1. Inclusion and Sharing Best Practice for Academic Events Facilitation: WAARC Reflections on the 'Critical Neurodiversity Studies: Directions / Intersections / Contradictions' Conference at Durham University.

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2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report is about accessible events held or organised by Universities.
- This report focuses on two universities as examples.
- First, there are reflections from the Wellcome Trust funded project led by The University of Sheffield on what makes a university event inclusive and accessible.
- Second, there is a reflection from the 'Critical Neurodiversity Studies' conference organised by Durham University.
- Academic research and funders have highlighted how important it is to be inclusive and accessible when it comes to university events. However, this does not always happen and disabled people are excluded.
- It is important to be transparent and accurate when talking about how accessible the event you are hosting is.
- One example discussed is how 'post-pandemic events' are a problematic concept. This report focuses on COVID-19 precautions to make key points and conclusions.
- This report suggests that access and inclusion is a shared responsibility between attendees, organisers, and institutions.
- We need to share best practice of access and inclusion work across universities in order to progress towards more equitable and broader anti-ableist research cultures.

3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

4. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

A core part of academic research culture is the engagement in academic events, inclusive of research conferences. However, while these events are often framed as central to scholarly and professional development, it is essential to acknowledge that many conferences still remain inaccessible and non-inclusive, shaped by longstanding structures of exclusion and elitism within academia. As Kill (2025) observes, "mainstream conferences often fail to provide even the most basic of access for some disabled people", and this inaccessibility extends beyond physical barriers to include sensory, cognitive, financial and social dimensions. These exclusions disproportionately affect disabled, neurodivergent and chronically ill people, making such spaces not only difficult to access, but also inhospitable once accessed.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature addressing the need to reimagine academic events through the lens of accessibility and inclusion. This includes extensive guidance on public engagement from research funders UKRI, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c), accessible event planning resources in a range of formats including easy-read guidelines (Ktenidis *et al.*, 2023), and a diverse collection of academic peer-reviewed work spanning many disciplines and global contexts surrounding accessible academic events (Darcy *et al.,* 2003; Matausch & Miesenberger, 2010; Hall *et al.,* 2024). Even the project that this paper comes from, the Wellcome Anti-Ableist Research Cultures (WAARC) project shows an interest in accessible events funding, with one of its work packages being dedicated to inclusive, accessible events facilitation (University of Sheffield, 2025a). Despite this wealth of resources and expertise, many conferences continue to overlook or actively resist prioritising the implementation of inclusive practices. This may be in the refusal to provide hybrid or asynchronous participation options or an unwillingness or even the ignorance to budget for access needs such as live captioning, amongst others. This unwillingness may be from event organisers who don't want to do the work, don't know *how* to do the work, or as a result of trying to operate in the context of financial constraints in the Higher Education sector particularly in the UK at the time of writing.

In considering the gap between recommendations and real-world application, this report draws on (1) early findings from the [WAARC Anti-Ableist Developments work package](#) alongside (2) first-hand reflections from involvement in the planning and delivery of the international-scaled conference *Critical Neurodiversity Studies: Directions/Intersections/Contradictions* hosted at Durham University in June 2025. By reflecting on the challenges and successes of applying research-driven accessibility principles in practice, this paper offers insights into how inclusive values can be embedded into large-scale events and concludes by outlining practical, research-informed recommendations for improving accessibility in academic conference facilitation, particularly in line with anti-ableist approaches to research culture as a whole.

Case Report Background

This case report comes out of collaborative working arrangements between myself, Dr. Daniel P Jones, as a part of the University of Sheffield's 'Wellcome Anti Ableist Research Cultures' (WAARC) project and Durham University's organisational team for the Critical Neurodiversity Studies conference that took place in June 2025, hosted by the Wellcome-funded Discovery Research Platform and the Institute for Medical Humanities.

Within WAARC, my research primarily focuses on the development and innovation of inclusive research methodologies and accessible hybrid events guidance. Working in collaboration with Dr. Lauren White, we are involved in the production of guidelines and other creative and dialogic mediums for reflecting on and developing accessible events through conducting workshops with University of Sheffield staff and members of Disabled Partner Organisation, SpeakUp Self Advocacy.

