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Making Academia More Accessible

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ABSTRACT

Academia can be a challenging place to work and academics who have a disability, neurodiversity or chronic illness are further disadvantaged, as non-stereotypical ways of working are not necessarily supported or catered for. The remit of this paper is to provide practical ideas and recommendations to address accessibility issues in events and conferences as a first step to improving existing working conditions. We start with providing a brief overview of and background to the issues of ableism, disabilities, chronic illnesses and neurodiversities in academia. We then offer a detailed description of the organisational and developmental strategies relating to the Ableism in Academia conference to practically demonstrate how accessibility can be achieved. Despite vast literature available on theorisations of reasonable adjustments and some individual handbooks on conference accessibility, noted the absence of a systematic write-up of a case study that would demonstrate the thought processes required for the organisation of a fully accessible and inclusive event. This paper provides almost a step-by-step rationale and rundown of the decisions that had to be taken in order to facilitate an accessible event. After a brief consideration of challenges we encountered along the way, we share personal reflections regarding the event and future developments.

Keywords: ableism; inclusive education; accessibility; disability; conference

Introduction

Academia can be a challenging place to work. This is due to a number of factors including high workloads coupled with increasingly measured, bureaucratised and managerial structures (Tilak, 2008; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2013) such as the excellence frameworks (Watermeyer, 2015), concerns about the impacts of consumerisation of UK HE, austerity, (Feigenbaum & Iqani, 2013) and the increasing number of precarious contracts in the sector (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005; Watts & Robertson, 2011).

In this context academics who have a disability, neurodiversity or chronic illness are further disadvantaged, as ways of working that do not meet the commonly accepted standards are not necessarily catered for or supported. In the harsh reality of academia where candidates for jobs can be considered 'too good' (Guardian, 2018), this leads to academics feeling that they are unable to 'admit to their shortcomings' and so do not declare their additional needs, illnesses or disabilities. Whilst 16% of working age adults have a disability (GOV, 2014), less than 4% of academics report having a disability, chronic illness, or neurodiversity to their place of work (HESA, 2017). Brown and Leigh (2018) discussed the 'absence' of these academics, and the reasons that those who live with invisible disability, chronic illness or neurodiversity might choose not to declare their conditions: the stigma of disability means that the decision to declare is risky on the one hand, and a very personal one of acceptance on the other.

If, however, the numbers of disabled, chronically ill and neurodiverse are higher within academia than may be visible initially from numbers of staff with declared conditions, then something must be said and done about existing working conditions. With this paper, we provide practical ideas and recommendations to address accessibility issues in conferences and events as a first step, as a more detailed exploration of how different ways of working can be considered or catered for would by far exceed the scope of this practical and practice-based article. Using the organisation of the conference Ableism in Academia 2018 (UCL, 2018 #AIA2018) as a case study, this article offers insight into the detailed levels of thought required to make day-to-day work and events such as conferences accessible and inclusive.

We start with providing a brief overview of and background to the issues of ableism, disabilities, chronic illnesses and neurodiversities in academia. We then offer a detailed description of the organisational and developmental strategies relating to the Ableism in Academia conference to practically demonstrate how improved accessibility can be achieved. Despite vast literature available on theorisations of reasonable adjustments and some individual handbooks on conference accessibility, we could not find a systematic write-up of a case study that would demonstrate the thought processes required for the organisation of a fully accessible and inclusive event. This paper therefore provides almost a step-by-step rationale and rundown of the decisions that had to be taken. After a brief consideration of challenges we encountered along the way, we share personal reflections regarding the event and future developments.



Ableism in academia

What is ableism?

