

‘Wellbeing’ and the production of disability in the university: Erasure, effacement and institutional exceptionalism

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Abstract

This article uses ‘wellbeing’ as deployed within UK higher education as a starting point for examining the relationship between disability and the university. We explore various strands of scholarship that seek to critique wellbeing, universities, and/or connections between disability and these institutions. Work on ‘wellbeing’ identifies the harmful logics underpinning its political appropriation, but erases disability by declining to consider it as political experience. Critiques of the university efface disability by considering disablement only insofar as it affects the non-disabled, and reify ‘intellect’ as neutral entity and sole true purview of higher education. Work on the political economy of disability exposes crucial connections between disability and capitalism, and the role of economic and political institutions in upholding them, but relies on a distinction between worker and surplus that cannot reckon with institutional complexity. Finally, scholarship that directly confronts the university as disabling institution accounts for complexity, but hinges on an ultimately utopian vision of the university as an exceptional, salvageable space, neglecting key mechanisms by which it continues to marginalise disabled people. We suggest that reaching a fuller understanding of the university as producing disability must involve moving away from this exceptionalism and toward dialogue with critiques of other institutions.

Keywords

Wellbeing, disability, ableism, university, higher education, exclusion

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In March 2023, Universities UK – the organisation representing British university leaders – published a report entitled ‘Mentally Healthy Universities’ (West, 2023). ‘Health and wellbeing’, the report states, are ‘a strategic priority for every university’, with ‘supportive and inclusive relationships’ essential for creating ‘healthy universities fit for the future’. The report was linked on the organisation’s Twitter account, inviting a response from university workers that was both immediate and scathing (Universities UK, 2023). This was perhaps no surprise, given that at the time of posting UUK was in the fourth year of a protracted industrial dispute with the main university workers’ trade union – a key battleground of which was the effect of excessive workloads on members’ health and wellbeing. The irony was not lost on commentators. Responses coalesced around UUK’s failure to address growing workload, increased casualisation, and the real-terms erosion of pay and pensions as the principal drivers of poor staff mental health. This supposed commitment to ‘mental health’, commentators made clear, was at best deeply oblivious – and at worst, flagrantly cynical. While this response was no doubt justified, it also missed the point. Carried within it was the implication that reform of university working conditions would entail a return to a baseline of good health: an assumption in no way antithetical to the desirability of a ‘happier, healthier’ workforce presented in UUK’s report. That the report presents health and happiness as synonymous with improved productivity and performance, all of which are cast as prerequisites for being deemed ‘fit for the future’, went unexamined.

This brief anecdote exemplifies one aspect of a dynamic that defines the position of disability in relation to UK higher education. The disabled university worker or student is consistently excluded, both discursively and materially, from the institution; popular and scholarly critique of the institution, in the meantime, effaces the disabled subject by accounting only for the disablement of non-disabled people, which is located exclusively in surface conditions. Set apart from other institutions, universities are explicitly or tacitly presented as exceptional spaces with the potential to counter, rather than reproduce, oppression, if only those conditions were corrected. In this article, we use the notion of ‘wellbeing’, an apparently benign, increasingly prevalent trope of contemporary university life, as a starting point to map the limits of current critique for understanding the relationship between disability and the university. We seek to demonstrate that ‘wellbeing’, as a discursive and material strategy for managing students and staff, is not only *for* the already-well, but that it also *produces* disability by demarcating categories of well and not-well, includable and excludable. In addition, however, we aim to show that existing critical scholarship – whether on wellbeing itself, the university as institution, the political economy of disability or even disability in the academy – cannot fully account for the university’s capacity to produce disability in this manner. The texts we have chosen to scrutinise here are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather are representative of certain lines of thought that run through their respective fields. We suggest that addressing the shortfalls of current critique must necessarily involve a move away from the tendency to view the university as an exceptional space, and toward reckoning with it as part of a continuum of disabling institutions that constitute public life.

Critical scholarship on the political deployment of ‘wellbeing’ has emerged in various fields over the past two decades, as the concept has gained currency as part of national and global public health agendas.¹ This appropriation of wellbeing transformed a loose philosophical designation into something that could be individually tracked, self-reported, and then measured and evaluated as an accurately quantifiable indicator of ‘health’ and ‘happiness’ at the population level. Roger Foster (2016) sees this transformation as part of what he terms the ‘therapeutic culture’ of neoliberalism that took hold in ‘Anglo-American’ societies over the mid-to-late twentieth century. Locating it in relation to a more generalised decline of collectivism, Foster (2016: 91) sees this cultural shift as manifest in both left- and right-wing

