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A Narrative Exposition of the University, Disability and the Non-Disabled Academic

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we reflect on our positions as senior non-disabled academics in the university and our experiences of trying to support colleagues who are disabled researchers. We consider notions of belonging, mutuality and community capacity. We sit with an original narrative exposition of the university and the creative potential of disability to detail, visit and resist, inform and reform our day-to-day working lives; to depathologise the university. We also reveal some of the barriers, blockages and frustrations. We make a case for the methodological rigour of a composite narrative which centres the fictional character of Florence. Our analysis of this narrative reveals five significant themes; addressing research funding inequities; anticipating disability; centering disabled people's organisations; revisiting support and fostering mutual alliances. In conclusion, we argue that we should approach tales of engagement with university processes, policies and bureaucratic arrangements not simply as undesirable entities of the neoliberal university that require deconstruction; but as everyday practices through which we might do some of our most depathologising work (as frustrating as this labour might be).

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we critically focus on our roles as senior non-disabled academics and our work in supporting disabled researcher colleagues in the university. Following Garland-Thomson (2005) we *sit* with a narrative exposition of the university and the creative potential of disability to detail, visit, inform, revisit, reform, and revolutionise our day-to-day working lives. We have written about this elsewhere as a process, politics, and attitude of depathologisation: working with disability in order to rethink the university's very constitution and character (Goodley 2024; Goodley et al. 2025). Depathologisation pulls back from the perspective that disability is a pathological problem (of an individual requiring a psycho-medical solution) and instead asserts that disability is a generative phenomenon (that contests the pathologising tendencies of social institutions). We want to note that disability is not a fetish, fad, nor fashion to be exploited. Disability is 'an impetus for vital, creative ways of being and doing – enriching a world of cultural difference' (Sealey 2026, np). Depathologisation encourages us to reorient to disability, but this is not without challenges. Hence, this paper exposes the potential and practice of depathologisation the university whilst also attending to the barriers, blockages, and frustrations.

In a recent paper by Reeves et al. (2025) they present a dynamic analysis of accentuating the social inclusion of adults with learning disabilities by attending to a sense of *belonging*, identifying forms of *mutuality*, and building *community capacity* through an embrace of human diversity. Their work propels us to think more deeply about depathologisation; specifically in relation to how we might support disabled researchers within the university (Reeves et al. 2025). As Reeves et al. (2025) make clear; disability is a capacious phenomenon that brings fresh understandings of belonging, community capacity, and mutuality. We understand belonging as a longing-to-be: a deeply affective relationship that human beings experience with their surroundings. Following Yuval-Davis's (2006) seminal work, belonging relates to those times when one's very being is valued and recognised: we *feel* like we *belong*. For Reeves et al. (2025, 2) 'belonging is a felt experience characterized by comfort, safety, value, and respect'. We ponder how we might work to create this sense of belonging for our disabled researcher colleagues. When disability turns up in the university it cannot help but craft new ways of being together (Titchkosky 2011). Community capacity is a reflection of what all of us can do in the university – disabled and non-disabled – to increase our individual and collective sense of belonging. Community capacity relies upon our interdependencies and relations of mutuality. Reeves et al. (2025) understand mutuality as an experience: of being with others who share our feelings and expectations. Mutuality also relates to giving back after one has been given. Hence, as we have benefitted from the university then it is only right that we give back to the university. We are interested in how non/disabled researchers are proactively involved in relationships of mutuality: giving to and receiving from one another.

As non-disabled research leaders committed to disability politics, we value working with disabled colleagues to make the university a more equitable community. While we have written with and continue to collaborate with disabled colleagues and disabled people's organisations (DPOs; Bottomley et al. 2024; Goodley et al. 2025), this paper foregrounds our perspectives of non-disabled researchers. Why? Precisely because non-disabled researchers and senior colleagues, like ourselves, have responsibilities to act as allies and creators of more equitable universities. Curating mutualistic research cultures should never be the sole duty of disabled colleagues. Non-disabled folks, like ourselves, need to be accountable, responsive, and proactive. What follows in this paper is a story that offers a critical appraisal of our own attempts – alongside others – to scaffold university work contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology is autobiographical by design; drawing upon stories, anecdotes, academic musings, literature, readings, debates, media narratives – 'partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors' (Sparkes 2007, 522) – gathered together from our working lives across numerous research projects and seven universities over the last 30 years. We draw on these empirical resources to present our story of Florence – a fictional composite character – a senior non-disabled academic struggling with the demands of the university (a pretty ordinary and typical story) and with the promise of disability (a more

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original narrative). We take on Sparkes's (2007) plea to use narrative to put our hearts and bodies into the centre of research inquiry.