The declaration rates of disability within academia highlight that there is a concern that the academy is an environment that is intolerant and non-accepting of non-stereotypical ways of working. It is acknowledged that higher education students are more likely to ask for adjustments to cater for their needs than staff in academia (Brown & Leigh, 2018). There is a clear, personal cost-benefit analysis for those affected by chronic illness, invisible disabilities or neurodiversity on whether or not to declare their conditions and concerns. It is also true that for students this analysis may be more likely to fall towards declaring than for staff as they have more to gain and less to lose. However, even these declaration statistics are skewed, as they do not account for those students who do not enter or attend university in the first place, because they find or perceive the environment too intolerant.

It is not the declaration of conditions or special needs that is most relevant here. As stated, in cases where a disability is not immediately obvious to others, it is a personal decision and choice. Instead the issue of concern is the prevalence of ableism in academia. Ableism is “a network of beliefs, process 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” (Campbell, 2001, p. 44). The root understanding of ableism relates to the discrimination and oppression experienced by those with disabilities (Overboe, 1999). Nowadays, it is acknowledged that ableism is more complex than merely a binary between disabled and non-disabled and needs to include intersectional considerations, as it is “an under-determined bias” (Scuro, 2017, p. xix). Systemic institutional ableism is rife (Beratan, 2008). In recent years, ableism has become a more established field of studies within or at least related to disability studies and discourses. Whilst categorisations and definitions have experienced shifts, there is some common understanding that ableism is very much ingrained in the social context. Indeed, ableist attitudes are so deeply rooted within ourselves that we internalise certain ways of working and expect ourselves as well as others to meet these requirements, with some potential adjustments to ‘close the gap’ and ‘make up for the shortfalls’. Any disability, chronic illness or neurodiversity is seen as a deficit. In reality, adjustments are attempts to provide quick fixes for more systemic problems and concerns around accessibility in academia.

Accessibility in academia

As we have seen, ableism is a complex concern and issue within academia, and indeed within society. However, as a first step towards a less ableist, more inclusive, equal and equitable environment, strategies to enhance accessibility must be valued. So, how is accessibility addressed or achieved in academia? The answer to this question is via ‘reasonable adjustments’ and/or ‘access to work adjustments’ (see for example, Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001; Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004).

Assessments of individuals’ special needs in relation to disabilities, chronic illnesses and neurodiversities are routinely carried out. These assessments then lead to the identification of specific measures that can be taken to ‘alleviate the needs’ and ‘minimise the impact’ of illness, disability and neurodiversity. For students, these strategies are implemented within the scope of individual learning plans and summaries of reasonable adjustments; for staff in academia, the strategies are related to access to work adjustments. These reasonable adjustments are statutory as per the Disability Discrimination Act (Gooding, 2000).

There has, however, always been critique of this model of ensuring inclusive education, as this model relies solely on the recognition of deficiencies and shortcomings (Wingate, 2007), and there is a discrepancy regarding what is considered ‘reasonable’ (Riddell & Weedon, 2006). On the other hand, there is a general consensus that actions are required in order to level the playing field amongst students and to respond to individual needs (Konur, 2006; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Strategies mentioned and requested tend to relate to making curricula barrier-free, encouraging institutional support systems (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010) and more specifically to change methods and means of teaching through reconsidering presentation techniques, for example (Konur, 2006).

In the context of the widening participation discourses within higher education, inclusion and inclusive education are being revisited. Increasingly, it is thought that reasonable adjustments should not be necessary, that these strategies should be available to all and everyone. Firstly, this is because adjustments often highlight the special status of those who require them (Grimes, Southgate, Scevak, & Buchanan, 2018). And secondly, there is a recognition that ableism cannot be counteracted with reasonable adjustments (Collins, Azmat, & Rentschler, 2018). Within compulsory education the trend leans towards a universal design for learning (Rose & Meyer, 2006); a trend that is slowly catching on within the tertiary sector (Dolmage, 2017).

Context

The attitudinal shift described above is certainly to be welcomed and strongly encouraged. However, at the same time, there is a need for practical advice and ideas on how to make academia more accessible. This is not to simplify matters or to promote a quick-fix culture. Instead, this is in response to the acknowledgement that academia is so ableist, that as a collective we do not have sufficient experience to know how to do things differently.

