

Disabled-Queer Student Experiences in Higher Education

by

Jack Cameron McKinlay
Strathclyde Institute of Education

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Signed: *J. McKinlay*

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Abstract

This study explores how disabled-queer students experience higher education in Scotland. While disability and queerness have each been examined within higher education research (e.g., Marzetti, 2018; Wertans and Burch, 2022), their intersection remains an emerging field (Miller, 2015a). Drawing on twenty-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews with self-identifying disabled-LGBTQ+ undergraduate and postgraduate students across universities in Scotland, the research explores how participants negotiate fit, exclusion, agency, and recognition within institutional, social, and academic environments. In doing so, it extends understandings of ‘the student experience’ beyond the classroom to encompass everyday relational and structural contexts.

Using a queer-crip framework (McRuer, 2006), the analysis illuminates how universities are experienced as spaces structured around normative expectations of the ‘ideal’ student, alongside intersecting inequalities. Participants describe uncertainty about whether they are ‘allowed’ to be present across settings. Their accounts highlight structural barriers, including uneven disability support, institutional rules, and normative cultures, as well as interpersonal dynamics such as disclosure dilemmas, community-seeking, and experiences of misfitting. Additionally, participants identify moments of affirmation, community, and self-sufficient practices that support inclusion, thereby offering a more nuanced account.

Foregrounding the temporality and situatedness of student experience, the study conceptualises university life as fluid and shifting, shaped by intersecting identities rather than reducible to fixed demographic categories. Through a distinctly intersectional and queer-crip lens, it contributes to ongoing debates about how ‘the student experience’ is theorised across multiple sites and degree levels.

The study contributes to emerging scholarship that brings queer-crip theory into empirical research on higher education (Abrams *et al.*, 2024), theorising disabled-queer student experience as a dynamic negotiation of fit. By centring disabled-queer students’ lived experiences, it offers conceptual

resources for re-examining the assumptions and norms that shape who higher education is for, and how universities might better recognise and sustain diverse ways of being at university.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study and the Thesis

In recent decades, universities have increasingly prioritised the recruitment, retention, and success of students from diverse backgrounds, with a focus on how diversity enriches the educational environment for all (Milem et al., 2005; Hurtado et al., 2012). Within higher education research, much attention has been paid to students' individual identity categories — for example disability or sexuality — but there remains a gap in understanding how these identities intersect (Abes et al., 2007; Museus and Griffin, 2011; Jones and Abes, 2013). While there is growing research exploring disabled students' experiences (Troiano, 2003; Getzel and Thoma, 2008; Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012) and LGBTQ+ students' experiences (e.g., Abes and Jones, 2004; Renn, 2007; Dugan et al., 2012), their intersection remains underexplored despite longstanding calls (see Harley et al., 2002; Henry et al., 2010; Miller, 2015a). As Morgan et al. (2011, p. 5) poignantly describe, disabled-queer students have historically been viewed as 'the invisible of the invisible'. This invisibility is compounded through Rankin's (2006) identification of an urgent need for research to explore multiple marginalisation. This study responds to that invisibility not only by foregrounding the lived experiences of disabled-queer students but also through extending Abrams et al.'s (2024) call to incorporate queer-crip theory into the empirical study of higher education. Queer-crip theory (McRuer, 2006), with its focus on challenging normative constructions of ability, gender, and sexuality, offers a powerful framework for (re)thinking how universities shape, and are (re)shaped by, the students within them. Where queer-crip literature does exist, it often focuses on challenges and deficits, positioning disabled-queer students as navigating hardship, rather than as agents shaping the educational and university environments around them. By extending into queer-crip discussion, this study seeks to move beyond documenting exclusion and toward exploring agency and the (queer-crip) reimagining of higher education.

Contemporary higher education is operating within a period of significant social, political, and institutional change. Universities have increasingly positioned themselves as inclusive spaces committed to widening participation and supporting students from historically underrepresented backgrounds (Hurtado et al., 2012; Stevenson et al., 2019). Within Scotland, higher education is frequently framed as progressive and socially inclusive, supported by policies such as free tuition for Scottish-domiciled students and a sustained emphasis on widening access (Scottish Government, 2021). Scotland has also sought to position itself as ‘world-leading’ in relation to LGBTQ+ inclusion, disability support, and social justice, with universities often adopting similar messages. Together, these developments have contributed to a national narrative in which higher education is imagined as an increasingly accessible and equitable space. However, as educational researchers have repeatedly demonstrated, formal commitments to inclusion do not necessarily translate into equitable experiences for all students (Burke, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Taylor and Falconer, 2017). Questions therefore remain regarding who is recognised, valued, and able to participate fully within contemporary university life, and whose experiences continue to sit at the margins of institutional understandings of diversity and inclusion.

The urgency of this research is further heightened by the wider socio-political landscape in which universities now operate. Although disability and LGBTQ+ identities have become increasingly visible within public discourse, this visibility exists alongside ongoing contestation regarding rights, recognition, and belonging. Globally, debates surrounding gender identity, transgender inclusion, equality initiatives, freedom of speech, and so-called ‘anti-gender’ movements have become increasingly prominent within political, media, and educational spaces (Butler, 2024; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017). Universities have often found themselves at the centre of these debates, navigating tensions between commitments to inclusion and competing claims regarding academic freedom, free expression, and institutional neutrality. At the same time, disability scholars have highlighted how neoliberal pressures within higher education continue to privilege ideals of productivity, independence, self-management, and resilience, often rendering disabled ways of being as

problematic, exceptional, or in need of accommodation (Brown and Leigh, 2018; Dolmage, 2017). Together, these dynamics create a complex environment in which students are encouraged to bring their 'whole selves' to university while simultaneously navigating cultures that continue to privilege particular forms of embodiment, identity, and participation.

Intersectionality, originally developed within Black feminist scholarship (Crenshaw, 1991), offers a critical framework for understanding how multiple forms of identity and oppression intersect within social structures. Rather than treating social categories (such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability) as separate or additive, intersectionality demonstrates how these categories operate simultaneously and relationally, shaping lived experience and structural intersecting inequalities. As Torres et al. (2009) argue, this framework enables recognition not only of the multiplicity of identities but also of the structural and institutional contexts in which those identities are negotiated. Within higher education, intersectionality provides a valuable lens for exploring how systems of privilege and exclusion manifest in university life, where students live holistically and intersectionally as they 'attend class, interact with faculty and peers, participate in extra-curricular activities, live on campus, and are academically and socially influenced by their environments' (Longerbeam et al., 2007, p. 215).

Against this backdrop, disabled-queer students offer a particularly valuable lens through which to examine contemporary higher education. Their experiences can illuminate how institutional commitments to inclusion are lived and negotiated within everyday university contexts, while also revealing the limitations of approaches that treat disability and sexuality as separate categories of analysis or support. While legal frameworks such as the Equality Act 2010 provide important protections for both disabled and LGBTQ+ students, formal recognition alone cannot capture the complexity of how identities are experienced within university spaces. Attending to disabled-queer students' narratives therefore provides an opportunity not only to understand experiences of marginalisation, but also to examine how students navigate, challenge, and reimagine the social and institutional structures around them. Situated within the contemporary Scottish higher education

landscape, this study responds to ongoing debates around inclusion, belonging, and participation by exploring what it means to live, learn, and belong at the intersections of disability and queerness.

This chapter sets out the rationale for the present study, arguing for a nuanced, queer-crip understanding of student experiences in higher education. It outlines the study's aims, key questions, methodological approach, and limitations, situating the research within both existing literature and the broader imperative to better attend to the realities of multiply marginalised students.

Statement of the Problem

Although attention to the intersections of disability and queerness is beginning to emerge within academic literature (O'Toole, 2000; Whitney, 2006; Noonan and Taylor Gomez, 2011; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013; Miller and Dika, 2018), this area of inquiry remains relatively underdeveloped, particularly in relation to higher education and student experiences. While some cultural conversations have acknowledged these overlapping identities, research focused on the lived experiences of disabled-queer students within university settings remains limited. Much of the existing scholarship continues to examine identities in isolation, rather than exploring their intersections and how these are negotiated within institutional life (Museus and Griffin, 2011). However, this framing has increasingly been challenged by scholars adopting intersectional approaches (Henry et al., 2010; Slater et al., 2019; Humphrey et al., 2023). Recent work by Miller (2015a), involving interviews with twenty-five disabled-queer students at a U.S. university, marks an important intervention, yet remains geographically limited.

In addition, dominant framings of 'the student experience' frequently centre classroom participation (e.g., Miller, 2015b; Pryor, 2015; Eadens et al., 2021), sidelining wider social, structural, and emotional terrains through which students move. There is a need to broaden this conception and to critically interrogate how disabled-queer students make sense of university and student spaces beyond formal learning environments. This is particularly pressing within the Scottish context, where

higher education is often positioned as progressive and inclusive, but still little is known about how disabled-queer students navigate Scottish universities.

This study addresses gaps in higher education research by centring the perspectives of students who self-identify as both disabled and queer, extending queer-crip theory into the empirical study of student experience. Through drawing upon queer-crip theory, the research examines how disabled-queer students navigate and, at times, (re)work normative logics of university life. In doing so, it documents both the reproduction of and resistance to institutional norms, responding to calls for more intersectional, contextually grounded research. This combination of theoretical and empirical foci positions the study to make a unique contribution to scholarship on higher education, as well as to broader conversations within queer-crip studies (Sherry, 2004; McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013; Clare, 2015; Miller, 2020).

Purpose, Aims and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how disabled-queer students experience higher education, drawing on the narratives of both undergraduate and postgraduate participants. By including students at different levels of study and different university types, the research aims to identify shared experiences and meaningful differences in how disability and queerness are navigated within and across university landscapes and environments. Central to this project is an emphasis on self-identification rather than diagnostic categorisation, recognising disability and queerness as socially constructed and contextually shaped identities, and thereby challenging deficit-based framings that often dominate institutional discourse. Instead, it positions disabled-queer students as knowledge-holders whose insights not only illuminate barriers, but also expand the possibilities of higher education for future disabled-queers (Kafer, 2013).

The aim of this study is to explore how disabled-queer students experience and (re)work the structures and spaces of higher education. As its starting point, it takes the recognition that disability and queerness are not merely individual identity categories, but relational, social, and political

positions that shape, and are shaped by, the environments within which they are lived. At its core, the study contributes to a nuanced, queer-crip understanding of contemporary student experiences in Scotland. It interrogates how structures of power, for example ableism, hetero- and homo-normativity manifest across university contexts, and how students both experience and challenge these. Central to this study is an interest in questions of fit and misfit. Drawing on Garland-Thomson's (2011) concept of misfitting, disabled-queer student experiences are understood not simply as individual feelings of bodies or identities, but as emerging through relationships between people and the environments they inhabit. From this perspective, (mis)fitting is a contextual, push-and-pull process that helps illuminate how disabled-queer students encounter, negotiate, and reshape university spaces.

From a researcher perspective, this project emerged from a personal and political commitment to equity in education. As someone engaged in both academic work and with personal affiliations to these identity categories, I aim not only to document experiences of disabled-queer students, but also to invite conversations around mobilisation. This is not a neutral act, but grounded in an ethic of care, critique, and imagination, drawing from queer-crip theory to reimagine what education is for and who it serves. Occupying both insider (via shared identities and commitments) and researcher positions involves navigating tensions between these two states. Sharing aspects of identity and experience can foster trust and connection, whilst also carrying the risk of over-identification or assuming commonality where differences exist. Acknowledging these dynamics is central in guiding how I interpret and represent participants' narratives throughout this thesis.

The study has the following key objectives:

- To document the lived experiences of disabled-queer students in Scottish higher education, paying particular attention to how disability and queerness are negotiated across academic, social, and institutional contexts,

- To explore the structural and cultural norms within universities, such as those tied to ableism, heteronormativity, productivity, and the 'ideal', 'typical', 'good' student (Brim, 2020; Taylor et al., 2023), shaping students' feelings around being at university,
- To explore and expand the idea of 'the student experience' beyond the classroom, examining how space(s), for example student societies, peer relationships, and student accommodation, shape disabled-queer experiences of campus life (Addison, 2012; Falconer and Taylor, 2017),
- To foreground students' own knowledge and agency, recognising participants not as passive subjects but as theorists and knowledge holders with respect to their own experience, whose insights can inform more inclusive and relational approaches to higher education,
- To challenge deficit-oriented approaches to student support and advocate for institutional change that does not merely accommodate difference, but actively centres it in the design and ethos of higher education (McGarvey, 2023).

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing conversation about what 'the student experience' is, and *who* and *what* the university is for. The study explores this through a deeper reckoning with the multiplicity of disabled-queer student lives. In doing so, it produces knowledge that is useful not only to academics and practitioners, but to students themselves, whose experiences are largely sidelined in dominant educational discourse (Morgan et al., 2011; Garvey, 2014; Miller, 2015).

Research Questions

This study is guided by three central research questions; each designed to explore and make visible the experiences of disabled-queer students within Scottish higher education. These questions are not posed to arrive at definitive answers, but to open space for generative (re)thinking about the university and the students within it.

The first question asks: How do disabled-queer students experience and make sense of higher education? This query attends to the lived realities of students whose identities often fall outside the

normative imaginaries of 'the student'. It seeks to explore how disabled-queer students navigate university life, emotionally, socially, and institutionally, and how their multiple, intersecting identities shape the meanings they attach to higher education. This includes examining how these students relate to the idea of 'the university', how they encounter (mis)fitting, and how their expectations align or collide with institutional practices and narratives.

The second question turns to the forms of labour that underpin these experiences: What forms of labour do disabled-queer students undertake in navigating university life? Here, the aim is to move beyond accounts of access, to explore the everyday work students do to sustain their presence and manage their identities across campus spaces. This includes identity (non)disclosure, negotiating institutional systems and support structures, and navigating interpersonal, social dynamics across spaces. By naming and attending to these layers of labour, this question foregrounds the effort required to 'get by'.

The final question invites a more speculative and transformative stance: In what ways do disabled-queer students challenge, reshape, or reimagine the university? This question explores how students not only adapt to university, but also act upon it by unsettling its assumptions, timelines, and spatial logics. It considers how disabled-queer students enact alternative ways of being within higher education. This includes moments where they carve out community, question normative success narratives, or reimagine what participation looks and feels like.

Overview of Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

This study is grounded in a queer-crip theoretical orientation, drawing upon the work of McRuer (2006), which has shaped not only the study's design and interpretation but also my own positioning as a researcher. Rather than operating as singular frameworks, queer-crip perspectives intersect in this research to challenge the idea that a singular, unified account of experience can be captured. This perspective recognises 'individuals as fragmented, produced through the intersection of multiple (and, at times, contradictory) social processes' (Pasque et al., 2012, p. 33). Through a queer-

crip lens, both categories and institutions are viewed as socially constructed rather than fixed or inherently meaningful. Feminist theory further informs this lens by drawing attention to the ways in which institutional and societal power structures shape who is heard and who is not. This study recognises that power is disproportionately held by those constructed as cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-class, and non-disabled, thereby upholding narrow ideas of class, ability, gender, and sexuality. By centring the experiences of disabled-queer students, voices frequently marginalised even within queer(er) work, this study both critiques and unsettles these normative structures.

Methodologically, this entangled orientation requires an approach capable of attending to the complexity, fluidity, and embodied nature of lived experiences. As Ambert et al. (1995) argue, qualitative research is particularly well-suited to inquiries that aim to explore how individuals understand, make sense of, and navigate their worlds. Rather than aiming for breadth or generalisability, the intention here was to centre intersectional depth, resisting large-scale quantitative work that can pull apart identity categories to arrive at a single answer. This project can be understood as exploratory in nature, seeking to 'build rich descriptions of complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature' (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). The study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-one self-identifying disabled and LGBTQ+ students who were currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate study at universities in Scotland. The focus of this study was not on quantity but on amplifying the richness of participants' narratives, while also connecting their insights to broader social and institutional structures.

Within a queer-crip epistemology, knowledge is understood as situated and relationally shaped through the research encounter (Ashton and McKenna, 2020). This theoretical orientation does not merely function as a conceptual add-on but as an interpretive tool for troubling normative assumptions about what 'counts' as 'a student' or 'a university experience'. Despite the increasing visibility of disabled and LGBTQ+ student research, queer-crip theory has not often guided empirical studies in higher education (Abrams et al., 2024). Thinking queerly and criply through intersectional

commitments, Ashton and McKenna (2020) reminded me that feminist research often embraces fragmentation and partiality, resisting the pull towards neat, all-encompassing conclusions, and allowing for complexity, contradiction and fluidity. By working at the intersections, this study contributes not only to a deeper understanding of disabled-queer student experiences but also to the broader reimagining of what higher education can be and for whom.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study is shaped by methodological limitations. Qualitative approaches are designed to generate rich, in-depth understandings of specific experiences or phenomena, often using purposefully selected samples. The goal is not to generalise findings to wider populations in the statistical sense, but to offer insights that may be transferable or resonant in other contexts. The study focuses specifically on students who identified as both disabled and LGBTQ+. It does not include students who identified solely as disabled or solely as LGBTQ+, nor does it seek to generalise across all LGBTQ+ or disabled student populations. Rather than treating disability and queerness as fixed or clinical categories, this study engages with them as fluid, socially embedded, and self-defined identities. Participants' understandings of their own identities were always shifting across context, time, and space, and this fluidity is central to the analytic approach taken. Diagnoses, impairments, or medical categories were not the primary focus of this research. Instead, what mattered was how students *experienced* and *made sense of* their identities while attending university. This study does not claim to represent the full range of experiences held by all disabled-queer students in higher education, whether within Scotland, the UK more broadly, or internationally.

Moreover, the participants in this research were self-selecting, which may influence the perspectives and narratives that were shared. Those who took part may hold investments in reflecting on their experiences or in contributing to research of this nature. It is possible that other students, particularly those who are newly exploring their relationship to disability and/or queerness, or who experience heightened safety concerns around these identities, may have chosen not to participate.

As such, the analysis was guided by a reflexive awareness of positionality and partiality. I present findings as situated rather than as a universal account of disabled-queer student life, with attention being paid to how participants' self-selection and social positioning shape what is voiced and what is left unsaid. The intention is not to claim representativeness but to foreground *how* these participants narrate and negotiate their experiences of higher education.

This study is situated within the context of Scottish higher education and draws on the narratives of disabled-queer students enrolled at a range of Scottish universities, from Russell Group to post-92, to smaller, regional universities. The geographical and national setting is significant as Scotland is often positioned as a progressive nation in terms of LGBTQ+ and disability rights, with this cultural framing shaping both the study's conceptual grounding and the expectations participants brought to their university experiences. At the same time, this national context carries its own silences and contradictions, all of which inform the institutional landscapes that participants navigated.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to theory, research, policy, and practice. Theoretically and conceptually, it advances growing conversations around intersectionality in higher education by centring identities that are frequently studied in isolation. In doing so, it fosters a more sustained dialogue between student experience research, queer theory, and disability studies. While queer theory has been used to explore student identity to some extent, it remains underutilised within higher education research (Renn, 2010; Miller, 2015). Building on scholarship that links queer and disability theory (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013), this study argues that queer-crip perspectives offer powerful conceptual tools for rethinking how students are understood within universities. By foregrounding disabled-queer students' experiences, the research disrupts binary framings that continue to structure institutional understandings of students (e.g., disabled/non-disabled; straight/LGBTQ+; in/out; visible/invisible), and highlights the contingent and relational nature of belonging and recognition within higher education.

From a policy perspective, the findings offer insight into how equality and inclusion policies may better reflect lived realities. While legal frameworks, such as the Equality Act 2010, mandate reasonable adjustments, protections may be undermined when students simultaneously experience marginalisation related to intersecting inequalities. This study therefore underscores the importance of understanding policy not only in terms of what it formally guarantees, but also in terms of how it is enacted and felt within the everyday cultures of higher education institutions.

In relation to practice, the study challenges the assumed divide between research and practice, suggesting that this separation is often overstated. Educators and professional services staff routinely engage in reflective, evidence-informed work that could be understood as research, even if it is not formally recognised as such. At the heart of this study is a commitment to producing knowledge that speaks to the lived experiences of students and the everyday concerns of those who work within higher education. In this sense, the research supports more relational and justice-oriented approaches to student support that move beyond deficit framings and towards institutional responsibility.

Although the primary focus of this research is higher education, the issues explored may resonate beyond this sector, including for disabled adults in general and LGBTQ+ young people. However, examining those wider connections is a task better carried forward by researchers and practitioners situated within those specific fields.

Structure of The Thesis

This thesis is organised into eight chapters, each of which builds on the previous to develop a sustained, critical, reflective engagement with the experiences of disabled-queer students in Scottish higher education. The structure reflects both the chronological development of the research process and the conceptual framework guiding the study. This thesis sets out to articulate the justification for the research, outline the methodological framework used to investigate the core questions and aims, present the findings, and reflect on their broader implications. The following section offers a summary

of each chapter, highlighting how they contribute to wider conversations around disabled-queer student experiences and underscoring the significance of this work within that body of literature.

Chapter One – Introduction

This chapter has set the stage for the study by outlining its central focus on the experiences of disabled-queer students, while highlighting the importance of centring student voices in both research and practice. It introduced the main research questions, which explore not only students' lived experiences but also the broader structural contexts shaping these. The chapter also introduced the qualitative, interview-based approach used in the study, and clarified research aims and objectives, as well as the study's underlying theory, scope, and limitations.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

This chapter critically reviews some of the literature across a range of areas that are relevant to the research topic and area: what is higher education; disabled student experiences; queer student experiences; conceptually, theoretically, and socially linking disability and queerness; the emerging field of disabled-queer student experiences; and 'the student experience'. Throughout these sections I highlight key gaps in current research. It also engages with key theoretical contributions from queer theory, crip theory, the social model of disability, and intersectionality, using these to frame the study and to identify the theoretical contributions of my study. Special attention is paid to the tendency within both policy and research to treat disability and sexuality as separate categories, as well as 'the student experience' being limited to the classroom.

Chapter Three – Methodology

The methodology chapter outlines the methodological approach, epistemological and ontological positioning, and research design of the study. It details the use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews and explains the reasoning behind the participant recruitment strategy, with a focus on centring self-identification. This chapter also engages in critical reflexivity, exploring my

positionality as a researcher, the ethical considerations involved, and the limitations and challenges of conducting research with marginalised student populations.

Chapter Four – The Road to University

This first data analysis chapter sets the stage for understanding the student journey by exploring the anticipatory experiences of disabled-queer students before they arrive on campus. Rather than beginning with university itself, I focus on the emotional, temporal, and practical labour that precedes enrolment. Drawing on participants' imagined ideas of university, the chapter shows how hopes for liberation and expression are tightly bound up with decisions to pursue higher education. Yet these hopeful imaginings often bump up against the realities of institutional inaccessibility, administrative delay, and uneven support. Through this dual focus on pre-arrival expectations and initial encounters with university life, this chapter showcases that 'the student experience' begins prior to entering the classroom, and that disabled-queer students must navigate a distinct and often demanding road to reach the university's front door. This chapter offers a critical foundation for those that follow, highlighting how early disparities shape the possibilities and limitations of university life for disabled-queer students.

Chapter Five – Am I Allowed?

Building on the previous chapter's exploration of anticipation and imagined possibility, this chapter turns toward what happens when those expectations collide with the realities of university life. Focusing on participants' experiences of (mis)fitting, doubt, and structural exclusion, this chapter examines how disabled-queer students negotiate their sense of fit, or at times lack thereof, within higher education. The chapter's title, *Am I Allowed?* captures more than a personal feeling, reflecting how participants encounter institutional boundaries around who is seen as legitimate or permissible within academic life.

Through narratives of internal questioning and external constraint, the chapter illuminates how queerness and disability are differentially recognised across campus spaces. Rather than framing misfitting as a personal deficit, this chapter foregrounds how normative student imaginaries and inaccessible systems shape disabled-queer students' everyday university lives. By tracing how identity is not only carried into but also (re)made within the university context, this chapter deepens the thesis's central argument, that disabled-queer students must navigate not only the demands of academic life but the terms of their recognition within it.

Chapter Six – Social Fit, Structural Friction

Following the anticipation and subsequent feelings of misfitting, this chapter turns to what comes next: how students navigate misfitting and attempt to (re)create spaces of (queer and disabled) connection. While dominant narratives frame university as a natural site of social integration, participants' experiences challenge this assumption, revealing that connection is neither automatic nor universal. Some students forged communities through student societies and activism; others navigated university on the periphery, highlighting how time, life circumstances, and identity shape access to student social life. Across accounts social fit emerges not as given, but as a contingent and uneven process, shaped by broader norms and expectations. This chapter argues that university social life often relies on the unpaid, emotional labour of those already marginalised. Disabled-queer students are not only navigating their own experiences of exclusion but are also frequently tasked with transforming the very spaces that exclude them.

Chapter Seven – In, Out, or Somewhere in Between

The final data analysis chapter explores how participants navigated decisions around disclosing their disabled and queer identities. It explores how disclosure, as participants describe it, is not a single, decisive moment but a continuous relational process shaped by environment. From seminar rooms to corridors, digital platforms to casual social conversations, participants navigated an ongoing dynamic of (in)visibility. Their accounts challenge understandings of disclosure as voluntary,

straightforward, or empowering. Instead, disclosure emerges as emotionally taxing, at times involuntary, and intricately tied to power, as shaped by assumptions about what is recognisable and appropriate in university life. This chapter argues that to understand disabled-queer experiences of disclosure, we must attend to how bodies and identities are read within uneven geographies of recognition. Participants' stories offer not only insight into the burdens of disclosure but also a deeper critique of the structural and cultural conditions that make such labour necessary in the first place.

Chapter Eight – Discussion and Conclusions

The final chapter brings together the key insights of the thesis, returning to the original aims and research questions. It reflects on the contributions the study makes to scholarship and practice, particularly in relation to queer-crip theory and reimagining higher education. It also outlines the limitations of the research and identifies possibilities for future research and practice.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter reviews academic literature and existing research to interrogate how disability, queerness, and their intersections are understood within higher education. Through this review I highlight how disabled and queer students are often treated as distinct populations in research and policy, while intersectional accounts of disabled-queer student experiences remain emergent. This study aims to foreground the complexities of these experiences, exploring the emotional, temporal, social, and structural labour that students undertake to navigate higher education. Drawing on queer-crip theory and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2002; McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013), my work challenges normative assumptions about *who* belongs in universities, *how* the student experience is framed, and what it means to be ‘a student’. The university is often imagined as a neutral or progressive space of learning and social mobility (Trowler, 2010; Marginson, 2016), yet it continues to be shaped by exclusionary histories and practices that privilege able-bodied, cis-heteronormative, and often white middle-class students (Ellis, 2009). At its core, this research seeks to ‘crip’ and ‘queer’ both the university and the student experience, making visible the norms that render some students out of place, while others are made hyper-visible or erased entirely (Ahmed and Swan, 2006). By critically engaging with existing scholarship, this chapter identifies both where the literature resonates with lived experience and where it falls short of capturing nuanced, intersectional realities. Situating the study within intersectional, queer-crip conversations, the review lays the foundation for the subsequent data analysis chapters. The overall aim is to contribute to a critical, queer-crip, intersectional understanding of higher education by centring the voices and realities of disabled-queer students.

This chapter situates the study within broader debates about higher education, student experience, and theoretical approaches. The chapter proceeds in four parts. First, it interrogates how universities are framed; not only in terms of what they do, but also who they are for, how they function,

and what they are imagined to be. Drawing on scholarship that critiques the structures, assumptions, and exclusions shaping higher education, this opening section establishes the conceptual foundation for exploring where and how disabled-queer students are positioned within these institutions. Secondly, it reviews research on disabled students' experiences in higher education, highlighting the limits of legal and accommodation-focused approaches and instead advocating for more nuanced, experiential understandings of disability as a social, political, and embodied identity (Shakespeare, 2013; Berghs *et al.*, 2019). Third, it turns to scholarship on LGBTQ+ students, focusing on issues of visibility and recognition (Ellis, 2009; Formby, 2017b). Analysing these literatures separately reflects not a belief that identities can be neatly compartmentalised, but rather the way research, policy, and institutional practice tend to treat them as distinct domains. This separation also enables a more precise discussion of how intersectionality operates across contexts, before moving to a combined analysis. The chapter then brings these strands together by reviewing literature that explicitly examines disabled-queer student experiences, situating this within intersectional and critical frameworks that view disability and queerness as co-constitutive and mutually shaping (Garland-Thomson, 2005; McRuer, 2006). Finally, the chapter concludes by reflecting on how 'the student experience' has been conceptualised across models, theories, and institutional frameworks. While models have advanced understanding of student life, they often rely on a somewhat fixed notion of the student. By contrast, this study approaches the 'student experience' as a fluid, intersectional, and contextually situated dynamic process shaped by identity, social environment, and institutional structure.

Research-based publications included in this review were identified through a combination of the University of Strathclyde's library and Google Scholar. Search terms included 'disability', 'LGBTQ+', 'student', 'queer', 'disabled-queer', 'student experience' and 'higher education', alongside their variants. These were combined in various ways to maximise the identification of relevant literature. Additional articles were sourced through searches of reference lists and via key journals (e.g., *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Teaching in Higher Education*) and university library services.

Although higher education literature has increasingly incorporated research on disability, gender, and sexuality, this review focuses on work relating specifically to student experiences to align with the aims and focus of this study.

What Is Higher Education? Whose Space Is It?

Higher education in the UK refers to a broad spectrum of post-secondary education, encompassing qualifications including undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs, occupational training, and continuing education (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2024). Yet, as Chawinga and Zozie (2016) argue, the role of higher education extends beyond teaching and learning outcomes or career preparation, as higher education influences a wide range of societal and personal dimensions spanning course curricula (see Martin et al., 2019), learning outcomes and prosperity (see Nusche, 2008; Caspersen et al., 2017; Hartikainen et al., 2019), staff experiences and attitudes (see Keashly and Neuman, 2010), and the culture of universities (see Dawson, 2023; Taylor et al., 2023).

Institutional priorities often emphasise metrics such as widening access, retention, post-graduation employment, and degree completion (Abes et al., 2007). These metrics can reflect historical assumptions about the ‘ideal student’ — young, neurotypical, able-bodied, white, cis-heteronormative — thereby communicating who fits and who does not (Puwar, 2004; Leathwood and Read, 2009; Reay, 2018b), as well as overlooking broader, and often messier, aspects of university and student life that intersect with various aspects of self (Davis et al., 2004; Lairio et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013; Munyuki and Vincent, 2017). Framing the university experience primarily through these ideals and metrics risks narrowing the definition of ‘the student’ to those who already fit the dominant race, age, classed, gendered, and able-bodied mould. Students who diverge from this norm may be seen as lacking or ‘at risk’, despite universities’ stated commitments to equality, diversity, and inclusion. These commitments are often presented as markers that ‘inclusion is here’, signalling progressive success even when the experiences of marginalised students tell a different story (Dawson, 2023).

The UK higher education sector has positioned itself as a driver of inclusion, opportunity, and social mobility, particularly through widening access policies, legal frameworks for equality, and public investment in education. In Scotland, this image is further reinforced through distinct policy frameworks: four-year undergraduate degree, free tuition for Scottish-domiciled students, and an emphasis on quality enhancement over competitive league tables. While Scotland may be framed as a socially democratic and progressive context for higher education, this can lend itself to a policy exceptionalism where the claim of inclusion obscures persistent (intersecting) inequalities (Taylor, 2012, 2013). Following Taylor (2012, 2013), it is crucial to understand that inclusion in higher education is not only about access to the space, the course, or the support services, but also simply being within the cultural, spatial, and emotional fabric of the university. Universities are affective institutions, shaped by histories and atmospheres that tell students who belongs and who does not. As such, this research treats the university not only as an institution, but as an imagined space, shaped by personal, political, historical, and cultural discourses about progress, knowledge, and fit. Understanding whose space universities are, and how that space is experienced by disabled-queer students, requires attention to both structural and experiential realities.

Queers and Crips in Universities

Before going further, it would be useful to outline what I mean by disability and queerness. Rather than being singular, stable identities, both queerness and disability are experienced in diverse, embodied, and individually felt ways. I use the terms 'disability' and 'queerness' as umbrella terms for a wide range of categories.

For the purpose of this thesis, I define queer as an umbrella term encompassing diverse sexualities and gender identities that exist outside of cisgender and heterosexuality. This includes, but is not limited to, identities related to sexuality (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, queer) and gender (e.g., transgender, genderqueer, non-binary) (Renn, 2010). I adopt queer not only as a descriptive category but also as an interrogative use of language that challenges normative frameworks around

gender and sexuality (Warner, 1993; Jagose, 1996). While acknowledging the term's contested histories, I choose it here for its inclusivity, fluidity, and capacity to foreground the instability of sexuality and gender categories.

Regarding disability, I draw on the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2014), which distinguishes between impairment (typically understood as a physical, sensory, cognitive, or mental difference of the body or mind) and disability (the social and structural barriers that restrict full participation in society). This contrasts with the medical model of disability, which locates disability primarily within individual bodies and seeks to 'fix' or 'cure' them. While the medical model has been criticised for its deficit framing, the social model offers an explicitly political account, positioning disability as a product of societal organisation rather than inherent personal tragedy. For this study, the social model provides an analytical lens that allows me to interrogate how higher education structures, policies, and cultures can disable students, regardless of their individual impairments. At the same time, some disability scholars have argued that impairment itself is not entirely separate from social processes, as the meanings, classifications, and lived experiences of impairment are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts (Shakespeare and Watson, 2002; Thomas, 2007). I remain attentive to critiques of the social model that call for greater recognition of lived experiences (Shakespeare and Watson, 2002), and I incorporate these nuances into my interpretation of participants' accounts. In the context of disability, this category spans a broad spectrum of experiences, including but, again, not limited to, ADHD, blindness or low vision, deafness/hard of hearing, learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), mental health conditions, physical disabilities, and social, speech or language differences (e.g., autism).

In both cases, I adopt a self-identification approach to these categories. Participants are recognised as queer *and* disabled if they identify themselves as such, regardless of whether their identities fit formal diagnostic, legal, or institutional definitions. This approach is essential for three reasons. First, it aligns with the study's commitment to centring participants' lived experiences and

self-understandings, rather than imposing externally constructed labels. Second, it recognises that institutional recognition of identities, particularly in the domains of sexuality, gender, and disability, is often contingent, uneven, and politically fraught. Third, it acknowledges the intersectional nature of identity, where lived realities resist neat categorisation. By taking self-identification as the starting point, my thesis respects participants' own language and conceptual frames while situating these within wider theoretical and policy contexts. This definitional framework is therefore not a neutral prelude, but a deliberate methodological choice underpinning the thesis. It enables a focus on how disabled-queer students navigate and negotiate their identities within Scottish higher education, in ways that engage both with structural constraints and with the personal and political meanings participants attach to their lives.

Legal and Policy Context: Disability and Sexuality as Protected Characteristics

Within a UK legal context, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity are recognised as 'protected characteristics' under the Equality Act 2010. This legislation imposes a duty on public institutions to implement reasonable measures to prevent discrimination and harassment against individuals based on these identities. Disability is broadly conceptualised to encompass physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental health impairments, with legal protections primarily oriented towards facilitating access and reasonable adjustments within educational settings. Sexual orientation includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual identities, aiming to safeguard these groups from exclusion and prejudice. Significantly, gender reassignment, encompassing trans and non-binary identities, is also protected under the Act, requiring educational institutions to recognise and accommodate diverse gender identities in policy and practice. Nonetheless, 2025 judiciary from the UK Supreme Court's interpretation has 'clarified' that the protected characteristic of 'sex' is to be understood as biological sex, with gender reassignment protections primarily extended to those undergoing or who have undergone gender transition. This judicial interpretation constrains the scope of legal protections available to trans and non-binary individuals, thereby allowing for persistent challenges regarding their inclusion and recognition within higher education contexts. Consequently,

while the Equality Act provides a formal framework for protecting gender-diverse students, these legal developments underscore the necessity for universities to pursue proactive and comprehensive strategies that transcend minimal legal compliance, fostering affirming environments responsive to the lived experiences of trans and non-binary students.

Universities may demonstrate compliance through, for example, equality, diversity, and inclusion statements, yet institutional cultures and everyday interactions can fall short. For example, disability support services tend to focus on individualised accommodations rather than addressing systemic ableism (Woolf and De Bie, 2022), while support for queer students may be limited to social spaces or specific awareness campaigns, again, without broader structural change (Raja *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, the intersection of disability and queerness presents unique challenges that are overlooked by policy frameworks that treat these identities separately. Disabled-queer students may face compounded discrimination, navigating assumptions about both their bodies and sexual identities simultaneously. These legal protections, while crucial, do not always translate into practice, as such complexities require more nuanced institutional responses.

The Equality Act 2010, alongside widening participation initiatives, has played a crucial role in enabling greater access and visibility for these groups within universities (Kendall, 2017). Recent data indicates a significant increase in the number of disabled students in UK higher education. In 2023/24, over 2.9 million students were enrolled in UK higher education institutions. Among them, around 514,310 (18%) students disclosed a disability, a figure that has steadily increased in recent years (The Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022; House of Commons Library, 2024). However, disclosure rates can vary due to factors such as stigma, awareness of support services, and the perceived relevance of one's disability to academic performance (Kerschbaum *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, while official statistics provide a baseline, the actual number of disabled students may be higher, emphasising the need for continued efforts to create an environment where students feel comfortable and supported in disclosing disabilities.

Quantifying the number of LGBTQ+ students in higher education presents challenges as sexuality and gender identity are not always captured in institutional data. However, broader societal trends offer insight. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2020, approximately 8% of 16- to 24-year-olds in England and Wales identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, a figure that has been on the rise since 2014. In Scotland, the 2022 census found that 4% (183,860) of people aged 16 and over identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, with 0.44% (19,970) identifying as trans or having a trans history. Further, a UCAS report from 2021, in collaboration with Stonewall, revealed that each year, around 40,000 applicants to UK higher education institutions identify as LGBTQ+ (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2021).

I point to these statistics to show that disabled and LGBTQ+ people are not just appearing on campus, but are holding space within it. They are not marginal presences to be accommodated after the fact, but are already there, shaping university life through their presence and participation. The growing presence of disabled and queer students underscores the necessity of inclusive policies, practices, and research that reflect their experiences. However, I also recognise that these statistics cannot be taken at face value. Identity and experiences are fluid, contingent, and intersectional, and I recognise that some people may choose not to disclose a disability or may not feel safe claiming an LGBTQ+ identity within institutional contexts. In this sense, the statistics are incomplete. While statistics may tell us *who is present*, they do not tell us *how* they experience university. Msibi (2013) argues that universities often rely on a numbers game to represent and claim institutional diversity. However, statistics do not capture the everyday experiences of navigating campus life, nor the anticipatory, social, emotional and structural labour required to claim space as a disabled and queer student.

The following sections explore how these questions have been taken up in research on disabled students and queer students, as well as within the growing body of work that seeks to understand their intersection. By tracing these literatures, I aim to critically engage with how higher

education is negotiated by students whose bodies, identities, and being challenge the university's dominant norms.

Disability and Higher Education: From Legal Compliance to Lived Experience

The Equality Act 2010 requires UK universities to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled students, embedding inclusion within institutional policy. This legal compliance has been instrumental in widening access for disabled students (Troiano, 2003; Kendall, 2017; Aguirre et al., 2021), driving universities to implement formal policies and procedures for inclusion, for example via disability services. These services are tasked with implementing individualised accommodations, from exam adjustments and assistive technologies to alternative teaching formats, forming the core infrastructure through which disability inclusion is operationalised.

While necessary, this infrastructure remains grounded in a materialistic approach to disability (Nichols and Quaye, 2008; Goodley, 2013); one that positions disabilities and impairments as problems to be 'solved' through targeted, material intervention. In this framing, inclusion becomes a logistical, material matter, or something universities can deliver through the right combination of compliance protocols. Such an approach does important work in facilitating access; however, it also risks reducing disability to an issue of accommodation alone. In this way, disability, and by extension disabled students, are positioned as the object of institutional examination and intervention rather than as producers of knowledge. This orientation is reflected in much of the empirical literature, which tends to focus on structural barriers and how universities can enact material inclusion and access (Hillier et al., 2018, 2019; Tarconish et al., 2023). Material inclusion has been identified across studies, for example, the importance of accessible buildings (Vogel *et al.*, 2008), inclusive assessment practices (Baker et al., 2012), and assistive technologies (Cox *et al.*, 2017). However, such approaches often reinforce a narrow definition of access, prioritising physical or functional entry over cultural, social, and epistemic inclusion.

Disability inclusion can be entangled with local histories, politics, and material conditions. Chataika (2007) explored the experiences of disabled students in Zimbabwe, revealing how participation was constrained by limited support services but also by broader socio-political factors, including the absence of legislation, lack of coordinated disability activism, and limited political will. Building on this work, Bengano (2024) provides a more focused account of how students with physical and visual disabilities navigate the built environment of a Zimbabwean university. Using mobile interviews and photovoice, Bengano shows how inaccessible architecture, uneven roads and paths, and inadequate pathways create daily navigational labour, reinforcing how physical design can produce exclusion even within institutions that nominally uphold inclusive principles. These studies highlight that inclusion cannot be reduced to individual accommodations or universal policy commitments, but rather that it emerges through the interaction of cultural norms, political conditions, financial resources, and physical infrastructures. These insights illuminate how global inequalities shape the conditions under which disabled students experience university, underscoring that (mis)fitting is produced in the relationship between bodies and environments, and that students' emotional and logistical labour often arises from institutional structures rather than resulting from individual impairment. A similar dynamic is evident in the UK. Wertans and Burch (2022), in their study of disabled students across several UK campuses, show how institutional responses often frame access as partial or conditional, with one participant describing their accommodations as 'better than nothing'. Here, access is shaped less by students' lived experiences of university life and more by institutional disablism expressed through compliance-driven interpretations of legislation. This further emphasises that inclusion is not guaranteed by policy alone, but requires sustained engagement with the everyday material, cultural, and affective conditions that shape disabled students' lives. Shakespeare (2013) warns of the risks of reducing disability to an institutional category, while Puar (2017) challenges the ways in which disability is constructed as something static and apolitical, rather than as socially embedded and intimately connected to time, environment, affect, and power. These critiques draw upon the social model of disability, which shifts attention from individual bodies

towards disabling environments, highlighting how power, time, and normativity structure disabled life. These approaches demand more than compliance, instead focusing attention on how the university itself, such as its buildings, pedagogies, and expectations, may reproduce ableist norms. From this perspective, disability is not just a matter of support needs, but shapes how a student can inhabit the university. As Ahmed (2012) argues, diversity policies often name commitments without transforming underlying structures. For example, Brown and Ramlackhan (2022), via a constructivist inquiry carried out with disabled academics, showed how neoliberal demands for productivity marginalise disabled voices. Moreover, Gibson et al. (2024) report that disabled students in English universities feel inclusion policies do not sufficiently address the ableism across learning and assessments. Therefore, reasonable adjustments may allow disabled students to participate, but they rarely alter the norms around what counts as success. Disability services, while crucial, are rarely positioned to challenge the deeper affective foundations of the university, a limitation also identified in professional contexts where compliance-driven inclusion leaves ableist norms and expectations fundamentally intact (Golightley, 2020). Even when structurally included, disabled students remain socially and epistemically marginalised (Wertans and Burch, 2022; Woolf and De Bie, 2022). Universities may offer access (e.g., lecture recordings, alternative assessments) yet still uphold norms of independence, rigour, and emotional detachment that exclude disabled ways of being.

Extending spatial analyses of disability, Slater and Jones (2021) foreground toilets as a critical infrastructure of participation, arguing that access to toilets is inseparable from access to wider spaces. Drawing on research with trans, queer, and disabled participants, they show how signage, particularly the International Symbol of Access (ISA), does not simply denote accessibility, but actively (re)produces and polices the borders of disability through a public imaginary of what disability is 'supposed' to look like. Rather than functioning as a neutral marker of inclusion, they argue that the ISA frequently operates as a mechanism of surveillance. Their participants described their toilet use as open to judgement, particularly when impairments were non-visible, or when access depended on gatekeepers, keys, or discretionary decisions about legitimacy. In this sense, 'accessible' provision

becomes conditional and affectively charged, requiring precautionary planning, justification, and the management of (disabled-queer) scrutiny, forms of everyday labour that are rarely recognised in institutional accounts of inclusion. Slater and Jones's analysis also sharpens critique of the compliance-oriented framing of accessibility, showing how the appearance of access can generate institutional 'happy affects' (Fritsch, 2013) by signalling that EDI obligations have been met, even when material access remains partial or exclusionary. Crucially, they situate these dynamics within capitalism, arguing that accessibility is persistently constrained by its potential to be lucrative, and that disabled access to space continues to be positioned as charitable rather than as a matter of justice. Read in this way, the accessible toilet becomes emblematic of a broader politics of conditional belonging in higher education, where inclusion is often offered in ways that remain unevenly liveable across disabled intersecting identities (Slater and Jones, 2021).

Indeed, research has increasingly drawn attention to the emotional and bureaucratic labour disabled students must perform. Students are often expected to disclose and justify their disabilities repeatedly, a process that can be exhausting, strategic, and even retraumatising (Price, 2011; Liasidou and Liasidou, 2025). Students with invisible or fluctuating conditions often describe not being believed or taken seriously, instead facing suspicion and dismissal (Kerschbaum et al., 2017). In response to these exclusions, authors have called for disability research in higher education to move beyond questions of access and attend more deeply to lived experiences of emotion and relationality (Miller et al., 2019; Miller and Smith, 2021). A growing body of scholarship answers this call, positioning disability not simply as a static identity but as a generative, lived relation to the world, thereby highlighting how disability is shaped by institutional norms, temporalities, spatial arrangements, and affective climates (Titchkosky, 2011; McRuer, 2013; Olsen *et al.*, 2020). The re-conceptualisation of disabilities foregrounds embodiment and resists narrow medicalised framings, but instead situates disability within wider social, relational, and institutional contexts (Golightley, 2019). From this perspective, access is not the final goal but the starting point for a deeper and ongoing negotiation. These perspectives foreground how disability inclusion cannot be fully achieved through material

adjustments alone. Gaining access to lecture halls, libraries, or assessments does not mark the end point of institutional accessibility, but could mark the beginning of a more complex negotiation which disabled students must continually navigate once entered. Disability, in this sense, is not a static identity to be managed, but an ongoing relation to the university that unfolds across time and space.

Despite increasing focus on disabled students' lived experiences, some have argued that this work still lags behind that on other marginalised identities in higher education (Nichols and Quaye, 2008; Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012). Existing literature focuses on specific diagnostic categories (e.g., autism, dyslexia) and how disability services can respond to disability-specific needs (Myers and Bastian, 2010; Meyer *et al.*, 2012; Grimes *et al.*, 2019). While valuable, this work can sometimes reinforce medicalised understandings of disability and rarely focuses on how the university itself produces exclusion through everyday operations. As Evans and Zhu (2023) note, disability is often treated as a deficit located within the individual, rather than as an interaction between the student and institutional structures. This focus often arises because institutional research and policy tend to prioritise compliance with legal frameworks and the provision of accommodations, rather than critically exploring how the everyday anticipations, structures, and cultures of universities themselves create barriers. As a result, scholarship may overlook the ways in which curriculum design, teaching practices, physical spaces, and social norms collectively shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion for disabled students.

Looking beyond material inclusion matters, not because these forms of access are unimportant, but because they are often treated as endpoints rather than entry points. When disability is reduced to adjustments like exam accommodations or lecture recordings, more complex, situated, lived experiences are sidelined. Most notably, there is still relatively limited research on the lived experiences of disabled students, and particularly how they *feel* about and *navigate* the university on a day-to-day basis. In other words, statistics and literature may tell us that disabled students are present, yet, it offers less insight into how they experience and negotiate university

environments in everyday practice. Statistics and literature does not account for the crip labour (e.g., anticipation of being a disabled student, reaching out to disability services), the fluidity of disability (e.g., transitions of dis/ability, fluctuating symptoms), social cues, pedagogical styles, or institutional expectations that shape whether students fit. Nor do they explain how disabled students cope with environments that simultaneously welcome and marginalise them. This study responds to those gaps by attending to disability as a fluid, lived, relational, and affective experience that is shaped by both institutional norms and students' own practices of 'getting by'. For many disabled students, the experience of university involves not just gaining access to a classroom but negotiating everyday encounters, whether personal or structural. These realities could suggest a need to reframe understandings of disability beyond material or policy issues, as a lived process that unfolds within, and sometimes against, the university's dominant logics. Understanding the student experience through this lens opens up space to explore how disability is lived and contested within the everyday life of the university.

The next section builds on these insights by examining literature relating to queer students in higher education. While often studied separately, queer and disabled students face overlapping experiences around fit, disclosure, and institutional recognition, as well as distinct divergences. These intersections will be explored more fully in later sections, but first, I turn to the development of research on queer student experiences within higher education.

Queer Students in Higher Education: Visibility, Risk, and Institutional Limits

Research into LGBTQ+ students' experiences in higher education has grown, shifting from early deficit-focused narratives to more nuanced explorations of identity development (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2016; Renn, 2022). While earlier studies often positioned queer students as 'at risk' (D'Augelli and Hersberger, 1993), for example, of discrimination and mental health challenges, more recent work recognises the agency that queer students deploy in navigating university life (Keenan, 2018; Marzetti, 2018). Rather than focusing solely on victimhood or harm, this body of work

increasingly explores how students actively construct queer lives on campus through activism, friendship, and self-articulation (Nicolazzo, 2016; Garvey and Dolan, 2021). Falconer and Taylor (2017), for instance, describe universities as queer transitional spaces of becoming. However, this hopeful framing exists in tension with scholarship that continues to document exclusion, harassment, and normative pressures (Rankin, 2005; Rankin *et al.*, 2010; Blockett, 2017; Duran, 2019). The resulting literature paints a complex picture. Universities are often imagined as spaces where students can ‘be themselves’, but this promise can be undercut by misrecognition and inequality when arriving at campus. US researchers have examined queer students’ navigation of campus climate, disclosure, and inclusion (Garvey *et al.*, 2015; Renn, 2022), with similar experiences being reported by South African queer students (Msibi, 2013). Msibi’s (2013) study of South African higher education reveals how institutional transformation agendas often prioritised race and gender equity while leaving sexuality largely unaddressed. Drawing on student and staff narratives, Msibi shows how homophobia remains pervasive across campus spaces, operating through silence and the framing of sexuality as a private concern. Msibi also argues that homophobia remains pervasive and insufficiently acknowledged within and across campus spaces. Building on this critique, Munyuki and Vincent’s (2017) study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students’ experiences of university accommodation in South Africa explores what it means to feel ‘at home’ on campus. Drawing on qualitative interviews, they show how residence spaces can be sites of queer surveillance, concealment, and emotional labour. Participants described carefully managing (in)visibility, moderating behaviour, and anticipating hostility to remain safe within student accommodation. While some students found moments of connection, these were fragile and uneven, underscoring that feeling ‘at home’ is conditional rather than guaranteed. Together, these studies demonstrate how inclusion is not secured through institutional access alone, but is lived and negotiated through everyday spatial, social, and affective encounters.

Yet a body of UK-based research offers important insights into more localised experiences, which are essential for understanding how queer student life unfolds within the specific legal, cultural, and institutional contexts of the UK. Attending to the UK context is crucial, as patterns of

marginalisation, policy protections, and institutional cultures differ from those in other national settings, meaning findings from international research cannot be assumed to translate directly. Ellis (2009), in a wide-ranging survey of 42 UK universities, found that LGBTQ+ students frequently encountered verbal abuse, physical assault, and property damage, often leading to university campuses feeling unsafe for queer students. Although Ellis's quantitative work is useful for mapping broad trends, it leaves underexplored the intersectional, affective, and contextual complexities of queer student life.

