Disabled students doing activism: Borrowing from and trespassing neoliberal reason in English higher education

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Abstract

The neoliberal rationale in English higher education promotes institutional and individual competition for economic success, often at the cost of equity and universalism. Within such context, there is a tendency to formalise student voice, for example, through professionalisation of students' unions. This paper argues that neoliberalism and its effects on university practices enforce ableist culture, further marginalising disabled students. More specifically, the paper is concerned with how Disabled Students' Officers – official full- or part-time student representatives of disabled students in English students' unions – practise activism in response to universities' neoliberal agendas. By utilising Foucault's concept of governmentality and qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with Disabled Students' Officers, we explore the ways of doing disability activism in their experience. The findings indicate that activism as it is practised by participants is complex and contradictory, combining neoliberal ways of acting, i.e., evidence production, committee-based work and lobbying, with more subtle forms of critique and resistance related to collectivism, arts and ethics of care. By enabling critical reflections on participants' experiences, this paper strives to encourage debate on renewed strategies and complexity and contradiction in activism, but also to highlight the potential for trespassing the dominant neoliberal rationale in higher education.

Keywords

disability activism, students' unions, marketisation of higher education, Foucault

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Introduction

Neoliberalisation of higher education, commonly reflected in marketisation of university education and the introduction of managerialist practices, continues to dismantle education as a public good (Apple, 2013; Giroux, 2011). In English higher education, the systematic withdrawal of state funding from universities has been accompanied by offloading the cost of education onto the individual and the undeterred entrance of private actors and interests to higher education, undermining equal opportunities and access to services based on principles of universalism (Carter et al., 2010; Tomlinson, 2017). Neoliberalism has been described as a form of late capitalist economic order that promotes free markets and privatisation of public goods (Harvey, 2005). However, a Foucauldian approach employed in this paper enables us to extend such perspectives and understand neoliberalism as something even more threatening and all encompassing: a specific mode of government that is rooted in economic discourses aiming to restructure all social life (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2004). Brown (2015) explains that neoliberalism, as currently the dominant mode of government, is underpinned by a particular rationale (or a logic) that reaches beyond economic policy and results in a situation where market principles circulate through institutions across society. As a dominant rationale, neoliberalism starts governing every sphere of human existence, while turning into a cultural regime that 'stamps price and profit onto the very souls of those who live under it' (Rodgers, 2018, 84). It has become our present and the future, where no alternatives are possible or even imaginable (Brown, 2006, 2018).

This neoliberal rationale underpinned by economic interest, competition and individualism engenders widespread ableism (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015; Dolmage, 2017), with disabled students being relentlessly side-lined, excluded and left behind even after a relatively more inclusive experience of remote learning during the series of Covid-19 lockdowns (Disabled Students UK, forthcoming report; Shew, 2020). While the participation of disabled students in higher education has progressively increased, where 15% of students studying in England in 20/21 declared at least one disability (HESA, 2022), the evidence shows that the sector is far from being inclusive. For example, there has been a regressive policy shift in terms of state support to disabled students, especially as regards the Disability Support Allowance (DSA)[1]. Since 2017, non-medical adjustments have been excluded from the DSA. The Office for Students (2019) frames these cuts as an opportunity to stimulate institutional and cultural change and advance disabled students' inclusion through accessible pedagogy, for example, by providing training on inclusive teaching and learning practices to academic staff. This has caused a situation where the responsibility for disability support needs and provision has been offloaded to the individual (Osborne, 2019), and disabled students are required to pay a larger share of the cost themselves (Brooks, 2019). Within such context, it is unsurprising that disabled students are likely to take longer to complete a degree (OfS, 2020a), demonstrate higher levels of dropout rates (Hector, 2020, Policy Connect Report – HE Commission) and lower levels of satisfaction with their studies (OfS, 2020b), compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

Alongside the erosion of disability support, the role of students' unions has been weakened in the name of individual rights and responsibilities that are dismembering the education community (Compton and Weiner, 2008; Raaper, 2020a, 2020b; Stevenson, 2015). Research has highlighted how neoliberal reforms in higher education, particularly the tuition fee increases and the professionalisation of student representation, have impacted on the ways of doing activism within and through students' unions, in which unions are shaped by the increasingly consumerist environment of higher education. In the context of this paper, it raises particular questions: *how are the Disabled Students' Officers – official full- or part-time student representatives of disabled students in*

students' unions – shaped by the processes of neoliberalism? What form does activism take in the experience of these officers?

