

Pandemic Accessibility

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Overview of sessions

Two sessions were hosted as part of the *Accelerate* programme: the first explored 'language of accessibility', and the second addressed to what extent the pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges for accessibility and/or created new challenges.

How has the pandemic exacerbated existing challenges for accessibility and created new challenges?

This session revisited several of the key learning points from the first session, including language of accessibility, and the social model of disability. The session then moved on to discussing accessibility in relation to education during the Coronavirus pandemic. The session stated that the Coronavirus pandemic has undoubtedly been a difficult time for the education sector, particularly for disabled people. However, commonly accepted narratives of the pandemic being truly 'unprecedented', and a 'unique moment in time' for the education sector were challenged. Such rhetoric is problematic as it discredits the legitimacy of disabled people's experiences of inaccessibility that have existed both before and during the pandemic (Danylevich & Patsavas, 2021). Instead, this session demonstrated how the pandemic period has both revealed new and inclusive ways of working, but also exacerbated deeply entrenched inequalities. Specifically, that disabled people may have encountered, and continue to encounter, barriers that non-disabled people may have faced for the first time during the pandemic. One such example is making online learning accessible during a period of lockdown. Online learning has the potential to markedly improve accessibility and inclusion for all teachers and learners. But, at the same time, new challenges that may have emerged, such as by ensuring that teachers and learners had appropriate digital literacy. It is important to stress that while this transition into online learning has been a new and potentially frustrating, or even frightening, experience for both disabled and non-disabled people, disabled people have encountered challenges in education as a result of inaccessible technology long before the onset of the pandemic (e.g. Perera-Rodríguez & Díez, 2019).

By making visible both the new and entrenched challenges for higher education, this session closed by asking example questions regarding accessibility and inclusion that may have been ignored in pandemic education discussions. One of the central questions that this session wanted to raise was in relation to what the higher education sector will 'look like' as it continues its shift into a more post-pandemic landscape. For instance, will disabled people's experiences be heard in decision-making and education practices going forward? Will the learnings and strategies that have been gained over the pandemic period be maintained?

Recommended reading

These sessions draw heavily on disability activist theory, including the social model of disability, and ethical disability representation in research and media. Recommended reading

Danylevich, T., & Patsavas, A. (2021). Introduction: Cripistemologies of crisis: Emergent knowledges for the present. *Lateral*, 10.1. <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.7>.

Gibbs, P. (Ed.). (2017). *The pedagogy of compassion at the heart of higher education*. Springer.

Kirby, P. (2019). Gift from the gods? Dyslexia, popular culture and the ethics of representation. *Disability & Society*, 34(9-10), 1573-1594.

Oliver, M. (2013). The social model of disability: Thirty years on. *Disability & Society*, 28(7), 1024-1026.

Parfitt, A., Read, S., & Bush, T. (2021). Can compassion provide a lifeline for navigating Coronavirus (COVID-19) in higher education? *Pastoral Care in Education*, 39(3), 178-191.

Perera-Rodríguez, V-H., & Díez, A. M. (2017). Technological challenges and students with disabilities in higher education. *Exceptionality*, 27(1), 65-76.

Shakespeare, T. (2017). The social model of disability. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (5th ed., pp. 195-203). Routledge.

Biographies

Stuart Read and Tanvir Bush are both disabled activists and Research Fellows at Bath Spa University. Stuart and Tanvir both co-chair the Disabled Staff Network at Bath Spa University. They are both currently working on the Wellcome Trust-funded 'We Are The People' programme, which is creating a disability activist-led research network for South West England.