 253–280). Penguin Books.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2007). Shape structures story: Fresh and feisty stories about disability. *Narrative*, 15(1), 113–123.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2007.0005>

Gibson, S. (2012). Narrative accounts of university education: Socio-cultural perspectives of students with disabilities. *Disability & Society*, 27(3), 353–369.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.654987>

Goodley, D. (2016). *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Hamraie, A. (2017). *Building access: Universal design and the politics of disability*. University of Minnesota Press.

<https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9781517901639.001.0001>

Kimball, E. W., Moore, A., Vaccaro, A., Troiano, P. F., & Newman, B. (2016). College students with disabilities redefine activism: Self-advocacy, storytelling, and collective action. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 9(3), 245–260.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000031>

Leigh, J., & Brown, N. (2020). Internalised ableism: Of the political and the personal. In N. Brown & J. Leigh (Eds.), *Ableism in academia: Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education* (pp. 164–181). UCL Press.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13xprjr.16>

Meekosha, H., & Shuttleworth, R. (2009). What's so 'critical' about critical disability studies? *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 15(1), 47–75.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2009.11910861>

Nishida, A. (2022). *Just care: Messy entanglements of disability, dependency, and desire*. Temple University Press.

Peruzzo, F. (2022). The model of becoming aware: Disabled subjectivities, policy enactment and new exclusions in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 37(3), 482–504.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2020.1856415>

Peruzzo, F., & Raaper, R. (2023). The making of the activist disabled subject: Disability and political activism in English higher education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 45(2), 173–186.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2023.2271406>

Titchkosky, T. (2011). *The question of access: Disability, space, meaning*. University of Toronto Press.

UCL Disabled Students' Network. (2020). *Disability discrimination faced by UCL students and recommended measures*. UCL.

<https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/disability-discriminationfaced-by-ucl-students-and-recommended-measures>

UPIAS. (1976). *Fundamental principles of disability*. UPIAS.

Wolbring, G. (2008). The politics of ableism. *Development*, 51(2), 252–258.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2008.17>

Recommended Citation

Peruzzo, F. (2025). Activism as a form of caring: Disabled students' activism to refuse ableism in higher education institutions. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 8(22).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2025.22.4

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting [guidelines](#).

Francesca Peruzzo

Francesca Peruzzo is a Research Fellow in Educational Equity and Policy at the University of Birmingham. Her research interests lie in the intersection between politics, policy, education governance and inclusion, and post-structural and decolonial approaches. She has published widely in the fields of sociology of education and critical disability studies, policy sociology and critical inclusion studies. She is the author of the book (2023) *Students, Teachers, Families, and a Socially Just Education: Rewriting the Grammar of Schooling to Unsettle Identities* (with Julie Allan) published by Lived Places Publishing.