Later work addresses this gap through qualitative approaches. Formby (2017b), through UK focus group research, illustrates how heteronormativity and cisnormativity are embedded in everyday university life, from accommodations, to social spaces, to curricula. Formby's participants describe subtle but persistent forms of exclusion by cisgender and heterosexual peers, including sexuality and gender assumptions in class discussions, invisibility of queer identities in reading lists, and microaggressions in student accommodations. These findings highlight how subtle intolerance shapes students' sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing. These findings are echoed in Keenan's (2018) photo-elicitation study where UK LGBTQ+ students reported how heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions are faced in everyday, causal encounters, revealing that even when policies exist to support LGBTQ+ inclusion, these do not necessarily translate into lived reality. Keenan's study also captures how queer students are made to feel out-of-place when they attempt to assert non-normative identities, for instance, through proposing queer research topics or using non-binary pronouns. Building on these concerns with everyday spatialities, Mearns et al. (2020) qualitatively explore trans individuals' experiences of a university campus in northern England. Their sample was made up of undergraduate and postgraduate participants, as well as some staff members. In their study they explored how bathrooms, accommodation, classrooms, and social spaces can become sites of misrecognition, surveillance, and avoidance. Central to their findings is Doan's (2010) notion of the 'tyranny of gender', through which trans students navigate passing, bodily scrutiny, and the management of hostility. One participant described routinely using the disabled toilet because no

gender-neutral facilities were available (Mearns *et al.*, 2020), thus reflecting upon institutional design choices that render both trans and disabled bodies ‘exceptions’ to be accommodated on the margins (Slater and Jones, 2021). In this sense, the disabled toilet becomes a catch-all space for anyone who does not fit normative gendered (and ableist) expectations, highlighting how the absence of inclusive infrastructure produces discomfort, misrecognition, and a sense of being out of place. Importantly, Mearns *et al.* demonstrate that these experiences are produced through campus spatial arrangements, with different environments facilitating different forms of exclusion. Their work underscores how institutional cultures and their spatial expressions shape the emotional and physical labour required simply to move through university environments. This resonates with Slater and Jones’s (2021) queer-crip analysis of toilet in/exclusion, which demonstrates how toilets function as politically charged spaces where access is routinely shaped through surveillance and contested legitimacy. Importantly, they argue that the International Symbol of Access (ISA) often delivers a ‘false promise’ of accessibility, not only because material access is frequently restricted, but because the sign itself can invite policing of who is entitled to occupy the space. Read alongside Mearns *et al.* (2020), this highlights how trans students’ navigation of campus infrastructures can become routed through disability-marked spaces that are themselves conditional and vulnerable to scrutiny. Together these studies explore lived experience, highlighting a recurring tension of institutional policies signalling diversity and inclusion, where these values often fail to materialise in day-to-day university life.

This disjuncture between policy and practice is especially stark in Marzetti’s (2018) study of LGBTQ+ students at a Scottish university. While the institution adhered to equality legislation and outwardly supported diversity, students reported pervasive queerphobia, institutional inaction, and a sense of carrying the burden for fostering inclusivity. This raises critical questions about the limits of legal compliance and performative inclusion, inviting reflection as to how institutions might better share the labour of transformation. Marzetti’s participants recounted not only verbal abuse and social alienation but also structural silence as in institutional failure to proactively name or disrupt queerphobic environments. Crucially, Marzetti also engages with intersectionality, highlighting how

sexuality and gender identity are experienced in relation to race, class, and mental health, and offering a much-needed bridge between queer studies and wider intersecting inequality work. These findings complicate the idea that inclusion can be legislated into existence, revealing how everyday university life can remain hostile despite legal compliance. Taulke-Johnson (2010) similarly brings an intersectional and geographical lens to his study of seventeen gay men in the UK, framing university as an escape from restrictive, homophobic home environments. Taulke-Johnson's participants' capacity to choose more 'liberating' institutions was shaped by class backgrounds. Working-class students, in particular, reported limited choices and heightened constraints with respect to which university to attend, illustrating awareness of classed institutions. Taulke-Johnson's findings thus highlight how queer working-class students must negotiate university choices in ways that are simultaneously classed and queer, shaping both their anticipatory decisions and lived experiences of higher education.

Taken together, these studies offer valuable insights into the institutional climate for queer students. Yet there are notable absences. There remains a tendency to foreground harm, often at the expense of recognising queer joy, resistance, and community-building, thereby framing queer students with respect to marginalisation. Moreover, queer student literature often reproduces a flattened understanding of LGBTQ+ identity. 'Queer' is frequently treated as a unified category, with little attention to intragroup difference. Certain forms of queerness — white, cisgender, middle-class, gay male — are more readily legible and institutionally recognised than others (e.g., trans, non-binary, asexual, racialised, or disabled identities). Visibility, in this context, is not evenly distributed or equally safe. As such, queer disclosure is frequently strategic, conditional, and shaped by an awareness of legibility and risk (Miller, 2015a, 2015b). Students may choose to remain closeted in particular contexts (e.g., residence halls, classrooms), not out of internalised shame but due to social calculation and perceived safety (Miller, 2015a, 2015b). Another underexamined area concerns students' pre-arrival expectations. Falconer and Taylor (2017) conceptualise universities as queer transitional spaces, where academic growth intersects with personal becoming, experimentation, and identity development. Crucially, they argue that the capacity to experience university in this transformative way is shaped by

social and economic privilege. Middle-class students are positioned to treat higher education as a site for personal growth and exploration, whereas working-class and other marginalised students may encounter structural constraints that limit these opportunities. This insight highlights how notions of transformation are not universal but entwined with classed inequalities, foregrounding the need to examine how intersecting social positions shape students' anticipatory and lived experiences. Within such imaginaries, higher education becomes more than a place of learning, additionally being imbued with the promise of (queer) possibility. The imagined potential of university life can be especially powerful for prospective students who have experienced marginalisation or constraint elsewhere. Queer students may therefore enter higher education carrying hopes that the university will offer room for transformation, community, and affirmation, where previously suppressed or fragmented aspects of self can be explored more openly. This anticipatory investment in the university as a space of liberation and self-realisation reveals the affective charge that surrounds higher education within queer imaginaries. While existing research has illuminated how these anticipations can collide with institutional exclusions, there remains scope to pause on how such hopes are shaped through intersecting identities and inequalities, and how these dynamics complicate the imagined promise of higher education. Reggiani et al. (2024) highlight that LGBT+ academics and PhD students in STEM face unique challenges due to the intersectionality of their identities, where experiences of marginalisation are compounded by factors such as race, class, and disability. These intersecting identities and inequalities influence their visibility, experiences of discrimination, and access to support within academic environments. This underscores the need for policies and practices that recognise and address the complexities of these intersecting identities in fostering an inclusive and supportive academic experience for all students.

In summary, the literature on queer students in higher education has matured from pathologising roots to a more situated, lived experience approach, paying attention to student agency, space, and embodiment. Yet it still carries certain limitations, namely, an emphasis on harm, a tendency to generalise across queer identities, and a lack of intersectional nuance. There is a need for

research that explores not only exclusion, but also how students build queer worlds within the university through friendship, activism, or quiet refusal.

Having explored how disability and sexuality are each constructed within higher education, the next section turns to considering how these identities intersect. Rather than treating disability and sexuality as discrete or additive categories, I draw on the framework of intersectionality to examine how they co-constitute lived experience. I first outline the conceptual foundations of intersectionality, a framework that has been vital in analysing the interlocking systems of power, identity, and oppression. I then turn to looking at some scholarship on the intersection of queerness and disability, offering a more relational and layered account of what it means to be a disabled-queer student in higher education.

Intersectionality, Lived Complexity, and the Limits of Additive Models

Intersectionality has become a vital conceptual and methodological tool for understanding how multiple and intersecting forms of inequality, systems, and identity co-constitute one another. First introduced by Crenshaw (1991) to describe how Black women experience racism and sexism as interlocking rather than separate forms of oppression, the term has since expanded to encompass a wider set of analytic concerns. Hill Collins (2002) advanced this work by framing intersectionality as a 'matrix of domination', emphasising how systems of oppression, such as race, class, and gender, interlock and shape lived experience. Intersectionality is not simply about the coexistence of multiple identities but about how those identities are constructed in and through systems of power. As such, it functions both as a theoretical lens and as a methodological stance that demands attentiveness to complexity, context, and relationality. This perspective offers a crucial critique of additive models of identity, treating categories such as 'queer' and 'disabled' as discrete and stackable categories. In higher education research, this manifests in studies that examine disabled students *or* queer students, with limited attention to the ways in which these categories overlap, interact, and transform one another. Such additive approaches risk flattening identity into a checklist, overlooking how identity

categories are not simply cumulative, but are structurally and socially distinctive, creating intersecting inequalities. These combinations are lived at the intersection of recognisability and erasure, inclusion and exclusion, and are shaped by how institutions perceive and respond to forms of difference. Intersectionality offers a way to understand how multiple marginalisations are experienced simultaneously and relationally. For students, this might affect who they feel safe talking to, how they are perceived in classroom spaces, or whether they feel recognised at all. The intersections of race, age, class, gender identity, nationality, and religion can further shape these dynamics, making certain students more visible, more vulnerable, and/or more excluded. As Collins (2015) reminds us, intersectionality is not only about identity, but about power and how institutions structure access, recognition, and participation.

Scholars have increasingly argued for an intersectional approach to understanding student experiences in higher education, recognising that categories are not discrete but mutually constitutive. Msibi (2013) calls for a queer approach that addresses the interconnectedness of discriminatory structures rather than treating them as separate domains. Such arguments align with Ahmed's (2012) conceptual work on institutional affect, which helps to explain *why* such patterns persist. Ahmed explains how the discomfort and frustration expressed by marginalised groups are frequently reframed as individual sensitivities rather than institutional effects, shifting responsibility away from universities themselves. Puar (2017) extends this further, highlighting how power, embodiment, and identity operate through complex relations rather than fixed categories.

Bringing these threads together, intersectionality pushes student experience research beyond identity labels and towards an analysis of lived and structural complexity. It invites us to ask how certain students shift between visible and invisible, and how materiality shapes their presence within the university. Intersectionality does not simply add another lens, it fundamentally alters the questions we ask about power, recognition, and fit. Despite its analytical richness, intersectionality remains underused in higher education research (Kutscher and Tuckwiller, 2019), particularly in relation to

queer and disabled students (Meadows-Haworth, 2023). While policies may acknowledge multiple 'protected characteristics', literature continues to isolate identity categories or treat them as comparable variables, rather than interlocking systems (Kutscher and Tuckwiller, 2019). This creates a gap in our understanding of how students who live at the nexus of multiple marginalities negotiate the university, not only structurally but emotionally, socially, and imaginatively. This study seeks to address that gap by foregrounding intersectionality as both theory and method. In doing so, it refuses to treat disabled-queer experience as an add-on to existing categories. Instead, it explores how such identities emerge inside, outside, through, and against institutional norms, shaping how students imagine, inhabit, and reshape the university.

The following section outlines the conceptual and empirical rationale for bringing disability and queerness into conversation. These are not arbitrarily selected identity categories, but ones that are deeply interconnected through theoretical, social, and academic linkages. Theoretically, both are framed as sites of non-normativity that challenge dominant ideals of the body, identity and capability. Socially, disabled and queer individuals are frequently subject to overlapping forms of marginalisation, exclusion, and regulatory surveillance. Empirically, growing bodies of research have begun to explore how these identities intersect in lived experience, though such work remains limited.

The Ties Between Disability and Queerness: Queer-Crip Theoretical, Social, and Academic Linkages

Disability and queerness are both expansive, socially constructed identity categories that encompass a wide range of lived experiences and identities (Sherry, 2004; Renn, 2010; Berger, 2013). These categories are inherently fluid, meaning that identification with them shifts across context, place, space, and time, challenging any reduction to fixed or static definitions (Abrams and Abes, 2021). Disability and queerness are umbrella terms reflecting the complexity and plurality of identification, with each individually shaped by their unique personal, social, and historical contexts. The proximity of disability and queerness is also echoed in the sharded social and historical realities of those living at the intersection of these identities. For example, the HIV/AIDS epidemic foregrounded the

entanglement of disability and queerness by making visible the medicalisation and stigmatisation of queer bodies (Clare, 2015). HIV/AIDS, as both a disability and a condition that disproportionately affected queer communities, became a site where these identities collided under the weight of public fear and institutional neglect. This historical context illuminates how queerness and disability can be socially linked and experienced in interlocking ways. A further point of convergence lies in the shared social practice of coming out, which operates as a key mechanism for both queer and disabled people to be recognised as such, as well as a self-actualisation process (Rockman, 2013; Clare, 2015). As Samuels (2003, p. 233) notes, there are ‘discursive and practical connections between coming out — in all the meanings of the term — as queer and as disabled’. This disclosure is entangled with social expectations, power dynamics, and of *proving* one’s identity. This shared experience deepens our understanding of the social linkages between these identities. Moreover, both groups frequently experience exclusion from dominant narratives of success, productivity, and normalcy, narratives that are particularly entrenched within higher education, as explained above.

Beyond shared social construction, disability and queerness are conceptually and theoretically intertwined. McRuer (2006, p. 31) argues ‘Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality’. Building on Rich’s (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality, McRuer’s crip theory introduces the intersection of disability and queerness by foregrounding the idea of compulsory able-bodiedness, highlighting how normative assumptions about ability and sexuality are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The structures underpinning heterosexuality and able-bodiedness mirror one another, and both rely on an implicit opposition to their respective ‘other’. The structure of these identity categories is strikingly similar. To be able-bodied is to be free from disability, just as to be heterosexual is to be free from queerness (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013). This duality is not coincidental. These categories are co-constituted within dominant cultural narratives that position and privilege the able-bodied, heterosexual subject as the norm. To be legible as a ‘normal’ subject is to be simultaneously heterosexual and able-bodied. Queer and disabled bodies therefore share a structural relationship to

normativity. They are positioned as 'other', and often subject to erasure, pathologisation, or panic. Both identities thus not only deviate from dominant norms but actively disrupt and unsettle them. Additionally, both compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality, McRuer argues, produce normative expectations that structure social life. Expectations that bodies be able, productive, self-sufficient, and heterosexually oriented are dominant. In McRuer's work, 'able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things' (McRuer, 2006, p. 1). The power of this formulation lies in showing how able-bodiedness and heterosexuality are not just personal attributes but social mandates, backed by institutions, language, and spatial arrangements. Theoretical frameworks, such as queer theory and crip theory, reveal the cultural mechanisms through which disability and queerness are marginalised, and, crucially, how these mechanisms operate in tandem (McRuer, 2002; Kafer, 2013). Kafer (2013) further deepens this framework by introducing a crip futurity, the idea of imagining alternative worlds beyond the ableist, heteronormative status quo. Kafer's work resists the tendency to frame disabled or queer lives as lives of lack or tragedy, and instead reorients attention toward relational, political, and imaginative modes of being. Rather than treating disability as an individual deficit or queerness as a private identity, Kafer emphasises the structural and material conditions that shape whose futures are seen as possible.

The links between disability and queerness are also evident in empirical research. While earlier work may have touched on aspects of disability and queerness, it is with McRuer's (2006) articulation of crip theory that more sustained theoretical attention to their intersection emerged. Since then, a growing body of research has begun to explore how disabled-queer individuals navigate overlapping systems of ableism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity across different social contexts. Yet, even within intersectional frameworks, there is a persistent tendency to explore disability and queerness as separate identity strands, rather than as interwoven dimensions of experience. This analytical separation has resulted in an impoverished understanding of how these identities shape and co-constitute one another. Additionally, the empirical, statistical relationship between disability and queerness has increasingly been acknowledged in research. Studies report that disabled individuals

are more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than their non-disabled peers (see Davidson and Henderson, 2010; Brown et al., 2017; Dewinter et al., 2017). This statistical overlap reinforces not only the conceptual intersection of these categories, but also the need to understand them as mutually entangled rather than discrete. However, despite growing visibility of these overlapping identities, higher education research frequently treats disabled and LGBTQ+ students as separate categories, where such treatment risks flattening the complexity of students' lived realities, especially for those situated within multiple historically marginalised groups.

Despite the conceptual and empirical richness of crip theory, its application to higher education, particularly in empirical research, remains limited. McRuer (2006) acknowledges that crip theory was largely developed within cultural and media studies. Yet as Miller (2015a, 2015b), Abrams *et al.* (2024), Ives and Elkins (2024), and Mery Karlsson and Rydström (2023) argue, the framework holds significant potential for exploring the university as a site of intersecting oppression. Miller (2015b) demonstrates how crip theory allows researchers to attend to the intersectional and spatial dynamics of disclosure within higher education. Miller's work positions the university not simply as a place where identities are expressed, but as a normative structure that invites some while excluding others. This theoretical move by Miller is especially crucial in understanding how students negotiate visibility, risk, and legibility. Crip theory can provide the language to understand these negotiations not as anomalies, but as the expected outcomes of institutions, and how these institutions can (re)produce normative ideals of the student.

Taken together, the theoretical, social, historical, and empirical connections between disability and queerness point to a clear and compelling intersection of identities shaped by shared histories of norm-challenging. While the Equality Act 2010 positions 'protected characteristics' as discrete, mutually exclusive categories, in fact, these identities are often deeply intersecting. Disability and queerness are not simply two identity categories that happen to coexist in the Equality Act 2010, but are interwoven experiences that produce distinct and overlapping forms of exclusion, community, and

self-understanding. Crucially, this intersection is not reducible to additive frameworks, instead, it demands a more critical, relational lens that acknowledges how disability and queerness shape, complicate, and reinforce one another. This section has shown that these identities are theoretically, conceptually, empirically, and socially entangled. With this grounding in place, the next section turns to existing research on disabled-queer students in higher education, exploring how these linked identities are navigated within university contexts, and where gaps in the literature remain.

Disabled-Queer Student Experiences: An Emerging Field

Scholarship has increasingly demonstrated that disabled-queer students do not experience their identities in isolation, but rather, these identities, alongside various others (e.g., race, class, age, type of disability), intersect in complex ways that profoundly shape students' experiences of university life (Miller, 2015a; Abrams and Abes, 2021). Although there has been a growing interest in intersectionality within education research, disabled-queer students, and the diversity within this group, continue to be overlooked, both in empirical studies and in institutional policy frameworks. Although disability and queerness have each received growing attention in higher education research, their intersection has historically been overlooked. More than two decades ago, Harley et al. (2002) argued that disabled-queer students represent one of the most marginalised and under-researched groups, a claim that, despite subsequent developments, authors restate today (see Miller, 2015a, 2020; Kimball et al., 2016; Peña et al., 2016). Early work in this area tended to treat disability and LGBTQ+ identities as discrete categories, resulting in scholarship that overlooked how students navigate multiple, overlapping forms of marginalisation. Quantitative research in higher education has rarely included demographic categories such as disability, sexuality, or transgender identity (Garvey, 2014). Garvey (2014) conducted a review of 373 quantitative articles published between 2010 and 2012 in five leading U.S. journals focused on higher education and student affairs. The analysis found that only a small number of studies considered sexual orientation (seven articles), an even smaller number addressed transgender identity (two articles), and none included disability as a demographic variable. Describing these omissions as both 'astonishing and unacceptable' (p. 211), Garvey

emphasised the urgent need for future research to incorporate these categories into study design and analysis:

Sexual, transgender, and disability identities permeate all facets of higher education, including all constituents (students, faculty, administration, alumni), policy, and teaching [...] Unfortunately, due to the subject and content of quantitative analyses, these journals are in essence erasing the experiences of several large groups of individuals, namely people with disabilities, transgender individuals, and sexual identity minorities. (p. 211)

Reflecting this trend, UK-based research also highlights significant gaps in the inclusion of disability, sexuality, and gender identity within quantitative higher education studies. For example, Ellis (2009), through both a literature review and a large-scale survey of 42 UK institutions, observed significant levels of homophobia on UK campuses, yet, the work remained limited in scope of intersectional depth, despite participants noting intersectional experiences (e.g., religion). Similarly, UK disability research frequently relies on institutional datasets that tend to underrepresent the nuanced experiences of disabled students and rarely account for intersections with sexuality or gender identity (Connor *et al.*, 2016). These parallels with Garvey's assertions suggest that, despite distinct UK-specific contexts, the marginalisation and erasure of disabled and queer identities in higher education research remains a widespread and persistent challenge.

While Garvey focused on quantitative research, and qualitative studies have arguably paid more attention to these identities, seldom have studies, regardless of method, explored disability, gender, and sexuality together, until more recent times. Addressing this qualitative gap, Miller (2015a) focused attention upon qualitatively understanding disabled-queer student identities on campus. Miller (2015a) argues that disabled-queer students frequently remain invisible within both disability services and LGBTQ+ support structures, which tend to operate under assumptions of singular or dominant identity categories. Drawing on qualitative interviews from US students, Miller (2015a) contends that universities often prioritise compliance with anti-discrimination legislation over

fostering inclusive campus cultures. As a result, institutional spaces may nominally acknowledge diversity but fail to address the full complexity of disabled-queer students' intersectional realities.

Miller's work foregrounds understanding the identity development of disabled-queer students while attending university, where they frequently create informal networks and employ creative survival strategies. Drawing from a predominantly white sample from a Texas institution, Miller (2015b) interviewed twenty-five disabled-queer students who revealed navigating the disclosure of their intersecting identities, opting to present as queer, disabled, both, or as normative allies depending on context. Participants seldom consider classrooms to be safe for fully disclosing identities, particularly when staff attitudes toward LGBTQ+ and disability issues are unaccepting or dismissive. This dynamic underscores how universities can fail to provide environments where disability and queerness can exist in tandem. Follow-up research by Miller et al. (2019) indicates little progress in campus inclusivity over time with their thirty-one participants from across two Southern state universities reporting still feeling compelled to adopt normative identities, thereby unintentionally perpetuating higher education's exclusionary norms and hierarchical values concerning who is 'allowed' to occupy university spaces. Several factors contribute to students' reluctance to disclose disabilities to university services, including stigma, negative staff attitudes, limited awareness of diverse disabilities, perceived irrelevance of disclosure to courses, and the episodic nature of conditions such as chronic illness or mental health issues (Miller et al., 2019). Henry et al. (2010) add that students frequently perceive disability services as ill-equipped to support intersecting identities. This perception aligns with Morgan et al.'s (2011) findings that educational staff often assume disabled students lack sexual identities, viewing them as asexual. Such assumptions discourage disabled-queer students from disclosing their queer identities within disability services, leading to missed opportunities for affirmation and support and further silencing disabled-queer presence on campus. This systemic neglect highlights how normative inclusion focuses on access, thereby falling short of cultivating genuine acceptance.

Building on Miller's insights, subsequent reviews by Kimball et al. (2016) and Peña et al. (2016) highlight how institutional practices, including accommodation procedures and diversity programming, often reinforce ableist and heteronormative norms. These reviews reveal that disabled-queer students must navigate fragmented support systems, engage in significant identity management, and shoulder significant emotional labour in educating peers and staff, all while striving to complete their studies. Building on these findings, I argue that we must reimagine the university through a crip-queer lens, not simply to make space for disabled-queer students, but to fundamentally question and disrupt institutional norms that render their presence precarious. This echoes calls by Miller et al. (2020), who emphasise the need for a higher education landscape that challenges, rather than accommodates within, the structures of exclusion. Miller et al. (2020) argue that disabled-queer students are frequently positioned as 'out of place', with their presence rendered anomalous or provisional, and their futures perceived as contingent on their ability to conform to normative institutional structures. Yet, even within these constrained spaces, disabled-queer students are not simply passive recipients of marginalisation. Their experiences are not reducible to the sum of 'disability' plus 'queerness'; rather, they reflect forms of being and becoming that emerge precisely at their intersection. These students navigate multiple, intersecting axes of difference in ways that not only expose institutional exclusions but also create space for agency. This systemic neglect highlights how normative inclusion focusing on legal access can fall short of cultivating acceptance.

Expanding on this critique, Ives and Elkins (2024) explore queer-crip enrolments to describe the complex educational trajectories of two-spirit LGBTQ+ students who are mad, mentally ill, and/or neurodivergent. Their ten participants, who varied across gender (genderfluid, trans, non-binary) and ethnicity (Southeast Asian, Jewish, Indigenous, Muslim), illustrate how intersectional inequalities shape not only students' experiences within university, but the temporal organisation of their student lives. Participants described academic journeys marked by interruptions, course failures, institutional withdrawals, and hospitalisations. Rather than framing these disruptions as individual shortcomings, Ives and Elkins (2024) position them as symptoms of an institutional failure to accommodate

complexity, non-normativity, and non-linear ways of moving into and through higher education, thereby reflecting the notion of queer-crip time (Kafer, 2013). This work has been generative in foregrounding temporality as a central dimension of disabled-queer student experience. Ives and Elkins's attention to disrupted, looping, and delayed educational trajectories provides a critical lens through which to understand how disabled-queer students are often positioned as 'out of time' within universities organised around linear progression, uninterrupted attendance, and normative timelines of success. Their findings help move beyond Kafer's (2013) theorisation of time, providing empirical evidence by drawing attention to how anticipation, interruption, recovery, and return shape how students live and make sense of university over time. The disrupted paths detailed by their participants underscore how traditional metrics of academic success and persistence often exclude or misrecognise disabled-queer students.

Like Miller (2015a), Ives and Elkins show that students must undertake substantial emotional and structural labour to render university spaces liveable, a form of crip-queer world-making (see Muñoz, 2020) that remains unacknowledged by dominant policy and inclusion narratives. Rather than framing students solely through marginalisation, their work foregrounds student resistance and community-building, and similarly calls for a reimagining of institutional structures towards the valuing and affirmation of temporal, non-normative ways of being. This orientation explores how disabled-queer students negotiate university not only spatially but temporally, through pauses, withdrawals, returns, and re-entries that challenge institutional assumptions about what a 'successful' student journey should look like. Their findings align with a growing body of research that critiques the deficit framing of disabled and LGBTQ+ students and insists on understanding student experience through the lens of intersectionality, fluidity, and agency, mirroring findings by Miller (2015) and Nachman *et al.* (2023).

Despite these challenges, disabled-queer students frequently express a desire to increase visibility through activism and peer education (Miller, 2015b). This activism reflects an institutional

awareness, necessitating that disabled-queer students themselves undertake the responsibility of transforming campuses. Consequently, students develop self-determination strategies to navigate and persist within higher education (Getzel and Thoma, 2008; Miller, 2015b; Gelbar *et al.*, 2020; Hudgens, 2022). Miller (2015a) characterises these students as striving for recognition, yet often entering spaces not designed for their acceptance and being forced to carve out inclusion through their efforts. The continuous need to assess social contexts and relationships for safety with respect to expressing intersecting identities requires substantial mental and emotional labour. Students often suppress parts of themselves to fit normative expectations, thus influencing their sense of self and overall university experience (Miller, 2015b). Disclosure decisions, such as presenting a normative, heterosexual, and able-bodied persona, add to this emotional load, shaping students' social navigation within heteronormative and able-bodied institutional cultures (McRuer, 2006). Such coping strategies, while protective, consume mental resources that might otherwise support academic and personal goals (Cech and Waidzun, 2011; Miller, 2015b; Mattheis *et al.*, 2020). This aligns with Goode's (2007) analysis of the emotional toll involved in managing multiple marginalised identities and impressions on others. Building on this, Miller *et al.*'s (2020) study of autistic-queer students illustrates the additional complexities of identity disclosure. The findings reveal that while queer identities were more readily disclosed, autism was more frequently concealed, sometimes accompanied by avoidance of other disabled or autistic students. Autism was often perceived as more stigmatising than queerness, influencing students' disclosure decisions, as based on prior experiences, perceived risks, and available support (Miller *et al.* 2020). These patterns echo other research demonstrating that disabled students commonly try to 'pass' as nondisabled to avoid stigma, especially when disabilities are non-visible (van Hees *et al.*, 2015). Disclosure decisions are shaped by a need for safety and the avoidance of negative social environments (Davidson and Henderson, 2010). Davidson and Henderson (2010) argued that university spaces are read as unsafe for disabled-queer students, affecting their sense of fit, academic persistence, and future prospects. Nachman and Brown (2024) reinforced this nearly 14 years on, noting that institutional climates often overlook the compounded effects of

ableism and queerphobia. Their work reports feelings of being hyper-visible in some spaces while invisible in others, a dynamic that fostered deep ambivalence about whether universities were for disabled-queers (Nachman and Brown, 2024). This emotional dissonance mirrors findings across earlier work (e.g., Miller, 2015a, 2015b; Parsloe, 2015), suggesting that intersectional marginalisation is not only underacknowledged but also structurally embedded within higher education systems. Crucially, Miller et al. (2020) argue that disclosure must remain a personal choice, and students should never be pressured to reveal identities or conform to normative academic expectations that do not serve their needs. Recent work by Nachman and Brown (2024) extends this discussion by exploring dual disclosure among queer-disabled university students. Their systematic review findings underscore that students are often caught in a 'double bind', where being visible in one identity can lead to greater vulnerability with respect to the other. Students have previously described needing to code-switch between identity expressions depending on context, reinforcing earlier claims that university environments are rarely safe spaces for full self-expression (Goode, 2007; Miller, 2015b). Nachman and Brown (2024) further suggest that the labour involved in navigating this tension can lead to social withdrawal, self-silencing, or avoidance of institutional support altogether, thereby highlighting the psychological costs of these intersectional negotiations. Universities must actively communicate disabled-queer acceptance through orientation programs, marketing materials, and faculty training, to acknowledge complex identity journeys that often take non-linear paths. However, such policies require faculty and staff engagement to effect meaningful change. Policies informed by experiential understandings, with disabled-queer students' voices centred, could foster a stronger sense of fit, moving beyond a limited focus on access (Williams, 2024).

Although there has been increased attention, disabled-queer student experiences remain underrepresented in higher education policy and scholarship (Parsloe, 2015). Parsloe argues that universities should prioritise acceptance and respect over access or awareness. While access can increase visibility, it does not necessarily promote respect or positive experiences. Acceptance across disability types and queer identities can foster students' confidence in sharing their identities, building

meaningful relationships, and enriching university life. Early work by Underhile and Cowles (1998), one of the first studies to address disabled-queer student experiences, highlighted how disabled students are often dehumanised as aggregates of disabilities, while LGBTQ+ students are reduced to sexual behaviours. Rather than offering detailed strategies for change, they brought to light the barriers these students face and argued that disabled-queer visibility and openness on campus depend on universities first fostering environments that are safe, accessible, and accepting of intersectional identities. Nearly three decades later, this call remains urgent as institutions continue to grapple with changing diversity landscapes, student needs, and sector challenges. Additionally, while intersecting inequalities are now more routinely invoked, attention to diversity within disability and queerness (e.g., race, gender, and class) remains limited in scholarship, with Miller et al. (2019) calling for greater attention to be paid to these inter-group differences in future work. These studies offer valuable insight into disabled-queer student experiences, illustrating how change can emerge from below even in the absence of full institutional recognition. Yet, as Miller and Smith (2021) caution, even research that claims an intersectional lens often prioritises policy and programming over the emotional, relational, and structural complexities of disabled-queer students' everyday lives.

This section has outlined the development of an emerging body of work that centres disabled-queer student experiences. I have highlighted how this literature attends to students' negotiations of visibility, fit, and exclusion across intersecting axes of identity. While this scholarship has made important contributions to understanding how disabled-queer students navigate higher education, it also raises broader questions about the very structures within which these negotiations take place. In the next section, I shift focus to interrogate the categories of 'the university' and 'the student experience'. Rather than treating these terms as neutral or self-evident, I draw on current models and theoretical perspectives to explore how they are constructed, idealised, and regulated, and to clarify how I am using them in this thesis, as well as how they might be critically reimagined.

Crippling and Queering ‘the University’ and ‘the Student Experience’

‘The University’

Queer-crip theory can offer powerful tools for interrogating the normative foundations of higher education. Institutions are not neutral spaces, but ones saturated with assumptions about time, ability, and identity (Sandahl, 2003; McRuer, 2006; Miller, 2015a). Within this scholarship, both ‘cripping’ and ‘queering’ function as modes of resistance, questioning, and interrogation, not only with respect to naming exclusionary logics of the university but also imagining otherwise. These approaches help disrupt dominant notions of who belongs and under what terms. They cast a critical light on the archetype of the ‘ideal student’, as one who is independent, able-bodied, neurotypical, middle-class, straight, and progresses efficiently through a linear academic timeline. As McRuer (2006) argues, the concepts of compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality indicate that such ideals are not merely descriptive but prescriptive, naturalising certain bodies and timelines while rendering others as out of sync, out of place, or in need of correction. The university is thus not simply a site of learning, but one of norm production. Within neoliberal frameworks, students are increasingly expected to be self-managing and resilient, attributes that are often at odds with the lived realities of disabled and queer students (Loveday, 2021; Mahn et al., 2023). Such expectations presume a student who can consistently perform independence, productivity, and linear progression, thereby leaving little space for fluctuating health, the temporalities of queer-crip being, or the affective labour involved in navigating hetero- and cisnormativity. Rodgers et al. (2023) show, in their study of sixteen disabled academics in Australian universities, that neoliberal norms around time and productivity are inherently ableist, structuring university environments in ways that fail to account for the non-normative, embodied temporalities by which disabled subjects live and work. Similarly, Wilde and Fish (2025) show that classed-ableism permeates UK academia, shaping everything from how futures in the university are imagined to the everyday cultures and practices that sustain it. Drawing on qualitative interviews with forty working-class disabled academics, they demonstrate how these scholars are disproportionately disadvantaged by cultural norms privileging ‘unencumbered’ academic ideals. This

means that moments of rest or resistance to normative timelines are often recast as failure or deficiency, rather than recognised as alternative ways of being in higher education. Dawson (2023) argues that institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion can be self-serving and operate as non-performative speech acts, or declarations that do not materially alter power structures, instead rebranding the (inclusive) institution while leaving its core logics intact (Dawson, 2023; Wilde and Fish, 2025). Students who do not easily conform to the idealised norms of presence are frequently tasked with adapting themselves to fit (e.g., via disclosure, emotional labour, or silence) rather than the institution being transformed in response to their presence (Merchant *et al.*, 2020). The work of Taylor and Addison (2011) and Inckle (2012) similarly draws attention to how inclusion is frequently conditional and surface-level, particularly when institutions equate diversity with representation rather than structural change. Ellis (2009) suggests that widening participation efforts tend to foreground class and race, with disability and sexuality receiving far less attention. Students are expected to 'bring themselves' to the university, such as their identities, struggles, and energies, without the university shifting in return. In this way, both queer and disabled students may find themselves positioned as evidence of inclusion while still navigating environments that marginalise their ways of being, knowing, and relating. This imbalance allows universities to overlook the structural issues shaping disabled-queer experiences.

My study looks at crippling and queering the university through a refusal to treat it as a neutral container for student experience. Instead, I wonder, who must bend, pass, or assimilate in order to fit? Who is permitted to speak, and who must remain silent to get by? Whose bodies and identities are rendered hyper-visible (as symbols of institutional EDI success), and whose are erased or ignored? Who is anticipated by institutional structures, and who is left to improvise their way through? These questions are not rhetorical but are grounded in the lived experiences of my participants, who navigate and anticipate higher education as active agents working to 'get by' and reshape institutions. What may be missed in prior empirical work is an illumination of reimagining the everyday ways in which students queer and cripple the university through subtle strategies of care and connection. My study

traces those anticipatory, emotional, temporal, and structural negotiations students undertake to exist within and against dominant institutional norms. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to an emerging body of work that foregrounds how students do not merely adapt to university life but remake it by insisting on new ways of being and fitting that trouble the very boundaries of what 'the university' is (imagined) to be.

'The Student Experience'

Up to this point this thesis has considered how 'the university' functions as both an institution and a space that could be queered and crippled. In this next section, I turn from the structure of the university to the concept of 'the student experience'. But what is meant by 'the student experience', and where is it located? Who is seen to possess it, and through what metrics or imaginaries is it understood? The research discussed above offers some insight into these questions. Across studies, the student experience is imagined as residing in various institutional and personal contexts. Within disabled student research, it is frequently situated within mechanisms of institutional access, including reasonable adjustments, disability support services, and inclusive teaching practices (Vogel et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2012; Cox et al., 2017). Within queer student research, it is more often framed in terms of identity development and experiences of queerphobia within campus life (Nicolazzo, 2016; Keenan, 2018; Marzetti, 2018; Renn, 2022). When it comes to disabled-queer students, a growing body of research has highlighted the classroom and services as key sites where 'the student experience' happens (see Miller, 2015b, 2015a, 2020; Miller and Smith, 2021). These studies have generated important insights, yet tend to localise 'the student experience' within bounded or discrete domains, such as institutional services, individual identities, or classroom interactions. What risk being overlooked are the broader affective, temporal, structural, and symbolic dimensions of student life, and the ways in which experiences accumulate, shift, and reverberate across time, space, and embodiment. In this section, I aim to showcase the varied understanding of what and where 'the student experience' is that has guided my exploration. I argue that it is not a stable or measurable

category, but a fluid, contingent, relational experience shaped by the intersecting forces of disability, queerness, and institutional life.

Across higher education research, practice, and policy, the term ‘student experience’ has become ubiquitous, frequently appearing in institutional mission statements, satisfaction surveys, and pedagogical initiatives. Yet as Sabri (2011) and Zepke (2018) argue, it can lack conceptual clarity. Rather than serving as a precise analytical category, the term frequently operates as a catch-all. The very grammar of the phrase — *the* student experience — implies a singular, unified journey, suggesting that there is one (normative) path through university that can be charted and measured. This framing tends to privilege linearity, measurability, and a presumed neutrality of identity. It assumes a student body that is able-bodied, neurotypical, normatively gendered, and driven by individual motivation toward graduation (Merchant *et al.*, 2020). What falls outside these models is the messiness, uncertainty, and emotional labour of being disabled and queer in university spaces, rendering these experiences irrelevant.

The definition of ‘the student experience’ can vary widely depending on disciplinary, institutional, and methodological contexts. Models such as Tinto’s (1994) theory of student departure and Astin’s (1999) student involvement framework underpin much of the developmental literature in the UK and beyond. These models, which emphasise individual persistence, integration, and involvement as predictors of student success, have been highly influential in shaping institutional approaches to retention and engagement. Their logic is also embedded in sector-wide measures such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and in frameworks developed by organisations like the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), where the student experience is frequently reduced to quantifiable indicators of course satisfaction and graduate outcomes. As Sabri (2011) argues, the NSS narrows student experience to a consumer metric, while Tight (2020) highlight how survey culture obscures the uneven dimensions of university life. Building on these critiques, I suggest that the assumptions underpinning both theoretical models and survey frameworks, which often centre a self-sufficient,

linearly progressing, identity-neutral student, risk erasing how structural and intersecting inequalities shape experiences of higher education. For instance, such models have little space to account for disabled-queer students whose pathways are non-linear, becoming disrupted by health fluctuations, disclosure dilemmas, or exclusionary social environments (Abrams and Abes, 2021; Abrams et al., 2024). Their presence on campus cannot be understood simply as involvement, but as an ongoing negotiation.

In response to these limitations, alternative models have emerged. Rankin and Reason (2008), for example, conceptualise 'the student experience' through the Transformational Tapestry Model, which emphasises the shaping of institutional environments by collective norms, practices, and attitudes across students, staff, and faculty. Shafaei et al. (2016) similarly stress the cultural and behavioural attributes influencing not only institutional climate but also individual students' selves, emotions, and perceptions of belonging within the university. Other frameworks offer different emphases, such as Museus's (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model, which accounts for pre-university inputs, external pressures (such as financial circumstances), and internal processes (such as sense of belonging or academic performance). In contrast to traditional theories of student engagement and departure, the CECE Model attends to the specific experiences of racially diverse students, proposing that culturally relevant knowledge, community values, and cross-cultural engagement can support positive outcomes across student groups. Similarly, the Diverse Learning Environments Framework (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999, 2012; Milem, et al., 2005) offers a multidimensional understanding, examining the institutional context, including its demographic composition, psychological climate, and historical legacy, and the effects of these on student belonging and achievement. Later updates (Hurtado *et al.*, 2012) further expanded this model to consider curriculum content and co-curricular processes, positioning students at the intersection of formal and informal educational influences.

These models advance our understanding by recognising the multidimensional nature of university life, yet questions remain about how fully such frameworks can account for the fluid, intersectional, and affective dimensions of student experience that this study foregrounds. While definitions of ‘the student experience’ vary across disciplines and frameworks, this diversity can be understood not as inconsistency, but as an invitation to think expansively about how students inhabit, negotiate, and make sense of university life. As Vaccaro (2012) notes, the experiences of a first-year undergraduate cannot be assumed to mirror those of a PhD student, just as the perspectives of academic staff and leadership may diverge according to the localised spaces and everyday social interactions that shape their work. The ‘student experience’, then, must be understood not only through institutional structures or theoretical models, but as something lived, embodied, and relational, continually shaped by identity, social location and context. These experiences are also inflected by broader institutional and structural forces, such as class, gender, race, and other exclusions that, as Vaccaro (2010) highlights, are often masked by seemingly neutral frameworks or inclusive policies. Such hidden dynamics reveal how the ‘student experience’ cannot be fully captured through metrics or frameworks alone. Rather than treat it as a fixed or universal construct, I approach the student experience as a fluid, contingent, and multiply situated experience. It consists of a constellation of overlapping, sometimes contradictory, experiences shaped by lived experience, institutional context, and structural limits.

The ambiguity over *where* the ‘student experience’ begins and ends further underscores this fluidity, revealing the boundaries between students’ academic, personal, and social worlds. This perspective is particularly important for recognising those whose experiences fall outside the ‘tick-box’ of inclusion, where realities are collapsed into satisfaction scores or aggregated into broad diversity categories (Merchant *et al.*, 2020), with such reductionism obscuring the nuances of how disabled-queer students encounter and reshape the university. I argue that we must challenge the tendency to conflate the student experience solely with the physical spaces of classrooms. Literature on higher education has often framed the classroom as the primary site for the student experience (see Yost

and Gilmore, 2011; Garvey et al., 2015; Miller, 2015a, 2015b, 2020; Vaccaro and Koob, 2019). I do not wish to suggest that classrooms are unimportant or that they no longer warrant attention, as they remain significant spaces where student experiences are shaped and negotiated (Addison et al., 2022a). Serving as microcosms of the broader student population, classrooms bring together students from diverse backgrounds to engage in learning, social interaction, and the exchange of ideas. As Taylor (2023) argues, the classroom continues ‘to be a contentious place, with some taking up more space than others’ (p. 133), highlighting persistent (intersecting) inequalities that can manifest within these settings.

I believe, however, that we should turn attention to other spaces and places beyond formal teaching environments in order to broaden the idea of ‘the student experience’. Focusing solely on the classroom risks oversimplifying the broader, multifaceted nature of the student experience. Studies on (classed) social fit (e.g., Reay et al., 2010), paid work and family structures (e.g., Moreau and Leathwood, 2006), student accommodation and mobility (e.g., Hubbard, 2008; Gaete-Sepúlveda and Murach, 2025), and digital environments (e.g., Gravett et al., 2023) all demonstrate that students negotiate their experiences across multiple, interconnected domains (Mearns et al., 2020). This broader orientation is reflected in Woodford et al.’s (2024) work on campus climate, which conceptualises the student experience as shaped not only by classroom interactions, but by experiential climates (such as everyday encounters with discrimination), psychological climates (including students’ perceptions of how marginalised groups are treated), and physical climates (such as the design and accessibility of campus spaces). Taken together, these dimensions illustrate how student experiences unfold across the everyday textures of university life rather than being contained within teaching and learning settings alone.

Building on this, I approach ‘the student experience’ (Sabri, 2011; Miller, 2015a) as constituted across a diverse array of on- and off-campus spaces, which can be public and private, material and digital. For example, students living in university-provided housing may experience their student life in

their private rooms or shared, common areas, while students living at home may take their university experience into their bedrooms, spaces where they write essays, interact with peers online, or juggle academic and personal responsibilities. Personal spaces, such as home life and internal thought processes, are also important with respect to how students negotiate and manage the demands of university life (Harrison and Hutton, 2014; Marzetti, 2018; Walton and Matthews, 2018; Coulson et al., 2023). Such an expansive perspective makes it possible to capture the complexity, messiness, and interconnectedness of student life, and is particularly important for understanding disabled-queer students, whose experiences exceed the boundaries of formal teaching spaces (e.g., Mearns et al., 2020). Student lives unfold through personal and social routines (e.g., student-led societies), student accommodation and home life, hallways and corridors, online interactions, paid and unpaid work, peer and community networks, and activist or identity-affirming spaces. Attending to these wider contexts therefore enables a fuller understanding of how the student experience is lived, negotiated, and reshaped within and beyond the classroom.

It is important not to limit attention to already identified or tangible spaces, but to remain open to those that are yet to be imagined, embodied, or articulated by participants themselves. Capturing these evolving experiences calls for a nuanced, in-depth methodological approach. This study aims to highlight how students negotiate their experiences across dynamic and intersecting spaces, drawing attention to how physical, social, and emotional environments shape their relationships with themselves, with others, and with the broader university community. In doing so, I aim to explore the layered complexity of student life, and how it is shaped not only by the spaces students move through, but by their personal and collective journeys within higher education. This thesis takes seriously the possibility that disabled-queer students not only challenge normative understandings of the student experience but also offer alternative ways of imagining it. In rethinking the student experience through queer-crip lenses, I contribute to a more expansive understanding of higher education, one that resists neat metrics and embraces complexity (Abrams et al., 2024).

The transformative potential of queer-crip theory to reimagine ‘the student experience’ remains a pressing need to explore how disabled-queer students’ experiences unfold on the ground: in classrooms, in lecture halls, in socialising spaces (e.g., student societies), in policy frameworks, and in lived moments of silence or disclosure. My research responds to this gap by applying a queer-crip theoretical framework to the lived realities of disabled-queer students in Scottish higher education. In doing so, it offers a theoretical contribution by foregrounding queer-crip analysis in empirical work, and a practical one by showing how these concepts can illuminate the material, emotional, and symbolic contours of student life. It does not reject existing models outright but rather places them in tension with the lived realities of students who navigate the university as a site of both possibility and constraint, to suggest that such models risk idealising ‘the student experience’ as coherent or universal, thereby obscuring uneven realities. In doing so, it contributes to an emerging literature that seeks to queer and crip the very idea of the student experience, asking what it means to fit, to resist, and to reimagine.

Situating This Study

Across this review, I have traced how disability and queerness have been taken up in higher education research. While there is growing work on queer students and on disabled students, these literatures are largely siloed, rendering their intersections incidental. Scholarship that does explore disabled-queer students tends to focus on classroom dynamics (Miller, 2015a), leaving wider dynamics (for example, anticipation, planning, disclosure, emotional labour, and everyday negotiations of identity and fit) underexplored. Existing work on LGBTQ+ students (Formby, 2017b; Keenan, 2018) highlights how university is imagined in advance, shaping anticipation and pre-arrival hopes. Similarly, studies of disabled students (Riddell and Weedon, 2014; Goodley *et al.*, 2019) foreground questions of (mis)fitting, showing the labour required to be recognised as a ‘proper’ student. Work on activism and collective care (e.g., Puwar, 2004; Ahmed, 2012; Clare, 2017) demonstrates how students intervene in institutional spaces, even when underacknowledged.

This thesis intervenes in these gaps by centring the narratives of disabled-queer students in Scottish higher education. It resists treating disability and queerness as abstract or static, instead framing them as lived, dynamic, and mutually entangled. In doing so, it examines how students imagine university before arrival, how they navigate normative expectations from ‘the university’ (e.g., independence, socialisation, and productivity), how they manage disclosure, and how they collectively create community and reshape institutional spaces with/against institutional EDI framings.

While concepts such as ‘belonging’ (see Gilani, 2024) are widely used within higher education literature to describe student experience, this thesis suggests that such framings can at times risk implying assimilation into dominant institutional norms. In contrast, I draw on the concept of (mis)fitting to attend more closely to the relational and uneven processes through which students are positioned as ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’ within university environments. Rather than assuming belonging as a stable or desirable endpoint, (mis)fitting allows for a more ambivalent account of inclusion, exclusion, and institutional normativity. In this thesis, ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ are used as analytic tools for understanding how students come to be positioned within higher education environments. These terms draw on existing scholarship (e.g. Garland-Thomson), where fit is understood not as neutral, but as produced through the social, spatial, and institutional arrangements that students negotiate. While Garland-Thomson’s work does not focus on higher education, this thesis extends her conceptualisation to the university context, using fit and misfit to explore how certain bodies, identities, and ways of being are placed within higher education.

The study is informed by queer-crip theory (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2002; Collins, 2015), which provide tools to interrogate both normative assumptions in higher education and the affective and structural labour students undertake (Miller, 2015b). This theoretical lens supports my analytic focus on the anticipatory, relational, and spatial dimensions of disabled-queer student experience, highlighting both constraints and acts of creative navigation within higher education.

My thesis takes up queer-crip theory as methodological and conceptual tools for unsettling these assumptions. It does not treat the university as a fixed or neutral institution, nor the student as a fixed or knowable category. Instead, it draws on queer-crip theory to ask who must bend to belong, who is rendered visible or invisible, and how students themselves perform the work of making space, sometimes through joy and solidarity, sometimes through exhaustion or refusal. The research questions that guide this study emerge from this critical conversation, asking not simply how disabled-queer students experience university, but also how they live it, challenge it, and remake it in ways that call us to reimagine the institution itself.

Further, this thesis is situated in Scotland, a context that is distinctive yet underexplored in relation to disabled-queer student experiences. While much research remains US-centric, with limited UK studies, the Scottish higher education context offers a useful site for examining how institutional structures, campus cultures, and policies shape student experience. Existing Scottish studies contribute to understanding disability (Hendry *et al.*, 2021) and sexuality (Marzetti, 2018), but typically treat these as separate domains and focus largely on urban institutions, leaving intersectionality and the influence of institutional type less well understood.

Scotland offers a particularly valuable site for interrogating these dynamics. Education is a devolved matter, and Scottish policy has taken distinctive directions in widening access, maintaining free tuition, and claiming ‘world-leading’ rights for disabled and LGBTQ+ people. These political distinctions shape not only governance but also institutional culture and student demographics. The higher educational landscape in Scotland is notably diverse, encompassing Russell Group universities, post-92 and technological institutions, and smaller regional, rural campuses, thereby enabling a more situated and expansive analysis of higher education and ‘the student experience’. Pragmatically, as a researcher embedded within a Scottish university, I also bring proximity to participants and familiarity with the political, educational, and cultural conditions under study.

Importantly, I wish to say that this study is not a comparative analysis of the UK's nations. Rather, it is a recognition, following Taylor (2023), that conflating England with the UK risks marginalising other national narratives, a tendency this thesis actively resists. Scotland has long been positioned in political and social discourse as both 'world leading' and as a 'wee but different' place of being small in scale, yet symbolically separate from England and positioned as distinct on the global stage. Such narratives inflect how higher education is imagined, marketed, and experienced, making Scotland an especially valuable context in which to examine the intersections of identity, policy, and lived experience.

The research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do disabled-queer students experience and make sense of higher education?

This question invites a situated, lived understanding of the university from the perspective of students whose voices are often missing from mainstream studies of 'student life' (Miller, 2015b). It seeks to centre the subjective, situated, and affective experiences of disabled-queer students in Scotland, through engagement with longstanding critiques of the university as a normative institution, shaped by hidden expectations of independence, resilience, and linear progression (Burke, 2013; Goodley, 2014). These expectations are rarely neutral, and often privilege able-bodied, heterosexual, and cisgender students who conform to dominant norms of productivity and fit (McRuer, 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013; Puar, 2017).

While higher education policy often foregrounds equity and widening participation, these commitments are not always felt at the level of lived experience (Taylor, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). The question therefore moves beyond surface-level institutional commitments to ask: *what does it feel like* to be a disabled-queer student navigating Scottish higher education today? In doing so, it positions students as meaning-makers and theorists of their own experience, thereby aligning with calls for more narrative, experiential, and reflexive approaches to educational research (Clegg and Bufton, 2008; Miller, 2015a).

2. What forms of labour do disabled-queer students undertake to navigate university life?

Here, I explore how participants manage disclosure, access community, and relate to institutional demands, illuminating the work required to 'fit' or to resist normative expectations of success, belonging, and visibility. This question is grounded in critical disability and queer scholarship that reveals how marginalised individuals are often required to perform various kinds of invisible labour to access, survive within, or be recognised by institutions (Puwar, 2004; Ahmed, 2012; Clare, 2017). For disabled-queer students, this labour is not only logistical or academic, but also emotional, relational, and embodied. It may involve strategic disclosure (Miller et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2020), navigating conflicting identity norms (Falconer and Taylor, 2017), managing fatigue or pain in inaccessible learning environments (Chataika, 2007), or carrying the burden of 'representing' difference in classrooms and committees (Puwar, 2004).

Higher education research has tended to focus on student satisfaction, retention, or outcomes (e.g., Tinto, 1994; Astin, 1999), which often erases the everyday work required to 'be present'. Inclusive policy initiatives can render such labour invisible by framing diversity as an institutional asset rather than a structural concern (Ahmed and Swan, 2006). This question responds to these limitations by asking how students themselves narrate and make sense of the work they must do, be it intellectually, emotionally, or practically. It also builds on Miller's (2020) findings that disabled-queer students in the US experience compounded marginalisations, requiring complex forms of identity management and adaptation that cannot be captured by additive models of identity (e.g., 'disabled + queer').