In this article, we discuss the workings of neoliberalism in English higher education and the effects that the years of corrosive processes of marketisation have had on the strength of disabled students' collective actions. We merge critical disability studies, particularly the studies of ableism in academia (Dolmage, 2017; Campbell, 2009; Peruzzo, 2020, 2021), with research on student unionism and political agency in higher education (Brooks, 2017; Brooks et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2011; Raaper, 2020, 2021). We also mobilise Foucault's (1982, 1984) analytic toolkit of governmentality to conceptualise neoliberalism and use qualitative thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with Disabled Students' Officers to explore disability activism in their experience. Guided by Foucault (1982), we argue that power relations are always exposed in moments of crisis. The ableist higher education discourse embedded in neoliberalism as well as cuts to DSA are likely to have triggered a political reaction from disabled student communities. By enabling critical reflection on different ways of doing activism, collectivism and the meanings of resistance, this paper strives to encourage debate on renewed strategies, complexity and contradiction in activism, but also on the potential to trespass the dominant neoliberal rationale in higher education. Mobilising collaboration, art and the ethics of care to break the ableist narrative of progress and performativity, the paper invites us to rethink the present and the future of higher education and what it means to thrive collectively for more inclusive higher education (Moe and Wiborg, 2017).

Disability activism and students' unions in neoliberal universities

Student activism can be traced back to the beginning of universities, but the concept of an organised student movement is much more recent (Hensby, 2017), grounded in 1960s and early 1970s events when most widespread student protests took place as part of civil rights movements (Altbach, 1997, 2007bib_Altbach_1997bib_Altbach_2007). Formalisation of student voice on campuses, especially through student representation within university governance structures (Klemenčič, 2014), was one the outcomes of these protests. More recently, as a reaction to the relentless marketisation of higher education and the raise of tuition fees in England in 2010/11, student protests witnessed an upsurge, where student activists incorporated social media campaigns into traditional practices of protest and occupation (Cini and Guzmán-Concha, 2017; Hensby, 2017; Myers, 2017). Furthermore, Berghs et al. (2019) argue that we live in 'activist' times with differing formal and informal expressions of what activism looks like, ranging from traditional protest marches to artistic movements, hashtag activism, consumer activism and to individualised forms of political expressions. It is known that since the austerity programme and welfare cuts in the UK, digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs more broadly have proved to be particularly important tools for disability organising (Pearson and Trevisan, 2015). Some would even argue that for disabled students, day-to-day life offers ample opportunities to engage in activist behaviours, as they are more likely to face overt discrimination. According to Kimball et al. (2016), such behaviours should be considered as a form of disability activism in higher education. This is particularly important based on two premises. First, within disability activism, it is impossible to separate the political from personal, as there is a strong intersect between personal experiences of discrimination and actions this can trigger (Leigh and Brown, 2020). Second, traditional forms of campaigning and protesting can require a great deal of physical stamina which can make it less accessible to disabled people due to the lack of social and structural support for participating in civic life (Rummery, 2020). Such distinctive experience could result in more individualised or digital

forms of activism, and the authors of this paper are aware of these potentially important modes of activism.

This paper, however, centres around disability activism that takes place within and through formalised students' unions, particularly through the dedicated role of Disabled Students' Officer. It is a fact that disability activism in higher education is happening within a setting where neoliberalism prevails in political discourse (Prince, 2012). The reactions to such policies often become visible through students' unions and their representative political practice. This is particularly important to emphasise as many (e.g. Luescher-Mamasela, 2013) would argue that student representation in institutional and national higher education governance has become more prevalent in neoliberalised universities where student voice is seen as part of consumer rights and necessary accountability over the universities as providers. Klemenčič (2011) suggests that there is a new form of contractual relationship between universities as providers and students as consumers who need a guarantee for value for money, particularly in a situation where tuition fees have significantly increased as is the case in England. The consumerist positioning of students is further enforced by The Consumer Rights Act 2015 that formalises all consumer transactions in the UK, including student-university relations as regards information provision, terms and conditions and handling of complaints (CMA, 2015). Above all, the legislation aims to enforce consumer identity among students and competition between universities. From a consumerist perspective, students need to be consulted, so that educational practices, standards and outcomes meet their expectations (Fielding, 2004; Jongbloed et al., 2008).

