

# Baking Chocolate Chips into the Cookie Dough: Anti-Ableist Assessment in Further and Higher Education

Sian E Jones and Clare  
Uytman



09 June 2026 | TAPPS



**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH

# Baking Chocolate Chips into the Cookie Dough: Anti-Ableist Assessment in Further and Higher Education

## Welcome

### Content:

- What is ableism?
- What is depathologisation?
- What do authentic, accessible assessments look like?
- What (else) could we change?

## Reflections on Practice



Sian E Jones and Clare Uytman



**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH

# Who are we?

Siân Jones, PhD,  
CPsychol,  
Senior Lecturer  
in Education  
She/Her  
Cerebral Palsy;  
Autism



Clare Uytman,  
PhD, CPsychol  
Senior Lecturer in  
Psychology  
She/Her



Queen Margaret University  
EDINBURGH



**The Toy Box Diversity Lab**  
disability inclusion through imagination and play



# 1. What is disability? Who is disabled?



**What is disability/  
who is disabled?**

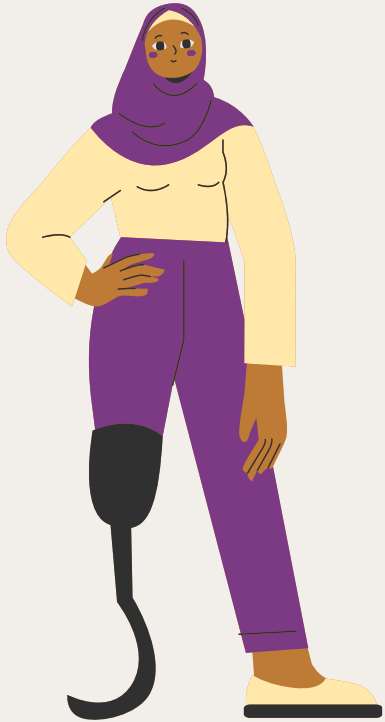


Please add your answers to the  
MentiMeter:  
<https://www.menti.com/alfpt9bx6kku>



**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH

# Who is disabled?



## Equality Act (2010)

### A person is disabled if they:

- Have a physical or mental health condition
- lasting (or expected to last) 12+ months
- That substantially affects day-to-day activities

## Disability in the UK

- 16 million disabled people (2021/22)
- 11% of children are disabled  
(DfWP, 2023)

## Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (2004)



# Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence



# Disability awarding gaps

More students  
disclosing disabilities  
→ 17.4% of students  
(2022/23)

## Attainment gap:

84.4% of disabled students  
achieved an upper degree  
88.9% of non-disabled  
students  
→ 4.5% gap

## But inequality starts earlier....

### Degree attainment in the wider population:

→ 21.8% of disabled people hold a degree  
→ 38% of non-disabled people

Disabled people are unrepresented as  
university staff



# Disabled Students Survey (2025)

## **Satisfaction is improving driven by:**

- Clearer institutional commitment
- Positive staff attitudes
- Greater understanding of disability

## **But barriers remain:**

- Unclear responsibility & limited training
- Fewer students receiving support plans (77% (2024) → 66% (2025))
- Accessibility is reducing (pandemic-era adjustments (e.g., recorded lectures, hybrid options))
- Ongoing structural barriers (physical access & evacuation concerns, accessible accommodation shortages, administrative burden to access support).



# Disabled Students Survey (2025)

## **Assessment:**

- 46% of disabled students believe they have received a lower mark on their course as a result of inaccessible assessment practices.
- Only 14% of students said they had optionality in their assessments.
- 58% said they found it easy to get extensions when needed, with a goal of 85% by 2033.