emphases on individual psychology, ‘autonomy, self-regulation and self-fulfilment’, enabling a more specifically conservative ‘de-socialized ethic of self-actualization’ to emerge in turn. Within this ethic, as Foster (2016: 92) goes on to outline, we are coerced – following Foucault – into ‘entrepreneurial self-government’, a state of persistent, compulsory self-improvement enforced by institutional audit culture. When set against a backdrop of ‘generalised insecurity and vulnerability’, this form of subjectivity allows managerial structures to ‘graft themselves into the ethical practices of individuals’ and to ‘exercise control by directing and incentivizing the individual’s ethical subjectivity, rather than repressing it’ (Foster, 2016: 87). Structural issues are thus individualised, and self-management becomes a duty, in lieu of collective social and political examinations and solutions. Along similar lines, Colin Wright (2014: 792) charts the increasingly imperative nature of wellbeing as part of a more ‘diffuse culture of positive thinking and self-help [...] in the face of the intensifying depredations of capital’, which serves to redefine health ‘as a narrow capacity to produce, consume, and enjoy’. Following the Western philosophical notion of ‘happiness’ from antiquity through to the present, Wright (2014: 794–795) identifies ‘bourgeois liberalism and utilitarianism’ as key to its contemporary framing as something that ‘can be measured, counted, rationalized and apportioned’. In the present, Wright (2014: 795) affirms, this conceptualisation has mutated into what Jack Halberstam (2011) has termed ‘toxic positivity’ – that is, the ‘injunction to maintain a cheerful, uncomplaining disposition’ even as our lives are degraded in the service of corporate profiteering.

Despite Wright’s (2014: 795) characterisation of this cultural demand as ‘brutally normative’, neither he nor Foster attempt to expose its uneven distribution along axes of power and structural oppression. This is surprising given that Sara Ahmed’s influential work *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) had laid the groundwork for such analysis several years prior. Written amid party-political debates in the UK over New Labour’s ‘wellbeing agenda’, Ahmed’s text shows how happiness is culturally attributed to certain normative desires – marriage, reproduction, capital, property – that we are then directed toward by means of happiness’s promise. Happiness becomes not only an objective but also both prerequisite and reward for making the correct decisions: as Ahmed (2010: 10) puts it, it is ‘a way of maximising your potential of getting what you want, as well as being what you want to get’. In this way, happiness helps ‘to make certain forms of personhood valuable’ (Ahmed, 2010: 11). In response to this restrictive status quo, Ahmed reimagines various figures that either refuse or are denied these directives – the ‘feminist killjoy’, ‘unhappy queer’ and ‘melancholic migrant’ – as exposing and resisting the exclusionary violence of happy collectivity. Yet in spite of its powerful deconstruction of the violently uneven ways in which happiness and wellbeing are deployed, disability is absent from *The Promise of Happiness* as it is from Foster and Wright. Underpinning all three texts is an assumption that a particular state of health, rationality, sociality and independence is both achievable by all subjects – albeit under the right conditions – and, more significantly, that it is universally desirable. Ahmed’s indictment of the tyrannical demands of happiness and wellbeing imposed on women, queer and racialised subjects, then, does not extend to those pathologised out of political agency, capacity or collectivity, or those who can never ‘be well’ in any legible sense. Disability is not so much exempt from intersectional critique as it is unrecognised as a political experience in the first place.

This erasure of disability in critical responses to the political use of wellbeing is pervasive across disciplines. Claire Edwards and Rob Imrie’s prescient 2008 article, published at the tail end of New Labour, is one exception.² The article takes up the central assumption of the Labour government’s wellbeing agenda, namely, ‘that life satisfaction is related to particular idealised forms of behaviour or ways of being (including being healthy, fit, employed and engaged in civic society)’, seeing it as

part of an increasingly dominant ‘moral discourse of wellbeing’ (Edwards and Imrie, 2008: 338). Like Wright and Ahmed, the authors examine the origins of wellbeing policy in ‘hedonics’, that is ‘the academic exercise of taking apart the factors that contribute to happiness and understanding how it might be measured’, showing how this conceptualisation of wellbeing as something that can be quantified is precisely what makes it susceptible to policy intervention (Edwards and Imrie, 2008: 339). Once wellbeing is established as a matter of national aspiration, individuals become responsible for cultivating it in themselves and those around them, meaning that ‘failure comes to be located within the individual, the personal; social issues can be transposed into psychological ones’ (Edwards and Imrie, 2008: 342). Where Edwards and Imrie (2008: 343–44) depart from work that draws similar conclusions is in their recognition of the then government’s increasing conflation of wellbeing with ‘participation in the labour market’, and of the potentially lethal danger posed by that elision for ‘those groups not deemed to be actively engaged in society’ on these terms. In addition to drawing out the reliance of this framing on a deficit model of disability, wherein disability is a biological defect that precedes social exclusion and can be ‘overcome’ through individual fortitude, the authors expose its logical conclusion: that people are owed ‘no rights without responsibilities’ (Edwards and Imrie, 2008: 348).