For transparency it is important to recognise our involvement with three live concurrent projects that have given us the impetus, time, drive, and excuse to write this paper together (see acknowledgements). Nevertheless, while we enjoy working with many brilliant research non/disabled colleagues across these three projects, the stories that we tell in this paper are in *no way a direct reflection of* these colleagues. It is fair to say that we are able to write the fictional narrative presented below precisely because many non/disabled researchers have been generous enough to permit us to become part of their university lives and stories (either directly or through their own writings). We sincerely hope that our story does justice to the collective work that non/disabled academics and DPOs have enacted as they seek to promote belonging, community, and diversity in the university.

Our composite narrative draws on accounts, tales, and practices in and outside of our working lives. We have written together many times. As life partners we live a life together: often struggling to separate the personal/political and work/home. In writing Florence – mainly in our leisure time – we've continued to these blur distinctions. We are yet to decide if this is a good or bad thing. We have worked with composite narratives and conversations in previous writing (Goodley et al. 2004; Goodley et al. 2025; Michalko, Goodley with Smokie 2023). Storytelling is the primary methodology for all of our research, and we build on a legacy of work engaged with the literary and analytical power of fiction and experimental writing in educational research (Clough 2002; Sparkes 2007; Spindler 2008; Walsh 2003). We do not adhere to empiricist conceptions of rigour and data but instead grapple with questions of authenticity in relation to fictional and experimental writing. We pursue this approach in this paper in order to unearth questions and practices in relation to research environments that might enable better working conditions for disabled researchers. We both identify as non-disabled. We are both full professors in our 50s. Rebecca is the Head of an academic school and Dan is co-director of an interdisciplinary research institute. Our family histories are deeply intertwined with disability, and we have been involved with critical disability studies research and scholarship for three decades now. In writing Florence' story, we are thinking through some of our own experiences *and* those that are not our stories; of friends, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers that we have come to know across the seven universities that we have worked in and the research literature that we have read. Florence is a true composite of slices of life taken from many different folk, imbued with ideas from disability studies literature and shaped into an imagined flawed and idealistic character.

Fiction introduces particular conceptions of methodological rigour (Clough 2002). We have written Florence's story to resonate with the contemporary state of the British university. We have tried hard to ensure that Florence, as a character, is interesting enough to keep the reader's attention. We have agonised about the inclusion of particular stories as these are close to home to colleagues that we have worked with. We have shared this story with a number of ex and current colleagues. We know that Florence's story is parochial: our working class, provisional, Welsh and English backgrounds have informed the narrative construction. The character of Florence is marked by the privilege of seniority and whiteness and her fictitious Anglocentric university threatens to settle our analysis in the global north; so is not written as an approximation of the university per se. Nevertheless, we believe that her narrative will resonate with readers from different university and national contexts – not least the traces of neoliberal competition, pressures of external research funding, and contemporary debates about the reality or otherwise of disability categories. When the story feels unfamiliar to the reader then we have sought to give more context and offer further explanation.

We are merely academic researchers telling a story; lacking the flair and imagination of writers, essayists and novelists that we admire. Perhaps in the final analysis of methodological rigour pertaining to our fictional narrative we need to ask: does this story say something about our subject – a non-disabled colleague's engagements with research culture and the university? As Sparkes (2007) observes, as with all fiction, it really is up to the reader to answer that question. At the centre of Florence's story is an imagined research project. We are influenced by Viney (2024) who argues that research projects are more than arbitrary containers: they say something about the workings of universities, the social and cultural construction of knowledge

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and the political economy of the university. A project gives context and life to a storying of research culture. By centring a fictional research project, we move away from the generalities of the university – and the vagueness of the academy – to sit with some practicalities of research support and leadership.

And so, with some trepidation, we hand over to you: Florence's story.[1]

BRYNMAWR, BARISTAS, BARRIERS, AND BECOMINGS

A TUESDAY AFTERNOON IN MAY 2022

Spring and central London is picture book perfect.

The lightest of breezes and a mix of blue skies, sun, and rolling clouds.

Florence dodges the tourists; many on their phones, heads down, pulling away at over-full suitcases; their wheels scraping against the pavement surfaces already marked by blackened chewing gum and pigeon droppings.

To be fair she is kind of a tourist in her own right: in search of a new experience. A *funded* experience of new pastures.

Electric bikes scoot by, catching her off guard.

She's disoriented. Perspiring on top of menopausal sweat.

She arrives. The map on her phone confirms.

By the entrance of the building.

The funder's name is emblazoned above.

Here it is then. Interview day. No pressure.