This was one of the reasons for our organising the Ableism in Academia event. We wanted to provide a platform for speakers with chronic illnesses, disabilities and neurodiversities to explore ableism in academia from the vantage points of their personal experiences. At the same time, we wanted to create a model for making academia accessible. In the run-up to the conference, we



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came across many recommendations regarding making conferences accessible (see Accessibility references an addendum to the cited literature references). However, there was a serious lack of discussion where practicalities and challenges were concerned. In the following, we offer some general ideas for making conferences or events accessible, before detailing some of the necessary steps and decisions when planning for inclusivity and full accessibility.

A practical approach to making conferences accessible

As per the conference theme and the remit of the event, we actively decided to make the Ableism in Academia event #AIA2018 as accessible and inclusive as possible. Our aim was to demonstrate the achievability of inclusive practice as well as model best practice in conference organisation. From our own experiences we were aware of the adaptations and requirements that might make an event more accessible. However, we were very aware that accessibility is multi-faceted and that we needed to consult with a wide range of academics so that we could consider adaptations that we might not necessarily have thought of. The working group for the conference included about 12 academics across the UK who had expressed a wish to be involved. This group had experience of a wide range of disabilities, chronic illnesses and neurodiversities.

We wanted to consider the impact and adjustments necessary for a wide range of conditions. Including (but not limited to): being d/Deaf, blind, d/Deafblind, visual impairments, processing impairments, chronic fatigue, sensory processing issues, wheel chairs (both manual and powered), mobility aids (such as crutches and walkers) and specific dietary requirements.

In brief, the event had to take place in a room that was accessible, with enough room to manoeuvre wheel chairs and mobility aids. We needed access to nearby toilets and specific disabled toilets, which would open with a RADAR key. In order to increase accessibility for those with neurodiversities or sensory processing issues, we organised a separate space to be a quiet room, which was equipped with a sofa, blankets, cushions and other items. In order to increase comfort in the conference room itself, we distributed some cushions and blankets. The event was live streamed so those wishing to follow and not be in the busy conference room could sit outside in the foyer. The livestream was broadcast with live captions, and this made the event accessible to those who were not able to attend on the day. The captioning was also projected in the conference room so that those who were hard of hearing could access the talks. The food was organised to take into account specific and anticipated dietary requirements of delegates, and we delivered water bottles and food options to tables. BSL interpreters were hired to provide accessibility to d/Deaf participants. Two interpreters worked throughout the day in order to translate and interpret the talks and workshops. On request we provided height adjustable chairs to aid d/Deafblind interpretation. All delegates had a conference bag, which included a copy of the conference programme, abstracts for the talks, a notebook, pens, post-it notes and a pencil case. Large print versions were available on request. And we even had a water bowl ready for service dogs, although none attended on the day.

Due to the popularity of the conference, overflow or break-out events were organised at three partner institutes, where the livestream from the main conference room was screened with the live captions. The attendees at those events were able to follow the talks, then have their own discussions and debates, and joined in with the main event via Twitter, our dedicated Moodle page, a virtual learning environment platform that is commonly used within University College of London and padlet, an electronic version of a noticeboard that is accessible via the internet.

The total spending for the conference and for financing all of the above-mentioned adjustments came to £4,600. The largest sums of that amount went towards the live captioning, the live streaming, the BSL interpreters and an academic film-maker. As the event was free of charge for delegates, the entire budget was fully funded through sponsoring and volunteers readily giving their time.

The concept of creating an accessible conference was easy, but the actual reality of fulfilling this, was a much more complex task. In the following, we will highlight some of the key considerations in relation to the quiet room, catering and most importantly the use of technology.