Edwards and Imrie’s (2008: 349) emphasis on policy manifestations of this maxim, including New Labour’s imposition of punitive benefit sanctions on disabled people who failed to demonstrate consistent engagement ‘in continuous activity to move them nearer or into the labour market’, anticipates the installation, two years later, of the Conservative austerity regime – which saw this callous and unyielding insistence on ‘engagement’ as condition of care inflated to grotesque proportions. This system of conscious abandonment, and the immiseration of disabled people that would follow, was (and continues to be) executed through a maze of what public administration and policy scholars refer to, either neutrally or approvingly, as ‘ordeal mechanisms’ or ‘welfare ordeals’. Here, the wellbeing agenda’s responsabilisation of individuals for their social inclusion is carried through to basic survival needs: rounds of paperwork, compulsory attendance of meetings and workshops, intrusive demands for personal disclosure as part of eligibility assessment and so on become mandatory for accessing increasingly inadequate state support. In the associated scholarship, these ‘ordeals’ are seen as useful for the ‘efficient targeting of services to the needy [who are] most willing to endure frictions to access services. [...] They may be a loss to the individual but still be socially beneficial’ (Madsen et al., 2022: 385). Social benefit is thus understood as making it difficult, or in some cases impossible, to access entitlements. Those who persist in the face of these deliberate, irrational obstacles will have moved over to the morally deserving category. In this landscape of banal, bureaucratised cruelty, the stigma attached to welfare claimants is a net positive that ‘enhanc[es] the targeting efficiency of the welfare system’ by ‘sort[ing] out the less needy individuals’ (Blumkin et al., 2015: 885). Perhaps the most familiar example of such an ordeal as inflicted on disabled people in the UK is the Work Capability Assessment, introduced by New Labour and made progressively more punitive, degrading and arbitrary by the coalition and Conservative governments that followed. Less well known is the practice of forcibly discharging from NHS mental health services patients who fail to maintain consistent ‘engagement’ or to perform sufficient ‘progress’ (Brown, 2020). To borrow from David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2005: 192), speaking in a different context, the tacit drive here is to make ‘disabled clients speak their own debasement’.

It is not difficult to identify the diktats of self-regulation, responsabilisation and personalised failure underpinning the broader wellbeing agenda in its manifestations in the university. Institutional wellbeing programmes, which are frequently legitimated through partnerships with local NHS trusts and third sector organisations, consist primarily of activities undertaken by individual

staff and students in addition to their work or study. (That these activities represent additional labour is nowhere more bluntly stated than in their being named ‘workshops’.) Common subject matter includes building resilience, avoiding burnout, dealing with change, and generalised ‘healthy lifestyle’ advice on exercise, diet, sleep and smoking cessation. Another recurrent element of such programmes is the exhortation to ‘open up’ about ‘mental health’, expressed through the provision of ‘listening spaces’ and ‘Time to Talk’ days. The message is barely disguised: to feel not-well within the institution is a matter of personal, rather than structural failure, and can be addressed through additional *work* on the part of the individual, not to mention the deliberate erosion of their privacy. What is perhaps less immediately clear is that the contents of such programmes also serve to inscribe a bright line between what is and is not incorporable into the institution. Shirley Anne Tate (2017: 54), writing on the experiences of Black women in the UK academy, notes how the question asked in wellbeing spaces – ‘how do you feel?’ – is always-already weighed down by the mutual awareness of ‘an unvoiceability regime’ that means ‘only some answers will be recognized as acceptable’. Within an institution at once shaped by anti-Blackness and heavily invested in denying its presence, such that ‘the Black woman academic body – individual, collective and epistemological – [is] constantly under surveillance for any sign of trouble’, to answer truthfully would be to threaten ‘the racial innocence of the “post-race” university and those who occupy it’ (Tate, 2017: 59–62).

Along similar lines, the kinds of disclosure solicited in ‘Time to Talk’ events and ‘listening spaces’ are those least threatening to the university’s projected image of harmonious inclusion – but also, significantly, those that leave the institution’s claim to sanity, to rationality, unscathed. It is notable that what is referenced in these spaces is, consistently, ‘mental health’, with mentions of ‘mental illness’ limited and ‘mental disability’ entirely absent. Jay Dolmage (2017: 110) refers to this tendency as a process of ‘exnomination’, where ‘we act as though what we are talking about is health, and this conversation will be generative, but really it is health that is being demanded’. In this way, disclosures of low mood or mild anxiety, particularly where these are recuperable into narratives of cure or management such that baseline normalcy always remains in sight, are acceptable, even useful. States that involve greater distance from rationality, that imply chronicity or dependence – in short, those that disable – are not.³ Likewise, offering ways to increase resilience, improve sleep hygiene or get more exercise is not only a gesture of responsabilisation or a demand for self-regulation concealing structural reasons for lack of sleep or limited exercise: it also positions any condition not resolvable through these techniques as alien, as unincorporable. Wellbeing, then, is for the already-well; disability becomes that which cannot be resolved or even spoken.