Within this altered context, students' unions have claimed their powerful position in formalising student voice through participating in various committees and consultation processes and exercising their right to keep universities accountable. However, such formalisation of student voice and unionism indicates that while the 'student voice' is now taking a central place in higher education, it is less reflective of ad hoc emancipatory political practices targeted against oppressive hierarchies within universities and society more broadly (Bragg, 2007). Some (e.g. Brooks, 2017; Brooks et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2011) have raised concerns that making students' unions perform representative functions, it could have a depoliticising effect on student movements and their sabbatical officers. They might turn into advisers rather than political actors who challenge institutional and national governance approaches (Brooks, 2017; Brooks et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2011). Furthermore, the work of students' unions can become increasingly isolated in such consumerist environments, influencing opportunities for larger scale student organising (Raaper, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Students' unions now recruit and employ a variety of sabbatical officer roles, covering areas such as education, sports, internationalisation, welfare and equality matters among others. Disability rights are often covered with the remit of the Equality and/or Welfare Officer roles, however, some students' unions involve a more specific role, dedicated to representing disabled students. While the titles of these roles may differ, we opt for 'Disabled Students' Officer' as a generic descriptor here. As in other areas of students' union work, Disabled Students' Officers have been increasingly involved in evidence and committee-based work. For example, since the attacks on DSA funding, Disabled Students' Officers have produced several reports to expose the unfair treatment of disabled students in England. Relevant examples include reports by the UCL Disabled Student Forum (2020) and the Cambridge Disability Report (2018). In both reports, the Disabled Students' Officers produced surveys to evidence and quantify their claims, exposing discriminatory and exclusionary higher education practices. There is some further evidence of larger scale and national level organising among students and officers. For example, disabled students have established an online umbrella group Disabled Students UK to unify their struggles on a national basis. The Disabled Students UK[2] is a UK-wide umbrella organisation run by disabled students and allies with an aim to

coordinate a more effective action against injustices in higher education by putting disabled students' voices at the heart of this change and promoting collective forms of activism. It could therefore be argued that these emerging structures of disability activism, including but not limited to students' unions and Disabled Students UK as mentioned above, begin to offer a more visible profile to challenge the neoliberal higher education policies (Pearson and Trevisan, 2015).

Borrowing from Foucault: Unpacking neoliberal governmentality and institutional ableism

To make sense of the Disabled Students' Officer experiences of activism within and beyond their students' unions, we borrow theoretical tools from Foucault. It is Foucault's concept of governmentality that is particularly useful for us in understanding how neoliberalism has come to operate as a dominant rationale, and how we practise our agency in response to neoliberalism. Governmentality, as it reflects in Foucault's work, is time- and context-specific, and it includes 'historically specific relations of power, practices of subjectification and technologies through which the "conduct of conduct" is regulated' (Bansel, 2014, 18). Combining the words 'to govern' and 'mentality', neoliberal governmentality is underpinned by a neoliberal rationale ('mentality') that involves discursive practices or the so called 'anonymous hand' that organises and unites everything at a given period (Foucault, 1969: 211). In simple terms, the neoliberal rationale offers an ideological justification for all governing decisions, whether it relates to marketisation of education, privatising public goods or restructuring public sector organisations based on management styles and tools borrowed from the private sector. It is also a rationale that responsibilises individuals for their own wellbeing and future where the role of the state is to endorse market competition rather than provide welfare support to those in need. It is the free market, economic competition and individual responsibility that describe the neoliberal rationale and thus, it is unsurprising that the 'governing' aspect ultimately relies upon individuals' agentic freedom to govern themselves for their own wellbeing and productivity (Peruzzo, forthcoming; Simons and Masschelein, 2015). We argue that the DSA reform introduced earlier in this paper is a prime example of shifting responsibility for disability support onto the individual. There are two key moments of neoliberal governmentality that deserve particular attention in the context of this paper and help us understand the possibilities for activism in the experience of Disabled Students' Officers.

First, it is important to acknowledge that neoliberal governmentality shapes the role and functioning of students' unions, and it is likely that the unions come to enforce rather than challenge ableism in higher education. From a Foucauldian perspective, it is the economic flourishing that matters, and as part of this dominant rationale, the state attempts to gain control over the human body by relying on an 'ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics' (Foucault, 2009: 144). One could argue that students' unions now play a significant institutional role in neoliberal higher education apparatus, making sure that the student as consumer voice is captured and contained. Such positioning of students' unions is heavily enforced by universities and the government more broadly, especially through students' unions charitable status, institutional block funding (NUS, 2016) and their involvement in various committee-based work (Klemenčič, 2011; Luescher-Mamasela, 2013). While the students' union work is becoming more strategic and institutionally governed, the pressure to perform and prove one's value has increased, reshaping the expectations to sabbatical officer work in students' unions. In fact, neoliberal governmentality aims to reduce the aspects of social reality to 'mathematical equations of the free market' (Chopra, 2003: 432) where metrics and hard evidence are seen as the most trustworthy

