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Disability and History Project Report

Lead author: Dr Sarah Holland.

Project Research Fellows: Dr Alexandra F. Morris, Dr Sarah E. Hayward, and Tilly Guthrie.

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Executive Summary

The History UK (HUK) Disability and History Project aimed to raise the profile of issues relating to disability and history in Higher Education (HE). It addressed concerns that disability is often overlooked in Equality/Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) work and relies on disabled staff and students to foreground it. The lack of disability representation (both disabled historians and disability history) and issues relating to accessibility (of higher education for disabled historians and the discipline of history) were recurring themes. These concerns have grown since the HUK project was launched in November 2023. The report and its recommendations are therefore timely.

The report highlights how disabled history staff and students experience higher education and the importance of disability representation in history curricula. Disability is broadly defined to include disabled, chronically ill, d/Deaf, and neurodivergent staff and students.

Key themes:

- Disability representation (of disabled students and staff in history departments and of disability history in the curriculum) is important. Disability is an inherent part of society (past and present) and disabled students want to feel represented in the curriculum. Representation can be transformative.
- Disability and health can shape the experience of being a historian. Experiences of disabled staff and students researching, teaching and studying history in HE are varied. The HUK project has foregrounded lived experiences.
- Co-produced work is necessary to a) make disability history more visible and accessible and b) embed inclusive practice in historical studies. There is scope to reimagine how history can be researched,

studied and taught, and how historical research can be communicated and engaged with.

- Perspectives on how accessible staff and students find their university are mixed. Fewer disabled staff and students (than non-disabled staff and students) found their university accessible. The proportion of disabled staff who found their university accessible was lower than disabled students. Most acknowledged that their university was accessible in some spaces or respects. This is a reminder that work to make HE more accessible is ongoing and more could be done.

The recommendations seek to enhance experiences of Higher Education for disabled staff and students teaching, researching or studying history and to widen representation of disability history/disability in history in the curriculum.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed below are a response to the findings set out in the report. They are not listed in order of priority. After the heading for each recommendation, suggestions as to who could lead this work are made in brackets. The recommendations are targeted at history and historians, but many are relevant to other disciplines and could be adapted accordingly.

1. **Create opportunities for discussion and action** (everyone)

A recurring theme was the extent to which historians felt disability was marginalised as an Equality/Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) issue.

It is important not to leave disability work to disabled staff or other individuals who usually 'do' disability work. Raising the profile of disability and accessibility should include everyone and ideally lead to measurable objectives and action.

History UK (HUK) will share the report with Higher Education Institutions and subject-specific organisations for history. HUK hopes that all historians in UK Higher Education will likewise share the report widely and engage with the recommendations. It is envisaged that this report will be used as a starting point for discussions and action. This could include institutional meetings (from department to university wide), staff-student committees, and subject-specific organisations for history.

2. **Access to disability awareness training for all staff** (individuals, departments/line managers, subject-specific groups for history, institutions)

It is important to encourage meaningful engagement with disability awareness training and make sure this is applied in practice to support disabled staff and students.

Suggestions include:

- Adequate support and information for line managers to support disabled colleagues.
- Specific training, toolkits and resources with a history focus.
- Greater awareness and acknowledgement of access friction (whereby certain decisions and actions lead to greater access for one person or group of people but create barriers for others).
- Mentoring programmes appropriate for all career stages beginning with early career disabled historians.
- Guidelines for staff to support disabled students (UG, PGT and PGR) to navigate institutional support and history specific activities (e.g. attending and presenting at conferences, accessing archives, supervisor-supervisee dynamics, outputs, subject-specific networks).

3. **Designated EDI lead for history** (line managers/departments/institution)

This will provide a two-way link in terms of information and action. It will help to ensure historians are informed about institutional support and training. It will also help to make sure history-specific issues and concerns

about disability can be raised and fed into institutional EDI work. Adequate workload allocations are crucial to make sure the value of this work is acknowledged and recompensed.

4. **Dedicated funding for disabled historians and historians of disability** (institutions, funding bodies, subject-specific organisations for history)

If the Higher Education sector, and specifically historians, are serious about greater representation and increased accessibility then we need to advocate for dedicated financial support for disabled historians, disability history and making history more accessible. In addition to dedicated funding, there is scope for greater flexibility and accessibility to be embedded into existing funding schemes. This should include a formal acknowledgement of the extra costs faced by some disabled staff and students when conducting their research.

5. **Inclusive practices for history and historians** (individuals, departments, subject-specific organisations for history)

Further work is recommended to explore what inclusive practice means for history and the impact this could have on disabled staff/students and on the discipline. For example, this could focus on outputs, archival access, and conferences/events. Part of this work should also include collating existing work and projects relating to inclusive practices for history and historians.

6. **Inclusive curriculum design with history subject-specific emphasis** (module convenors, Directors of Teaching or equivalents, subject-specific organisations for history)

As well as adopting and embedding inclusive approaches to curriculum design and practice, further work to explore subject-specific elements is recommended. Guidelines and resources for inclusive curriculum design and practice specifically for historians could be developed. This work could include lectures, seminars/workshops, field trips, source material, and assessment. This links with recommendation 5: inclusive practices for history and historians.

7. **Greater representation of disability history/disability in history in the curriculum** (module convenors, Directors of Teaching or equivalents, subject-specific organisations for history, archives and museums)

The report has demonstrated the powerful impact of representation in the curriculum.

Suggestions to enable greater representation in the curriculum include:

- Incorporating discussions of disability history/disability in history into curriculum planning and design, teaching 'away' days, forums/roundtables at subject-specific groups and conferences.
- Embedding disability history in first-year modules.
- Embedding disability history into modules generally.
- Using skills modules and independent research projects as opportunities for students to research disability history.

- Resources and case studies relating to disability in different chronological and geographical contexts.
- Further work to make disability history more 'findable' in archival and museum collections.

8. **Further work to address Disability Awarding Gaps (the difference in degree outcomes between disabled and non-disabled students) in history** (departments, institutions, subject-specific organisations for history)

Feedback:

History UK are interested in how the report is being used in practice.

Have you discussed the report with your department, colleagues and/or a subject-specific organisation for history? Do you plan to?
Are you or your department doing anything differently because of the report? Do you plan to?
Has the report increased awareness of under-representation of disabled historians in higher education and disabled history in the curriculum?
Are you involved with any work to address recommendations made in the report?
Let us know by providing anonymous comments via the HUK History and Disability Report Feedback Form or by emailing the lead author directly: sarah.holland@nottingham.ac.uk

Introduction

The History UK (HUK) Disability and History project was launched in November 2023. It was a response to the HUK History, Pedagogy and EDI report, which identified disability as an important aspect of Equality/Equity, Diversity and Inclusion work worthy of further investigation. The project defines disability broadly and includes all types of mental and physical impairments defined under the Equality Act 2010. It acknowledges that not everyone covered by legal definitions of a disabled person identifies as having a disability; that some people with significant health conditions or impairments may not be covered by legislation, and that definitions of and terminology relating to disability change over time.

The project aimed to better understand:

a. accessibility in Higher Education from the perspectives of historians,
b. the experiences of disabled, chronically ill, d/Deaf, and neurodivergent staff and students in history departments (and related units), and
c. disability history in the curriculum.

The project focused on history, historians, and students of history within Higher Education in the UK. It explored subject specific issues and the representation of disability in history curricula. Although some issues discussed are not specific to history (or even Higher Education), it was important to understand how history staff and students were affected by them.

This two-year long project was initiated and led by Dr Sarah Holland (co-convenor of History UK).

It was supported by three project research fellows (Dr Alexandra F. Morris, Dr Sarah E. Hayward and Tilly Guthrie) and an Advisory Board. It received financial support from History UK and the Royal Historical Society.

We invited all history staff and students in Higher Education to complete an online survey, which was shared via the History UK website, UK Higher Education Institutions, and other history organisations. The survey addressed the three themes outlined above in the project's aims. Just over 200 people (disabled and non-disabled staff and students) filled in the survey. This included participants from different parts of the UK, different types of institutions, and at different points in their career or student journey. More disabled staff (61%) and students (81%) filled in the survey than their non-disabled counterparts. In addition, we held a series of online focus groups with disabled staff and students about their experiences of teaching, researching or studying history at university, and with disabled and non-disabled staff (at different career stages) about teaching disability history. Project meetings were also held with individuals from a Higher Education context and beyond (including heritage and archive professionals). Collectively these focus groups and meetings engaged over 50 people. These discussions enabled us to delve deeper into both lived experiences and disability history in the curriculum.

History UK would like to thank all the participants who took part in the project focus groups, filled in the survey or provided case studies. Special thanks go to the three project researchers, members of the Advisory Board, the Royal Historical Society, and members of the History UK Executive.

This report presents the findings of the project. Experiences of disabilities are diverse. Inevitably, that means the findings and recommendations will not resonate with everyone. It does, however, present varied lived experiences, highlight inequities, share examples of good practice, and offer some recommendations. We hope the report raises awareness and prompts action. HUK does not envisage the report being an end point. It will be a foundation for further work relating to disability and history.

Context

The under-representation of disabled staff and students in Higher Education has been widely acknowledged. Moreover, various barriers and challenges can affect the experiences of disabled staff and students in Higher Education.

Legislation makes it illegal to treat disabled students less favourably than non-disabled students. However, research shows disabled students still face numerous barriers when accessing Higher Education. As Gibson asserts, many students are 'included' due to the Equality Act 2010 but the reality is a process of 'trial and error, frustration and failure'.[1] The Disabled Students' Commission, established in 2020, highlights evidence of dedicated staff and innovative practice making a difference but notes the lack of a holistic approach across the sector. The Disabled Student Commitment (2023) was a 'call to the sector and sector bodies to make the step change that is required to create a more inclusive environment'.[2] However, only fifteen institutions had signed up to the Disabled Student Commitment by Autumn 2024.[3] Data from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published in April 2024 highlighted that continuation rates for disabled students were slightly lower than for non-disabled students.[4] Data from the Office for Students also showed that disabled students were more likely to have a lower degree outcome than non-disabled students.[5]

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[1] Suanne Gibson, 'When rights are not enough: what is? Moving towards new pedgaogy for inclusive education within UK universities', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19:8 (2015), p. 875.
[2] Disabled Students' Commission, *The Disabled Student Commitment* (2023), p. 5.
[3] Livia Scott, 'Why are so few universities signing up to the Disabled Student Commitment', WONKHE, 19/9/24: https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/why-are-so-few-universities-signing-up-to-the-disabled-student-commitment/
[4] Nick Hillman, 'Dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers?: Non-continuation of students in the UK', *HEPI Policy Note*, 53 (April 2024), p. 5.
[5] Office for Students, *Student characteristics data: student outcomes* (2022): https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/51a83529-f7d4-4e8e-b854-22fb0a971460/student-

Data indicates that disabled staff are particularly under-represented in Higher Education. Only 6.8% of staff have a disability compared to 19.9% of full-time undergraduate students and 24% of the adult population.[6] Research has generally focused more attention on disabled students than disabled staff. Work by Brown and Leigh has sought to address this and has brought to prominence the 'under representation of disabilities, chronic conditions, invisible illness and neurodiversity amongst academic staff'.[7] Inclusive learning and accessibility are increasingly a focus of research and practice. Disability representation in the curriculum is, however, less common.

This of course is not to say that important and innovative work is not taking place. The profile of staff and students is changing; there is a willingness on the part of many staff to be supportive allies for disabled students and disabled colleagues; and there is some pioneering research and teaching on disability history (led by both disabled and non-disabled historians). Nevertheless, at a time of great change in Higher Education and wider society, participants in the project said the report was a timely intervention. Reference was made to concerns that disability could potentially be further marginalised in EDI work and that conditions in Higher Education could worsen for disabled staff and students. Some already noted uncertainties about restructuring and redundancies, higher workloads, and how new and disorientating initiatives and processes had exacerbated mental and physical health conditions.

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characteristics-data-student-outcomes-report-2022.pdf. Anne Shaw, 'Inclusion of Higher Education Disabled Students: A Q-methodology study of lecturers' attitudes', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 30:4 (2025), p. 822.

[6] WONKHE, 'Time to address disability inclusion for university staff' (2025): https://wonkhe.com/blogs/time-to-address-disability-inclusion-for-university-staff/. Office for Students, 'One size doesn't fit all: equality of opportunity for disabled students' (2025): https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/one-size-doesn-t-fit-all-equality-of-opportunity-for-disabled-students/.

[7] Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh, 'Ableism in academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?', *Disability and Society*, 33:6 (2018), p. 985.

Accessibility, Disability and UK Higher Education

This section of the report is based on survey responses, focus group discussions, and contextual information. It includes responses from disabled and non-disabled staff and students to better understand perceptions and experiences of accessibility.

The project findings reiterate concerns that disability is often perceived as a lower priority in Equality/Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in Higher Education. Many staff felt disability was still overlooked and marginalised:

- 'disability is altogether marginalised' [staff survey].
- 'Clear structural reasons why disability gets overlooked in EDI terms'. [focus group participant].
- 'disability has yet to be given proper attention in my university often falling at the bottom of the EDI ladder – this is mirrored both by subject area and society more broadly' [staff survey].

Accessibility and Higher Education

All participants in the project were asked to consider how accessible they found UK Higher Education and any barriers they had encountered. Intersectionality, whereby different aspects of a person's identity converge, can play an important role in the experiences of disabled staff and students.[8] About one third of staff responding to the project survey reported having experienced barriers in Higher Education relating to three or more

[8] Anuj Kapilashrami, 'Embracing intersectionality to interrogate and action equality, diversity and inclusion in teaching and learning', *Advance HE News and Views*, 22 April 2021: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/embracing-intersectionality-interrogate-and-action-equality-diversity-and-inclusion. Victoria Showunmi, 'The importance of intersectionality in higher education and educational leadership research', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership*, 1:1 (2020), pp. 46-63.

overlapping characteristics. Combinations included different disabilities and health conditions and then intersections between disability/health and gender, age, class or socio-economic background and race/ethnicity.