**“Reduce the evidence requirements for disabled students who require extensions on projects, or adjustments for exams.”**

**“I had one year long module for which the whole assessment was a test at the end of the year for ALL of the material. I have a depressive disorder (dysthymia) which affects memory encoding and retrieval. I don't think these types of test show real understanding by any student, but for me, it was very difficult. I would've preferred other assignments.”**





## 2. Framing disability

# Models of Disability

Medical Model  
(disability is  
impairment)



2000s  
Affirmative  
Model



1970s Social  
Model: disability vs  
impairment



# Medical Model



Views disability as a problem located in the individual

## Key Features

- Disability = medical impairment
- Based on “bell-curve” ideas of normality
- sends messages about not being “normal”
- Experts decide what support is needed

## Approach to Access

- Provided after a problem is identified

## Limitations

- Focuses on fixing individuals rather than changing environments or systems



# Social Model

**1. Impairment:** A difference, limitation, or variation in the body or mind (Oliver, 1996)

**2. Disability:** The barriers, exclusion, and disadvantage are created by society, not caused by the body itself (Oliver, 1996)

We must break the assumed link between impairment and disability to overcome oppression (Terzi, 2004)

## Core Message:

- Impairment is individual
- Disability is social and is produced by institutions, environments and attitudes



# Affirmative Models of Disability



- See disability as an equality and human rights issue
- Lack of representation and accessible provision as structural and systemic problems
- Advocate for agency and celebration of disabled people



### 3. What are ableism and anti-ableism?



A large pink thought bubble with a thick outline, containing the text 'What is ableism?'. Below the main bubble are two smaller pink circles of decreasing size, also with thick outlines.

**What is ableism?**



Please add your answers to the  
MentiMeter:  
<https://www.menti.com/alfpt9bx6kku>



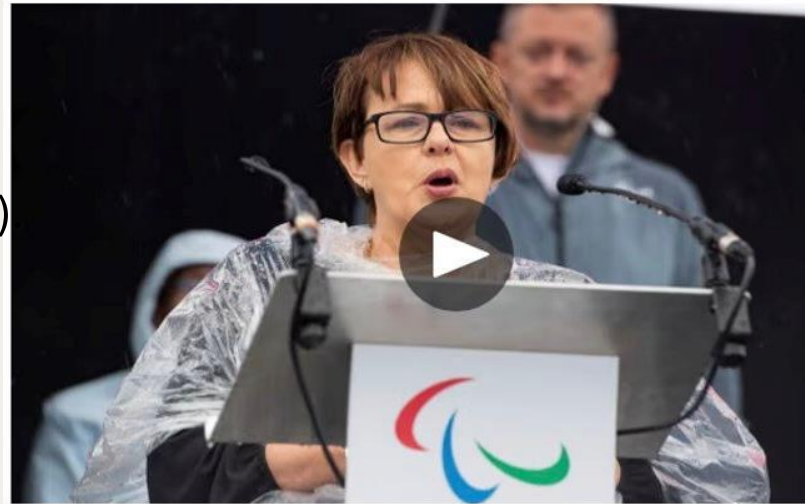
**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH

# Hate Crime & Ableism

- Bias-based discrimination towards disabled people is globally prevalent.
- In Scotland in 2021/22 550 disability hate crime reports, rising to 592 in 2022/23 (+7.6%)

## Tanni Grey-Thompson says apologies not enough for having to 'crawl off' train

Paralympian sent series of tweets when her train arrived at King's Cross with no one available to help her



■ Tanni Grey-Thompson speaks out after being forced to 'crawl off' train - audio

Home | Cost of Living | War in Ukraine | Coronavirus | Climate | UK | World | Business | Politics | Tech

Disability

## Rosie Jones: 'If I went on Question Time again, I'd shut my Twitter down'

26 February



GETTY IMAGES



Queen Margaret University  
EDINBURGH

# What is ableism?

Ableism is a system that decides whose bodies and minds are valuable

- It rewards what is seen as normal, productive, intelligent & devalues what does not fit into these standards

These standards are shaped by histories of eugenics, racism, misogyny, imperialism and capitalism.