mechanisms to prove the value of work we undertake. We acknowledge that the data in itself is not harmful, and it has enabled many marginalised communities to demonstrate the systemic forms of exclusion and discrimination, whether it is to do with access to higher education (or other public services) or transition to employment among many other important aspects of social life. The problem emerges, however, when the quantitative data becomes the only type of legitimate evidence that counts, thus downplaying the unique individual experiences and needs. This data-driven approach then feeds into the culture of performativity where there is never enough evidence for any argument to be made, and individuals need to work and try harder to produce the evidence. Ball (2013) argues that while neoliberalism has become all prevailing in governing institutions and individuals, people tend to voluntarily work harder, faster and better as it has become a part of their sense of personal worth and their estimation of the worth of others. While such responsibilisation is damaging to all workers in higher education, due to its ableist nature, it is particularly harmful on disabled communities. Dolmage (2017) and Peruzzo (2020, 2021) argue that neoliberalism with its performative drive weighs more heavily on disabled bodies who are more likely to struggle to keep up with raising expectations to perform and deliver. This is what Critical Disability Studies problematise as 'compulsory able-bodiedness' embedded within the neoliberal rationale (Dolmage, 2017). It is likely that the Disabled Students' Officers in this study are governed by performativity that in its very essence enforces institutional ableism.

Secondly, however, Foucault (1982: 225) argued that governmentality includes an 'encounter' between the techniques of domination and those of the self. The concept of governmentality therefore can also act as an important entree to the discussion of ethics and the care of the self which in turn enables a shift from 'conventional conceptions of power' to 'an ethical problematic of how to practise games between liberties with the minimum of domination' (Dean, 2013: 68). This also means that ableism in contemporary higher education needs not to be taken for granted, and that a Foucauldian ethics of care offers an opportunity for resistance that '[begins] within the individual, as a process of caring for one own self and for others' (Peruzzo, forthcoming). It is also likely that the students who the universities fail – the ones who fall through the nets of ableism in the context of this study – are the ones who have no choice but to find ways to care for oneself (and the other) and practise agency through alternative modes. This requires us to perceive disabled students as 'free subjects' who are able to exercise certain degree of freedom in their own conduct when manoeuvring within the dominant neoliberal rationale (Peruzzo, 2020: 4). Within the context of diffuse, all-encompassing and normalising networks of power, it is important to question what opportunities exist for individuals to manoeuvre within the power acting on them (Patrick, 2013) and exercise forms of resistance. Tobias (2005) even suggests that the power that controls subjects carries an opportunity for the subject to resist these forces. From a Foucauldian perspective, political act could therefore mean Disabled Students' Officers recognising and resisting the ways in which their role has been constructed and governed in universities and finding alternative ways to do activism.

Methodological approach

Students' accounts used in this project were part of a qualitative study conducted in 2020–2021 in England. One of the two researchers in this project attended the in person launch of the UCL Disabled Students' Network Report titled 'Disability Discrimination Faced by UCL Students & Recommended Measures'. The UCL Disabled Students' Network was part of the UCL Students' Union and had compiled a study to increase accessibility of UCL campuses through capturing lived experiences of disabled students. Here, a connection with the UCL Disabled Student Officer at the

time and future founding director of DSUK was made, and they acted as a gatekeeper, providing contacts of interviewees, and actively collaborating to the shaping of the project. Data were collected through eight in-depth semi-structured and open-end interviews with undergraduate and post-graduate Disabled Students' Officers working for students' unions in different English universities. The interviews were conducted online upon approval of the research project by the School of Education Ethics Committee at Durham University.

During the interviews, we focused on how students understood and did things, following the 'how(s) of power' (Ball and Olmedo, 2013: 86) and the 'microphysics of power' (Lazzarato, 2009) in their discursive and productive fashion, and capturing the accounts of disabled unionists on how they make themselves as activists. In this sense, in the process of interviewing there was no 'teleological tendency towards an ideal of "joint construction of meaning"' (Scheurich, 1997: 66), but the intention of creating an open space in which subjects navigated their selves through the practicalities, the problematics, the struggles and achievements of their sabbatical officer roles.

Following transcription, we applied thematic analysis to the data. Inductive analysis was initially used to provide an individual categorisation of interview data, which was followed by a process of joint reflection and interpretation to enable the researchers to consider our understanding of the data (Robson, 2002) in the context of a Foucauldian theorisation. We therefore balanced between inductive and deductive coding (Merriam, 2009), until all initial codes could be adequately explained conceptually (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). During the process of analysis, Foucault's theorisation of governmentality and care of the self allowed us to explore and consider how disabled activists in students' unions were governed and govern themselves within the neoliberalised higher education, and what opportunities they had to challenge the workings of the neoliberal rationale within the university. The final themes therefore centred around the ways of doing activism in the experience of Disabled Students' Officers interviewed and how activism operates in response to the dominant neoliberal rationale. We also followed this logic in the write up of this article. Given that the two academic researchers identify as disabled people's allies, the founding director of DSUK who identifies as disabled, provided constant space for criticality and reflection on our positionalities during the analysis of lived experiences of ableism on disabled students' bodies and minds.