She takes a deep breath and moves through the revolving doors.

A waiting room. A table. Just as it was detailed in the invitational email she received.

Before her; water. Fizzy and still. Branded in the funder's logo.

To her right a door. Behind that: the interview panel.

How many times has she imagined this moment?

Who, behind that door, does she have to convince?

She is called into the interview room and met by a sea of faces. Many are bespectacled. There is a fair gender mix. A lot of grey hair. Some male-pattern baldness. Modest postmodern black attire. It is mainly a white crowd. Judging from the accents of those in conversations: received pronunciation. Firmly middle class. Definitely a touch of the Golden Triangle.[2]

Florence's Provisional North Town University™[3] feels a long way from here.

So – just the 12 academic peers (competitors? judges?) to convince.

She takes another deep breath and makes her way to the front table where a laptop sits; her PowerPoint slides already projected on the wall behind her.

40 minutes later, that same day

She thanks the hipster chap at the cafe for the coffee.

She clocks his arms. Tattoos. New ink. Nice guns.

Making her way out onto the busy street she asks herself why she picked this dress to wear today.

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1 Brynmawr is the name of a market town in Wales.

2 As will be expanded upon later in this paper, this refers to a group of elite universities located in the Southern counties in England.

3 This is, of course, a generic fictional university: very much the opposite in terms of status to the Global Triangle universities.

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She knows she should have chosen something lighter from her admittedly overflowing wardrobe of garments.

The now cloudless sky reveals an unseasonably hot sun (or maybe it's Ms Menopause, again).

She walks by the 'national', 'world', 'global', 'royal' associations and institutions.

Past embassies, grand gardens, Georgian, and Victorian buildings.[4]

She admires their elegant palace fronts.

She recognises the globally renowned names of university departments.

Dead men (and the occasional woman) are memorialized on blue plaques.

This whole place has the smell and feel of the elite.

She feels a long way from her childhood in Brynmawr, South Wales.

What is she doing here?

Does she really deserve this funding?

Do people like her get the money?

June 2022

Friday 4.55pm[5]

Her phone pings. The sound of a teaspoon striking the body of a teacup made of the finest crockery. A sound that used to be cute is now hateful through repetition.

It's an email.

That email. The one that she has been obsessively searching for over the last month. Refreshing and refreshing the email on her phone. Hour after hour. From morning to night. Thumb pulled down from the top to the bottom of the screen.

She opens the email and reads.

'Dear Professor Evans, we are delighted to confirm that…'

Euphoria.

She got the funding.

She realises that, for the last minute or so, she has been doing the macarena dance[6] in the shared office space of her provincial university's building. The few colleagues that are in today look up, appear to shrug and then get back to their own computer screen time.[7]

No one likes a show-off.

Few appreciate the macarena.

March 2023

Disability can arrive in many ways in the university.

Sometimes it arrives in a flourish like today.

The new project is live. A new website. A tagline: recalibrating the university through disability. Florence feels a sense of overwhelming pride as she stands before a huge university foyer screen that announces her project. She fiddles with her new art house necklace bought from a makerspace stall at a trendy market in Manchester. There are so many makers now; a legacy of the pandemic and all that spare time while many feared for their lives and some were judged to be disposable by the NHS.[8]

4 The places described here are typical of many of the old and impressive buildings located in central London.

5 We have chosen time to pick up on a bad practice of funders to notify applicants of funding decisions the last working day of the week. A decision can make or break the weekend.

6 This is a well known song made popular in the 1980s and 1990s and a staple of family get-togethers in the UK.

7 Many universities bare the marks of Covid-19 with many academic colleagues still working from home that render buildings and offices empty.

8 Many disabled people were rendered precarious, abandoned and devalued during the pandemic.

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The necklace was a present to herself: for getting through the interview in London. For getting through Covid-19. Today the necklace fits even better.

How might she help initiate disability's arrival in her university?

She wonders how she might cultivate conversations that start with the idea that disability is less of a problem to solve and more of a resource to rethink how we might do things better together.

She remembers when she was typing the text for the slide that now appears before – in human size on the foyer screen – in response to a request from the university's marketing team – that her computer's autocorrect wanted to change 'disability' to 'the disabled'.

Right *there* is the problem: the *objectification* of disability.

Does her work threaten to do the same?

These thoughts will have to wait; or at least settle for a while as there is work to be done. Job descriptions to write, finance meetings to hold, human resources' advice to garner, contracts to draft for non-academic partners, online training courses to complete including 'neurodiversity training online module'. New financial regulations are to be poured over. Changes to invoicing, requisition, new supplier registrations, tax considerations, questions about VAT, overheads, indirect costs, direct costs, funder regulations, virement...[9]

It's already 3pm Friday.