Participants in the survey were asked how accessible they found higher education, with a focus on the institution they worked or studied at. This was separated into physical, digital, and sensory accessibility for both staff and students.[9]

Staff responses:

Physical accessibility (e.g. campus, study spaces, library, support services, accommodation): Only 15% of staff said their university was physically accessible with 17% saying it was inaccessible. However, 67% said it was accessible in some spaces or respects but not all. Slightly more disabled staff said their university was physically accessible (23.5%) but again over half of disabled staff (62.8%) said it was in some spaces or respects but not all.

Digital accessibility (e.g. virtual learning environments, captioned videos, accessible resources, alternative text for images): 44% of staff said their university was digitally accessible with a further 38% saying it was in some spaces or respects but not all. However, only 37% of disabled staff thought their university was digitally accessible with a further 45% saying it was in some spaces or respects but not all.

Sensory accessibility (i.e. relating to all the senses and sensory processing): Only 12% of staff said their university was accessible in terms of sensory matters (42% some respects/spaces but not all, 15% no, 31% not sure).

[9] Physical accessibility refers to how accessible staff and students found campus, study spaces, teaching spaces, the library, support services, accommodation, etc. Digital accessibility refers to how accessible staff and students found online resources, digital learning materials, virtual learning environments, etc. Sensory accessibility refers to all the senses and any impairments or barriers linked to them.

Similar proportions for disabled staff: 14% yes, 19.5% no, 23.5% not sure, and 43% in some respects/spaces but not all.

Student responses:

Students similarly reported that their institutions were accessible in some respects/spaces but not others, although the proportions often differed significantly to staff.

Physically accessible: 43% of students agreed their university was physically accessible, with a further 46% saying it was in some respects/spaces but not all. A lower proportion of disabled students (36%) said their institution was physically accessible, although more (51%) said in some respects/spaces but not all. Overall, a high proportion of disabled and non-disabled students said their university was either physically accessible or in some respects/spaces but not all.

Digitally accessible: 64% of students agreed their university was digitally accessible, with a further 26% saying in some respects/places but not all. Similar proportions of disabled students said their institution was digitally accessible (59% agreed and 30% said in some respects/spaces but not all). Again, a very high proportion of all students agreed their institution was digitally accessible or it was in some respects/spaces but not all.

Sensory accessibility: 29% of students agreed their university was accessible in terms of sensory matters, with a further 36% saying it was in some respects/places but not all. However, 11% of students disagreed with this statement and a further 24% were unsure, suggesting this was the least accessible aspect of university for many students. Slightly fewer disabled students agreed their institution was accessible in terms of sensory matters (23.7%), with more (40.2%) saying in some respects/spaces but not all.

13.4% of disabled students said they disagreed with the statement and 22.7% were unsure.

From both a staff and student perspective, it is evident that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not entirely accessible (physical, digital, or sensory). Large proportions of both disabled and non-disabled staff and students recognised that some spaces or respects were accessible whereas others were not. This is a stark reminder that work to make places accessible is ongoing. Although improvements may have been made in some areas, inevitably there will be others where progress is still needed. Another significant point is the difference between how accessible staff and students, both disabled and non-disabled, find their institutions. Far fewer staff (than students) said their institution was accessible. There are also issues of what has been called 'access friction'. This can refer to situations where a decision 'leads towards greater access for one student or group of students, but creates barriers for others', as well as a lack of inclusion or attempts to provide access that are not actually helpful.[10] Universal Design for Learning can start to address this by introducing significant flexibility in learning, teaching and assessment.[11]

[10] Sarah Silverman, 'Navigating "access friction" in teaching: when inclusive teaching is harder than "one cool trick"', *Beyond the Scope*, 23 May 2024: https://beyondthescope.substack.com/p/navigating-access-friction-in-teaching.
[11] Seán Bracken and Katie Novak (eds), *Transforming Higher Education through Universal Design for Learning: an international perspective* (Abingdon, 2019).

Experiences of ableism

Nicole Brown asserted that 'ableism is endemic in academia'[12] Ableism refers to discrimination of or prejudice against disabled people in favour of non-disabled people. Ableist attitudes have been associated with negative or non-existence disability representation and the medical model of disability.[13] Brown argues that academia seeks to normalise and homogenise ways of working rather than embracing difference.[14]

In response to the History UK survey, over half (57%) of disabled staff said they had experienced ableism, whereas only a fifth of disabled students (20.9%) said they had. However, a further 23.5% of disabled staff and 29.1% of disabled students said they were unsure. Additional comments further illuminate concerns about ableism in HE. One member of staff said there was:

- 'a lot of covert (and sometimes overt) ableism at the institution meaning that disabled staff struggle physically to access teaching spaces, and then struggle to access time and institutional funds to undertake research...a failure to ask disabled staff in the first place' [staff survey].

Although fewer disabled students said they had experienced explicit ableism, the impact on those who had was profound. As one student explained:

- 'The ableism that's ingrained in academia means I don't have as many chances to 'make it' (into a course, all the way through a

[12] Nicole Brown, 'Introduction: Being 'different' in academia' in N. Brown and J. Leigh (eds), *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education* (Bristol, 2021), p. 6.
[13] Anne Shaw, 'Inclusion of Higher Education Disabled Students: A Q-methodology study of lecturers' attitudes', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 30:4 (2025), pp. 822-4.
[14] Nicole Brown, 'Introduction: Theorising ableism in academia' in N. Brown and J. Leigh (eds), *Ableism in Academia* (London, 2020), p. 5.

programme, further in my career) or much representation to look up to as a disabled person and that's discouraging. I don't see many people with my lived experience, because we can't even get a seat at the table' [student survey].

Authenticity and belonging

Authenticity and belonging were also an integral part in shaping the experience of disabled staff and students.

Whereas 54.4% of non-disabled staff responding to the survey said they felt they could authentically be themselves, only 17.6% of disabled staff agreed they could be. Although higher proportions of students felt they could authentically be themselves, there was still a disparity between disabled students (48.5%) and non-disabled students (73.9%).

Many more (59.9% of disabled staff and 42.2% of disabled students) felt that even if they could be authentic, it was only in some respects/spaces not all.

Similarly, fewer disabled staff and students felt they belonged at university compared to their non-disabled counterparts. 31% of disabled staff felt they belonged with a further 45% reporting they did in some respects/spaces but not all. This contrasted with 55% of non-disabled staff saying they felt they belonged. The proportions of disabled and non-disabled students saying they felt they belonged were closer, but still fewer disabled students (51%) compared with non-disabled students (68%). Wider research suggests that it is not uncommon for disabled students to experience a notably lower sense

of belonging and authenticity compared with their non-disabled peers.[15] Belonging and authenticity are important as they can impact significantly on student experience, wellbeing, retention and outcomes.[16]

Moreover, there was a sense that belonging and authenticity were interlinked and required effort on the part of disabled people. One staff member said 'Places I feel I belong the most are places I have to create and that says something about the time and energy that disabled people have to create those authentic spaces' [staff survey]. Another said that intersectionality was important with regards to both belonging and authenticity [staff survey].

Confidence using inclusive language relating to disability

Research has demonstrated the importance of disability-inclusive language in helping to promote and embed various aspects of EDI practice and to help empower people.[17] Inclusive language avoids a deficit model and focuses on people's abilities. Examples include 'disabled person', 'person with/living with [disability/health condition]', and 'accessible toilets/parking'. It avoids using terms that act as collectives, imply suffering or carry negative connotations (e.g. 'the disabled', 'wheelchair bound', 'suffering from or victim of [illness/health condition]', 'disabled toilets/parking'. It also extends to avoiding phrases such as 'falling on deaf ears', 'that's lame/dumb', 'idiot'.[18]

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[15] A.R. Verbree, M. van der Schaaf, L.W. Meij and G. Dilaver, 'Students' sense of belonging and authenticity in higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*, 51:3 (2025) pp. 1097-1127.
[16] Karen Welton, Dyslexia in higher education: enhancing student belong and overcoming barriers to achievement through communities of practice', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 26 (February 2023); Anne Shaw, 'Inclusion of Higher Education Disabled Students', p. 824.
[17] Melanie Thorley, 'The importance of disability-inclusive language', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 27:2 (Aug 2025), pp. 164-175.
[18] The Open University, *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: inclusive language and image guide* (November 2022): https://university.open.ac.uk/equality-diversity/sites/www.open.ac.uk.equality-diversity/files/files/Inclusive-Language-Image-Guide-2022.pdf.

Over half of all staff (58%) said they felt confident using inclusive language relating to disability. The proportion of disabled staff was slightly higher (63%) compared to non-disabled staff (51.5%). Overall, 12% of staff did not feel confident and 30% were unsure.

A high proportion of students (71%) reported confidence using inclusive language relating to disability. However, a higher proportion of disabled students (74%) felt confident, compared with just over half of non-disabled students (56.5%). The overall high proportion is thus somewhat explained by far more disabled students (81%) than non-disabled students (19%) filling in the survey.

Several HEIs produce guidance on inclusive language, which may be reflected in the above findings. Key to understanding and applying disability-inclusive terminology is that it is not fixed; it evolves, and what might be viewed as inclusive language now may well be outdated in the future. As such, terminology that once was considered acceptable, and even introduced with a view to being more inclusive, may be outdated now.[19] This could be one of the factors reflected in the aforementioned uncertainties about inclusive language for both staff and students. Collectively, this suggests that not only is there scope to increase confidence in disability-inclusive language but also to increase awareness of how this can change over time. Change over time is particularly relevant and important for historical studies. Language used in historical documents reflects the outdated language used at the time it was produced, which can be both distressing and challenging for those researching, teaching or studying the topic. Alexandra Morris and Debby Sneed highlight the importance of language in historical studies, with

[19] Melanie Thorley, 'The importance of disability-inclusive language', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 27:2 (Aug 2025), pp. 164-175.

reference to the Ancient World, and provide guidance on disability terminology and its application to historical scholarship.[20]

Disability awareness training

Research suggests that disability awareness training can make a difference to staff and student experiences.

68% of all staff responding to the History UK survey had undertaken some disability awareness training. Most training had been organised by the current institution they were employed at (with some by an institution they were formerly employed by and some externally). The proportions who had undertaken training were similar for disabled and non-disabled staff.

However, that still leaves 28% of staff (who responded to the survey) having not undertaken disability awareness training. Wider research suggests that many academic staff in universities do not feel they have received adequate training in working with disabled students.[21] This is often not included in mandatory training or support for those new to teaching in Higher Education. Moreover, some staff taking part in the HUK study felt that training was largely only what was legally required or related to legal requirements. Another commented that 'training is often optional, and if mandatory not all engage with it – not actively – the ones who need it don't go or don't actively engage' [staff survey]. Aside from this, staff felt there was very little training on working with a range of disabled students in different contexts. One specifically said 'I feel like I learnt about ADHD and other conditions mainly from my students – and that the training I received didn't cover this,

[20] Alexandra Morris and Debby Sneed, 'Blog: A Brief Guide to Disability Terminology and Theory in Ancient World Studies', *Society for Classical Studies* (August 2021): https://www.classicalstudies.org/scs-blog/alexandra-morris/blog-brief-guide-disability-terminology-and-theory-ancient-world-studies

[21] Tanya Osborne, 'Not lazy, not faking: teaching and learning experiences of university students with disabilities', *Disability and Society*, 34:2 (2019), pp. 228-252, p. 231.

but it should' [focus group participant]. More in-depth, tailored training was thought necessary, with subject-specific considerations.

- 'I would like to engage with more opportunities around this to ensure I am inclusive, empathetic and mindful when communicating with colleagues and students' [staff survey].

Awareness of disabled student's equality gap (including awarding gaps)

A 2023 report on equality gaps for disabled students highlighted various inequalities in Higher Education from entry or access, during the student experience, or in terms of outcomes.[22] Although there has been a significant increase in the number of disabled students in higher education, the report highlighted how they are still under-represented at point of entry, less likely to complete their degree, less satisfied with their educational experience and have lower degree results and worse employment outcomes than their non-disabled peers. Moreover, the substantial increase is largely accounted for by the growth in students sharing a mental health condition, which still means other disabled students are not well represented.[23] Data from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published in April 2024 highlighted that continuation rates for disabled students were still slightly lower than for non-disabled students.[24] Data from the Office for Students also showed that disabled students were more likely to have a lower degree outcome.[25]

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[22] TASO, *What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students* (February 2023), p. 3: https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023-02-16_What-works-reduce-equality-gaps-disabled-students_TASO.pdf

[23] TASO, *What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students* (February 2023), p. 4.

[24] Nick Hillman, 'Dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers?: Non-continuation of students in the UK', *HEPI Policy Note*, 53 (April 2024), p. 5.

[25] Office for Students, *Student characteristics data: student outcomes* (2022): https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/51a83529-f7d4-4e8e-b854-22fb0a971460/student-characteristics-data-student-outcomes-report-2022.pdf. Anne Shaw, 'Inclusion of Higher Education Disabled Students', p. 822.

Approximately two thirds of staff (68%) said they were aware of the disabled student's equality gap including awarding gaps (the difference between the number of disabled and non-disabled students awarded a first or 2:1 degree). The proportion was slightly higher for disabled staff (70.5%) compared with non-disabled staff (63.6%). Just under half of all students (48%) said they were aware, but again the proportion was higher for disabled students (51.5%) compared with non-disabled students (37.5%).