Doing activism in neoliberal times

We begin our discussion with an exploration of how the Disabled Students' Officers complied with the neoliberal rationale and enforced the professionalised forms of student activism. This was done within and through their formalised Disabled Students' Officer role in students' unions. We then move on to present and unpack themes related to more inclusive and caring modes of activism that reflect in collaboration, artistic expressions and the ethics of care, and which we argue signify the opportunities to trespass the dominant neoliberal reason.

Complying with neoliberal expectations

The analysis indicated that the formal role of the Disabled Students' Officer as a legitimate representative of disabled students in a given university is likely to include several professional routes to vocalise disability matters in higher education. Participants' accounts emphasised the importance of producing evidence on disability discrimination, participating in various committees and lobbying. By drawing on these examples, we argue that by complying with the rather conventional and expected forms of sabbatical officer practice, the participants borrowed from the existing neoliberal toolbox – the now expected ways of doing things – to amplify the disabled

students' voices. While instrumental in its sense, it is an important and perhaps most prevalent mode of activism in contemporary students' unions that are increasingly professionalised and streamlined to serve the purposes of neoliberal universities (Brooks, 2017; Brooks et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2011; Raaper, 2020a).

There is no surprise that in neoliberal environments, shaped by the culture of accountability and performativity (Ball, 2013; Chopra, 2003), the participants found themselves in situations where they were expected to provide evidence to discriminatory issues they raised. Phrases such as *'I realised quite quickly that informal conversations didn't matter to my institution'* (P2), '*I am talking with senior management and what they ask you is to give figures on how many students are speaking to you'* (P6) and *'every time you say there's a problem, they want statistics that show that there's a problem'* (P5) were common to highlight how the universities required the officers to comply with the expected evidence-based approaches. This also means that the lived experience of disabled students gets devalued and side-lined unless it is quantifiable at a larger scale. One could argue that this is how today's universities depoliticise the lived experiences of marginalised student populations and turn the experiences of discrimination and suffering into neutral statistics. The participant narratives demonstrate how the evidence-based practices can become normalised in the Disabled Students' Officers experience, and how they themselves can enforce this practice:

> ...*from my experience, we just have to be based on evidence. We have to have reports and we have to have like writing and research and things like that, because, uh, whether it should be or not, word isn't enough for the people that were trying to talk to … I think evidence really is going to be the way forward (P2)*

The quote above indicates how the Disabled Students' Officers employ the expected ways (in this case evidence-based practices) to conduct themselves (Foucault, 2009). This evidence-based practice then reflects in running surveys among disabled students, writing reports and delivering presentations to disseminate the evidence collected, of which all were common to our participants. To certain extent, these activities relate to research and policy work in their experience, but what counts as acceptable evidence reflects in large scale numeric data. However, not everyone viewed such evidence-based approach as the right way forward in advancing disability rights, and as the P5 highlights, this practice can run a risk of silencing individual cases and lived experiences:

> *Um, and you know it's difficult because every time you say there's a problem, they want statistics that show that there's a problem, and I'm like if one person says there's a problem, then there is a problem, like I don't need to prove to you that enough people think that someone getting kicked out of the University because they're disabled is bad. Like I don't care if 10 people or 100 people think that's important, if one person thinks it's important, it is important. (P5)*

There is no doubt that the neoliberal culture obsessed with evidence ultimately shapes the work and activist practices of the Disabled Students' Officers. Ball (2013: 136) argues when problematising neoliberalism and its focus on performativity that we are expected to 'make ourselves calculable rather than memorable'. We suggest that this idea could be expanded from an individual internalising responsibility to the institution that does not really care about the discriminatory experiences of individual disabled students, but it goes after numbers. It is the numbers that bring money from the government or justify expenses. However, it is important to note that these participants are not the only ones affected by such instrumental practices, but the evidence-based approach has come to characterise most English students' unions and their relationship with senior

management. Rodgers et al. (2011) even argue that the issues surrounding efficiency and quality assurance have led students' unions (as any other units of a neoliberal university) to a greater use of the benchmarking of best practices and more rigorous application of evidence-based measures.