Scholarship from the field of Critical University Studies has devoted significant attention to the workplace culture of individualisation that dominates universities, and which wellbeing programmes further intensify. John Smyth’s 2017 work *The Toxic University* provides an instructive synthesis of work in this field in this regard. Smyth (2017: 2) explores how ‘universities have become toxic places to work’. This is not simply a matter of poor conditions, but rather a fundamental falsification of the purpose of the institution. He argues that the university is ‘the last remaining place in which social critique and criticism is incubated, nurtured, fostered, encouraged and supported’, subject to misunderstanding and misrepresentation which has stifled opposition to the ‘massive and possibly irreversible damage’ being done to it (Smyth, 2017: 3). The financialisation and marketisation of British universities since the Thatcher government has put them into a perpetual state of ‘pathological organizational dysfunction’ (Smyth, 2017: 5), a term borrowed from organizational theory, which has overwritten a ‘collaborative and collegial culture’ with ‘a synthetic commercial and economic one’ (62). He affirms Maria Nedeva and Rebecca Boden’s (2006: 277–278) characterisation of the university as having been transformed from a ‘temple [...] a

self-contained sanctuary dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake' to a factory 'in which power is vested in the hands of non-scholar professional managers' (Smyth, 2017: 166). While less elegaic and more intersectional in scope, Richard Hall's *The Hopeless University* (2021) makes similar arguments. Hall (2021: 3) draws on Marxist, feminist and decolonial thought to frame the contemporary university as an ever more extractive 'anxiety machine'. He describes the disconnect between the popular imagination of universities as 'places for self-actualisation, becoming and belonging' and the reality of work within such institutions, characterised by 'a lack of autonomy over working conditions, deepening performance management, and the intensification of work' (Hall, 2021: 2). Universities have become dominated by 'diseased or pathological organisational cultures' that demand from their workers 'culturally acceptable self-harming activities', chiefly overwork, which 'generate ill-being and distress' (Hall, 2021: 2–3). In this setting, programmes of 'resilience, mindfulness and wellbeing' are used to 'centre individual failings' and to conceal the structural production of 'ill-being' (Hall, 2021: 124). The result for university workers is 'corporeal and mental deterioration', with 'the body's response to overwork, a deterioration in labour conditions, ongoing competition' representing 'a mark of what is reasonable and what is unreasonable' (Hall, 2021: 127).

From the perspective of disability, there is much to be questioned here. Notably, both Smyth and Hall engage heavily in language that relies on stigma and abjection around illness for its rhetorical charge: alongside both authors' recurrent characterisation of managerial cultures as 'pathological' and 'diseased', Smyth (2017) refers to universities as, variously, 'psychopathic', 'sociopathic' (5–6), 'schizophrenic' (57); as suffering from a cancer that has metastasised (149–177), and dominated by 'a predatory and unproductive ideology that has disabled the brain of the host' (184). Similarly, Hall's (2021) invocation of self-harm and compulsion to describe what are, ultimately, culturally rewarded activities represents a profound erasure of psychiatric stigma, amounting to what Lucienne Spencer and Havi Carel (2021) have termed 'wrongful depathologization'. This use of language associated with disability as metaphor or intensifier reflects a phenomenon Mitchell and Snyder (2001) have referred to as 'narrative prosthesis', which describes how disability – 'the master trope of human disqualification' (3) – is used by writers 'as an opportunistic metaphorical device' signifying 'social and individual collapse' (47), leaving disabled people with 'the consequences of representational association with deviance and recalcitrant corporeal difference' (8). What is more far-reaching, however, is the demarcation of 'reasonableness' enacted through both Hall's and Smyth's insistence on working conditions as the sole named source of disablement. On the flipside of naming a particular amount or type of work as 'reasonable' is the suggestion that there is such a thing as a 'reasonable' capacity for work on the part of the individual. If an 'unreasonable' amount of work is what disables, where does that leave those who remain disabled regardless of their working conditions – or even in the absence of any work? It is clear, in Smyth's and Hall's analyses as in the popular critique they reflect, that overwork is only overwork when it disables the non-disabled. Disability itself is cast out of the frame of political critique: a source of pungent metaphor, and to be sharply relegated to the clinical zone as apolitical.

The inability of this kind of institutional critique to reckon with disability speaks to the limits of Marxist thought for facilitating such analysis. In their account of eugenic histories, Mitchell and Snyder (2005: 15) show how Marx himself recognises disability only in terms of "the crippling of the working class body" by capitalist greed'. Thus, whilst mainstream eugenics 'invalidat[ed] people with disabilities on the basis of their failed labor skills', Marx instead 'bemoaned disability as a stripping of capacity from the body by excessive labor demands', meaning that 'rising levels of worker disability [...] provided a reliable indicator of the corruption of capital' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2005: 15). In this way, his analysis 'denounced [capitalism's] creation of disability while solidifying the concept of labour capacity as the

foundation of citizenship rights', leaving intact 'the presumption of the ability to labor as a cornerstone of human validity' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2005: 16).