Quiet room

The quiet room was located across the foyer from the main conference room. This was a darkened, quiet and private space available only to conference delegates. Inside the room were several comfy sofas so that people could lie down for a rest or even a nap. The room had close access to the toilets, and a range of equipment designed to enhance and improve comfort. This equipment included soft blankets, memory foam cushions, warm socks, eye masks, ear plugs, water bottles and the like. The space was used throughout the day for participants who were overwhelmed, who needed to withdraw, who needed a quiet space and those who needed to regroup. Conferences are by their nature, busy and overwhelming. The quiet room allowed people to dip in and dip out again, to rest, and to return. It was an additional space for the conference delegates and volunteers to use as they needed, and an easy option to improve accessibility at any conference or event.

Catering

The organisers' experiences of disability and chronic illness included limitations around diet. Jennifer and Nicole have both been to conferences and events where either we had not had the opportunity to state our dietary requirements, or if we had, they had not been catered for. At one specific conference it was highlighted that we could either have dairy-free food or gluten free food, the



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message being you cannot be vegan AND coeliac. We had to buy our own lunch and one of us ended up snacking on a bowl of cauliflower as that was the only option available. Dietary requirements are a difficult matter because of a lack of understanding in society. For some, food restrictions are deliberate choices and so 'some gluten' would not matter. For others however, food intolerances and allergies are significant and could potentially lead to dangerous and life-threatening situations. Whilst it may not appear to be 'a big deal', imagine every time food is provided having to explain exactly what you can or cannot eat, often having to justify why and graphically explain what might happen to you if you had that food, or having to bring your own lunch provisions and eat separately from the other delegates. This is exactly the kind of ableism that affects those with food issues.

We were aware that dairy and gluten are food types that are commonly eliminated by those who have restricted diets due to health issues. We chose to make sure that all the food options offered for lunch were vegan and gluten free. The university caterers were unable to provide food that met our requirements, and so we found a caterer, Neds Noodles (<http://nedsnoodlebar.com/>) willing to deliver hot food. We offered delegates a menu of three options, with a full list of ingredients given, so that they could make an informed choice of sugar-free, soy-free sauces on rice or rice noodles. We provided 'free-from' snacks mid-morning and mid-afternoon, which were sourced from a supermarket and laid out with packaging so that people could read the full ingredients and information. We also provided a range of fruit and bottles of water.

The consideration of catering went a step further. We provided food for delegates, their personal assistants, the technology teams and volunteers, and we also considered how attendees would be able to get to their chosen menu. Every person present had their lunch choice written on their name tag, and at lunch volunteers took the boxes of food to the tables. Each volunteer was assigned one lunch option, which was then taken to attendees, as per the colour-coded and numbered name tags. This approach meant that there was no crush or lunch queue to contend with. Through this approach we could be certain that all attendees received the food they ordered, that there was no shortage of specific meals or choices, and that attendees with mobility issues were not disadvantaged and would remain independent from other people's help to be able to navigate their mobility aids, food platters, drinks glasses.

Technology

The use of technology required particularly detailed consideration, as it was not merely a matter of choosing suitable technologies for livestreaming and live captioning. The main concern and issue around technology revolved around the fact that the technologies needed to work together effectively to produce a seamless and effective presentation of the conference content and to ensure that each user had a smooth presentation experience.

User-centred planning - know your audience

We firstly had to factor in three main audience types that would be situated in three different locations all viewing and experiencing the conference in different ways. These were attendees in the face to face live session, attendees at the breakout event venues at various universities receiving the live stream, and online users from across the world. This meant that we considered the final conference presentation from each of their views and selected our final technology in order to benefit all three audiences as much as possible.