The participants further described themselves as manoeuvring and participating in existing institutional power structures; this primarily means committee-based work. The officers tend to claim their space within existing power hierarchies: *'to be at the table'* as argued by P6. The quotes below provide some further examples of how the senior management facing work starts dominating their role:

> As a part time officer, I get invited to all kinds of committee meetings and things and well, nothing actually happens at those committees, but at least I get invited now to the table. (P6)

> You have a lot more meetings and it's very much more policy focused than it is individual student focused. And I think that's structural in our union, as well as just an attitude. Yeah, it's definitely everyone tells me it's like I must be saying it's like hang out with students all day and I'm like, 'yeah, I don't really do that there'. (P1)

As most other sabbatical officer positions, it appears that the Disabled Students' Officer role is professionalised to serve the quality assurance functions in neoliberalised universities (Brooks, 2017; Klemenčič, 2011; Raaper, 2020b). It could even be argued that the officers become the (vice) guardians of the university structures when they embody representational practices to their activist role through participation in committees, engaging with policy work and producing reports. The concern, however, is that by shifting the focus to committee work, Disabled Students' Officers are being slowly depoliticised and absorbed into the neoliberal university structures. There is now a clear structure for student voice being exercised – through various committees, reports and meetings – and it works for the university in terms of containing student voice, particularly preventing it from developing into protest action. Nissen and Hayward (2017) argue that in such contexts, the role of student collectives in mobilising students for wider political causes has been weakened and their practices have been more closely aligned with the motives of the university management.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that the participants use lobbying to make their voices heard. Lobbying in the participants' experience can take many forms. In its traditional sense, there was evidence of the Disabled Students' Officers lobbying politicians or other key policy stakeholders:

> I would tend to things like that, the House of Lords Round Table for the inquiry into disabled students in November. So, I've tried to like basically speak to anyone who wants to talk to us. (P2)

> And then one of our greatest achievements was actually being listened to, and actively contributing with our expertise and experience with the think-tank Policy Connect at the report 'Arriving at Thriving', reporting about discrimination and the widespread ableism within our institutions – hopefully through them we will reach the OfS [Office for Students]. (P7)

Such engagement with key stakeholders through lobbying is characteristic of contemporary students' unions in England and internationally (Klemenčič, 2015). This is especially as universities are increasingly shaped by 'new patterns and networks of governance' (Simons et al., 2009: 43) where policies are created by multiple agencies, sites and discourses (Ball and Exley, 2010). These stakeholders include think-tanks and entrepreneurial bodies who are able 'to speak about and speak to policy' through the networks that cross between public, private and third sector spaces

(Ball 2013: 223). Disabled Students' Officers in this study, as students' unions more broadly, are learning to navigate this territory and establish themselves within these networks of influence.

Interestingly, however, the participants also explained lobbying in terms of their social media presence. P6 explains that lobbying via social media helps to communicate with other disabled students but also to reach people in position of power: '*the report on how covid was affecting disabled students has reached all sorts of university management simply from Twitter and Facebook*'. They go further to explain:

> And you really can just through the Twitter account, get an official sounding name, you can actually lobby national organisations, you can get into conversations with the Office for Students[3] and that [is] what we have done. [...] It's not so much important the physical presence if you make the choice of picking the online structure is so much more sustainable, and you're going to have so much more reach than if you do a little protest or like an in-person gathering. (P6)

It is expected that the professional practices in students' unions – participation in evidence production, committee-based work and lobbying as discussed in this article – normalise certain formal modes of activism while making other types of actions such as student demonstration potentially less desirable (Foucault, 1975). In fact, it is part of the Disabled Students' Officer's role to engage with professional conduct where student voice (and complaints) is handled through expected and neutralised means. These are safe practices for universities, and a way to govern not only the officers but the disabled student population more broadly. It could also be argued that such involvement in various power hierarchies may produce an illusionary sense of freedom and democratic policy participation, characteristic of neoliberalism (Foucault, 2004). In practice, however, it is difficult to identify which voices are heard more and how the decisions are made (Ball, 2012, 2013). Disabled Students' Officers in this case may internalise the neoliberal rationale, enact and enforce the expectations placed on their roles. From a Foucauldian perspective, this indicates the power of neoliberalism in engineering responsibilisation where what counts as normal is heavily shaped by economic discourses (Besley and Peters, 2007; Foucault, 2004).

Trespassing the neoliberal rationale

It is important to note that the participants interviewed did not only comply with the expected neoliberal modes of activism, but they spoke about doing activism in ways that exceeds and challenges the expectations placed on Disabled Students' Officers. There was a strong sense of collaboration in the experience of Disabled Students' Officers with an aim to counteract the culture of performativity. Further themes related to creativity and Crip time added to the sense of doing activism differently. We will cover examples related to these less visible and less regulated modes of activism below.