Work on the political economy of disability that has emerged since Marx has without doubt allowed for a far more nuanced conceptualisation of the relationship between disability and capitalism. Nonetheless, there remains a tendency to rely on labour as the sole, or at least principal, site of marginalisation. A case in point is the incisive work of Marta Russell, published in scattered ways across the late 1990s and early 2000s and only collected, posthumously, in 2019.⁴ In her account, 'disability is a socially created category derived from labour relations' which classifies 'persons deemed less exploitable or not exploitable by the owning class who control the means of production in a capitalist economy' (Russell, 2019: 28). Disability, then, is a mechanism for controlling the supply of labour, meaning that 'just as capitalism forces workers into the wage relationship, it equally forcefully coerces disabled workers out of it' (Russell, 2019: 18). To be forced out of waged labour in this manner is to be marked for extraction by other means, as 'entrepreneurs and rehabilitation specialists [make] impaired bodies of use to the economic order by shaping disablement into big business and turning the disabled body into a commodity around which social policies get created or rejected according to their market value' (Russell, 2019: 19–20). Russell's argument here builds on Gary Albrecht's (1992) mapping of the process through which the rehabilitation of disabled workers came to be a valuable commodity within the political economy of the USA. To the extent that it lays bare the commodification and financialisation of disabled people regardless of their capacity for work, the 'money model of disablement' presented by Russell (2019: 126) remains striking. Yet the central preoccupation of her writing – that exclusion from the labour market 'lies at the core of disabled people's oppression in every aspect of modern life' (Russell, 2019: 21) – cannot account for the myriad other forms of ostracisation and violence to which disabled people, whether in work or not, are subjected. Nor can it truly make sense of states' engagement in what we might call 'austerity theatre', wherein more public money is spent on the construction of ordeal mechanisms designed to create a corrective logic of coercion into work than it would cost to give all applicants a basic income.

Russell's work remains almost unknown and barely engaged with in disability studies as a whole. In part this can be attributed to her overly trenchant disavowal of 'postmodern discourse' and 'identity politics'. As her collaborator, Ravi Malhotra (2017: 3), stated, she bemoaned a perceived 'degeneration' in disability studies 'into a focus primarily on culture and identity', as opposed to the political economy approach she favoured. It is indeed the case that the heavy focus on economic marginalisation that characterised early disability studies – evident in work by scholars and activists such as Paul Hunt (1960s–70s, anthologised 2022), Vic Finkelstein (1981), Deborah Stone (1984) and Gary Albrecht (1992) – is now scarce within the mainstream of the field, and that these foundational figures are frequently cited as part of an activist prehistory rather than as theoreticians in their own right. This neglect is unfortunate, given the paucity of attempts in mainstream disability studies scholarship to attend meaningfully either to the impoverishment that frequently defines disability, or to the exploitation of disabled people in a financialised system of care. Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant have recently taken up this shortcoming in their podcast, *Death Panel*, and book, *Health Communism* (2022), arguing that 'health' is not 'an individual consumer good, [or] a kind of aspirational, positive quality that each of us needs to work hard to achieve, in order to be valued by society' but rather 'a very violent architecture: an economic system – not a personal trait – in which your body is commodified based on how it interacts with the things that it needs to survive' (Markbreiter, 2022). Within this system, disabled people are 'surplus' in the Marxian sense and thus 'regarded as waste' (Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, 2022: 20), forming part of 'a collective of those who fall outside of the normative principles for which state policies are designed, as well as

those who are excluded from the attendant entitlements of capital'. Building on Russell's 'money model of disability', Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) 'organized abandonment', and Liat Ben-Moshe's (2020) work on disability and incarceration, Adler-Bolton and Vierkant (2022) devise the term 'extractive abandonment' to name the process 'by which the state constructs "health" culturally, politically, and institutionally' (20) in order that 'surplus populations [...] become a source of capitalist profit generation' (13) even as they are 'framed as a drain or burden on society' (5).

Health Communism usefully nuances Russell's work. Demonstrating that the dehumanisation of disabled people is partly but not exclusively framed in financial terms, Adler-Bolton and Vierkant (2022: 20–21) introduce the concept of the 'eugenic/debt burden'. Disabled people are both '*eugenic burden*: demographic threat, threat of disruption to the social order, reproductive threat, bloodline threat, "three generations of imbeciles," etc.' and debt burden, which hinges on the assumption that 'protecting the health of the most vulnerable few will lead to the immiseration of the many'.⁵ This acknowledgement of the ontological, as well as financial, threat posed to institutions by the infiltration of disabled people accurately captures one aspect of our relationship with the university: our presence is not only financially unviable, the unfavourable outcome of a bureaucratic cost-benefit analysis, but also an unsettling influence on the claim to hyperability and rationality that bolsters the university's cultural position and self-perceived exceptionality. Likewise, the authors' appropriation of Ellen Samuels's (2014: 9) 'biocertification' – a term she uses to describe 'the massive proliferation of state-issued documents purporting to authenticate a person's biological membership in a regulated group', beginning in the mid-nineteenth century – allows for recognition of the bureaucratic infrastructure of 'proving' disability, underdeveloped in Russell's work. And yet when we return to the capacity of institutions to produce disability, Adler-Bolton and Vierkant's work is held back by their reliance on a binary distinction between worker and surplus. Through most of their text this distinction is overstated – underestimating the potential of any individual to be both worker and surplus as a given institution requires, or the internal hierarchies of either category – and at times is collapsed completely, such that by the end of the book 'we are each of us ripped and maimed, strangled and buried by capital in one way or another. [...] We are all surplus' (Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, 2022: 183). While this is in one sense a needed effort to invoke and build solidarity by foregrounding the basic fact of expendability under capitalism, its suggestion that we share distance from power or experience state violence in comparable ways is untenable on those very terms. What is at stake here is not reducible to liberal 'identity politics' or a defanged 'postmodern discourse' of disability, but rather the material realities of proximity to harm and even death. If we are all surplus, what does disability (or for that matter, race or even class) actually name?