With this in mind, my involvement on the Critical Neurodiversity Studies conference organising team was primarily as an 'Accessibility Consultant', and I was brought in due to my work package relating specifically to inclusive and accessible events. Working closely with the conference organising committee, I was able to apply some of the emerging headlines for the accessible research methods strand of WAARC being applied to an international-scaled event. In particular, some relevant emerging headlines from WAARC here include:

-   The notion of the 'post-pandemic face-to-face event is problematic and does not recognise the need to put in place forms of access that recognise and support those who are still masking or at risk of COVID-19.
-   Anti-ableist events demand creative engagements with many forms of access.
-   Access is a relationship: it requires the commitment of a community of academic and professional services.
-   Lots of great work on accessible events planning exists, but there is no visibility for this work. A platform for sharing best practice is needed.

Through reflecting on both my own involvement in the organisation of the conference and the process of producing the aforementioned emerging headlines for the WAARC project, this paper will ask whether anti-ableism is possible in academic conferencing events, consider some key reflections that align with the emerging headlines, and consider steps that we can take as scholars, organisers, and knowledge producers ourselves to work towards anti-ableist research culture in this regard.

5. CASE EVALUATION: Is anti-ableism possible?

As a part of the WAARC Developments work package, we conducted workshops with academics at the University of Sheffield to explore their experiences and approaches to conducting inclusive, accessible academic events. Within the project workshops for WAARC's accessible events strand of research, one response in particular stood out for us:

"Anti-Ableist research culture is a catch-22".

This was stated by a participant in a discussion over how the current structure of Universities generally speaking are not able to facilitate anto-ableism, and that a lot of so-called 'research culture' is about excelling, being hyper-productive, and being 'the best'. Participants stated that it was particularly hard to imagine an anti-ableist version of this.

There are various ways in which anti-ableism might be defined, which have been used in academic and community literature in previous years. This includes equity-focused approaches that disrupt typical Equality/Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) narratives and strategies (Scott & Shogren, 2023), as something which requires political and activist organising rather than passive non/inaction (Murillo Lafuente, 2023) and as "strategies, theories, actions, and practices that challenge and counter ableism, inequalities, prejudices, and discrimination" (Salem State University Library, 2025). Notably, Goodley *et al.,* (2025a) have used 'depathologisation' as a process in the disabling of ableist legacies; one which moves beyond the deficit model of disability and towards a call for structural transformation as key for anti-ableist research cultures. Additionally, Goodley (2024: 1001) states that "all is not well" amidst the equality, diversity and inclusion revolution in academia and higher education, urging us to consider ableist architectures (literal and metaphorical) within the academy. Examples of this might include a lack of step free access, or even an absence of financial support for travel and accommodation for people who might require slower paced travelling. Whilst understandings and definitions of anti-ableism differ across geographical contexts, institutions, and even on an individual scale. Resultantly this can lead to questions of whether an objectively anti-ableist university can ever be achieved, the constant across these definitions is the lean towards *active* rather than passive engagement with ableism.

With this in mind, this section acknowledges that an anti-ableist approach to 'accessible conferencing' in academia is based on action, and so will consider specific actions taken in the process of organising that upon reflection the conference helped in the slow pushing towards anti-ableism norms within academic research culture.

5.1 The problematic nature of the 'post-pandemic' event; access as relationship

The notion of the post-pandemic event is problematic. This is not something that is groundbreaking to state, but unfortunately we need reminding as academics that we still need to be working in ways that are making use of the toolkit we have, be it masking, regular testing, or so on (cf. Gauthier-Mamaril & Jones, 2025). Towards the end of 2024, I published a paper about zineing and its popularity in academic spaces. "...[D]uring the [COVID-19] lockdowns within the pandemic, academics were locked away in their homes, faced with the task of changing their research methodologies, teaching material, and other commitments to be carried out remotely. This sudden change caused significant frustrations for academics [...]" and has led to a pivot almost backwards in the preference for exclusively in-person academic activities, even down to some of the research methods we use (Jones, 2024: 413). This frustration and its association with the digital or the remote has persisted and as a result, I argue that typically there is hesitation and a dislike more broadly speaking over engaging with remote practices that were developed and normalised during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, once again, the COVID-19 pandemic is not in the past, and is very much ongoing. Additionally, many of these measures are not solely related to COVID-19, but to other viral infections and respiratory diseases more broadly speaking.