As noted in the previous section, the Disabled Students' Officers interviewed were aware of (and perhaps even conditioned by) neoliberalisation of university practices, and they claimed their space and voice within the dominant structures and through expected means. However, when they spoke about working with a wider disabled student population, there was a noticeable emphasis on collaboration and community building. They particularly emphasised how this strong community feeling helps to counterbalance the ableist pressures that officers face individually when needing to constantly perform and participate in formal power structures. Thinking and speaking about the community enabled the participants to make sense of the performative forces of ableism playing through their Disabled Students' Officer role.

I find if it's just me in my own head, I'll be like 'Oh but I should do it', and then I'll end up feeling bad about it if I can't do it. Whereas if you talk to other people … they probably know your capacity better than you do. Like 'No, no, no. You've done a lot you need to sleep or like you need to eat food. You haven't eaten all day. Please eat some food first'. […] Things like that, I find being part of a supportive community like really helps you to know your own boundaries and to be able to assert boundaries as well, because you feel empowered to do rather than having to empower yourself, which is like a lot harder. (P5)

The community theme and its resourcefulness in terms of support provision, boundary building and care was strong among all participants, and the phrases such as '*don't assume that you know better than other disabled people*' (P6) and '*it is about collectivity and numbers*' (P4) were characteristic. The latter also refers to diversity that is characteristic of a disabled student community where diversity of conditions is often seen divisive and individualising rather than uniting (Garland-Thomson, 2007). Interestingly, the participants in this study viewed diversity as a bonding element, resource and something to celebrate:

Absolutely respect the diversity of experiences because we are one of the most dis-homogenous groups, we are one of the least homogenous groups possible I think, we come in all sorts of kinds and shapes and we should celebrate it. I think that is one of the most positive values of being part of a disabled community; it's actually all the opposite of the fear of otherness; it's about celebrating otherness and diversity and difference. (P4)

It could therefore be argued that in an individualising and evidence-based regime, Disabled Students' Officers find ways to collaborate and draw on each other's strengths and support which goes beyond the expected practices of doing neoliberal university or the Disabled Students' Officer role. It reflects the ethics of care through noticing one's limitations in existing power structures and practising care towards oneself and the other (Foucault, 1982; Dean, 2013). In ableist higher education environment (Dolmage, 2017), such experience of care is particularly important, allowing interdependencies to form (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) when responding to but also trespassing the ableist and performative culture of higher education. Caring for the other, and recognising their resourcefulness but also their needs, is what supports the caring for oneself in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1982). It is a key moment through which refusal of neoliberal governmentality can be triggered and freedom to act reclaimed (Peruzzo, forthcoming).

In light of the community spirit, it is unsurprising that the participants shared their experiences of more creative and artistic forms of activism. There is beauty in the ways in which Disabled Students' Officers describe their role in community-facing disability activism. For example, the P5 described their experience of leading an artistic initiative, aimed at producing '*a collection of people's poetry, we had creative work, art and practical advice for disabled students*'. This initiative, combining art and disability rights in higher education, was focused at developing and celebrating disability culture with its unique characteristics.

We kind of wanted it to be something to welcome people in and also to show something for disability culture that we have at [the university] because disabled people writing is pretty powerful, it's very beautiful and I thought was very important to show people that like we have a culture…[And] also to give people advice because the university, as most of the universities in the UK has a habit of obscuring information about getting support for disability... (P5)

Related to the distinctive disability culture, the analysis indicated a strong desire to establish new patterns and rhythms for disability activism that would align with the needs and values of the community: to establish and celebrate Crip time (Sheppard, 2020, Peruzzo, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). In particular, the participants problematised the narrative of immediacy and linear progress which clearly reflects in their evidence-based and committee-facing work. The Disabled Students' officers expressed the need to slow down with the phrases such as: '*A key point really is just you're no good to anybody if you are burnout*' (P5) and '*The world doesn't sit on your shoulders*' (P6). Such experience of slowing down, or doing slow activism, feeds to the counternarrative of the ethics of care, and being aware of your own and others' needs and capabilities:

> *Just being unapologetic about it, like you know you're not going to fix the world in the next three months, and you also are not going to destroy it by not doing anything for the next three months (P6).*

By deliberately slowing down and protecting oneself, the participants protect the disability community and the activist movement. Crip time is concerned with slowness, aiming to make time and space for productive reflection (Peruzzo, 2021). The examples below demonstrate how prioritising health and having a long-term approach to making an impact, is seen as more meaningful and authentic way of doing disability activism in higher education.