The 2023 TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) report made a series of recommendations aimed at reducing equality gaps for disabled students. These included improved data collection, better evidence about the impact of reasonable adjustments and the use of increased anticipatory adjustments, institutional-wide approaches to disability inclusion, disability inclusion in all Access and Participation Plans and improved evaluation of disability inclusion measures.[26]

[26] TASO, *What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students* (February 2023), p. 13: https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023-02-16_What-works-reduce-equality-gaps-disabled-students_TASO.pdf

Examples of Good Practice

Staff identified many examples of good practice in Higher Education that could facilitate accessibility for both staff and students.

Enhancing accessibility for students:

- Inclusive approaches to curriculum design including adherence to minimum standards, use of inclusive practice toolkits, automatically applying common elements that recur in support plans for all students (e.g. lecture slides and handouts online in advance, recording lectures, alt-text, allow all students to leave seminars without question).
- Co-creation, whereby disabled and neurodivergent students are involved in curriculum development.
- Discussions between student services, disability support and academic staff before a student starts university about how to provide an equitable experience.
- Colleagues reaching out to students ahead of teaching to discuss reasonable adjustments.
- Streamlined processes for getting extensions and other adjustments.
- Designated EDI lead for each subject who is able to update the rest of the team.
- Monitoring data for the disability awarding gap and using this to inform practice.

Enhancing accessibility for staff:

- Interviewing all disabled applicants who meet the essential criteria.
- Extra time in workload model for disabled colleagues.
- Supportive colleagues or line managers.
- Inclusive induction process.

Students also identified examples of good practice that they had found helpful. These included:

- Regular communication and advice from disability support.
- Helpful and supportive university staff, disability support teams and dissertation or PhD supervisors.
- Tutors or supervisors talking openly about their own disabilities.
- Reasonable adjustments/support plans/independent learning plans that are co-created with students.
- Extending some reasonable adjustments to all students (e.g. resources available in advance, lectures recorded, ok to leave sessions, etc).
- Shorter readings and different formats/resources for preparation for taught sessions.
- Representation in the curriculum including a module on accessible pasts which was about making history accessible as well as the history of disabilities.

Experiences of Disability and Health in HE – disabled history staff and students

This section of the report explores the experiences of disabled staff and students in history departments (or related units).

It examines the lived experiences of disabled staff and students in Higher Education in relation to diagnosis, the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, processes for 'disclosing' or sharing and receiving support, formal support processes (Access to Work and Disability Student Allowance).

The role of diagnosis

49% of disabled staff said their disability or health condition was a recent diagnosis (with 24% waiting for a formal diagnosis). An even higher proportion of students (66%) of students said this was a recent diagnosis, with 29% waiting for a formal diagnosis. One disabled staff member said:

- 'I am still processing/grappling with how my experience of undiagnosed neurodivergence has shaped my career trajectory and made some things much more challenging' [staff survey].

The role of diagnosis was discussed by focus group participants. One student explained how they were unwell at the end of high school but did not get diagnosed until the end of their undergraduate degree so 'saw both sides' starting with 'we can't quite support you because there's nothing wrong with you' and ending with 'now you've got a diagnosis we're happy to add time to your exams and help you out with, you know, accessing books and things like that' [focus group participant]. Of course, there can be significant time delays and costs associated with diagnosis processes. Without a diagnosis, students are not always entitled to the same level of support, although some

universities are using online diagnostic tools as a means of facilitating support plans and reasonable adjustments for students. One participant noted that a diagnosis still requires an educational institution to have sufficient understanding and support mechanisms. For example, although they felt lucky to get an autism diagnosis at a young age, their school didn't necessarily understand what it meant and what they could do. In comparison, they said 'uni has been great with lots of support and with a diagnosis you're entitled to stuff like DSA' [focus group participant].

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on disabled students and staff. Research highlights how the pandemic affected transition to university and learning experiences. Many disabled students, however, benefited from greater flexibility including asynchronous learning opportunities, online or hybrid sessions, and different assessment types. For example, students noted a more positive attitude and increased understanding from institutions and individual staff towards disability and especially mental health and wellbeing. Many students expressed hope that this more empathetic and responsive approach to disabled students would continue, with a recurring theme of not 'going back'. This has ongoing implications as the number of UK disabled students is expected to continue growing as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic (long Covid, deterioration of mental health, exacerbation of other health conditions). Key areas for improvement include improving online accessibility, resourcing

staff to enhance accessibility, greater flexibility in policies, reducing the administrative burden and listening to disabled students.[27]

Just over half of disabled staff (57%) and disabled students (56%) responding to the HUK survey said the Covid-19 pandemic had affected their experience of higher education. Aligned to this wider research, this included more beneficial impacts as well as negative ones.

For example, many disabled staff identified benefits associated with flexible working:

- 'I didn't feel as fatigued as I can do trying to navigate buildings, campus, meetings, etc' [staff survey].
- 'I could heavily control my social interactions' [staff survey].
- 'Enabled me to participate more fully in university life because so many activities were moved online' [staff survey].
- 'Highlighted what was possible if the motivation is there' [staff survey].
- 'Hugely positive – suddenly, everything was online and my entire professional life became more accessible' [staff survey].

However, many also found it frustrating that these adaptations were made on a large scale and so quickly, when they had repeatedly been told it was not possible pre-pandemic, and for many of them to equally quickly be eroded in subsequent years. For example, disabled staff said:

- 'it was infuriating watching accommodations which I'd been told for years were just not possible, suddenly become possible overnight on a large scale because able-bodied people needed them. Watching able-bodied people now trying to get rid of hybrid and online meeting

[27] H. Borkin, *Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences* (Advance HE on behalf of the Disabled Students' Commission, 2021); Disabled Students UK, *Going back is not a choice: Accessibility Lessons for Higher Education* (2022).

because they’re too faffy or not the real thing just because they personally don’t need them anymore is even more infuriating’ [staff survey].

- ‘Disabled people have asked for such interventions for years and told they are impossible. Sadly, the ‘return to normal’ sees all this being rolled back, emphasising that access for disabled people simply isn’t seen as a priority or valued – the new normal could have integrated measures that increased access during the pandemic’ [staff survey].

Other disabled staff identified negative impacts of the pandemic ranging from exacerbating existing symptoms, developing further serious illness or delays in diagnosis or treatment to less accessible working practices (including increased workloads, which some noted have never returned to pre-pandemic levels, disrupted life-work balance, erosion of coping strategies and difficulties of online working).

Similar themes were replicated in student responses to the survey. For example, some students benefited from working remotely, citing regulating sensory needs and less travel time as beneficial. However, disabled students also noted increased workload, isolation and reduced social skills, social anxiety, delays in diagnosis/access to healthcare and exacerbated health issues. Again, disabled students expressed frustration about the ‘return to normal’ commenting that ‘Initially everything became much more accessible, now it is even less accessible than before the pandemic’ [student survey] and ‘Online learning was so much better for me but the forceful return to in person learning has made things a lot harder for me as I’m still vulnerable’ [student survey].

The Impact of the Cost of Living Crisis

A recent article published by WONKHE (an online space for UK Higher Education debate and insight) asserted that 'Welfare reforms will hit disabled students hard' with the potential to further entrench inequity. It concluded by positing: 'what kind of higher education system are we building, and for whom, if we cannot meet basic conditions needed for disabled students to study, participate and succeed?'.[28]

Although only 24% of disabled staff said the cost-of-living crisis had affected their experiences higher education and disability (67% no and 10% not sure), 47% of disabled students said it had impacted them (35% no and 18% not sure). For both staff and students, this included negative impacts only.

One respondent said 'disability is expensive with additional costs such as taxis, support, personal assistance, medication, etc' [staff survey]. Several disabled staff referred to concerns about financial insecurity, including having to work part time. Insecure work and the uncertainty of cuts and redundancies across the sector create stress, which in turn significantly worsens health conditions. The latter raised concerns as to whether disabled staff would be disproportionately affected due to issues with productivity and expectations (especially if a disability and health condition has not been shared/recorded) and the increased workload implications for those who remain. The perils of the early career job market were also highlighted. One respondent said that the precarity was bad enough anyway with short term contracts, low pay and requests for free labour, but this was magnified for disabled early career historians.

[28] Hailie Pentleton, 'Welfare reforms will hit disabled students hard', *WONKHE* (June 2025): https://wonkhe.com/blogs/welfare-reforms-will-hit-disabled-students-hard/.

Disabled students particularly noted financial pressures and the challenges this posed. Many noted they were unable to work alongside studying or were being forced to take on several jobs even though it exacerbated health conditions. Again, the extra costs associated with disability, coupled with the rising cost of living, were noted as impacting disabled students with one student saying 'disability is expensive – it can be isolating' [student survey]. The direct impact on study was mentioned by some respondents including being unable to afford to be on campus as much as they would like (which could affect attendance to classes or access to resources) or to visit archives, museums or heritage sites [student survey and focus group participants].

Cuts in funding and scholarships were noted as further impacting on disabled scholars and the studying of disability history. Staff were very concerned about the impact this would have on disabled students and disability history:

- 'We know our disabled students are more likely to have fewer financial resources. The reduction in funding opportunities is going to have a big impact...' [focus group participant].
- 'Funding cuts will disadvantage disabled people and disability history, especially if humanities are targeted for cuts' [focus group participant].
- 'As Director of PGR students, I am very aware of a lack of funding, even if a student has a very good idea. This idea of it being a 'niche' topic affects that. Making the case for disability history being its own subject for new generations is going to be very tough. I am depressed about the situation and the future prospects of this research. I've been involved with a project on equity and diversity in doctoral education – completely undermined by lack of funding' [focus group participant].

Barriers to disclosing or sharing disability and health conditions

- 'Disclosing disability is an act of negotiation, rather than a single event'.[29]
- 'Whether or not academics choose to disclose their disabilities and illnesses is, in practice, a risk-benefit analysis of consequences associated with the specific concern or issue'.[30]

Staff and students are frequently asked to 'disclose' disabilities and health conditions, although the terminology around 'disclosure' is increasingly being challenged with some preferring 'sharing'.

Both disabled staff and disabled students experienced barriers to disclosing or sharing disability and health conditions. Notably this was far higher for staff (55%) than students (24%) and suggests that much more could be done to support disabled staff in the workplace.

Barriers identified by staff included fears of discrimination/stigma, being perceived as less capable and/or the potential impact on career progression; the perception that nothing will change/improve; a lack of trust in institutional support systems; concerns about privacy; previous negative experiences; a reluctance to disclose personal medical information; or a lack of knowledge or clarity as to how to disclose and who to inform.

- 'I don't mention my neurodivergence because I can see how they talk about the students who have these conditions. It is quite distressing. I try to advocate and be a vocal champion but I also don't want it to sound like I'm just advocating for myself. It makes it all quite difficult...What kind of adjustments can be made unless I

[29] Emma Shepherd, '"I'm not saying this to be petty": reflections on making disability visible while teaching' in N. Brown (ed), *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia* (Bristol, 2021) p. 189.
[30] Nicole Brown, 'Disclosure in academia: a sensitive issue' in N. Brown and J. Leigh (eds), *Ableism in Academia: theorising experiences of disability and chronic illnesses in higher education* (London, 2020), p. 6.

> tell everyone? And anything requiring resources is just a non-starter...' [staff survey].

These are not unique to history and speak to wider structural issues. A recent report about the experiences of Disabled PhD students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) likewise highlighted uncertainty as to what support is available, unclear processes, unnecessary evidence requirements and underfunding of disability services.[31] The administrative burden placed on disabled students was a recurring theme.

Support

A disparity was evident in terms of disabled staff (only 24%) and students (68%) receiving adequate support or accommodations at their university. HEIs have legal responsibilities to support disabled staff and students under the Equality Act 2010. This often takes the form of reasonable adjustments.

Types of support identified by disabled staff as making a difference to them in the workplace included: adjustments to workload/deadlines, flexible working arrangements, equipment (e.g. ergonomic chair, specialist software, etc), access to quiet space, mentoring/coaching, referral to Occupational Health, regular check-ins with line manager, parking/travel adjustments, and Access to Work.

Those who said they did not receive adequate support or reasonable adjustments highlighted not knowing what support they could get or not knowing how to access this. This was in addition to those who did not receive adequate support because they were reluctant to share their disability for the reasons outlined above. One staff member said:

[31] Disabled Students UK, *Improving the experience of disabled PhD students in STEM* (2023), p. 41.

- ‘I would not know how to access such support and I would also be concerned that whatever I chose to share would not be shared in confidence’ [staff survey].

Others said that structural or organisational changes could create additional barriers. For example, shared workspaces and hot desking were highlighted as problematic for many disabled staff. The administrative burdens of accessing formal support were emphasised by many disabled staff. One described it as an ‘exhausting process’ [staff survey]. Another said they were asked to fill in a flexible working application annually rather than having reasonable adjustments written into their work pattern permanently [staff survey]. A further member of staff said:

- ‘I have become far more assertive about having reasonable adjustments made but this is exhausting and takes a long time to process. Similarly, it just reminds you that you don’t fit in the system that wasn’t created for you! It is exhausting and frustrating to struggle to get the basic adjustments’ [staff survey].

Processes were described as ranging from being unclear and time consuming to straightforward and worthwhile for the support received.

A higher proportion of students (than staff) said they were receiving adequate support, including reasonable adjustments. Nevertheless, experiences still varied considerably. Negative experiences included the administrative burdens (including providing evidence that they could not always easily get) and attitudinal issues where support was only provided reluctantly. Others, however, commented that the process was very straightforward.

Access to work – awareness and experiences – staff

Access to Work is a government scheme which aims to support disabled people in the workplace (or to get into work) by providing grants to overcome work-related barriers.[32] This is intended for support beyond the requirements for reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.

69% of staff said they were aware of Access to Work. 40% of those who were aware said they were eligible to apply, with 79% of those eligible to apply having made an application.

Of course, those aware of the scheme but not eligible to apply could provide information and support for colleagues they line managed.