3. In what ways do disabled-queer students challenge, reshape, or reimagine the university?

This question foregrounds agency, attending to how students make space for themselves and others through acts of care, community-building, and strategically coming out. This final question reflects a queer-crip commitment to not only critique the university, but also to attend to the generative, resistant, and imaginative ways students rework the institutions. While some research highlights students' exclusion from normative models of success (Burke, 2013), less attention has been

paid to how students actively refuse, subvert, or reconfigure what it means to belong. Acts of refusal (e.g., withholding disclosure, forming alternative communities, or disengaging from normative success narratives) can be understood not as failure, but as forms of queer-crip world-making (Muñoz, 2020).

Ahmed (2012) and Taylor (2012) both point to the institutional tendency to absorb critique without transformation. This raises a key tension where students are 'included' but the conditions of that inclusion are often non-negotiable. This question therefore explores how disabled-queer students generate their own terms of engagement through society participation, peer networks, informal care practices, or small-scale institutional interventions. It asks how students contest the normative idea of 'the student experience' itself, reimagining it not as a fixed or measurable outcome, but as a shifting, negotiated, and sometimes resistant process (Miller, 2015a).

By articulating these questions through empirical research, this study makes three key contributions:

1. Extending crip theory: While queer-crip theory has been influential in disability and queer studies, its application within higher education research remains limited (Abrams et al., 2024). This study contributes to conversations on mobilising crip theory, as well as crippling and queering the university, to interrogate the normative logics embedded in university structures and cultures.
2. Reconceptualising the student experience: Existing accounts of 'the student experience' provide useful frameworks, yet they often rely on outcome-driven or identity-neutral models that do not fully capture the complexity of lived experience. This study develops a more integrated, relational, and situated perspective, foregrounding fluidity, duality, emotion, (mis)fitting, anticipation, and affective labour.
3. Reframing disabled-queer students: Research frequently positions disabled-queer students as recipients of support rather than as knowledge-makers. This study offers an alternative lens,

highlighting the everyday strategies through which disabled-queer students navigate, reshape, and reimagine the university.

In doing so, this thesis responds directly to the conceptual and empirical gaps in current literature. It seeks to expand how we understand what it means to be a student, particularly when one inhabits multiply marginalised positions. Together, the research questions and contributions to knowledge aim to shift the focus of higher education research, from abstracted student ‘types’ or quantifiable outcomes to a more fluid, relational, and affectively attuned account of the student experience. The thesis also connects with a broader body of literature that critiques inclusion as a managerial goal, and instead foregrounds the radical potential of misfit, friction, and nonconformity (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013; Shotwell, 2015). It aligns with calls to queer and crip the university and to imagine what might be possible.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter maps and reflects on the methodological approach underpinning the research. My study explores how disabled-queer students experience higher education in Scotland, and I recognise the importance of situating myself within this field, particularly as a disabled-gay researcher committed to exploring the intersecting dynamics of power and identity within university life. From the outset, I understood that my positionality would shape every stage of the research process, influencing interviews, data collection, analysis, and the writing process. Feminist scholarship, with its emphasis on power relations and situated knowledge, provided a crucial framework for understanding these dynamics (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Adkins, 2002). This methodological grounding required ongoing critical reflection to ensure the research maintained its queer-crip integrity by engaging honestly with the complexities and contradictions inherent to the topic.

The decision to adopt a feminist methodology reflected a commitment to attending to the nuanced and varied experiences of disabled-queer students in Scotland, whose identities and experiences rarely align in neat or normative categories. Feminist theory, particularly when read alongside queer-crip perspectives (McRuer, 2006), encourages a continuous attentiveness to whose voices are centred in research, and whose may be excluded. I sought to move beyond the imagined 'default' queer or disabled subject and instead to create space for those whose experiences often remain overlooked, including disabled-queer students of colour, postgraduates, mature undergraduates, and students studying at smaller, regional universities. These groups are commonly marginalised within dominant narratives of university life, which tend to foreground younger, straight-from-school undergraduates.

This approach was situated within an interpretivist paradigm that privileges lived experience, subjectivity, and the contextual production of meaning. Rather than imposing rigid analytical frames, I centred the richness and complexity of the twenty-one participants' narratives, allowing their stories

to guide how the research unfolded. Feminist epistemology underpinned this orientation by challenging dominant knowledge structures and aiming to amplify those voices within the university that often remain unheard. At the same time, it was necessary to acknowledge the inevitable exclusions produced by any research design. This reflects a wider methodological tension: the desire to include a breadth of experiences while recognising that no study can capture the full spectrum of lives in higher education. There is no singular or 'typical' student experience; rather, student life is shaped through intersecting inequalities related to gender, sexuality, disability, race, class, age, and cultural background (Taylor, 2012). By foregrounding these multiplicities and remaining attentive to the limits of this study, the project aims not to offer a definitive account of disabled-queer student life but rather a partial, situated contribution attentive to the tensions, resistances, and labours of navigating university. Participants' narratives were treated not simply as individual accounts but as reflections of how students actively navigate and encounter institutional structures within higher education.

The chapter proceeds by outlining the methodological foundations of the study, including the adoption of a feminist, queer-crip epistemology and an interpretivist stance. It discusses the practical methods used for data collection, particularly semi-structured interviews, and reflects on the ethical considerations that shaped the research, including reflexivity, positionality, and power relations. Given the geographical spread of Scottish universities, the study required a flexible and responsive approach. I combined virtual and in-person interviews to accommodate the dispersed nature of institutions and, crucially, the diverse access needs of participants, many of whom experience fluid or unpredictable disability-related symptoms. This flexibility aligns with feminist commitments to accessibility, care, and attentiveness to shifting embodied realities.

Data analysis drew on an inductive approach to thematic analysis grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2021) work, enabling themes to be actively generated through iterative engagement with participants' accounts rather than being derived from pre-determined theoretical categories. Themes

and codes were treated as analytical outputs that capture broader patterns of meaning (Morriss, 2024). This approach aligned closely with the exploratory aims of the study and was further enriched by feminist insights from Riessman (2008) and Olesen (2017), who highlight how power, voice, and positionality shape qualitative inquiry. Manual coding enabled a slow, iterative, and embodied engagement with each transcript, fostering attentiveness to the complexity of participants' narratives and supporting an ethical commitment to representation without flattening individual experiences. Together, these approaches created a balance between analytical depth and methodological flexibility, which was essential for capturing the nuanced, multifaceted lived experiences at the heart of this study.

Research Design

Feminist, queer-crip research foregrounds the interconnectedness of epistemology (how we know), ontology (what we believe about reality), and methodology (how we study knowledge and reality), viewing them not as isolated but as mutually constitutive. This perspective has been central to the design of my study and my own thinking. Drawing on the work of Stanley and Wise (1993) and Hesse-Biber (2012), I understand research as a practice that is both informed by and generative of these entangled dimensions. Nash and Browne (2010) emphasise the grounding of feminist ontology in lived experience. Rather than viewing knowledge as removed from reality, I approach it as something embodied in lived experiences. This perspective underscores how ways of knowing (epistemology) are embedded in, and shaped by, the conditions of existence (ontology). Hemmings's (2012) focus on subjectivity further shaped my thinking around how feminist ontology foregrounds positionality and lived experience. In practice, this led me to connect theory with experience throughout my research, paying attention to both my participants' lives and my own role in shaping the knowledge produced.

Barad's (2006) work has also shaped my understanding of the relationship between knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology). Rather than treating knowledge and being as separate, Barad's

argument foregrounds how these aspects are mutually connected, with each continually shaping and reshaping the other. This perspective supports my own methodological orientation, where I aim to understand not just what participants say about the world, but how their everyday, embodied experiences help to create knowledge. I approach knowledge as situated through material, emotional, and social contexts. This orientation aligns with feminist methodologies that resist dominant power structures, centre subjectivity, and critically examine how power circulates within research relationships. These principles have informed both how I recruited participants and how I engaged with their narratives, treating lived experience not as extractable data but as rich, complex, and deserving of careful, respectful engagement.

As a feminist researcher, I have actively resisted the constraints imposed by positivist frameworks that claim access to universal, objective 'truths'. Positivism, rooted in the pursuit of singular logic and empirical certainty, often upholds hierarchical ways of knowing that marginalise subjectivity and complexity (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Ryan, 2018). This paradigm tends to prioritise quantifiable, 'hard' data while viewing contextualised, subjective narratives as unreliable or anecdotal, thereby reproducing norms and obscuring the power relations embedded in knowledge production. The supposed neutrality of positivism treats lived experiences as less valid or too messy to count as real knowledge, thus, masking how it privileges dominant perspectives, contributing to the silencing of those whose realities fall outside normative assumptions. In this way, positivism can function to flatten complexity and silence difference, reinforcing systems of power within the research process itself. In contrast, feminist methodologies recognise that knowledge is never neutral, but instead that how we know is always shaped by who we are, where we are situated, and whose voices are included or ignored in the research process.

Feminist research actively works to interrogate and disrupt dominant power structures by embracing diverse voices and experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2012). A key part of feminist thinking, as discussed by Stanley and Wise (1993), involves recognising difference and analysing how structural

inequalities shape knowledge. Rather than seeking universal explanations, my own research focuses on generating understanding of lived realities within a specific social context (i.e., higher education). Epistemology, or how we come to know things, rests upon particular assumptions about the social world (Hesse-Biber, 2012), while ontology relates to our understanding of what reality is and how it operates (Stanley and Wise, 1993). A feminist ontological position says that knowledge is deeply entwined with lived experience, arguing that embodied experiences matter both as real, felt experiences and as things shaped by the social world around us. This means that our knowledge of the world is grounded in how we live and feel in our bodies, and those experiences carry their own kind of truth and meaning.

Methodologically, feminism resists standardised, one-size-fits-all approaches, aligning with feminist epistemology and ontology. Instead, it values flexible and thoughtful approaches that are shaped by its core beliefs about knowledge and reality (Nash and Browne, 2010). It emphasises ethical practice, social justice, and the importance of researchers being aware of how they influence the knowledge they help create (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992). Haraway (1988) challenges the idea that research can ever be truly 'objective', calling for researchers to reflect critically on their own position in the research. In line with this, feminist scholars such as Oakley (1981) and Holmes (2020) advocate for transparency in research relationships, positioning the researcher not as a detached observer but as an embedded and active participant in the research process and site (see 'Researcher Positionality' in Methods section). This reflexive stance challenges neutrality, as well as making visible the ways research can reproduce or resist existing hierarchies.

My research is underpinned by a subjective-interpretative epistemology, which recognises knowledge as situated and constructed through meaning-making processes embedded in social and cultural contexts. This epistemological stance aligns with queer-crip theory, which similarly foregrounds lived experience and challenges dominant, normative understandings of identity and embodiment. In drawing these together, I approach the narratives of disabled-queer students not as

fixed truths to be uncovered, but as situated articulations shaped by power, context, and relational meaning. Queer-crip theory, emerging at the intersection of queer theory and critical disability studies, interrogates normative constructions of the body and mind, rejecting binaries such as abled/disabled and heterosexual/queer as stable or neutral categories (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013). It highlights the ways in which both queerness and disability are socially constructed, pathologised, and policed within institutions. By resisting essentialist readings of identity, queer-crip theory offers a fluid and dynamic framework through which to understand how disabled-queer students navigate institutional spaces.

A subjective-interpretative epistemology complements queer-crip theory by emphasising that knowledge is co-produced through interaction and interpretation. Rather than seeking to categorise or generalise participant experiences, this approach recognises meaning as emergent and contingent, shaped by the interplay of personal history, institutional structures, and broader socio-political discourses. This is particularly relevant when engaging with participants whose identities, needs, and ways of being fall outside normative expectations of the 'ideal student' (Taylor and Scurry, 2011; Goodley, 2014).

Both queer-crip theory and subjective-interpretative epistemology reject claims of objectivity, instead situating the researcher as an active participant in knowledge-making. In this study, I do not aim to speak on behalf of disabled-queer students, but to engage deeply with how they themselves make sense of their experiences, and how they negotiate institutional logics of inclusion. The combination of these frameworks enables a reflexive, critically engaged inquiry that foregrounds complexity and nuance over coherence.

Methods

Interviews

Informed by and aligned with my queer-crip epistemological and ontological positioning, this study adopted semi-structured, in-depth interviews as its data collection method. Museus (2007) advocates for qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and observations) as particularly

well-suited for capturing the complexity of student experiences, offering the flexibility and depth necessary to engage with intersectional identities. Unlike quantitative methods, which often rely on aggregate data and obscure individual variation, qualitative research foregrounds individual voices and centres experiences that have historically been marginalised (Perl and Noldon, 2000). This approach enabled a nuanced engagement with participants' stories, offering space for reflection and meaning-making on their own terms.

Interviews were the most appropriate method for exploring disabled-queer student experiences. Compared to other methods, like surveys or structured questionnaires, interviews offer greater flexibility in navigating complex and sensitive themes, including the possibility of follow-up questions to deepen understanding (Seidman, 2013). This method enabled me to access rich, in-depth, detailed personal narratives and to situate them within the wider context of university life, an approach more rigid methods might miss. My intention in using interviews was to reflect the layered realities of student experiences among disabled-queer individuals, offering insight that is both personal and socially embedded. This approach also aligns with feminist research values, which emphasise listening to participants' voices, valuing their stories, and situating knowledge within lived experience (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

Interviews are shaped by shifting power dynamics that change throughout the conversation, especially as participants share personal or emotional stories. These shifts can be subtle, influenced by how people position themselves and each other during the exchange. Leahy (2021) describes this process as both revealing and protecting, defining interviews as a way of understanding how people carefully choose what to share and what to hold back. This highlights how interviews can offer brief but meaningful windows into people's lives where trust is present. I understood that participants were telling me stories that they may not have discussed with others and may never discuss again.

In feminist research, semi-structured interviews are especially useful because they allow for flexibility and depth, creating space for participants to express complex, intersectional experiences on

their own terms. Using this approach, I hoped to generate themes that are rooted in diverse experiences of disabled-queer students. This method reflects feminist commitments to valuing subjectivity, disrupting hierarchies in knowledge production, and challenging broader systems of inequality. I will now explore why the use of semi-structured interviews are an applicable method within feminist research, outlining both the benefits and the challenges.

Semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable because they strike a balance between structured and unstructured interviews. While an interview guide (Appendix 7) helps ensure that core topics are addressed, this approach also leaves space to follow unexpected threads that emerge during conversation (Seidman, 2013). This adaptability is especially important in feminist research, which aims to capture the richness of participants' experiences without forcing them into pre-established frameworks (Oakley, 1981). The use of open-ended questions enables a range of viewpoints to surface, encouraging participants to express themselves in their own terms (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992). By prioritising how individuals interpret and navigate their social realities, semi-structured interviews can reveal patterns and insights that more rigid methods may miss (Bryman, 2016). This method also creates opportunities for participants to shape the direction of the conversation, making space for what matters most to them, rather than adhering strictly to the researcher's predetermined focus (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

While qualitative methods offer valuable insights, they also come with certain limitations. One common critique is that findings from qualitative research are not easily generalisable to wider populations (Bernard, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). My project does not aim for broad generalisation, instead focusing on capturing the richness and complexity of experiences. However, the detailed descriptions provided allow for readers to consider whether the insights presented here resonate with or apply to other contexts. In addition, the researcher's own assumptions and values may unintentionally shape how questions are asked or interpreted, thus influencing the direction of the conversation (Holmes, 2020). In response, feminist researchers emphasise the importance of reflexivity, or remaining critically

aware of how their identity and positionality might affect the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Another limitation relates to consistency in data quality. Since semi-structured interviews depend heavily on interaction and rapport, the richness of the data can vary based on how comfortable participants feel and how well the interview goes (Blee and Taylor, 2002; Yeo *et al.*, 2003; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2013).

I conducted both in-person and online interviews, and I now want to reflect on these formats not only as modes of data collection, but as distinct interview spaces and sites of meaning-making. Each setting shaped the dynamics of the interview differently, influencing rapport, comfort levels, disclosure, and power relations. For example, the embodied co-presence of in-person interviews allowed for a certain immediacy and intimacy, while online interviews offered participants more control over their environment, potentially increasing accessibility and emotional safety. I explore these settings as logistical choices, as well as offering a deeper understanding of how space, technology, and context shape the production of knowledge in qualitative research.

In-person Interviews

In preparing for interviews, I recognised that the interview space is never neutral. Working with disabled participants required attention not only to dialogue but also to the material and spatial dimensions of access. I selected ground-floor rooms in the Lord Hope Building at the University of Strathclyde that were functionally accessible from the street, considering lifts (wide enough to accommodate wheelchair users including the ability to turn around inside the lift, rather than exiting backwards), toilet access (including male, female, disabled, and gender-neutral facilities), and natural light. While these preparations aimed to create an inclusive environment, I remained aware that accessibility is shaped by individual needs and my own positionality as a physically able-bodied researcher may mean I never fully account for participants' needs. Participants could choose an alternative location if preferred, although all in-person interviews were held at Strathclyde.

To support comfort and autonomy, participants were informed they could move, stim, or stretch during interviews, and I checked in on their needs throughout. Participants were also offered guidance on navigation and on-site logistics, such as parking. This approach reflects a commitment to reflexive, inclusive research practice that foregrounds participant wellbeing and disabled-queer ways of being. All participants expressed satisfaction with the arrangements, and no adjustments were requested.

Virtual Interviews

In planning for remote interviews, I reviewed various video conferencing platforms available, drawing in particular on the work of Lobe et al. (2020), who highlight the strengths of Zoom in terms of its recording functionality, security features, and accessibility. Also, institutional guidance shaped this decision. As of June 2020, the University of Strathclyde entered into a Data Protection Agreement with Zoom, ensuring that any data saved to the cloud (including through associated services like OneDrive) would remain encrypted and protected. This agreement provided assurance that Zoom could be used in line with institutional and ethical requirements. Based on Lobe et al.'s (2020) considerations and the university's agreement, I selected Zoom as the platform for conducting virtual interviews. Accordingly, all virtual interviews were conducted using my university-issued Strathclyde Zoom account to maintain compliance and data security.

Online interviews offered flexibility for participants with diverse and fluctuating disabilities, allowing them to engage from familiar, comfortable spaces. Ethical and feminist commitments guided this approach, prioritising participant autonomy and wellbeing. I provided guidance on privacy, encouraged participants to pause or stop if needed, and remained attentive to interruptions or technical issues, although these rarely disrupted the interviews. Providing the option of online interviews was not only a matter of accessibility but also of a feminist and ethical commitment to participant comfort. Participants could choose to engage in an environment that suited them, exercising control over the interview space and feeling a greater ease (DeVault and Gross, 2012). In

line with existing literature, online methods can both facilitate participation and pose challenges regarding privacy or candidness (Lobe et al., 2020; Oliffe et al., 2021). Zoom, in particular, proved useful in increasing accessibility, reaching participants across Scotland who may have been unable to travel, and providing a familiar and safer space for disabled-queer participants. The flexibility afforded by Zoom allowed participants to select locations that met their comfort and privacy needs, and pre-interview guidance helped mitigate risks related to interruptions or privacy concerns. Fifteen of the twenty-one participants opted for online interviews, demonstrating that virtual methods can enable participation in ways that align with individual needs, capacities, and preferences. While in-person interviews offered specific relational benefits, the online format did not inherently constrain rapport. Rather, both formats required attention to relational and ethical dynamics, highlighting that interviews are dialogic spaces shaped by participants' agency, context, and the research process itself (Oliffe et al., 2021).

Ethical Approval and Potentially Sensitive Subjects

Prior to participant recruitment and data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Strathclyde's Institute of Education Ethics Committee (see Appendix 9). This approval informed the design of the recruitment process, participant information materials, consent procedures, and data management practices.

I was acutely aware that educational experiences can be deeply personal and emotionally charged, such that it was important to create an environment where participants felt comfortable and safe sharing sensitive aspects of their lives. Establishing rapport was central to this aim, as trust facilitates openness and depth in qualitative research (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2013). Strategies included open-ended questioning, careful attention to tone and pacing, and creating settings (whether physical or virtual) responsive to participants' needs. Participants were reminded they could pause, skip questions, or take breaks at any time. Debriefing forms (Appendix 8) also included support channels for participants. Small gestures, such as light conversation or referencing

shared experiences, further helped ease anxiety and foster connection (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Reflexivity was also essential, wherein I reflected on my own emotional responses to sensitive material and discussed these with supervisors to ensure the ethical and emotional labour of the research was acknowledged and managed (Lee, 1993; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2008). These practices collectively supported an ethical, inclusive, and responsive research process capable of generating rich, meaningful insights.

Researcher Positionality

As a researcher informed by feminist theory and methodology, I recognise that power and reflexivity are central to every stage of the research process (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Adkins, 2002; Johnson, 2011; Hemmings, 2012). Following Johnson's (2011) reflections on the entanglement of self, story, and the written word, I understand positionality not as a fixed identity to be disclosed but as a continual negotiation throughout the research journey where the personal becomes professional. Johnson's queer epistemological lens encourages a move away from disembodied notions of objectivity and instead values subjectivity, affect, and embodiment as integral to knowledge-making. I therefore position myself not as a detached observer but as an active participant in the situated process of meaning-making. I am always writing and thinking from somewhere. Being a disabled, gay man in Scotland shaped every aspect of how I conducted this study, influencing how I am revealed, concealed, or assumed throughout the research process. Like my participants, my positionality is fluid and context-dependent, though it is also mediated by privilege. I am a white, middle-class, physically able-bodied man with dyslexia and autism, both of which shape how I read, write, and communicate.

This project is also deeply informed by my educational trajectory across the Scottish system from primary to doctoral study, and by my own experiences of navigating education as a dyslexic, autistic, gay man. These experiences sensitised me to the exclusions and silences that structure who is imagined in higher education. My research emerges from, and contributes to, this ongoing trajectory of personal and scholarly inquiry. Earlier work on autistic inclusion and on gay men's experiences in

schools naturally led me to explore the intersection of disability and queerness within higher education, a space I have long inhabited. My methodological and epistemological commitments are grounded in feminist and queer-crip perspectives that centre lived experience, challenge normative academic boundaries, and foreground the politics of voice and visibility (Kafer, 2013; Taylor, 2013; Clare, 2015, 2017).

Diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of eight, I became attuned early in life to the institutional logics of ‘ability’ and the hierarchies they produce. Classrooms made these hierarchies visible: ‘smart’ kids moved quickly through ‘advanced’ reading books with smaller lettering and more pages per chapter, while I stayed with my larger lettering reading books that had pictures in them for weeks on end. The ‘smart’ kids would move to the classroom next door for maths lessons, while I would remain in my seat. Later, in secondary school, I was quickly moved from mid-level to bottom learning groups. When my parents raised concerns about the lack of disability accommodations, the response was dismissive — ‘It’s maths’, said the head of department, ‘there isn’t much reading anyway’. My mum’s words to me — ‘You’ve got two choices: bury your head in the sand or work hard’ — have stayed with me ever since.

Socially, I drifted between groups and often spent breaks alone in computer rooms until, by fourth year, I found lasting friendships. Following years of parental advocacy, I was diagnosed as autistic at 16. I kept my diagnoses of both dyslexia and autism private, driven by a desire to ‘pass’ as capable, a feeling that still lingers. Teachers likely knew my disabilities via my pupil records, but I often wonder how this shaped their perceptions of my ability. I was frequently told by teachers, implicitly and explicitly, that university was not for someone like me, imagined by them as a space ‘over there’.

Now, as a PhD student, I reflect on how far I’ve travelled. With a first-class undergraduate degree and a master’s with distinction, I’m aware of how I might now be read as a ‘successful’ student; yet I also am aware of the surprise that accompanies my disclosure that I am doing a PhD. Such moments are both affirming and alienating. Doctoral study has not erased these feelings, instead

reawakening insecurities. Doubt and imposter syndrome remain daily companions, prompting repeated questions about my ability and fit. During a workshop in my first year of PhD study, I was asked to identify my 'imposter animal'. I chose a penguin — I plod along, and if I fall into the water, I (hopefully) swim. This metaphor has stayed with me, particularly as I encountered queer-disabled participants who, like me, are navigating university's uncertain waters (Addison et al., 2022b). It makes me wonder: where are the other penguins in academia? How have they navigated these waters? Over time, I've been fortunate to encounter some penguins (i.e., queer-disabled students) making their way through choppy waters (i.e., institutions). It is in these shared experiences of doubt, exclusion, resilience, and care that the heart of this research lies. Recognising these shared yet varied experiences guided my empathetic interviewing style and my interpretive stance, allowing me to read participants' expressions of uncertainty as deeply situated rather than individualised.

Situating myself reflexively in this research is not about centring my own story. As Skeggs (2004) cautions, simply inserting oneself into a project does not dissolve the problems of power and privilege. Rather, I do so to recognise how my positionality has shaped my ethical commitments, methodological choices, and interpretations of participants' accounts. I make no claim to neutrality as my own life is entangled with the very conditions I seek to explore. Following feminist and interpretivist traditions, I understand knowledge as situated (Haraway, 1988) and co-produced, emerging through dialogue, mutual vulnerability, and shared uncertainty. My role is not that of a detached investigator but of a fellow student — one penguin among many — working to understand the complex experiences of disabled-queer students. Within this study, my identities and lived experiences position me simultaneously as both an insider and an outsider. As Taylor (2011, p. 9) describes it, insiderness is 'where the researcher's personal relationships are deeply embedded in the field [...] and where the researcher is privy to undocumented historical knowledge of the people and the cultural phenomenon being studied'.

Following feminist scholars such as Collins (1986) and Haraway (1988), I approach positionality as fluid and intersectional, rather than as a fixed binary. Insider and outsider positions are shaped by context, identity, and the shifting power dynamics of the research encounter. As Jones et al. (2014) caution, researchers must remain critically aware of how their assumptions and experiences inform interpretation. Following this, I adopted a feminist methodological approach that views insider/outsider status as a continuum, where positionality is shaped and reshaped through ongoing interactions with the research site and participants, and the researcher's presence inevitably shapes what is said and how it is heard. Within this continuum, I share several identity markers with my participants — sexuality, disability, and student status in Scotland — which fostered moments of recognition and empathy but also risked over-identification. Drawing on Oakley's (1985, in Reinharz and Davidman, 1992) argument that subjective and embodied experiences are vital to social understanding, I approached participants not as data providers but as co-constructors of meaning.

Yet, as Collins (1986) reminds me, shared experiences and identities do not guarantee insider status across all aspects of identity. While I identify as disabled, my own diagnoses of dyslexia and autism do not grant direct access to the experiences of participants with, for example, physical or sensory disabilities. In some interviews, participants referenced their use of walking aids, perhaps anticipating difference or pre-empting discomfort, reminding me of my outsider status in relation to embodiment. Beyond disability and sexuality, my whiteness, cisgender identity, and middle-class background also shape research encounters. As Bettez (2015) argues, social positions influence how researchers are perceived and how participants narrate their experiences. Participants of colour, for example, often spoke of the intersections of race, disability, and queerness, experiences I do not claim as my own. I approached these moments with reflexive care and attentiveness, aware that difference can both constrain and deepen understanding. As Davis et al. (2004) suggest, a lack of personal experience with certain forms of marginalisation may enable researchers to listen more openly, and this was a stance I sought to maintain throughout interviewing and analysis. This shaped my analytic

practice, prompting me to foreground difference and to read accounts relationally rather than comparatively.

As Tuhiwai Smith (2021) reminds me, researchers working with marginalised populations must adhere to high ethical and moral standards. This demands ongoing reflexivity, transparency, and an awareness of the relational and political nature of knowledge production. My aim was not to speak for participants but to hold space for their narratives while remaining conscious of how my own positioning shaped the research process. At the outset of interviews, I shared aspects of my positionality, including my disability, sexuality, and academic background, in order to foster transparency and rapport. As Lewin and Leap (1996, p. 12) note, disclosure in 'fieldwork is seen as different from daily life at home', functioning as an ongoing negotiation between researcher and researched (Jackman, 2010). These self-disclosures were never intended to centre my experience but to create trust and reduce participant anxiety. Yet, following Skeggs (2004) and Adkins (2002), I remain cautious about equating such acts with reflexivity itself. Feminist and queer scholars have long highlighted the politics of 'coming out' in research, where access to self-representation, and to being heard, is unevenly distributed. Simply naming one's identity risks becoming self-authorising if not paired with accountability and attentiveness to the structural dynamics shaping the research encounter. Like Taylor (2005, 2009), I have sometimes questioned whether such reflection will be valued as methodological insight or dismissed as complying.

Reflexivity, therefore, required critical attention to the influence of the research setting, topic sensitivity, power relations, and the social dynamics between myself and participants (Gamson, 2007). Delamont (2002, p. 67) emphasised reflexivity in analysis: 'Reflexivity in the collection of material, and analysing it as it comes in, not letting it pile up unread, are the two most essential things'. In following this principle I, through continuous reflection and iterative analysis, engaged with feminist questions of voice and representation, asking 'Who is speaking, for whom, and under what conditions?' (Probyn, 1993, p. 2). Recognising my non-neutral role as designer, interviewer, interpreter, and author, I was

mindful of the power inherent in representing participants' stories. This awareness guided my engagement with questions of power, privilege, and positionality throughout the research process. I was also guided by Mazzei and Jackson's (2009) critique of unreflexive qualitative practices, which cautions against treating participant voices as transparent or unmediated:

Letting readers 'hear' participant voices and presenting their 'exact words' as if they are transparent is a move that fails to consider how as researchers we are always already shaping those 'exact words' through the unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative researcher agendas and timeline (p. 2).

I recognise that, as the researcher, I did not simply 'find' participants' words ready to be quoted, but I shaped the circumstances within which students spoke and what they spoke about, later selecting some words over many others. Probyn (1993) warns of the risks of 'speaking for' others without acknowledging these power differentials, reminding me that even well-intentioned researchers can reproduce hierarchies if they fail to interrogate their position. Similarly, Adkins (2002) argues that reflexivity must move beyond surface awareness to become a sustained critique of the power relations shaping research encounters. This required balancing the creation of space for participants' voices with vigilance against imposing my own interpretations and/or silencing theirs. As Adkins cautions, reflexivity can become performative when it centres the researcher's awareness rather than participants' experiences. Claiming reflexivity does not, in itself, undo privilege or power (Skeggs, 2004). I therefore approached reflexivity as an ethical responsibility to actively engage with the hierarchies embedded in research. I grounded my reflexive practice in participants' narratives, continually questioning how my biases and positionality shaped interpretation. Recognising that participants also enact reflexivity, I sought to use my power and resources responsibly, holding space for their accounts while remaining accountable for the processes of knowledge production. Following Skeggs (2004) and Riessman (2008), I avoided assuming that theoretical frameworks should dominate participants' words, instead treating accounts as emergent, co-constructed, and shaped by discursive

histories (DeVault and Gross, 2012). This required attentiveness to my embodied presence, language, and research design, allowing flexibility in questions, prompts, and interpretation. I aimed to resist fixing them as static subjects and instead asked what, or who, was being held rigid during reflection and analysis (Adkins, 2002; Skeggs, 2004). This stance supports an accountable, situated approach to qualitative interpretation.

Population and Sampling

A convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants, in line with qualitative research practices that seek depth and relevance over generalisability (Jones et al., 2014; Braun and Clarke, 2021). The study was designed to engage with disabled-queer individuals currently studying at a Scottish university either at undergraduate or postgraduate level, and in either full-time or part-time study. I utilised snowball sampling as a supplementary strategy, which allowed for word-of-mouth sharing of the study among potential participants, enabling access to networks that might not have been reached through traditional recruitment routes (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Data collection was concluded after twenty-one interviews, as I had gathered a rich and nuanced dataset that demonstrated thematic depth and diversity. While I recognise the concept of data saturation as a common rationale for ending data collection, Braun and Clarke (2021) advise caution against viewing saturation as a fixed endpoint. Instead, they advocate for embracing the complexity and fluidity of qualitative research and the value of interpretive sufficiency. In line with this perspective, I concluded data gathering when I felt confident that the dataset offered sufficient scope for analytic insight. Participants represent a diverse student population ranging in age from 18 to 58, encompassing a diverse spectrum of gender identities, sexualities, and disabilities (see Appendix 5 for full demographics, and Appendix 6 for participant thumbnails). Participants identified across the gender spectrum, including women, men, queer, trans, and non-binary individuals. Sexual identities were varied, with participants identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual, panromantic, asexual, and other non-heteronormative labels. All participants reported identifying with one or more disabilities, encompassing neurodivergence (e.g., autism, ADHD, dyslexia), long-term health conditions

(e.g., diabetes, chronic pain, connective tissue disorders), and mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression). Participants' racial and ethnic backgrounds were predominantly White Scottish or British, with representation also from Chinese and South Asian communities. Socioeconomic backgrounds spanned working-class, middle-class, and lower-class experiences. Participants were enrolled across multiple levels and years of higher education, from undergraduate (BA/BSc) to postgraduate (MSc, Master's, PhD, EdD).

Criteria and Recruitment

This study was designed to recruit participants who met four key criteria:

- (1) were aged 18 years or older; and
- (2) were currently enrolled in a Scottish university as an undergraduate or postgraduate student; and
- (3) self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+); and
- (4) self-identified as having a disability of any kind.

A central emphasis of this study was placed on self-identification with respect to both sexuality and disability as opposed to formal diagnoses. Participants were not required to provide medical or psychiatric proof to take part, reflecting Hutcheon and Wolbring's (2012) critique of rigid diagnostic frameworks. This approach recognises the fluid and lived nature of identification, which may not align with clinical or institutional definitions. It is worth noting that this emphasis on self-identification could have shaped *who* may have chosen to participate in the study. While this approach aligns with feminist and queer-crip commitments to respecting participants' own understandings of identity, it may have excluded individuals whose experiences were relevant to the research but who did not identify with the term 'disabled'. As Lister, Coughlan and Owen (2020) note, some students do not always identify with the label of 'disabled', even when they experience disability-related barriers or access disability-related support. The use of self-identification in recruitment materials (see Appendix 4 for recruitment poster) was therefore both a methodological and conceptual choice, prioritising participants' own understandings of disability rather than imposing clinical, institutional, or researcher-defined

categories. Disabilities included, but were not limited to, ADHD, blindness or low vision, brain injuries, D/deafness or being hard of hearing, learning, medical, physical, psychiatric, social, or speech and language disabilities.

Miller (2015a) notes that disabled and LGBTQ+ students are both minorities within higher education, and hence, convenience sampling approaches were essential. Given the stigma surrounding these identities, individuals may conceal or selectively disclose them depending on social, cultural, and institutional context. Recruitment materials, including posters and email invitations, were designed to reflect this sensitivity. I deliberately used the term 'LGBTQ+' rather than 'queer' alone, acknowledging that while 'queer' functions as an umbrella term in this thesis, it may not resonate with all potential participants given its contested and culturally variable meanings (Miller and Wynn, 2011).

Students identifying as disabled and LGBTQ+ are often difficult to reach institutionally as universities rarely track these populations beyond voluntary registration or society membership (Sanlo, 2004). This lack of visibility shaped my careful, ethically attuned recruitment strategy, which sought to build trust and minimise risks associated with disclosing marginalised identities. These challenges do not suggest that disabled-queer voices are inherently 'hard-to-reach', rather highlighting how structural and cultural barriers shape visibility. Intersectional tensions also complicated recruitment, as LGBTQ+ spaces can privilege able-bodiedness, while disability spaces may assume heterosexuality, prompting individuals to emphasise or downplay aspects of identity depending on context.

Recruitment materials were designed with accessibility in mind (see Appendix 4 for recruitment poster). Posters and participant information were produced using clear formatting, accessible fonts, and high-contrast colour schemes, including the use of yellow paper to support readability for individuals with dyslexia and other reading-related access needs. Contact details were provided in multiple formats (e.g., email and QR code), and participants were invited to contact myself regarding any questions they may have had prior to participation. Consistent with the feminist and queer-crip commitments underpinning this study, accessibility was approached as an ongoing process

rather than a fixed set of adjustments. Participants were therefore offered flexibility throughout recruitment and data collection, including choices regarding interview format, timing, and location.

Recruitment combined personal and institutional channels to maximise reach and diversity. I circulated posters and calls for participants (Appendix 4) via personal social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn), physical university spaces (unions, libraries, study areas), and LGBTQ+ and disability societies and university services across Scotland. The focus on student-led societies and university services was due to these groups offering clear points of contact and 'named' individuals who might be willing to participate. These were logical starting points, given their visibility and their established roles in supporting disabled and LGBTQ+ students. However, community-based routes were less effective than anticipated. This aligns with wider observations that community organisations, particularly those working with and for vulnerable groups, are necessarily protective of their spaces, members and activities. As Boussalem (2023) notes, gaining access to such communities often requires a lengthy process of trust-building, which is rarely compatible with the time-pressured nature of doctoral fieldwork, short recruitment windows, and institutional funding demands. My own experience reflected this tension. While organisations were supportive in principle, many were understandably cautious about sharing recruitment materials or facilitating contact without a sustained prior relationship. Additionally, as time went on, I was aware that not all disabled-queer students engage with such societies or services, and that those who are less connected to these structures may have markedly different experiences. This recognition shaped the widening of my recruitment strategy, prompting me to use JiscMail email lists related to disability, LGBTQ+ issues, and higher education to reach students who might otherwise be overlooked. JiscMail ultimately proved the most effective recruitment route, with most participants learning about the study through it.

Recruitment remained ongoing throughout data collection to maintain diversity and identify cases beyond the usual 'go-to' participants. I revisited earlier recruitment avenues and used snowball sampling (Small, 2009), encouraging participants to share the call with others. Some took particularly

active roles in this process. For example, River connected me with a Deaf and blind student group, and Ben circulated recruitment materials via their student union's social media channels. These participant-led efforts significantly expanded the reach and inclusivity of the study in ways that institutional and community-based channels alone could not.

Data Collection and Analysis

Collection of Data

Participants contacted me via email in response to recruitment materials shared on social media, via JiscMail lists, or through peer referrals. I replied with a secure online form containing a participant information sheet (Appendix 2), digital consent form (Appendix 3), and demographic questionnaire (Appendix 10). The questionnaire collected information on age, gender, sexuality, disability, race and ethnicity, social class, degree programme, university, and level of study, using text boxes to allow participants to describe themselves in their own words (see Appendix 5 for participant individual demographics). Utilising open-ended questions rather than rigid, pre-defined categories structurally aligns with a queer-crip framework. This approach rejects essentialist classifications, and instead honours the fluidity and complexity of disabled-queer identities. Furthermore, this design choice stemmed from a reflexive interrogation of researcher power, where constructing a standardised tick-box list inevitably requires deciding which identities are centralised (for instance, placed at the top of the list), which are marginalised (placed at the bottom of the list, or even relegated to an exclusionary/awkward 'other' category), and in what order they should appear. Rejecting these restrictive boxes intentionally shifts the power of definition entirely to the participants. The demographic questionnaire also asked about interview preferences (Zoom or in-person) and availability. Demographic data was used both to provide context and to guide reflexive sampling (e.g., targeted outreach to Deaf/blind student societies), helping to ensure diversity and representation across intersecting identities. The final sample comprised twenty-one participants, consistent with

other intersectional studies (see Renn, 2007; Patton, 2011; Miller, 2015a). A detailed record of communications and participant information was maintained in a secure spreadsheet.

Following completion of the consent and demographic form, participants were offered interview dates aligned with their availability. Each took part in a single, semi-structured interview lasting between 53 and 121 minutes (mean = 75 minutes), conducted over ten months (March - December 2024). Interviews followed a flexible topic guide (Appendix 7) informed by Miller et al. (2020), which acknowledged the fluidity of identities and avoided static framing. Topics included participants' university journeys (past, present, and future), experiences of campus spaces, interactions with staff and peers, and broader reflections. Interviews were co-constructed spaces, responsive to participants' priorities, with pseudonyms chosen by participants or assigned by me to protect anonymity. Following their interview participants were thanked for their time and given a debrief form (Appendix 8).

Participants often shared deeply personal experiences, including family and health histories. I remained attentive to their well-being, offering breaks or topic changes as needed, reflecting ongoing consent and an ethics of care (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). While participants were not formally compensated, small gestures such as providing refreshments during in-person interviews were offered to acknowledge their contribution.

Transcription of Data

Interviews were recorded via Zoom for online interviews or a handheld Dictaphone for in-person meetings, and I personally transcribed all recordings in full. Although time-intensive, this process facilitated close engagement with participants' narratives and supported thematic analysis by allowing me to trace patterns and subtle shifts (Fine, 1992; Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Braun and Clarke, 2021). I treated transcription as an interpretive process, attending to speech rhythm, pauses, emphasis, and phrasing, and acknowledging that meaning often extends beyond words to gestures and embodied expressions (Du Bois, 1991; Finlay, 2005; Wetherell, 2012; Pink, 2015). For example,

Ben used hand gestures to illustrate the social positioning of queerness and disability, which I captured in the transcript to preserve nuance. As MacLure (2013) and Ellingson (2006) suggest, such affective and non-verbal forms of expression are not peripheral to data but constitute important dimensions of participants' meaning-making. Including these cues allowed me to better honour the complexity of participants' narratives, particularly when words alone were insufficient to express lived experience.

All data was securely managed in line with the University of Strathclyde's Data Protection Policy, the Data Protection Act (1998), and GDPR. Typed transcripts were pseudonymised and saved in secure OneDrive folders; printed documents were stored in a locked cabinet; audio files were password-protected. This approach embedded methodological and ethical commitments throughout the research process, reflecting BERA guidelines and a feminist ethos of care, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy (Tilley, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Analysis of Data

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach to thematic analysis, which offers a flexible framework for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns across a dataset. Their approach to thematic analysis involved several iterative steps: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. I undertook an inductive, iterative process, generating codes and themes directly from the data rather than applying a pre-existing analytical framework. This inductive, iterative orientation was particularly well-suited to the exploratory nature of my study, allowing participant voices to shape the direction and focus of themes. Themes were developed through repeated cycles of close reading and coding. I looked for commonalities, divergences, and contradictions, remaining attentive to how each participant and their own story materialised differently in different contexts. This analytical approach enabled a nuanced and situated understanding of disabled-queer student experiences, aligning with feminist and queer epistemologies that resist essentialism and foreground the complexity of lived experience.

Having personally transcribed all interviews, I was already immersed in the data, such that transcription served as a preliminary analytic step, allowing for attention to tone, rhythm, and emotional nuance (Fine, 1992; Reinhartz and Davidman, 1992). Rather than using qualitative analysis software, I undertook manual coding of all transcripts. Each transcript was read and re-read multiple times, with initial observations, reflections, and potential codes hand written in the margins. Codes were then documented and organised separately before being compared across transcripts. This manual approach facilitated a close and sustained engagement with participants' narratives, allowing me to remain attentive to context, language, and meaning throughout the analytic process. Initial coding involved identifying meaningful units of content across transcripts, synthesising margin notes, and remaining open to revision as new insights arose. Codes were then grouped into potential themes using iterative, tactile methods such as post-it notes to visualise patterns and relationships, reflecting the recursive and non-linear nature of qualitative analysis (Thompson, 2019).

Theme development involved refining and defining coherent narratives, selecting illustrative extracts, and situating findings within relevant scholarship. Throughout, I maintained reflexivity regarding my positionality and interpretive influence, striving to centre participants' voices while acknowledging the multiplicity of meanings inherent in their accounts. While Braun and Clarke (2021) describe this process of analysing data in a step-by-step guide, analysis was iterative and dialogic, with themes and excerpts being revisited and reworked multiple times to reflect new insights and the layered complexity of disabled-queer student experiences. As participants' narratives often intersected with multiple thematic areas, their stories could be read in different ways¹. This approach reflects a commitment to ethical, attentive, and nuanced analysis, recognising that thematic

¹ For example, Samantha, a 21-year-old first-year undergraduate student, spoke at length about how the intersection of her age and disability shaped her experience of university. Due to her health conditions, Samantha had been in and out of hospital, and described feeling as though she had arrived at university later than the imagined 'normative' undergraduate student age. Her story draws on multiple themes, and I recognise this as a common theme across participants' accounts, where no singular theme could contain the full nuance of their experiences, as participants' data could be read multiply. Samantha's story exemplifies the analytical challenges I encountered throughout this project.

interpretation is a situated, interpretive, and ongoing process rather than a linear or purely procedural task.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework that shaped and sustained this study, emphasising the centrality of feminist epistemologies and reflexive practice. Feminist, queer-crip values were not merely theoretical commitments but practical, ethical, and methodological guides that influenced every stage of the research, from how participants were recruited and interviews were conducted, to how data was analysed and represented. A commitment to inclusivity and ethical responsibility informed decisions large and small, ensuring that the study remained grounded in lived experience. My own positionality as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, gay man was a point of ongoing reflection. Situated at the intersection of both privilege and marginalisation, my experiences of navigating education as a dyslexic, autistic, gay man sensitised me to whose voices are heard and whose are dismissed, shaping my methodological commitment to co-constructing knowledge *with* participants rather than extracting it *from* them. At the same time, awareness of my whiteness, class, and institutional familiarity privilege compelled sustained reflexivity about how power circulates through research encounters and how this awareness might be used responsibly. Reflexivity, in this context, was not simply a research tool, but a necessary ethical practice that underpinned my efforts to listen attentively, analyse responsibly, and write with care (Maxwell, 2013).

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout, from securing informed consent and maintaining confidentiality, to creating a queer-crip interview environment that enabled participants to speak freely. The use of semi-structured interviews and flexible, participant-led approaches supported a richer engagement with individual stories and allowed for complexity and contradiction to come through. These methods aligned with research principles that challenge conventional hierarchies of knowledge production and seek to centre marginalised voices. The inductive, thematic approach to analysis was similarly shaped by these values. Engaging closely with participants'

narratives allowed me to construct themes organically, fostering insights grounded in lived experience rather than imposed from theoretical abstraction. This analytical process reinforced the project's alignment with feminist methodologies, which prioritise interpretive openness, emotional atonement, and political responsibility in research.

Ultimately, this chapter has sought to demonstrate that methodological decisions were not neutral or technical, but deeply entwined with the ethical and intellectual ambitions of the project. In this way, the study contributes not only to understandings of disabled-queer student experiences, but also to broader conversations about how feminist, reflexive, and ethically committed research can be practiced in higher education settings.

Chapter 4: The Road to University

This chapter explores an often-overlooked aspect of the student experience: the anticipation and expectations that disabled-queer students hold before starting university. For participants, the decision to pursue higher education was not merely an academic choice, but was imbued with personal hopes, aspirations, and imagined possibilities. These aspirations are best understood through the lens of queer-crip temporality (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013; Ives and Elkins, 2024) and queer migration (Gorman-Murray, 2009), which highlight how disabled-queer students navigate non-linear trajectories toward higher education. Falconer and Taylor (2017) argue that higher education is often framed as a site of personal liberation, an argument which resonates with my participants' idealised expectations. Throughout participants' accounts, the concept of university is not simply viewed as an educational institution but as a space of personal transformation. For my participants, the idea of university symbolises a 'a bright light', a site of liberation and acceptance of their identities that may previously have been constrained by family, cultural, or geographical boundaries. The anticipation of being surrounded by like-minded peers, engaging in LGBTQ+ communities, and gaining access to disability support services shaped their imagined, new (student) life. In this sense, pre-arrival imaginaries are not only aspirational but also migratory, as they involve movement across various boundaries in search of more legible, affirming spaces for disabled-queer identity. The allure of a fresh start and personal gain through university creates a powerful emotional drive. In this sense, the student experience begins long before enrolment or the first day of classes, starting instead with the road to university, a journey that is practical, emotional, spatial, and temporal.

This metaphorical road is one that my participants spoke about, describing their individual journeys of searching and applying for universities, and imagining their future lives as students. This road encapsulates both the practical and emotional dimensions of preparing for and entering higher education queerly and cripily. Participants detailed the complexities of selecting universities, deciphering which courses to pursue, and envisioning how they might experience and navigate university life. For some, this road represents a new and exciting path, an opportunity for adventure,

independence, and escape. It marks their first time away from family and familiar surroundings, evoking a sense of anticipation and possibility. For others, it is more daunting, due to being unknown and nerve-racking, a route they have yet to travel, leaving them unsure of how to drive through the unfamiliar terrain of university. For those returning to university, the road takes on a different character. Some participants described revisiting this path, having left university previously and returned to complete a different degree. Others reflected on the experience of moving on to postgraduate study, a road they had travelled before but now approached with greater familiarity and, in some cases, a better sense of how to drive. Yet, even for these returning students, the journey was not necessarily smoother, as they still faced detours along the way. Overwhelmingly, participants depicted this road as bumpy and unpredictable, marked by twists and turns, with obstacles to overcome, often requiring planning and recalibration. This road is not a linear or straightforward path; instead, it reflects the non-normative trajectories of disabled-queers, as well as intersecting with gendered and classed temporalities. For disabled-queer students, it is shaped by irregular, often extended, and non-sequential experiences, impacted by interruptions, re-routes, and the need to accommodate fluctuating access requirements. Their journeys reveal that the road to university is rarely direct, but is rather complex, nonlinear, and filled with both promise and uncertainty.

This chapter is divided into three sections, each illustrating either the anticipated and imagined version of student life, or the initial experiences of stepping into university. In the first section, *A Promised Land?*, I explore the expectations disabled-queer students form based on imagined ideas of what university life is going to offer them, and the transformative possibilities they believed university would hold. The next section, *A Planned Journey Ahead*, explores the practical work disabled-queer students must engage in prior to starting university. Finally, *Escapism* explores the sexual and social freedom that university was imagined to offer.

A Promised Land?

The anticipation and imagination surrounding university among disabled-queer students highlights how higher education functions not merely as an academic institution, but as an affectively charged site of potential personal transformation. University is imagined as a space where normative constraints of home, family, and local communities might be (temporarily) suspended, creating opportunities for self-expression, social experimentation, and the enactment of new identities (Falconer and Taylor, 2017). For my participants, this imagined potential was both spatial and symbolic. Entry into university represented not only an achievement but a possible escape from environments in which they had previously felt constrained or excluded. My participants spoke in depth about their excitement with respect to attending university. Despite awareness of ongoing challenges related to their identities, university was often framed as a site of self-expression and acceptance:

you grow up knowing that something is different [with you], struggle with making friends during school, and then come to the big bright city and university and think things will be very different. – Bethany

Bethany's reflection that she grew up 'knowing something is different' encapsulates a sense of otherness that predates entry into higher education, highlighting how university is imagined as a transformative site where personal and structural inequities can be renegotiated. This self-awareness, and her hope that 'things will be very different', illustrates how higher education can be conceived as a symbolic site of recognition (Miller, 2020). The image of the 'big bright city' situates this hope within a geography of aspiration and escape, echoing Chatterton's (1999) account of the city-as-promise, where the urban and the university become metaphors for (queer) transition. The imagined move away from family and to the city/university signals a deeper reorientation of time and self, where anticipation represents a temporal rupture rather than a linear progression, offering a chance to inhabit a new mode of being beyond past, exclusionary norms (Halberstam, 2005). In imagining higher education as a site where 'things will be very different', Bethany enacts a queer-crip negotiation of

futurity, resisting the sense that her future is determined by exclusionary norms (Ives, 2022). Her narrative, then, does not merely describe the excitement of transition but performs a form of world-making and of reimagining the university as both a personal and a social space of becoming. A similar experience of university being a ‘different’ place was also spoken about by Caroline and Dan:

coming to [university name] was like a fresh start. So there was this sense of reinvention, like new city new me type thing [...] when I came to [university name] and I'm like ‘I want to be out’. It was such a driving force for my student experience that I knew I was going to get involved in the LGBT society. I'd already looked at their social media and what they did. – Caroline

one of the teachers spoke to me, he was a modern studies teacher, and after I failed one of my prelims. He said ‘look, you can always fry burgers, but you can't always go to uni, this is the year you really should put your head down and get your exams, because I believe you can do this’. – Dan

Both Caroline and Dan imagine university as a place imbued with the hope of ‘difference’ and aspiration. Yet, the routes they describe towards this imagined future are markedly different. Caroline enacts a planned queer transition shaped by self-direction. Her re-entry into university reflects a temporal reset where she is thinking and anticipating queerly. Her pre-engagement with LGBTQ+ student groups before arrival illustrates the anticipatory labour involved in queer identity formation (Halberstam, 2005), showing how belonging can be curated digitally before physical arrival as a form of empowerment, which is, nonetheless, still shaped by institutional infrastructures. Caroline is thinking of her future (queer) self, allowing us to understand university as a way of (re)claiming self (Abrams et al., 2024).