This is something that as a WAARC project team we have been addressing. Whether through the provision of masks, higher quality air filtration, or even through hosting separate online versus offline versions of the same event in order to offer hybrid options in a way that fits around our own capacities, considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is core to the work many of us engage with. The events we have engaged with as a team have been relatively small scale, and we have been successful in showing that COVID-19 provincial strategies are valued and possible for institutional-scaled events.

In the case of the conference *Critical Neurodiversity Studies: Directions/Intersections/Contradictions* (CNS)*,* it was a key consideration to consider how we can continue to acknowledge the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and make the event as safe as possible. Whilst within the WAARC events we were successful in demonstrating the value and possibility of these COVID-19 precautionary measures, there were some further conversations that needed to be had regarding the CNS conference at Durham - a conference of international scale, with a significant number of attendees from across the globe both online and in person. Some of the specific measures taken are discussed below.

i. A commitment to hybridity

The event was hybrid, save for a couple of workshops that had limited spaces for attendees due to specific logistics of the sessions (one example was that a workshop included participants playing a board game, which would not have worked with an uncapped number of participants). This hybrid format gave people the opportunity to stay at home should their circumstances change and they were sick (the event being free meant that people were not losing out financially if this was the case, though this was obviously a concern for those who might have booked hotels if they were travelling far to attend the conference). Making this commitment clear early on ensured that people were able to recognise that there was a commitment to having the significant majority of sessions available to access remotely. Further to this, we ensured that all sessions (should the presenters consent) were recorded and available to all attendees to view afterwards. Due to the hybrid nature of the conference, this did not require a huge amount of additional labour, and allowed people to attend the conference on their own terms, and to spread out the sessions to avoid burning out. The online Zoom rooms each had dedicated paid moderators, who had practiced and been trained on the software so that any tech issues were able to be resolved quickly. The commitment to adequate provision of hybrid sessions was found in the investment of resources (staff, financial, equipment) into ensuring those attending remotely were not having a worse experience than those who chose to attend in person.

ii. FFP-3/4 masks were provided for every in person attendee

The organising team made sure that every single attendee was given a high quality face-mask (FFP-3/4 grade) as a part of their conference pack. Whilst surgical masks offer protection against splashes that might occur during surgeries, FFP3/4 masks provide superior wearer protection through high filtration efficiency and through offering protection against finer airborne particles (Protective Masks Direct, 2021). Whilst not everybody wore them, student staff who were registering attendees in person specifically mentioned that they were in the conference packs they were given, and encouraged people to use them.

Additionally, additional funds were spent to provide FFP (filtering face piece) masks rather than surgical masks in line with scientific research that highlights the best practices for face-mask wearing (cf. Vimiero *et al.,* 2025; Onishi & Nojima, 2024; Kisa & Kisa, 2024). Whilst not everybody throughout the entire conference did use them, there was an understanding that wearing face masks is not necessarily accessible to everybody, and people made a visible attempt to honour this access commitment where possible.

iii. Full transparency about the minimum commitments of the conference organising team surrounding access and inclusion, inclusive of COVID-19 precautions.

The CNS conference organising team were intentionally transparent about the minimum commitments to access, which was updated as the event grew closer. These [minimum access commitments]were uploaded onto the Neurodivergent Humanities Network website, as partners of the conference, and shared widely on social media inclusive of X, BlueSky and LinkedIn (Neurodivergent Humanities Network, 2025). These minimum commitments relate to the minimum that the organising team were able to confirm, and this grew as time went on, based on things such as turning toilets into gender neutral bathrooms, specific COVID-19 precautions, and so on. These minimums were shared and were understood as the baseline of access for the team to continue to build upon.

These commitments included discussion of COVID-19 precautions. This allowed some people to make a decision about whether or not they felt that the event would be accessible to them and whether or not the COVID-19 precautions (or other access commitments such as gender neutral and accessible toilet provision, quiet spaces for decompression, outdoor green space, and so on) were enough for them to feel comfortable and safe attending in person. For some, the commitments were enough, whilst for others they were not. This allowed people to make a decision about whether they wanted to attend in person, online, or a hybrid mixture of the two. Furthermore, these were published four months in advance, which allowed time for attendees to reflect and have the time to make this decision about attendance.

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With these measures in place, as an attendee of the event in person, it really felt like there was a shared commitment to protecting people. Windows were opened, wearing a mask was much more common that expected, and generally there was a sense of community in that as people began to network more and more throughout the event, we got to know people's preferences and comfortabilities surrounding masking, as well as their access needs whether that is the need to lip read or the preference for networking in outdoor spaces. I feel that this speaks to the ways in which this is very much a collective responsibility.

