Ableism in Academia

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Preface

Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh

In September 2017, Nicole came across an announcement for a symposium in the United States that would explore academic ableism and the notion that disability in higher education is conceptualised as a problem in need of a solution, rather than a different way of working. Unfortunately, unless you were in the lecture room at that particular university at the time, there was no way to be involved in the symposium, nor was it possible to access any materials from it. The irony of this academic ableism was not lost on us; and the idea for a different kind of academic ableism event in the UK was born. The aim would be to have an event that would be fully accessible at all levels and that would produce concrete outcomes, of which an edited book would be one. This event would not be yet another symposium or conference that left delegates feeling that nothing had changed or been achieved once it ended.

The ‘Ableism in Academia’ conference that resulted from this idea was held at the UCL Institute of Education in March 2018. Initially the conference was going to be for 40 delegates, but these tickets were sold out within the first 24 hours. Consequently, the number of tickets was increased to 80, and these sold out within the subsequent few days with more than 100 people on a waiting list. As there were so many who wanted to attend and could not, we organised livestream viewing opportunities at the University of Kent, the University of Manchester and Birkbeck, University of London. Additionally, anyone was able to view the livestream or catch up with the recording via the UCL TV YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZScXkO40Pk. At the time of writing, in March 2020, the YouTube video has had more than 1,000 views and the @AbleismAcademia Twitter handle has more than
1,000 followers (it only follows 37 accounts). The 2018 conference hashtag #AIA2018 generated 978 tweets from January before the conference to three days after the conference.

The event was not only popular but also topical. In the course of the #MeToo movement it emerged more strongly than ever before how certain voices in society had become marginalised. With the conference we offered individuals a safe space to explore and theorise what it feels like to be ‘othered’ and ‘different’ in an environment that is usually seen as privileged, yet where many feel they cannot openly disclose their needs (see Brown and Leigh 2018). Most delegates and speakers had been personally affected by ableist attitudes within academia and had felt that something needed to be done to change these. The conference was organised in two parts, with lightning talks in the morning and a workshop in the afternoon seeking to answer five key questions:

1. How does your disability/disadvantage affect you in the workplace and what practical effects does it have on your ability to perform your role?
2. What does your employer do to help you, and what more could they do?
3. What forum(s) is/are there at your institution for discussing matters related to ableism?
4. What forums are there in higher education to deal with these matters (from trade unions to Higher Education Funding Council for England)?
5. What could/should be done to encourage members of academia to disclose their concerns/disabilities?

The thought processes and preparation that had gone into the organisation of the conference were unique and unprecedented. The main conference room was spacious enough to allow for manoeuvring several types of wheelchairs and mobility aids; we ensured access to disabled toilets via a RADAR key; we had organised a quiet room equipped with a sofa, blankets, cushions, eyepatches, socks and the like; we distributed blankets and cushions in the conference room to make delegates more comfortable; we had British Sign Language interpreters and one deaf-blind interpreter in the room, and we had enlisted a captioning service for the entire day; we provided height-adjustable chairs; the conference programme was available in large print; we offered snacks from ‘free-from’ ranges with the packaging openly laid out so delegates were able to read the labels to consider their personal dietary
requirements; we had hot food delivered as per delegates’ advance orders that would also cater for dietary requirements, such as sugar-free, gluten-free, vegan and all potential combinations thereof; and food was handed out to delegates so that nobody would need to navigate a lunchtime buffet queue. Our conference was well received and we ensured accessibility as much as we could, but we are under no illusion: it was not perfect (see Brown et al. 2018). However, this conference was an opportunity for many academics to engage in relevant debates and discussions from the comforts of their own homes: a factor that was particularly commended by the Twitter community.

This book comes out of the unique experience from March 2018. And yet this collection is not a collection of conference proceedings. Some contributors to this book were involved with the conference, including our keynote Fiona Kumari Campbell, but others were not. It was always our aim not only to present lived experiences, but also to provide scholarly debates and theorisation to add much-needed gravitas to individuals’ ongoing narratives. Therein lies the strength of this collection.

References