Dan's entry is marked by contingency and external encouragement, with his imagined transformation mediated through his teacher's belief. His teacher's remark evokes a classed future, constructing higher education as the ‘promised land’ of possibilities and upward social mobility. Lawler

(1999) and Reay (2001, 2018) argue that higher education aspiration is deeply classed, gendered, and emotionally charged. Within these hierarchies, working-class students are often positioned as 'aspirational' only when aspiring upwards towards middle-class educational ideals, simultaneously being made to shoulder the emotional burden of doing so. Dan's teacher embodies this discourse, acting as an institutional voice that simultaneously enables and disciplines aspiration. By encouraging him to 'aim higher', the teacher frames university and upward mobility as a legitimate route out of working-class life. Yet such encouragement is double-edged as it simultaneously reproduces a classed logic in which legitimacy is conditional upon alignment with middle-class values and institutional trajectories. Dan's experience thus captures the tension between invitation and constraint, where his hope for a different future is permitted, but only through alignment with normative ideals of academic and social (classed) success, rather than being self-driven.

Read together, these narratives illuminate how futurity in higher education is unevenly distributed. Caroline's planned reinvention and Dan's contingent encouragement represent distinct modes of queer-classed transitions into university (Taulke-Johnson, 2010), one as self-authored, and the other as institutionally mediated. However, both reveal the conditions under which certain individuals are invited, or must be persuaded, to imagine themselves within the university. The 'promised land' also held some trepidation, for some who were anticipating the negotiating of disability and sexuality on campus:

knowing that I'm non-binary, queer, I use my walking cane, and autistic. I knew there were things that could make uni harder and I was wary of how others could perceive me. I've been the social outcast before. I had always thought uni would be great, but when I got my offer I started to think more about actually how is this going to be? – Ali

Ali explicitly links their trepidation to an awareness that their disability and queerness may not be received well in university settings. Their account ('I've been the social outcast before') foregrounds prior experiences of misrecognition, which have then shaped their emotional labour in planning for

university. Rather than anticipating a neutral or welcoming environment, Ali thinks queerly and criply about how they will be read and potentially excluded, revealing that the imagined university is never a blank slate, but an institution already known to be uneven in how it recognises or values particular embodiments and identities.

Ali's narrative illustrates how the anticipation of a 'fresh start' intersects with structural, competing ideas of self. Even as university is imagined as a site of renewal, its structures may not always offer a clean slate, with inequalities potentially re-encountered in new forms. For many, this hope of a fresh start was overshadowed by the awareness that institutional structures do not reset alongside personal beginnings. Structural inequities, past exclusions, and the limits of recognition travel with them into university life (Ahmed, 2010). Unlike participants whose accounts foreground anticipation and excitement, Ali embodies the emotional labour of anticipating university criply and queerly, reflecting concern about whether disability and queerness will be safe or legible on campus (see Mearns et al., 2020). This ambivalence can be understood as an intersection of multiple dimensions of access: affective, temporal, and institutional, where imagined inclusion can contrast with apprehension for those whose identities challenge normative expectations (Ahmed, 2012). Ali's hesitation further reflects the weight of past marginalisation, thereby aligning with Muñoz's (2020) notion of queer utopia, in which imagined futures offer potential for transformation, but mediated by structural constraints. At the same time, Titchkosky's (2011) conception of access as recognition clarifies that participation is not merely a matter of physical entry, but requires being perceived as a legitimate subject within institutional space. In this light, Ali's experience demonstrates that the imagined university as a 'promised land' is both emotionally contingent and structurally uneven when thinking about how their disability and queerness may be received on campus. The hope it affords is inseparable from the work of negotiating exclusion, reclaiming futurity, and anticipating the conditions under which one is read.

Collectively, participants' narratives reveal university as a site of possibility, but also of risk and uncertainty. Excitement is intertwined with apprehension where higher education is imagined as a space for all, yet one that may also reproduce earlier exclusions (e.g., Miller, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017). These expectations are shaped by intersecting inequalities, including class, disability, queerness, and prior experiences of marginalisation, which condition how safe or legible a disabled-queer identity is (Mearns et al., 2020). In this sense, university functions not merely as a site of academic progression but as a complex terrain of emotional and social negotiation. While *A Promised Land* captures the emotional weight of hope, projection, and longing that my participants associated with university, in this next section, *The Planned Journey Ahead*, I turn to how participants prepared for the logistical transition into higher education. This next section explores the strategies and anticipatory labour involved in crossing the threshold into university, showing that the journey was rarely straightforward. Rather, it was mapped through considerations of access, support systems, and the risk of being 'out of place' before even stepping foot on campus.

The Planned Journey Ahead

Disabled-queer students experience higher education through temporalities that often diverge from normative institutional rhythms, revealing how university timelines and administrative logics can misalign with disabled-queer lives. These misalignments require anticipatory labour that often begins before students apply or arrive on campus. Participants described navigating multiple, intersecting layers of planning, including selecting a university that felt inclusive, researching LGBTQ+ life, contacting disability services, and advocating for adjustments. This preparatory work highlights the complex, overlapping demands of transition and exemplifies queer-crip time — the non-linear, disrupted temporalities characteristic of disabled-queer life (McRuer, 2006) — which can contrast with the fast-paced, linear expectations of higher education (Price, 2011). In this context, the transition to university becomes a site where queer-crip temporalities continually collide with institutional rhythms, exposing how disabled-queer embodiment and anticipation often fall out of sync with administrative structures. These experiences make visible the work of anticipation, temporality, and embodied

labour, showing that pre-arrival preparation is not simply practical but deeply entangled with the negotiation of self.

it was actually more like who do I contact about my disability before I even go to uni because there are things I need to sort out and just know some things are in place before I go. – Ethan

when I was doing my UCAS I was searching ‘is it okay to be gay in [university name]?’ [...] Although I was looking forward to going and sort of knowing that things might be better, I still was scared because I didn’t know. – Ben

Ethan and Ben’s reflections illustrate the anticipatory labour that disabled-queer students undertake prior to university, revealing the differentiated ways in which they prepare for institutional life. Ethan’s planning focuses on navigating administrative structures and securing supports related to disability, whereas Ben, coming from a rural home environment with limited access to queerness, is oriented toward assessing the social and cultural safety with respect to queer life. Both forms of anticipatory labour reflect the structural inequalities highlighted by Reay *et al.* (2001) and Taulke-Johnson (2010). While Reay *et al.* discuss how class and race shape access and decision-making, and Taulke-Johnson discusses queerness and class, here we see similar dynamics operating around disability and queerness. Ethan’s engagement with institutional systems and Ben’s investigation of queer-friendly campuses demonstrate how pre-university work is mediated by unequal access to supportive structures, information, and safe spaces, highlighting the ongoing negotiation required to reach higher education. Together, their accounts demonstrate that pre-arrival labour is multifaceted, simultaneously practical and existential, and exposes the uncertainty inherent in negotiating university as a disabled-queer student. This planning disrupts normative imaginaries of moving into higher education as a seamless transition, highlighting the uneven temporality of access. McRuer’s (2006) theorisation of queer-crip temporality and Ives and Elkins’s (2024) empirical queer-crip temporality insights help conceptualise this pre-arrival labour as a form of non-linear temporal navigation, where disabled-queer students must plan and rehearse their entry into institutional spaces. Their accounts

highlight how preparatory strategies extend beyond academic readiness, encompassing safety, visibility, and inclusion, aspects often rendered invisible in dominant narratives of student life. This work does not result from a deficit of optimism, rather, it constitutes a deliberate negotiation within a higher education landscape that presumes normative embodiment and identity. While Ben and Ethan describe anticipatory labour during their undergraduate transitions, for postgraduate students this work and negotiation extended into later stages of higher education, showing how disabled-queer temporalities and preparatory strategies persist:

when I was going for my master's I had to really think about my diabetes [...] if I'm in an evening class I thought the uni coffee shops might not be opened, or if the vending machines doesn't work, which has happened in undergrad, and I need a bit of sugar like chocolate, if none of that's opened because it's shut after hours then that's an issue for me. – Paul

I'm going back to do a master's in September [...] I may as well get on the list [disability waiting list] right now because its seven months away but that's how long it will take. I'll be done with my master's before the arrangements get put in place. But I really need those things in place because it just helps immensely. – Dan

Paul and Dan's reflections demonstrate that anticipatory labour for disabled-queer students does not end with undergraduate study, but persists at the postgraduate level. Even with prior accommodations in place, students must navigate institutional uncertainty, anticipate infrastructural gaps, and plan for embodied needs as a form of ongoing, non-linear temporal work. Paul's concerns about evening classes and access to sugar, for example, exemplify how pre-emptive strategising addresses not only administrative requirements but also embodied vulnerabilities (Titchkosky, 2011). Similarly, Dan's need to re-engage with disability services highlights how institutional supports cannot be assumed to follow students across programmes, therefore requiring additional temporal and logistical foresight. These practices illustrate queer-crip temporality and futurity (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2014), with thinking criply embedded across university levels, systems and spaces. Access is not a static

provision but an ongoing negotiation that is spatial, temporal, and emotional (Puar, 2017). These accounts disrupt normative imaginaries of university as a linear, self-contained journey, instead revealing a continuous choreography of preparation. They also expose the friction between institutional and crip temporalities where the university's time, defined by deadlines and administrative logics, collide with the embodied, unpredictable pace of disabled-queer life. This temporal collision generates both affective and practical consequences, as students must continually reconcile their bodily and emotional rhythms with structures of institutional time.

Paul and Dan's narratives challenge the assumption that entry into university marks the end of effort for students. Participation, they show, is ongoing, highlighting that access encompasses temporal, material, and emotional labour, which is often unacknowledged yet central to disabled-queer survival in higher education (Mingus, 2011; Puar, 2017). Taken together with Ben and Ethan's, their accounts reveal how disabled-queer students invest substantial time and energy pre-arrival, reflecting both the unequal distribution of responsibility within accessibility systems and the temporal complexities of negotiating disability and queerness in institutional spaces. This preparatory labour extends beyond the academic calendar and demonstrates how students must anticipate and manage access continuously, exposing systemic shortcomings where individuals are expected to navigate and initiate systems. While these accounts show the importance of timely planning and intervention (Price, 2011), Eden and River's experiences illustrate a different means of navigating the planned journey:

I won't be getting my needs assessment until late October/start of November and I was initially asking day one of Freshers. I think I might have got in contact before Freshers because I know how long it might have been, but I didn't follow up until day one of Fresher's. – Eden

they had a three-week waiting list at the start of the academic year. It then took another three months to get a laptop [...] three weeks to see them, and then another three months to get my technology. That was a whole semester. – River

Eden and River's accounts illustrate how proactive planning and self-advocacy do not always secure timely access to support, thereby exposing structural inefficiencies. Even when students initiate contact well before arrival, persistent delays in, for example, needs assessments, assistive technology, or other accommodations, render anticipatory strategies only partially effective. These experiences highlight the temporal and material barriers that disabled students face, demonstrating that forward-thinking preparation cannot fully counteract institutional bottlenecks. Such delays have both practical and emotional consequences, disrupting academic engagement and shaping the lived experience of higher education (Hamraie, 2017). These moments reveal a deeper temporal misalignment between disabled-queer students and the institutions they inhabit. The bureaucratic time of the university collides with queer-crip temporalities that are embodied, fluctuating, and contingent (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013). Where the university assumes linear progression and timely responsiveness, disabled-queer students live and plan through rhythms of delay, uncertainty, and adaptation. The institutional timeline, therefore, not only fails to accommodate crip time but actively produces forms of temporal exclusion. As Eden and River's narratives show, the university's insistence on normative pacing and delayed responsiveness renders access precarious and continually deferred, making 'getting by' a form of temporal negotiation. Their experiences demonstrate that equitable participation in higher education is contingent not only on individual foresight but also on structural responsiveness, reinforcing that disabled students' survival within these spaces depends on continuous negotiation and advocacy.

Planning for university was not only an administrative process but also an emotionally and socially charged one. Participants described engaging in careful preparation around how to *be* at university, such as anticipating how they might be read by others, negotiating decisions about disclosure and expression, and envisioning how to find a sense of fit. These forms of emotional and social labour reveal that the transition to higher education extends beyond logistical preparation, encompassing the affective and relational work required to navigate belonging as disabled-queer students.

I started uni as a mature student. So I started at 21 and kind of the reason that I had delayed my entry into higher education was because of health issues [...] anyone starting uni as a mature undergrad is immediately deemed as weird [...] when it comes to meeting people I thought I'll constantly have to disclose that I had been unwell [...] I thought I'd always have to give people the backstory as to why I'm here older than them. – Samantha

in my brain I have socially appreciable topics to talk about, and not socially appreciable topics to talk about that I might talk about when I know the person a bit more [...] for example, if I was to speak to someone and they're like 'oh, my favourite game is Call of Duty', well I'm not going to tell them that I like Animal Crossing because that instantly says I'm queer [...] I play on the Nintendo Switch, so not the straight boy Xbox console they all talk about. – Ali

Samantha and Ali illustrate students' anticipation of how their identities will be read and their management of disclosure, expression, and fit with respect to peer interactions. Samantha's reflections on being a mature undergraduate demonstrate a temporal divergence from the normative school-to-university trajectory, requiring repeated justification of her 'older' crip presence and anticipatory social labour, a temporality reflected by Ives and Elkins (2024). Again, her account reflects crip time, highlighting how bodily unpredictability and illness disrupt linear institutional imaginings (Kafer, 2013), and placing Samantha 'behind' the imagined trajectory of an undergraduate student. Ali's account similarly demonstrates anticipatory navigation, curating conversational topics to mitigate potential heteronormative judgment, revealing acute awareness of gendered and heteronormative undertones in social conversation. Their reflections indicate a pre-emptive calculation of how queerness might be read or even rejected by others, and thus, how it must be managed. These practices can be understood through a form of impression management (Goffman, 1959): Samantha and Ali actively rehearsed and edited risks in anticipation of the social stage of university. Yet their performances are constrained and shaped by compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality (McRuer, 2006), rendering their participation structurally out of place in social and institutional

contexts. Samantha and Ali's accounts illuminate the pre-emptive, relational labour required to negotiate normative expectations, demonstrating that access to higher education is not solely procedural but deeply social, requiring ongoing anticipation and management of how one is perceived.

Taken together, these narratives problematise idealised notions of university as a 'promised land' of difference. Rather than a seamless site of inclusion, disabled-queer experiences reveal a complex choreography of anticipatory labour, where planning is simultaneously institutional, social, and emotional. This study illustrates how normative timelines and embodied expectations continue to dominate student life, requiring students to perform invisible labour to render themselves legible and relatable in university spaces. Queer-crip time (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013) offers a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Here, I empirically highlight how disabled-queer students navigate non-linear, disrupted temporalities. For Ben, Ethan, Dan, and Paul, queer-crip time manifested in pre-arrival administrative planning and advocacy; for Eden and River, it appeared through the temporal dissonance of delayed accommodations; for Samantha and Ali, it structured queer-crip anticipatory social navigation. In each case, participants were compelled to act ahead of the institutional calendar, anticipating both systemic and normative social expectations, a hyper-vigilant, future-oriented approach that Kafer (2013) identifies as characteristic of disabled-queer life.

These findings extend existing crip conversations (see Abrams and Abes, 2021; Abrams et al., 2024) by showing that queer-crip time in higher education is multidimensional. It encompasses procedural, social, and affective labour, not simply abstract temporal dissonance. Participants' accounts reveal how administrative inefficiencies, delayed accommodations, and the need to curate social interactions produce cumulative burdens that intersect disability and queerness. This labour is not additive, but interwoven, reflecting how these identities co-constitute lived experience and shape access (Samuels, 2017). Furthermore, the temporal contradictions embedded in their experiences illuminate the persistent misalignment between institutional timelines and disabled-queer student realities. In this way, these narratives extend queer-crip theorisation into the material and social

structures of (pre-) higher education. They show that being able to remain, participate, and move within university spaces is not simply a function of accommodations or stated commitments, but requires recognition of the temporal, emotional, and relational labour disabled-queer students perform to navigate, anticipate, and sustain their participation. By centring this pre-emptive, ongoing labour, we can see how higher education continues to operate on normative assumptions of time, embodiment, and identity, assumptions that disabled-queer students constantly negotiate, disrupt, and work in and around.

Escapism

Another dimension of the road to university lies in the anticipation of social and sexual escapism, where participants imagined higher education as a journey of liberation from normative constraints to explore identities previously limited by family, community, or geography. My participants illustrate how they strategically anticipated the temporal, spatial, and relational possibilities of higher education. In this sense, university emerges as more than an educational institution, becoming a social and affective terrain where queer-crip temporalities intersect with aspirations for autonomy, belonging, and self-expression:

queerness was never spoken about in school, and then you think of uni and it's very, very different. They do stuff for Pride Month [...] and I see that [university name] on social media they posted things about Disability Month. – Timothy

Timothy's reflection captures a disabled-queer tension. Queerness was invisible in school, whereas university offered visible markers of inclusion, such as Pride and Disability Months. This contrast highlights the emotional and aspirational stakes of higher education for disabled-queer students. These anticipations can be understood as an orientation towards the possibility of recognition (Ahmed, 2012). For Timothy, and other participants who imagined university in this way, these markers of visibility were not merely symbolic but constituted affective guides, shaping expectations of safety, affirmation, and potential for the queer-crip self. University thus emerges as a

site of both imagined and felt possibilities, where disabled-queer students navigate affective landscapes to anticipate inclusion, connection, and the freedom to perform and inhabit identities often constrained elsewhere. In this way, higher education functions as an aspirational escape, with a larger emotional pull for many participants who sought environments where they could explore their queerness. Once initially 'arriving' at university, many spoke of the sexual escapism and exploration they encountered, with Ben exemplifying this:

there was a lot of exploration when I came to uni. I was able to explore my sexuality a lot more. Just feeling like I was now in my own space and place and I could do that. Like I had the right to do that [...] I was like 'Oh, yeah once I get to uni it will be fine because I can then just do what I want, like everything will be better once I'm at uni'. – Ben

University was imagined to be a site of sexual exploration and escape, and a space offering liberation from heteronormative home environments, particularly for those from rural areas with limited queer visibility. This queer escapism reflects how the affective and spatial possibilities of higher education operate as motivators and guides for disabled-queer students (Falconer and Taylor, 2017). Ben's anticipation of autonomy and the 'right' to explore his sexuality exemplifies how physical separation from normative home spaces intersects with a symbolic claim to self-actualise. These movements toward university can also be read through the lens of queer migration, where mobility is not only geographical but deeply affective and symbolic (Weston, 1995; Manalansan, 2006; Gorman-Murray, 2007). Leaving home represents a form of sexual migration toward spaces imagined as holding the promise of difference and self-actualisation. Similarly, my participants' transitions to university were charged with a sense of movement from constraint to possibility, acts of spatial and emotional migration that allowed queerness to become thinkable and liveable. University, in this sense, functions as a vehicle toward queerness, where imagined queer freedoms shape both pre-arrival expectations and the initial experiences of participation. The emotional intensity projected onto university life underscores that higher education is not solely an academic pursuit, but that it is experienced as a

relational and affectively charged environment in which disabled-queer students anticipate both the practical and symbolic enactment of their identities. Ben's sense of 'betterness' was expressed across multiple participants' narratives, including Katie and Dorothy, who show the long-term imagined 'betterness' of university:

you come to uni kind of bright eyed and you see it as a positive light [...] Before I actually made the move I was like 'Oh yeah I'll be able to buy what I want, I'd be able to do what I want', cause my family is religious like Muslim. So I was like 'well, I get the freedom to explore my sexuality a bit more, maybe drink', so I was really excited with the prospect of having my freedom [...] I got a chance to finally be able to date people and have sex. I hadn't had proper sex until I went to uni. So that was also really kind of life changing I suppose. I went on a lot of dates with people as well. I just went through a phase where I was just going to every party and event, and chatting with somebody. – Katie

when you go to university there is a hope that you are going to meet all these new people and figure out yourself, and that life is going to be so different and wonderful. You just go on your own journey during university and you're more comfortable with who you are [...] it's easier when you go to uni to do all that, and to become more comfortable with yourself. And then maybe the sort of higher you go in uni then it just gets even better. – Dorothy

Dorothy and Katie's accounts reinforce the idea of university as a journey of both sexual and social escapism, offering opportunities for disabled-queer students to claim autonomy. Their narratives suggest that higher education functions not merely as an academic institution, but as a space where queerness can be enacted and explored beyond the constraints of home life. For participants who left restrictive or heteronormative environments, the physical and psychological distance from home created conditions for social and sexual self-expression, intimacy, and relational experimentation, marking university as a site of transformation and self-actualisation. These experiences illustrate how institutional, spatial, and temporal contexts intersect with affective

dynamics to facilitate queer exploration (Falconer and Taylor, 2017). In this sense, movement toward university mirrors what queer migration scholars describe as a spatial and emotional journey toward imagined freedom, and a form of mobility charged with desire and hope (Weston, 1995; Manalansan, 2006; Gorman-Murray, 2007). The act of leaving home operates as both a geographical and affective migration, through which disabled-queer students seek not only distance from heteronormativity, but proximity to spaces where queerness feels possible.

Framing university transition with respect to queer migration foregrounds the uneven geographies that shape disabled-queer lives. As Gorman-Murray (2009) notes, migration toward queer spaces, while liberating, can be entangled with structural and embodied inequalities that determine who can move, where, and with what support. For disabled-queer students, this movement is further inflected by access and accommodation needs, complicating the promise of mobility that higher education appears to offer (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). The desire to migrate toward university as a 'queer elsewhere' is both affectively charged and materially constrained, shaped by institutional, material, bodily, and temporal contingencies that make such movement possible only through negotiation and labour, as illustrated in *A Planned Journey Ahead*.

Sexual escapism, then, is not reducible to physical encounters, also encompassing emotional and social freedoms. University becomes a site where disabled-queer students navigate new forms of social and sexual labour, projecting imagined possibilities and negotiating the social worlds they are entering, thereby extending understandings of higher education as a transformative environment for marginalised identities. Sexual exploration emerged as a central theme in participants' transition to university, particularly for those seeking distance from familial and/or heteronormative constraints. Moving away from home and into student accommodation was a material and spatial precondition for queer self-expression. This shift represents both a literal and a symbolic journey of moving toward spaces that hold the promise of queer recognisability and the potential for reconfiguration (Weston, 1995; Gorman-Murray, 2009). These accounts therefore illustrate how higher education operates as a

site where spatial mobility, affective anticipation, and identity work converge. Despite temporal differences in attendance and variations in university LGBTQ+ policies, participants consistently framed university as a site of possibility, a space where queerness could be enacted. Dorothy's past reflections underscore the historical continuity of this function, while Katie's current experience confirms its ongoing relevance. Together, their narratives indicate that universities are not simply neutral backdrops for education, but actively constitute spaces where disabled-queer students negotiate autonomy, cultivate sexual and social agency, and enact forms of self-realisation that may be constrained elsewhere.

Alongside sexual exploration, participants' university experiences facilitated social escapism, providing the conditions to experiment with identities previously constrained by familial, cultural, or community expectations. Engagement in student social life (e.g., nightlife, informal gatherings) functioned as more than recreational activity, becoming a medium through which agency could be enacted. These spaces operated and were imagined as thresholds for temporal and spatial shifts, allowing participants to step outside prior normative constraints and experience new forms of social existence. University thus emerges as a site of identity work, where disabled-queer students negotiate social lives while actively constructing alternative social selves (Kafer, 2013; Falconer and Taylor, 2017). For Katie and Dorothy, this process involved leveraging social activities to translate newfound freedom into tangible forms of independence, marking a shift from constrained environments toward relational and social experimentation.

In doing so, university functions as both a queer migratory destination and a site of social reorientation, where non-normative identities are negotiated through the intersecting logics of space, time, and embodiment (McRuer, 2006; Gorman-Murray, 2009; Kafer, 2013). This framing highlights how disabled-queer students inhabit the university through crip futurity (Kafer, 2013), via the imaginative work of envisioning liveable futures even within institutions structured by normative assumptions. Such processes position higher education not merely as a backdrop for learning but as

an affective landscape where the aspirations of queer migration, the demands of crip time, and the realities of institutional life converge.

While Dorothy reminisced about her undergraduate years with noticeable excitement in her voice, her use of the word 'hope' suggests a recognition that the imagined idea of university can sometimes be an idealised dream, encompassing the hopeful idea of 'escaping' original home life, and 'escaping' to university, which she sees as a place to explore. For my disabled-queer participants, the concept of finding a new 'home' carried the idea of freedom, a place that provides the space, time, and opportunity to explore and express identity categories without restriction. In this sense, university is imagined and felt as an exciting and potentially new 'home', an imagined safe and welcoming environment where disabled-queer embodiments are accepted and can thrive. However, while it may be easy to claim universities as 'safe' spaces (via policies and legislation), there are still a myriad of examples of disabled-queers being rendered 'unsafe' (Allen et al., 2020), which will be explored further in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how the student experience often begins long before physically setting foot on university grounds. For my participants, the process of anticipating and applying for university was not merely administrative, but was deeply emotional, with their imaginations of what university could personally bring them being a significant motivator for them attending higher education. The prospect of independence, self-exploration, and the potential for greater social acceptance exerted a powerful pull, offering the hope of a radically different life.

For disabled-queer students, university was often imagined as a promised land of freedom from the constraints and expectations of home. It represented the possibility of living more openly, and expressing identities that had previously been suppressed or rendered invisible. University was envisioned as a place where queerness and disability could not only coexist but be embraced, where participants could claim new identity categories and explore previously inaccessible aspects of self.

This imagined journeyed liberation was particularly powerful for those who had grown up in environments with little visibility offered to disabled-queer life. University thus became a projected site of possibility, a space charged with hope for sexual, social, and personal exploration. Yet when these aspirations met institutional barriers, exclusions, or delays, the promise of freedom often gave way to frustration and disillusionment. The journey to this imagined promised land was physical, emotional, personal, and structural, and rarely smooth or equitable. While the freedom and independence associated with higher education were eagerly anticipated, disabled-queer students described the additional and often invisible labour required simply to access university on equal terms. This work included early contact with disability services, securing accommodations, and repeatedly advocating for their own access needs, all before arriving on campus, with many of my participants already performing significant administrative and emotional labour to ensure that the university would be ready for them. This pre-arrival work highlights a temporal and structural disparity, with the burden of access displaced onto those already navigating marginalisation. Despite proactive engagement, participants still faced long waiting lists for needs assessments and delayed implementation of accommodations, leaving some to begin the semester without essential support. These experiences reveal how the institutional machinery of accessibility, though framed as supportive, can in practice reproduce inequity through administrative slowness. For many disabled-queer students, the imagined promise of university as a liberating space was therefore undercut by systemic inaccessibility, exposing the gap between the idealised rhetoric of inclusion and its lived reality.

A key takeaway for universities is the need to reduce the burden of pre-university labour placed on disabled-queer students. The necessity for these students to engage in early-stage advocacy highlights how universities must rethink the temporal boundaries of student support. Rather than requiring students to chase services or initiate repeated contact, institutions could develop more streamlined and integrated pre-enrolment support. This might include automatic prompts or guided pathways within the application process, ensuring disabled students are aware of the full range of services available to them. Clearer, more transparent information on how to access support, paired

with proactive outreach from the university, would ease the pressure on students to locate this information themselves. By embedding accessibility within admissions and onboarding, universities could significantly reduce the emotional and practical strain disabled-queer students face (Ives and Elkins, 2024). Ensuring that support structures are both easily accessible and proactively offered would allow these students to enter university on a more equitable footing, sparing them the disproportionate labour that too often defines their pre-university experiences (Ives and Elkins, 2024).

The concept of queer-crip time (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013) further offers universities a framework for rethinking how they conceptualise and accommodate students' temporal experiences before arrival. Disabled-queer students often move through higher education along nonlinear and non-normative timelines: some return after earlier experiences of exclusion or disruption, while others take longer to complete their studies due to fluctuating health or access needs. Universities must recognise and respond to these diverse trajectories rather than privileging linear, normative models of progression. Doing so requires reflection on how institutional structures create uneven experiences, and how recognition of queer-crip temporalities might be embedded into pre-enrolment and transitional processes.

As I move into the next chapter, I turn to what happens once disabled-queer students pass through the doors of university. A central tension emerges in these transitions: the hope for personal reinvention and freedom, and the risk that these expectations may not be met. Participants' accounts revealed uneven distributions of access, acceptance, and opportunity within university spaces. Who, after eagerly anticipating escape, arrives only to encounter a similarly unwelcoming environment? Who is granted the freedom to explore their identity, and who is denied that possibility? Who is able to move 'higher' within the university, accessing the inclusive spaces or postgraduate experiences that Dorothy spoke of, and who remains on the margins, unable to experience fit? These questions are not merely rhetorical, but expose the structural inequalities embedded within participants' experiences. The optimism, excitement, and hope that characterised the pre-arrival stage were often short-lived.

As the next chapter, *Am I Allowed?*, explores, the realities of university life frequently fell short of the promised land. Rather than spaces of freedom and acceptance, disabled-queer students often encountered exclusion, inaccessibility, and institutional rigidity. Their journeys reveal that while university may be imagined as a transformative space, its realities are marked by ongoing and uneven forms of negotiation and constraint.

Chapter 5: Am I Allowed?

In this chapter, I explore the uncertainties my disabled-queer participants faced when university did not meet their pre-arrival expectations. Central to this is their questioning of ‘fit’, where my participants felt a sense that they did not align with a normative student mould of being able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, white, and middle-class (Ahmed, 2012; Burke, 2013). The chapter’s title, *Am I Allowed?*, captures a persistent and often unspoken tension around not only physical access, but also the emotional labour, self-doubt, and ongoing negotiation involved in students’ academic and social lives. Participants’ experiences of misfit reflect structural and institutional pressures, including exclusionary classroom practices, inaccessible campus spaces, and broader norms that create a feeling of otherness. This chapter interrogates how university structures and cultures determine who is recognised and therefore able to fully participate.

While these experiences unfolded at the level of individual feeling, they also reflect a higher education sector under considerable strain. Underfunding, industrial action, and intensifying marketisation have reshaped academic life (Mountz et al., 2015; Loveday, 2021; Mahn et al., 2023). Within this context, promises of equality, diversity, and inclusion often remain aspirational rather than achievable, as universities negotiate competing pressures with respect to performance metrics, funding priorities, and reputational management (Burke, 2013; Mahn et al., 2023; Gilani, 2024). These conditions form the backdrop to the question *Am I Allowed?*, which speaks not only to personal uncertainty but also to the precarious structures through which inclusion is imagined and enacted in higher education. In this sense, participants’ feelings of misfit are inseparable from the wider fragility of the university itself.

Importantly, I do not present disability or queerness as fixed categories. I treat identities as fluid, shifting between participants, and across time and place, and always shaped by context (Butler, 1990; Plummer, 2011). They were relational and emergent, rather than simply attributes students brought with them to campus. For example, Ethan described queerness as difficult to locate, while

Katie reflected on 're-transitioning out of disability', highlighting how bodily experience and institutional recognition transform over time. Dorothy drew strength from her dyslexia in academic contexts, whereas Paul became newly aware of his 'disabled' status once entering university, causing anxieties around institutional and societal expectations. Samantha and Lisa framed disability in terms of energy and capacity, navigating the demands of social life, and Timothy and Ali, both autistic, highlighted how normative university expectations rendered certain behaviours marginal. Across all accounts, identities shifted with context, as some were amplified in particular settings and subdued in others. Participants described moments when queerness was hyper-visible while disability was overlooked, and vice versa. In other spaces, both identities receded or intersected with additional axes of marginalisation, including race, class, and age. These accounts underscore that identity is not static but continually negotiated, and shaped by institutional conditions, interpersonal dynamics, and internal reflection. This fluidity aligns with the queer-crip lens of this thesis, focusing on resisting institutional pressures to stabilise categories, and instead attending to the ongoing, relational, and processual nature of disability and queerness across time, space, and context. Yet, this fluidity often sits uneasily within university systems that depend on fixed, recognisable categories for policy and access purposes. To become 'legible' as disabled or queer requires translating lived complexity into bureaucratic forms (e.g., disclosure statements, medical evidence, or diversity data), processes that can both enable and constrain recognition (Titchkosky, 2011). I use Ben and Lisa's accounts to demonstrate the vast differences across participants' experiences of navigating disability and queerness on campus. Their accounts exemplify how these identities are lived relationally, and are shifting, contextual, and differently legible within university life:

I feel like queerness has more vocalness at [university name]. I feel disability, unfortunately, does not have the same vocalness [...] I think queerness is very loud at [university name], and disability goes under the radar at times [...] if it was a sort of bar chart then disability wouldn't be as high as queerness, just in terms of awareness or support. I think queerness would be

[up] here and disability would be [down] here [...] Unfortunately my identity here [disability] is not as maybe fun or glamorous as my vocal queer identity. – Ben

[person] loves to say to me 'just rest. Just take it easy'. I'm like that 'I'm not going to not be disabled if I get a good night's sleep. That's not how that works'. It's not like I can take two weeks off and then come back and that's it gone. It's chronic and I need to manage my energy consistently every day [...] In my normal life I am not like 'oh, I'm waking up queer today'. I am just waking up. I'm going about my day. It does not feature in my day in the way that it seems to for other people because I am the only queer person in my department that I'm aware of. – Lisa

Here, we see how Ben and Lisa experience disability and queerness in distinct and contrasting ways. Ben's metaphor of a bar chart captures the uneven institutional politics of visibility. Queerness, in their account, is not simply 'more vocal', but more readily recognised within campus diversity (Ahmed, 2012). In contrast, disability, for Ben, remains less publicly legible, constrained by stigma and narratives that render it private. This disparity points to how universities privilege certain forms of difference that are celebratory, outwardly expressive, and compatible with inclusivity agendas, while obscuring those that demand material change or unsettle institutional norms (see Dawson, 2023). Lisa, by contrast, foregrounds the temporal and embodied dimensions of her physical disability. Her discussion of energy management highlights how she must renegotiate time, productivity, and participation across her day, thereby reflecting *crip time* (see Kafer, 2013). Whereas Ben experiences queerness as a visible and performative presence, Lisa's account situates disability as an enduring negotiation that shapes her ability to take part in academic life. Attending university is not an automatic act of participation but a calculated, daily negotiation, exposing how higher education's demand for continuous presence and productivity is built around able-bodied norms (Campbell, 2009; Titchkosky, 2011).

Taken together, these narratives reveal how higher education continues to value certain forms of diversity over others, constructing 'inclusion' around what can be easily celebrated rather than what challenges its temporal, spatial, and bodily logics. In this sense, queerness and disability do not simply coexist, but are differently positioned within the university's economy of 'inclusion'. Ben and Lisa's experiences show how identity in higher education is not only intersectional but situational, mediated by visibility, time, and institutional legibility. Their accounts invite us to question how universities produce and sustain uneven forms of fit, where some identities can be proudly displayed while others must be carefully managed or contained.

To explore these complexities of 'fit', the chapter is structured into three interconnected sections that expand on the title *Am I Allowed?*, each illuminating how participants negotiated this internal questioning. Accounts invite reflection as to how universities can ever fully prepare themselves for 'everyone and anyone' when identities and needs are fluid and always shifting. Inclusion, in this sense, becomes less a static achievement and more of an ongoing negotiation shaped by the emotional and structural conditions under which 'fit' is made possible or denied in higher education.

The first section, *It's Not in My Blood*, explores participants' reflections on feeling misaligned with university due to their identities. This section captures the subtle, yet pervasive, estrangement participants described when their identities seemed at odds with their expectations of university life. For some, this created a quiet but enduring sense of not fitting and that university was not 'in their blood', something that was not meant for them or natural for them to attend.

The second section, *Personal to Structural*, reframes these experiences as more than individual failings. I highlight the structural dimensions of exclusion which shapes how disability and queerness are recognised and accommodated. Universities, as institutions, are underpinned by norms that can actively produce misfit. By shifting focus from the individual to the institution, this section complicates

Am I Allowed? through showing that participants' uncertainty stemmed from structural constraints rather than personal deficit.

The third section, *Can I Speak?*, explores how disabled-queer and other marginalised identities are discussed, or silenced, across campus, from classrooms to interactions with staff and university management. Silence around identity topics heightened participants' sense of being out of place and reinforces the persistent question of *Am I Allowed?*

Together, these sections illuminate the navigation of structural fit, permission, and (in)visibility in university. Participants' reflections reveal that, despite portrayals of inclusivity, higher education remains structured around implicit norms. Disabled-queer students' questioning of their place exposes enduring, intersecting inequities, showing that, even in spaces claiming diversity, universities can privilege certain ways of being while others remain precarious.

It's Not in My Blood

Upon arriving and spending time within the university, many disabled-queer participants described a shift from early excitement and optimism towards doubt and self-questioning. Rather than reflecting a lack of ability or preparedness, these shifts illuminate how higher education environments are structured around implicit norms that distinguish between those who appear to 'fit' and those who do not. As participants encountered everyday academic expectations, social rhythms, and institutional practices, feelings of misalignment emerged, producing an internal questioning of whether they were ever meant to be there. These experiences reveal how universities can reproduce exclusion, not through overt barriers but via taken-for-granted assumptions about who the university is for and what a legitimate student should look like.

you're looking about thinking why are these other people who seem to get by just fine and I'm not. What am I doing wrong? Or is there something about me that just doesn't get it or is not meant to be here? – Katie

Katie's words foreground the internalisation of systemic expectations. Rather than simply describing personal struggles, her reflection highlights the affective labour of navigating a space structured around normative assumptions. Participants frequently interpreted barriers as personal failings, which points less to individual inadequacy and more to a structural misalignment between 'the student' and institutional norms (Shotwell, 2015). This pattern of self-blame was common across all participants. Instead of recognising external structures that may have contributed to their struggles, they initially blamed themselves for their perceived inability to *fit* within the university. In doing so, they internalised systemic exclusion, misinterpreting barriers as evidence of their own inadequacy:

I didn't feel like uni was for somebody like me. Someone who just didn't get it at all. Someone who wasn't out and was really unwell with my health conditions all the time [...] I was just like 'well, I'm obviously not smart enough or good enough to be here. I'm not out, I've got these health conditions right now, I'm working class, I'm a carer' [...] I didn't fit the mould of what a uni student should be. – Caroline

Caroline's reflection exposes the 'mould' metaphor as an index of structural exclusion. The doubts around fit and place my participants felt were often rooted in a perceived mismatch between themselves and the idea of who a university student 'should' be, perceiving themselves, along with their identities, as not aligning with the correct 'mould'. Participants' internalised sense of misfit signals how universities continue to uphold implicit templates of the 'ideal' student, often coded as able-bodied, neurotypical, white, middle-class, and heterosexual (Leathwood and Read, 2009; Earle, 2023; Wilde and Fish, 2025). Participants' reflections reveal two interconnected aspects. First, the sense that their identities do not align with their perceived idea of who or what a university student 'should be'; and second, the broader structural and institutional forces that shape exclusion in higher education. 'Fit' in higher education is shaped by normative systems of (dis)ability, class, and heteronormativity, thereby shaping how institutions define and value certain students (Reay, 2018b; Wilde and Fish, 2025). 'Fitting in' is not simply about comfort, but being recognised as a legitimate subject within

institutional ideals and hierarchies. Misfit operates both internally and externally, as students feel personal inadequacy while the university simultaneously communicates who it is designed for, where 'being the right kind of person' is not just about ability or intelligence, but performing the right kinds of social, cultural, bodily, and emotional behaviours that the institution rewards (Inckle, 2012; Brim, 2020; Addison et al., 2022a). Participants struggle to see themselves aligning with these expectations and internalised this as self-doubt. As Shotwell (2015) writes, the embodied experience of misfit is experienced as personal shortcoming, a sentiment echoed by several participants who felt their discomfort was an individual flaw rather than a response to exclusion the concept of the 'ideal' or 'good' student is further explored by Puwar (2004), who argues that universities are designed around a very specific, often exclusive, concept of what a student is, which is something Eden, a neurodivergent student, spoke explicitly about:

uni seems to just work very well for that neurotypical, able-bodied, easy to comprehend stuff kind of student. That's who it feels it is set up for, and so for those who aren't like that then I have found it very challenging. It really pushes me to my end every year and I so look forward to my summers when I don't need to do much because my head hurts to much after a year of uni. – Eden

Eden's account makes visible the embodied and temporal dimensions of disability. Her exhaustion underscores how academic norms privilege certain cognitive and physical rhythms, producing structural fatigue for students whose bodies and minds do not align with these expectations (Titchkosky, 2011; Dolmage, 2017). In describing how university is for the 'readily able, neurotypical student', Eden positions herself as separate to the image of someone who can 'do' and succeed at university, pointing to a normative template of academic life (Price, 2011). This institutionalised ideal values certain forms of communication, cognition, and embodiment while casting others as deficient or excessive. Fit, in this sense, is not a passive or background condition but an active institutional production (Taylor, 2012). Universities teach, design, and spatially organise around particular

assumptions of 'the student'. Lecture halls, teaching styles, and assessment formats privilege those who are already aware of the unspoken rules of how to 'do' university, reproducing the very (ableist) hierarchies they appear to transcend on their inclusion mission statements. These reflections collectively highlight how universities are not simply sites where fit happens or fails, but those where it is continually constructed through pedagogical, spatial, and cultural practices.

Collectively, participants' narratives reveal how higher education institutions can create a pervasive sense of misfit. While participants often framed their struggles as personal, these reflections read structurally, indicating universities' implicit reliance on normative student ideals and the uneven distribution of support. Fit and misfit are therefore structurally produced. Accessibility is not just a matter of individual adaptation, but determined by the fit between institutional design and student diversity (Puwar, 2004; Ahmed, 2012). Taken together, these narratives reveal higher education's implicit hierarchies of recognition. Students who do not conform to normative templates are required to manage their participation carefully, navigate invisible barriers, and expend emotional, cognitive, and bodily labour to maintain enrolment. Their sense of university 'not being in their blood' is thus less about individual inadequacy and more about encountering structures based around a limited conception of 'the student' (Puwar, 2004). In reframing these accounts structurally, the data illustrates that internalised self-doubt among disabled-queer students is a response to systemic misalignment, not an innate flaw. The university, through its design and implicit standards, produces differential access and recognition. My participants' experiences foreground the disconnect between the idealised promise of higher education and the structural realities that marginalise certain bodies, identities, and modes of participation.

While this section has focused on how disabled-queer students internalise feelings of inadequacy and interpret misfit or difficulty as personal failings, their reflections simultaneously point to broader systemic factors. Participants' sense that 'something is wrong with me' cannot be fully understood without situating this within the structures, norms, and expectations of higher education.

The next section turns outward, examining the institutional, pedagogical, and cultural factors that shape these experiences, and thereby highlighting how universities themselves produce misalignment, exclusion, and differential recognition of student identities.

Personal to Structural

As I progressed through discussions with participants about why university did not feel as though it was ‘in their blood’ it became clear that their sense of misfit was not merely individual but structurally produced. While participants articulated a profound sense of displacement that felt deeply personal, their accounts reveal how institutional norms, spatial design, and administrative frameworks actively shape and intensify experiences of exclusion. The intersecting identities of my participants created intersecting inequalities that were systemically overlooked. What appeared as a personal struggle was in fact produced by university structures that privilege certain bodies, minds, and ways of being. The perspectives from queer-crip theorists across time (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013) help (re)frame my participants’ accounts, demonstrating that their deeply personal struggles actually speak to wider systemic and institutional barriers. Their work illuminates how discomfort, misfit, and self-doubt emerge not from individual deficit, but from the institutional norms that privilege able-bodied, normative modes of learning, time, and participation. In this sense, participants’ reflections are not merely autobiographical, but reveal how university structures continue to delimit who belongs and on what terms. In this section, I explore how disability and queerness are materially and spatially encoded into the university landscape, shaping how disabled-queer students move through or are obstructed within campus space. Firstly, I turn to Caroline, who, after describing how university systems had been deadnaming² trans students at her institution, reflected on how these practices undermine the inclusive messages the university publicly promotes:

² Deadnaming refers to the act of calling a transgender or non-binary person by a name they no longer use (usually their birth name) after they have adopted a new name as part of their gender affirmation

they [university] still have processes and things that screw up at times and it just reminds you that you can say that everything's good, you can be visible, and you can be inclusive, but if actually some of your processes still cause harm to people then actually you're not as inclusive as you act. – Caroline

Caroline's account exposes how institutional inclusion often operates at the level of discourse rather than infrastructure. A university's public messaging of celebrating visibility, diversity, and inclusion can be undermined by the very systems that continue to misrecognise trans and non-binary students. Deadnaming is not a minor administrative error, but a structural practice that re-inscribes harm and normative assumptions about gender, identity, and legitimacy. Inclusion fails when it relies on symbolic commitments rather than the transformation of the everyday institutional practices through which students are recognised and legitimised (Harper and Quaye, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2017; Dawson, 2023).

In Caroline's reflection, the harm is twofold: trans and non-binary students must repeatedly bear the emotional and bureaucratic labour of correcting the institution, and the university's systems reveal who they are designed around. This aligns with Nicolazzo's (2017) argument that trans students experience micro-level slippages of recognition where trans bodies are bumping up against institutional system failures. These failures accumulate to enshrine structural exclusion, and following Ahmed's (2012) critique, institutions use diversity as a form of branding while failing to dismantle the mechanisms that produce inequality. What appears to be a technical or administrative issue is in fact epistemic. The university's systems assume gender to be fixed, stable, and easily classifiable, with these assumptions rooted in cisnormative and ableist logics (Baril, 2020). These systems privilege students whose identities align with institutional expectations and render others as disruptions to be managed. The persistence of misrecognition signals that trans and non-binary students are not the imagined university subject, rather, they appear to be 'corrected' by systems. As Price (2011) reminds us, such normative institutional templates do not simply sort bodies, they actively shape who is seen

as a 'legitimate' university participant and whose presence is treated as excess or an administrative burden.

Caroline's reflection thus moves the analytic focus from the individual to the structural. Her account demonstrates that inclusion cannot be accomplished through rhetoric or representational politics alone, but requires remaking the institutional systems, data infrastructures, and administrative processes that otherwise position marginalised students as misfitting. The notion of institutional infrastructure was also spoken about by River, whose account offers a compelling example of how infrastructures can fail to support the realities of students living at the intersection of disability and queerness. River is a queer, non-binary student who uses mobility aids, and their experience highlights how campus infrastructures can produce barriers when disability access and gender inclusion are not considered together:

if the lifts aren't working in the building, then I have to take this incredibly long route to find another accessible route or lift that will then take me to the accessible and gender-neutral bathroom in those buildings because they haven't made sure that there is an even distribution of facilities to use. – River

River's account illustrates that accessibility is not a neutral or purely technical provision, but an intersecting, spatially embedded phenomenon. The repeated failure of lifts and the uneven distribution of accessible and gender-neutral facilities produce what might be understood as fragmented inclusion, in which access exists in principle but is unreliable in practice. River becomes a recipient of this fragmentation, undertaking significant physical, temporal, and cognitive labour simply to move through campus. This highlights that inclusion cannot be reduced to policy compliance or the presence of designated facilities but must be understood through how accessibility is practically integrated into everyday university life. River's account resonates strongly with Mearns et al. (2020) and Slater and Jones's (2021) analyses of trans, non-binary, and disabled experiences of campus space, particularly their observation that the absence of inclusive infrastructure forces marginalised students

to take indirect routes, avoid certain spaces, or rely on 'workaround' solutions. As Mearns *et al.* and Slater and Jones show, such spatial arrangements are not incidental but actively shape how non-binary and disabled bodies are rendered out of place within the university. River's reliance on distant accessible and gender-neutral toilets echoes Mearns *et al.*'s discussion of disabled toilets functioning as a catch-all for those outside of cis-normative gendered expectations.

Importantly, River's experience demonstrates how disability and queerness are not simply accommodated separately but are jointly misrecognised with respect to spatial organisation. The segregation of accessible and gender-neutral toilets across campus reflects an institutional logic that treats disability and queerness as distinct categories rather than intertwined lived realities. This compartmentalisation produces a structural form of misrecognition, where intersecting identities are acknowledged only partially and are never fully anticipated. In this sense, River's navigation of campus space reveals how universities continue to design for a normative student body, with disabled-queer students required to adapt themselves to systems. What River's account ultimately exposes is that accessibility is relational rather than static. It is shaped by the reliability of infrastructure, spatial proximity, and the cumulative effort demanded of students over time. As with the participants in Mearns *et al.*'s study, River's experience underscores how institutional commitments to inclusion often fail to materialise in aiding day-to-day movement through campus. The emotional and bodily labour required simply to access basic facilities becomes an ongoing reminder of not being the assumed subject of the university.

The structural separation of disability and queerness is something that came up across participants' narratives. I wish to explore this separation a little further by drawing on the accounts of Erika, Ethan, Timothy, and Eden to provide insight into and critique of the structural, institutional set up with respect to disability and queerness. Their accounts exemplify how many of my participants spoke of their identities, explicitly articulating how each aspect of their identity impacts them differently in various contexts. Some of my participants' reflections on their identities made it clear

that while they identify with and embody these identities, there is a push-pull dynamic that is often experienced, with disability impacting some aspects of university life, and queerness impacting other, separate aspects. My participants experience disability and queerness in distinct and sometimes conflicting ways. The ability to separate and reflect on these differences allows them to speak to how each is felt and navigated differently within the university environment:

I've spoken about autism more than sexuality. But I think that's because autism affects education and sexuality affects social acceptance. My sexuality doesn't affect my ability to learn or engage with learning. I think my sexuality is impacted more wider. – Erika

it's mainly my disabilities that affects my learning aspect. Whereas my queer identity comes up more in the social aspect. – Eden

Participants' accounts reveal how universities structure experiences unevenly, producing differential weight and visibility for disability and queerness. Disability is materially and institutionally legible within academic contexts, shaping engagement, attendance, and performance; whereas queerness operates primarily in social domains, requiring students to self-manage recognition. Erika and Eden's reflections illustrate how the structural frameworks of higher education channel students into separate spheres, making some aspects of self immediately relevant to institutional life while marginalising others. This division not only affects where and how students feel they can participate but also signals which identities are treated as integral and which peripheral. Timothy and Ethan deepen this distinction, complicating the picture and shedding light on the nuanced, contradictory ways disability and queerness are received in classroom discourse:

disability is something to do with the university because it can impact your reading and how you learn [...] I get a feeling that queerness is something that they think happens outside of uni [...] it's almost as if queerness is not relevant to university [...] they feel disabilities are at university, but queerness is not. – Ethan

people understand disabilities or can make more allowances for disabilities than they can for queerness. Maybe queerness isn't something that they can tangibly see, whereas with disability, people can tangibly see that and so it makes more sense in their head [...] if queer chat is brought up in a class then people would think that you're a snowflake, but if you brought up disability, very initially, then it would be okay, but if you kept digging deep about disability and how it relates to maybe something you're reading or something in society, if you kept going on about it then they would roll their eyes and go 'here's another snowflake'. – Timothy

Ethan and Timothy's accounts reveal a hierarchy of legibility whereby disability is institutionally recognised because it is perceived as relevant to learning, whereas queerness is treated as peripheral, personal, and confined to the social aspects of university life. Queerness is rendered less tangible, less legitimate, and therefore more vulnerable to dismissal or marginalisation in academic discourse. This creates structural boundaries around which aspects of student identity are seen as fitting within the institution and which are positioned outside its concern. The differential treatment of disability and queerness highlights how higher education frameworks simultaneously accommodate and constrain student identities, shaping what can be claimed and where. Across participants' accounts, this distinction was a recurring pattern.

Disability is most commonly engaged with by universities through institutional and legal frameworks, notably the Equality Act 2010 and the operation of university disability services. Within these frameworks, disability is rendered administratively legible and positioned as an issue that must be managed to secure academic participation. Disability services are typically tasked with implementing 'reasonable adjustments', such as examination modifications or assistive technologies, intended to mitigate barriers to learning. Through this process, disability becomes recognised primarily as impeding academic engagement and therefore requiring institutional intervention. Support is consequently framed less as a transformative practice and more as a mechanism of compliance, oriented towards the fulfilment of legal obligations rather than the reconfiguration of the structural

conditions that produce disability in the first place. This bureaucratic orientation reflects the broader mechanics of institutional life, in which responsibility is operationalised, documented, and delegated, rather than structurally embedded (Ahmed, 2012).