August 2024

The conference room is impressive; located in the university's business school.

A long rectangular table is accompanied by faux leather seats that ergonomically bend backwards and forwards in concert with the user's movement.

The room is walled by frosted glass windows: giving a sense of privacy and self-importance.

The final interviewee has just left the room.

Members of the interview panel study their notes.

Florence surveys the room.

The panel is constituted by four academic colleagues and four researchers from local self-advocacy groups: experienced activists and researchers with learning disabilities.

Florence has had the pleasure of working with these self-advocacy groups [10] for three decades.

The movement remains strong. It was not broken by COVID-19.

The panel has interviewed six people today for the post of researcher.

Joyce, an experienced researcher from the local self-advocacy group, is collating her views with her supporter Jonny.

Florence kicks off the discussion. She reminds them of the names of each interviewee and seeks responses from around the table.

Joyce ploughs straight in.

'I really liked the first interviewee Matthew. His presentation made sense to me. His words and pictures on their slides didn't have any jargon. Also, did you notice he spoke to me and my mates, not to you Flo? He seemed kind.'

Florence smiles and nods in agreement.

She reminds herself that her academic colleague Dai is blind.

Why does she need to remind herself? She's worked closely with Dai for over a decade.

9 This is a non-exhaustive list of the many bureaucratic tasks involved in employing researchers, setting up grants in the university and engaging contractually with non-academic organisations in university research.

10 Self-advocacy groups are part of a large international movement that represent the aims and aspirations of people with learning disabilities. The term 'learning disabilities' is used in this paper to reflect the Anglocentric nature of our story. Like all disability labels, 'learning disabilties' is a contested term. Some members of the self-advocacy movement prefer the term 'People First'. Different geographical locations also use other labels and synonyms (including 'intellectual disabilities' and 'developmental disabilities') and increasingly people so-labelled align themselves with labels of neurodiversity and neurodivergence.

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'Dai, sorry, I'm nodding in agreement with Joyce.' Florence explains.

Dai nods back acknowledging Florence's belated explanation.

Florence moves to the other members of the interview panel to garner their feedback.

Early November 2025

An online meeting.

'Still no news on Access to Work.' Matthew declares making ready use of his Alternative and Augmentative Communication technology.

Florence surveys Matthew's status on the screen. His face captures an overwhelming state of exasperation. It exists in direct opposition to the bold colouring of his home office which frames him. There are neon greens and oranges. Framed gig posters of dance and rave events from the 90s.

The two of them are from the same era.

Florence lost nights and mornings in underground raves.[11]

Matthew, a wheelchair user, would have struggled to access the nightclubs with many being located down many stairs to their dingy locations.

Their career trajectories have also taken very different turns.

The university was no place for a disabled researcher in the 1990s.

The contemporary university remains out of bounds to Matthew.

Florence wants to give Matthew a virtual hug. She enlarges the screen size on their meeting. Somehow this feels like a spatial recognition of the significance of what they are talking about.

'I am sorry Matthew. Shall I get in touch with Peter again?

Peter is the one Access to Work[12] specialist colleague in the university. His workload is frankly unworkable.

'With respect, Florence, I don't need apologies. I need to see change.'

Matthew has been working on the project for 10 months now. While the Access to Work processes were put in on the day that he accepted the position (13 months ago today) he still has not had confirmation of a paid support worker.

Matthew has continued to do this work without formal support.

He has completed an ethics application. Carried out a literature review. Designed the research methods. Drafted the participant information sheets and consent forms. All of this done without support that would have made the job smoother, less exhausting, less demanding. All of this work was done in the face of a disjuncture between inaccessible university systems and their failure to fit with Matthew's support needs.

'I want to thank you for doing this work for us Matthew: we don't deserve it. And you did not have to do it.' Florence flounders.

'I have my own professional status to think of as well', Matthew replies. 'Thank you for your support though Florence.'

'It's the least I can do. Please call me Flo.'

The call ends.

[two days later]

This *will* be an accessible event.

This *has to be* an accessible event.

11 This section of the story is evoking memories of 1990s dance and rave culture in the UK: an element of youth culture that the authors remember with fondness.

12 Acccess to Work (AtW) is a formalised form of support offered in the UK which will be further explained in the analysis section of this paper. AtW specialists like Peter are often member of non-academic staff located in the university that support disabled colleagues to access AtW funding and support.

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This is a showcase launch event of the project.

Can a hybrid event – especially an academic event – ever be an accessible event?

Florence scribbles a note on her tablet: 'Is the university fit for purpose to even allow us to consider the very idea of access?'