Comments on the scheme varied. Some found the process frustrating and time consuming. Others said they still struggled to get support and had to fight to get things implemented. Whereas others were very positive:

- 'I cannot recommend Access to Work enough!' [staff survey].
- 'It's been life changing. I'm not exaggerating – software, equipment, ADHD coaching, support worker' [staff survey].

The scheme, however, has an annual cap and employers contribute financially. A recent Action on Disability report stated that Access to Work was failing many disabled people in all sectors due to 'systematic administrative failure, lack of transparency, and potential breaches of equality and human right obligations' by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which had led to 'job losses, reduced hours, and withdrawal from inclusion programmes that were previously successful' causing

[32] Access to Work: https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work and Disability Rights UK: https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/resources/access-work.

widespread harm.[33] The government is consulting on the future of this scheme, which is creating a lot of anxiety.[34]

Disabled Students' Allowance

Disabled Students' Allowance is a government scheme to support study-related costs due to disability or long-term illness.[35]

95% of students said they were aware of the Disabled Students' Allowance. 71% of those aware were eligible to apply. 83% of those eligible to apply had applied.

Again, there were mixed experiences of applying for DSA. Many highlighted administrative burdens and frustration at the time it takes, having to supply so much documentation and not always getting what they need. Others said it was straightforward and very helpful.

[33] Disability News Service, 'Access to Work Dossier of Evidence shows real harm and job losses caused by DWP cuts and failings' (October 2025): https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/access-to-work-dossier-of-evidence-shows-real-harm-and-job-losses-caused-by-dwp-cuts-and-failings/.
[34] Department for Work and Pensions, *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper* (2025). Disability News Service, 'Minister's comments add fuel to Access to Work concerns', August 2025: https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/ministers-comments-add-fuel-to-access-to-work-concerns/.
[35] Disabled Students Allowance: https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa.

Open days

For some disabled students, their experience of whether an institution was accessible or not began when applying to university and attending open days. Visible support for disabled students and supportive staff could make all the difference. For example:

- 'Yes, disabled students present and centred as part of their open days and recruitment, which greatly appealed to me whereas another had the disabled students' advice desk tucked away in a corner and not particularly accessible – it gave the impression one would centre my needs much more than another' [student survey].
- 'Yes, good support for autistic students' [student survey].
- 'Head of Department was very encouraging, very helpful and able to answer my questions' [student survey].

Equally, bad experiences at open days could influence decisions. For example:

- 'Inaccessible seating arrangements so I didn't bother applying' [student survey].
- 'some failed to provide interpreting support I needed in order to access open days which affected my decision' [student survey].

Many, however, said that open days made no difference. This included those who had not attended an open day, who were geographically restricted in choice of university and other considerations (e.g. preference for the course or other institutions being equally accessible or inaccessible).

Experience at open days links to wider work about disabled students applying to university. The Disabled Student Commitment wants all Higher Education Institutions to make sure applicants and students are provided

with comprehensive information, advice and guidance about how they support disabled students. The document also emphasises the importance of ensuring open days are accessible to disabled applicants, and to disabled parents and carers of applicants, and that all relevant information on accessibility is shared in advance. Moreover, the document links these processes with widening participation and outreach work, including ensuring all staff delivering these activities know how to support disabled participants.[36] The Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) provides dedicated advice and support for disabled students applying to university, including research courses and universities, preparing for open days, Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and transitions to university. [37]

[36] Disabled Students' Commission, *Disabled Student Commitment*, p. 8.
[37] UCAS, 'Applying to university - disabled students': www.ucas.com/applying/applying-to-university/students-with-individual-needs/disabled-students.

Disability and history

This section of the report explores disability and history, including perceptions and experiences of accessibility in the discipline and representation of disability history in the curriculum.

Not all disabled staff and students want to study, research or teach disability histories. Likewise, many non-disabled staff and students are active in the field (or would like the opportunity to be).

Nevertheless, many disabled staff and students identified ways in which disability has shaped their identity as a historian, whether in terms of
a) what they study/research/teach,
b) how accessible/inaccessible they find the discipline,
or c) their approach to the discipline.

Becoming a Historian

Some staff and students said their research interests had been motivated, shaped or informed by their disability, including histories of the lived experiences of health and disability. This was often a process of discovery and not always intentional.

For instance, one PhD student said:

- 'when I started my uni journey I did history and war studies and for the dissertation I researched disabled victims of the holocaust…now I am researching the history of autism for my PhD - this has intersections with war studies and especially World War Two' [focus group participant].

Another explained:

- ‘not intentionally…it was totally by accident that I came across this connection…but I see a lot of myself in the women I study’ [focus group participant]

In other cases, an active decision was taken not to research histories of disabilities that researchers had. Here, there was still a relationship between lived experience and historical research. For example, one PhD student explained

- ‘when I first discovered that disability history was a thing...I felt to some degree…I should research the disabilities that I have and those histories. But I quite quickly realised…that studying them through history is going to be even more emotionally draining and I don't want to think more about them than I already have to...I think it could be distressing. So I kind of circumvented that by looking into [another disability], which allowed me to still be in disability history...without feeling it's all about me and my disabilities’ [focus group participant].

And another commented:

- ‘There's often a strange assumption that being visibly disabled means I do disability history, which I absolutely don't - I don't want to spend even more time thinking about it than I already do! That said, I do think that my experience of chronic illness gives me insight into areas of the history of medicine which are usually dismissed, e.g. nonspecific constellations of symptoms’ [staff survey].

In addition, 71% of staff and 79% of students responding to the survey said that their disability or health condition had impacted on them as a historian. Many comments highlighted issues about productivity expectations and chronic illness and fatigue.

The 'leaky pipe'

Concerns were raised by staff and PhD students about barriers to entering or remaining in higher education due to disability or health issues.

- 'it was not a foregone conclusion that I would get to this point' [student focus group].

The 'leaky pipe' metaphor has been used to describe the loss of competent and capable individuals from academic study/careers. Wider research has most frequently discussed this in relation to STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and gender or ethnicity, but it is also applicable to the Arts and Humanities and disability. Research shows that disabled students are more likely to consider leaving or leave their course than non-disabled students, although the overall percentage is beginning to fall.[38]

Examples of barriers discussed by participants in this project included:

- Negative experiences at school.
- Open days and admission processes.

[38] Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton, 'Support for disabled students in higher education in England', Briefing Paper no. 8716 (22 February 2021), House of Commons Library: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8716/; Office for Students, 'Topic Briefing: Disabled Students': https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/effective-practice/disabled-students/; Disabled Students UK, *2024 Access Insights Report*: https://disabledstudents.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-Access-Insights-Report.pdf; Jim Dickinson, 'Disabled students are almost twice as likely to have considered quitting', WONKHE: https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/disabled-students-are-almost-twice-as-likely-to-have-considered-quitting/.

- The higher education journey.
- Apprehension as to whether universities are inclusive enough for current PhD students and post-docs to be able to remain.

For example, a current PhD student reflected on their experience of school where it was assumed autism would hold them back. University was not suggested as an option. Another PhD student identified two moments when they could have left academia, firstly in the last year of their undergraduate degree and then during their Masters. On both occasions they were very unwell and hospitalised, and it was suggested by the institution they would have to drop out. However, in both instances, intervention from staff advocating on their behalf made a massive difference. Another PhD student commented that there had been many points this could have happened:

- 'It's been like a close call that I've ended up staying in academia but again it was teachers at school and tutors at university who encouraged and supported' [focus group participant].

The importance of people in more senior positions that have encouraged, supported, and advocated was a recurring theme in terms of remaining within academia.

An added layer of complexity is introduced for international disabled students. An international PhD student recounted being very ill and hospitalised and the challenges they faced:

- 'I couldn't work, but I also didn't know if I could take any leave, because if I took too much leave, then my visa would be invalidated and I would be kicked out of the country. Again, my supervisor stepped in and said you need to take leave – take the pressure off and stop the clock of heading towards submission. But I couldn't. I could take two months, but no one could tell me whether that was two months consecutively, whether it was two months

cumulatively, whether it was per year, per academic year...they still haven't been able to give me an answer...and my funding body has different guidelines' [focus group participant].

These experiences have led to concerns about their future in academia including issues of productivity, mobility, and inflexibility.

One PhD student said:

- 'I have conditions that lead to debilitating fatigue and I've been told that you'd be surprised what you can do in a short amount of time if you have to, which is probably the most unhelpful thing to say to somebody who would happily put themselves in a flare to get stuff done. And that's what concerns me for the future is, is academia going to be a supportive place with a chronic illness, if that's how it is at a PhD level?' I'd love to continue in academia, but I don't know if it if it's going to work because I don't know if the kind of support mechanisms are going to be in place, which is sad' [focus group participant].

Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh emphasise that the way in which students experience academia and the extent to which they find it an ableist community have a big impact on whether or not they continue in higher education (from undergraduate to postgraduate student to postgraduate researcher to staff).[39]

[39] Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh, 'Ableism in Academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?', *Disability and Society*, 33:6 (2018), p. 988.

Examples of what disabled students said had made a difference included:

- interventions by staff who encouraged, supported and advocated,
- lessening the bureaucratic burden (e.g. flexibility with policies),
- awareness of intersectionality and how this can affect disabled students,
- awareness that disability and chronic health conditions may not be linear,
- mentoring,
- and representation.

A recurring theme was the importance of representation and the potential of the 'leaky pipe' to undermine representation of disabled students and staff in HE.

Doing History: an accessible subject?

Staff and students identified a range of factors that they felt made history an accessible subject or degree including:

- independent working and working at one's own pace,
- accessible resources,
- diverse range of sources,
- different types of assessment,
- online and hybrid events,
- digitisation of reading and sources including museum collections,
- connecting the past with issues in the present when teaching disability history,
- and potential to do historical research in quieter environments.

Equally, inaccessible elements were identified by both staff and students including:

- publishing,
- conferences,
- some archival research (both online and in-person),
- the amount of reading,
- material incompatible with screen readers,
- inaccessible sites (whether university buildings, archive, heritage sites, seminar rooms),
- the lack of disability representation in history and academia,
- limitations of the traditional lecture-seminar model for neurodivergent staff and students,
- and limitations of some alternative text for images for blind and partially sighted students.

There was some overlap between elements staff and students found accessible and inaccessible, including events, archival research, online content and source material, and ways of working.

The Disabled Student Commitment emphasises that it is 'vital that we create a culture in which all students can excel in higher education', which requires work at subject and course level. This includes inclusive practice embedded in curriculum design and choice in assessment methods where feasible. The document also calls on the QAA to support Subject Benchmark Statement Advisory Groups to explore how this can be reflected in the statements produced.[40]

[40] Disabled Students' Commission, *Disabled Student Commitment* (2023), p. 11.

Being a Historian

Workload and productivity

Heavy workloads have been an issue in academia for years, for both staff and students, and often relate not only to the amount of work but also how this is organised and structured throughout the year.

Workload issues, such as balancing the amount of preparation required for taught sessions and assessments, were noted by some disabled students as having a considerable impact on their experience.

A typical response is to give 'extra' time to complete work but as a recent WONKHE article noted disabled students increasingly don't have that time. The cumulative extra hours 'given' to disabled students as part of accommodations can equate to a substantial loss of income, reduced opportunities for volunteering and extracurricular activities, disrupted work-life balance, less time to reflect on feedback and more debt.[41] The solutions are not straightforward, but everyone should acknowledge the potential issues and accept that 'one size fits all' solutions might not always work. An emphasis on co-creation with disabled staff and students is necessary to address the issues.

An additional issue raised relating to workload was that of hyper-productivity. As Nicole Brown suggests, current standards in academia can be exceptional and indeed toxic, fostering ableism in academia. By normalising excessive workloads, staff and students are forced to 'adhere to ever rising standards' and 'compete with and outperform one another'.[42] Disabled staff who filled in the HUK survey or took part in focus groups

[41] Jim Dickinson, 'Disabled students aren't time travellers. And extra time isn't yours to give', *WONKHE* (September 2024): https://wonkhe.com/blogs/disabled-students-arent-time-travellers-and-extra-time-isnt-yours-to-give/.
[42] Alice Andrews, 'Autoimmune actions in the ableist academy', in N. Brown and J. Leigh, *Ableism in Academia* (London, 2020), pp. 112-113 and 118.

wanted greater acknowledgment of the inequities of workload and increased accommodations and adjustments for staff as well as students.

These issues may not be specific to history staff and students but are nevertheless an important feature of their experiences of academic life. They are also recurring themes in other sections of the report.

Reading

Many students commented on the amount of reading required for a history degree and the paucity of alternative formats for academic texts and sources. For example, although screen readers and text-to-speech can be used, academic texts are not generally published as audio books. Assistive technology has many advantages, but challenges can be faced due to inaccessible content, technical limitations and/or lack of compatibility, artificial voices used to read material, the expense of equipment/software, or the need for training. Audio books or audio versions of module materials could benefit both disabled and non-disabled staff and students.

Moreover, students said other output types are frequently dismissed as less scholarly when used as references [student survey]. This reliance on text-heavy, and often long, academic outputs has proved challenging for some students:

- 'My disability has made completing all the reading difficult. It is hard to concentrate for long periods' [student survey].
- 'History is so reading intensive, it can be quite mentally draining to do this all day every day, especially when I am struggling to focus' [student survey].
- 'Often studying history requires hours of reading and concentration. Due to my chronic illness, I have poor memory and concentration

which can make these methods difficult to keep up with' [student survey].

- 'Sheer amount of reading which as being Autistic I struggle with massively, not understanding a lot of it' [student survey].

Some students commented that online resources can be more accessible, if fully compatible with screen readers, but also noted that a lot of texts are not available digitally. Students noted that if texts are not accessible, then they have to try and find alternative sources of information which are different from their peers and not always considered suitable by their tutors. Ensuring all essential texts are accessible, as well as having a greater range of recommended resources, is crucial in a discipline like history.