Work in disability studies goes a long way toward addressing the shortfalls in both scholarship aimed at a general critique of wellbeing or the university, which assumes a non-disabled subjectivity as both universal and desirable, and studies of the political economy of disability, which over-rely on a worker/surplus binary. Directly addressing the position of disability in the academy, these critiques expose how universities and their wider ecosystems have long functioned to deepen the marginalisation of disabled people, whether by excluding them as students or staff or degrading them as subjects of research. Tanya Titchkosky's wide-ranging *A Question of Access* (2011), for example, shows how institutional bureaucracy works as a disabling force in universities. Central to her thesis is the idea of 'disability's inclusion as an excludable type'; that is, the conceptualisation of disability as something that must be effaced before the disabled person can be assimilated (Titchkosky, 2011: 102). Here, Titchkosky draws on Henri-Jacques Stiker's (2006: 128) analysis of 'rehabilitation' as 'an act of identification, of making identical' which 'will cause the disabled to disappear and with them all that is lacking, in order to assimilate them, drown them, dissolve them in the greater and single social whole'. This rehabilitative approach ensures that bureaucratic processes

of access work from the premise that certain manifestations of disability are unincorporable: ‘that it is good to have an operating sense of types of people who are beyond inclusion’ (Titchkosky, 2011: 37). For the university, the legal codification of ‘accommodations’ has reduced access to a matter of liability and compliance, subjecting the disabled student or worker to an inhumane cost-benefit calculus (Titchkosky, 2011: 32–34). This theorisation of the bureaucratic dehumanisation that dominates the academic experience of disability is underpinned by a reading of institutional time as something that is both relentless – tight deadlines, excessive workload, rushed curricula – and glacial, in the sense that changes urgently needed to improve access are subject to permanent deferral (Titchkosky, 2011: 94).

Dolmage (2017: 2–7) describes these myriad mechanisms of exclusion as constituting an ‘ideology of the steep steps’, which reflects how ‘academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability’. Disabled people are epistemic objects, rather than ‘subjects or agents’, meaning they are actively divested of a role in knowledge production: a dynamic he refers to as ‘disabling studies and disability, studied’ (Dolmage, 2017: 27–28). Genealogically, he argues, ‘disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education’; indeed, ‘higher education’ was historically the counter to ‘lower education’, intended for those devalued as ‘feeble-minded’ in twentieth century North American eugenic hierarchy (Dolmage, 2017: 3). Beyond the university’s foundational exclusion of disabled people as students or staff is its role as ‘the arbiter of ability and the inventor of disability’ (Dolmage, 2017: 15): it ‘constructs both knowledge and disability’ (58). The folding of disability into liberal narratives of inclusion based on a watered-down interpretation of the social model, which posits ‘reasonable accommodations’ (or adjustments, as they are more commonly named in the UK) as solution to institutional exclusion, serves only to obfuscate the location of the university at the centre of eugenic history (Dolmage, 2017: 61–62).

This understanding of the university as not simply discriminatory toward disabled people but as historically and presently defined against disability underpins Margaret Price’s *Mad at School* (2011). Price (2011: 8) focuses specifically on mental disability, since ‘academic discourse operates not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability [...]. For thousands of years academe has been understood as a bastion of reason, the place in which one’s rational mind is one’s instrument’. She notes that even the ostensibly inclusive scholarship offered in the field of critical pedagogy frequently ‘use[s] psychiatric discourse as a touchstone, presuming both its authority and its benevolence’, and that pedagogy per se is bound up with psychiatry since ‘both psychiatrists and teachers are interested in governing the mad subject in academic discourse, and the two groups’ efforts feed each other’ (Price, 2011: 33–34). A particularly generative concept in *Mad at School* is that of ‘kairotic space’, which Price (2011: 60–61) uses to refer to ‘the less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged’, characterised by ‘the pairing of spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact’; such spaces include classroom discussions, conference Q&A sessions, dinners and other ‘networking’ events, and the days-long campus visits traditionally central to North American academic hiring practices. The ability to navigate and perform effectively in these spaces, Price (2011: 103–112) notes, has become pivotal to success both as a student – manifest in course attendance and participation requirements – and in academic jobs, where it is framed in terms of ‘energy’, collegiality and productivity. Yet the fundamental role played by kairotic space is rarely acknowledged, much less dismantled, in discussions of academic inclusion, meaning its profound hostility toward mentally disabled people is obscured.