When was the last time anyone experienced a hybrid event as, well, an event?

Here in the university: this is a context where we now, apparently, do 'face-to-face'.

To be totally honest with herself; Florence is nervous about the face-to-face. She spends all her time online these days in meetings. Walking into the university today she came across the following sprayed in yellow paint on the wall of the Turkish Baths:[13] *Familiarity will be what overwhelms us.*

Perhaps this explains her nerves.

Florence surveys the seminar room.

Speakers, interpreters and personal assistants have been booked and are in place.

Travel and accommodation finalised.

Participants arrive online and offline.

Dietary requirements and allergies have been collated and shared with the university's in-house caterers.

Screens are on.

BSL[14] interpreters are in situ. No participant nor speaker has requested them. But their presence makes a powerful point: Deaf and deaf people are welcome here.

The interpreters are frustrated that they have no one to interpret for.

Florence notes that some are wearing face masks. COVID lurks somewhere in these lecture rooms, corridors, and crowded student coffee bars.

Suddenly, the horrible noise of a fire alarm. There is no test today. She knows this. She had checked that with the porter Jim.

Two participants cover their ears.

Jim appears just in time in the seminar room.

'Y'all right Flo? Jim asks, noting Florence is visibly worried. 'Now, we need everyone out.'

Florence is a trained fire marshall. Sadly, her Hi-Viz jacket is upstairs on level 3.[15]

Florence and three colleagues facilitate the movement of 28 people.

Some are visibly distressed by the noise.

There are moments of connection.

An arm to support the balance of another.

A door kept open to allow smooth access.

Comforting smiles and touches.

'Thank God I booked the ground floor', Florence tells Jim.

'Yeah: no refuge area by the bins for some of these folk today',[16] Jim replies.

13 We are thinking here of a building in Sheffield which offers well-being and health spa days in its stately building.

14 British Sign Language.

15 It is common in British universities for academic and non-academic staff to be trained as fire marshalls to help support colleagues adhere to regulations in the case of a fire including; including leaving the building, meeting in a designated safe area or occupying a refuge area to wait for assistance from ambulance crew.

16 A common practice in the UK during a fire alarm is for people who use wheelchairs to be assigned a refuge area: a designated place for those who cannot use the stairwells when the leave the building.

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Some three minutes later and the face-to-facers of the event gather together outside of the building.

An inauspicious start to the project.

Meanwhile, in the panicked movement from lecture room to assembly point, no one has told the 73 online participants spanning nine countries why the room has been cleared. Each appears on the projected screen. Each framed by a separate square. Two have cameras on. Others do not. Some are visible on the projected screen in the seminar room. All occupy a temporary muted world of confusion and uncertainty.

Florence finds out later that it is a false alarm.

Someone burnt their morning toast.

Late November 2025

Mid-morning.

Another event.

Online only.

What can possibly go wrong?

Three presenters share their work. Ten-minute presentations. All have kept to time. There is a five-minute access break before the Q&A. The presenters offer their perspectives upon disability studies. One speaks of working in rehabilitation studies. Another reflects on social work. The last has some very critical things to say about psychology.

Florence starts to relax. Is this transdisciplinarity at its best? Where disability seriously disrupts established disciplinary ways of thinking.

She risks entering a warm fug of smugness.

She downs her coffee.

She allows her cat to jump up onto her lap.

Big mistake.

The cat has either been playing in mud or worse.

And then: a rupture.

Clearly, she has been over-relaxing.

Comments start to file through on the Q&A.

Participant 31: I am not sure if disability studies engage with neurodivergence?

Participant 9: Yes, I was going to ask the same thing. I think there is neurodiversity studies and disability studies, but they are different things.

Participant 13: I am neurodivergent – but this does not mean I am disabled – I'm differently abled – so I'm not sure what disability studies can offer me.

Participant 43: Thanks for these comments. I did want to raise an access question: I appreciate the 1¼ hours timing but I think this is still too long for neurodiverse folk like myself.

Participant 13: yep. That kind of backs up my point. Neurodiversity and disability are very different.

[Private comment to Florence]

Moderator 4: Flo', BIG questions. Do you want to answer them?

[2 hours later]

That ping again.

An email.

A message from Dai: still one of Florence's oldest and most trusted friends in the department.

Subject heading: Nightmare…

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'Flo.

Peter from Access to Work has taken Voluntary Severance.[17] No replacement organised so far. Not sure if you should tell your colleague Matthew. Coffee? Chat?'

One wheel forward.

Another wheel back.

[6 hours later]

Florence drains her glass.

She turns to her partner Dizzy and gives him those eyes: more wine.