The question of reading in a digital age also raises bigger questions about the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and scaffolding discipline-specific skills for university level study. The Active Online Reading (AOR) project originated in the 'reading rich' discipline of history. It highlighted the extent to which reading practices have changed over the last twenty years with increasing use of online or digitized.[43] Many students struggle with online reading but approaches to teaching students how to read and write effectively in digital spaces have not been particularly well developed.[44] Generative AI has increased these challenges as it 'increasingly mediates students' encounters with texts by outsourcing processes of summarisation, annotation and note-taking'.[45] AI may have the potential to make long texts

[43] 'Active Online Reading Project', *Making Digital History*: https://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/read/active-online-reading/.
[44] Jon Chandler and Jamie Wood, 'Back to Basics: teaching digital reading and the age of AI', *ALT guest blog* (October 2025): https://altc.alt.ac.uk/blog/2025/10/back-to-basics-teaching-digital-reading-and-the-age-of-ai/#gref.
[45] Jon Chandler and Jamie Wood, 'Back to Basics: teaching digital reading and the age of AI', *ALT guest blog* (October 2025): https://altc.alt.ac.uk/blog/2025/10/back-to-basics-teaching-digital-reading-and-the-age-of-ai/#gref.

more accessible for students, but we need to think about how and why students use AI and what specific skills they need to use AI.[46]

Source materials and archives

Historians teach and research using a range of materials (texts, images, objects, audio and visual recordings), some of which will be more accessible to some students than others. Not all of these exist in equal numbers for all periods and places. Nevertheless, there is scope to acknowledge and incorporate a wider range of source materials when teaching and researching history. More work on the accessibility of primary source material, with specific reference to different disabilities, which is co-curated with disabled staff and students, would be useful for the discipline. Likewise, more research about the experiences of disabled staff and students and the use of field trips in history and related disciplines would be helpful. Some staff and students argued that field trips can be transformative, but others noted they are not always inclusive. Likewise, the experiences of placements were variable.

Much discussion about historical research focused on the use of archives. Staff and students had varying experiences of undertaking historical research, whether that be using online or physical archival or museum collections.

Non-disabled staff generally said historical research was becoming more and more accessible, particularly compared to 5-10 years ago, and this was generally equated to the increase in online access. There was, however, awareness that this might not be the same for others. Some staff drew

[46] Jon Chandler and Jamie Wood, 'Back to Basics: teaching digital reading and the age of AI', *ALT guest blog* (October 2025): https://altc.alt.ac.uk/blog/2025/10/back-to-basics-teaching-digital-reading-and-the-age-of-ai/#gref.

attention to their role as supervisors, noting that some disabled students had been unable to visit physical archives. For example:

- ‘I know of students with compromised immune systems who had to alter their research entirely to avoid archives and use only what is online and in books’ [staff survey].
- ‘I’ve had students who have only been able to use online archives because they've found the physical ones too hard to navigate. That has affected their grades with colleagues who did not always understand that supposed ‘choice’ they made’ [focus group participant].

Participants raised concerns about the implications of this in terms of who could research what and whether outdated expectations and therefore limitations were being imposed.

Challenges identified with visiting physical archives included navigating online catalogues or catalogues not compatible with screen readers; travelling to archives including associated costs, anxiety or exhaustion; inaccessible workspaces relating to accessing the building, temperature or sitting position; or the absence of relevant assistance technologies to view documents.

- ‘travelling to and working in archives can be very tiring. There isn’t much that can be done about that, but it’s clear that this is a situation where digitisation and remote access would make things easier’ [staff survey].

Also, greater clarity of processes involved with undertaking archival research and how this differs between archives was noted as being important. For example:

- ‘For me, accessibility in the archives has always been about being able to know what I need to do, where and when (so clear guidance online is good so that I can prepare)’ [staff survey].

No one type of archive was deemed to be collectively more accessible than another, although respondents explained why they personally found some to be more accessible than others. One disabled staff member said it was ‘better working in local archives where the rules and environment is more relaxed. The more official the archive becomes the harder it is to navigate, especially catalogues...’ [staff survey]. Whereas another disabled staff member said they were usually fine with institutional or official archives but ‘I’m autistic and don’t deal well with uncertainty so find smaller or private archives with lack of clarity about access very stressful’ [staff survey].

Recent work to clarify the processes involved with archival research and provide guidance is hoped to reduce some of the anxiety and uncertainty associated with visiting physical archives for all researchers. Work includes:

- the Divergent Minds in the Archive project, which has produced a range of practical tools and visual resources to assist archives and collections professionals and neurodivergent researchers;
- the Accessible Pasts, Equitable Futures’ project, which explored how disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people engage with collections and how that access can be improved, leading to best practice guidelines for accessible collections and other resources
- Accessing Archives: creating a network for disabled, neurodivergent, chronically ill or deaf historians, which is creating community, raising awareness, learning from others and building resources for researchers with advice when accessing archives.

In addition, the AccessAble accessibility guide enables users to search for archives and record offices who are then provided with a guide to disabled access and facilities.[47]

Disabled staff overwhelmingly stated that the expansion in online resources was significant for undertaking historical research. Many noted that a considerable expansion of online resources since the Covid-19 pandemic had made research more accessible for both them and students they supervised. For example,

- 'as I have an energy limiting condition, online archives are massively more accessible to me' [staff survey].

Nevertheless, there was also an awareness of the extra challenges online archives could pose, and that simply providing digitised resources did not automatically make them accessible. Issues of cost were raised:

- 'There is very little money for cataloguing and conservation of archival records, let alone the production of accessible formats, and that imposes limitations on what some disabled researchers can access, choice of dissertation topics, etc' [staff survey].
- 'Online archives are brilliant, but they do depend on your institution subscribing to the ones you're interested in, and commercial ones can be prohibitively expensive' [staff survey].

Concerns were also raised about how digitisation processes can shape historical research. After all, not all historical evidence is digitised. Disabled staff summed this up as follows:

- 'Digital archives are more accessible on the surface but you lose the serendipity of the archival process' [staff survey].

[47] AccessAble Your Accessibility Guide: https://www.accessable.co.uk/.

- Online is more accessible than not having it! Although often partial, with reasons for selection not clear' [staff survey].

Again, this raised concerns about who could research what and whether limitations were imposed on disabled researchers according to what sources were digitised.

Excessive screen time or incompatibility with screen readers were also identified as issues for online collections. One respondent said that many archival websites 'do not seem to follow the principles of accessible design' [staff survey].

It is also important to note that some disabled staff showed a preference for physical archives and found them to be accessible (with or without any adjustments).

The experiences of disabled students were again variable but often comparable with those mentioned by disabled staff. It should be noted that many non-disabled students stated that they did not find archives particularly accessible as first-time users. For example,

- 'Visiting physical archives can be anxiety-inducing the first time' [student survey].

The aforementioned work being undertaken to clarify archival processes will thus benefit all students. Disabled students however particularly noted that it would be useful to 'have advice of what to expect and helpful staff on arrival' [student survey].

Many students, both disabled and non-disabled, indicated a preference for online archives. This was often due to the inaccessibility of physical archives rather than a preference for online. For example:

- ‘Online is significantly more accessible than in person...often archives aren’t neurodiverse or disability friendly’ [survey – student].
- ‘It can be difficult going to an archive with lots of sensory input’ [student survey].
- ‘I cannot access materials...because I cannot access the buildings they are in’ [student survey].
- ‘I have some issues with physical archives as you cannot use immersive readers’ [student survey].
- ‘the lack of online catalogues being designed with screen readers in mind’ [student survey].

Disabled students also raised concerns about online archives and accessibility, many of which were similar to those points raised by disabled staff. For example:

- ‘Online is limited and already a filtered version of the archive’ [student survey].
- ‘Screen reader compatibility and lack of alt text is common and disheartening with museum digital collections’ [student survey].

Again, concerns about what can be researched were raised. PhD researchers were particularly attuned to the availability of very specific material or collections, which often was not digitised. One questioned whether we want a situation where ‘certain histories may not be researched and communicated by disabled historians or to be dominated only by non-disabled historians’ [focus group participant]. Reference was made to a wide range of different histories in this respect. Another explained how they had had to change the focus of their research to ensure material was available locally or online [focus group participant]. A further comment on the nature of research highlighted that some research is ‘emotionally very tiring as well’

[focus group participant], in addition to the actual processes of undertaking archival research. Research can be emotional, especially when working with challenging material and difficult accounts. With little acknowledgement about emotions and wellbeing in the research process and with few researchers feeling adequately supported, guidelines were produced in 2021 with a view to normalising such conversations and providing targeted advice for researchers, supervisors/line managers, ethics committees, universities and funders.[48]

Being able to take photos or request material remotely has empowered many researchers. For example:

- 'Being able to take photos made it more possible – I struggle with a lot of pain and I wouldn't physically be able to sit and look at documents in an archive all day – it's wonderful most archives now are letting you take images...that brings a lot of barriers down for me' [focus group participant].

Some material cannot be photographed or digitised for legal reasons, but where possible, PhD researchers called for greater flexibility in how funds could be spent. For example, one PhD researcher said:

- 'I was begging for my university to let me use my conference allowance to pay for these' [focus group participant].

It is important to acknowledge the extra costs associated with conducting research for some disabled staff and students and for Higher Education

[48] Jessica Hammett, Agnes Arnold-Forster, Jenny Barke, James Dawkins, Hannah Elizabeth, Aleema Gray, Sophie Holley, Kate Mahoney, Claire Nunan and Yewande Okuleye, *Researcher Wellbeing: Guidelines for History Researchers* (June 2021): https://researcherwellbeing.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/. Jenny Barke, Aleema Gray, Jessica Hammett, Kate Mahoney and Yewande Okuleye, 'Emotions, Vulnerabilities and Care in Sensitive Researcher', *History Workshop* (November 2021): https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/memory-emotions/sensitive-research/.

Institutions and funding bodies to respond flexibly to requests around support and funding.

Conferences and events

As noted earlier in this report, the Covid-19 pandemic created numerous opportunities to engage with academic activities virtually but gradually these have been eroded in a so-called 'return to normal'. However, many disabled staff and students cited numerous challenges to attending in-person conferences and events, including chronic fatigue, chronic pain, anxiety, neurodiversity and extra costs. One respondent summed this up as a result of unrealistic expectations that 'everyone can cope with constant activities and noise' [staff survey]. A student added:

- 'My neurodivergence has made it difficult to engage with aspects of the course outside of research and taught modules, mainly informal social encounters' [student survey].

This raised concerns about isolation and the impact on being able to forge connections and belonging.

Good practice cited included hybrid and online events and quiet spaces at in-person events. However, the survey findings and focus group discussions suggest a prevalence of in-person conferences, and an expectation to be 'present', in the aftermath of the pandemic. Disabled staff and PhD students who were part of the History UK study acknowledged issues relating to cost and budget cuts and a lack of technical expertise to facilitate hybrid events. They also highlighted further concerns relating to attitudes: a reluctance to consider hybrid or online events because they are no longer considered necessary now it is possible for them to be in-person again. Other research also suggests that reverting to in-person activities has become the norm in

academia. It has been argued that not providing virtual components for in-person conferences contributes to academic ableism, whereas hybrid conferences can act as:

- 'a catalyst for academia to overcome systematic barriers to exclusive spaces of knowledge exchange'.[49]

The expectation to attend in-person conferences and the failure to understand why this might not be possible or desirable were widely reported. Disabled PhD researchers participating in focus groups as part of this History UK study described their experiences relating to conferences:

- 'I love going to conferences. I love getting to meet people and hear about their research. But this last year I haven't been able to go to any purely because I didn't feel well enough to travel...I'm now being asked, why haven't you been to a conference this year? That it looks bad' [focus group participant].
- 'I can't fly but I'm being told that I have to attend an international conference and being chastised for not doing and told it will look very bad' [focus group participant].
- 'I love going to conferences but its tiring and expensive...the physical effort of going and then of being on and socialising and going to panels' [focus group participant].
- 'it's expected that is it just a normal thing that we all do but it's exhausting' [focus group participant]
- 'it's a balancing act...if I go to a conference, I'm going to wipe off a good month and a half having to recover from having been at a conference' [focus group participant]

[49] W.E. Donald, 'Rejecting hybrid conferences as the new norm reeks of ableism', *Times Higher Education* (August 2022): https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/rejecting-hybrid-conferences-new-norm-reeks-ableism.

Some PhD students (focus group participants) acknowledged that disabled academics in more established positions than themselves had made the decision not to attend conferences but that they still felt it was necessary to 'get their name out there', 'be seen' at conferences and events, to network and build relationships at an early stage in their career. Supportive and understanding supervisors were noted as being very important. There were also some concerns raised about whether online conferences were always fully accessible. Early career historians called for more action to make all academic events more inclusive, accessible and diverse, including alternative ways to showcase work and network.

Outputs - students

History can be assessed in numerous ways, enabling students to produce a wide variety of outputs. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education Subject Benchmark Statement for History states that 'diversity in assessment is vital' in order to assess the full range of abilities and to accommodate increasingly diverse student cohorts.[50] The reality can sometimes be much more constrained. Assessment tends to remain relatively traditional compared to innovation in other areas of the curriculum.[51] Respondents to the History UK survey raised concerns about continued reliance on essays and exams. These concerns are reflected in wider research relating to assessment and disability in Education, Social Sciences and Humanities.[52] The Disabled Student Commitment recommends

[50] QAA Subject Benchmark Statement: History (2022), p. 13.
[51] Sarah Richardson, 'History', in H. Fry, S. Ketteridge and S. Marshall (eds), *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice* (2019); S. Holland, 'Rethinking assessment: the potential of "innovative" or "creative" assessments in history', *History Education Research Journal*, 21:1 (2024).
[52] Lynne Kendall, 'Higher Education and disability: exploring student experiences', *Cogent Education*, 3 (2016).

choice in assessment wherever feasible.[53] Diverse assessment in history has the potential to be more inclusive by providing different methods and means to meet learning objectives and assessment criteria.[54]

Outputs – staff

History outputs can also take different forms, but traditional scholarly formats such as the peer-reviewed article and monograph remain the norm. This, to a certain extent, feeds into aforementioned discussions about the high levels of academic reading expected of students and traditional assessments. It is also shaped by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which is discussed below.