Titchkosky, Dolmage and Price share an understanding of ‘wellness’ or ‘health’ in the university as synonymous with an unspoken idea of ‘appropriate functioning’ inimical to, and indeed defined

against, disability. Drawing out the lineage of ‘wellness’ in North American universities as traceable to campus ‘mental hygiene’ movements embedded in ‘euthenics’ – a subsidiary of eugenics focused on nutrition and preventative healthcare – Dolmage (2017: 16–17) notes that its contemporary deployment ‘works rhetorically to demand that we do not discuss disability, especially mental illness/mental disability/madness’ (57). Price (2011: 12) notes that mental ‘wellness’ functions as both proof of success of intervention and as reason to withdraw it, in addition to showing how mental illness has been mobilised as a violent threat to the ‘ivory tower’, particularly in the wake of the 2007 and 2008 campus shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, respectively (141), in order to strip away mentally ill students’ right to privacy and other civil liberties (159–162). Titchkosky (2011: 17) locates university disability policies in relation to wider approaches that ‘conceive of [disability] as biologically grounded and explainable as such, and to seek solutions in order to cure, care for, or contain disability’. When held against scholarship on institutions that erases disability entirely, these interventions are welcome.

In spite of this vital role in exposing the ways universities have always operated to systematically efface and degrade disability, however, the three texts cited here are limited by their very insistence on those institutions as recuperable and exceptional spaces of emancipation. This shared utopianism is not necessarily explicitly stated, but rather appears in tacit form through the divestment of academic work of its status as wage labour, and/or the broadening of disability’s terms of reference to the point that non-disabled people come to figure as subject to disablement. Price (2011), for example, asks her readers to ‘recognize ways that [university infrastructure] can be redesigned for the benefit of all’ (140), offers ‘suggestions for ways that the academic profession might be redesigned [to be] more inclusive of those with mental disabilities, and more successful – perhaps even more *productive* and *collegial* for all’ (106), and, in the first few pages of *Mad at School’s* introduction, describes academic work as ‘opportunity’ and ‘privilege’ (1) and academic ableism as something that ‘impairs all of us’ (8). Titchkosky’s analysis of both access and disability studies as discipline implies the university’s potential as a site of liberation temporarily forestalled by bureaucracy and financialisation – which are furthermore not made to extend to the labour precarisation, attacks on critical disciplines and poor remuneration that increasingly dominate academic life. Dolmage (2017: 7) sets the tone for *Academic Ableism* by asserting early on that ‘*there is no more ableist location than the university*’ – itself an exceptionalising statement – and approaches the attempts at ‘inclusion’ offered by ‘progressive pedagogy’ and university appropriations of universal design with forensic and welcome cynicism. But even his text is subtended by the assumption that the university can be transformed into an institution that ‘rejects its eugenic, steep steps history, refuses to accept an ongoing series of retrofits and slapped-on accommodations, and values instead the unpredictable times and places of disability to come’ (Dolmage, 2017: 124).

These gestures of exceptionalisation are ubiquitous in popular and scholarly critique of the university. For Smyth (2017: 19), the university is ‘one of the few crucial remaining places for the construction, preservation, and contestation of knowledge and ideas’, which can and should be restored to its former status as a ‘sanctuary’ for intellectual endeavour. Even Hall (2021: 2), despite his radical assertion that the ‘University-as-is’ is ‘hopeless’, still reifies ‘intellectual work’ as both a discrete entity and a ‘socially useful’, essential good. This insistence on the university as exceptional space hinges on the notion that there is a tangible essence of benevolence at the heart of the university that has been concealed and undermined, and can be recovered through collective action – at which point the university will become the space for ‘self-actualisation, becoming and belonging’ (Hall, 2021: 2) that is desired. This set of beliefs is certainly understandable, even alluring. At the same time, it prevents us from reaching a full sense of the university as disabling institution. As Dolmage, Price and Titchkosky have shown us, for disabled people the university has

never been a sanctuary, nor the liberatory utopia that is fantasised as its essential nature. But what if it can also never be such a space?