> *So like martyring yourself, it's just not economical in the long term. Because you know what is useful, is long term progress and someone working on an issue for a long time and passing it onto a new person, is having like a kind of system built where everything is sort of reliable and steady… (P5)*

> *[The] biggest thing that a lot of activists need to know is like you can just stop doing things for a few months and everything will continue turning, and people will come back when you restart an events programme. (P6)*

The accounts above indicate a desire and a need to do activism differently. They also demonstrate the hopeful opportunity to trespass and defy the evidence-based competitive higher education environment and the Disabled Students' Officers' attempt to build a culture of support through non-economic means – through art, ethics and politics – this is doing politics through art in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 2004). When speaking about community-facing and artistic activism, there is a sense of rejection of top-down ways of representing disabled students. Policy work and lobbying are responsive, speedy and strategical modes of activism: these are expected and unescapable elements of students' union work today. However, the ways in which community engagement happens through the ethics of care – the care for the other and for oneself (Foucault, 1982) – demonstrates significant potential in disability activism. As the mind and body require care in the experience of disabled people in ableist world (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Rummery, 2020), there is a unique sense of prioritising health and slowing down (if not breaking down) the linearity of ableist performativity. By introducing various elements of creativity, arts and sharing as caring, the Disabled Students' Officers create spaces for more democratic and socially just forms of unionism and activism. The idea that everything needs to be done immediately – to exploit the opportunity – is challenged by participants when drawing attention to health and the ethics of care.

Concluding and continuing thoughts

This paper focused on how Disabled Students' Officers understand and practise activism within and beyond their students' unions. There is a clear sense that their role (as any other sabbatical officer role in English students' unions) is shaped by an expectation to professional conduct related to capturing and presenting student voice. This is especially the case as students' unions' position in university governance has grown through various representative functions (Brooks et al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2011, 2014). In the participants' experience, this relates to producing and presenting evidence, participating in university committees and lobbying key higher education stakeholders. While these were seen as important, expected and unescapable tasks for Disabled Students' Officers, they were also burdensome modes of activism, requiring officers to turn themselves and the disabled community into statistics and keep up with ever increasing pace of senior management facing meetings and committee-based work. While there was some critique targeted against such professional practice, this type of activism was also something that became normalised in the experience of Disabled Students' Officers. It demonstrates the power of neoliberal rationale in a Foucauldian sense (e.g. Foucault, 1982, 2004) where individuals internalise responsibility and thrive for productivity and outputs. Disabled Students' Officers like everyone else are subjected to the complex and shifting relations of power in today's universities and are conditioned to practise their agency within and through these relations. Activism from such perspective is turned into a manageable, neutral and safe form of student voice: it is not a threat to a neoliberal university that is obsessed with economic competitiveness and its market position. It also leaves an ableist system unchallenged.

The actual critique against the dominant mode of governance emerged when the participants spoke about their student facing activism and belonging to the disabled community, reflecting how a neoliberal governmentality in its very essence offers an escape from the prevailing forms of domination. It is important to remember this agentic possibility within neoliberalism. This possibility in the participants' accounts reflected in a strong sense of community building, leading to the identification and celebration of distinct disability culture with a desire to do activism differently. Participants were practising the ethics of care by drawing on the resourcefulness of their community, engaging with artistic forms of activist expression and deliberately slowing down in times of need. From a Foucauldian perspective, the ethics of care reflect how the individual can 'come to know himself [sic] as well as take care of himself [sic]' (Besley and Peters, 2007: 89). However, it is also recognised that 'one cannot attend to oneself, take care of oneself, without a relationship to another person' (Foucault, 2010: 43–44). The question of ethics is always related to the question of 'what binds me to another and in what way this obligation suggests that the "I" is invariably implicated in the "we"' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 107). In the experience of Disabled Students' Officers, this relationality reflected in the officers' relationship with the wider population of disabled students.

The importance of community-building and care demonstrates how disabled student activism can take many forms and is not necessarily bound to conventional practices of representational politics or student protest (Kimball et al., 2016; Leigh and Brown, 2020). This slow activism, as was promoted by the officers, only becomes possible when there is a strong sense of community who care for each other and challenge the ableism of higher education institutions by actively 'slowing down'. It could therefore be argued that in addition to expected modes of activism enforced through the formalised wok of students' unions, the Disabled Students' Officers demonstrated a unique side of activism where trespassing a neoliberal rationality is possible as long as there is a community and will to do differently. While traditional forms of collective action against marketisation of universities may have become difficult (Klemenčič, 2015), we believe that there is much to be learnt

about activism in the experience of disabled students, informing student activism more broadly. There is hope that slower and more creative forms of activism could help to imagine more inclusive, democratic and socially just higher education, particularly in current turbulent times when we need it most.

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Notes

1. The Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) was established in 1974 (and refined in 1992) with an aim to provide financial support based on individual needs and covering medical and non-medical expenses that resulted from their disability. For more information, please visit https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa
2. Please see more at https://disabledstudents.co.uk/
3. The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator of higher education in England, sponsored by the Department for Education. Please see more at https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/

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