The first venue we considered was the face to face audience in the live session. We had 80 attendees booked to attend the event in person. We designed the room layout in advance, which meant that we already knew where the BSL reserved seating section would be, where the main seating area, food and snack area, main projectors, rostrum and main walkways would be located. This then allowed us to plan where the technologies would be and what we would need to factor in. We then thought about our breakout event users' experience and visualised what we wanted them to experience. We lastly considered the online users across the world, who would be viewing the same livestream as the satellite sites. We knew that if the output was good for viewing in a 60-seat breakout event site, the online users would also get a professional conference livestream as we were publishing the same feed. After analysing these audiences' needs we knew that we wanted to provide captions both for the face to face live audience as well as for the breakout event sites and online users. In conjunction, we also wanted our breakout event sites and online users to receive a video stream of the speaker, and to be able to view the PowerPoint Slides.

Live caption considerations

In order to cater for d/Deaf and hearing-impaired audience members as well as those with cognitive disorders or other processing challenges, we wanted to provide live captions. We decided to display the live captions on the main projector screen which would automatically be visible to our face to face live audience, and as an additional benefit would also allow the captions to be livestreamed both to our breakout event sites and to our online audiences. This was possible due to our planned livestream technology which streamed the video feed of the speakers together with a side by side stream of the projector screen which would include the captions. This meant that our breakout event venues and online users would not need to view captions in a separate window, making the whole conference experience more seamless for our audiences. It also resulted in a more accessible post event recording that could be published for those that could not attend the event.

We had to make a careful decision on how much screen space to allow for the captions in conjunction with the PowerPoint and video feed. The captions needed to be large enough to be seen and give sufficient space for them to be viewed without hindering the PowerPoint slides. We finally decided on a 60-40 split with the PowerPoint taking the larger share, as the PowerPoint contained more text. The caption size could be controlled to fill the bottom split very effectively, and so this required less space. We



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incorporated a pre-conference and start of conference test with one of our breakout event venues to ensure that the caption feed was a legible size and that our 60-40 split gave an acceptable experience.

Our caption provider required us to perform a pre-test in the room, and to download and connect to them via zoom software. The provider of the live captioning had to connect into the room via the zoom software and listen in live during the conference. The pre-test was very important, as it allowed us to identify ahead of time that we needed administrator rights to install and run zoom for the live conference to ensure that our captioners could listen in. In the pre-test we found that the quality of the live captioning was good. However, in order to assist them we prepared the captioners team by sending them any pre-recorded presentations or videos with a transcript, and gave them access to all PowerPoint slides in advance. Live captioners may have difficulties hearing recorded material on the day. This was all to allow the captioners to be prepared for speakers who might use or discuss unfamiliar terms or technical language, and in order to avoid the captioners displaying 'unfamiliar term' or 'inaudible' every time those terms were used.

Lastly, if the captions are not to be livestreamed then it is crucial to publish the caption link both in advance and at the start of the event so online users can still benefit from and have access to the caption feed. Most caption providers offer this on a separate URL that can be published and viewed by attendees.

PowerPoint considerations

There are several methods of combining captions with PowerPoint slides. We decided not to complicate things and minimised the PowerPoint to the top part of the screen and expanded the caption feed to fill the lower part of the screen. However, when using this option, specific slideshow settings are required: in the 'Set Up Slide Show' options under the slide show tab. The show type 'Browsed by an individual (window)' must be selected. This ensures that the PowerPoint fills the assigned screen area and preserves the area below for the caption feed (PowerPoint, 2016).

It is also helpful to ask speakers to submit their PowerPoint presentations ahead of time. This allows time to combine all individual slides into one seamless PowerPoint presentation. This removes any delay in loading new speakers' PowerPoints which disrupts the conference and reduces the atmosphere and professionalism of the event. This also lowered the risk of captions being covered by switching PowerPoints.

Livestream considerations

Our livestream offer was provided by an in-house UCL Media Team who utilised the YouTube livestream service. They used professional cameras on tripods and a mixing desk that allowed them to stream the video feed of the speakers together with the images displayed on the projector screen as one single stream through YouTube. It is important to note that the livestream needed a dedicated internet port setup in the room to allow the livestream to take place, and this had to be setup in advance by our desktop teams to make a spare port live for use. We also ensured that both the YouTube livestream link and the caption link were published ahead of time to ensure that our online audience knew exactly where to go to join the conference.