By contrast, queerness, particularly where it is not perceived to intersect with curriculum content, academic performance, or regulatory requirements, is positioned as peripheral to the institutional remit of the university. As Msibi (2013) similarly observes, queerness is frequently constructed as a private or personal matter rather than as an institutional concern. It is often rendered informal, optional, or extracurricular, and spatially confined to LGBTQ+ student societies rather than embedded within academic or administrative structures. While such societies can provide important sites of affirmation and community, they are predominantly framed as social rather than institutional spaces and are largely sustained through (queer) student labour. Consequently, queerness becomes both spatially and symbolically marginalised within university life, recognised only in selective and contained contexts rather than integrated across the institution as a whole.

Taken together, this institutional differentiation illuminates how universities delineate and hierarchise 'legitimate' student identities. Disability is rendered visible through legal obligation and bureaucratic recognition, while queerness is acknowledged through conditional tolerance and optional participation, becoming visible only when students themselves actively assert it. In this sense, universities appear to conceptualise disability as a matter of compliance and queerness as a matter of culture or lifestyle. This distinction reinforces uneven regimes of recognition, in which some identities are constituted as appropriate subjects of institutional intervention, while others are relegated to the realm of personal expression, thereby shaping whose needs are understood as structurally consequential and whose are rendered supplementary or peripheral.

The split is further deepened between a staffed disability *service* and a student-led *society* for queerness, signalling a hierarchy of recognition, where disability is an administrative obligation, and

queerness is a personal matter to be managed or celebrated outside institutional accountability. This split — a *service* versus a *society* — shapes students' experiences, where one aspect of identity is formally supported, and the other marginalised and requiring careful self-management. Universities thus produce and reinforce unequal conditions, privileging what can be codified and accommodated, while identities that resist such legibility are siloed or rendered invisible. Even in seemingly inclusive disciplines or initiatives (e.g., gender or queer studies), Zaborskis (2022) argues that certain (queer) lives and experiences may remain invisible because they must operate within dominant logics of curriculum and institutional discourse. By legitimising certain identities through formal frameworks and relegating others to informal, social spaces, universities both uphold existing hierarchies and constrain the ways in which students can participate in academic life. This insight sets the stage for exploring the day-to-day implications of how structural patterns shape disabled-queer students' navigation of campus, access to resources, and experiences of (mis)fit. I turn next to Phoebe and River to explore structural inequalities tied to disability, and to Ethan, Timothy, and Ali to examine how queerness is institutionally managed, showing how experiences are inseparable from the structures that produce them.

More Than a Ramp

Across participants' accounts, disabilities were described as shaping, and being shaped by, the rhythms, demands, and spatial configurations of university life. While support was often framed through legal compliance under the Equality Act 2010, many participants experienced only exam accommodations, signalling a narrow, material approach, as critiqued in Chapter 2. For some, this material approach reflected assumptions about the 'default' undergraduate student, with postgraduates overlooked (Bethany: 'why talk to disability services at uni when they don't do anything really other than put exam adjustments in? I'm doing a PhD, we don't have exams'). Participants' reflections reduced disability services to individualised interventions rather than them being part of a structural response. This aligns with Dolmage's (2017) critique of institutions attempting to 'adjust'

students to existing structures rather than reimagining those structures. Across campus, structural ableism emerges not only in pedagogy and assessment design, but also in physical navigation and social expectations, issues that no single department can address (Dan: 'it's gonna take more than one department to make the campus inclusive [...] it's got to be a whole campus thing'). To explore how these dynamics play out in daily university life, I draw on the narratives of River and Phoebe, who illustrate the ways in which different types of disabilities, both visible and invisible, are felt across university spaces. By examining their experiences together, I demonstrate how the university, as an institutional structure, responds differently to varying forms of disability:

you are expected to act and be a certain academic way, and if you don't fit that then you do kind of get looked at like 'why you struggling?' But you might not be struggling at all. You just write differently or present differently, but you are seen to not be as good as the rest [...] those who can write well, or not be monotone are rewarded in their grade. It literally is in the marking criteria [...] There was a few times giving presentations that I was marked down for not giving eye contact and being monotone [...] why do I need to be a performing arts student to be here and to pass. – Phoebe

[university name] isn't the most physically accessible campus. It's on its own land so you would've thought that it would be very accessible, but it isn't [...] the campus was just not easy and comfortable to move around in. It was so difficult [...] I realised the inaccessibility of the uni just made continuing on too hard and difficult [...] once I did use a wheelchair or walking sticks I then realised how inaccessible the university was and it became so hard to get about. – River

Phoebe and River's accounts highlight different dimensions of structural ableism in higher education. Phoebe illustrates how hidden and learning disabilities intersect with institutional norms. Academic success is defined by performative abilities such as fluency and speed. Students become acutely aware of these implicit expectations, which remain unspoken for others, reflecting Garland-

Thomson's (2020) observation that disability renders institutional norms hyper-visible, whereby disabled students become aware of implicit expectations that remain unspoken. Phoebe captured this dynamic as an academic competition that is unevenly distributed and structurally privileged, resonating with McRuer's (2006) critique of compulsory able-bodiedness, where success is conflated with the ability to perform a normative academic self. River's experience foregrounds the material and spatial dimensions of ableism. Inaccessible campus infrastructure directly constrained participation, engagement, and retention, demonstrating that disability emerges from the interaction between bodies and environments (Oliver, 1990; Hamraie, 2017). Their account also challenges assumptions about campus design. While urban universities must navigate pre-existing city infrastructure, whereby the city's problems become the university's problems, isolated campuses are often presumed to be more accessible due to having greater control over their layout. However, even self-contained campuses, where planners might presume accessibility, can fail to anticipate the embodied realities of disabled students, showing how institutional design reproduces structural inequities.

The repeated need to expend additional labour to meet these unspoken rules exemplifies the pressures of queer-crip time, exposing how institutional assessments and pedagogical practices implicitly enforce ableist standards. Participants' reflections suggest that disability services, while providing legally mandated accommodations, are insufficient to address these structural inequities, where support is narrowly focused and confined by regulatory frameworks (Equality Act 2010), leaving broader exclusionary norms unchallenged. McRuer (2006, p. 158) urges universities to move beyond these ableist norms by asking, 'How can we crip it?', inviting a reimagining of higher education that challenges assumptions embedded in pedagogy and assessment. Crippling might involve questioning notions of linear progress and standardised productivity, creating alternative modes of demonstrating and capturing knowledge that centre difference as generative rather than exceptional. Such an approach aligns with participants' reflections and has the potential not only to improve access for disabled-queer students, but also to disrupt the very institutional ideal of the 'typical' student.

Together, these accounts reveal the limits of framing disability solely as a matter of legal compliance or individual support. Universities codify ableist norms in pedagogy, assessment, and space, producing differential access and recognition. These findings resonate with broader sociological literature on institutional structures, cultural expectations, and spatial design collectively reproducing inequality (see Price, 2011; Titchkosky, 2011; Garland-Thomson, 2020), illustrating the necessity of proactive, relational, and systemic approaches to accessibility. A queer-crip pedagogical framework calls for a reimagining of university practices that integrates difference into the core of teaching, assessment, and campus design, rather than treating accommodations as exceptional interventions (Kjaraan and Kristinsdóttir, 2015).

Queer Limits and Legibility

Similarly to discussions of disability, participants described their queerness on campus as marked by a persistent sense of misfit, reflecting structural and institutional norms that subtly define which forms of queerness are legible, acceptable, and welcome. I use Ethan, Katie, Timothy, and Ali to illustrate how queerness is unevenly recognised and structurally mediated. Despite visible EDI policies and celebratory symbols (e.g., Pride flags or LGBTQ+ History Month), participants revealed a more complex reality, where queerness may be acknowledged but on constrained terms. Katie, a lesbian student, reflected on feeling overlooked within LGBTQ+ student spaces when lesbian identities were not meaningfully represented, while Timothy, an asexual student, questioned the limits of campus understandings of LGBTQ+ inclusion:

I had to beg them [the LGBTQ+ society] to make a lesbian event. When they do events they would never put up the lesbian flag. It just kind of really annoyed me cause I was like 'but we're part of the community as well'. I don't understand why we don't get our own events. – Katie

I have wondered though can we only talk about queerness in terms of gay and lesbian. What about asexuality? Can we talk about asexuality? When you say to somebody that you are

LGBTQ+ the immediate thing is gay or lesbian or bisexual or trans, and people might forget that there's more than just those four labels. There are people that are questioning, there's asexual people. – Timothy

Katie and Timothy's accounts reveal that on-campus, social understandings of queerness are narrow and exclusionary. Queerness is often conflated with a narrow 'go-to' archetype of gay, middle-class males, with identities outside this frame rendered invisible, and universities similarly prioritising these embodiments (Formby, 2017b; Keenan, 2018; Taylor, 2023). Many participants embodied identities beyond this dominant understanding and spoke of feeling apart from mainstream queer norms. Katie's struggle to secure a lesbian-specific event and Timothy's questioning of whether asexuality can be meaningfully discussed illustrate both the limits of campus queer imaginaries and the conditional nature of recognition. Their experiences resonate with those of Taylor and Scurry's (2011), who argue that institutional diversity efforts often create conditional recognition by celebrating identities that align with dominant queer norms. As Katie and Timothy express, queer inclusion on campus is selective, frequently reproducing hierarchies within LGBTQ+ communities (Ellis, 2009; Valentine and Wood, 2009). A similar sentiment was expressed by both Ali, a non-binary queer student, and Eden, a transwoman, with regards to gender:

there are times I think people are okay with me being gay, but they don't know what to do when I say I'm non-binary. – Ali

there is the trans and non-binary swim session. I have looked at it and it says woman and non-binary people. And what comes to mind with me there is just 'who is deciding what non-binary means?' [...] I would like to attend that but I worry that I would be turned away. It scares me going to some things like that that are on at the university. I don't like when these labels are used to allow some in and others not. – Eden

Ali and Eden's accounts illustrate the challenges non-binary and trans students face in navigating university spaces. Even when institutions signal openness, for example, through inclusive

policies or gender-specific programming, these spaces remain structured by cisnormativity. This requires significant emotional labour as students must constantly negotiate and manage the legibility of their identities (Nicolazzo, 2017). Non-binary identities resist fixed categorisation, yet institutional practices and social expectations often remain tethered to a gender binary (Spade, 2015; Jaekel and Nicolazzo, 2022). Eden's concern over a trans and non-binary swim session ('who is deciding what non-binary means?') exemplifies how access can be conditional, leaving some to question their intended participation. Such experiences reveal the limitations of bureaucratic diversity initiatives, which often rely on visible, stable categories to administer inclusion (Puar, 2017). Even spaces intended to be affirming can reproduce exclusion, reflecting Caroline's earlier quote that opened this section, thus highlighting how institutional understandings of gender continue to constrain who is legible.

The experiences of Katie, Timothy, Ali, and Eden collectively illuminate how queerness is both made legible and constrained. Participants' narratives reveal that while celebratory LGBTQ+ inclusion is signalled through policy, symbols, and events, its day-to-day interaction is structured around dominant, recognisable, and institutionally understandable forms of queerness. Katie's struggle to have the lesbian flag acknowledged, Timothy's highlighting of asexual erasure, and Ali and Eden's experiences as trans and non-binary students, demonstrate that queerness is often only visible when it conforms to homonormative legibility (Taylor, 2012; Formby, 2017a; Keenan, 2018). These accounts illustrate the limits of institutional inclusion, whereby policies, societies, and events may provide formal recognition, but can equally fail to accommodate the multiplicity and instability of those queer identities that resist easy categorisation. Eden's anxiety over a trans and non-binary swim session underscores the conditional and performative nature of inclusion. Ali's observation that being gay was relatively accepted, while being non-binary provoked confusion, further highlights the uneven terrain of queer legibility on campus. In both cases, queer students are required to undertake significant emotional and epistemic labour, negotiating how their identities are understood and accepted (Ahmed, 2012; Nicolazzo, 2017).

From a queer-crip perspective, these experiences reveal how institutional inclusion often demands conformity to recognisable scripts of identity (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013). Non-binary, trans, and asexual identities disrupt normative expectations of coherence and legibility, producing 'out-of-place' experiences that require translation work, explaining, or modifying one's identity to fit institutional logics. This reflects broader structural patterns within Scottish higher education, where the visibility of LGBTQ+ policies or societies does not guarantee substantive inclusion (Taylor, 2012). Inclusion, in practice, reproduces hierarchies, privileging certain identities while marginalising those that are less legible or are disruptive to existing norms. These accounts also resonate with critiques of performative or checklist-based diversity efforts (Formby, 2017b; Miller and Smith, 2021), which foreground representation without addressing the structural conditions that shape recognition. Institutional spaces are underpinned by assumptions of stability, coherence, and recognisability, which dictate whose queerness counts. As Katie and Timothy's experiences show, hierarchies emerge across both social and academic spaces, privileging some queer identities while rendering others invisible. Ali and Eden further illustrate that policy recognition alone cannot resolve exclusion: without addressing normative assumptions embedded in the fabric of university life, institutional inclusion remains conditional and limited. Together, these accounts suggest that universities must move beyond assimilationist frameworks of inclusion, instead treating queer students' experiences as foundational to reimagining campus life. Such a shift would centre difference as generative rather than deviant, challenging existing hierarchies and institutional logics to create spaces that accommodate the full spectrum of queer identities, rather than only those legible within dominant norms.

The accounts explored in this section reveal how experiences of misfit are not confined to disability or queerness individually, but emerge through the intersectional, structural logics that underpin university life. Across participants' narratives, disability and queerness became sites through which the limits of institutional inclusion were exposed. While disability was described via academic structures (e.g., assessment criteria, speed, attendance, participation) and positioned students as 'behind'; queerness revealed how inclusion was conditional on existing within recognisable,

understandable identities. In both cases, difference was only accommodated when it could be made legible to institutional norms. This convergence reflects Garland-Thomson's (2020) observation that those excluded by institutional design often become hyper-aware of the norms shaping participation, and aligns with McRuer's (2006) and Kafer's (2013) arguments that inclusion is too often predicated on assimilation to able-bodied and heteronormative ideals.

Seen together, these accounts illustrate that the university's promise of equality, diversity, and inclusion frequently stops short of structural transformation. Disabled-queer students are welcomed if they can perform versions of self that align with institutional expectations of 'the student'. The resulting sense of not fitting, and of being simultaneously visible and marginal, is therefore not an individual failing, but a reflection of how universities remain structured around and for normativity. As Ahmed (2012) notes, diversity work often reproduces the very exclusions it seeks to undo, creating spaces where students must continually translate or manage their difference to belong. The emotional, intellectual, and bodily labour that participants described, whether in navigating inaccessible campuses, negotiating disclosure, or questioning who 'counts' within LGBTQ+ spaces, signals the persistence of a university ideal that privileges certain kinds of learners. Their experiences remind us that inclusion cannot be achieved through visibility or representation alone. Rather, it requires reimagining the university itself via crip-queering its assumptions so that difference is not managed or accommodated but is accepted as the starting point.

Can I Speak?

A further tension in participants' navigation of their internal question '*Am I Allowed?*' arose from the noticeable absence and at times avoidance of disabled and queer topics across academic spaces. While many acknowledged visible signs of inclusion (e.g., Pride flags, Disability Awareness Month) these efforts often felt superficial or disconnected from the academic core, where such topics were frequently avoided. In other words, gestures of inclusion rarely translated into engagement with disabled and queer issues within the curriculum or classroom dialogue. This lack of integration fuelled

questions of fit, reinforcing a sense that while their identities were nominally acknowledged, they were not fully legitimised within intellectual discourse.

This absence can reflect broader curriculum politics through which certain identities and knowledges are rendered peripheral or excluded altogether. Many participants described lecturers and staff sidestepping discussions of queerness, disability, or intersectionality, not always overtly but noticeably. For those embodying these identities, such avoidance reinforced cumulative feelings of misfit. While disabled-queer students may physically occupy university spaces, many felt their intellectual presence, contributions, and perspectives were too 'difficult' to address:

a lot of walking past and not even acknowledging our queer poster, and walking past to go to another poster, and just being like 'oh I don't understand this, I don't want to understand it, I don't see the point in this research so I'll just ignore it'. And even again all our queer posters were all put together, so it wasn't spread out across and in with different types of research. – Bethany

Bethany's account exemplifies the tension between visibility and invisibility within academic spaces. While the posters themselves represent an attempt to make queer research visible, the responses she describes (e.g., walking past, ignoring, clustering) simultaneously render these invisible. Her experience highlights how efforts to assert presence can be undermined by institutional and peer practices that subtly negate recognition. Bethany's observation that queer-related posters were grouped together rather than dispersed throughout the event further exposes how institutional practices reproduce marginality. The physical act of grouping queer posters together further enacts a symbolic boundary where the work is visible only in a confined space, and invisible in relation to the broader academic landscape. In this sense, visibility is conditional, as it exists but only within limits defined by the institution, while invisibility is equally produced through avoidance and symbolic marginalisation (Dotson, 2012). The clustering of queer research(ers) creates a visible boundary between what is considered 'mainstream' and what is positioned as niche, echoing Puwar's (2004)

argument that certain bodies and knowledge remain 'out of place'. Such spatial organisation mirrors broader intellectual hierarchies, where identity-based work is tolerated but rarely integrated, suggesting it is acknowledged as important only within its own silo.

Although Bethany's experience occurred outside the classroom, it vividly illustrates how academic inclusion can be undermined through subtle acts of separation and avoidance. The physical layout of the event becomes a metaphor for epistemic boundaries: who is invited into the centre of knowledge production, and who remains at its edge (see Fricker, 2007). As Zaborskis (2022) notes, universities often privilege normative forms of knowledge while marginalised discourses are accommodated to an extent, as long as they do not unsettle these norms. In this context, Bethany's experience points to the persistence of epistemic exclusion, where disabled and queer scholarship is positioned as supplementary rather than constitutive of academic life. For participants, such experiences of spatial and symbolic distancing produced not only feelings of isolation but a deeper questioning of their belonging, of whether their research, and by extension their selves, were recognised. Across accounts, this sense of being 'pushed to the margins' was recurrent. The absence of engagement with disabled-queer issues was not merely observed but felt across silences, glances, and spaces where certain topics did not fit. The following section explores how this lack of engagement shaped participants' ongoing negotiations of fit and place within academic life.

Speaking in the Class

The avoidance of disabled-queer and other identity-based topics within the classroom emerged as a recurring thread across participants' experiences. This absence was not incidental, but was felt daily and directly shaped participants' ongoing internal questioning. For many, the classroom represents a space where ideas can be explored. Yet, when conversations about identity were sidestepped, it signalled something deeper: *if I cannot speak about my identities, do I belong here?* Participants frequently described feeling hesitant to raise identity-related issues, even when directly relevant to course content. This hesitation stemmed from a perceived reluctance among academic

staff to engage, and from a fear of dismissal or discomfort. The result was a quiet burden, with participants weighing whether to remain silent or risk visibility and vulnerability. Eden and Dan's accounts powerfully exemplify this atmosphere of avoidance within the classroom:

it is very much dependent on the demeanour of the lecturers or the peers. Sometimes you are walking on eggshells a bit. Sometimes you can assume someone might not be as receptive to the things you want to talk about. – Eden

some lecturers just don't want to discuss some topics and so I didn't think I could bring some things up. Some things wouldn't be allowed to be said here, or if I did say anything then they [lecturers] would try and move it on [...] Staff play a big role in making campus and making university feel good to come to. They can manage classroom chat and behaviours. They can manage what is being said on lecture slides and readings. – Dan

Eden and Dan's accounts illuminate how the classroom can subtly, and at times overtly, communicate exclusion through what is left unsaid. Eden's description of 'walking on eggshells' exposes the emotional labour of navigating uncertain boundaries, and of gauging what can be expressed and to whom. Dan's reflection that 'staff play a big role in making campus [...] feel good to come to' underscores how educators' choices shape not only learning but belonging. The avoidance of identity-related topics does not simply reflect interpersonal discomfort but institutional norms that define what counts as appropriate or legitimate knowledge. These silences echo a pedagogical distribution (Rancière, 1991) whereby institutional arrangements determine who is known within educational spaces. Such distributions demarcate the limits of intelligibility, shaping which knowledges are valued and which are rendered peripheral. The exclusion of disabled-queer perspectives from classroom dialogue thus constitutes not just a social or pedagogical oversight, but an epistemic one. As Riddell and Weedon (2014) note, inclusion in higher education has often prioritised physical access over intellectual participation. My participants have shown how disabled-queer students may be *present* in the class yet intellectually unacknowledged, with their realities left unspoken within the

very spaces designed for critical thought. In this sense, participants add depth to Taylor's (2025) call for a (queerer) reimagining of curricula: not merely by adding LGBTQ+ content or acknowledging disability, but by fundamentally rethinking the values and norms that underpin what is teachable and sayable. For Eden and Dan, the classroom becomes a site of continual risk assessment. A space where self-censorship replaces dialogue in the absence of structural affirmation. Their accounts expose the limits of inclusion as currently practised, highlighting that belonging requires more than presence: it demands pedagogical environments that actively invite marginalised students into knowledge production.

Yet it would be simplistic to position teaching staff as solely responsible for this silence. As Zaborskis (2022) reminds us, academics operate within institutions where precarity, performance metrics, and reputational risk constrain what can be safely discussed. Silence, in this sense, can be a form of professional survival rather than indifference. Under neoliberal conditions, staff are increasingly expected to perform care and inclusion while navigating competing pressures that can simultaneously limit the ways in which feminist, queer, anti-racist, and anti-colonial knowledge can be discussed in the classroom (Zaborskis, 2022). Mountz *et al.* (2015) highlight the emotional and professional toll of 'speaking out', particularly for minoritised academics whose labour of inclusion often goes unrecognised and unrewarded. Within this context, marginalised academics may feel compelled to tread carefully, particularly when discussing topics that challenge dominant narratives or are perceived as 'political' or 'risky'.

Eden and Dan's narratives thus remind us that exclusion is not only about absence but about how presence is structured. The classroom is not merely a space of knowledge transmission but a site where identity is negotiated, and where recognition or erasure is felt. Their accounts invite a shift in focus: from questioning whether disabled-queer students 'fit' with the university to examining how the university fails to accommodate the complexities of who its students are. The question, then, is not simply who is in the room, but whose realities are expressed and valued within it.

Speaking Outside of the Classroom

While the classroom serves as a critical site of exclusion, the marginalisation of disabled-queer discourse extends beyond. Some participants express uncertainty about whether they would feel comfortable raising disabled-queer issues with university management, while others highlight that such discussions do occasionally occur. The contrasting experiences of Victoria and Ben showcase the differences felt across cases and institutions, where some environments foster hesitancy around discussing disabled-queer issues at the university level, while others provide opportunities for these topics to be addressed:

I don't know how many disability or queer-related issues I would bring up at committee or university level. I think that was confident conversation among some of my peers. – Victoria

we [student representatives] sat down and they [university management] went 'what are the biggest issues facing trans and non-binary people in [university name] and what can we do?'

And that produced a massive action list that me and the Director of Student Services review pretty much every three or four weeks [...] queerness really is respected from staff and students in general, like I say we had a round table talk with the president of the uni. – Ben

Victoria and Ben's contrasting experiences highlight the tension between visibility and invisibility in institutional discussions of disabled-queer issues. Victoria, despite being willing to advocate for others, described hesitancy in engaging with university management at her post-92 institution, noting that discussions among peers felt safe, whereas formal institutional spaces could leave her and her peers feeling 'pushed out'. Ben, by contrast, experienced structured opportunities to discuss queer, trans, and non-binary issues through a roundtable talk with university leadership, signalling a heightened visibility and stating that 'queerness really is respected', allowing their voice to be heard and legitimised. These accounts suggest that institutional type and formal mechanisms for engagement shape whether disabled-queer concerns are 'on the agenda'. In other words, institutional inclusion is uneven, meaning visibility in some spaces may confer recognition, while invisibility in

others can reinforce marginalisation, shaping both the affective and material dimensions of participation. I also draw on these accounts to highlight two key considerations: (1) the significance of university type in shaping disabled-queer conversation, and (2) the dynamics of who participates in, and is granted space within, disabled-queer conversations beyond the classroom.

Despite assumptions about university type and status, such as the belief that post-92 institutions are inherently more inclusive and diverse, Victoria and Ben's accounts present a more complex picture. Their experiences suggest that it is not institutional type that determines acceptance or marginalisation, but rather the presence or absence of intentional practices. This resonates with the work of Mountford-Zimdars *et al.* (2015), who caution against over-reliance on institutional type as a predictor of student experience, arguing that disparities in outcomes and belonging are shaped by the cultures and practices universities cultivate. Similarly, Breeze *et al.* (2019b) note that inclusion cannot be achieved through symbolic gestures or institutional branding alone, but requires sustained commitment to challenging dominant norms. My participants' accounts give empirical weight to these claims, demonstrating that what mattered was not the institutional type *per se*, but whether they could locate practices of care, representation, and participation. Miller (2015a) similarly emphasises that institutional recognition, including leadership support and integration of queer voices into campus life, affirms LGBTQ+ identities, a point echoed by Vaccaro and Koob (2019), who showed that students feel more included when diversity initiatives are accompanied by tangible institutional engagement. These practices signal a broader institutional commitment to inclusion, beyond university type, contributing to the affective feeling of diversity being welcomed or marginalised based on how it is materially enacted on campus.

Secondly, this contrast also raises questions about *who* gets to participate in institutional conversations about disabled-queer issues. While Ben's experience of structured meetings and open dialogue with university management was significant, it was also rare among my participants. Few, if any other, of my participants mentioned being involved in such roundtable, managerial conversations.

I feel this could suggest either that these conversations are not happening across other universities, thereby making Ben's experience an exceptional one; or that these conversations are happening but few students are aware of them. Ben's position in the student union can afford greater visibility, knowledge, and access to university management discourse (see Fielding, 2001; Cook-Sather, 2006). This highlights that participation is unevenly distributed where students in formal leadership roles or those perceived as safe or knowledgeable are more likely to be invited into these spaces, while others, including those who are less 'out', not in leadership positions, or cautious of visibility, may find these conversations to be out of reach (Ahmed, 2012). These dynamics prompt reflection as to *who* is regarded as a legitimate spokesperson for disabled-queer concerns and has a seat at the table. While the existence of meetings like the one Ben described is promising, such initiatives risk reproducing exclusion if they only engage a select few 'diversity champions', rather than being embedded across the institution. Universities and management must therefore consider not only what conversations are happening, but also *who* is in the room. For these dialogues to be inclusive, they must be widely promoted, accessible, and designed with sensitivity, considering the different levels of comfort, visibility, and risk that students may face.

Across accounts, the absence of disabled-queer and other identity-based discussions, both in and beyond the classroom, emerges as a key mechanism through which exclusion is enacted, leaving participants to question their fit. Such silences reflect not only individual hesitation but also broader constraints, including precarious working conditions and institutional pressures that shape lecturers' capacity to engage with these issues (Zaborskis, 2022). The contrasting opportunities for engagement with university management further illustrate that institutional practices and the spaces they produce play a central role in shaping students' sense of acceptance and legitimacy. Creating change, therefore, requires universities to ensure that these spaces are deliberately accessible, and embedded across the institution, rather than limited to a select few. Attending to these structural and cultural dynamics is essential if higher education is to support the diversity of students' experiences and enable all disabled-queer students to participate confidently in academic life.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how my participants came to feel that they did not ‘fit’ at university, a feeling often rooted in the perception that their position and recognition did not align with dominant understandings of *who* or *what* a university student *is* or *should* be. While participants sometimes imagined university as a ‘promised land’ of inclusivity, contemporary UK higher education is shaped by structural pressures (e.g., underfunding, ongoing industrial action, and the precariousness of staff and institutional resources) that make such a vision aspirational rather than universal (Burke, 2013; Mountford, 2014; Mahn et al., 2023). Widening participation and equality, diversity, and inclusion agendas signal institutional commitment to accessibility, yet these exist alongside sector-wide strains that limit the practical realisation of inclusion. Against this backdrop, participants’ perceptions of misfitting reveal how structural, cultural, and institutional norms continue to shape the university as a space that privileges a particular normativity and ignoring intersecting inequalities (e.g., heterosexuality and able-bodiedness; see McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013).

Throughout this chapter, I have drawn attention to how these institutional logics operate in ways that marginalise disabled-queer students, both through what is made present and what remains unsaid. My participants shared how the absence or avoidance of meaningful discussions around disability and queerness, particularly in academic settings, contributed to a sense that these aspects of identity were either irrelevant or inappropriate in the university context. My participants’ accounts echo broader research highlighting a persistent gap between EDI policy commitments and the lived experiences of disabled and queer students (Riddell and Weedon, 2014; Miller, 2015b). These findings suggest that university management and policy makers need to critically examine how inclusion is operationalised in practice, rather than assuming formal policies automatically translate into student experiences.

While some participants acknowledged that their universities had visible signs of inclusion, these efforts often felt disconnected from their day-to-day academic and social realities. These

symbolic gestures, while potentially well-intentioned, did not translate into sustained or embedded cultural change, and can, for Dawson (2023), further exclusionary norms, where institutional diversity work becomes symbolic rather than transformative. Positioning such gestures within a politics of 'diversity work' leads to individuals being asked to embody institutional commitments that are not materially supported (Ahmed, 2012). From this perspective, symbolic inclusion is not neutral but performative, allowing universities to declare commitment while avoiding structural accountability.

As a result, participants were left feeling as though disabled-queer issues were acknowledged superficially, rather than engaged with critically or structurally, a finding reflected across scholarship (see Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Breeze *et al.*, 2019a). The separation of disability and queerness was particularly felt across university spaces, where participants noted how these were differently positioned, with some forms of difference treated as legitimate subjects of discussion and others sidelined. Disability, for instance, was more frequently accommodated or acknowledged due to its perceived link to academic performance and legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. In contrast, queerness often remained intangible, considered a personal matter managed through student-led societies and disconnected from the 'serious' work of learning (Valentine and Wood, 2009). The uneven institutional recognition of disability and queerness reveals how universities continually negotiate the boundaries of who and what can gain access, and who remains peripheral (Titchkosky, 2011). Where queerness is formally included, such as in the humanities and social sciences, gender or queer studies courses, these offerings remain marginal and constrained by institutional logics and sector demands (Brim, 2020; Zaborskis, 2022). These dynamics not only shaped participants' material access to support but also sent messages about what is institutionally recognised, and what is left to be self-managed.

What emerges from participants' narratives is a complex and uneven landscape of fit, involving continuous negotiation that cuts across intersecting inequalities, thereby shaping who is the 'proper student' (Reay *et al.*, 2010; Inckle, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Reay, 2018b), and impacting upon internal self-

questioning. The accumulation of these experiences led many participants to question whether university was a space where they could thrive, or even if it was a space they were meant to be in at all. The question *Am I Allowed?* became more than a passing doubt, it was an embodied uncertainty that shaped how participants moved through university life, how they viewed themselves, and how they imagined their futures at university. Importantly, I have aimed not to present disability or queerness as singular or stable identity categories. Rather, I have foregrounded the fluid and intersectional ways in which identity was felt across different spaces and times. Participants themselves often separated or differently emphasised aspects of themselves and their student life depending on context, particularly foregrounding disability in relation to learning, and at other times highlighting queerness in relation to social life. In doing so, they revealed the dynamic, push-and-pull nature of identity, and the ways in which different aspects of self can be rendered more or less visible depending on the demands, constraints, and affordances of specific university environments. In this way, this chapter has not only illuminated the structural conditions contributing to disabled-queer students' sense of (mis)fit but also illustrated the emotional and embodied toll of navigating such spaces. Ultimately, the question *Am I Allowed?* extends beyond students' internal reflections, highlighting how 'fit' is actively produced through normative pedagogies, institutional cultures, and campus architectures (Ahmed, 2012; Brim, 2020). Participants' experiences show that performative measures of inclusion often fail to translate into meaningful engagement (Dawson, 2023), leaving disabled-queer students to navigate structural and cultural expectations largely on their own. In this way, the embodied uncertainty of *Am I Allowed?* reflects an ongoing institutional shaping of who is recognised, legitimised, and made to feel at home within higher education.

Chapter 6: Social Fit, Structural Friction

Participants have described the anticipation and excitement they felt in relation to attending university. However, upon arrival, many found themselves questioning whether they truly *fit*. Despite their initial enthusiasm, participants often sensed that they did not fit the ‘mould’ of a university student. Feelings of misfit were compounded by the perceived difficulty of openly discussing identity-related topics across university spaces. As I move into this chapter, I shift focus to how participants navigated the social dimensions of (mis)fitting at university. Experiences of misfit extended beyond the walls of learning and into the social arena, revealing how structural and temporal dynamics resonate across the wider university environment. This chapter explores how participants negotiated, resisted, and at times reimagined the social conditions that made fit feel either possible or out of reach. Drawing together the concepts of fit, temporal disconnect, and institutional labour, I explore how these interlocking forces shape the everyday social experiences of disabled-queer students. To illustrate these points Bella and Ali explain:

you hear all the time about uni that you will meet all these people and instantly bond and be friends for the rest of time [...] I haven’t found those people that everyone says you meet [...] it’s things like the partying, going out every weekend, meeting your flatmates and getting on with them, its things like that that make uni uni. – Bella

it was super scary to begin with walking in and not seeing any weird people, because where do I sit and who can I make friends with [...] I thought there would be people willing to meet new people from different areas, different sexualities, with disabilities, different genders [...] I thought ‘right it’s a big uni so there’s going to be a very high number of gay people’, but then I come here and no one looked visibly queer, so it was like ‘where are the queer people?’ – Ali

Bella and Ali’s sense of missing out reflects a temporality of student life, one structured around able-bodied, middle-class, and heteronormative rhythms of participation (Ahmed, 2012; Kafer, 2013). Bella’s feeling of being socially ‘off-time’ is not a personal failing, but an affective dissonance produced

through institutional norms of socialisation, while Ali's experience illustrates how social spaces can fail to reflect or accommodate diversity, producing a further layer of misfit that is both social and temporal. For my participants, experiences of social exclusion were often intensified by university environments reflective of normative assumptions about socialisation (Miller and Smith, 2021). These norms, embedded in what are seen as 'integral' aspects of student life (partying, bonding, and forming close peer networks, as described in Bella's account) may not align with the temporalities for disabled-queers, particularly those who may be studying part-time or have outside responsibilities and commitments (see Ethan's account below). It demonstrates how social misfit is embedded within temporal expectations that shape when, how, and by whom students are expected to participate in social life. Together, these accounts reveal that the imagined 'ease' of university social fit (e.g., instant friendship, shared activities, and communal socialisation) is often disrupted for disabled-queer students. These disruptions are not simply personal experiences of failure but emerge from structural and normative factors embedded in institutional culture, including assumptions about participation, visibility, and pace of social integration (Holdsworth, 2006; Mountz *et al.*, 2015; Miller and Smith, 2021; Gilani, 2024).

Participants responded to these challenges in varied ways. Some invested significant energy into cultivating connections through student societies, peer networks, and activism, enacting institutional and affective labour to make space for themselves and others. Yet, for others, such engagement was impractical or inaccessible, highlighting how the uneven distribution of time, resources, and personal circumstances shapes possibilities for social participation. Taken together, these reflections demonstrate that social fit in higher education is not simply about desire or motivation, but is mediated by being mis-fit, temporal dissonance, and structural conditions (Reay, 2001; Ahmed, 2012; Kafer, 2013).

This chapter begins by exploring student societies as a social site where (mis)fit is both felt and (re)produced. Student-led societies were often spoken about by participants, explaining that these are

spaces in which social inclusion and exclusion are negotiated through norms of age, race, and the visibility of (dis)ability and queerness. I then turn to how participants responded to these challenges, showing how some took on the labour of ‘fixing’ or reconfiguring their university experiences, both for themselves and for others. Across these accounts, community-building emerges not as a seamless process but as one that demands emotional, social, and institutional labour. By tracing the interplay between mis-fit, temporality, and institutional labour, this chapter argues that disabled-queer students are often positioned to repair or compensate for misalignments that are embedded within the structures and rhythms of university life. In doing so, it contributes to the thesis’s broader claims about how fit is actively constructed, maintained, and sometimes contested within higher education, highlighting both the possibilities and limits for marginalised students.

Student Societies: Finding a Place or Out of Place?

Student-led societies emerged across nearly all participant accounts as key sites for negotiating university life. These were imagined as spaces of connection yet were experienced as sites where exclusion and difference were amplified. Social involvement is widely recognised as central to fostering fit in higher education, with participation in both academic and co-curricular activities linked to student satisfaction and retention (Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Gilani, 2024). For my participants, these societies were seen as a way to actively shape their university experience, foster community, and carve out a sense of fit. However, participants’ accounts complicate this ideal. Access to these spaces is not equally felt or taken up. For some, societies offered opportunities to connect with peers and feel affirmed within the wider university environment. For others, participation was shaped by structural, social, and temporal factors, including visibility, time, and the ways queerness, disability, race, and age intersected with institutional expectations. These experiences highlight that mis-fit and temporal dissonance are embedded within institutions. Ben’s reflection illustrates this tension of involvement:

there's a big divide between people who take part in stuff in the union and people who don't.

– Ben

Ben points to differences in level of participation, describing a perceived divide between those who engage with union activities and those who do not. After speaking to my participants, I see involvement as structured by resources, social confidence, and perceived acceptance, rather than simply personal choice. Who participates is shaped by multiple factors: whether students feel able to be visible, whether their identities align with expectations of the space, and whether they have the personal capacity to engage. For my participants, structural and temporal dimensions are particularly salient, with some being part-time students, some having caring responsibilities, some having employment responsibilities, and others navigating these spaces with other marginalised identities, all of which shaped whether and how participation was and is possible. In other words, student societies do not simply offer inclusion, instead enacting social, structural, and temporal boundaries that can reinforce (mis)fit for some while enabling connection for others. By foregrounding this divide, Ben's reflection sets the stage for the following sections of this chapter: Who gets involved, and why? Who cannot, or chooses not to, participate? And how do disabled-queer students experience, negotiate, and sometimes resist these structural and temporal barriers? Societies were experienced in contrasting ways by my participants. Some described building community, finding peers with shared experiences, and gaining a sense of social belonging. Others highlighted how the same spaces could reinforce difference, exposing them to heightened visibility or scrutiny. These experiences illustrate that student societies, while designed to promote inclusion, often mirror broader institutional norms and hierarchies, conditioning who can and cannot engage, which may align poorly with disabled-queer students' lived experiences and intersecting responsibilities.

In the sections that follow, I first explore how societies have enabled some participants to build community and connection. I then examine how societies can produce unease or reinforce mis-fit, particularly when participation exposes students to visibility or normative expectations within queer or disabled student groups. Through this analysis, I argue that student societies both illuminate and complicate the processes through which belonging is experienced, revealing how mis-fit and temporal dissonance are reproduced in spaces intended to generate community.

Terms and Conditions of Society Involvement

Joining, or considering joining, student-led societies emerged consistently across participants' accounts, with many describing them as significant to their university experience. For some, these groups were spaces of connection, affirmation, and belonging, places to find 'their people', and acquire a sense of fit within the university. Caroline's reflection illustrates this vividly:

my very first day of Freshers week there was an LGBT society drop-in thing, and it was the first thing I did. I kind of made a beeline for it because I really wanted to find my people, my community. And that was so hugely influential to my student experience at [university name]. I don't think I would have completed my degree or done nearly as well if I hadn't been for that community [...] I had to join the society to build community, and I had to be more visible with my disabilities and sexuality to get the support and to just build more community. That stuff wasn't necessarily there when I stepped in the door. – Caroline

Caroline's account illustrates that joining a society was not a casual or optional aspect of university life, but a strategic and necessary means of establishing fit. Her reflection highlights the conditional nature of society participation. Caroline's ability to join and benefit from the society depended on her having the temporal and structural capacity to attend, as well as the emotional labour to make visible her disabilities and sexuality. This, however, was not available to everyone, and instead participation was shaped through resources, time, and identity (Tinto, 1994; Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023). Moreover, her account resonates with institutional norms that have allowed her full participation (Ahmed, 2012), with fit not simply given but requiring navigation, often involving adaptation to or performance within institutional expectations.

Caroline's experience also speaks to the intersection of fit and temporality. Societies operate according to established schedules, social conventions, and normative ideas of student life, which may align better with some students' circumstances than others (Kafer, 2013). For Caroline, her availability to engage fully rendered the society a space of affirmation and support. For other disabled-queer

students, who may have caregiving responsibilities, employment commitments, or part-time study schedules, these temporal and structural conditions may create barriers, reinforcing mis-fit rather than alleviating it. Caroline's account exemplifies the potential for societies to create belonging, but also underscores that such participation can be conditional and unevenly distributed, and may reflect wider structure norms. Societies can function as infrastructures of survival, offering both emotional and material support, but only when students have the capacity, resources, and alignment with institutional rhythms to access them. This analysis both extends and reframes prior work on student engagement by conceptualising participation as a temporally and relationally mediated process rather than a discrete outcome. Whereas existing literature documents inequalities in access to engagement opportunities (Miller and Smith, 2021; Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Gilani, 2024), it largely overlooks how institutional temporalities and identity-based expectations condition students' capacity to sustain participation over time. By centring disabled-queer students' accounts, this chapter demonstrates that engagement frequently involves compensatory emotional and institutional labour, positioning students as responsible for repairing misalignments that are structurally produced. In doing so, the analysis shifts attention from individual engagement deficits to the normative assumptions embedded within university life. For many of my participants, society engagement was conditional, shaped by factors directly reported by participants, including temporal constraints, intersecting responsibilities, and concerns about visibility and fit. In the sections that follow, I explore these conditions as they were expressed in participants' accounts. I begin with availability, before moving onto other conditions that shaped participation, including visibility of queerness, as well as disability, race, and age.

Condition 1: Availability

Participation in student-led societies was not uniformly accessible for all participants. While some joined and engaged actively, others faced barriers shaped by personal circumstances, institutional rhythms, and temporal constraints. For disabled-queer students in particular, these barriers intersected with embodied rhythms and wider responsibilities, including work, caring commitments, and health management, that did not align with the standard scheduling and social

norms of student life (Thomas, 2012; Kafer, 2013). Societies can therefore privilege students with the time, energy, and flexibility to attend, while constraining others. Ethan and Samantha's accounts illustrate these dynamics:

I'm always working or I've got an essay to write. There's always something that I'm doing elsewhere that means that I can't go to some of the social stuff. I wonder if I was to get involved in more of the social stuff then maybe I would have this student life that I kind of hoped for or thought I might get from uni. – Ethan

I make sure I stay in the best health I can, which kind of comes at the cost of the social aspect, because the academics are such a higher priority than the social. It's so much easier to go 'I'm not doing this. I'm not doing that'. I find myself just in my room a lot. It was one of those things where I wouldn't go out because it wouldn't be worth feeling terrible the next day and it wouldn't be worth probably inducing a migraine for myself. – Samantha

These accounts illustrate that participation in societies is not simply a matter of choice or interest. For Ethan, logistical and temporal constraints related to living at home, and balancing work and study, limit his capacity to engage. For Samantha, health management required prioritisation over social involvement, highlighting how disabled embodied and temporal rhythms shape participation (Kafer, 2013). Their experiences reveal that student societies, while intended as inclusive spaces, are conditionally accessible, privileging students with the personal capacity to participate, while constraining others. These accounts reveal how universities structure social life around normative assumptions that students are able-bodied, have flexible schedules, and can balance social engagement with academic work successfully (Thomas, 2012). In this way, the very spaces intended to foster belonging can reproduce hierarchies of participation, reflecting and reinforcing broader institutional norms about who 'fits' into the social and cultural life of the university.

Ethan and Samantha's reflections also challenge assumptions about what constitutes a 'student experience' (Holdsworth, 2006). Normative narratives often present social and extracurricular

involvement as a standard expectation (Thomas, 2012; Gilani, 2024), yet for these participants, broader life circumstances mediate their capacity to engage. Their stories demonstrate that non-participation illuminates structural and temporal constraints that shape how disabled-queer students navigate university life. These experiences make visible the hidden labour and negotiation required to access inclusion, showing how belonging in higher education is contingent, conditional, and unevenly distributed.

Condition 2: Visibility of Queerness and Disability

Participation in student-led societies is not only shaped by practical availability, but also by questions of visibility and recognition. For my participants, entering a society involved negotiating how their queerness or disability would be received. Being visible could enable connection, but it could also expose students to scrutiny, misrecognition, or exclusion. These dynamics highlight the conditional and negotiated nature of when spaces, explicitly framed around identity, are mediated by factors that shape who can participate comfortably and who may feel out of place (Thomas, 2012). In the next section, I explore how these dynamics played out in participants' experiences, showing that participation in student-led societies is always mediated by both the structural conditions of availability and the social conditions of identity visibility.

there's an expectation for you to be really, really out there, and really visibly queer and be very, very out. But a lot of us aren't. And that's one of the things that really annoys me about the LGBT society is that there's an expectation for you to be out of the gender norm, almost like you had to be really out to be accepted or seen by them [...] for the longest time I felt a bit of an imposter [at the disabled student society], because even though I had these problems, on the outside I don't look physically disabled and I don't have a diagnosis like some people do with their learning disabilities. – Katie

I never personally [join any societies]. That feels like a big thing to do, especially the queer or disabled society, that would feel quite big to join them. – Phoebe

These accounts illustrate that student-led societies are not uniform in how they enable fit. Different societies impose different visibility regimes (Thomas, 2012), with some demanding hyper-visible, performative identities, and others exposing participants to broad public scrutiny. Katie's account reflects a wider pattern among participants, who described questioning whether they were 'disabled enough' or 'queer enough' to participate in student-led societies, while Phoebe's hesitation to join a queer or disabled society reflects the stakes of visibility were participation requires making one's self known to a broader audience, which can feel risky. Both forms of visibility can create tensions for disabled-queer students who do not conform to dominant expectations of identity, thereby reproducing a sense of misfit (Garland-Thomson, 2011). These dynamics reveal that the challenge is not simply individual reluctance or lack of desire to participate, but the ways in which societies, even those designed for marginalised groups, can mirror a broader institutional and cultural 'mould' of the 'ideal' student (Taylor, 2012; Burke, 2013).

Participation in student-led societies often hinged on visibility, but the stakes of being visible differed across contexts. Both Katie and Phoebe illustrate that 'being yourself' in these spaces is mediated by social norms, group expectations, and personal comfort with exposure. Katie's experience highlights the pressures of internal visibility within the society itself. In queer spaces, she described an 'expectation for you to be really, really out,' and in the disabled students' society, belonging appeared to be contingent on having a medically recognised or physical disability. In this sense, if queerness and disability were not 'done' correctly for those spaces, fit, and by extension space, could not be claimed. Hyper-visible performance and alignment with dominant ideas of 'the disabled' or 'the queer' student became prerequisites for recognition. Phoebe's account, by contrast, illustrates the external stakes of visibility. She described the emotional labour of exposing her identity to a wider audience and the risk of misrecognition or scrutiny. The act of making her queerness or disability legible to others carried consequences that could feel risky or overwhelming. In hobby-focused or neutral societies, these stakes may be lower, and participation could occur without this kind of exposure.

Taken together, Katie and Phoebe's experiences show that the imperative to 'come as yourself' can be complex. Fit is contingent on both performing identity in ways that satisfy internal group norms and managing visibility in public or institutional spaces. This reflects a wider push and pull of (in)visibility across university life (Miller, 2015b), where students may seek recognition in some contexts but retreat into privacy in others. Dynamics such as this are a strategy for navigating safety, authenticity, and belonging within environments that remain uneven. These dual pressures illustrate how student-led societies, while framed as inclusive, can reproduce hierarchies of fit. 'Being yourself' is not a simple guarantee of acceptance; rather, it is negotiated, conditional, and sometimes risky, revealing that the very spaces designed to foster community can inadvertently reproduce misfit for those whose identities do not align with dominant expectations. As Ahmed (2012) reminds us, institutional commitments to diversity often fail to address the affective and embodied labour required of those who must continually make themselves visible to be recognised. Recognition was further spoken about by Eden:

I know that they may be collecting data to see who has signed up. But once you go there it is as if your queerness or disability is the only thing that matters. I am so much more than my queerness and disability but I get reduced to that alone. – Eden

Eden's reflection brings a different dimension to the discussion of visibility. As a trans student, her concern was not only about being seen, but about what that seeing does and how visibility can become a mechanism of reduction. In noting that her queerness and disability risked becoming 'the only thing that matters', Eden highlights how recognition can slide into containment, making identities knowable and countable through demographic forms, membership data, or even visual representation; but in doing so, they risk fixing what is meant to remain fluid. This tension points to the politics of counting and categorising identities. As Guyan (2022) argues, data collection on queer and marginalised communities is never neutral, it involves decisions about what counts, who counts, and what visibility costs. Within student societies, this process of counting may appear inclusive on

the surface, yet it can reassert boundaries of belonging by privileging recognisable, neatly defined identities.

Eden's account also illuminates a deeper queer-crip tension between legibility and resistance. McRuer (2006) contends that both queerness and disability resist normative ideals of a fixed, coherent identity. Yet the logic of institutional fit, which is even evidenced within peer-led societies, depends on legibility. To be supported or included, one must first be read. Eden's anxiety about being reduced captures this paradox: visibility becomes both a condition of access and a site of containment. In this sense, her account resonates with Ahmed's (2012) critique of diversity work, where being recognised by institutions often involves reproducing the very categories that marginalise.

Seen in this way, accounts do not simply describe personal hesitation but point to the structural limits of recognition within student-led societies and, by extension, higher education. Societies become microcosms of institutional logics that demand categorisation, which can simultaneously affirm and constrain multiply marginalised students (Vaccaro et al., 2015). For disabled-queer students, inclusion is not only about access or willingness to participate, but about whether belonging allows for multiplicity, contradiction, and fluidity, or whether it risks boxing students into knowable, countable forms. Their reflection reveals that visibility, when framed through the politics of recognition, can become another form of regulation.

Condition 3: Race

While the previous sections explored how availability and visibility shape disabled-queer students' participation in student-led societies, these dynamics do not operate in isolation but were entangled with other axes of power and identity. In the accounts that follow, race emerges not as an additional variable but as a structuring condition that shapes how queerness and disability are valued. As Ahmed (2012) argues, whiteness functions as an institutional orientation, an invisible background against which other forms of difference become hyper-visible and are sometimes misrecognised. Within student societies, this manifests in the subtle racialisation of inclusion: the presumption that

fit looks, feels, and sounds white. For my participants of colour, participation in identity-based societies was therefore mediated not only by the politics of visibility but by the racialised terms on which visibility becomes possible. Their accounts reveal how spaces framed as inclusive or progressive can nevertheless reproduce whiteness as the unspoken norm, shaping who feels comfortable, who is seen as belonging, and whose presence is marked as 'other'. Ashwin, a South Asian postgraduate student, reflected on how race conditioned his search for queer community, while Samantha, a Chinese undergraduate student, similarly described the racialised dynamics of LGBTQ+ student societies. In this sense, race does not simply intersect with queerness and disability, it conditions the very terrain on which fit is negotiated.

it is very white, and so being a person of colour and you go along hoping to see and find a community of LGBT people of colour and that wasn't there. It was difficult and sad for me to see that. So that impacted my mood of like 'oh, where are my friends? Like where are the people that I can be social with?' I struggled with that feeling of isolation where I look around and didn't see people I could make friends with. And then I started thinking maybe I had made the wrong decision coming here for my PhD. Should I have gone somewhere else? – Ashwin

it took me a while to like just be engaged with them [student-led societies]. I think for at least for LGBT society what took me a while was gauging how white it is. I think that that was like a huge kind of barrier for me and for my friends as well. – Samantha

Ashwin and Samantha's accounts reveal how racialised experiences shape participation within university queer spaces. Universities frequently deploy narratives of global diversity and cosmopolitanism, yet Ashwin and Samantha's accounts reveal the limits of these claims. Their experiences of whiteness within student-led societies expose a tension between the university's self-presentation as international and the racialised realities that shape everyday experiences. Although Scottish universities often frame themselves as progressive and globally engaged, they remain embedded within a predominantly white cultural landscape, one that continues to exhibit limited

racial diversity (Mahn, 2019). The progressive identity of Scotland, and by extension its universities, is frequently contrasted to England, mobilising narratives of tolerance and inclusivity to distinguish itself from Westminster politics. Yet, this framing risks functioning as a form of exceptionalism, a positioning that allows institutions to appear inclusive without confronting the deeper structural whiteness on which they rest. Within this context, the 'whiteness' of student societies is not simply demographic but operates as an orientation determining what and who feels 'at ease', and shaping how space is inhabited and experienced (Ahmed, 2012). For Ashwin and Samantha, the whiteness of queer student spaces marked the boundaries of comfort and recognition. These spaces appeared open, yet were subtly communicating racial divides that generated both social and emotional distance.