## How it shows up

→ People's worth is judged based on:

- Health or perceived “wellness”
- Ability to produce or achieve
- Behaviour, appearance, language, age, culture

→ Ableism affects everyone – not only disabled people



# Ableism



# Ableism in education



- Education systems are often designed around a narrow idea of ability, such as:
  - **Written exams**
  - **Timed assessments**
  - **Memory-based performance**
- Attendance is rewarded
- Disability history, culture, and rights are rarely taught. This erasure perpetuates stigma and reinforces non-disability as the norm.
- Many buildings remain inaccessible — e.g. lack of lifts, inadequate seating, poor acoustics, or no sensory-friendly spaces.
- Teaching assistants, **additional support needs staff and accessibility resources are underfunded.**



# Ableism in higher education

Ableism in academia is rarely blatant. No one says, “you’re not allowed here.” Instead, they say:

- “Of course you can attend”—but don’t provide accessible formats or online options.
- “We’re flexible”—but make you jump through hoops to access accommodations.
- “Just let us know what you need”—but then treat your needs as disruptions.

Access isn’t explicitly denied—but it’s quietly made impossible.

## **Student Experience of Ableism:**

- Told in Master’s interview that “disabled students are very rare in graduate school”
- When disclosing a visual impairment, offered study delay rather than access to support

→ Suggests inclusion and academic success are often viewed as incompatible



# Sometimes, more time isn't the answer:

"During my intake interview for my master's at **Tilburg University** the program coordinator casually told me that "**disabled students are very rare in graduate school.**" At the time, the comment felt off. Now, after everything I've experienced, I understand why.

When I explained that I'm visually impaired and would need accommodations, the **first option I was offered was a study delay—as if inclusion and access were incompatible with academic success.**

This happened after a nearly perfect academic track record: scoring 76th out of over 2 million students in Turkey's national university entrance exam, and graduating with high honors with two degrees from the country's top public university"



# Reasonable adjustments

- Students in Scotland typically obtain disability support through a specialised support programme at their place of study.
- At QMU, we have ‘Individual Learning Plans’
- Students typically need to be open about having a disability (Riddell & Weedon 2014) and be able to show documentation of their diagnosis (McGregor et al. 2016).
- Relies on students knowing what they need and being able to ask.



# Student views

- N = 5 disabled students, asked about their experience at university.

## Findings highlight:

- Inconsistent implementation of adjustments
- Poor communication between departments and staff
- Responsibility falling onto the student

“Alternative arrangements were put in place for exams but not classes”.

“I had to chase staff weeks into term because adjustments weren’t communicated”



# What is anti-ableism?

Anti-ableism means actively challenging systems, attitudes, and practices that privilege non-disabled people.

→ It is about creating change, not just raising awareness

In practice, it may look like:

- Reframing difference as diversity, not deficit.
- Challenging exclusionary policies and bias.
- Using inclusive language and representation.
- Reflecting on assumptions and internalised ableism.
- Centering belonging.



# Pushing on an open door?

## Legislative support for tackling structural inequalities:

- Disability Equality Duty guidelines
- 2015 World Education Forum's Vision for Education 2030
- National Framework For Inclusion (Scotland)
- AdvanceHE inclusion framework

However...we're working in an ableist society and education system.