He smiles, tuts – gently teasing her – and wanders off to find a refill. The toils of the sober designated driver.

This party – all the way over in the leafy suburbs of Liverpool – is the last thing she needed after the busy work of this last week.

Still, she has no choice. Lizzie – her oldest university friend – is celebrating her 50th Birthday.

She admires the granite tops of the newly refurbished kitchen, the Tom Dixon melt lights and the shiny new duck egg blue Smeg refrigerator.[18]

She asks herself not for the first time 'why did she marry another poor academic rather than a corporate lawyer like Lizzie?'

As if reading her mind Lizzie plus her lawyer husband approach.

They look annoyingly amazing.

Head to toe in designer gear no doubt procured from Manchester's Selfridges.[19]

Florence smooths down the bottom of her dress with her hand; reminding herself that a £10 bargain from the Zara[20] sales is still Zara.

'Flo, Lizzie tells me you have a big disability project?' The lawyer asks though clearly not waiting for, nor needing a response.

He is drunk.

Sloshed red wine stains cover his white shirt.

He strokes his scruffy blond moptop from his eyes.

'Isn't everyone disabled or neuro-y – or whatever the trendy term is – these days? I mean how is this new Labour-lite government[21] going to cope with the welfare bill. We cannot all be disabled, can we?'

Dizzy returns with her full glass of white wine.

Just in time.

Dizzy turns to address the boorish boring lawyer. 'So, Boris, I see you've still not managed to get over Nottingham Forest hammering Liverpool?[22]

For once; football is a saviour.

17 Voluntary Severance (VS) refers to a mutually agreed departure from a place of employment where the employee resigns in exchange for a financial package.

18 Tom Dixon and Smeg are luxury brand home furnishing and kitchen products.

19 Is a designer department store located in central Manchester.

20 Zara is a mid-level clothing brand.

21 Boris is exhibiting his clear prejudice against the current Labour Government in the UK.

22 Dizzy is referring to a rare defeat by Liverpool Football Club at the hands of Nottingham Forest Football Club that occurred in the 2024–2025 English Premier League season. It was a beautiful moment.

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ANALYSIS

In writing 'Florence' we have tried to give life to a fictional research project in action; to reveal some of its practical, relational, and human qualities. Below, we explore five themes through which disability provides an exposition of the university's system, institutional workings, and cultural practices, with a specific focus on research culture and the support of researchers. Our analysis reveals the promise and challenges of depathologising the university. Our approach draws upon foundational ideas of thematic analysis (developed by Braun and Clarke 2006) and the analytical ethnographic ideas developed by Snow and colleagues (2004) while also drawing on literature from critical analyses of the university, disability, and neurodivergence. We implicitly revisit belonging, community capacity, diversity, and mutuality introduced earlier. Furthrmore, our analysis seeks to be prescriptive: to take forward learnings from Florence's story as part of a wider project of creating more inclusive research environments.

ADDRESSING RESEARCH FUNDING INEQUITIES

In writing 'Florence' we could have drawn upon many of our own experiences of disappointment when we have failed to land a grant (last count, over 30 rejections, a number of which we have actively repressed and forgotten). Instead, we have sat with the success of grant capture; a practice framed as a performative necessity of academic career success at least in the UK. While Florence's story is a privileged narrative of a senior academic it also bears the traces of class, gender, and inequality as she reflects upon her place at the funding table.

We know though, that deep systemic inequalities are baked into the funding landscape of British universities. Competition for funding does not take place on a level playing field. The Golden Triangle is a term that was initially used to describe the grouping of elite, highly funded universities located in the southern English cities of Oxford, Cambridge, and London (Wise 2017). And while there is evidence to suggest research funding is more dispersed across the UK, the Golden Triangle continues to still benefit from discretionary funding and endowments (see Grove 2025; Wise 2017). There is also evidence that applicants from working class, black, and disability backgrounds struggle to break through the various glass ceilings, broken pipelines, and barriers to progression associated with grant success (e.g. CRAC 2020; Crew 2021; EPSRC 2022). Even when invited into the funding machine, Florence questions her place: reminding us that seniority is not simplistically correlated with a positive sense of belonging. Moreover, the university landscape is marked by inequalities; some institutions boast community capacities and resources that enable their academics to secure funding more readily than colleagues in other institutions. Depathologising the university sector involves contesting inequities of research funding. We welcome recent practices by funders to tackle their own inherent biases through an embrace of partial randomisation and the rewarding of innovative approaches to inclusive research cultures such as co-production and participatory research (Lewis-Wilson et al. 2023). Research collaborations with key non-academic stakeholders – such as disabled people's representative organisations – have the potential to be innovative because transformative practices of organisations outside of the university are brought into the university.