The lack of reckoning with this question even in disability studies limits our consideration of the university's capacity to produce disability, in part because it fails to consider the permeability of the boundaries between the university and other institutions. For this reason, work on disability and the university so far has underacknowledged the intrinsic link between disability and poverty, or between disability and labour precarisation – a connection that dialogue with work by Russell, Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, and their political economy predecessors Hunt, Finkelstein, Stone and Albrecht would generatively account for. Seeing the university as wholly self-contained has also limited analysis of how it works with other institutions to reify and reproduce disability. There is little attention paid to how, for example, the processes for accessing disability support in the university – for both students and staff – echo the ordeal mechanisms that constitute applications for welfare, or how these processes demand engagement with biocertification, forcing disabled students and staff into contact with ableist healthcare institutions or stigmatising diagnostic models. Nor is there sufficient analysis of the way funding is bestowed on university research programmes that extract knowledge from disabled bodies and minds in order to reproduce a deficit model of disability, which then influences policy and practice in clinics, schools and charities – a dynamic encouraged particularly in the UK via the assessment of 'impact' as part of the Research Excellence Framework and in grant bids for public money. Exceptionalising the university by insisting on its recuperability obscures these institutional entanglements and more.

Reaching a fuller understanding of the ways universities produce disability also necessitates a more critical reckoning with the selective rewards of ableism: the way that it serves to 'shore up the identity of those invested in higher education' by creating the appearance that 'if those who do not "qualify" can be vilified, marked out, and kept away, then those who make it up the stairs must deserve to' (Dolmage, 2017: 62). It is self-evidently not the case that within the university 'ableism impairs all of us' (Price, 2011: 8) or that 'we are all surplus' (Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, 2022: 183). Ableism benefits the non-disabled by elevating and rewarding certain modes of embodiment, behaviour, communication and interaction and by marking others as unacceptable, punishable or expendable. This is as much the case in the university as in any other institution, despite the imaginary line frequently drawn, not least by academics themselves, between the university and the 'real world'. An area in which this system of rewards is particularly evident is that of time: both in terms of the 'culture of speed' that Travis Chi Wing Lau (2019: 17) identifies as dominant in contemporary academia, serving to project 'an academic future that does not have disabled scholars in it', and in the related, more granular sense of 'temporal inaccessibility' that Alex Haagaard (2021) notes as a fundamental yet unnoticed barrier to cultural participation. While both Titchkosky and Dolmage do acknowledge the role of bureaucratic time in perpetuating academic ableism, they still privilege the spatial in their analyses. In the context of British universities, which are perhaps more temporally regimented than North American ones – with student deadlines and extensions managed centrally and rigidly, little to no autonomy granted to students in managing their timetables or credit load, and the REF forcing scholarship into strict seven-year cycles – the rewards and exclusions enacted through time merit particular attention.

Working from the starting point of 'wellbeing' as understood and deployed within UK universities, this article has sought to make clear the gaps in current scholarship in terms of making space for such analysis. Critique of the wellbeing agenda erases disability from political consideration, while analysis of the university as institution effaces it by considering disablement only insofar as it affects the non-disabled; in both cases, the effect is to reinforce the dominant assumptions of normative embodiment produced by those same institutions. Work on the political

economy of disability recognises the immiseration of disabled people as a statistical class, and the role of state and private institutions in perpetuating this economic marginalisation, but falls short of accounting for the more fluid complexities of expendability across the worker-surplus divide. Scholarship from the mainstream of disability studies, meanwhile, neglects the role of capital, in part through failing to enter into productive dialogue with political economy approaches. By depending on a vision of the university as both discrete and essentially well-intentioned, and of academic work as vocation rather than labour, such analysis sidelines both the continuities and flows between various institutions and the rewards afforded to non-disabled people by structural ableism. If we are to fully account for disability within the university as a political experience, we need to let go of this tendency toward institutional exceptionalism, building analysis that recognises the connections between universities, doctor's surgeries, hospitals, Job Centres, schools, care homes and more. We need to recognise that the fantasy of the university as intellectual sanctuary is as underpinned by ableism as the institution itself. Our argument here should not be interpreted as meaning that anti-ableist work within universities is futile, much less as defeatism; we should all try to make institutions as liveable as they can be. What is vital is that we recognise that both the university as it is now *and the university as imagined and desired* are disabling institutions. The university, to paraphrase Esmé Weijun Wang (2019: 59–77), will not save us. Working against ableism means dismantling the cultural position not just of universities, but also of 'higher education' and even intellect itself.

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Notes

1. For example, the World Health Organisation began to collate wellbeing metrics in 1998 (Topp et al., 2015); in the UK, the New Economics Foundation published its 'Manifesto for Wellbeing' in 2004 (Edwards and Imrie 2008).
2. For a further contemporaneous account of disability in New Labour welfare policy, see Roulstone (2000).
3. For more on the limitations of 'Time to Talk' and other 'mental health awareness' initiatives in the specific context of the UK, see Edge (2019a, 2019b).
4. For other work on the political economy of disability, see, for example, Finkelstein (1981), Stone (1984), Albrecht (1992), and later work by Hunt (1960s–70s, anthologised 2022).

5. A recent example of this ‘debt burden’ characterisation can be found in Clark and Haynes’s *Telegraph* article (2023), which contains a calculator allowing readers to calculate how much of their ‘salaries are spent on the benefits of those who do not work’.

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