## 4. How can we effectively depathologise FE & HE?



**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH

*With love and thanks  
from the MomsRising.org team*



**"DO THE BEST YOU CAN  
UNTIL YOU KNOW BETTER.  
THEN WHEN YOU KNOW BETTER,  
DO BETTER."** - Maya Angelou



**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH

# Awareness of privilege

## Definition of privilege

Privilege is an unearned advantage based on aspects of identity

## Examples of privilege

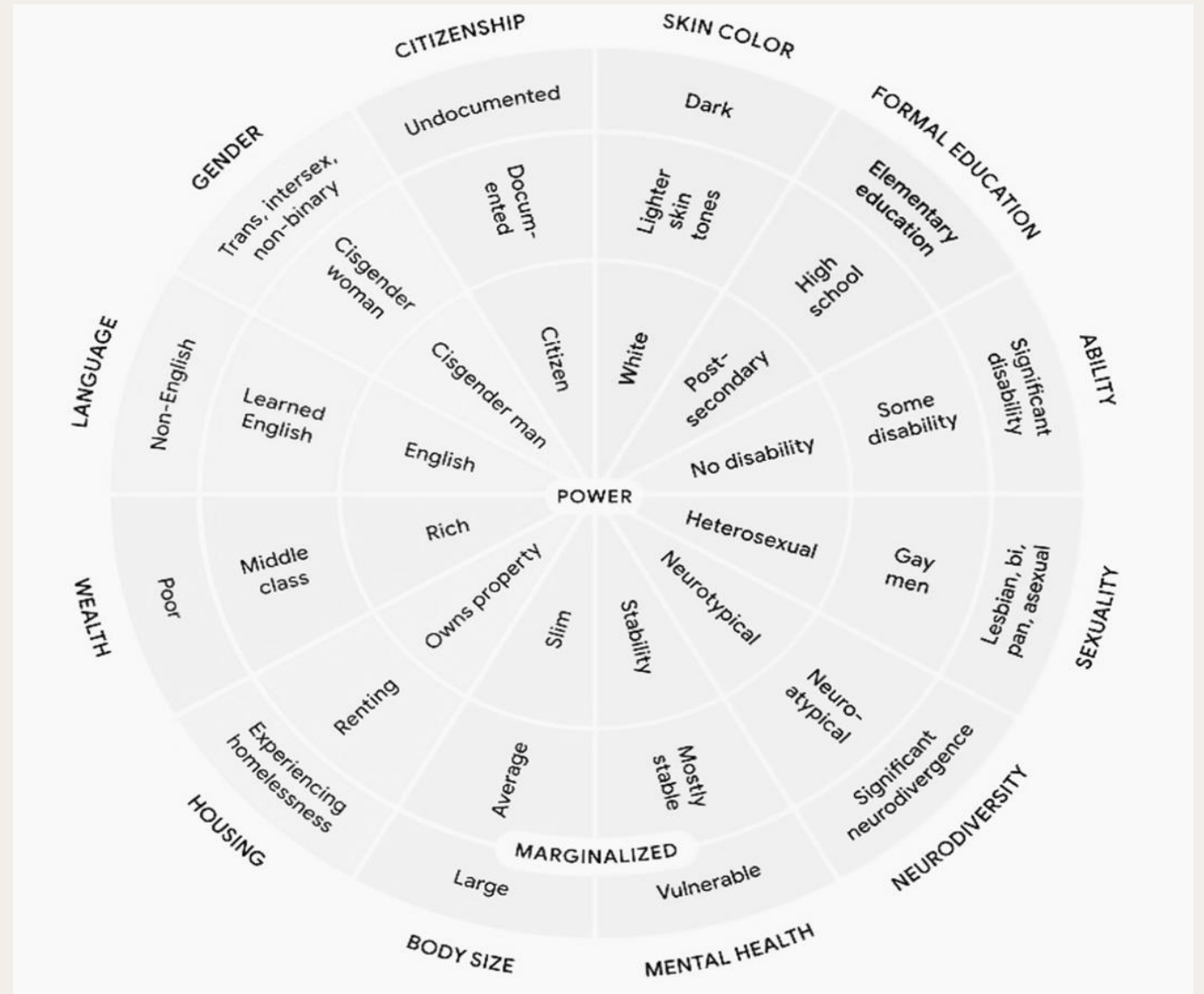
For example, some young people can use all parts of the school without any problems

## Impact on identity

Understanding privilege helps us see how our background, identity or needs can change how people treat us or what opportunities we have



# Wheel of power/privilege



# Intersectionality

- Intersectionality describes how race, class, gender and other personal characteristics 'intersect' with one another and overlap.
- All humans have more than one characteristic that may be subject to discrimination.
- For example, while a woman may experience sexism, a black lesbian may experience sexism, racism & homophobia



# Depathologising tertiary education.

- Disability as pathology remains a common story re/told with Higher and Further Education.
- In other words, disability tends to be understood as a technical problem within a student necessitating a solution: each disabled member of staff or student is expected to manage their own pathology and obtain ILPs / reasonable adjustments.
- Goodley (2024) names the process of reconsidering disability as a systemic inequality within HE, rather than as medical deficit, 'de-pathologising the university'





How can we  
effectively  
de-pathologise  
assessment?