The absence of racial diversity within LGBTQ+ spaces is not a local anomaly but part of a wider, patterned disconnect. Logie and Rwigema (2014) argue that whiteness functions as an unspoken norm within queer spaces, rendering racialised queerness peripheral. The result is a conditional inclusion, where queer students of colour must continually negotiate visibility within spaces that claim inclusion but are structured around whiteness. The progressive rhetoric of internationalism obscures the racialised hierarchies that underpin both student societies and the broader university. Whiteness is (re)produced not only through who is present, but through what is celebrated and assumed to be the default. It sets the tone for participation, quietly defining the terms via which queerness can be expressed. As a white, Scottish man, I am not outside of this dynamic, and my own interactions with participants were shaped by the same power structures they navigate daily. Acknowledging this positionality is crucial in understanding how whiteness shapes not only institutional life, but also the research encounter itself.

Condition 4: Age

Age is often an overlooked axis of difference in higher education, yet it deeply shapes who is seen as a 'typical' student and who is positioned as an outsider. Within student-led societies, participants spoke of the rhythms of participation tending to reflect youthful norms that can

marginalise or alienate mature and returning students. As KQ and Bethany reveal, age intersects to produce distinctive experiences of participation within university life:

they [student-led societies] are for the kids. I am 35 years old. I feel too old and maybe I don't want to interact with them. Or maybe they wouldn't want to interact with me [...] we have some LGBT clubs, but I wouldn't bother taking time to join them. Not for me. I'm too old (laughs). – KQ

there is a generation gap between the queer society and me at the grand old age of 28 (laughs) I haven't joined the society [...] At the queer society we are surrounded by 18-year-olds and then you have all the issues that come with just being 18 [...] it just feels weird going to a society when it is full of undergrads and then you're there just like awkward. – Bethany

KQ and Bethany's reflections expose how student-led societies are not only socially organised but temporally structured. Their sense of not fitting is framed through age, revealing how the category of 'student' is implicitly bound to youthfulness. Queer student societies in particular are often built around a youthful imaginary of queerness as newly discovered, expressive, and socially visible. This positions older queer students as temporally out of place, their lives unfolding outside the normative timelines of student life and queer becoming (Halberstam, 2005; Freeman, 2010). Rather than signalling a lack of willingness to participate, KQ and Bethany's hesitation reveals how age operates as a gatekeeping force in campus life. Student-led societies can reproduce age norms that equate belonging with being at the 'right' stage of student life. These norms organise social participation around specific temporal expectations: the student as young, carefree, and socially embedded; queerness as exploratory, visible, and exuberant. Within this, older queer students become unintelligible as members of the student community.

This temporal misfit (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Kafer, 2013) highlights that exclusion is not only spatial or demographic but also chronological. Universities and their student societies implicitly discipline who counts as a legitimate student through time via assumptions of when one should study,

socialise, and self-discover. KQ and Bethany's accounts show how those who live 'off-time' (Kafer, 2013) encounter subtle but powerful forms of exclusion, not through overt rejection but via the cultural tempo of student life itself. Their experiences thus invite a rethinking of inclusivity in higher education towards one that recognises age and temporality as key dimensions and challenges the youthful and linear imaginaries through which both studenthood and queerness are constructed.

Throughout accounts, student-led societies came across as operating as microcosms of the broader university. They become spaces where belonging is imagined, but unevenly realised, and where structural and cultural norms are magnified in ways that shape who fits, how, and when. Participants' experiences, through limited availability, pressures of visibility, racialised norms, and age-based expectations, reveal that misfit is not merely a personal feeling but a reflection of institutional design. These societies mirror the broader temporal, social, and normative frameworks of the university, illustrating how structures reproduce structures and hierarchies, and thus constrain participation. Misfit functions as a diagnostic of institutional norms, whereby universities construct both formal and informal communications of what a student should look like, how they should participate, and when they should engage. My participants illuminate the frictions between these norms and lived experience, exposing the contingent, conditional, and uneven nature of fit. This demonstrates that inclusion is mediated by structural rhythms, representational expectations, and the social imaginaries embedded within both societies and the wider institution (Halberstam, 2005; Freeman, 2010; Kafer, 2013).

Yet these experiences of misfit are also generative. Student-led societies made visible the gaps, exclusions, and tensions that students must navigate. These moments of friction create opportunities for critique, creativity, and intervention. As explored in the next section, participants leverage these experiences to reimagine community, and to undertake emotional and structural labour that circumvents or challenges the constraints of institutional norms. In this way, misfit is both a lens for

understanding exclusion and a catalyst for reimagining, thereby revealing that the very dynamics that produce marginalisation can also inspire transformative practices of connection.

Holding Each Other Up

Experiences of misfit across campus environments reveal not only the ways disabled-queer students are positioned uneasily within university structures, but also how they respond to this positioning. The discomfort of misfit, socially, spatially, or temporally, often became a catalyst for action. Participants described feeling compelled to ‘do something about it’, to repair what was missing, to build what was absent, and to make space for themselves and others. This turn toward *making* rather than *experiencing* university marks a shift from misfit as a condition of exclusion to misfit as a site of resistance and creativity.

I don’t think there is a queer space on university (laughs). It [the university] really is just not a space for queer people, and nor is it for disabled people. Yes queer and disabled people go to university, but the space itself just doesn’t feel comfortable and easy for queerness or disability at points [...] You need people who’ve come before you and who were openly and visibly queer, and openly and visibly disabled to be that point of contact. We are now making spaces for ourselves. That’s all on us. Not the university. Not the academics. – Bethany

I don’t think uni is set up for disabled and queer people, but then you have other disabled and queer people there that make it feel like you can change the experience yourself and make it a good one. – Ben

Bethany and Ben’s accounts reveal how disabled-queer students may come to understand the university not only as an exclusionary environment, but as a terrain that must be actively remade. Their reflections illuminate a recurring tension seen in this chapter: universities symbolically celebrate diversity, yet the everyday textures of campus life remain structured around norms that assume able-bodied heteronormativity. In identifying the university as ‘not a space for queer or disabled people’,

Bethany and Ben diagnose a structural absence, not a lack of diverse students but a lack of infrastructures, cultures, and temporalities that recognise and sustain their ways of being.

Crucially, both point to the importance of precedent: the idea that visibility and belonging are made possible by those who came before. This insight reframes inclusion not as an institutional achievement but as cumulative, intergenerational labour performed by students themselves. Their comments reveal how disabled-queer students inherit both the benefits and the burdens of this lineage, where they draw strength from earlier forms of resistance while also feeling a responsibility to repair the conditions of belonging for those who follow. This sense of obligation illustrates an important distinction between institutional inclusion and student-generated inclusion. Whereas universities often imagine inclusion as a matter of policy or provision, Bethany and Ben highlight how meaningful change emerges through relational practices: modelling visibility, offering points of contact, circulating care, and generating micro-spaces of comfort and recognition. Their accounts therefore extend the concept of 'fit' beyond individual adaptation and into the realm of collective, identity-based labour.

What their reflections reveal is that disabled-queer belonging is produced through a queer-crip ethics of mutuality, not through institutional design. The 'we make spaces for ourselves' stance is not only a strategy of survival, but a quiet critique of the university's reliance on student labour to fill the gaps of its own inclusivity and then make claims about diversity. In this way, Bethany and Ben show how misfit can become a catalyst for community-making and institutional re-imagining, but that this is a form of labour that remains unevenly distributed and largely unrecognised. Their accounts thus expose an important contradiction: the university depends on the very students it marginalises to make the institution liveable for others.

In what follows, I focus on the ethos of sticking together that emerged across participants' accounts. This was not merely about friendship or shared identity, but about collectively reimagining the university itself: building informal networks of care, advocating for institutional change, and

creating spaces where disabled-queer students could feel at home, even temporarily. Drawing on the accounts of Bethany, Ben, River, and Ashwin, who are each situated within a different type of university, I explore how these students engaged in different forms of emotional and structural labour to make their universities more inclusive, supportive, and liveable for themselves and others.

Let's Change It

I now turn to the specific changes that River, Ashwin, Ben, and Bethany initiated at their respective universities. These four participants spoke extensively about the actions they took to reshape their experiences and the wider institutional environment. Their accounts offer a window into the differing ways disabled-queer students interact with and respond to 'the university'. While all four shared a common drive towards such reshaping, the scale and form of their interventions varied. For Bethany and River, change was often immediate, personal, and relational: acts of visibility, support, and advocacy that had tangible, usually immediate, impacts on their peers. In contrast, Ben and Ashwin described pursuing longer-term, structural forms of change through student governance, new initiatives, and policy reform. Their efforts aimed at embedding inclusion more durably within the institution for longer-term impact. Taken together, these narratives illustrate the multiple scales and approaches of agency: from the intimate and interpersonal to the strategic and institutional, each intervention reveals a distinct mode of engaging with and remaking conditions. Firstly, Bethany and River explain their engagement:

in the department we [group of friends] have created our own wee queer bubble. We are in this homo-normative space that we have created for ourselves. The university hasn't done that so we have done it. And I really like it. You forget the rest of the world. – Bethany

a trans student came to me and was like 'here is what I'm experiencing and I don't know what to do and I can't do this on my own' and I was thinking well I've been given no training on this but I need to do this. I really need to do this for this student. So I took her to the wellbeing person. – River

Bethany and River's accounts illuminate how small, personal acts of queer care can carry disproportionate emotional and political weight, revealing how the personal becomes infrastructural. While existing work on queer world-making emphasises the imaginative and affective possibilities of creating alternative social worlds (Muñoz, 2020), these findings extend that literature by showing how such practices function pragmatically to sustain participation within higher education. Here, queer world-making is not oriented toward futurity alone, but towards an immediate need: keeping marginalised students connected, supported, and present within an institution that does not reliably meet their needs. This care work unfolds within constrained parameters of acceptable difference, aligning with Duggan's (2002) account of homonormativity, yet it also exposes the limits of institutional tolerance by demonstrating how much labour remains unrecognised and informal. In this sense, Bethany and River's practices both affirm and complicate Ahmed's (2017) argument that diversity labour is displaced onto marginalised bodies. Their accounts show not only that disabled-queer students are tasked with doing this labour, but that such care becomes an informal infrastructure upon which the university increasingly depends. Rather than compensatory or supplementary, these acts of care are constitutive of how the university functions in practice, revealing a model of participation sustained through interdependence rather than institutional provision.

The contrasts between Bethany and River's accounts further expose how institutional form, spatial arrangement, and mode of delivery shape who can enact (queer) peer care and how easily it can be sustained. For Bethany, her large, urban, Russell Group campus provides both the physical proximity and visible density of queer peers needed to materialise a 'queer bubble', highlighting that when material, relational and structural configurations align there can be scaffolding for peer formation (Wong, 2024). In contrast, River's online, distance learning university context fragments these possibilities, amplifying isolation and redistributing the emotional and relational labour of connection onto the individual (Farrell and Brunton, 2020). This comparison reveals a broader structural insight: the university's ability to facilitate or support peer-led care is deeply contingent on

context, and institutional claims of inclusion may function unevenly across different settings. In physical, urban campuses, the architecture, student demographics, and visibility of peers can partially compensate for gaps in formal support, whereas online or geographically dispersed contexts may place the burden of care almost entirely upon students themselves. More critically, these contrasts underscore the university's structural dependence on students to generate the very conditions that formal mechanisms fail to provide. The labour Bethany and River enact is not simply about individual initiative, it reflects systemic gaps in institutional provision. When care and community rely on the proactive effort of marginalised students, universities risk reproducing (intersecting) inequalities. Those with access to dense networks, visible peers, or urban resources may more easily create inclusive spaces, whereas students in dispersed, online, or otherwise isolated contexts may bear the labour alone. In this sense, the enactment of queer care across contexts exposes both the possibilities and limits of student-led resilience, revealing the uneven architecture of support.

Taken together, Bethany and River's narratives highlight a shared recognition that when one person falls through the cracks, others must step in. This sticking together ethic is affective, infrastructural, and an everyday form of resistance. These acts of care are not secondary to the university but constitutive of it, as through their relational labour disabled-queer students quietly rebuild the university on their own terms, crafting temporary, vital structures that allow themselves and others to remain.

While Bethany and River's accounts illuminate the intimate, peer-focused labour of queer care, the work of reshaping the university does not stop at the personal level. Ashwin and Ben extended this ethic of care into more structural and enduring interventions, targeting policies, practices, and organisational processes to produce change that could be felt across time and campus social spaces. This shift from immediate, relational support to systemic action highlights the temporal and scale dimensions of DIY'ing university, where some forms of labour are immediate and affect individual

peers while others require sustained effort, negotiation, and strategic engagement to influence the broader institutional environment.

there's a lot of things I'm quite proud of like [safety initiative name] and helping set up schemes like that. We did quite a lot of things making sure people could have like inclusive nights out. That was a really big thing for me. – Ben

I'm looking of joining the LGBT network in the university and maybe I can talk about POC [people of colour] issues there. Maybe I could be their POC person in charge [...] if I can be a part of their management then maybe I can see some changes that I would like to see [...] I will speak about changes I want to see, work with the systems to change the system, that is how I see a way out. Maybe a way that I can reconcile. – Ashwin

Unlike Bethany and River, whose interventions were immediate and relational, Ben and Ashwin engaged with the university at the level of governance, policy, and organisational process, revealing how disabled-queer students are drawn into the bureaucratic temporalities of institutional change. Their accounts extend existing work on student engagement and participation, which often frames involvement in governance as voluntary enhancement or civic contribution (Miller and Smith, 2021; Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023), by showing how such engagement becomes a necessary strategy for repair. Ben and Ashwin translate lived experience into formal mechanisms via initiatives, networks, and managerial roles, effectively positioning themselves as agents of institutional adaptation. In doing so, they exemplify what Ahmed (2012) describes as the non-performativity of inclusion, where change is only realised through persistent pressure rather than policy alone. Crucially, their labour operates across extended temporal horizons: unlike moments of peer care that offer immediate relief, structural interventions aim to stabilise conditions of belonging for future students, redistributing vulnerability across time rather than upon individuals. This analysis advances existing scholarship by demonstrating that DIY university work is not merely compensatory but rhythm-altering, reshaping institutional

processes while simultaneously exposing universities' structural reliance on marginalised students to produce the very conditions of inclusion they claim to support and offer.

Across these accounts, mutual aid and peer support emerge not simply as expressions of kindness or community, but as politically situated responses to institutional absence. While these practices resonate with longstanding traditions of queer and disability mutual aid, as seen from HIV/AIDS activism to the development of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Altman and Buse, 2012), this analysis extends that literature by locating mutual aid within the specific temporal, bureaucratic conditions of higher education. In the university context, care is enacted alongside formal systems that are unevenly accessible, particularly for disabled-queer students with intersecting marginalisations. Participants' actions therefore translate activist traditions onto constrained institutional settings, where care must often operate informally, beyond official remit, and without recognition. This finding complicates celebratory accounts of mutual aid by showing how universities come to structurally depend on the unpaid labour of marginalised students, even as inclusion is rhetorically institutionalised. Rather than positioning mutual aid as a substitute for institutional responsibility, these accounts expose it as an institutional failure, revealing how care becomes necessary precisely where structural provision falls short.

Contemporary activist movements continue to illustrate the enduring role of mutual aid and solidarity as forms of political intervention. Initiatives such as #DisabilityTooWhite foreground intersectional disability justice, led by disabled-queer people of colour, and exposing how whiteness shapes whose needs are recognised within disability spaces (Harrington *et al.*, 2023). Global

movements including Black Lives Matter³, #TransRightsAreHumanRights⁴, and #NoLGBWithoutTheT⁵ underscore the ongoing significance of collective mobilisations for justice, demonstrating how care, advocacy, and visibility are inherently political (Taylor and Haider-Markel, 2014; Takhar, 2020). Rather than equating participants' peer support practices with these movements, this analysis draws on them as conceptual lineages through which to understand how care becomes politicised under conditions of institutional neglect. Within the university context, participants' acts of 'sticking together' enact scaled-down, situational forms of mutual aid that respond to immediate risks and exclusions, such as stepping in where formal mechanisms feel inaccessible, creating queer 'bubbles' within departments, or taking on representative roles beyond official remit. These practices reveal how intersectional care can be localised within higher education, while still functioning as a challenge to exclusionary norms and an implicit critique of the institution's failure to provide sustainable support.

These practices also unsettle dominant metrics of university 'success', which are typically tethered to individualised outcomes such as grades, employability, or degree completion. As Gilani (2024) argues, such narrow framings obscure the relational, affective, and collective dimensions through which belonging is often experienced. My analysis extends this critique by showing how, for disabled-queer students, these alternative forms of 'success' are not supplementary but are necessary conditions of persistence within the university. Participants locate meaning and achievement not solely in institutional recognition, but in the peer networks they cultivate, and the shared sense of purpose co-created with others navigating similar exclusions. Crucially, these relational achievements emerge

³ Black Lives Matter is a global movement that originated in the United States in 2013 in response to police violence against Black individuals. It has since grown into an international network advocating for racial justice, intersectional anti-racism, and structural reform across institutions, highlighting how systemic inequalities are embedded in everyday life.

⁴ #TransRightsAreHumanRights is an online campaign asserting the fundamental human rights of trans people, particularly in contexts of legal, social, and institutional marginalisation. The movement has mobilised online and offline advocacy to challenge exclusionary practices, amplify trans voices, and create spaces of safety and recognition.

⁵ #NoLGBWithoutTheT is a slogan and activist campaign emphasising the inclusion of trans people within broader LGBTQ+ movements. It critiques instances where lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities have excluded or marginalised trans voices, asserting that solidarity and coalition-building are essential for meaningful social change. The campaign highlights the importance of intersectional, inclusive community-making and resistance to normative pressures within queer spaces.

precisely where institutional measures of success fall short, revealing how universities benefit from recognising individual outcomes while leaving collective labour unacknowledged. What appears as ‘quiet’ or informal care work thus operates as a constrained form of resistance: not a wholesale refusal of the university, but a reworking of its value systems from within. In foregrounding relational and embodied practices of care, participants’ accounts demonstrate how universities are reshaped not only through formal policy or EDI initiatives, but through the uneven and often invisible labour of those positioned at their margins.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how disabled-queer students experience, navigate, and actively reshape the social dimensions of university life. Across participants’ accounts, social fit emerged as a contingent and negotiated process, shaped by intersecting conditions of power, institutional temporality, and the politics of visibility. Student-led societies in particular illustrate both the possibilities and limits of fit. While for some they can generate belonging and support, they also reproduce hierarchies of race, age, and ability through implicit expectations of who can be recognised as fitting. For many participants, fit was not something given but was made through ongoing emotional, social, and institutional labour.

Importantly, misfit was not only a site of exclusion but also a generative space of creativity, care, and resistance. The challenges participants faced often prompted collective practices of adaptation and mutual support that extended beyond individual coping to reconfigure the emotional and social infrastructures of university life. Whether through small peer-led networks or structural interventions, participants enacted forms of relational and institutional care that exposed both the fragility and possibility of inclusion. Their actions demonstrate how the labour of belonging is continually produced from the student-level, revealing both the promise and the limits of institutional frameworks.

Building on Garland-Thomson's (2011) notion of misfit, this chapter extends the concept beyond spatial relations to encompass the temporal and affective dimensions of university life. Moments of fit unfold unevenly across time as fleeting feelings of recognition coexist with bureaucratic rhythms of institutional change (Kafer, 2013). For disabled-queer students, this temporal disjuncture is important as fit can be momentary and affective, while exclusion remains structurally embedded. Reading these accounts through a queer-crip lens (McRuer, 2006) reveals that these forms of care and collectively are not merely acts of survival, but critiques of the neoliberal university's emphasis on individual responsibility and self-management (Ahmed, 2012; Yergeau, 2018).

Together, these insights advance an intersectional idea of misfit that foregrounds how ableism, heteronormativity, and other institutional hierarchies co-produce the conditions through which belonging becomes possible. This chapter has reframed fit as a relational, temporal, and uneven process that disabled-queer students both endure and actively reshape. Their experiences illuminate that universities are not static structures but living, negotiated spaces, continually remade through the everyday labour of students.

Chapter 7: In, Out, or Somewhere In-Between

This chapter explores how my disabled-queer participants navigate disclosure, visibility, and recognition within higher education, emphasising the relational, spatial, and institutional conditions that shape the push-and-pull of disclosure. Rather than framing disclosure as a purely individual choice, participants' accounts reveal it as a form of labour that is continually negotiated across contexts. Decisions about whether, when, and how to reveal disabled and queer identities are embedded within broader systems of visibility, normativity, and institutional expectation, producing uneven access to agency and recognition (Miller, 2015a). The push-and-pull of disclosing or coming out was spoken about across participant accounts in varying ways, as further explored in this chapter. Samantha's experience captures this dynamic with particular clarity. Reflecting on what it felt like to move through different university spaces, she explained:

it [university] has that kind of environment where everyone's out to everyone. So it's quite weird to be like 'ohh I'm kind of half in the closet, not to you guys, but to those guys I am'. –
Samantha

Rather than appearing as an isolated example, Samantha's account illuminates the broader conceptual stakes of this chapter. Her description of being 'half in the closet' illustrates how disclosure is not a stable state but a relational position of in-betweenness, a continual negotiation shaped by who is present, what is at stake, and which identities are rendered intelligible or risky in a given moment across spaces. It reveals a distinctive push-and-pull where the desire to be known and the need to protect oneself are linked; where the pull toward connection and the push away from potentially unsafe visibility is present at all times. In this sense, disclosure is less an expression of identity and more a spatially and socially attuned management of recognition and risk (Miller et al., 2019).

Through participants' narratives this came across deeply, and this chapter foregrounds three interrelated dimensions of disclosure. First, disclosure is relational. Identities are not simply expressed but are co-constructed in interaction with peers, staff, and institutional structures. Some identities are

elective and strategically revealed, while others are materially or socially enforced, rendering students visible in ways they cannot fully control (Miller et al., 2019). Second, disclosure is spatially mediated by experiences of recognition, safety, and inclusion, which vary across campuses, social spaces, and national contexts, reflecting the uneven microclimates of higher education (Nicolazzo, 2016). Third, disclosure is emotionally and cognitively labour-intensive, requiring ongoing assessment of risk, trust, and relational dynamics, highlighting the often-invisible work disabled-queer students perform to navigate environments structured by normative expectations (Miller et al., 2019).

By tracing participants' strategies, this chapter illustrates that disclosure is a continual and adaptive intersectional practice. Participants' experiences further underscore that Scottish higher education is not uniformly inclusive, but rather, national policy, campus infrastructures, and local cultures interact to create both affordances and constraints around being known. The chapter therefore situates disclosure at the intersection of personal, social, and institutional dynamics, providing a nuanced understanding of how disabled-queer students negotiate legibility and safety in higher education.

The following sections unpack these dimensions through participants' narratives. First, I explore the structural and relational conditions that shape who can and cannot 'choose' disclosure, and who is inevitably made visible. Next, I examine the practice of strategically coming out, highlighting how students calculate risks, assess contexts, and manage relational and spatial contingencies. Finally, I consider the role of place, demonstrating how national, urban, and rural contexts intersect with institutional climates to shape lived experiences. Together, these sections advance a conceptualisation of disclosure as relational, spatial, and embodied labour, foregrounding the complex and contextually situated processes through which students navigate visibility and recognition.

Choosing or Being Chosen

This section explores disclosure not as a purely individual choice but as a relational and structurally shaped practice, showing how power, visibility, and social legibility condition who can

exercise agency over disclosure and who cannot. In doing so, this section highlights the uneven terrain of recognisability and the politics of being seen (Ahmed, 2006; McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013). I argue that my participants' experiences demonstrate that disclosure is less about personal preference and more about the social conditions that make certain identities hyper-visible while rendering others concealable.

While disclosure is often framed as a personal decision through which individuals claim agency, the ability to choose whether, when, and how to disclose is not equally distributed. Research on queer and disabled students highlights that disclosure is structurally shaped by visibility, legibility, and institutional norms, rather than simply by individual preference (Vaccaro, 2012; Miller, 2015b; Nicolazzo, 2016). Participants whose queer or disabled identities were not immediately legible to others possessed greater control over timing, context, and audience, positioning disclosure as optional and strategically negotiable. For others, disclosure was not a choice they actively made. Their identities were, as Ali described, 'written on' them. Students who were visibly disabled or gender nonconforming disrupted dominant expectations of who is assumed to belong in university spaces and were therefore already marked as 'different' before they spoke, echoing Nicolazzo's (2016) observation that trans and gender-nonconforming students are routinely read within campus environments. For these individuals, disclosure became a continual, often involuntary, negotiation, required simply to navigate academic spaces and manage how others interpreted them.

What emerges here is an unequal landscape of agency shaped by normativity. The question of who can 'opt in' to disclosure and who is already assumed, questioned, or exposed is not simply interpersonal but deeply structured by systems that privilege certain bodies, identities, and forms of legibility (McRuer, 2006). This uneven distribution of agency is further shaped via fears of being misread, misunderstood, or reduced to a single identity category. For several participants, withholding was not a matter of secrecy, but of protection as a means of resisting being stereotyped or treated

differently. Erika articulates this tension, approaching disclosure to peers as cautious, deliberate, and shaped by past experiences of judgment and misrecognition:

I tend to keep my cards close to my chest, and if it's not something they need to know then I don't tell them [...] I'm just always wary of that judgment. Once people know you're gay or queer or autistic, they make decisions about you in their head [...] they put you in a different box because of it [...] they have ideas of what an autistic person is or what a queer person is and then suddenly in their mind you are all those things. – Erika

Erika illustrates the affective labour required to navigate disclosure within higher education, where consequences are shaped by assumptions others put onto disabled-queer identification. Her hesitancy to volunteer information reflects not simply personal caution but a wider institutional climate in which disclosure can trigger reductive categorisation. Rather than offering recognition, being known as 'disabled' or 'queer' risks being collapsed into narrow scripts that are read through pre-existing norms (Miller, 2015b; Miller et al., 2019). In a university environment that may expect students to explain their identities, often for the purposes of support, administration, or peer legibility, Erika's nondisclosure becomes a strategy for retaining control over how she is understood. Non-disclosure thus functions as a kind of protective labour against queer-crip norms, allowing students to resist the interpretive dominance of others and to maintain autonomy over their self-presentation.

Erika's ability to enact this strategy also exposes the uneven politics of visibility. As her identities are not immediately legible, she can decide when and to whom she discloses, allowing for increased self-protection. This affordance is not universal, rather reflecting a structural privilege available only to those whose identities are not inscribed on the body. In this sense, Erika is managing stigma through nondisclosure and is thus afforded the choice of deciding what to reveal, when, and why (Miller et al., 2019). Non-disclosure becomes not only an interpersonal act but also a negotiation with structures of legibility (Cooper and Brownell, 2016; Miller et al., 2019). This uneven distribution of agency becomes clearer when contrasted with Samantha's account:

if I was in that situation where I was getting harassed for being queer, I could just pretend to be straight. Whereas if I'm being harassed for being Chinese, I can't really pretend that I'm not because it's very visible. – Samantha

Samantha's ability to 'pretend to be straight' in contexts of threat, juxtaposed with her inability to conceal her race, underscores that the possibility of (non)disclosure is uneven. While aspects of identity such as sexuality may, for some students, be strategically managed or temporarily concealed, racial identity operates differently. Samantha's account illustrates how race is not simply visible but actively *read* within higher education settings. Ford's (2011) work is useful here in conceptualising how institutions position bodies through racialised scripts that shape recognition and treatment. Samantha's experience resonates with this argument, demonstrating how racialised readings precede any act of self-presentation and place her body into already-understood categories. However, her narrative also extends this insight by showing that these interpretive logics shape not only treatment but legibility itself. She must navigate not only how she presents herself, but how her body is already being interpreted before she speaks or acts.

This contrast highlights a critical asymmetry inherent to the politics of disclosure. While Samantha can, at times, strategically conceal her queerness, her race is subject to what might be understood as compulsory visibility: it is not disclosed so much as imposed. This distinction matters because it exposes how the capacity to 'choose' disclosure is not equally available across identities. Rather than disclosure being a neutral or individualised decision, it is shaped by intersecting pressures of race, queerness, and campus climate (Garvey *et al.*, 2019).

In this sense, Samantha's ability to 'pretend to be straight' is not simply a personal strategy but a form of conditional agency that is only available because her queerness is not immediately legible. Conversely, racialised readings render her continually visible and therefore continually exposed. This dynamic reflects wider analyses of racialised hypervisibility in higher education, where

students of colour are positioned as representatives, and required to engage in ongoing identity management in ways that constrain autonomy (e.g., O'Neill, 2025).

In contrasting Samantha with Erika, who exercised non-disclosure as an intentional boundary, we see two different configurations of agency. Erika's withholding was elective; Samantha's (partial) concealment is situational and precarious. Together, they reveal that disclosure is intersectionally structured and privileged, patterned by which identities are deemed recognisable, and which remain invisible. Their accounts therefore underscore that the politics of disclosure cannot be understood without attending to the dynamics of visibility that shape students' everyday negotiations of safety and legitimacy. Building on the contrast between elective and situational disclosure, Charlie's account highlights a further dimension of this uneven distribution:

you do see the sort of turning of the heads when I walk in with walking sticks or my crutches [...] if I don't use them then I'm in such pain that I just can't even walk or get up. So I have to choose between people seeing me with crutches or being bed bound for that day or that week. I guess it's easier to hide the dyslexia or autism [...] I usually wear my pronoun badges and I use my rainbow lanyard [...] if there's some other queer people about [on campus] then they know that I'm also a queer person and you can talk to me. – Charlie

Charlie's account deepens understandings of disclosure by showing how agency is unevenly distributed across embodied realities and intersecting identities. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that disability is often made legible through material markers such as mobility aids, which can pre-empt students' control over how they are read within institutional spaces (Shakespeare, 2018; Spratt, 2022). Charlie's experience resonates with this work, illustrating how walking sticks or crutches render disability immediately visible. However, their account also extends these insights by showing that such visibility does more than 'out' disability, it actively structuring *where*, *when*, and *how* disclosure becomes compulsory, particularly within the spatial and temporal rhythms of university life, such as navigating timetables, classrooms, and public spaces. At the same time, Charlie's narrative

reveals that other aspects of identity operate through different logics. Research on queer signalling practices (e.g., pronoun badges or rainbow lanyards) suggests that these forms of self-identification can enable students to exercise greater control over when and how queerness is recognised (Alabi, 2018; Daley *et al.*, 2021). Charlie's account brings these two dynamics into the same analytical frame, demonstrating how disabled-queer students must negotiate both enforced visibility and elective legibility simultaneously. This juxtaposition foregrounds disclosure not as a uniform process but as one that varies across identity categories and material conditions. Placing these dynamics together invites a reconsideration of disclosure as an individualised or voluntary act. Instead, it highlights how disclosure is produced through embodied, material, and institutional conditions that unevenly distribute agency (Ahmed, 2012; Miller, 2015, 2019). Disclosure, in this framing, emerges not as a single moment of revelation but as a differentiated and ongoing negotiation shaped at the intersections of disability, queerness, and the organisational demands of higher education.

Charlie's experience foregrounds the limits and possibilities of agency. The necessity of using walking aids to participate in daily academic life simultaneously enforces exposure, while elective disclosure of other identities allows for some control over recognition and social interaction. This underscores that disclosure is a negotiated process, shaped by the interplay between bodily realities, institutional norms, and social perception. Charlie, Erika and Samantha illustrate that while elective or conditional non-disclosure can be a source of agency for some aspects of self, for others, bodily and material realities impose exposure that must be managed alongside selective acts of disclosure. Participant accounts illuminate how higher education spaces structure which students can exercise choice in disclosure and which are inevitably subjected to visibility, thus highlighting the complex, embodied, and intersectional politics of recognition and safety on campus. Building on Charlie's account of bodily and material visibility, Lisa's experience highlights the ways in which some identities are socially spotlighted by others, rather than being revealed or withheld on one's own terms:

it [sexuality] seems to show up for other people. It [sexuality] seems to be something that [person] will randomly bring up in weird situations that have absolutely nothing to do with it. It [sexuality] seems to be a highlighted aspect of me for straight people. – Lisa

Whereas Charlie's exposure is tied to the material visibility of disability, Lisa's experience illustrates a different mechanism through which disclosure is produced via the social spotlighting enacted by others. In her account, sexuality becomes repeatedly foregrounded in interaction, even in moments where Lisa herself has not referenced it. This highlights disclosure as a relational process, in which identities become visible not solely through intentional self-expression but through the interpretive practices and assumptions of others. In this sense, Lisa's experience resonates with Miller's (2015a) work which conceptualises disclosure as co-produced within social interaction rather than individually controlled. However, Lisa's account also complicates this literature by showing that non-disclosure does not necessarily result in invisibility. Instead, campus cultures can compel recognition by repeatedly directing attention towards certain identities, effectively drawing them into public circulation. As Lisa's experience suggests, this form of spotlighting transforms disclosure from a choice into a situational outcome, shaped by interactional norms and expectations about sexuality within student cultures. Disclosure, in this framing, emerges not as a moment of saying, but as an effect of being repeatedly read, named, or anticipated by others.

Existing research on queer student life often documents how peers, rather than institutions, become key producers of visibility, whether through curiosity, assumption-making, or microaggressions (see Ellis, 2009; Formby, 2017b). Lisa's narrative extends this work by showing that such spotlighting is not merely about social discomfort but is a relational power that shapes how queer students are positioned within everyday interactions. In her case, peers' insistence on marking her sexuality creates a mismatch between self-presentation and social categorisation, illustrating that agency with respect to disclosure is always contingent on the interpretive dominance of others (Formby and Wolff, 2020). This resonates with Kezar and Maxey's work (2015) on campus norms that

frames queer identities as simultaneously hyper-visible and misunderstood, producing expectations or scrutiny that students must manage.

Lisa's account also highlights how these relational exposures intersect with other identity dimensions. As work on uneven visibility suggests, those who already attract attention because of race, gender, disability, or cultural difference often experience compounded forms of unsolicited recognition (Alabi, 2015). While Lisa speaks specifically about sexuality, her example illuminates a broader pattern in which visibility is not evenly distributed but structured by campus norms and social hierarchies.

In foregrounding the interpretive agency of peers, Lisa's account complements and complicates the earlier examples of Erika, Samantha, and Charlie. Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that disclosure cannot be understood as a singular decision or personal strategy. Instead, it is continually co-constructed through material constraints, spatial conditions, and relational dynamics, often in ways that exceed students' control. Lisa's experience therefore sharpens our understanding of disclosure as a socially produced and institutionally situated process, shaped as much by campus microcultures as by individual intent.

Across accounts, it becomes clear that disclosure in higher education is neither uniform nor solely a matter of personal choice. Erika demonstrates that elective non-disclosure is a deliberate boundary, Samantha shows how passing is situational and precarious, Charlie illustrates the limits imposed by embodied and materially enforced visibility, and Lisa highlights how socially spotlighted dimensions can override non-disclosure. Together, these experiences reveal the politics of disclosure as intersectional and shaped by relational dynamics. This synthesis underscores several critical insights for understanding higher education contexts. First, the capacity to control disclosure, in terms of when, how, and to whom, is unevenly distributed, producing forms of agency for some students while constraining others. Second, visibility is relational, where being 'seen' is not only determined by self, but also by social assumptions, peer attention, and normative expectations, which can (mis)recognise identities (Ahmed, 2012; Alabi, 2015; Miller, 2015b, 2019). Third, disclosure operates along multiple

dimensions, including bodily, social, and institutional, highlighting that higher education spaces are structured by complex configurations of power and recognition. Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that disclosure is a dynamic and negotiated process, where students continuously assess benefits and consequences across intersecting identities. Importantly, this analysis moves beyond framing disclosure as a simple personal decision and instead situates it within the embodied, relational, and structural realities of higher education, revealing the nuanced ways in which students navigate visibility and agency.

Building on these insights about the uneven distribution of disclosure and the relational, embodied, and social dynamics that shape visibility, the next section explores how students actively engage in strategic coming out. Whereas the accounts above illustrated the constraints and involuntary aspects of being seen, participants also described moments where disclosure is carefully calculated, reflecting a deliberate negotiation of timing, context, and audience. This highlights that even within environments structured by material, social, and institutional pressures, students exercise forms of tactical agency, navigating when, how, and to whom to reveal their identities to foster connection, safety, and recognition.

Strategically Coming Out

An insight from participants' accounts is that disclosure in higher education is rarely spontaneous. Instead, it was spoken about as strategic and an ongoing negotiation shaped by context, perceived risk, and the potential for stigma. Within this section I foreground disclosure not as a singular act, but as a form of relational and strategic labour that intersects with institutional, social, and cultural norms. For example, Erika's careful choice to only share when necessary ('if it's not something they need to know then I don't tell them') illustrates that disclosure involves assessing audience, environment, and potential consequences. Charlie similarly captures this emotional and social weight ('I have to choose'), highlighting how decisions to reveal or withhold identities become embodied and affective work. Across participants, these experiences reveal that strategically coming out is a

contingent and spatially mediated practice where disabled-queer students must continuously evaluate when, how, and to whom to disclose, often splitting or withholding aspects of themselves depending on the social and institutional environment. University spaces structured by ableist, heteronormative, and cis-normative norms make disclosure both necessary for recognition and risky with respect to misinterpretation, misrecognition, or harm. Rather than framing disclosure as empowerment alone, participants' accounts underscore its ambivalent and uneven nature, emphasising an ongoing negotiation, relational awareness, and adaptive strategies, as explored across prior literature (see Miller, 2015a, 2019; Cooper and Brownell, 2016). Strategically coming out thus emerges as a critical dimension of student agency, revealing how marginalised students navigate the competing demands of (in)visibility and safety in institutional contexts that are not always structured to accommodate difference.

Do I Do This?

This subsection turns to the initial calculated work of strategically coming out. Here, disclosure is not simply about being seen or recognised, but is an emotionally laden practice, where participants continually assess when, how, and to whom to reveal their identities. Participants' accounts reveal that disclosing disabled or queer identities involves navigating complex social, institutional, and emotional terrains, balancing the desire for recognition and connection against the risk of misjudgement, marginalisation, or relational harm. By focusing on the initial self-question, this subsection illuminates how higher education environments shape not only what students can reveal, but also how disclosure becomes a form of anticipatory, adaptive, and relational labour, highlighting the tension between agency and structural constraints.

it's just always a question of when and to who, and also why would I be telling somebody if I don't think that the conversation or the sort of friendship is not going to go anywhere [...] It's always a question I think to myself of who to tell, but more importantly why would I tell. –

Timothy

you have done a lot of work mentally to vet these people and see if you can trust them with what you are about to say [...] you take a lot of time to think 'this is something that I'm going to say' and you anticipate the worst but hoping for the best when you do tell them that you're disabled and you're queer [...] I worry that it could be quite a conversation stopper (laughs). It's always something at the back of your mind, 'do I say this? Do I not say this?' – Ethan

Disclosing disabled and queer identities carries emotional significance, relational risk, and personal history, emerging as an internally negotiated act. Mearns et al. (2020) illustrate that disclosure is rarely spontaneous, but rather is shaped by anticipatory reading of environments, institutional cultures, and social norms. My participants extend this argument, demonstrating that disclosure is not only about *where* one feels safe, but also about *when* one can afford to expend the emotional labour such disclosure requires. Timothy and Ethan's reflections illustrate this temporal dimension where their question *Do I Do This?* foregrounds disclosure as an ongoing calculus in which students must weigh what might be gained against what might be lost.

In this sense, my data resonates with Miller et al.'s (2019) argument that queer and disability-related disclosures sit at the intersection of agency and constraint. Participants do exercise choice, yet that choice is conditioned by structural pressures, such as normative assumptions about bodies, identities, and 'appropriate' forms of participation that require continual vigilance. My findings complicate this framing by evidencing the uneven distribution of the emotional labour of disclosure. Disabled-queer students must repeatedly scan environments, read social cues, and anticipate marginalisation in ways that are not required of many others.

Bringing these perspectives together suggests that disclosure is not a neutral or purely personal decision but a relational and structurally mediated practice. Strategically coming out becomes a form of adaptive navigation throughout spaces and is seen as a dynamic negotiation (Miller et al., 2019). Timothy and Ethan's accounts show that fit is not simply about being present in university spaces but about learning when to share, when to withhold, and how to manage the risks of being

misrecognised. The question ‘*Do I Do This?*’ thus encapsulates disclosure as anticipatory, calculated, and situated, revealing both the agency disabled-queer students exercise and the constraints that shape their everyday emotional and relational labour.

Managing Risk Strategically

Decisions about disclosure did not depend upon identity alone but on the anticipated risks of how that identity might travel across university spaces. Disclosure was experienced not as a one-off admission but as an ongoing process of assessing environments, anticipating reactions, and weighing the potential consequences of being fully known. This reveals that the stakes of disclosure are not purely emotional or interpersonal; they are shaped by the wider institutional conditions that determine whether complexity will be recognised, flattened, or rendered suspect (Miller *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, risk arises not from being disabled-queer, but from navigating settings where norms around legibility are unevenly distributed. It is in this context that Ali’s reflections become particularly illuminating:

you have to be careful who you say what to, because I don’t know where that is going to end up and who is going to hear that there is a gay non-binary autistic person on the course. I don’t know how people are going to react and so I’m always wary. Since starting here I’ve just been questioning how niche of a person can I be here? Can I be honest with people here? I’m afraid of that. – Ali

Ali is not simply describing nervousness but articulating the labour of managing how identity might circulate in spaces where misinterpretation is possible. Their worry about ‘where that is going to end up’ signals an anxiety of uncontrolled circulation, moments when identity moves beyond one’s control and becomes vulnerable to the interpretation of peers (see Shuster, 2020). Likewise, Taylor’s (2017) work on institutional legibility helps illuminate why Ali’s description of themselves as ‘too niche’ matters: it reveals how universities subtly differentiate between identities that feel recognisable within dominant student imaginaries and those perceived as outside the expected norm. Within these

conditions, disclosure becomes structurally precarious because its outcome depends on whether the environment can hold complexity without collapsing it into stereotype.

Ali's account therefore resonates with, but also extends, scholarship on strategic disclosure. While Miller (2015b, 2022) and Connell (2019) show that disclosure requires balancing vulnerability with contextual judgement, Ali highlights the deeper institutional labour involved in managing visibility within environments where disabled-queer complexity rubs up against dominant understandings of being. Here, strategic risk management is not about hiding but about navigating conditions where recognition is uncertain and safety rests on careful, continuous assessment. The emotional labour is inseparable from the institutional labour of students needing to modulate their visibility in response to the university's uneven readiness to receive them.

Understanding disclosure in this way shifts the focus. Participants' reflections make clear that disclosure is not a singular decision but a relational and anticipatory practice involving scanning for cues, monitoring interactions, and testing whether the people around them will allow for their identity. This movement from internal calculation to outward performance marks an important transition. Strategic disclosure is not only about *what* to share and *with whom*, but also about *when* to perform or withhold aspects of oneself, depending on space, who occupies it, and what consequences might follow. It is this broader, dynamic labour of modulating identity across shifting settings that sits at the heart of the next subsection. The following accounts show how disabled-queer students navigate environments that are continually changing, requiring them to recalibrate how they present themselves as they move through lectures, social spaces, and institutional encounters.

Strategic Performance in Shifting Spaces

Disclosure was not only a matter of personal readiness or individual risk calculation; it was also shaped by the environments participants moved through and the people who populated them. Participants described disclosure as something enacted in relation to spaces and people: lecture halls,

group-work settings, corridors, societies, or informal social encounters each carried different permissions and risks. In these shifting university spaces, disclosure could not simply be declared or withheld, but rather had to be performed strategically in and across spaces, calibrated to the norms, moods, and power dynamics of each setting. For Samantha, Dan, and Ashwin, feeling able to disclose was dependant on how a space signalled receptivity. Their accounts highlight disclosure as a situational practice of continual atonements to context, revealing how university environments unevenly shape who can appear, how, and at what cost:

how do I have to present myself in this particular setting with these particular people. That's something that is always going through my head. And that's quite intense each time because it's like 'okay I'm with this lot of people, this is how they know me and this is how I'm gonna be in front of them'. So yeah I can create many different identities for myself. – Samantha

it depends on what circle I'm in. It's all about the other people [...] If I feel comfortable in a space, I could disclose then I do. – Dan

I think carefully about if I should tell people I'm disabled and that I'm gay. I think about it a lot. I have to consider where I am or who are the people that I am with [...] if I go to a meet-up or forum with many mixed people then I would check the vibe and then talk about it. – Ashwin

In the shifting spaces of campus life, disclosure emerges as a performed, situational practice rather than a single act. Samantha, Dan, and Ashwin describe this not as a one-off decision but as continual, calibrating their presentation in relation to particular people and places. Their accounts resonate with Miller's (2015a; 2015b) argument that disclosure is a context-dependent form of labour. They also speak to Orne's (2011, 2013) conceptualisation of strategic outness, wherein queer people deploy multiple identity positions to manage recognition and risk. However, my findings extend this, highlighting how within university settings these negotiations are intensified by the embodied and spatial dimensions of disability, producing forms of disclosure that are acutely attuned to the affordances, constraints, and atmospheres of particular environments.

They further affirm and offer development to Orne's (2011, 2013) work on strategic outness, which demonstrates how queer people deploy multiple identity labels to manage risk and recognition. However, my study extends Orne's work by foregrounding how the intersections of disability and queerness intensify and complicate these negotiations, particularly within institutional environments structured by normative assumptions. Here, strategic disclosure becomes a spatially attuned practice in which students actively assess the affordances and constraints of a setting and adjust *whether* and *how much* of themselves to make available. What they describe speaks to a combined labour of emotional risk-calculation and embodied performance, where being visible in one setting may be safe, yet in another may invite misunderstanding.

Two conceptual points emerge from these accounts. First, disclosure is co-constructed. Rather than a unilateral act, it is an interaction that depends on audience cues, group norms, and the perceived capacity of others to recognise and hold complexity. This aligns with the work of both Abes *et al.* (2007) and Duran and Miller (2023), who argue that identity expression is shaped by relational signals and context. Participants' continual scanning for signs of receptivity or threat shows how disclosure is conditioned by micro-level social signals that indicate whether a space will allow such identities to be articulated.

Second, disclosure is situationally stratified. The same student may reveal a queer identity in one setting while withholding a disability in another, or vice versa. Jones and Eisen-Markowitz (2023) argue that such unevenness reflects how possibilities for being known are shaped intersectionally, with my participants showing how this is shaped across race, class, disability, gender, and group dynamics. Participants described campus microclimates where pockets of safety or hostility vary dramatically, complicating institutional claims of consistent inclusion. Institutional equality statements thus mask a patchwork reality in which recognition is contingent on specific people, times, and events.

The necessity of this continual performance generates substantial emotional and cognitive labour. Students expend time and energy 'checking the vibe', rehearsing disclosures, and managing the

social afterlives of what they say. Ahmed's (2012) work on institutional affect helps illuminate how this structural labour is experienced as a personal burden, while Miller *et al.* (2019) emphasise the anticipatory nature of navigating spaces that unevenly scaffold legibility.

Participants' accounts therefore complicate simple narratives of 'choice'. The ability to perform different identities in different spaces is unevenly distributed, with some code-switching because certain identities are less legible, while others cannot escape immediate marking (Nicolazzo, 2016). In this light, strategic performance across spaces is not about neutral agency but is a negotiated tactic shaped by privilege, embodiment, and the interpretations of others. The consequence is conditional inclusion, where it is available in some spaces and withheld in others, with students internalising rules about which parts of themselves are safe to show. These findings suggest that institutions should attend to the micro-level conditions under which inclusion is practised. Interventions might include developing locally negotiated norms in small teaching groups and social spaces, training staff to recognise and respond to cues of vulnerability, and creating visible, low-risk community locations where disclosure is less likely to carry reputational cost. More fundamentally, recognising disclosure as performance highlights the hidden labour disabled-queer students undertake, which is arguably labour that should be acknowledged within equity work rather than considered to be individual.

Across these sections, accounts reveal that disclosure for disabled-queer students is rarely a singular or spontaneous act. Instead, it emerges as a continuous, emotionally charged negotiation that must be recalibrated across shifting contexts, audiences, and atmospheres. In the same way institutions generate feelings of (mis)fit that shape who feels able to enter a space and who must remain cautious (Ahmed, 2012). Similarly, participants' reflections show that disclosure is never merely a personal choice but is conditioned by the uneven microclimates of campus life, which determine when identity becomes sayable, recognisable, or risky. Their accounts extend existing understandings of disclosure by demonstrating that it is not simply an individual act of self-expression (Miller, 2015b), but a relational practice produced through the everyday textures of university life.

Across the section, participants described the labour of anticipating how their identities might circulate, and be interpreted or misinterpreted, illustrating the emotional work of being in university (Reay, 2018a). While Reay develops this concept primarily in relation to working-class students, it resonates strongly with my disabled-queer participants' experiences, foregrounding the uneven distribution of emotional labour. Concerns about trust, fears of misrecognition, and worries about being seen as 'too niche' made clear that the stakes of disclosure are inseparable from the institutional conditions through which disabled-queer identities are made legible. Conditions that, as Loveday (2021) suggests, continue to privilege normative forms of being even within seemingly progressive institutions. This moves the discussion beyond being about emotional vulnerability alone, demonstrating how disclosure becomes a mode of navigating universities that remain calibrated toward particular expectations of diversity and acceptable difference. In doing so, these sections contribute new insight into intersectional disclosure as a form of institutional navigation, revealing the often-invisible work required of disabled-queer students to make university spaces usable, liveable, and safe.

Participants' accounts also emphasise that strategically coming out is shaped not only by individual readiness but by the relational and spatial affordances of specific environments. Participants continually moved between settings that alternately offered recognition, indifference, or potential risk, echoing research that shows how universities produce patchworks of inclusion rather than consistent landscapes of safety (Dawson, 2023; Taylor et al., 2023). Foregrounding this contributes to work on student identity and disclosure by showing that identity is co-constructed with audiences (Jones and Abes, 2013) and embedded within the micro-geographies of higher education, rather than being an individualised act. Strategically coming out is therefore best understood as a relational and adaptive practice, and an act that responds to the atmospheres, expectations, and constraints of particular moments and places.

This section ultimately demonstrates that disclosure for disabled-queer students involves navigating an institution where inclusion remains unevenly distributed across space and interactions. Even within universities committed to equality and widening participation, students must make continual calculations about where they can be known, how they will be read, and whether the environment can hold identity complexity. This conceptualisation, of disclosure as a spatial, relational, and institutionally patterned process, highlights the subtle but consequential ways in which higher education shapes the possibilities and limits of being recognised.

Queer Selves Across Locations

While much of this chapter has explored the personal, social, and embodied negotiations of disclosure, an important thread running through some accounts is the significance of geographical location. For some, disclosure unfolded within concrete geographical, cultural, and institutional landscapes that shaped what identities felt possible. Participants' narratives reminded me that universities are not sealed-off institutions but are deeply entangled with the socio-spatial dynamics of their local contexts, meaning that the work of disclosure is always conditioned by the politics of place.

For several participants, moving to or within Scotland prompted a re-evaluation of visibility, safety, and the terms on which their identities could be lived. These movements, of crossing borders, regions, or cultural landscapes, brought into view how queerness and disability are differently welcomed depending on local norms. For instance, KQ, attending an urban university, found that his queer identity felt more legible and accepted in Scotland than it was in China, highlighting how national and urban contexts can produce distinct affordances for being seen. In contrast, Bella's shift from what she described as a 'homosexually-approved scene' to a Scottish environment generated a sense of reduced affirmation and increased caution around disclosure. Together, accounts underline that the university is not experienced in a vacuum but is shaped by the geographies that surround it. Such geographies can open up or foreclose possibilities for living and expressing disabled-queer identities, such that understanding disclosure requires attending to place. KQ and Bella's accounts below highlight

how place mediates the visibility, legitimacy, and liveability of a queer identity, with each experiencing Scotland differently:

I think I have fully realised my gay identity since I studied my PhD project at [university name]. Initially, I was in closet. I never came out to anyone [...] I enjoy the freedom and the LGBT rights in Scotland. We don't have that in China. Yeah, before I came to Scotland I wasn't confident about my gay identity, and I had no pride of being gay [...] Being in Scotland is so good for that. Scotland and UK has developed my gay identity. I think I would still be in the closet if I was still in China. But here [Scotland] I can be free. I can be me. I am allowed to. And people don't care. People here [Scotland] want people to be happy. – KQ

it feels strange being here is because I came from a very multicultural, homosexually-approved scene. Like growing up in London there were just so many gay bars and clubs everywhere. Whereas coming up here, it took a while to find them because I don't think there is as much pride about it, and then if they are then a bunch of straight people are in them anyway. – Bella

KQ's narrative illustrates how place can enable identity consolidation and self-acceptance, offering both the emotional and spatial safety that were not available in his previous context. His sense of freedom aligns with international research positioning urban settings as sites of queer possibility (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Weston, 1995). KQ's reflections also resonate with Scotland's national narratives of being progressive and socially just, which are often invoked in policy and promotional discourse around LGBTQ+ rights. However, his experience emphasises that these narratives are not merely symbolic but are enacted through everyday interactions and the affordances of urban campus life, demonstrating how geography and local culture can materially shape disclosure and queer visibility.