It is also important to consider what should be displayed on the livestream during the lunch or during any planned breaks. This kind of decision has to be agreed in advance with the livestreaming provider so that relevant place holders can be displayed to online users at these times. As bespoke images can be displayed during the breaks, conference logos or programme details could potentially fill this downtime.

Camera view and recording considerations

As stated, the livestream was filmed by a professional crew using tripods and cameras. The film crew were able to ensure a professional service by paying attention to the following issues. It was important to protect the line of sight throughout the event. This included factoring in the different locations where speakers would stand and each speaker's possible movements, as the camera needed to follow them. It does not look professional if the camera view is obstructed by attendees' heads. Additionally, we had to be aware of issues in relation to rights and consent, ensuring that all attendees had signed a consent form to being filmed, or were seated in places where they would not be part of the footage. We had to protect a channel from where the camera was located through to the main speaker area and maintain this throughout the day. This meant ensuring that no chairs or tables were placed where attendees might move into the camera line of sight. To assist with this, the floor could have been marked out with small black tape to make it clear to all attending and those facilitating the event which areas needed to be kept clear. Similarly, it was beneficial to reserve a standing zone for speakers. This zone was based on the allowable camera line of sight before it was interrupted by attendees or other objects in the room. Again, this could have been marked out with tape on the floor to ensure that speakers would not go outside this reserved zone.

Video cameras and live streaming technology come with various wires and leads. In order to ensure they did not pose tripping hazards or obstructions for wheelchair users or participants with mobility challenges it was important to tape the wires down, ideally in areas where the reserved zones were not affected.

Facilitating online user contributions and questions

We decided to encourage our online audience to ask questions and contribute to the event. There were a number of options to facilitate this, but in the end, we decided to allow these questions to be contributed via Twitter. To allow this to happen a hashtag and a Twitter account were set up for the conference. All attendees were encouraged to use these to contribute. During the conference,



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Twitter was used heavily and was facilitated by the event organiser with the help of three volunteers using the one dedicated Twitter account. We had in excess of 300 tweets during the conference, with the discussion and conversations continuing afterwards.

Rostrum and microphone considerations

The height of the rostrum that the speakers used needed to be considered carefully, as most are too high for wheelchair users. We planned for this and provided clickers to move the PowerPoint slides rather than each speaker needing to reach for the rostrum computer. We also ensured that each speaker was given a clip-on microphone rather than having to struggle to get these from the high and sometimes inaccessible rostrum.

For the questions and discussion elements we had volunteers assigned in advance to be in charge of roving microphones so that they would hand microphones to the audience members. This enabled the conference to run smoothly by lowering the disruption to the audience and flow of the event. When planning to use roving microphones microphone handlers must be ready to help the audience hold the microphone close enough to their mouth, and to prompt anyone who is not, to do so. If there are not enough volunteers or microphones to facilitate roving microphones, then the chair or facilitator must ensure that any questions from the audience are repeated by the speaker. This is crucial in order to include hearing impaired delegates, but also to ensure good sound quality for online audiences and captioners.

Testing the technology

Before the event, we carried out a range of tests to ensure that the technology and all systems would communicate well with one another for the best possible outcome on the day. We did a full room test in the main conference room, and also at and with the break-out locations booked for the conference. The checks included testing the sound quality, the caption feed, the PowerPoint and caption feed ratio and positions to visualise where on screen these would be placed. In order to ensure that sound levels and screen positions were adequate for all seated we scheduled two tests with our audio-visual team, one several weeks in advance of the event and one on the morning of the conference. Although this testing may appear to be overly cautious, we certainly could not have done without that level of care, as we were bringing together teams that were not usually working together (in-house audio visual team, the film crew, live streamers and captioners). We used the final check on the day to ensure we had enough clip-on microphones for the speakers, as well as handheld microphones for any audience questions after each presentation. During the event, several audio-visual team members, volunteers and organisers regularly checked on the livestream feed to ensure that it was focused on speakers and no one was obstructing the camera line of sight. This allowed us to make minor adjustments throughout the day.