**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH

## Example: X3095

### Inclusive Practice: Difference and Diversity



- Uses inclusive pedagogies to explore equality, diversity, and inclusion in the primary classroom.
- Created by staff with backgrounds in inclusive education, academia, and practicing teachers.
- Takes a community-of-learning approach.



# X3095:

## Inclusive Education: Difference and Diversity

### Assessment (20 credits)

Learning outcomes are assessed summatively using a **choice** of essay or podcast.

The assessment is designed to be as inclusive as possible whilst being on the topic of EDI.

Both media invite critical reflection.



Queen Margaret University  
EDINBURGH

# Depathologising assessments

- Transparent rubrics matching learning outcomes
- Ensuring feedback to students is accessible.
- Accessible document formats
- Careful timing of "deadlines"
- Ensuring students have the cultural/social capital
- Ensuring access to resources
- Providing choice or multiplicity of tasks
- Ensuring that the markers' access needs are met: you are part of the cookie dough, too.



# Depathologising assessments: Neurodivergence

style: good  
vocal delivery,  
use of eye  
contact and  
interactivity with  
audience.

| AA<br>Outstanding                                                                                                                                                     | A Excellent                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | B Very Good                                                                                                                                                                                   | C Good                                                                                                                                                                                                  | D Satisfactory                                                                                                                                                                                      | E<br>Unsatisfactory                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| This contains all the elements under Excellent. There is no way this element could have been improved. This piece would clearly be regarded as of publishable quality | The presentation is given confidently and smoothly (e.g., audible voice, clear language, appropriate pacing, and graphics/text). The presentation is demonstrably accessible to audiences with diverse needs. Minor points of improvement may be made. | The presentation is relatively smooth (e.g., audible voice, clear language, appropriate pacing, and graphics/text). The presentation is partially accessible to audiences with diverse needs. | The presentation is fairly smooth (audible voice, clear language and graphics/text) but could be improved with more practice. The presentation is partially accessible to audiences with diverse needs. | The presentation could be improved significantly in terms of smoothness (audible voice, clear language and graphics/text). There is little attempt to make content accessible to an audience with d | Presentation is quite unclear and/or evidences little advance preparation. Accessibility to audiences with diverse needs is not apparent. |



# Get feedback: Inclusion is a process

“The assignment gave an authentic opportunity to bring university learning & practical experience together, and there was detailed feedback”

“I liked how the assignment was a 10 minute pre-recorded powerpoint [podcast]– I preferred this”

“The readings are very academic and sometimes hard to read”

“As a parent of 3 children and carer to my eldest. I couldn't attend the sessions during the school holidays which was frustrating”



**How do your  
colleagues/students frame  
disability?**

- A personal deficit?
- A service or placement issue?
- A sensitive topic to avoid?
- A social identity shaped by history?



# Depathologising in Assessment: Closing thoughts.

- Ableism is inherently present in Education
- Shift the focus from individuals → systems
- Depathologising means reframing disability as diversity not deficit.
- Anti-ableist assessment is proactive, not reactive
- Anti-Ableism is an ongoing, and collective endeavour – Bake it in, don't sprinkle it on top!



# Further Useful Links

Jones, S.E. (2025) “Disabled Joy is Resistance”: Insights and Recommendations from Social Psychology on Reducing Ableism’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 64(3), p. e12893. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12893>

CAST. (2024). *UDL guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

University of Waterloo. (n.d.). User experience design for learning (UXDL). Retrieved from <https://cms.cel.uwaterloo.ca/honeycomb/index.aspx>

Additional sources:

- [Sussex University Accessibility Guide](#)
- [Dundee University accessible resources guide](#)



**Queen Margaret University**  
EDINBURGH



**qmu-toybox-diver...**

@qmu-toybox-diversity-lab



AllMyLinks.com