Bella's narrative complicates assumptions about Scotland as uniformly progressive. While she had anticipated a comparable level of queer visibility and cultural vibrancy on moving, her experience revealed the limits of national policy and legal protections when translated into everyday life. Her

observation that queer spaces were less recognisably queer when sometimes co-occupied by heterosexual individuals, underscores that formal equality does not automatically produce cultural or affective inclusion. This echoes findings from McCartan and Nash (2023), who argue that seemingly inclusive spaces can reproduce exclusions, particularly for those with intersectional identities. Bella's experience also speaks directly to scholarship contrasting urban and rural campus climates, illustrating how access to microclimates of safety, community, and cultural resonance is shaped by local infrastructure. Rankin et al. (2010) argue that campus climate is deeply spatial and uneven, with students' sense of belonging contingent on the availability of supportive communities and identity-affirming environments. Bella's account extends this work by showing how these dynamics unfold not only across different types of campus but also within a single university setting, where pockets of queer- and disability-affirming space exist alongside areas marked by uncertainty or risk. Her reflections highlight that safety is not a uniform property of the university but an emergent, localised condition, dependent on the social, cultural, and geographic infrastructures that students can access. In this way, Bella's experience nuances Rankin et al.'s (2010) analysis by illustrating the spatiality of campus life and the uneven availability of supportive microclimates.

The divergence between KQ and Bella illustrates that place is mediated by both possibilities and constraints, shaping when, where, and how coming out can occur. Even within a single national context, students encounter varying levels of recognition depending on local geography, campus size, and cultural histories. This interplay between personal experience and broader context demonstrates that disclosure is spatial, cultural, and institutionally mediated. This dynamic is further reinforced when situating personal experience alongside national narratives and policy frameworks. Scotland is frequently cited as a global leader in LGBTQ+ inclusion, with initiatives such as mandatory LGBTQ+ inclusive education and politically framed commitments to social justice (Taylor, 2023). Yet, LGBT Youth Scotland (2022) report a notable decline in young LGBTQ+ people's perception of Scotland as 'a good place to live', falling from 81% in 2017 to 65% in 2022 (Brooks, 2022). Bella's sense of dissonance between expectation and reality highlights the gap between legislative and symbolic progress and the

material infrastructures required to make queer life legible and liveable, where policy alone cannot guarantee inclusion. In this light, accounts reveal that Scottish higher education, as with broader national contexts, is experienced as a patchwork of possibility and limitation, with disclosure and identity performance continually negotiated within these uneven terrains.

Taken together, KQ and Bella's accounts illustrate that place shapes disclosure in multiple, interlocking ways. It affects perceptions of safety, visibility, and cultural affirmation, while intersecting with local campus cultures, national narratives, and policy frameworks. Critically, these accounts suggest that universities seeking to support disabled-queer students must attend not only to formal equality measures but also to the relational, spatial, and cultural infrastructures that enable identities to be expressed across different environments.

Building from this broader national lens, I now turn to the more localised and uneven spatial dynamics of rural and urban environments, as experienced by Ben and Phoebe. Whereas KQ and Bella reflected on Scotland as a nation with distinct cultural and legal narratives of LGBTQ+ inclusion, Ben and Phoebe illustrate how these narratives play out unevenly across different campuses. Their accounts foreground the micro-geographies of everyday life via the ways in which urban and rural settings, campus infrastructures, and community atmospheres shape not only visibility and safety, but also the fluid performance of identity. In doing so, they reveal that disclosure and strategic coming out are not solely mediated by national policy or urban imaginaries, but also by the social norms and material realities of the local environments students inhabit:

despite the fact that geographically [university name] to [home] is like two hours on the train.

But yeah you go back home and maybe like go back into myself. Maybe just not fully me or feel as free. – Ben

I feel totally at home in Glasgow, and then you move to [university name] and life just got a bit slower. And in a way it made me feel like I've got two different identities because the places are so different and so I was so different at uni versus at home in Glasgow. Like literally

everything was different. The people were different. The space I was in was different. And like you have to change yourself to fit in there [university]. – Phoebe

Ben and Phoebe's accounts highlight that Scottish higher education landscapes are far from spatially neutral. Their narratives make visible the uneven microclimates that form across campuses, shaped by the social, cultural, and material conditions of place, an argument that resonates with and extends Nicolazzo's (2016) work on the spatial patterning of queer possibility. In this framing, disclosure is geographically mediated, conditioned by how campus spaces feel, who occupies them, and what forms of identity are rendered liveable there.

Ben's description of returning home as a process of 'going back into myself' aligns with research on the differing queer climates of urban and rural settings, where reduced visibility, fewer LGBTQ+ infrastructures, and stronger normative pressures produce a rural heteronormativity (Bell and Binnie, 2004). Yet Ben's account nuances this literature by showing how such transitions can occur over very short geographic distances, where even when a rural home is only miles from an urban university the cultural distance remains substantial. Their experience affirms Miller et al.'s (2019) argument that movement between spaces requires embodied recalibration, but Ben's story illustrates how rapidly and repeatedly these recalibrations may be required in relation to student life.

Phoebe's narrative similarly reveals the identity-splitting effects of moving from a cosmopolitan centre (Glasgow) to a quieter, more rural university town. Her sense of having 'two different identities' echoes Nicolazzo's (2016) analysis of queer and trans students' multiple selves across contexts, yet her account sharpens this by showing how place-based expectations of fit intensify this labour. The need to 'change yourself to fit in' foregrounds the pressures of smaller, more intimate campus settings where anonymity is limited and surveillance is heightened, conditions also identified by Breeze et al. (2019a) as characteristic of rural institutions.

These accounts challenge policy-led narratives of Scotland as uniformly progressive. Despite national legislation and symbolic commitments to equality, Ben and Phoebe show that inclusion is

experienced locally and unevenly, shaped by everyday atmospheres and spatial affordances, a point which aligns with the work of Jones and Eisen-Markowitz (2023), but is here grounded in the specificities of Scottish higher education. Urban universities often benefit from proximity to LGBTQ+ cultural infrastructures, diverse populations, and denser networks of peers, thereby producing microclimates of queer possibility (Kimball *et al.*, 2018). By contrast, rural universities can generate microclimates of constraint, where expectations of conformity and limited diversity render certain identities more precarious. For disabled-queer students, these spatial differences are often heightened. Inaccessible queer spaces, limited community infrastructures, and increased visibility intersect in ways that intensify the emotional and embodied labour of 'fitting in', adding a disability-specific dimension that existing queer campus climate literature rarely addresses.

Taken together, these narratives show that spatial inequalities within Scottish higher education matter. They complicate the assumption that national policy or institutional statements can secure belonging. Instead, they demonstrate that disclosure is place-dependent, experienced through layered geographies of risk and possibility, requiring institutional strategies attentive to the relational and spatial conditions that shape how, where, and whether disabled-queer students feel able to disclose.

Conclusion

Participants demonstrate that disclosure is neither a singular moment nor a purely individual act, but an ongoing, relational, and spatially contingent labour. Participants' stories reveal how disclosure is shaped by emotion, timing, embodiment, and institutional expectations, complicating the assumption that safety or belonging can be measured as stable, universal conditions (Rankin, 2005). Instead, participants show that 'climate' is lived through micro-interactions, shifting atmospheres, and the affective performance of university life. Participants described feeling pressure to perform particular versions of 'studenthood', echoing critiques of how universities implicitly reward normative ways of being.

This chapter also brought attention to Scotland as not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping how disabled-queer students negotiate their identities. Participants' movements into and across Scotland illuminate tensions between national imaginaries of progressiveness and the uneven realities of rural–urban life, showing that experiences vary dramatically across geographies, even within nations that describe themselves as inclusive (Dawson, 2023; Taylor, 2023).

By tracing these differentiated experiences, the chapter advances three interconnected arguments. First, disclosure should be understood as relational and spatial, not simply a personal choice but a process shaped by atmospheres, place-based norms, and the affordances or constraints of different environments (Miller et al., 2019). Second, Scottish higher education cannot be separated from the geographies in which it is embedded, where local cultures, rural–urban dynamics, and national narratives all shape how equality commitments are felt, taken up, or resisted (Riddell and Weedon, 2014). Third, participants' stories reveal the substantial emotional and structural labour students undertake to 'get by' in university, echoing Puwar's (2004) Black feminist critique of institutional space, demonstrating how racialised and gendered bodies are positioned as 'out of place', while extending this analysis to foreground how disability and queerness similarly structure experiences.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter addresses the central arguments and findings of this research by focusing on the research questions. Participants' experiences reflect and resist social, political, and cultural aspects of intersecting inequalities in universities. This chapter brings together the key findings and arguments from this study, foregrounding the experiences of disabled-queer students in Scottish higher education. In exploring how these students navigate university life, this research asks how disability and queerness intersect to shape the everyday, emotional, and institutional realities of studenthood. The findings show that universities are spaces where disabled-queer students must continuously manage their visibility, plan with respect to their identities, and negotiate structures. This chapter reflects on the broader significance of these findings, highlighting the material, temporal, and emotional labour involved in 'making university work' as a disabled-queer person. It is essential to explore more deeply these embodied experiences and to identify the patterns and pressures that emerge through their consideration. My critical review of existing literature revealed a gap in addressing the disabled-queer intersection and a need to expand upon the idea of the classroom as the site of 'the student experience'.

This study was guided by queer-crip theory and research, establishing a framework that uses disability and queerness as lenses to examine broader social and intersecting inequalities. In situating this work within the wider literature, this thesis contributes to growing critiques of inclusion and diversity initiatives in higher education. While existing scholarship often explores disability or queerness in isolation, this study demonstrates that disabled-queer student life cannot be understood through singular lenses. Participants' accounts illustrated a range of intersecting marginalisations: while disability, sexuality, and gender diversity were central to most interviews, age, race and class similarly shaped experiences for some individuals. These intersections were negotiated daily through acts of disclosure, silence, planning, or resistance. Findings build upon and extend theoretical frameworks such as queer-crip time (Kafer, 2013) and queer-crip theory (McRuer, 2006) by situating higher education as a key arena through which these ideas are lived. Findings also show how university

timelines, norms, and expectations can be experienced by students as exclusionary and misaligned with queer-crip ways of being.

Grounded in four years of research and interviews conducted with twenty-one disabled-queer students studying across Scottish institutions, this study explored how these identities play out on campus. Ultimately, my findings challenge assumptions about *who* and *what* a student is, offering a queer-crip perspective on studenthood, and allow us to (re)imagine university in such a way. Participants' accounts make clear that 'the student experience' reaches beyond classrooms and calendar structures. For disabled-queer students, it is lived across shifting temporalities and spaces, rather than within the linear rhythms of the academic day, week, or year. Participants' accounts also reveal a persistent need to anticipate how they will be read and responded to by institutions, peers, lecturers, and services. In this sense, disabled-queer students are not passively included but work to construct a legible and manageable presence within a system that privileges normative ideas of 'the student' and can reproduce heteronormative and ableist ways of being.

Ultimately, my research argues for a few things. Firstly, for the reconceptualisation of 'the student experience' beyond the classroom. Throughout this thesis I have shown that 'the student experience' is not a singular or fixed entity, but is shaped across campus spaces by social, institutional, and embodied differences that condition access, participation, and recognition. Secondly, it advances a queer-crip imagining of both 'the student' and 'the university'. Drawing on foundational crip theory (see McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013), as well as contemporary arguments for applying crip theory within higher education (see Abrams et al., 2024), my contribution lies in extending these ideas into the specific context of Scottish higher education. Through the stories and practices of disabled-queer students, I demonstrate how the theoretical concepts of queer-crip scholarship (such as time and temporality, fluidity, and the disruption of normative assumptions) are lived realities that unsettle dominant institutional expectations about who a student is and how a university should operate. The conclusions that follow build on these findings to reflect on what is needed to create an imagined

(queer-crip) future. Rather than offering easy solutions, this chapter calls for a fundamental shift in how higher education understands access, inclusion, and student life, not as isolated issues to be ‘fixed’ through policy or provision, but as deeply structural and relational concerns. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations in critical disability studies, queer studies, and educational research, offering a framework for future scholarship, practice, and resistance.

Discussion of Findings and Relation to Research Questions

This section of the conclusion will return to the three research questions posed at the onset of this thesis. Across the four data analysis chapters, participants' narratives have illuminated a rich and often contradictory set of experiences. From anticipatory hopes to feelings of disconnection, from identity management to acts of collective, everyday resistance. In turning now to explicitly answering each of the research questions, I move from an analytical account of the data toward a more interpretive and critically reflective engagement with what these accounts tell us about disabled-queer student life in Scottish universities.

I present my answers to the three research questions, while remaining critically aware of the wider structural pressures currently shaping the higher education sector, including staff redundancies, funding precarity, time scarcity, and competing academic and administrative demands. Attending to disabled-queer students is therefore not a simple matter of willingness, but is constrained by current sector conditions. The findings disrupt narrow, normative understandings by queering and crippling ‘the student experience’, while also highlighting the structural challenges that may limit universities’ capacity to respond. In doing so, they offer opportunities to reimagine university life not only for disabled-queer students, but for those whose experiences fall outside the university mould.

Research Question 1: How do disabled-queer students experience and make sense of higher education?

Disabled-queer students in this study experienced university as a complex, fluid, messy, and contradictory terrain marked by moments of both possibility and exclusion. Much like existing work on disabled students (Fuller *et al.*, 2004; Wertans and Burch, 2022) and queer students (Nicolazzo, 2016),

participants' accounts demonstrate that university life is not experienced as coherent but as an uneven landscape shaped by social norms, structural barriers, and competing expectations. However, my findings extend this work by showing how these dynamics are not simply encountered *within* the university, instead beginning long before arrival.

Participants' experiences were shaped by their own broader life circumstances. Some lived in student accommodation and spoke of an immersed student life, while others stayed at home and had work or caring responsibilities. This complexity echoes the variability of student life noted in previous research (e.g., Keenan, 2018; Marzetti, 2018; Gibson et al., 2024), but my findings further highlight how these relational and material conditions fundamentally shape whether students can engage with the university at all, and if so how. In this sense, the study pushes against dominant framings of 'the student experience' as institutionally bound or universally shared, emphasising instead the multiplicity and unevenness of disabled-queer students' everyday lives.

Accounts also reveal that universities demand ongoing navigation, negotiation, and affective labour, often before students arrive on campus. Participants often arrived at university carrying a hopeful imaginary 'promised land' belief that higher education might offer a place of reinvention and difference, particularly in contrast to earlier experiences of marginalisation in schools, families, or local communities. These imagined futures were often underpinned by the cultural positioning of universities as spaces of openness and self-discovery (Falconer and Taylor, 2017), as well as by national narratives that frame Scotland as a progressive and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ rights (Formby, 2017a). Yet my findings complicate these narratives, as participants' expectations were frequently tempered by the practical and emotional labour required even before stepping onto campus. This work adds a new dimension to existing scholarship by showing that disabled-queer students do not simply enter the university, but that they prepare and negotiate it in advance. The process of transitioning into higher education was described as logistically, socially, and emotionally demanding. Participants spoke of having to plan ahead in relation to accessibility, disclose aspects of their identity to new

people, and rearticulate themselves in unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcoming contexts. In this sense, the university's promise of freedom or self-expression was never guaranteed but was always contingent, unevenly distributed, and conditioned by social norms, structural barriers, and the embodied politics of identity.

Importantly, these pre-arrival imaginaries indicate that disabled-queer students do not simply begin their university experience at the point of entry, but that they start to live and navigate 'the student experience' long before arriving on campus. My findings show that disabled-queer students engaged in extensive pre-university planning: researching disability accommodations, speculating on the queerness of campus culture, imagining how they might disclose their (multiple) identities, and preparing themselves emotionally. These preparatory acts are not peripheral but were central to how disabled-queer students began to inhabit and make sense of university life. In this way, the findings challenge the often taken-for-granted notion that 'the student experience' begins upon stepping onto campus or is neatly captured by institutional metrics like National Student Survey results or retention statistics. Such framings risk overlooking the affective, temporal and structural labour that disabled-queers undertake before arriving, as well as the social imaginaries that shape why and how students decide to pursue higher education in the first place. To position the student experience as something that *only* begins at matriculation is to ignore how disabled-queer students are already engaged in navigating, imagining, and negotiating university well in advance, and how these engagements are shaped by broader discourses of access, safety, and fit. This contrasts directly with research that situates the 'student experience' primarily within institutional boundaries (e.g., Miller, 2015a), highlighting the need for a more temporally expansive understanding.

Once within university spaces, participants often felt a sense of misalignment and questioned their fit across time and spaces. The university was experienced not simply as a place of learning, but as a space that subtly demanded certain (classed, able, heteronormative) performances. Participants described being read in normative ways that reflected a normative 'mould' of 'the student', a mould

that participants felt did not reflect their own being. Although research has shown that normativity operates forcefully within university spaces (Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Nicolazzo, 2016), my findings show that these norms are not simply interpersonal but structural: embedded in marking criteria, campus layouts, classroom interactions, and expected rhythms of participation. My participants internalised these dynamics, questioning their own sense of fit and often interpreting their discomfort or marginalisation as a personal shortcoming. Yet what appeared on the surface to be individual doubt was, in reality, a reflection of broader structural exclusions. This disjuncture between how students see themselves and how they are seen (or not seen) within institutional contexts resonates with queer-crip conceptualisations of the university as organised around normative embodiments and temporalities (see McRuer, 2006).

These findings therefore extend existing literature by showing how student imaginaries, affective labour, and structural misalignments operate to shape the lived experience of higher education as a layered, shifting, and affective landscape within which intersecting inequalities are lived. These findings extend and complicate existing research on disabled students (e.g., Fuller et al., 2004; Wertans and Burch, 2022) and queer students (e.g., Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Nicolazzo, 2016; Taulke-Johnson, 2010), while contributing to an emerging literature on disabled-queer experience in higher education (Miller, 2015a, 2020), as well as bringing queer-crip theory into conversation with higher education studies (Abrams et al., 2024). Crucially, this work demonstrates that the student experience begins prior to enrolment, is deeply relational, and cannot be understood solely through institutional metrics or normative assumptions. These insights underscore the importance of attending to the structural, affective, and embodied conditions that shape how universities are experienced by students whose identities do not align neatly with the normative mould of ‘the student’.

Research Question 2: What forms of labour do disabled-queer students undertake to navigate university life?

Disabled-queer students in this study undertook multiple, intersecting forms of labour, such as emotional, structural, and identity-based. Rather than passive recipients of inclusion efforts, students emerged as active agents, continually managing and mitigating exclusions embedded within universities. Their accounts reveal the everyday work required to 'get by', as well as the enduring power of normative ideas about *who* the 'ideal student' is and how this figure silently structures university life. In doing so, the findings extend existing analyses of disabled labour in higher education (e.g., Fuller et al., 2004; Wertans and Burch, 2022) and queer labour around visibility (e.g., Nicolazzo, 2016; Woodford et al., 2018), showing how these forms of labour converge in the lives of disabled-queer students.

Structural labour encompassed efforts to change either immediate spaces or wider institutional structures, both for one's self and for others. This included formal and informal engagement across spaces and at differing levels. Some got into representative roles for the student unions, allowing them to meet with university management, while others created informal peer support networks in their departments. These practices constitute a form of mutual care and activist world-building, reflecting queer-crip approaches to institutional change (Winters and Ningard, 2023). Yet, in line with Pryor (2018), this labour was often unpaid, unrecognised, and unequally distributed, producing burnout or the paradox of being the relied-upon 'go-to' voice for concerns. Structural labour was thus relational, political, and sometimes contradictory, where participants worked to remake the institution incrementally and under conditions not of their own choosing. The findings therefore challenge celebratory framings of student activism by foregrounding the labour conditions under which this activism is sustained and the institutional logics that quietly depend on it.

Emotional labour intersected with these structural efforts, with participants continually navigating questions of visibility, safety, and (mis)fit, and deciding whether, when, and how to disclose

aspects of their identities. Existing scholarship often positions disclosure as a strategic moment (see Miller, 2015a; Miller et al., 2019), and my findings extend this by showing that disclosure operated as a routine, ongoing practice of a series of micro-negotiations shaped by context, risk, and interpersonal power dynamics. For some, disclosure generated connection and ease, while for others it precipitated emotional depletion, self-monitoring, or the burden of managing others' reactions. Emotional labour was not only about self-regulation but also about cultivating safety, defusing harm, and anticipating the consequences of being known in particular ways. I demonstrate that emotional labour extends across multiple campus spaces and temporal moments: from researching and choosing which university might offer the possibility of a different (queer) life to navigating learning and social environments and not finding 'my people'; from negotiating access with disability services to emotionally supporting peers.

Identity-based labour was also a recurrent and emotionally intensive feature of participants' university experiences. Participants described being hyper-aware of how they were read on campus and in social spaces (Mearns et al., 2020). My findings push this further by illustrating how these readings are layered across disability, queerness, gender, and class simultaneously. Participants moved through campus being cast as 'not queer enough', 'too queer', 'not disabled', or 'the disabled one', with each positioning carrying distinct forms of vulnerability and hypervisibility. These dynamics shaped not only how participants were perceived but how they navigated academic and social life. For those whose queerness or disability was less visible, this often resulted in misrecognition. Conversely, those whose identities were more visibly marked reported heightened vulnerability to stigma, unwanted attention, and inability to practise agency with respect to their own disclosure (Miller and Smith, 2021). These dynamics shaped not only how participants were perceived by others, but also how they moved through academic and social life.

Many participants engaged in what might be termed 'strategically coming out' — a process of continually weighing the risks and potential consequences of revealing aspects of their identity (Orne,

2011, 2013; Miller, 2015a, 2015b; Miller et al., 2019). Decisions about disclosure involved a daily, shifting dynamic of jumping in and out of visibility, requiring constant attention to space, time, and people. While Orne's work foregrounds how queer individuals actively manage visibility across social contexts, my findings demonstrate how, within higher education, such strategies are structurally produced and institutionally demanded. Disclosure emerges not simply as interpersonal negotiation, but as a routine form of identity-based labour generated by university environments structured around ableist, heteronormative, and productivity-oriented norms. Extending Orne's work, I show how disability and queerness intersect to intensify these negotiations, positioning disclosure as an ongoing institutional task rather than a personal choice. In doing so, this analysis also builds on Woodford et al.'s work (2018), reflecting upon 'beingness' as fluid, contextual, and strategic, and challenging inclusion frameworks that assume identity can be straightforwardly declared. I push this further by illustrating how these negotiations are intensified at the intersection of identity. Identity-based labour emerges here not as a personal struggle but as a structural feature of higher education, one generated by institutional norms that privilege certain bodies, identities, and ideas of studenthood.

Taken together, these forms of labour demonstrate that disabled-queer students are continually engaged in work that is emotional, political, relational, and often invisible within institutional discourses of inclusion. This study both affirms and extends existing research by showing how labour operates intersectionally, how it accumulates across time and space, and how it illuminates the institutional architectures that require certain students to continually adapt and re-shape those environments through which they move.

Research Question 3: In what ways do disabled-queer students challenge, reshape, or reimagine the university?

Disabled-queer students in this study actively challenge and reconfigure the university through their everyday actions and negotiations. While institutional structures constrain who is imagined to fit and how fitting is performed, participants unsettled dominant narratives of what a university is, who

it is for, and how it should function. These practices represent an ongoing effort by participants to get on and continue to get by within university.

One key form of reshaping occurs through student-led meaning-making. Participants crafted their own spaces of care and connection, particularly through peer networks, informal friendships, and grassroots student society practices. In doing so, they created infrastructures where they could be complex, challenging the idea that visibility, productivity, and participation must conform to institutional norms. Everyday acts (e.g., wearing pronoun badges on rural campuses, taking on representative roles) functioned as both resistance and invitation, making queerness and disability visible no matter the size of the act. However, the extent to which students could engage in these practices was shaped by their broader life circumstances. Some had the time and resources to take on representative roles (e.g., Ben, Bethany), while others balanced university with work or family responsibilities (e.g., Erika, Ethan) which constrained their involvement in structural or formal types of engagement.

Participants also queered and criped time and space. Rather than following linear, normative academic trajectories, they navigated altered temporalities, such as taking breaks, deferring years, or returning after time away. These were not simply responses to personal circumstances, but navigations of queer-crip time (Kafer, 2013; Samuels, 2017). These temporal practices challenge ableist and heteronormative assumptions of continuous progress and student success. Their temporalities are shaped by fluctuating health, emotional labour, care responsibilities, and navigating institutional structures that they bump up against. Spatially, participants described reshaping campus geographies according to their needs, such as navigating inaccessible buildings, or frequenting spaces where they felt queer and/or disabled visibility was possible without risk. In doing so, they redefined what university space *is* and *can be*. The micro-geographies that participants spoke of (e.g., Bethany's 'queer wee bubble') reorient the spatial map of the university, suggesting that meaningful parts of student life can occur outside formal academic or social spaces.

Together, these temporal and spatial disruptions reveal how disabled-queer students are reconfiguring the university through their everyday (queer-crip) practices. These practices illustrate how queer-crip perspectives extend understanding of the student experience beyond institutional definitions of inclusion and success. Disabled-queer students actively bend, stretch, and remake structures around them. As Samuels (2017) suggests, queer-crip ways of being can unsettle foundational norms of space, time, value, and identity. Through such unsettling participants can open up new imaginaries for what university could be. These findings challenge assumptions about who counts as a student and how universities should operate, positioning disabled-queer everyday practices as sites of critical insight, resistance, and imaginative potential.

Contributions of the Study

Theoretical Contribution

This thesis brings queer-crip theory and higher education research into sustained conversation by extending queer-crip theory into the lived realities of disabled-queer students in Scottish universities. Drawing on the work of McRuer (2006), this project contributes to a growing body of scholarship that engages with crip theory, exploring how queerness and disability intersect to trouble normative understandings of time, space, and embodiment. Responding directly to calls from Miller (2015a) and Abrams et al. (2024) for an engagement with crip theory in higher education, this study demonstrates how queer-crip perspectives illuminate the everyday negotiations through which students encounter, navigate, and subtly remake university structures. In doing so, it theoretically contributes to this emerging body of scholarship by troubling normative assumptions, while also positioning Scottish higher education as a distinctive context through which these theories can be extended.

This thesis develops queer-crip theory by taking McRuer's (2006) invitation to think queerly and criply and applying it directly to dominant constructions of 'the student' and 'the student experience'. This work has shown how compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness

operate together in university life shaping expectations of 'the student' and defining who is imagined to 'fit' within normative, institutional structures. By situating these theoretical concepts within students' everyday negotiations of recognition, disclosure, spatial practice, and temporality, the thesis reveals how 'the student' is normatively reproduced through the pedagogical, administrative, and relational infrastructures of higher education. This empirical grounding extends queer-crip theory into a new domain, demonstrating how normative systems are lived, felt, and contested by disabled-queers in university.

Importantly, the thesis foregrounds the productive tensions and contradictions within identity categories themselves. It uses identity categories strategically while simultaneously questioning and unsettling them, reflecting queer-crip arguments that identity is shaped by institutional context. The study shows how disabled-queer students move between identification and ambivalence depending on the spaces they occupy and the meanings made available to them. In this way, the research contributes theoretically by modelling an approach that holds both structure and nuance, where identity categories matter for navigating university systems, but are never fixed or singular.

Finally, this thesis argues for more situated, contextually grounded understandings of higher education. While theoretical work on queer-crip temporality and spatiality often operates at abstract levels, this study demonstrates how these concepts manifest through the micro-practices of students' lived experiences of altered trajectories, strategies of disclosure, emotional and structural labour, the creation of micro-geographies of safety, and modes of 'getting on by'. By tracing how queer-crip theoretical concepts unfold in a Scottish higher education landscape shaped by widening access agendas, equality law, and institutionalised narratives of support, the thesis shows that theory must remain attentive to the specific institutional terrains within which students live and negotiate identity. In this way, it provides a theoretical contribution that both extends existing frameworks and re-grounds them in the everyday, situated realities of university life.

Empirical Contribution

This thesis offers an in-depth exploration of disabled-queer students' lives, extending and re-situating existing intersectional scholarship. Empirical work examining the intersection of disability and queerness in higher education has primarily emerged within a US context (e.g., Miller, 2015a; Ives and Elkins, 2024), while UK-based research has tended to explore queer student experiences (Ellis, 2009; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Formby, 2017b; Keenan, 2018; Marzetti, 2018) and disabled student experiences (Fuller et al., 2004; Wertans and Burch, 2022) as distinct. While this body of work has been vital in highlighting structural exclusions within higher education, it has largely left unexplored how disability and queerness are lived together within UK, and specifically Scottish, university contexts.

Building upon and in dialogue with this literature, this thesis demonstrates that disabled-queer students encounter higher education through forms of anticipatory planning, affective labour, and non-linear temporalities. In doing so, it extends US-based intersectional insights by grounding them within the policy, cultural, and institutional landscapes of Scottish higher education. The findings suggest that disability and queerness are not simply parallel axes of experience but are mutually constitutive in shaping how students imagine, enter, and navigate university life.

Further, where earlier studies have often centred the classroom as the primary site through which student experience is understood (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Miller, 2015a), my research deliberately unsettles that focus. By attending to multiple campus, social, and digital spaces, and to experiences that unfold before arrival, across the academic year, and beyond formal teaching contexts, this study expands how student experience is conceptualised. In doing so, it challenges linear, place-bound accounts of higher education and offers a more temporally and spatially attuned understanding of how disability and queerness intersect across affective, institutional, and everyday contexts. This reorientation not only broadens existing intersectional scholarship but also demonstrates the value of moving beyond classroom-centric framings to capture the full complexity of disabled-queer student lives. My research shows that crucial student experience moments can simultaneously occur outside

formal teaching, such as in student societies, living at home, in student accommodation, and with respect to internal thoughts and emotions. While I recognise the classroom as a key site within university life and a space where ideas, identities, staff, and students come together, I am reminded of Taylor et al.'s (2023) caution against seeing the classroom as an end point:

I'm still convinced that being queer, and insisting on a queerer world, and via a queerer educational world, is not just about fitting in, it's about stretching those classroom contexts, rather than trying to fit back into contemporary imagines of the classroom, even if it's just adjusted a little bit more, even if we have the LGBT poster up. (p. 10)

Taylor et al. (2023) argue that queering education requires stretching our understanding of educational spaces beyond the classroom. My findings extend this argument further, showing how disabled-queer students transform the university through everyday strategies. By widening the analytical lens beyond the classroom and integrating Scottish university contexts, this thesis enriches existing UK scholarship (see Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Formby, 2017b; Keenan, 2018) and offers novel insights into the intersectional realities of disabled-queer student experiences.

Finally, this study contributes new empirical insight as to how identity categories operate and intersect in Scottish and UK educational and political contexts. Participants navigated institutional markers — disabled/non-disabled, cis/queer — in ways that shifted across contexts and situations. Their experiences challenge fixed taxonomies and demonstrate the need for more fluid, contextual approaches in policy and research. Disabled-queer students' practices reveal that they are active co-producers of university life.

Practical Contribution

This research offers actionable insights for Scottish higher education, grounded in both the lived realities of disabled-queer students and the policy landscape structured by the Equality Act 2010, widening access commitments, data-driven governance, and recent constraints facing EDI infrastructures and the wider university sector. Participants' narratives show that inclusion cannot be

achieved solely through formal accommodations or classroom provision. Instead, universities must consider the wider temporal, affective, social, and digital structures through which disabled-queer students navigate their studies. Practical action therefore involves working with diverse, fluctuating temporalities that shape students' engagement.

Arguably, there is a need for universities to engage with the notion of queer-crip time. By developing a deeper understanding of how disabled and queer students can experience time differently, universities can begin to adapt their systems, expectations, and support services to better accommodate these non-linear, fluctuating student journeys. Such a shift is not only about improving support across the academic year but also about addressing the critical issue of disabled-queer students leaving university before graduation due to fluctuating life circumstances (see Spencer et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2025). Understanding departures through the lens of (queer-crip) temporality may enable institutions to see these moments not as failure or dropout, but as part of a different temporal trajectory which could be explored in relation to how it intersects with structural systems. This opens possibilities for more flexible approaches, such as encouraging deferrals, academic pauses, or re-entry pathways. In doing so, institutions would translate a theoretical insight into practical support that acknowledges queer-crip engagement.

Participants' accounts also show that experiences were shaped by the interplay between formal structures and informal forms of support. Many participants contributed to networks that provided the day-to-day support not always available through formal services. Universities can work with these already-existing infrastructures by offering optional recognition, resourcing, or partnership pathways, without formalising them in ways that dilute their community-driven ethos. Supporting intersectional student-led initiatives, particularly those centring queer students of colour, neurodivergent students, and those with competing life circumstances, can help to broaden belonging and strengthen the co-construction of university spaces (Kelly et al., 2023).

These recommendations are situated within the current realities of the UK and Scottish higher education sector. Universities are operating within tight financial, political, and staffing constraints, and institutional processes are increasingly shaped by regulatory pressure, data-driven accountability, and contested public debates, such as the recent Supreme Court ‘clarification’ on the meaning of ‘woman’ in the Equality Act. In this context, time and structural support to enact wide-scale change, even when there is a commitment to doing so, can be challenging. A realistic and constructive approach to practical contributions therefore requires recognising that institutions may not be able to respond rapidly to every issue, particularly given student turnaround cycles. Immediate large-scale transformation can be challenging, and long-term, incremental change supported by reflective structures that allow universities to adapt sustainably over time may be more feasible.

Within this broader context, it is important to consider how universities gather insight from students. While good work is undoubtedly already happening across departments and committees, there is value in periodically reflecting on *who* typically contributes to institutional conversations. Universities often, and understandably, rely on student representatives or well-established ‘go-to’ voices when seeking input. These students provide important perspectives, but relying too heavily on a small cohort can unintentionally reproduce a narrow understanding of student experience. Creating additional, low-barrier avenues for contribution, for example, invitations to students who have not previously participated, part-time or mature students, or those studying online, can broaden the range of voices. This shift is not about replacing existing mechanisms but supplementing them with wider opportunities for participation, helping institutions to avoid equating visibility with representativeness and to attend to who may still be missing from dialogue. However, there is a need for institutions to reflect carefully on how data is collected, interpreted, and utilised. I don’t believe ‘getting more’ is always the equalising answer (see Guyan, 2022; English, 2024), particularly given some participants chose to remain less visible. Instead, universities can work toward thoughtful, proportionate, and ethically grounded data practices that recognise the fluidity of queer and disabled identities while still generating insights that can support structural change. Such practices do not require perfect datasets

or rapid system overhauls, rather inviting ongoing reflection on what can be learned from existing information, how gaps can be reduced over time, and how data can be used to inform inclusive, contextually responsive action.

Limitations of the Study and Possibilities for the Future

The Situated Nature of Qualitative Inquiry

As a qualitative inquiry, this study does not aim to achieve the broad generalisability often associated with quantitative research. Instead, I present a situated and contextually grounded exploration of the diverse experiences shared by twenty-one disabled-queer students studying at a range of institutions across Scotland, including those of varying rankings. While the insights generated here may offer relevance to scholars and practitioners working in other national or institutional contexts, deciding upon the applicability of such insights lies with the reader of this thesis. Equally, the accounts presented in this thesis cannot be understood as unproblematic truths. Like all narrative accounts, they are situated, partial, and shaped by the interview encounter itself. Participants were asked to speak about university and student life, which may have foregrounded forms of difficulty while obscuring ease, privilege, or moments of comfort. Their reflections, like any qualitative data, are open to contradiction and reinterpretation.

Participants' narratives should not be read simply as individual or isolated experiences. Participants exercised agency in how they navigated university life, accessing, engaging with, and sometimes attempting to reshape institutional spaces. Their accounts therefore reveal how experiences that can appear personal are often encountered structurally, with participants' experiences in progress even when interviewed. For example, students joined societies in search of community yet encountered racialised dynamics within those spaces; they entered lecture halls and classrooms expecting learning yet encountered barriers related to accessibility and disclosure. In this sense, participants' stories illustrate how agency and structure operate simultaneously: students actively engage with university environments, even as they encounter the limits and exclusions

embedded within them. Attending to this complexity does not diminish the significance of what these participants have said, but rather situates their narratives within the wider social, affective, and methodological contexts through which they were produced.

Sample Composition: Presence and Absence

This study holds particular significance in terms of *who* is present on the page and the stories that come into view but often remain marginal even within queer and disability research. My sample includes identities that are frequently under-recognised: sexualities such as asexual and polyamorous; genders including non-binary, trans man, and trans woman; a wide age range (18 to 58, mean 28.7); racialised identities including South Asian, mixed-race, and Chinese; and disabilities that are not always foregrounded in disability studies or policy, such as diabetes. Some of these identities were represented by single participants. For example, one trans man, one trans woman, one polyamorous student. I do not position these individuals as representative, but as voices that complicate normative assumptions about the ‘typical’ disabled or queer student and thereby widen our sense of who the university is imagined to be for.

A natural next question, however, is *Who is not on the page?* Despite sustained efforts to recruit a diverse group of disabled-queer students, there are clear absences that require acknowledgement. Only four participants identified as students of colour. While demographic statistics (such as the 2022 Scottish Census reporting that 96% of the population identifies as white) may provide one explanation, I resist using population data to rationalise underrepresentation. Doing so risks implying that disabled-queer students of colour are simply ‘not there’, reinscribing the very whiteness that research often critiques. Outreach to racially minoritised student-led societies was persistent yet unsuccessful. Naming this as a limitation is a recognition of how research processes can reproduce exclusions and present as project failures. I remain deeply grateful to the participants of colour who did take part as their narratives demonstrate that race was not peripheral but was embedded in every aspect of their university experience, underscoring the need for more research that centres disabled-

queer students of colour in Scotland. Other notable absences include students who identified as Deaf or blind. Despite attempts to recruit through relevant student groups, I did not receive responses. This is another limitation worth naming as their insights would have added vital perspectives on navigating the university through alternative sensory and communicative modes. While some existing work (see Hendry et al., 2021), attends to Deaf students' experiences, there remains considerable scope for research that foregrounds visually- and hearing-impaired disabled-queer students within Scottish higher education. In both cases, I understand these not simply as gaps, but as project possibilities. They gesture toward the next steps required if research on disabled-queer students is to avoid reproducing the exclusions it critiques.

Participation in this study was voluntary and shaped by self-selection. The narratives presented here therefore reflect the perspectives of students who were willing to share their experiences. Participants self-identified under the umbrella terms 'disabled' and 'LGBTQ+', reflecting a commitment to recognising identity as fluid, shifting, and self-defined. While this inclusivity is a strength, it inevitably excludes individuals who may have been uncertain about participating, who are navigating disclosure, or who felt uncomfortable with the prospect of being interviewed by a PhD researcher. The stigma surrounding disability, sexuality, and gender may have further narrowed the pool. As with all qualitative research, this means the study cannot be replicated precisely; conducted at another time, in another institution, or with another population of students, the findings would inevitably differ. Future research might explore subgroups, for example autistic students, students with chronic illness, bisexual students, or trans students, to deepen understanding of specific identity-based dynamics.

There are also limits related to geographic and disciplinary scope. This study focused on higher education in Scotland, primarily for pragmatic reasons rather than to claim that Scottish universities are wholly distinct. Many of the findings align with research from elsewhere in the UK (e.g., Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Formby, 2017a), highlighting dynamics that are likely relevant across different UK

contexts. However, it remains important to recognise that institutional cultures and policy environments vary across the UK. Comparative research across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland could provide additional insights into how these contextual differences shape disabled-queer student experiences, as the findings explored here are likely relevant beyond Scotland. Similarly, many participants were based in the humanities and social sciences. Students in disciplines such as engineering, business, or the hard sciences may have different experiences of academic cultures, particularly where discussions of identity and equity may be less common. Examining disabled-queer experiences within these disciplines would provide important extensions to this work (see Friedensen et al., 2021; Reggiani et al., 2024a; Essex, 2026).

Methodological and Design Considerations

It is important to consider how research design itself can facilitate or hinder accessibility and inclusivity. As detailed in my methodology chapter, I selected an interview room that I believed would support participants' comfort and access needs (e.g., easily reachable from the street and close to accessible facilities). I surveyed multiple campus spaces to identify what seemed most appropriate. However, on reflection, a more participant-led approach would have strengthened this process. I could have asked participants directly about specific access needs, such as lighting, sound, temperature, or spatial layout, rather than assuming what would be comfortable.

This study also prompts reflection on the qualitative method itself, and how traditional, sit-down interviews may limit what becomes knowable. While the interviews produced rich insights, the format may have constrained participation, particularly for students with mobility-related disabilities, chronic pain, or fatigue. As an able-bodied researcher, I can listen to these accounts but cannot fully inhabit the embodied challenges of navigating a university with these conditions. This raises questions about how future research might adopt queer-crip methods that foreground movement. Future research might benefit from queer-crip methods, such as photovisual methodologies (see Pryor, 2015) or participant-led campus tours (see Bengano, 2024), offering more grounded understandings of

inaccessibility by situating knowledge in the environments where exclusion occurs, and thus reflecting the social model of disability. These approaches challenge static assumptions about what qualitative research looks like and encourage more embodied forms of inquiry that centre disabled-queer ways of knowing and moving through space. In doing so, they open up methodological possibilities that are both more inclusive and more attuned to the everyday negotiations of disabled-queer students.

Temporal and Structural Limits of the Inquiry

Although many participants might be read as ‘succeeding’ (e.g., progressing on to master’s or PhD study, achieving academic milestones, or actively reshaping their environments), it is essential to question what this success signifies. Interviews inevitably capture only a moment in time. I cannot speak to where participants have since moved, what directions their lives have taken, or how the conditions that shaped our conversations may have changed. Across the sample, relationships with university were marked by precarity. For several participants, withdrawal from university had already been part of their story, and it remained a future possibility. These accounts unsettle linear narratives of progression and achievement. They emphasise that ‘success’ is contingent, shaped by fluctuating health, shifting access to support, the uneven recognition of needs within the institution, and the broader structural and personal circumstances framing a student’s life (Spencer et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2025).

While this study foregrounds the voices of those who continued, adapted, or persisted, I often think about quieter, less visible experiences that fall outside the frame of this inquiry. These include those who disengaged entirely, those who were subtly or overtly ‘pushed off’, and those whose stories are absent precisely because structural barriers rendered their participation too difficult. Attending to these absences underscores the limits of this project and signals a crucial direction for future work by understanding not only the persistence of disabled-queer students, but also the conditions under which persistence becomes untenable.

Taken together, these limitations reflect the structural conditions of qualitative inquiry and the emergent nature of research on disabled-queer students in UK higher education. They point toward a generative set of future directions through which the field can continue to grow by expanding the voices represented, diversifying methodological tools, and deepening the attention paid to intersecting structures. This study offers one contribution to this broader collective project, opening conceptual, methodological, and empirical pathways still to be explored.

Reflections on the Research Process

The direction this research took was often unpredictable, at times challenging, at times overwhelming, and frequently thought-provoking. There were restless nights spent questioning how best to honour the words and experiences participants had entrusted me with. I wrestled with how to portray their stories without reducing them to overly simplified archetypes, not casting them as inspirational figures or cautionary tales, nor framing their experiences solely through binaries of risk and resilience. Each interview added new layers of complexity, encouraging me to rethink earlier assumptions and deepen my analysis and understanding. Participants shared candid reflections about what it meant to navigate university life as both disabled and queer, often alongside other intersecting aspects of identity. These narratives did not fit neatly into categories, moving across spaces and temporalities, resisting easy conclusions. During analysis, I frequently returned to advice from my supervisors about not prioritising coherence at the expense of complexity. I have tried to hold true to that by resisting the urge to force cohesion where it does not exist. Instead, I have allowed space for multiplicity, contradiction, and fluidity to remain visible, knowing that no singular story could encapsulate all that was shared, and nor should it.

Before starting their thesis, I read that Miller (2015a, p. 318) was told to ‘get out of the way and let participants tell their stories’. This sentiment remained a directive throughout the course of my own research. From the earliest stages of fieldwork, I was conscious of my role not as the centre of the story, but as a facilitator holding space for participants. This was especially important given the

complexities of the identities under discussion. My intention was not to lead participants to particular narratives, but to invite them to share what felt most salient, and to trust that this would guide us toward a fuller understanding of what disabled-queer students experience. At the outset, however, my own nerves were palpable. I initially clung tightly to the interview schedule, worried that I might miss something crucial or fail to 'do it right'. I treated the guide like a checklist, ensuring each question was covered. But as I conducted more interviews, I grew more comfortable in letting go of this structure. Increasingly, I saw the value in allowing participants to steer the conversation, allowing them to tell their stories in ways that felt messy or non-linear. Some participants spoke freely with only minimal prompting, delving immediately into reflections on their identities, relationships, or experiences of university. Others required more structure and more reassurance. It was not uncommon for participants to ask, 'Is this the sort of thing you're looking for?', a moment that underscored how disabled-queer stories were rarely given space. Despite the flexible nature of the interviews, certain themes came up in conversations more regularly. This repetition, whether around moments of coming out, experiences of (mis)recognition, or navigating access barriers, pointed not only to the shared nature of some experiences, but to the wider cultural narratives that shape how these experiences are narrated. I hoped, in those moments, that I had managed to strike a balance between structure and openness, and that I got out the way and let participants tell their stories without being overly directed, giving them the opportunity to bring their own experiences to the forefront.

Over time, I also began to reflect on what motivated participants to take part. A few framed it in reciprocal terms, as they too were conducting research, and saw participation as a good-faith gesture, a way of supporting a fellow student. Others were drawn to the intersectional focus of the study, noting they had never seen their experiences asked about in this particular way. Several said they welcomed the rare opportunity to reflect out loud, to dedicate time to thinking about their own identities, choices, and challenges in a way they rarely had the space or invitation to do. These interviews sometimes felt like co-constructed moments of reflection allowing participants to think

through their stories in real-time, exploring identities they had not fully named previously, or experimenting with language that felt in flux. There was laughter, but also moments of vulnerability, and even silence. The emotional tone of the interviews often shifted, sometimes unexpectedly, and I tried to stay attuned to these dynamics as best I could.

Throughout, I remained aware of my own identity and how it shaped my presence in the research. I shared aspects of myself at the beginning of each interview (e.g., that I was a disabled-gay researcher) in an attempt to build rapport and signal a level of shared understanding. While these commonalities may have helped establish a degree of trust, I never assumed that sharing identity markers created equivalence. I was acutely aware that my whiteness, physical able-bodiedness, and other forms of social privilege shaped the dynamics of the interviews. Some participants held identities and life experiences very different from my own. I often questioned: How could I truly do justice to stories that emerged from experiences I did not inhabit? What would remain unsaid because of who I am? And how might my presence, my assumptions, or even my language have unintentionally limited what participants chose to share? At times, I was left with lingering questions, particularly around moments when participants would say, 'Well, you know what I mean' (Kanuha, 2000), leaving something unspoken or assumed. These moments highlighted the ongoing challenge of representing what was shared, what was omitted, and what was perhaps considered unsayable in the context of our conversation. In other cases, I was surprised by the depth in which participants described their experiences, including those that diverged significantly from my own. It is possible that by naming my positionality early on, I reduced the pressure for participants to presume shared understanding, instead inviting them to explain and elaborate. I remain incredibly grateful to the participants who chose to engage in this process. Their generosity in time, in trust, and in openness cannot be overstated. Their reflections challenged me to reconsider assumptions, to sit with contradiction, and to recognise the multiplicity of experiences that exist within the label of 'disabled-queer student'. Their stories not only deepened this research but raised a host of questions that I continue to carry with me. As Alcoff (2009) reminds me, speaking with or about others demands ethical attentiveness to how

power, position, and identity shape knowledge production. Positionality, as Alcoff notes, is not fixed but multidimensional and fluid, always moving in relation to context. I have tried to honour that fluidity consistently across this project and to recognise my interpretations as situated. This thesis is not a definitive statement on disabled-queer student life, but one interpretation, offered with respect for those who entrusted me with their stories. In doing so, I hope this work contributes to ongoing conversations around equity and complexity in higher education.

As I reach the end of this project, I am struck by how profoundly I have changed, not only as a researcher but as a person. Coming from a psychology background, my early approach to the PhD was shaped by a search for clarity, structure, and the reassurance of ‘doing things right’ and arriving at a definitive answer. Moving into education and the broader social sciences has unsettled and expanded that orientation in ways I could not have anticipated. I now write, read, and think differently, no longer seeking neat conclusions or universal explanations, but instead engaging with nuance, complexity, and the situated, partial nature of knowledge. This shift has transformed how I approach texts, reading them not just for findings, but for silences, assumptions, and the politics of knowledge they carry. It has changed how I write, wherein I allow space for contradiction, resisting closure, and recognising writing itself as a practice of meaning-making. It has reshaped how I interact with participants, listening not simply for answers to my questions, but for the contexts, emotions, and uncertainties that give their words depth.

The process of listening, analysing, and writing has sharpened my sense of the social worlds we inhabit. I see more clearly how structures of inequality shape everyday life, and how research both reflects and reproduces those realities. I feel I see social problems differently now, not as distant or abstract, but as lived, embodied, and always entangled with power. This shift has altered how I move through the world, how I engage with others, how I understand myself, and how I position myself in relation to the knowledge I produce. This PhD has not just been about producing a thesis, but about reshaping how I understand myself, my work, and the world around me. I finish with more openness

to uncertainty, more awareness of inequality, and a stronger commitment to research that is due to the people and communities it is about.

No Neat Endings, Only Openings and Continuations

In tracing the richness, difficulties, and contradictions that shape disabled-queer student life in higher education, this chapter (and thesis) holds space for complexity rather than resolution. What emerges is not a singular narrative but a layered and messy account that resists neat conclusions and instead invites reimagining. By tracing participants' narratives in conversation with the thesis's research questions, the discussion has not aimed to simply categorise experience as final answers. Rather, it has sought to critically reflect on what these accounts reveal about the assumptions, structures, and exclusions that shape the university itself. In doing so, this thesis has argued that disabled-queer students do not merely experience higher education, they actively reconfigure it. Through acts of strategic disclosure, community-building, refusal, and adaptation, participants have shown that the university is not a neutral or static space, but one that is constantly being navigated, shaped, and sometimes resisted. Their accounts trouble neat binaries — between urban and rural, visible and invisible, policy and practice, fit and misfit, able and disabled, heterosexual and queer — and challenge taken-for-granted notions of what 'the student experience' is or should be.

At the same time, this chapter has remained cautious about not romanticising resistance or suggesting that these participants have all the answers. The labour of 'making it work' was often experienced by students themselves. While their insights offer powerful tools for rethinking institutional practices and policy frameworks, they must not become a substitute for structural change. As the thesis has argued, listening to disabled-queer experiences is not just an ethical imperative, it is a conceptual and political one. It urges us to queer and crip the university, to unsettle the normative expectations that define inclusion, excellence, and even education itself. However, the findings raise new questions about who feels permitted to speak, how institutions can be reimagined queerly and cripely, and how (queer-crip) futures are made thinkable. In this spirit, this is not a conclusion, but an

invitation for universities, researchers, and students alike to keep listening, keep questioning, and keep reimagining what higher education could become for future disabled-queers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Definitions of Terms

Definitions are inherently fluid, contested, and shaped by time and context. While this research draws on queer-crip perspectives that intentionally resist rigid categorisations, I offer working definitions to support clarity. That said, some terms are used flexibly and inter-changeably by participants and myself throughout the study (e.g., ‘student experience’ and ‘university experience’). In line with this, when referring to social identities, I prioritised participants’ self-identification over diagnostic or psychological criteria. Terms and definition below have come from a range of sources, for example Human Rights Campaign (2023), and/or scholarly work which is referenced in-text.

Able-bodied. A socially constructed status that denotes individuals perceived as having typical cognitive, emotional, and physical capacities. Can also describe those not identified as disabled or affected by ableism.