In particular, it is important to bring to attention in this discussion the transparency of minimum access requirements. For example, the minimum access commitments (Neurodivergent Humanities Network, 2025) did not highlight specifics about the air filtration offered by the conference venue and Durham University more broadly as the host institution, as there were questions surrounding the specifics. These commitments were last updated at a point in time where the team were unaware of all of the specifics in this regard, and so "Proactive viral infection control procedures" was what was promised - this is inclusive of

encouraging attendees to attend remotely should they present with any symptoms of viral infection, and the provision of FFP-3/4 face masks in conference packs. This is particularly important, as looking back to the WAARC research findings one participant in particular stated the following:

> "There's an element of lip service at the University of Sheffield because they say it's welcoming [and accessible] but there aren't any specifics given for events"

This, from personal experience, is not a single-institution issue, and is representative of the large majority of academic institutions I have been involved with as both student and staff member over my academic career. Conversations within the WAARC research workshops went on to discuss promises of access that were not always abided by, and it left me wondering whether there was still a distrust of the CNS conference minimum access commitments despite the transparency. Whilst attending the conference, I noticed some online attendees speaking of how they were glad to see in-person attendees masking and there was almost a surprised reaction to seeing access commitments followed through on. This highlights how there is general distrust over academic institutions and their promise of access and inclusion in events, and I argue that ensuring we take collective responsibility to access in this regard is key in building that trust as a research community. This means continually showing up and having transparency about the extent of access measures. It also requires us to act on what we say, particularly surrounding COVID-19. For example, regardless of your role in organising a conference, if you are testing positive or showing symptoms of COVID-19 and you have publicly shared commitments to COVID-19 mitigation, you should not attend. Nobody is too important to abide by access measures. Unfortunately, many still show up due to a fear of missing out, or as a result of the neoliberal academic pressures and expectations surrounding productivity. The precarious nature of many academic jobs and wanting to *make the most* out of limited funding and contract length may also contribute here. However, showing up in person when sick only reinforces people's distrust of access commitments at these kinds of events. Collective responsibility here looks like not placing anybody in a position that positions them as more important than the access commitments already made.

The financial backing of an event directly shapes the extent to which COVID-19 precautions can be implemented. This goes far beyond providing masks: for instance, at the CNS conference, sufficient funding allowed the event to run fully hybrid. Dedicated technical staff were hired to manage the multiple conference streams (up to four at once), ensuring smooth facilitation for online participants. Without the budget to hire staff, maintaining such a high level of hybrid provision would not have been feasible. Similarly, sustained funding makes it possible to provide additional protective resources, such as face masks for multi-day events, or to compensate online facilitators who play a critical role in maintaining equitable access between in-person and remote attendees. The same ideas extend beyond COVID-19 precautions, inclusive of British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation, childcare provisions, support workers, and so on. Beyond COVID-19, these access commitments all require adequate resources, care and attention.

Both WAARC and the CNS conference benefited from Wellcome Trust support, and we recognise that this level of provision may appear a luxury compared to many other events that must operate with far fewer resources. Yet framing access as a collective responsibility

highlights that it should not fall solely on organising teams or individual participants. Institutions and funders share responsibility for enabling access, and their support is essential to creating safer and more inclusive environments.

At the same time, ensuring access and inclusion does not always require extensive financial backing. As Élaina Gauthier-Mamaril and I have written elsewhere, access protocols might include "advocating for institutional commitments to clean air [...and] regular [COVID-19] testing," which are possible without significant new and additional funding needing to be made available (Gauthier-Mamaril & Jones, 2025).

By demonstrating ongoing commitment to access and inclusion—particularly through integrating COVID-19 precautions—and by being transparent about what we can and cannot promise[1], organisers can begin to build trust with potential participants. Considering access as a collective responsibility also involves adopting 'protocols' (Murphy, 2012) that emphasise collective rather than purely individual steps to reduce infection risk. This trust, in turn, ensures that access commitments are perceived as meaningful, reliable, and genuinely directed toward fostering inclusion.