Challenges

Despite the meticulous planning, there were a number of challenges in organising this event, which we would like to outline here. This section is not meant to be a justification for not planning an inclusive event like ours, but merely an opportunity to reflect on and learn from our personal experiences.

Ticketing

The booking of tickets was challenging, in part because of the event's overwhelming popularity. When it was originally conceived, the organisers envisioned a small event of about 40 people and released 40 tickets on Eventbrite. All the tickets were registered for within 24 hours, and after some consultation, the event size was doubled to 80 people. The remaining tickets were gone within a week. These ticket registrations happened well in advance of the call for papers and advertising and promotion of the event. As the call went out and promotion and word of mouth spread, the organisers were inundated with requests for more tickets which we were unable to grant. Some people were able to attend as volunteers, and three institutions organised live-streamed 'break-out' sessions on their campuses.

Ticketing was also problematic due to the nature of the conference and the topic of interest. The conference was marketed as fully inclusive and accessible and therefore attracted a much higher number of disabled, chronically ill and neurodiverse delegates than conventional academic conferences would. This resulted in more ticket fluctuations. Tickets were cancelled and returned, and although we were able to re-allocate most returned tickets, there were still unused tickets on the day. This was due to tickets having been cancelled at the last minute and delegates not attending on the day because of their conditions having aggravated unexpectedly.

Catering

Collecting choices for lunch was challenging, in part because the survey to do this was distributed as some institutions in the UK were on strike. The deadline for orders was extended, and personal emails sent to delegates to ask for their choice. Although we stated that we would not provide food if a choice was not made, we took the decision to order some extra. That, combined with the cancellations and no-shows led to there being excess food in the end. We were able to share our lunch boxes with attendees at a local break-out event. Eventually, any left-over food was distributed to homeless people near St Pancras Railway station.

We had to outsource the food delivery, as the university was unable to provide suitable food for the event. Specific dietary needs are an adjustment and an accessibility issue. Delivery of the food, both from the supermarket and Neds Noodle Bar was challenging, due to the inner-city location of the event and bad traffic. This meant that the snacks and water bottles did not arrive until the event was underway, and the lunch was delayed slightly.



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British Sign Language interpretation

There were challenges around the contractual requirements and hiring of the BSL interpreters. The organisers contacted over 50 interpreters to find two willing to work on the day. The first hired agreed to sign for the participants and was not willing to be filmed for the live stream even if provided with abstracts and transcriptions in advance in order to prepare. The second hired was agreed on the same terms. When the first withdrew, the organisers had to hire a third, and felt that it was unfair to change the terms of the contract. We were aware that this was an unusual arrangement, but as it was so difficult to hire BSL interpreters in the first place, we decided to stick to this arrangement. The lack of signing on the live stream was a challenge to accessibility to d/Deaf participants trying to access remotely.

Captioning

In addition to the lack of signing on the livestream, there were issues with the captioning. Although the captioning company had tested well and had been provided with abstracts and transcripts for videos in advance, they did not use these, and the quality of the captioning was inadequate. For example, incorrect captioning choices changed the meaning of the words that some speakers said to nullify their argument or to make it nonsensical, and according to the captioners Ricky Martin was thanked for his enlightening talk. This again impeded accessibility for those who were hard of hearing or relying on the captions at the event, and for those accessing remotely.