ANTICIPATING DISABILITY

As old academics we find the contemporary university more responsive to disability than it was three decades ago. We appreciate colleagues that are more likely to proudly identify as disabled, chronically ill, and/or neurodivergent. Disability's naming as a protected characteristic demands a response. Disability arrives in Florence's university in many ways. Various processes, policies, and practices are driven by disability including inclusive job recruitment, personal assistance, and support systems, accessible face to face and online events.

Our worry is that disability still tends to be treated as an individual problem that inconveniences the university. Too often the university fails to anticipate the presence of disability. Disability lands in the disability almost as if it were a surprise. This suggests that the university fails to have the community capacities that set necessary conditions for a sense of belonging on the part of our disabled colleagues. The continued ideological constitution of disability as an individual problem lets the university off the hook.

Individual problems tend to be treated with individual solutions. As the founding parents of British disability studies – such as Mike Oliver (1996) and Carol Thomas (2007) – told us many

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years ago; the individualisation of disability is itself a problem because it fails to ask questions of society and culture. We understand one of our responsibilities as senior researchers to be social agitators; pushing our colleagues to embrace disability as a socio-cultural phenomenon. When disability becomes something owned by an individual then this risks individualising the very essence of disability. Instead, we need to collectively anticipate disability's arrival in the university. We need university communities to anticipate how they might embed disability equality within their work cultures to engage immediately, proactively and positively with the contributions of disabled researchers (Lawson and Orchard 2021). And here universities can learn much from collaborating with disabled people's organisations (DPOs) because these collectives have the community capacities and disability literacy required to anticipate disability.

CENTRING DISABLED PEOPLE'S ORGANISATIONS

While co-produced research has become a hallmark of inclusive research practice, mainstreaming co-production risks producing tokenism and appropriation (Shen 2026). As Perry and Atherton (2017) make clear, meaningful collaborative research between university researchers and non-academic partners offers moments of real critique and the proffering of alternative practices and policies. Co-created research can be responsive to the aspirations of disabled people and has the potential to bring DPOs into the centre of university life; thus increasing a sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006; Reeves et al. 2025). Moving expertise and counsel of DPOs (including self-advocacy groups) *into* the university – to inform the recruitment process of researchers or the running of hybrid events – goes beyond gesture politics to cultural change.

Collaboration is, however, not without tensions. DPOs must be properly remunerated by funders and university systems through the payment of competitive consultancy, research, and innovation rates that ensure their involvement in research from start to end (Bottomley et al. 2024; Disability Wales 2019; Phillips and Scargill 2025). Universities need to be more responsive and agile to ensure co-created research becomes a sustainable practice. As Florence labours to propel collaboration within her institution she is pulled into a myriad of bureaucratic systems (Goodley et al. 2025). The university – like any big organisation – is rife with administrative complexities. Contractual arrangements are not simply administrative red tape: they protect DPOs against institutional exploitation and when tackled correctly ensure that the intellectual property of these organizations is maintained. But administration also creates forms of hidden labour on the part of non/disabled academic and professional services colleagues – and DPO partners – that need to be remunerated, made visible, and recognised precisely because this work is at the heart of building equitable relational mutualities between universities and DPOs (Aboudihaj et al. 2025).

REVISITING SUPPORT

Throughout Florence's story we find moments of mutual connection between non/disabled colleagues. One kind of formal support – Access to Work (AtW) – has been crucial to supporting disabled people into work in the UK. Through the AtW scheme, universities can apply for grants to help support disabled people into the workplace through the funding of equipment, support workers, personal assistance, travel, and specialist equipment. At the time of writing this, the AtW scheme is in crisis: facing government cuts, a backlog of applications, and a lack of institutional support and knowledge (Rafiq and Fox 2025). When disabled researchers rely upon AtW to carry out their jobs – and support associated with AtW is cut-off from them – then this risks undermining existing networks of support that have taken many months to embed in the day-to-day realities of work in the academy.

One of our colleagues – Dr Armineh Soorenian – is currently leading a subgroup of the UK's National Association of Disabled Staff Network to critically uncover the challenges posed by the current AtW crisis (NADSN 2026). Disabled people are often forced into forms of entrepreneurship that sit in counter-distinction to societal expectations that do not expect disabled people to succeed (Lorenzo et al. 2007). And, as we note with the case of Florence's colleague Matthew, labour might well be enacted in workplaces without support that people are entitled too. Career progression will always be impacted by complex interactions of class, race, sexuality, and gender (Shah 2005). All of us in the academy grapple with ableism but disabled people also have to tackle disablism within the academy.