Many staff responding to the HUK survey commented on how expectations concerning the production of such outputs can be problematic. For example:

- 'History's obsession with monographs as the gold standard of research outputs is ableist...' [staff survey].
- 'I'm dyslexic and dyspraxic - reading, for me personally, is less of a challenge (same with spelling and grammar) but actually articulating even quite basic concepts on the page seems to take disproportionate effort compared with other colleagues. I write quite slowly as a result...' [staff survey].
- 'I'm repeatedly told that I need to develop more articles or, better, a book, but again fatigue makes this difficult beyond the duties I already have (which do include writing articles as part of my research project). I suffered a serious episode of stress due to what I'd regard as unreasonable demands from my line manager' [staff survey].

[53] Disabled Students' Commission, *Disabled Student Commitment* (2023).
[54] Sarah Holland, 'Rethinking Assessment: the potential of 'innovative' or 'creative' assessments in history', *History Education Research Journal*, 21:1 (2024).

- ‘My health has made, and continues to make, it difficult to research and share findings quickly, resulting in a less 'impressive' publication profile and therefore fewer opportunities within academia’ [staff survey].
- ‘It affects my research and writing due to energy levels, pain levels, and general impact on my life’ [staff survey].

Traditional scholarship and outputs will continue to play a role in the future of historical research and study, but, as Rosenstone argues, the problems stem from assumptions or expectations that these are the only ways of making meaning about the past.[55] Work by Alison Twells, Will Pooley, Matt Houlbrook and Helen Rogers has subsequently explored the relationship between scholarly practice and the growing field of creative histories. Different approaches to making history have long been recognised but traditionally these were often in the realm of ‘public history’ and distinct to academic history, where the latter frequently informs the former and academics advise or consult on public history projects. However, as Twells, Pooley, Houlbrook and Rogers argue, it is very different for academic historians to ‘make the move to producing histories as performances, or graphic novels, or Twitter threads’.[56]

Further work on the potential of different outputs in history and their impact on disabled staff and students may also provide significant insights into other aspects of the discipline and the extent to which is or can be accessible or inclusive.

[55] R.A. Rosenstone ‘Space for the bird to fly’ in K. Jenkins, S. Morgan and A. Munslow (eds), *Manifestos for History* (London, 2007).
[56] Alison Twells, Will Pooley, Matt Houlbrook and Helen Rogers, ‘Undisciplined History: creative methods and academic practice’, *History Workshop Journal*, 96 (Autumn 2023) pp. 153-175. Quote on p. 153.

Research Excellence Framework (REF)

REF is the system used to assess the excellence of research in UK Higher Education Institutions, and the outcomes determine the allocation of research funding.[57] It is not history specific but rather is interwoven into academic life. Disabled staff were statistically less likely to have been submitted to REF 2021 than non-disabled staff, with under-representation a characteristic of the REF submission process. Evaluation of REF 2021 suggested this was not simply due to REF processes but also existing structural inequalities common in the sector.[58]

Nevertheless, many staff (both disabled and non-disabled) responding to the History UK survey commented on how inaccessible they found the process, with some specifically referring to REF as being ableist or enabling ableism. One respondent said that it was an 'extremely discriminatory procedure on many fronts'. With specific reference to disability and health, one respondent said:

- 'it's an inflexible metric that takes no account of an individual's mental or physical health. It treats historians as machines who deliver a set amount of research each cycle and gives universities more ability to punish those not mentally or physically able to meet the targets' [staff survey].
- 'It has had little flexibility for people who are slower to publish because of disability or chronic illness' [staff survey].

Many felt the pressures stemmed from this emphasis on hyper-productivity, which assumes a consistent capacity to work and the constant production of a certain number of articles and books. Several people argued that this could

[57] 'What is the REF?', *Research Excellence Framework*: https://2029.ref.ac.uk/about/what-is-the-ref/
[58] REF 2021 Analysis of inclusion for submission, representation in outputs attribution and scoring: https://2021.ref.ac.uk/media/1919/ref-2021-analysis-of-inclusion-for-submission-representation-in-outputs-attribution-and-scoring.pdf.

incentivise unhealthy work environments and excessive workloads. Staff articulated specific examples of how aspects of REF impacted them:

- 'It can feel as though you are failing because you aren't able to 'just' sit down and write the article... rather, you aren't doing it (or being supported to do it) in a way that suits your brain' [staff survey].
- 'Sometimes, my neurodivergent brain has struggled to understand the REF guidelines, scope, and scoring systems... I feel like there is a whole other language at play that I only partially understand' [staff survey].
- 'Nightmarish, especially the repository deadlines for articles – my brain wants to bundle tasks but that means I end up adding things late' [staff survey].

A commitment to diversity and inclusion in REF panels is important. Recent guidelines set out underpinning principles for REF 2029 panels, which are in part designed to address some concerns raised in the sector. These include promoting inclusive outreach, encouraging participation through existing EDI frameworks, reducing barriers to application, and supporting diverse career pathways.[59]

However, whilst some staff acknowledged that adjustments could be made on the grounds of disability, ill health and other protected characteristics, there were concerns that an increasing emphasis on EDI (and the increased weighting of people, culture and environment) would lead to superficial activity rather than 'ground-breaking initiatives to support disabled people who require more substantive adjustments' [staff survey].

[59] REF 2029, Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion in REF panels: https://2029.ref.ac.uk/panels/commitment-to-diversity-and-inclusion-in-ref-panels/.

Teaching Disability History: Representation of disability history in the curriculum

All survey respondents were asked about the representation of disability history in the curriculum at their institution. Only 14.3% of staff and 17% of students felt disability history was adequately represented (Staff: 58.3% disagreed and 27.4% not sure; Students: 46% disagreed and 38% not sure). The proportions were relatively similar for disabled and non-disabled staff and students, although in each case a higher proportion of disabled staff and students felt disability history was not adequately represented in the curriculum (62.7% of disabled staff and 50.5% of disabled students).

Representation in the curriculum was explored further in two focus groups with staff, where it was often cited as missing. Even those who now research disability noted it had never featured in their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees or training to become an archivist. One person said:

'My specialism is history of war, where you might expect disability to be more prominent, but it was barely mentioned throughout my training' [focus group participant].

Several staff acknowledged that they had noticed an increase in interest in disability history but said it still was not considered mainstream. There were also concerns about superficial engagement with disability history.

Further survey questions asked whether staff or students had taught or studied disability history and whether they had encountered any barriers or resistance to doing so. The responses helped to highlight some of the reasons why disability history is not more widely represented in the curriculum, as well as better understanding the diversity in disability history being taught and studied and the enabling factors noted as being important.

Almost half (49%) of all staff responding to the survey said they did teach an aspect of disability history. In light of comments about disability history not being adequately represented, this perhaps seems like a high percentage of staff and may be indicative of who responded to the survey.

Motivations cited by staff teaching disability included personal connections to the topic, research interests and gaps in the curriculum.

A wide range of time periods, countries and topics are covered:

- ancient history, medieval, early modern, modern, contemporary,
- Britain, Ireland, Europe, US, Australia, Africa,
- Mental health, learning disability, war studies, health and welfare, reproduction, social policy and criminal justice, working class history, industrial history, gender, family, children, protest, education including special educational needs, disability rights movement, disability activism, British empire, neurodiversity, blindness, institutional histories, eugenics, the body, representations in literature, lived experiences, poverty, and public history.

This included modules within undergraduate and postgraduate history degrees.

A distinction was made between disability history being the focus of a module or a smaller part (perhaps one session or a case study within a session) of another module. A further distinction was made between disability history as an approach and examples of disability in history. In addition, disability history was noted to be the topic of an increasing number of dissertations.

In free text comments in the survey and as part of focus group discussions, staff reflected on their experiences of teaching disability history. These included:

- ‘Students are very keen...they have much personal experience of disability in their own lives and those of family and friends. So it's a popular option where available’ [staff survey].
- ‘There seems to be strong student interest in this, often driven by personal/family experience of such conditions’ [staff survey].
- ‘I've generally found it a positive experience for both myself and the students’ [staff survey].
- ‘I have found that audiences are surprisingly receptive to having their preconceptions about disability challenged...Disability history is a powerful way to encourage people to think about modern disability, including internalised ableism and prejudice about what it means to be disabled today. I spend a lot of time, for example, debunking the notion that in the Middle Ages disability was always equated with sin. This allows for a discussion of the ways in which in modern society disability is often linked, implicitly or explicitly, with morality’ [staff survey].

However, aside from disability not being a primary research interest, respondents highlighted several barriers or challenges to teaching disability history. Amongst factors cited, a lack of confidence or a fear of getting things wrong was noted by some people. This included individual concerns and explanations as to why others may be resistant.

- ‘It may be easier not to touch on the subject than get it wrong’ [staff survey].

Responses indicated an overwhelming sense that there was insufficient support for developing and introducing modules which would enable them to teach disability history. This ranged from staff who had little input into the curriculum to institutions moving to more fixed curriculums where they felt

less able to teach disability history. Some said their colleagues thought of disability history as niche.

- ‘We still encounter resistance from some colleagues when we try and embed disability history into e.g. historiographical or chronological survey modules, on the grounds that it's too 'niche' (no one ever says this about race/ethnicity, or sexuality, though) or that it lacks significance’ [staff survey].

Moreover, some felt that anything considered niche was being eroded with a view to recruiting more students with what are considered more ‘popular’ topics.

- ‘I would love to develop a module but unlikely it would be popular enough to run’ [staff survey].

One member of staff proposed teaching disability history, but this proposal was dismissed. There was a strong sense that those who taught or wanted to teach disability were constantly having to advocate for representation in the curriculum.

- ‘It can feel like you have to campaign about embedding disability and to make people realise how important it is’ [staff survey].
- ‘I do think there is a role that ableism is playing in this perception of disability history being niche – i.e. that disability only affects a small minority. If you look at student support plans, this is demographically not the case – yet the belief remains that disability is a minority concern. Also, that ‘not much happened’ that we can teach about’ [staff survey].

One respondent said that disability 'should not be added to the ever-growing list of topics we are expected to consider when designing curricula or recruiting new staff. The students are not interested' [staff survey].

There were also concerns about 'push back' in the current political climate.

- 'I feel like there's been a gentle push-back against these kinds of histories being 'integral' to the curriculum' [staff survey].
- 'Not new, but at the moment, there's a lot of negativity towards disability' [staff survey].

This linked to one disabled staff member's very personal reasons for not teaching disability history:

- 'The hostile climate for disabled people in the UK means I find it infinitely more triggering and raw as a topic...The baseline level of understanding among the general population (including in HE) is so low that teaching disability history would feel like an onslaught to me. I just can't face it. I want to see disabled historians teaching disability history, but for my own part, I'd rather able-bodied historians did that emotional labour as long as they're truly consulting and giving back to the disabled community and working for change within the institution' [staff survey].

A positive outcome from the survey was the number of people saying they thought disability history was important and should be more embedded in the curriculum. Some respondents mentioned they were becoming aware of relevant research they would like to include in their teaching, or they themselves were beginning to undertake research in this area which would hopefully be included in their teaching.

- ‘I would like to do more to integrate disability history into my teaching – this survey is helping me to think about how that is important’ [staff survey].
- ‘There should be more opportunities to study disability history - but as well as specialist modules, it should be embedded in modules more generally. It has made me think more about how we teach and assess history as well as what we teach’ [staff survey].

Only 38% of students said they had had the opportunity to study or research an aspect of disability history. Of those students, 53% had studied disability history. Again a wide range of topics were noted: disability rights movements, physical and mental disability, medicine and healthcare, palliative care, illness and ‘monstrous births’ in early modern Europe, ancient history, 20th century trade union movements and early history of securing rights for disabled workers, neurodivergence, ‘freakshows’, asylums and psychiatry, disability legislation, deafness and epilepsy.

Of those students who had had the opportunity but chose not to study it, only a few showed outright disinterest in or disregard for disability history. Some said they either found other modules of more interest or were put off because disability history had never been covered before, so it was very unfamiliar. Embedding in first year modules (as well as in school history) could help to address these concerns. Others still planned to do some disability history as part of independent research projects or their dissertation.

Moreover, many students who had not had the opportunity to study disability history showed enthusiasm and interest in doing so, with some stressing the importance. For example:

- ‘we talk about race, gender, ethnic and social inequality but never really disability inequality’ [student survey].
- ‘Neurodivergent lives throughout history’ [student survey].
- ‘I would have found it helpful to study disability history to see myself represented and know that others in the past have also struggled – it would also open a more helpful discussion on disability and how far we’ve come but also how we also need to improve further still’ [student survey].
- ‘Yes – even if only one lecture in a core module is dedicated to this’ student survey].
- ‘It should be incorporated into the core modules’ [student survey].
- ‘I would love to have the opportunity to research Deaf history, which is an important part of my identity’ [student survey].

Far from being something students are not interested in; these responses show that disability history is viewed as important but missing from history curricula. For some, never having studied disability history before makes them cautious about selecting modules where this is a core focus. Many would like to be introduced to aspects of disability history during their first year of study. Moreover, many would like disability history to be a part of other lectures, topics and modules in order to better represent disability in society.

Representation matters. This was a recurring theme throughout the project. It was articulated in two different ways: personal and societal. Respondents noted the importance of disability history in understanding the past, noting how it is integral to all parts of history and society.