6. Conclusions

Through discussing access, inclusion and transparency through the lens of problematising the notion of the 'post-pandemic event' in the previous sections of this report, I have highlighted the significance of transparency in access and inclusion work. However, the value of transparency goes far beyond acknowledging any access limitations that you might have to your event, and the sharing of minimum access requirements to potential attendees, speakers, community members, and so on.

It is important to acknowledge the much broader conclusion from my reflections on my engagement with both WAARC and the CNS Conference that can be adopted as a practice and as an ethic by all academic event organisers. Structural ableist approaches to a neoliberal university / capitalist business-model academia hinders the extent to which anti-ableist approaches can be taken, and we need to begin considering more radical approaches to dismantling restrictive systemic ableism. In an age of EDI accreditations for Higher Education Institutions such as Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter, Disability Confident, and so on, access and inclusion has been turned into nothing but a competition. Whilst the competitive nature of pitting universities against each other to compete over who is the most inclusive according to accreditations, we need to move beyond this. The competition had its value in encouraging institutions to engage. However, if we are approaching the anti-ableist[2] university as a broader concept we need to move towards normalising the sharing of best practice across institutions, not just across faculties/departments within one institution.

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[1] By 'promise' I do refer to those unexpected access issues that might arise such as technology issues that are not simply a fault of not testing to see if the technology is working adequately, but rather things such as power cuts, spills, and more.

[2] Whilst the Athena SWAN and REC do not relate to disability, the same points made here can be argued for inclusion and accessibility more broadly speaking, beyond the sole instance of disability. However, the language of 'anti-ableist university' has been used to mirror the goals and intentions of the Wellcome Anti-Ableist Research Cultures project which has facilitated this research.

One step in moving towards this approach of cross-institutional sharing of best practice was in the encouragement of my engagement with this conference as a part of the organising team. This allowed me to bring my expertise and the knowledge that we are producing within the WAARC project to the organisation of a conference that did not have any specific association with the University of Sheffield. Upon reflection, it is perhaps a strange occurrence that my line manager allowed me to contribute to this conference within my work package at the University of Sheffield, but as a result there have been significant improvements and increased depth of the discussion and analysis of WAARC data based on my engagement with the CNS Conference. Simultaneously, Durham University's Institute for Medical Humanities invitation to be involved in the organisation of this conference and to be willing to listen to my suggestions based upon the WAARC findings positively contributed to access and inclusion at the conference. Cross-institutional collaboration and the active sharing of best practice benefitted all parties involved. This reflection brings me back to the WAARC participant who stated that 'anti-ableist academia is a catch-22'. Perhaps transparency, honesty, and shared commitments in the context of inclusive and accessible academic events might help us to move towards a more anti-ableist research culture more broadly speaking, but only if findings and reflections are shared publicly and not hidden behind institutional logins. Beyond this, it is also about a culture that embraces this collaboration; a culture where we are willing to be open to sharing and *doing* this kind of work. 'Open research' and the sharing of best practice is not only about access to information, but about being generous colleagues, leaders and collaborators across institutions - something which I was able to work towards due to the generosity of having the CNS conference factored into my work package.

In an attempt to continue pushing towards the normalisation of cross-institutional sharing of best practice when it comes to access and inclusion, I want to bring attention to the forthcoming work of the CNS Conference organising team who are all based at the Institute for Medical Humanities at Durham University. At the time of writing, these are forthcoming. However, this report shall be updated once some of these resources have been made publicly available by Durham University, either through [Wellcome Open Research](#) or the [Discovery Research Platform for Medical Humanities](#) website. Aside from this, other resources that have been made open-access for all that might be of interest can be found WAARC's '[Anti-ableist Resources](#)' page, which includes further discussions of events, inclusion and accessibility (cf. Goodley *et al.,* 2025b; Gauthier-Mamaril & Jones, 2025), and will continue to be updated in the future with work from both within and outside of the University of Sheffield.

Ultimately, this report highlights the importance of public sharing of best practice in line with approaching access and inclusion as a collective, shared responsibility by all of us who find ourselves within Higher Education and academia more broadly speaking. Through moving beyond access as competition and as a stand-out-marketing approach, we *can* begin to move towards being able to imagine an anti-ableist university. There is no one formula for an anti-ableist university, but perhaps the approaches suggested here of sharing best practice across institutions in defiance of accreditations such as Athena SWAN, REC and Disability Confident can help us shift towards a more hopeful future whereby an anti-ableist research culture is not only imaginable, but achievable.

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