The question of support is a troubling one; especially in the academy where narratives of individual quest and achievement are valued and support systems are bureaucratised. There is an urgent need for universities to redress their relationships with support – not simply through an engagement with formalised processes such as AtW – but through an anticipatory commitment to curating everyday forms of mutuality as markers of university success. Support often happens in the everyday informal relationships between non/disabled colleagues that foster a sense of belonging in our communities (Reeves et al. 2025). Senior academics like ourselves clearly have a responsibility to ensure that we demystify support: to remind us of all of our interdependencies that build unity with one another.

FOSTERING MUTUAL ALLIANCES

While neurodivergence and neurodiversity have emerged as powerful expressions of disability and difference, they have also been treated with disdain, skepticism, and rejection (Krazinski 2023; Rippon 2025). Neurodivergence is a desired proud identity for some, and a diagnosis placed upon others without choice. Neurodivergent theorists have called for a complete transformation of societal institutions, social theory, and political activism through the politics and process of neuroqueering (Shannon 2020; Walker 2021). Neurodiversity permits people to contest society's tendency to fit with the desires of neurotypical folk (Stenning and Rosqvist 2021). For Mcgee (2012, 12) neurodiversity politically names individual rights and celebrates a diversity of people; extending discussions from the disability rights movement (which historically was dominated by folk with physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments) into 'the realm of cognitive, affective, and perceptual difference'. Neurodivergent politics have a long history of contesting normative ideas and ideals associated with non-disabled ontologies as being the productive ontologies of contemporary society (Botha et al. 2024).

Embracing neurodiversity has the potential to work *with* depathologisation: to deconstruct normative assumptions associated with neurotypical tropes of good citizenship and personhood (Chapman and Carel 2022). Questions are also raised about the mutual relationship between neurodiverse and disability politics. Runswick-Cole (2014) argues that the growing drive for neurodivergent identities and politics risks creating an 'us and them' binary – not only between neurodivergent and neurotypical folk – but also between neurodivergent and other disabled people. We might read some of the comments from Florence's online symposium as emblematic of these tensions. Jones and Orchard (2024) note that just as neurodivergence becomes more represented within the university, many other disabled people remain fundamentally excluded from the academy. We do not read these commentaries as criticism of neurodivergent comrades whose own entry-points into – and exit-points out of – the university reflect deeply entangled histories and contemporary practices of disablism. Instead, we want to connect neurodivergence's iteration, categorisation or deployment with other expressions of disability. Neurodivergent politics embolden disability activism's generative potential to reimagine the very elements of the human condition that we value and support together. Senior colleagues like ourselves should foster mutual alliances between neurodivergent and disabled colleagues, their representative organisations and university colleagues, as we challenge together neurotypical *and* ableist conditions of the university.

CONCLUSION

We recognise that as senior academics *we* are the university and *we* must work to make sure that disabled researchers are a central part of our communities. Florence's story reminds us that universities are founded upon networks of relationships. Any understanding of relationality should bring with it considerations of mutuality: our ways of being with one another. And mutualism requires community. Mutuality is an experience of being with others who share our feelings and experiences (Reeves et al. 2025); of giving back after one has been given. We should not confuse this with an equalised relationship between one and another; with each giving and receiving the same. Some of us are in positions of power that demand giving while others are engaged with the daily task of survival. Florence's story encourages us to identify a number of affairs associated with enhancing community capacities of and within the university.

First, we need to recognise the responsibilities of non-disabled colleagues like ourselves to create forms of support for disabled researchers where disability lands as an opportunity rather than as a problem.

Second, we need to consider how we bring together our various communities of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent folk and non-disabled allies in ways that recognise specificity and difference whilst contributing to a wider common politics of disability.

Third, we need to work against those assumptions and practices that represent our disabled colleagues as failing to meet the imperatives of ability.

Fourth, we need to curate forms of connectedness across our non-disabled, disabled, and neurodivergent communities; respectful of frictions, tensions, and differences. Disability has always been an ever-expanding phenomenon because it is 'a network of multiple positions, constructed in and through many chains of past and present signification' (Corker 2000; 306). We must embrace new expressions of disability as a means to unify rather than divide.

Finally, we must approach tales of engagement with university processes, policies and bureaucratic arrangements not simply as undesirable entities of the neoliberal university that require deconstruction; but as everyday practices through which we might do some of our most depathologising work (as frustrating as this labour might be). Florence's story – like our own – is a largely unglamorous tale. From menopausal sweats to repetitive email correspondence, to endless engagements with university processes, to the release of a Friday night party: it narrates a tale of university labour. And, in this labour, we might how we are depathologising the university together.

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