Funding and budgeting

The event was funded through sponsorship from UCL, UCL IOE, UCL Arena, University of Kent, University of Leeds, and University of Nottingham. The funding was given through a variety of streams including EDI initiatives, disability budgets and discretionary funds. There were challenges in organising the 'cashing in' of these monies, as some institutions were happy to transfer money direct to UCL to be spent at the organisers' discretion, whilst others required direct invoices. Further complications came when trying to pay contractors, for example the caterers, as the organisers did not have access to a university credit card or account to make a bank transfer. Luckily, Neds Noodle Bar were happy to support the event, however, it is unlikely that many restaurants would accept payment months after an event.

Concluding reflections

As part of our experience with this conference, we sought feedback and evaluations from all attendees in order to be able to learn for future events. What the twitter feed showed very clearly is that the conference was particularly well received – for its content, and also for its focus on accessibility. Indeed, there were several comments in public as well as in private emails and messages that this was the first conference delegates have been able to 'attend' over the course of years. This was because they were actually at home and 'attended' from the comfort of their sofa or bed. Where possible, we even sent conference packs to delegates in order to ensure that they would benefit from the materials prepared for the day.

Many comments referred to the thought processes that had gone into the planning of the event to ensure that most needs would be catered for and everyone would be comfortable. The atmosphere on the day was one of comfort, and for an individual that may have meant that they needed to wear sunglasses, remove their shoes or use a blanket. Whilst they may have been inhibited at doing any of these at a 'normal' inaccessible event or conference for fear that they would stand out or draw attention to themselves, at the Ableism in Academia event there was no need for justification or for trying to fit into 'acceptable' roles. It was this atmosphere that was received most positively. Equally, many commented on the fact that lunch was served rather than there being a requirement for a lunchtime queue on the buffet tables. Everyone could sit down at a table for a comfortable and indeed delicious warm meal. The fact that there was a delay in the delivery was seen as an issue by the organisers, but the attendees actually appreciated this extra time, as we used this to allow for a more open discussion.

The impact of the conference has been far-reaching already, as we are involved in a range of presentations and consultancy activities on the basis of our own experiences. Within our respective institutions, changes are being made to how conferences and events are planned and to how staff are trained regarding running successful events. In view of our experiences and our modelling, recommendations include to consider accessibility and inclusion more broadly than merely through ensuring that a room can be accessed.

If we are honest, despite our interest in this field of study, we were still very inexperienced regarding inclusivity along the lines of the universal design. And once we started considering specific needs, we realised the complexity and immensity of the task. Obviously, we did not get our event perfect, but we can pride ourselves in having organised a conference that was exemplary within the sector. Naturally, not all disabled, chronically ill or neurodiverse academics would like to have adjustments made for them, as they do not wish to draw attention to themselves or as they feel that it is a natural course not to look at academia for help and support. Also, adjustments made for some groups of academics may potentially have an adverse effect on the experience for those not requiring or desiring such adjustments measures. However, we are of the view that the strategies we employed must become mainstream, not only for conference organisations, but also in relation to meetings, training sessions and indeed teaching. Since the Ableism in Academia 2018 conference we have spoken about accessible events on a number of occasions, which clearly demonstrates the need for relevant training regarding accessibility within academia. For that reason, we developed a one-page summary of the strategies outlined in this article: <http://www.nicole-brown.co.uk/MakingEventsAccessible/x.pdf>. As we have shown in this article and in our presentations, not



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all adjustments are costly, such as conference chairs insisting on the use of microphones, and can therefore be implemented relatively easily. We genuinely believe that many changes could be made without any impact on structural, hierarchical or financial concerns. However, we also suggest that lecture capturing, subtitling and BSL interpretations should become as common-place as the use of PowerPoint slides. Finally, with recently won funding to carry out more detailed research into ableism in academia we now seek to develop strategies and initiatives that will support disabled, neurodiverse and chronically ill academics and students in more general ways.

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Additional material

One-page summary of strategies to make events accessible: <http://www.nicole-brown.co.uk/MakingEventsAccessible/x.pdf>

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