- ‘We’re missing a big part of the past without understanding issues of disability’ [staff survey].

The importance of being represented in the curriculum also had a powerful impact on disabled staff and students. Students seeing themselves or family members represented could be transformative. For example:

- 'I saw myself and others like me in history for the first time' [student survey].
- 'first time we are talking about people like me' [student survey].
- 'how have I not encountered this before' [student survey].
- 'I started to identify myself as being disabled' [student survey].

One staff member said that including mental health histories in the classroom in the first few weeks of term for foundation students or first year undergraduates resulted in students speaking about 'their own mental health' and being 'more open from an early stage in their academic journey' [focus group participant].

Although these students may not go on to pursue modules on disability history or research it further, staff and students (in focus groups and the survey) reported that representation in the curriculum can make a difference to identity, belonging, retention and outcomes.

Staff commented on the relationship between representation in the curriculum at undergraduate level and disabled students pursuing postgraduate study including PhDs.

- 'I have seen a much greater number of disabled PGRs – opening up the conversation about disability histories at undergraduate level has been a factor in this' [focus group participant].

Disability on the curriculum has helped to bring in disabled PGRs, but the pathway to those people staying on in academia to become staff needs a lot of work [focus group participant].

The latter comment links to work on the so-called 'leaky pipe' in academia which is discussed further on page 40 of the report.

Enabling representation

Several factors were identified during the project as being important for facilitating representation in the curriculum. Action begins with opportunities to engage colleagues in conversations about disability history and the curriculum, and these conversations should actively be encouraged. Disabled staff and students, Directors of Teaching (or their equivalent) and other key stakeholders should be a part of these discussions.

- 'We need a discussion on this on the lines of "decolonising the curriculum"' [staff survey].

Many institutions are undergoing curriculum reviews, which should be an opportunity to ask what disability history teaching is or could be taught. Inevitably this will be determined to some extent by staff expertise and interest but by no means should be constrained by this. Although introducing disability history should never be done in a tokenistic way, starting small should not be dismissed for fear of being criticised as such. Inclusion at all levels and across a variety of modules, including first-year undergraduate modules, is very important. Efforts to decolonise the curriculum and diversify the history being taught are important. Embedding disability history is an integral part of this work. Embedding disability history throughout a history degree requires a programme level approach. Many universities that have undergone or are undergoing curriculum review processes have noted a reduction in individually taught modules and more thematic, team-taught modules. Some pioneering disability modules have been lost from the

curriculum as a result. This emphasises the importance of embedding disability history across the curriculum with better inclusion and representation in a range of modules, rather than just through specialist disability history modules.

Research on disability history intersects with numerous aspects of history (as highlighted above by the range of disability history being taught and studied). Awareness of such research means disability history can be incorporated into wide-ranging modules, as well as being at the forefront of dedicated modules. Concerns about popularity of modules and recruitment speak to wider issues about normalising diverse histories. Resistance will be encountered but should be challenged. This work should not be left to disabled staff and students or those actively researching or teaching disability to advocate for representation of disability in the curriculum. As one staff member said, we need to challenge the 'we don't do disability history' mentality or the assumption that you cannot find disabled people in certain time periods [focus group participant].

Beyond taught content, staff can highlight disability history and relevant sources that enable students to undertake independent research projects required throughout their degree (including but not limited to dissertations). Linked to this is the accessibility of source material relevant to disability history. This may include the accessibility of archival collections (as discussed earlier in the report) but also relates to terminology.

Some work has been done to support researchers interested in disability history, including dedicated research guides produced by archives. Examples include:

- The National Archives UK – disability history research guide
- Institute of Historical Research – history of disability collections

- The Bodleian Libraries (University of Oxford) - disability history resources
- Borthwick Institute for Archives (University of York) - disability history
- Sheffield Archives – Sources for the Study of Disability History
- University of Exeter Special Collections – Disability History Resources

Many of these guides acknowledge that archival collections include outdated terminology and these terms are often necessary to search the catalogues. One participant in the HUK project said:

- 'We need to advocate for disability to be more findable within existing collections...and deal with the historical language that is currently required in searches for historical material relating to disability. Having to use derogatory terms to find archive documents needs to be changed. Any work towards this needs to be inclusive of people with lived experience' [focus group participant].

Co-production is a key element of making disability history more accessible. In some instances, disabled historians and/or activists and archives/record offices have worked together to create, catalogue and/or curate disability history collections. Examples include

- the Disabled People's Archive, which is the largest collection relating to disability politics in Britain and where the steering group includes disabled activists.[60]

[60] The Disabled People's Archive: https://gmcdp.com/disabled-peoples-archive.

- the Cardiff People First (a self-advocacy organisation run by and for people with a learning disability in Cardiff) takeover event at Glamorgan Archives, whereby members selected recorded relating to their organisation to be archived and were involved with the conservation and cataloging processes.[61]

[61] Glamorgan Archives Newsletter September 2025: https://glamarchives.wordpress.com/2025/09/05/glamorgan-archives-newsletter-september-2025/.

Summary

The History UK Disability and History Report has responded to demands for more dedicated work about disabled historians in higher education and the representation of disability history in the curriculum. The report provides insights into

a. historians' perspectives of accessibility in Higher Education,
b. the experiences of disabled staff and students in history departments (and related units), and
c. disability history in the curriculum.

Many of the findings are not specific to history or historians but should enable historians to better understand the issues raised within their subject specific context. Inevitably, the findings and recommendations will not resonate with everyone. The report does, however, foreground varied lived experiences, highlight inequities, share examples of good practice, and offer some recommendations. We hope the report raises awareness and prompts action. History UK will continue to advocate for greater representation for disabled historians in Higher Education and disability history in the curriculum.

History UK are interested in how the report is being or will be used in practice. Let us know by providing anonymous feedback via the HUK History and Disability Report Feedback Form or emailing the lead author directly: sarah.holland@nottingham.ac.uk

Case Studies

Divergent Minds in the Archives

The 'Divergent Minds in the Archive: Creative Engagements with the Archive as Research Workspace' project was a 2025 project aiming to generate new knowledge about how neurodivergent people experience archives and collections workspaces, and in particular the barriers they might encounter in these spaces. A neurodivergent project team worked with sector partners, neurodivergent users of archives and collections, and both neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent sector professionals to gather data and develop practical resources.

The project was led by Dr Ria Cheyne (Liverpool John Moores University) with co-Investigators Ann-Marie Foster (Robert Gordon University) and Lucinda Matthews-Jones (Liverpool John Moores University). The project was supported by UKRI and British Academy Funding through the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Caucus (ES/X008444/1). Project partners were Glamorgan Archives, Gwent Archives, Imperial War Museums, Liverpool Record Office, the Scottish Council on Archives, Tyne & Wear Archives, and History UK.

The project was led by a team who brought expertise of working in and with archives and disability studies, who shared a commitment to creating accessible processes throughout the project. Across four workshops (three face-to-face and one online), we gained new knowledge about neurodivergent experiences of archives, with a focus on reflection, dialogue, and creative interpretation of experiences through zine making. The project built a network of archive and collections users, professionals, and key partners who are actively interested in overcoming the barriers neurodivergent researchers face. This collaborative work, and the generosity

of our participants, has enabled us to share a deeper understanding of the barriers neurodivergent researchers encounter and ask, what might an accessible archive look like for neurodivergent users?

We produced a range of practical tools and visual resources to assist archives and collections professionals, and neurodivergent researchers, understand and develop more accessible approaches to encountering archive and collections spaces. These can be found on the 'Divergent Minds in the Archive' hub.

This project is only the beginning of a wider dialogue that needs to take place about neurodivergent accessibility in our workspaces (not limited to archives) and in research cultures more broadly. We have been struck by how willing both archive and collections professionals and neurodivergent researchers have been to think through barriers and to share personal and sector knowledge. We thank all of our contributors for enriching the project and being so generous with their time.

Archives and collections are important workspaces for academic staff and students. While there is no reliable data indicating how many academics, postdoctoral researchers, postgraduates, and students in the history community are neurodivergent, we know that projects like ours have important implications for archive accessibility. It became evident through workshop discussions that archives are still spaces that need demystifying, particularly for undergraduate and postgraduate students. This invites further consideration of how, as lecturers, teachers, and supervisors, we introduce archive processes and spaces to a new generation of scholars in inclusive and accessible ways.

Accessible Pasts, Equitable Futures

The 'Accessible Pasts, Equitable Futures' project is an embedded research project funded through an Arts and Humanities Research Council Early Career Fellowship in Cultural and Heritage Institutions (AH/Y002563/1) led by Dr Ann-Marie Foster and hosted by Imperial War Museums. The project explores how (digital) collections can be made more accessible to disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent users. It runs from February 2024 to March 2026, and resources and guides from the project will be launched on the project Resource Hub in early 2026.

This project began as a question - if the spaces where disabled historians do our research are not accessible, how can we do our work, and how can we encourage more disabled historians into the discipline? There are, of course, ways we twist ourselves around this – work with digital collections, focus on local history, or hope that the one exhausting trip we made will sustain us through the next year of writing (and beyond). Thankfully, the wonderful librarians, collections, and archive professionals who have engaged with this project are keen to ensure better access to their materials. There are, of course, shared challenges to working in history-adjacent spaces at present. Library, archives, and collections professionals too are faced with increased workloads and cuts to staffing and resourcing. Add to this difficulties of providing access, from inherited digital infrastructure through to listed buildings, a perfect storm of partial access can emerge.

This embedded research explores how disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people engage with collections, and how that access can be improved. From a mass survey of Imperial War Museums' digital users in 2024, through to the creation of a disabled focus group, people with lived

experience and who use the collection in different ways (from an undergraduate degree to a family tree) are at the heart of this work. Following a clear message about what users would value, during summer 2025 thirty-eight digital volunteers were recruited and trained to create alternative text, long descriptions, transcriptions, and audio descriptions of c.200 collections items, to trial ways to improve access to the online collections for people who use screen readers. In December 2025 a digital prototype, using some of this material, is being created and tested to think through issues of digital access more broadly. In addition, and based on feedback from the survey, the librarians in the Research Room team have been developing increased information and access measures for disabled users, from increased information before a visit through to different seating in the room itself. Overall, we are developing a pathway through the complex ways of accessing the material at the museum, from the online catalogue through to seeing something in the Research Room. In early 2026, project findings will be shared with the sector through best practice guidelines for accessible collections.

Imperial War Museums are a stellar partner in this work, although special thanks should be given to Head of Collections Access and Research, Dr Maria Castrillo Llamas, who has supported this project from its inception. Library, archive, and collections professionals are committed to ensuring people can engage with their materials in accessible ways, and are open to constructive dialogue with disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent users. This, of course, goes both ways, and we would do well to remember that the frustrations that come from historians' increased workloads are shared by those in the information sector – they too are doing the best they can with limited time and resources. For disabled historians (from seasoned professor

emeritus to undergraduate fresher), this project has offered hope that better ways of working do and can exist, and that sometimes the best way of increasing accessibility is through honest and open dialogue.

Accessing Archives: Creating a network for disabled, neurodivergent, chronically ill or deaf historians

Who?

Esme Cleall (PI, Sheffield) and Rachel Bright (co-I, Keele)

Esme and Rachel are both historians of the British Empire. Their individual work has explored a wide variety of themes, especially related to migration, citizenship, race, gender, and disability in Britain and its empire. They have previously collaborated on a ISRF-funded project about eugenics and migration. The project includes a postgraduate assistant as well (Amelia K. Witt).

Project Partner: Buckingham Disability Service (BuDS)

BuDS is a user-led disability support and rights organisation that focuses on supporting members across Buckinghamshire and England and removing barriers that their members encounter.

Funding

Award: £5,000

Funder: Wellcome Anti-Ableist Research Culture (WAARC) Collaborative Projects.

Project Outline

Both Esme and Rachel are disabled researchers whose experiences have led them to set up a network for disabled, chronically ill, neurodivergent and deaf historians called 'Accessing Archives' aimed at providing support for disabled researchers and advocating for better access to archives. The network will be open to UK-based PGRs, academic historians of all career stages, family historians and independent scholars who self-identify as disabled, deaf, neurodivergent or chronically ill.

Despite developments in diverse historical methodologies, archival research is still imagined as the gold standard of historical research. Disability raises many critical questions about how archives function. This is both about access and what historians Hunt-Kennedy and Barclay call the 'machinations of archival power', which can perpetuate 'ableist power structures and dynamics within the archive' (Hunt-Kennedy and Barclay, forthcoming, p.14).

Aims and Objectives

This project seeks to network disabled historians to discuss these barriers to archive access, raise awareness, share strategies, and produce recommendations for archives and other institutions to facilitate disabled people's research. It also endeavours to support community building.

We have several aims:

- destigmatising difficulties working with archives and the shame attached to the idea that archival struggles threaten our identity as historians;
- developing solidarity between disabled historians;
- awareness-raising of these challenges within the academy;
- and practical recommendations to generate inclusive research cultures going forward.
- Work with BuDS (Buckinghamshire Disability Service), Disabled People's organisation, to learn about access possibilities, and how to advocate
- Develop and use methods designed to be anti-ableist and as inclusive as possible, while recognising the challenges of streamlined approaches to 'disability'.

There are three parts to our project.

- **Part One: Sharing Experiences**
  This strand aims to get disabled historians together to share experiences about using archives. We want to build Accessing Archives

as a Disabled People's Organisation. This includes building collective knowledge and finding out what people would like to get out of the network. We do this through a mixture of hybrid and online consciousness-raising sessions to pool our collective knowledge.

- **Part Two: Learning from and with Others**
  This strand aims to learn from other people. We will work with **Buckinghamshire Disability Service** (BuDS) which is a Disabled People's Organisation. Together we will think about building up our network, facing challenges and overcoming them. BuDS will provide two workshops specifically around Access. We will also work with Archives to have conversations about access in a collegiate, collaborative and constructive way. This is not about criticising archives about what they do and do not offer in terms of accessibility, but about working with them to develop solutions. As part of this, we are inspired by the project **Accessible Pasts, Equitable Futures**, which is a current project seeking to make digital heritage collections more accessible.
- **Part Three: Building Resources**
  This strand will build and share resources for disabled researchers and for archives to use in thinking about accessibility. Based on our experiences, information gathered, and evidence accumulated through our collaborative discussions, we will produce three outputs, listed below.

Outcomes/outputs:

- Host a series of events online, including BuDS-hosted workshops on 18 December and 15 January 2026 (join our mailing list for more details) and one in-person event in Spring 2026 in Sheffield.
- Produce an online toolkit for disabled, deaf, neurodivergent, and chronically ill researchers with tips and suggestions for accessing archives.
- Meet with organisations and groups working in similar areas within the archive and higher education sectors, advocating for better archival access for disabled researchers. This has included participating in other research projects around access and disability, and we will present a

personal reflection on ‘Advocating for Access’ at the Disability and the Archives conference, London, January 2026.

- Policy paper aimed at our own institutions for how they can support employees and students, which we will also disseminate as a potential model for others.

Accessing Archives Project Website

The UK Disability History and Heritage Hub

The UK Disability History and Heritage Hub (UKDHHH/the Hub) was co-founded by Alexandra F. Morris, Louise Bell, Isabelle Lawrence, Samuel Goldstone-Brady, and Kirstie Stage on 3rd May 2022. It is currently run by Alexandra F. Morris, Louise Bell, Samuel Goldstone-Brady, Alice Conibere, Niamh Malone, and Beck Heslop.

To date, the Hub has received funding from the Wellcome-funded New Networks in Critical Medical Humanities funding scheme, granted by the Northern Network for Medical Humanities Research, and the Wellcome-funded Society for the Social History of Medicine Research Community Networks. This funding allowed us to put on two large-scale networking events in June 2024 and June 2025. We have also received funding from the Design History Society in the form of the Accessible Design grant which will be used for a forthcoming event.

UKDHHH is a group, created by then PhD students with links to the heritage industry. We felt there was space for a network to allow those interested in Disabled, Neurodiverse, and D/deaf histories, from the ancient world to the modern era, to connect and collaborate. The Hub is open to researchers, students, archivists, museum professionals, activists and anyone in-between! We also strive to show best practice in running accessible events. This includes making sure best practice is followed whenever we partner with other organisations to encourage implementation throughout the academic and heritage sectors.

We run virtual monthly events which take a variety of formats including presentations, author talks, reading discussions, and zine making

workshops! We have also run two annual Connecting and Sharing events which have highlighted current projects and research in the field. Additionally, we have hosted in person meet-ups including at the People's History Museum in Manchester, the Leeds Disability Studies Conference, at the Wellcome Collection and the Horniman Museum and Gallery, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. We also have a monthly news bulletin featuring the latest disability history news, events, exhibitions, and publications.

To find out more about the Hub, and to keep up-to-date with us, you can find us on various platforms:

UKDHHH website

BlueSky

X/Twitter

History Workshop podcast about the Hub

We wish to connect with others with lived experience and offer support, resources, and community to those working in, researching, teaching, interested in, or new to disability history.

Biographies of Advisory Board members

The mini-biographies

Jenny Bangham

Jenny, together with Liesbeth Corens, was awarded a Jinty Nelson Teaching Fellowship (2023-24) from the Royal Historical Society for their 'Histories of Disability Toolkit'.

Daniel Blackie

Daniel is a disability historian and author (with David Turner) of Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical impairment in British coalmining, 1780–1880. His work also appears in the *Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, the *Journal of the Finnish Historical Society*, and *History*. Daniel has a long track record of public engagement and teaching in disability studies. He was a key member of the 'Silent History of Disability' project in Finland, a major public history initiative, supported by the Kone Foundation. Among the numerous courses he has devised and taught over the years, the most recent is 'Disability Histories of Britain and the Atlantic World'.

Adam Budd

Adam is Senior Lecturer in Cultural History at the University of Edinburgh, where he is also Director of Postgraduate Taught Programmes. He is also Secretary for Education at the RHS; he co-authored the RHS Report on Race and Ethnic Equality (2018). Adam co-authored History UK's EDI Report (2023).

Esme Cleall

I am a historian of disability and the British empire at the University of Sheffield where I have taught since 2012 and have been a senior lecturer since 2017. As a disabled academic, I'm passionate about advocating around the Equality Diversity and Inclusion issues that disabled researchers, teachers and students encounter individually and collectively. As a historian of disability, I'm also keen to think through ways in which to include disability history across the curriculum. I have published two monographs, including one on disability history – Colonizing Disability: impairment and difference across Britain and its empire (CUP, 2022) and many articles including on disability history. I have been involved in public engagement projects around Deaf and Disabled histories. And, at Sheffield, I am on the Disabled Staff Network with a particular interest in fostering mentoring and peer support relationships amongst disabled colleagues. I am very interested in both the element of this project which examines the experiences of disabled students and staff in Higher Education; and in that about the teaching and studying of disability history in UKHE.

Ann-Marie Foster

Ann-Marie Foster is a public historian with interests in heritage, accessibility, war studies, and ephemera. Ann-Marie is a Chancellor's Fellow at Robert Gordon University, which they joined in 2024 after previous research and lecturing roles at Northumbria University and Queen's University Belfast. Ann-Marie also holds an AHRC ECR Fellowship at Imperial War Museums, exploring how to make collections more accessible for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent users through the 'Accessible Pasts, Equitable Futures' project, as well as being Co-Investigator on the EDI Cacus funded project 'Divergent Minds in the Archive'. Their work has been published in *History*

and Memory, T*wentieth Century British History*, and *Urban History*, and their first monograph, Family Mourning After War and Disaster in Twentieth Century Britain was published by OUP in 2024.

Kristopher Lovell

Kristopher is an Associate Director for Enterprise at CU Services Limited. He is responsible for developing and driving strategies to support enterprise on behalf of Coventry University's College of Business and Law, supporting activities related to leadership skills and professional development.

Kristopher was previously Assistant Professor in History within Coventry University's School of Humanities as well as Course Director for MA History and Systems Thinking (Apprenticeship Route). He has extensive experience in course development and design as well as over a decade of experience delivering teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

His research focuses on the relationship between war and the media. His Leverhulme Trust funded PhD explored British politics and the press during the Second World War. Recently he has published work on the history of the British press and cultural memory. In 2020 he established the #RecordCovid19 Project, which sought to historicise people’s experiences of the pandemic. In 2025, he published a monograph with De Gruyter on Totalitarian by Consent: Press, Politics and the 'People's War,' 1939-45.

As a deaf academic and former Project Manager within Widening Participation, he is passionate about ensuring and supporting accessibility and equality in higher education.

Coreen McGuire

Coreen is Assistant Professor in Twentieth-Century British History at Durham University, and the author of *Measuring Difference, Numbering Normal: Setting the standards for disability in the interwar period*. Her current research focuses on the development and impact of the categories used to organise data to measure disability and this work is supported by a Wellcome University Award. She co-leads 'The Measurement Lab' at Durham University's Institute for Medical Humanities. She is co-editor with Dr Joseph Martin of *The British Journal for the History of Science* book reviews section and is a member of the editorial board for the Disability History Series at Manchester University Press.

Lucinda Matthews-Jones

Lucie is a Reader in Victorian History at Liverpool John Moores University. She is keen to create and advocate for inclusive higher education environments for both students and staff. To this end, she has been a leading proponent of creative assessment because of its inclusive potential for disabled and neurodivergent students. She was subsequently awarded the Royal Historical Society's Jinty Nelson Teaching Award for Inspirational Teaching and Supervision in History in 2021 for this work. She is the Principal Investigator for two Research England–funded initiatives that explore how we can build a positive research culture for disabled and neurodivergent researchers at LJMU and beyond (2022–2026). She is also co-lead on a UKRI Edica–funded project on neurodivergent experiences of archives. Lucie is a recognised advocate for disability in history, the wider subject area, and Victorian Studies, having been invited to speak at the British Association of Victorian Studies conference and at a Women's History

Month event on Disability History Month about her lived experiences as a disabled historian.

Kirstie Stage

Kirstie is a PhD Candidate at the University of Cambridge and the British Library. Her current work examines the 'Labour and Livelihoods of Disabled People, 1970-2010'. Previously, she has researched disabled-led campaigns and Deaf-led activism in Britain since 1960. In 2022, she co-founded the UK Disability History and Heritage Hub.

Working with a number of different higher education institutions, including Queen Mary University of London, University of Warwick and University of Cambridge, Kirstie has been in dialogue with various EDI policies, procedures and strategies.

Outside of academia, she has worked with various thinktanks, NGOs, DDPOs (Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations), politicians and activists. She has also been a UN Delegate for the Commission on the Status of Women, working with local, national and international contacts to investigate the intersection between gender and disability. She is deaf and also identifies as disabled.

Liz Tilley

Liz is Professor of Learning Disability Studies in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at The Open University. Liz oversees a programme of inter-disciplinary and inclusive research exploring the lives of learning disabled people across the life course, with a particular focus on enduring health and social inequalities and their rootedness in past policies

and practices. Liz has championed the inclusion of history within health and social care learning materials at the OU, arguing that knowledge of the past is critical to the development of more person-centred health and social care services for people with learning disabilities and their families. In her role as Director of the Centre for Society, History and Learning Disabilities (SHLD) Liz works alongside community organisations, self-advocates, heritage professionals and academic researchers to facilitate opportunities for people with learning disabilities to participate in or lead history and heritage research projects. Liz is also involved in initiatives to support career development and capacity building for disabled students and staff. Dr Elizabeth Tilley | OU people profiles (open.ac.uk)

David Turner

I am Professor of History at Swansea University. I have published three books on disability history, including *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England* (Routledge, 2012), which won the Disability History Association's Outstanding Publication Prize, and *Disability in the Industrial Revolution*, co-authored with Daniel Blackie (Manchester University Press, 2018). For over ten years I have taught an undergraduate module, 'Deformity, Deviance and Difference: Exploring Disability History' at Swansea, which explores disabled people's experiences from the Middle Ages to the present. My work in embedding disability history into all levels of our undergraduate curriculum was commended in the most recent QAA review of the Swansea History programme in 2023. I am also committed to making disability history publicly accessible. My work inspired the BBC Radio 4 series, Disability: A New History (2013). I have been advisor on documentaries for BBC2 and S4C, co-curated a disability history exhibition in collaboration with the National Museum of Wales, and worked with community groups and disabled

people’s organisations on projects. I also serve as a trustee of Disability Arts Cymru. I am currently writing *Disability: A History of Resistance* for The Bodley Head, the first trade book commissioned by a major publisher on disability history.

Biographies of Project Researchers

Dr Alexandra F. Morris is a disabled Egyptologist, lecturer, and disability activist tying the past to the present. Her research is on disability in ancient Egypt, the Classical world, and creating inclusive museums. Alexandra is a Co-Founder of the UK Disability History and Heritage Hub, Co-President of CripAntiquity, serves on the Editorial Board for Asterion Hub, is Chair of the Lewisboro, NY Advisory Committee for the Disabled, and Vice-President of the Disabled Action Research Kollective (D.A.R.K.). She has a BA in Archaeological Studies, Anthropology, and Art History with minors in Classics and History from SUNY Potsdam, an MA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Pennsylvania, an MA in Museum Studies from New York University, and a PhD in History from Teesside University. Alexandra is, along with Dr. Wade Berger, the Co-Founder of the Lived Experience with Disability in Museums research group, and fundamentally believes that disabled people have the right to learn about, work with, and see themselves reflected in history, ancient and modern, with as few barriers as possible. Additionally, Alexandra is a published author and editor in both academic and nonacademic spaces, with two of her more recent publications (2024) being the first ever two books on disability in ancient Egypt. She has cerebral palsy and dyspraxia.

Tilly Guthrie is a PhD researcher in History at the University of Sheffield. Her thesis explores the use of tactile alphabets in correspondence by the British blind community in the nineteenth century. She holds an MLitt in Book History - which provides a technical background in material bibliography to apply to the study of embossed texts - and a certificate in Grade 2 Unified English Braille. Tilly has also worked with the RNIB and the

Braillists Foundation to deliver public lectures and workshops with replica historic tactile alphabets.

Dr Sarah E. Hayward is the Heritage Engagement Officer at the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability (RHN). She is also a freelance historical researcher and heritage consultant whose work focuses on inclusive and engaging approaches to interpreting the past. Her research is grounded in archival work and informed by her PhD, which uncovered stories from within a Victorian institution for people with a learning disability, revealed through its archive collection, and situated them within the broader history of learning disability. She recently completed a National Lottery Heritage Fund project at the RHN that produced a new collection of oral histories and a documentary film, celebrating the Hospital's 170-year history through the lived experiences of its community.

https://sarahehayward.com/

Biography of Lead Author

Sarah Holland is Associate Professor in History at the University of Nottingham and co-convenor of History UK. Her research explores the relationship between farming, rural life and mental health during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She has published work on the patient experiences of farm work at psychiatric institutions and how these challenged or were used to support institutional narratives about patient work. She teaches about disability in history and is keen to explore ways to make higher education and historical studies more accessible. Sarah has been an advocate for alternative forms of assessment in history for a long time and has observed the powerful impact these can have on students. She has published articles on alternatives forms of assessment in history: 'Rethinking assessment: the potential of "innovative" or "alternative" assessments in history', *History Education Research Journal* (2024) and 'Assessing History Creatively', History (2025). She co-authored History UK's History, Pedagogy and EDI report in 2023.