Ableism. A system of structural advantage and disadvantage organised around normative assumptions of ability. It privileges those seen as non-disabled while marginalising and devaluing disabled individuals.

Access. The ‘process of entering a postsecondary institution or an individual’s ability to come into the higher education arena. It is important to consider common barriers to accessing higher education, which include but are not limited to high cost, work requirements, family/home demands, academic ability, individual merit, a lacking support system, and inadequate information about policies, aid, and college life in general’ (Myers et al., 2013, p. 6).

Accommodation. An ‘adjustment made to a course, program, event, service, job, activity, or physical space that enables individuals with disabilities to participate equally. These accommodations or modifications occur after an individual with a disability has discovered that the current environment is prohibitive of their full participation’ (Myers et al., 2013, p. 7).

Ally. A term used to describe someone who actively works in solidarity with marginalised groups to challenge oppression and promote social justice. For instance, a heterosexual individual who advocates for the rights and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer communities.

Asexual. Refers to someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Within this spectrum, a grey-asexual person may experience sexual attraction infrequently or under specific circumstances (Bogaert, 2015).

Aromantic. Describes a person who does not experience romantic attraction to others (Bogaert, 2015).

Biphobia. Refers to negative attitudes, prejudice, or discrimination directed at individuals who identify as or are perceived to be bisexual. This can include invalidation, exclusion, or fear.

Cisgender. A term for someone whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a person assigned female at birth who identifies as a woman. This category is often used in contrast to transgender identities.

Crip. Originally a derogatory slur, crip has been reclaimed by 'disabled activists, artists, and others who have come out crip...in response to systemic able-bodied subordination and oppression' (McRuer, 2006, p. 35). A person can also self-identify as crip.

Crip theory. An emerging body of academic work that critically considers the overlapping systems and identities of disability and queerness and the intersections of queer theory and disability studies. Crip theory argues that 'the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness' (McRuer, 2006, p. 2).

Demisexual. A person who experiences sexual attraction only when an emotional connection is made or is present (Hille, Simmons and Sanders, 2020).

Disability. Disability is understood through the social model of disability. Disability arises from the interaction between individuals with impairments and the social, environmental, and institutional barriers that restrict participation in society (Oliver, 1990). Disability is therefore not located solely within an individual's body or mind but is produced through disabling structures and practices. Individuals may also self-identify as disabled.

Disabled people / Disabled students. Terms used to describe individuals who have impairments and who experience barriers due to societal expectations of normal functioning. This study adopts identity-first language to emphasise the political and social dimensions of disability, though it also recognises the importance of self-identification (Berger, 2013).

Disability Studies. An interdisciplinary academic field that prioritises the lived experiences, voices, and knowledge of disabled people. Rather than viewing disability as solely a medical issue, this field generally understands it as a social construct shaped by environmental, cultural, and political contexts. Disability studies often challenges dominant medicalised perspectives, instead adopting social, minority, or radical models of disability (Berger, 2013).

Gay. A term commonly used to describe individuals, particularly men, who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction toward people of the same gender. While sometimes used broadly to refer to all LGBTQ people, in this study it specifically refers to those who self-identify as gay men.

Gender. A socially produced set of roles, behaviours, and expectations linked to how individuals identify and present themselves. Gender is culturally and historically specific, and may include identities such as woman, man, non-binary, transgender, and genderqueer (Davies and Hoskin, 2021).

Gender expression. The outward presentation of one's gender identity, communicated through clothing, speech, body language, and interpersonal behaviour (Davies and Hoskin, 2021). This can align with or differ from societal expectations based on perceived gender.

Gender identity. An individual's deeply felt internal sense of their own gender, which may include identities such as man, woman, transgender, non-binary, or other self-definitions. Gender identity may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, and is distinct from biological or anatomical sex (Davies and Hoskin, 2021).

Gender pronouns. Words used to refer to individuals in ways that reflect their gender identity (Davies and Hoskin, 2021). Common examples in my study include she/her, he/him, and they/them. Pronouns can express identities that lie within or beyond the gender binary.

Heterosexism. A dominant social system that assumes heterosexuality to be the norm and superior to other sexual orientations. This structure privileges straight people while marginalising and discriminating against those who are, or are assumed to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

Heterosexual. A socially constructed identity typically used to describe people who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to individuals of a different gender. Often referred to colloquially as 'straight', a term critiqued for implying that non-heterosexual orientations are somehow deviant.

Homophobia. A form of prejudice, avoidance, or hostility directed toward people who identify as, or are perceived to be, gay or lesbian. This bias may manifest socially, culturally, or institutionally.

Homosexual. A term historically used in psychological and clinical settings to describe same-sex attraction. It is often critiqued for its association with pathologisation and medical discourses that framed queerness as a disorder.

Impairment. A 'biological or physiological condition that entails the loss of physical, sensory, or cognitive function' (Berger, 2013, p. 6).

Intersectionality. A concept that examines how multiple aspects of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability, intersect to shape experiences of marginalisation. Crenshaw (1991), who significantly advanced this concept, critiqued how Black women's experiences were often overlooked due to the separation of race and gender in both legal and academic discourse.

Lesbian. An identity term typically used by women who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction to other women. It is one of several self-defined categories within broader LGBTQ+ communities.

LGBTQ+. An umbrella term referring to individuals who do not identify as both heterosexual and cisgender. In this project, it is used interchangeably with the term 'queer' to signal a shared positioning outside dominant gender and sexual norms. Acronyms such as LGB or LGBT are retained when referring to prior research that excludes specific groups, such as trans or queer people.

Non-binary. A gender identity that does not conform to the traditional binary classification of male or female. People who are non-binary may identify with aspects of both genders, neither, or exist entirely outside binary gender norms.

Oppression. A systemic pattern of marginalisation and discrimination targeting specific social groups. This often takes place through entrenched social, institutional, and cultural practices and can be based on categories such as race, disability, gender, class, sexuality, or immigration status.

Panromantic. Describes someone who experiences romantic attraction regardless of another person's gender (Hille, Simmons and Sanders, 2020). Gender is not a defining factor in how romantic connection is felt.

Pansexual. A term used by individuals who are sexually attracted to others regardless of their gender identity (Hille, Simmons and Sanders, 2020). This label often challenges the assumption of a binary gender system and may be preferred by those who find the term 'bisexual' too limiting.

Personal identity. How individuals understand and describe themselves, including aspects such as personality traits, interests, occupations, and social roles. These identities may or may not intersect with broader social identity categories (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008).

Privilege. Refers to the unearned social, cultural, or political advantages afforded to individuals based on their membership in dominant identity groups, such as being white, cisgender, able-bodied, or heterosexual, within existing power structures.

Queer. A term reclaimed by some to reject heteronormative and cisnormative classifications. It can function as a sexual or gender identity, a political stance, or a challenge to fixed identity categories. In this study, it is used alongside LGBTQ+ as a broad, inclusive term, as well as an interrogative, academic, and political use of language.

Queer theory. An academic field that questions and destabilises dominant assumptions about gender, sexuality, and identity. It critiques rigid binaries and highlights the socially constructed nature of categories like 'male/female' and 'straight/gay', often centring the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Sex. Usually refers to biological attributes, such as chromosomes, genitalia, and hormonal profiles, that are culturally used to classify people as male, female, both, or neither (Hille, Simmons and Sanders, 2020).

Sexuality. Refers to an individual's pattern of sexual and/or romantic attraction, including their feelings, behaviours, and identities. This term is used in this study to foreground the fluid, evolving, and socially situated aspects of sexual identity.

Sexual orientation. A term describing whom one is romantically or sexually attracted to, such as people of the same gender, another gender, multiple genders, or none. Categories often include identities like gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, and queer.

Social identity / Identity category. Describes how individuals are socially categorised, either by themselves or others, in relation to wider systems of power. These categories often relate to race, gender, disability, class, age, religion, and other factors, and play a role in shaping life experiences and access to resources.

Transgender. A broad identity category for individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth (Davies and Hoskin, 2021). This umbrella term includes a range of identities and expressions, such as genderqueer, transmasculine, transfeminine, non-binary, and others.

Transphobia. Prejudice, fear, or hostility directed toward people who are, or are perceived to be, transgender. This can manifest at interpersonal, cultural, or structural levels.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Name of department: Strathclyde Institute of Education

Title of the study: Disabled-Queer Student's Experience of Scottish Higher Education

Introduction

My name is Jack McKinlay, and I am a PhD student at the University of Strathclyde. For my PhD thesis, I am exploring disabled-LGBTQ+ students experiences of Scottish higher education. This project is supervised by Professor Yvette Taylor and Dr Claire Wilson. If you are interested in being a part of the study, then please read on.

What is the purpose of this research?

The proposed study aims to explore the experience of disabled-LGBTQ+ undergraduate and postgraduate students from Scottish universities.

Do you have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time during the interview (and up to 1-week after completing the interview) without giving a reason. If you do, all your data will be deleted.

What will you do in the project?

You will be invited for a one interview to discuss the university experience. There will be in-depth discussions about your experience of university. Interviews will be conducted in-person or via Zoom (you can [choose](#), however, may also be dependent on your location) at a time and place convenient to you. Interviews will be audio and video recorded (this is for transcription purposes only). Once transcription is complete and verified, then audio and video recordings will be deleted. You will be asked to give a pseudonym of your choosing (e.g., 'Nathan', 'Sophie', 'Jessie').

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been chosen to take part in this study because you:

- (1) are at least 18 years old; and
- (2) are presently enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student at a Scottish university; and
- (3) self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+); and
- (4) self-identify as having a disability of any kind

What are the potential risks to you in taking part?

While there is no intended harm of these interviews, issues and discussion relating to your higher education/student experience may be upsetting to discuss. However, you are under no pressure to discuss topics that you do not wish to discuss, and you do not need to answer any questions to do not wish to answer.

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If during the interview you wish to not discuss something, then let the researcher know this and they are happy to move on. You will also be given a debrief form after the interview. This will provide contact details of support services you can contact if you wish to discuss any distressing and upsetting events that came up during the interview.

Below are some contact details of support services you can get in touch with if you currently feel you need to discuss anything:

Switchboard (LGBT+ Helpline) (an organisation for anyone to discuss anything in their lives, including sexuality, gender identity, sexual health, and emotional wellbeing):

Telephone – 0300 330 0630

Website: <https://switchboard.lgbt>

Email: chris@switchboard.lgbt

Mind (an organisation providing advice and support for anyone experiencing mental health problems):

Telephone: 0300123 3393

Website: <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Email: info@mind.org.uk

What information is being collected in the project?

Your name will be collected. This will allow the researcher to identify you if you wish to withdraw, meaning they can erase all personal data. Your email will be collected so the researcher can communicate interview times, days, and send Zoom details to you (if required). You will be asked if you meet the inclusion criteria for the study. Also, interview data about your experience of university will be collected. The interview will be audio and video recorded; this is for transcription purposes only. Anything you say will be transcribed and may be used as data for the study, and used as part of the PhD thesis. You will be given a pseudonym (e.g., 'Nathan', 'Sophie', 'Jessie') to protect your identity, and if possible, you will be able to choose your own pseudonym.

Who will have access to the information?

The researcher (Jack McKinlay) will have access to the original audio recording, contact information, personal identifying information, anonymised data (transcripts), anonymised extracts of your data. The supervisory team (Professor Yvette Taylor, Dr Claire Wilson) will have access to anonymised data (transcripts) and anonymised extracts. This information is stored on a password protected OneDrive University of Strathclyde account. Finally, there may be wider access to the scientific/academic community and general public, for example, if the work is published via papers, chapters, or books. Wider access will have access to anonymised extracts of data.

All data will be confidential, with anonymity being upheld. Data within the transcripts may be used in the study, and therefore, anyone who reads the study will read parts of the data. Although, as mentioned, you will not be personally identifiable in the data as pseudonyms will be used.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

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Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

Demographic information (e.g., name, age etc.) will be stored on a password protected Strathclyde OneDrive student's account. Other data (e.g., pseudonyms, transcripts, audio recordings) will be stored on a secure and password protected Strathclyde OneDrive account. Audio recordings will be kept until the end of the transcription process, to which, they will be deleted and destroyed immediately. You are free to withdraw from the study up to 1-week after completing the interview without giving a reason. If you do, all your data (e.g., demographic, personal, and interview) will be deleted.

Thank you for reading this information – please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

All personal data will be processed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please read our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#) for more information about your rights under the legislation.

What happens next?

If, after reading this information sheet, you still wish to participate then please complete the consent form provided (next page). You will then be asked some demographic questions to ensure you fit the criteria for the study. If, unfortunately, you do not fit the criteria or do not wish to participate, then thank you for your interest in the study. No data will be stored if you do not meet the inclusion criteria and/or do not complete the form.

If you have any questions then please do not hesitate to get in contact. My contact details are below.

After completing the interview, you will get a debrief form explaining what you participated in and support details if you were distressed by anything discussed.

Researcher contact details:

Jack McKinlay
E-mail address: jack.mckinlay@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator/Supervisor details:

Professor Yvette Taylor
Email-main address: Yvette.taylor@strath.ac.uk

This research was granted ethical approval by the School of Education Ethical Committee.

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the research, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

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The Strathclyde Institute of Education Ethics Committee
Strathclyde Institute of Education
University of Strathclyde
Lord Hope Building
141 St James Road
Glasgow
G4 0LT
Email: hass-edu-ethics@strath.ac.uk

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Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form



Consent Form

Name of department: Strathclyde Institute of Education

Title of the study: Disabled-Queer Student's Experience of Scottish Higher Education

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e., how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, and within 1 week of completing the interview, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - audio recordings of interviews that identify me;
 - video recordings of interviews that identify me;
 - my personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e., data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study (1 week after interview).
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to being audio recorded as part of the project.
- I consent to being video recorded as part of the project.

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

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Participants Needed

Disabled-LGBTQ+ Student Experiences of Scottish Higher Education



Would you like to participate in research exploring your experience of university?

If you are:

- Presently enrolled at a Scottish university (undergraduate or postgraduate student)
- Self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer, and
- Self-identify as having a disability of any kind

Follow link or scan QR to read more/sign up for an interview:

<http://tinyurl.com/3cxna5s7>

Any questions, or would like more information, contact Jack McKinlay:

jack.mckinlay@strath.ac.uk

@_jackmckinlay_

Ethical approval from the Strathclyde Institute of Education Ethics Committee, University of Strathclyde



University of
Strathclyde
Glasgow

Appendix 5: Participant Demographics⁶

Name	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Pronouns	Disability	Race/Ethnicity	Class	Level of Study	Length of Interview (minutes)
Ali	Early-20s	Non-binary	Bisexual	They/Them	Autism plus using a mobility aid due to chronic pain	White	Lower	UG	42.88
Ashwin	Mid-40s	Queer	Gay	He/they	Diabetes	South Asian	Working Class	PG	67.53
Bella	Late teens	Female	Bisexual	She/her	Anxiety disorder	White British	Middle Class	UG	62.23
Ben	Early-20s	Non-binary	Bisexual	He/they	Depression, anxiety	White British	Working Class	UG	98.22
Bethany	Late-20s	Female	Bisexual	She/her	Long-term mental health condition, chronic illness	White British	Working class	PG	81.5
Caroline	Late-30s	Female	Lesbian	She/her	I have multiple disabilities/chronic illnesses and I am also neurodivergent (formal ADHD diagnosis, suspected autism)	White Scottish	Working class	PG	55
Charlie	Early-20s	Non-binary	Panromantic, Grey Ace	Any pronouns	Autism, ADHD, Fibromyalgia (Chronic pain and Chronic fatigue)	White	Working class, deprived community	UG	53.18

⁶ The descriptions within this table are the exact words participants used to describe themselves via the open-ended text boxes utilised on the demographic questionnaire.

Dan	Early-20s	Transman	Pansexual	He/him	Undisclosed	White European	Underclass	PG	82.78
Dorothy	Late-50s	Female	Lesbian	She/her	Learning difference (dyslexia) and rheumatoid arthritis	White Scottish	Working class	UG	111.47
Eden	Early-20s	Transfemale	Bi-lesbian	She/her	Autism, ADHD	White	Midde Class	UG	69.42
Erika	Early-40s	Female	Pansexual	She/they	Autistic	White British	Middle class	PG	81.17
Ethan	Early-20s	Male	Gay/Questioning if bisexual	He/him	Dyslexia	White	Working Class	UG	72.95
Katie	Early-20s	Female	Lesbian	She/her	Mobility issues	Mixed race	Working Class	UG	82.8
KQ	Early-30s	Male	Gay	He/him	Not disclose (talks about underling health conditions)	Chinese	Working class	PG	63.58
Lisa	Mid-30s	Female	Bisexual/Queer	She/her	Long term health conditions	White British	Working class upbringing	PG	77.5
Paul	Early-30s	Male	Gay	He/him	Diabetic - type 1 - long term health condition	White Scottish	Middle Class	PG	75.78
Phoebe	Early-20s	Female	Bisexual/Queer	She/her or they/them	Autistic and ADHD	White Scottish	Working Class	PG	73.15
River	Mid-20s	Non-binary	Queer	She/they	AuDHD, connective tissue disorder, POTS, user of various mobility aids	White Scottish	Middle Class	UG	121.5
Samantha	Early-20s	Female	Queer	She/her	Chronic illness/pain	Chinese	Middle Class	PG	110.42

Timothy	Early-20s	Non-binary queer	Asexual queer	He/they	Autism and suspected ADHD	White Scottish	Working Class	UG	59.34
Victoria	Late-30s	Female	Lesbian and Queer	She/her	ADHD	White Scottish	Middle Class	PG	69.97

Appendix 6: Participant Thumbnail

Ali

Ali, an Autistic, non-binary, bisexual undergraduate student in their early 20s from a working-class background, spoke of facing multiple challenges as they navigated university life. Feeling unprepared and overwhelmed, Ali described arriving at university with the fear of having ‘bitten off more than I can chew’, a feeling intensified by the absence of family or friends with university experience and a resulting sense of isolation that extended beyond academics. Ali reflected on how neurodivergence played a central role in shaping their experience. Crowded spaces heightened anxiety, while uncertainty about how to approach peers, coupled with concerns about being judged for dressing ‘weird’, often left them unsure where to sit or how to present themselves. Although they had hoped to find a community of similarly ‘weird’ people who had shared interests and aesthetics, this had so far been limited, deepening their loneliness. Their non-binary and queer identities were central to them, yet they remained cautious about disclosure. Instead, Ali described using clothing, such as wearing cat ears, as quiet acts of self-expression and signalling an openness to queer connection. Physical and institutional barriers, including inaccessible entrances, long waiting times for disability services, and the emotional labour of repeatedly explaining their needs, also contributed to hesitation about formally disclosing aspects of their disability. These intersecting pressures of class, disability, and queerness left Ali feeling as though they had to perform a role, uncertain how much of themselves to reveal. Yet despite these challenges, they remained hopeful and had begun meeting peers through neurodiversity groups outside the university. While their expectations of university as a diverse and welcoming space had not yet been met, they continued to enjoy their course and looked forward to finding a stronger sense of community as they progressed.

Ashwin

Ashwin, a queer gay man in his 40s from a working-class background in South Asia, moved to Scotland to pursue postgraduate study, with his journey marked by cultural, social, and personal challenges. Adjusting to a new environment proved difficult, particularly in the early stages of his academic life, as he struggled with Scottish social norms. The prominence of alcohol-centred social events left him feeling out of place and unsure how to socialise 'correctly', deepening his sense of isolation. Before arriving, Ashwin had imagined Scotland as home to a vibrant and diverse LGBTQ+ community, but was disappointed by the limited visibility of LGBTQ+ people of colour (POC). Although he attended campus queer society events, he found these spaces were predominantly white and largely centred around undergraduate students, limiting his sense of belonging. The scarcity of queer POC spaces and the fragmented nature of community networks reinforced his feeling of being 'separately together' with others, while the absence of a visible South Asian community further compounded this sense of disconnection. During his time in Scotland, Ashwin was diagnosed with diabetes, introducing new challenges as he navigated an unfamiliar healthcare system. Although his supervisors had limited knowledge of diabetes, he valued their empathy and willingness to support him. Navigating the intersections of disability, sexuality, race, and migration made Ashwin acutely aware of when and where he disclosed different aspects of his identity, often weighing whether particular spaces felt safe enough to do so. Despite these challenges, he remained committed to contributing positively to academia and the wider community. Looking ahead, he hopes to continue working in higher education, where he aims to foster more inclusive multicultural environments and help build stronger networks for LGBTQ+ people of colour.

Bella

Bella, a bisexual woman in her late teens from a white, middle-class background, moved away from home to begin her undergraduate degree, navigating the transition into a new social and cultural environment. Her early experiences of university life have been shaped by feelings of disconnection

and unmet expectations. Arriving later than her flatmates, Bella struggled to form friendships and found most social interactions to be light-hearted and surface-level, contrasting with her hope of finding the 'mates for life' she had imagined before coming to university. The transition from what she described as a 'multicultural, homosexually-approved' home environment also proved surprising, as she perceived relatively little visible queerness within both the city and university spaces. This lack of visible LGBTQ+ presence, combined with uncertainty about how others might respond, led Bella to censor parts of herself and avoid openly discussing her bisexuality. Academically, Bella described experiencing anxiety in lectures, particularly during long presentations where maintaining concentration became difficult, at times discouraging her from attending altogether. These academic and social challenges sometimes undermined her confidence and sense of belonging at university. Nonetheless, Bella remained hopeful about her future, expressing optimism that as she progressed through her studies she would develop greater confidence, connection, and a stronger sense of community.

Ben

Ben, a non-binary, bisexual undergraduate student in their early 20s from a working-class background, described navigating university while managing anxiety and depression alongside part-time work. Originally from a rural area, Ben reflected on their university experience as unfolding in distinct 'chapters' that traced both personal growth and academic challenge. Moving away from home provided the freedom to explore their gender identity and sexuality more openly than ever before, transforming university into a space of self-discovery as much as study. Ben described becoming actively involved in student organisations and representative groups, where they felt able to contribute to creating a more inclusive environment for queer students. They spoke positively about classroom discussions that challenged gender binaries and lecturers who encouraged open and inclusive dialogue. While Ben felt increasingly confident expressing their queerness, conversations around disability and mental health remained more complex. They described anxiety and depression as

aspects of their identity that 'go under the radar', often less visible and less openly discussed within university life. Despite this, they became involved in the disabled students' network, drawing on their own experiences to advocate for greater awareness and support. Looking ahead, Ben expressed both excitement and uncertainty about the future, alongside a growing sense of confidence and self-assurance, feeling more grounded in who they are and optimistic about the next stage of their journey.

Bethany

Bethany, a bisexual woman in her late 20s from a working-class background who lives with long-term health conditions, is a doctoral researcher. After completing her undergraduate degree, she moved away from home to undertake postgraduate study. Bethany spoke at length about the pushback she perceived towards queer people and queer topics on campus. She felt that queer students and queer issues were often kept 'kind of in the corner', with the institution adopting what she viewed as a largely performative approach to inclusion. She also reflected on studying at a prestigious university, feeling that its emphasis on status came at the expense of students' everyday experiences. Although Bethany described her own supervisors as supportive and affirming of queer research, she recognised that many of her peers did not share this experience. She frequently listened to their concerns and raised these issues through student–staff liaison meetings, while questioning whether meaningful change would occur in either the short or long term. In response, Bethany described how she and other queer students had begun to 'make spaces for ourselves', hoping to create a more welcoming environment for future generations of queer students.

Caroline

Caroline, a late-30-year-old working-class white Scottish lesbian with multiple disabilities, chronic illnesses, and neurodivergence (diagnosed ADHD and suspected Autism), is balancing full-time work alongside part-time doctoral research. Her academic journey has been shaped by both exclusion and persistence. Caroline first attended a post-92 university for her undergraduate degree but left

midway, feeling profoundly out of place and uncertain how to navigate university life describing the experience as ‘playing the game without knowing the rule book’. She recalled how peers seemed to understand unspoken academic and social norms that she could not access, while intersecting aspects of her class, sexuality, and disability compounded her isolation. At that time, she was not out as LGBTQ+ and was frequently in hospital, which intensified her disconnection. Class-based encounters, such as a fellow student casually asking about her favourite ski resort, underscored her sense of difference, while her mother’s attempts to smooth out her working-class accent deepened her feelings of misfit. After leaving university, Caroline later moved to Glasgow and re-entered higher education at a prestigious institution, where she experienced a far more affirming environment. Although undiagnosed with ADHD and still managing health challenges, she became increasingly visible as a disabled-queer student, taking on leadership roles as student representative and president. These roles offered her a sense of belonging and purpose, enabling her to foster community among disabled and queer students while excelling academically and graduating top of her class, a moment that affirmed she was ‘good at this’. Now pursuing her doctoral studies, Caroline’s experience has been more ambivalent, feeling adrift and unsupported by staff and is considering transferring institutions. Despite ongoing frustrations, she remains deeply committed to helping others navigate higher education, drawing on her own experiences to support students facing similar barriers.

Charlie

Charlie, an early-20-year-old panromantic, grey-ace, white, working-class, non-binary undergraduate student living with autism, ADHD, and fibromyalgia, entered higher education through a college–university partnership after completing their Highers at a local college. During the COVID-19 lockdown, confined at home with their mother and brother, Charlie embraced their queer and non-binary identities after years of masking, describing this period as pivotal for self-acceptance. In our conversation, Charlie reflected on how chronic pain, fatigue, and neurodivergence shape their daily life and studies. They spoke about the importance of accommodations provided through the Disabled

Students' Allowance, such as text-to-speech software and sensory tools, which help them manage dyslexia and autism. Yet disclosure remains a constant negotiation. Some days Charlie uses walking sticks for support, making their disability visible; on other days, they weigh the choice between attending classes or staying home to conserve energy. Despite these challenges, Charlie describes university as far more respectful and adult-oriented than school. When they filed a complaint about a staff member, the university's serious response reinforced their sense of being valued. They also find freedom in self-expression, comfortably wearing pronoun badges and feeling accepted on campus. Beyond university, Charlie maintains strong connections through online gaming communities, where they find understanding, camaraderie, and emotional support.

Dan

Dan, a transman, queer student in his early 20s from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background, had not long finished an undergraduate study, about to start a postgraduate course, as well as alongside full-time employment. Reflecting on his educational journey, he described not initially expecting to attend university until encouragement from a teacher led him to apply. Once there, he often felt out of place, explaining how his class background, gender identity, sexuality, and disabilities intersected to shape an uneasy relationship with the university environment. He frequently encountered inequalities both within and beyond campus life, noting, for example, the visible differences in material resources between himself and many of his peers, which reinforced feelings of not fitting in. Dan spoke candidly about the challenges of accessing disability support and reasonable adjustments, navigating discussions of gender and sexuality within academic spaces, and deciding whether to raise issues that mattered to him in the classroom. He spoke of anticipating that many of these challenges would persist within postgraduate study. Despite these uncertainties, he described finding a strong sense of belonging through his workplace, where supportive colleagues and meaningful friendships provided affirmation and became an important source of stability.

Dorothy

Dorothy, a lesbian woman in her late-50s from a working-class background who lives with multiple disabilities, is a part-time doctoral student. Dorothy trained and worked as a nurse before later completing postgraduate qualifications and eventually embarking on doctoral study, motivated, as she explained, by the belief that 'it would make me better at my job'. Alongside her studies, she supports student nurses within higher education. During our conversation, Dorothy reflected on a childhood marked by poverty, foster care, and instability, experiences that continue to shape how she experiences university. She described often feeling out of place within academic settings, aware of how class, disability, and sexuality intersected to position her as different. While she rarely discussed her disabilities with peers or supervisors, she nevertheless felt the unequal effort required to achieve academically, often investing considerably more time than others while feeling her achievements were not reflected in her grades. Over time, she became more comfortable acknowledging her disabilities, although she remained cautious about disclosing her sexuality until beginning her doctoral studies, where she finally experienced a greater sense of acceptance. Drawing on both her personal and educational journey, Dorothy now seeks to encourage and support new nursing students.

Eden

Eden, a trans and queer undergraduate student in her early 20s from a middle-class background who is neurodivergent, described finding the pace and expectations of university study demanding, particularly as receiving diagnoses later in life complicated her ability to access institutional support. Despite these challenges, she spoke warmly about being on campus, noting the increasing visibility of queer inclusion and explaining that university often felt more like home than her home environment. At the same time, Eden remained cautious about spaces that categorised identity, such as LGBTQ+ societies, where she worried about being reduced to a label. Instead, she preferred that both her queerness and neurodivergence be understood through everyday interactions rather than explicit self-definition. Interestingly, she felt more comfortable discussing her neurodivergence

than her queerness, sensing that although universities had become more accepting, subtle forms of judgement still persisted. Eden was also critical of traditional university structures, which she viewed as being organised around neurotypical and non-disabled assumptions. She described the physical environment and academic expectations as exhausting and expressed concern about how her gender identity and gender expression might shape future employment opportunities. Nevertheless, she viewed university as a place where she could be most authentically herself, describing it as an important space for self-discovery and acceptance.

Erika

Erika, a queer woman in her 40s from a middle-class background who is neurodivergent, is a part-time doctoral student. Her educational journey has been marked by significant personal and professional challenges. After spending time away from education due to changing life circumstances, she returned to complete her undergraduate degree before progressing to postgraduate and doctoral study while balancing family responsibilities. Reflecting on her earlier experiences of higher education, Erika described how overstimulating learning environments, difficulty connecting academic content to professional life, and social challenges contributed to feeling overwhelmed during her undergraduate degree. These pressures culminated in a significant mental health crisis during her final year, leading her to step away from her studies for a period before returning and completing her degree. She found postgraduate study considerably more rewarding, particularly because it connected closely with her professional practice. Now, as a doctoral student, Erika values the autonomy to shape her learning environment around her life and describes herself as more engaged with her studies than ever before. She spoke candidly about navigating disclosure, social interactions, and institutional support for disabled and LGBTQ+ students, which she often perceived as more performative than meaningful, remarking that universities could sometimes appear to display inclusion 'just for the way it will look on them'. While her neurodivergence continues to shape her educational experiences, she explained that her sexuality is more salient within her personal and family life. Despite her academic and personal

achievements, Erika reflected that she still masks aspects of herself, acknowledging that she continues to keep 'some of the weirdness in and to myself'.

Ethan

Ethan, a gay/questioning undergraduate student in his early 20s who lives at home and commutes to university, reflected on his complex relationship with the idea of 'the student experience'. He often questioned whether his journey resembled that of his peers or the imagined version of university life centred on moving away from home, forming lifelong friendships, and participating in social events. Reflecting on these absences, Ethan wondered whether missing these aspects had contributed to his sense of disconnection from what is often portrayed as the 'typical' student experience. His account highlights how experiences of university can feel elusive when the expected social and residential dimensions of student life are absent. Living at home reinforced a sense of continuity between school and university, rather than a transition into independence. Ethan frequently compared his experiences with those of others, both online and in-person, noticing differences in the social opportunities available to him, many of which he missed because of work and study commitments. This isolation was compounded by his cautious approach to disclosure. While he identified as gay/questioning and has a learning difference, he tended to keep these aspects of himself private. Even so, Ethan described his university as a generally friendly and supportive environment. He spoke positively about the disability services, highlighting their consistent and proactive support, which had significantly improved his studies. However, he felt that while disability was relatively well recognised, discussions of queerness remained less visible and less integrated into everyday academic and social life. Despite these tensions, Ethan approached the remainder of his degree with optimism and curiosity, determined to make the most of his time at university.

Katie

Katie, a lesbian undergraduate student in her early 20s from a working-class background, moved away from home to begin her studies. During university, she developed a long-term health condition that significantly altered her experience of higher education. Reflecting on this transition, Katie described arriving at university as a non-disabled student before gradually coming to identify as disabled, a process she characterised as ‘a shock to the system’. Navigating this change meant engaging with disability services for the first time, fundamentally reshaping how she experienced university life. Although she valued the support available, she also reflected critically on how disability was understood within student communities. She described feeling uncertain about her place within the disability society, where she sometimes perceived a narrow understanding of what disability ‘looks like’. Katie also spoke about becoming more confident in her sexuality. Moving away from home provided greater freedom to explore this aspect of her identity, and she later came out as a lesbian. While she appreciated the sense of community offered by the LGBTQ+ society, she also felt that it often centred an ‘ideal’ member, leaving her feeling overlooked as both a lesbian and a disabled student. She observed that events frequently reflected the interests of the majority rather than the diversity of the wider queer community. Discussing the intersections of disability and sexuality was particularly meaningful for Katie, who explained that she had rarely encountered research or conversations that addressed ‘being gay and disabled at the same time’. She described taking part in the study as ‘really monumental’ in helping her make sense of her own experiences. Despite the challenges she has encountered, Katie remained positive about university and hopeful for the future.

KQ

KQ, a doctoral student in his 30s, identifies as a gay man from an East Asian background and comes from a working-class background. He also lives with a long-term health condition. After completing his earlier university education in his home country, he moved to Scotland for doctoral study, marking a significant transition in both his academic journey and personal life. Throughout our

conversation, KQ frequently compared his experiences across the two countries, reflecting on differences in academic culture, attitudes towards sexuality, and the challenges of navigating life as an international student. He described his earlier educational experiences as highly competitive and fast-paced, whereas he experiences his current university as more supportive, particularly valuing supervisors who encourage him to work at his own pace and show concern for his health and wellbeing. Moving to Scotland also transformed how he understood and expressed his sexuality. Whereas he had previously felt unable to be open because of family expectations and wider social attitudes, he now feels more able to embrace this aspect of his identity. This sense of freedom, however, is tempered by ongoing challenges. KQ spoke candidly about the complexities of being an international student, including navigating visa processes, occasional experiences of racism, feelings of not always belonging, and the isolation of being older than many of his peers. As he approaches the end of his doctorate, he remains uncertain about where to build his future, weighing opportunities in Scotland against concerns about returning home and what each context might mean for both his career and his personal life.

Lisa

Lisa, a doctoral student in her 30s, identifies as bisexual and queer, comes from a working-class background, and lives with long-term health conditions. She described the challenges of balancing multiple part-time jobs alongside her doctorate while managing fluctuating health and navigating limited institutional support for her intersecting identities as disabled, queer, care-experienced, and working-class. Although she values the opportunities her doctoral studies have provided, including supportive colleagues and academic collaborations, she spoke of feeling persistently othered by the institution and becoming 'very used to being disappointed' by universities that she felt should care more effectively for students and staff like herself. At the same time, Lisa distinguished between institutional shortcomings and the commitment of individual staff members,

expressing both frustration and determination as she approached the final stages of her doctorate. Looking ahead, she hoped completing her PhD would allow her to 'get my health back'.

Paul

Paul, a doctoral student, identifies as a gay man and lives with Type 1 diabetes. He described feeling secure in his sexuality throughout his life, supported by family and friends, and rarely encountered overt homophobia. His diagnosis of diabetes during university marked a significant turning point, reshaping his understanding of himself and prompting new engagements with disability support services. While appreciative of the support he has received, Paul reflected that institutional provisions often overlook the specific needs of students with less visible long-term health conditions. Initially self-conscious about managing his diabetes in academic settings, he has since become more open about his condition, viewing disclosure as both practical and empowering.

Phoebe

Phoebe, a postgraduate student from a working-class background, identifies as bisexual, queer and is neurodivergent. Reflecting on her undergraduate years, she described a period marked by exhaustion, masking, and isolation while navigating university without formal recognition of her neurodivergence. Struggling with deadlines, sensory overload, and expectations of 'normal' interactions (e.g., maintaining eye contact), she felt pressured to perform both neurotypicality and heterosexuality, describing herself as living 'two different lives' as she was openly queer at home but largely closeted on campus. Finding few supportive queer spaces further intensified this sense of disconnection. During her postgraduate study, however, she found a more inclusive environment where peers and lecturers were responsive to her sensory needs and welcomed queer perspectives. This shift enabled her to embrace her strengths, advocate more confidently for herself, and rediscover enjoyment in academic life. Looking ahead, she hopes to continue building on her academic interests while remaining engaged with research in this area.

River

River is a mid-20-year-old undergraduate student who identifies as non-binary and queer and lives with multiple neurodevelopmental and long-term physical health conditions. They are completing their degree through distance learning after studying at several universities, eventually finding a learning environment that better accommodates their needs. River reflected on earlier experiences at an in-person university, where increasing accessibility needs made campus life progressively more difficult, explaining that 'once I started using mobility aids, it became obvious how inaccessible the university was'. Long waits for support and inadequate adjustments compounded these barriers, while noisy student accommodation left them overstimulated and isolated. Limited gender-inclusive facilities further underscored the ways disability and queerness intersected in everyday university life. Hoping to improve conditions for others, River became involved in student representation, although they found advocacy work emotionally demanding and often unsupported. Ultimately, they left the physical university environment and transitioned to distance learning, where they now feel more able to engage with their studies and remain optimistic about continuing their advocacy.

Samantha

Samantha is an undergraduate student who is in her early-20s, and who identifies as queer and comes from an East Asian background. She reflected on how her overlapping identities shape her everyday experiences at university. Samantha's route into higher education was delayed by long-term health challenges, making her older than many of her peers when she began her studies. She described navigating student accommodation alongside younger students and frequently finding herself explaining why her educational journey had taken a different path. These repeated conversations reinforced a sense of being out of step with the imagined 'traditional' student experience. Samantha also spoke candidly about her queer identity, explaining that while she is open with some university peers, she has not come out to her family, a tension she carries quietly but constantly. Her efforts to find community through the university's LGBTQ+ society were complicated by its predominantly white

membership, leaving her feeling marginalised and disconnected. More broadly, she reflected on how student societies often seemed to expect conformity to a particular image or identity, making belonging feel conditional. Throughout our conversation, Samantha described the emotional labour of navigating university as a queer student of colour living with a long-term health condition. She was acutely aware that, while aspects of her sexuality could remain unseen, her racial identity could not, shaping how she moved through university spaces and contributing to an ongoing uncertainty about whether she truly belonged.

Timothy

Timothy is a non-binary, queer, and asexual undergraduate student from a working-class background who identifies as Autistic, and in their early-20s. Before starting university, they were excited by the promise of a space that felt ‘very different’ from school, particularly after seeing their university publicly celebrate Pride and promote itself as an inclusive environment. A central feature of Timothy’s experience has been the importance of peer support. They described their friendship group as crucial to their persistence at university, often reflecting on how different their experience might have been had they studied on a course that was less accepting of queerness and disability. Compared with school, Timothy found university to be more welcoming of queer identities, although they noted the limited visibility of asexual and non-binary experiences within institutional life. They also reflected on how autism shaped their social interactions, recalling early anxieties about making friends alongside uncertainty about how others might respond to their queerness. Over time, however, Timothy developed a strong network of supportive peers that affirmed their identity and fostered a genuine sense of belonging. As they approach graduation, they described feeling increasingly confident and optimistic, attributing this to the affirming relationships and community they found during their university journey.

Victoria

Victoria is a lesbian master's student in her late-30s and who is neurodivergent. She described her educational journey as unfolding in 'two big parts'. The first was characterised by disconnection and pressure: despite having been a strong student at school, she struggled to find a sense of belonging at university and eventually withdrew, a decision that left her feeling she had failed. After several years spent working, volunteering, and exploring her identity, Victoria decided to return to higher education, choosing a different course and institution. Her second experience of university was markedly different. She found community, became more comfortable in her sexuality, and developed a renewed sense of self. Receiving an neurodivergent diagnosis during this period was, in her words, 'transformative', helping her better understand both her learning and her identity. Victoria also reflected critically on the university as an institution, particularly its policies and working practices. She positioned herself as an advocate for greater equity for both staff and students. Her intersecting experiences of sexuality, disability, and class continue to shape how she navigates academic spaces, though she now feels more grounded and self-assured than ever. She attributed much of this confidence to the personal and political growth that accompanied her return to higher education.

Appendix 7: Interview Question Guide

Introduction	
The interviewer shall introduce himself, his positionality, identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, disability, race, class), and why he is interested in the research topic. The interviewer will then ask the participant if they feel comfortable can introduce themselves as a way of allowing the participant to explain their identities in their own words.	

Section 1: Life as a Student: Past and Present	
Question	Why did you choose to attend the particular university you are at?
Indicative prompts	
Question	What are you now studying and why did you choose it?
Indicative prompts	

Question	Tell me a little bit about your experience of university so far, and (for postgraduate students) your undergraduate experience.
Indicative prompts	a. <i>If needed:</i> Tell me a bit about how university and campus life has been for you
Question	Tell me what you like about being a student on this campus.
Indicative prompts	
Question	Tell me what do you dislike about being a student at your university.
Indicative prompts	

Section 2: Experiences, Spaces and Places on Campus	
Question	Tell me about a typical university day is like for you.
Indicative prompts	
Question	Tell about some campus spaces you go to.
Indicative prompts	a. Can you describe how this space makes you feel? b. What is it about (<i>place</i>) that makes it friendly, inclusive, accepting, welcoming and supportive for being disabled and LGBTQ+? c. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about such campus spaces?

Question	Tell me what are your experiences like in the classroom.
Indicative prompts	a. <i>If needed:</i> Can you be open about being disabled and LGBTQ in classes?

	b. <i>If needed:</i> How and why do you feel this? c. <i>If needed:</i> Do people support and make you feel welcomed, accepted, and included within classes?
<u>Question</u>	Tell me what are your experiences in social spaces on campus.
Indicative prompts	a. <i>If needed example:</i> Library b. <i>If needed example:</i> Student societies (Why did you choose these societies to get involved with?) c. <i>If needed example:</i> Student accommodation d. Refer to Q5,6,7 for more social spaces' participants have already mentioned they use
<u>Question</u>	Tell me what are some campus resources that you tend to use.
Indicative prompts	a. <i>If examples are needed:</i> Library, career services, disability services, LGBT resources

<u>Question</u>	Are there any places, settings, or events on campus that you avoid?
Indicative prompts	a. What are they? b. Why do you avoid these spaces? c. What in particular makes this space unwelcome for you, can you tell me more about that? d. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about campus spaces?
(If mentioned by participant)	
<u>Question</u>	Could you describe any discrimination or prejudice you have experienced at university?
Indicative prompts	
<u>Question</u>	Could you describe any support or affirmation you experienced at university?
Indicative prompts	a. Social support b. Academic support

<u>Question</u>	Tell me about why you decide whether and how to disclose or share your identities (i.e., coming out) with others on campus (e.g., friends, staff).
Indicative prompts	a. <i>If needed:</i> Can you tell me about a time when you decided to disclose your identities to others? b. <i>If needed:</i> Can you tell me about a time when you decided not to disclose your identities to others?

	c. <i>If needed:</i> What was your thought process about disclosing/not disclosing?
<u>Question</u>	How would you describe your interactions with others on campus (e.g., friends, staff)?
Indicative prompts	a. How do they respond/react to you being disabled and/or LGBTQ? b. Positive? What makes these interactions positive? c. Negative? What makes these interactions negative?

Section 3: Concluding Questions	
<u>Question</u>	Tell me if your experience of university can be improved at all.
Indicative prompts	a. How come? b. Why would this be an important change/improvement to you?
<u>Question</u>	What would an inclusive/accepting university disabled-LGBTQ+ experience look, sound, and feel like to you?
Indicative prompts	
<u>Question</u>	What do you consider to be the most important topics we talked about today?
Indicative prompts	
<u>Question</u>	Is there anything you would like to add?
Indicative prompts	

Thank you again for your participation, I really appreciate your time. If you know any other students who might fit the criteria for this study, please pass the word along and have them contact me.

Appendix 8: Debrief Form



Participant Debrief Sheet

Name of department: Strathclyde Institute of Education

Title of the study: Disabled Queer Student's Experience of Scottish Higher Education

Thank you for taking part in this research, your time is greatly appreciated.

Project information

The proposed project is examining the lived experience of university from the perspective of disabled-LGBTQ students. Much research into university experiences has taken a singular identity approach (e.g., focusing on disability or LGBTQ), thereby missing the intersections of these two identities.

Right to withdraw

It should be noted that you can still have your data withdrawn from the study. You have up to 1 week from completing the interview to get in touch with myself stating your withdrawal, and you do not need to give any reason for your withdrawal.

We have provided contact details of support services you can get in contact with if you found any issues raised distressing:

Switchboard (LGBT+ Helpline) (an organisation for anyone to discuss anything in their lives, including sexuality, gender identity, sexual health, and emotional wellbeing):

Telephone – 0300 330 0630

Email – chris@switchboard.lgbt

Website: <https://switchboard.lgbt/>

Mind (an organisation that provides advice and support for anyone experiencing mental health problems):

Telephone: 0300123 3393

Email: info@mind.org.uk

Website: <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

If you require any further information or have any questions, please feel free to contact the research team:

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Researcher contact details:

Jack McKinlay

E-mail address: jack.mckinlay@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details:

Professor Yvette Taylor

E-mail address: yvette.taylor@strath.ac.uk

Thank you again for your participation.

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Appendix 9: Ethical Application Form

OFFICE USE ONLY
UECREP
Date
Paper



Ethics Application Form

Please answer all questions

1. Title of the investigation
Disabled-Queer Student Experiences of Scottish Higher Education
2. Chief Investigator (must be at least a Grade 7 member of staff or equivalent)
Name: Yvette Taylor ☒ Professor ☐ Reader ☐ Senior Lecturer ☐ Lecturer ☐ Senior Teaching Fellow ☐ Teaching Fellow Department: Institute of Education E-mail: yvette.taylor@strath.ac.uk
3. Other Strathclyde investigator(s)
Name: Jack McKinlay Status (e.g. lecturer, post-/undergraduate): Postgraduate, PhD Department: Institute of Education Telephone: [REDACTED] E-mail: jack.mckinlay@strath.ac.uk
4. Non-Strathclyde collaborating investigator(s) (where applicable)
Name: Claire Wilson Status (e.g. lecturer, post-/undergraduate): Senior Lecturer Department/Institution: The University of the West of Scotland, Paisley Campus, School of Education & Social Sciences, Psychology If student(s), name of supervisor: [REDACTED] Telephone: [REDACTED] E-mail: claire.wilson@uws.ac.uk Please provide details for all investigators involved in the study: [REDACTED]
5. Overseas Supervisor(s) (where applicable)
Not Applicable Name(s): [REDACTED] Status: [REDACTED] Department/Institution: [REDACTED] Telephone: [REDACTED] Email: [REDACTED] I can confirm that the local supervisor has obtained a copy of the Code of Practice: Yes ☐ No ☐ Please provide details for all supervisors involved in the study: [REDACTED]

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6. Location of the investigation At what place(s) will the investigation be conducted Participants will be interviewed either in-person or on Zoom depending on the participant choice. In-Person Interviews: A location that is suitable for the participant and researcher will be discussed ahead of the interview (preferably Strathclyde university). The researcher shall book a quiet and comfortable room ahead of time and in line with Strathclyde university opening times. If participants have indicated a preferred time out with the university times, then alternative locations will be discussed and agreed with participants. Booking private meeting rooms within the University of Strathclyde (e.g., Lord Hope building). The Lord Hope building may be most appropriate to book. This building has appropriately sized lift access and wheelchair access from on street, thereby elevating up-hill access. A meeting point outside of Lord Hope building will also be discussed allowing the participant to meet with the researcher, and the researcher to show the participant to the room that is booked. This may alleviate any confusion of navigating Strathclyde campus for any participants, as well as creating greater rapport. In-person interviews may be advantageous as there may be greater rapport built with in-person communication, thus allowing for greater depth of conversation. Travelling to different Scottish universities may also be an option. A location on the university will be discussed with participants ahead of time if in-person interview is chosen. Zoom Interviews: Zoom will be used if the participant feels more comfortable with this option rather than in-person. Participants will be encouraged to choose a location where they are free from distractions, are comfortable in, and a place that is confidential for them to discuss their experiences of higher education. Zoom is advantageous for this study because there is a hope that a wide array of participants from varying Scottish geographical locations shall participate in the study, making Zoom a logistical option. Furthermore, some participants may not feel comfortable with going into university spaces they are unsure of. Additionally, my participants will identify with having a disability, and some disability symptoms may vary from day to day. Zoom may eliminate the pressure of commuting to a physical location for such participants whose disability may show and present differently on different days. Conducting interviews via Zoom is an alternative logistical option that provides the comfort and familiarity that some participants may wish for. The researcher will be flexible with either in-person face-to-face interviews or Zoom, and will be led by the participant's choosing. A Dictaphone will be used for audio recording interviews for the purposes of transcribing and analysing data and participants permission will be requested. This will then be saved onto a password protected Strathclyde OneDrive account and then deleted from the Dictaphone.
--

If this is not on University of Strathclyde premises, how have you satisfied yourself that adequate Health and Safety arrangements are in place to prevent injury or harm?

I am satisfied that the Health and Safety arrangement are in place to prevent harm. I will keep a record of the location and dates of interviews once participants are recruited, notifying my supervisors if this involves travelling beyond the university and when the interviews are safely concluded.

I have read and understood page 24 of the 'Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Participants' from the University of Strathclyde. Section 4.10: Exposure to risk, including location of investigations.

7. Duration of the investigation

Duration(years/months): 3 years

Start date (expected): 30 / 09 / 22 Completion date (expected): 30 / 09 / 25

Data collection phase

Duration(years/months): 9 months (pending ethical approval and participant recruitment)

Start date (expected): 3 / 2024 Completion date (expected): 10 / 2024

8. Sponsor

Please note that this is not the funder; refer to Section C and Annexes 1 and 3 of the Code of Practice for a definition and the key responsibilities of the sponsor.

Will the sponsor be the University of Strathclyde: Yes ☒ No ☐

If not, please specify who is the sponsor:

9. Funding body or proposed funding body (if applicable)

Name of funding body: University of Strathclyde (Student Excellence Awards)

Status of proposal – if seeking funding (please click appropriate box):

☐ In preparation

☐ Submitted

☒ Accepted

Date of submission of proposal: 10 / 22 Date of start of funding: 30 / 09 / 22

10. Ethical issues

Describe the main ethical issues and how you propose to address them:

Key ethical issues pertaining to this project relate to consent, confidentiality, and participant safety. Participants will be given a Participant Information Sheet (PIS: Appendix 2) prior to conducting their interview which will outline their right to confidentiality during the project. Alternative PIS (e.g., different font sizes, different colour text) will be provided when and if required upon participant request. PIS will also cover how data will be handled by the researcher and the university, including notification that such information may be used in subsequent secondary publications or be presented in other formats (e.g., online media). The statutory rights and the protections granted both by law and by university policy for participants are also set out in this document. Consent will be obtained (Appendix 3). Verbal consent will

also be gained before and during the interview by the researcher (e.g., 'Are you okay to begin?', 'Do you need a break?'), and participants will be given time to ask any questions they may have prior to their interview. Participants will be reminded at the beginning and throughout the interview that all interview questions are optional, and they do not need to answer any questions they do not wish to. The researcher shall move on without question.

BERA Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct:

Consent will be gained from all participants before and during interview. Participants will be made fully aware of the aims and intention of the research, and their involvement via PIS and before the interview commences. I will be clear from the outset of the interview what my research is, why participants will be interviewed, and what I intend to do with their data. Participants are welcomed to ask any questions/queries they may have, and I will answer these to the best of my ability. Participants will be debriefed after interview. Participants will be protected from harm (i.e., physical and psychological). Participants will also have the right to withdraw at any point during or up to 1-week after the interview date. The researcher shall make sure that anonymity of both participant demographic information and personal recorded data is upheld (e.g., when discussing the participants with the supervisory team the researcher shall always use the pseudonym of the participant). OneDrive will be used for saving and organising of data. There will be constant reviewing/updating of data management plan, and making sure participant demographic information and personal recorded data is well organised on a password protected Strathclyde OneDrive account. This will be constant throughout the project. This is in line with BERA Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct.

Informed consent will be sought via PIS, consent forms and discussion with participants ensuring that the projects aim, and objectives are explained in plain language for the purposes of clear communication and understanding. The PIS and consent forms are included in the Qualtrics sign up (used for gathering demographic information of participants and interview sign up). The consent form requires a 'forced response' on Qualtrics meaning that participants have to check the boxes stating they have read, understood, and consent electronically before continuing to the demographic questions. The purpose of this is so that participants (and researcher) can access all PIS, consent and demographic information using one electronic link (https://hass.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4OD1XM6gNQajPMY). Participants have the right to know, understand and decide if they would like to participate in the study based on its aims, objectives, and methodology.

Power dynamics may come into play within the research. The researcher shall introduce himself, and lightly signal his interest in the research as partly based on some of his own student experiences of, for example, sexuality and disability (e.g., "I'm Jack and the research is focusing on..., and I have an interest in this because..."). This will lightly make his positionality and identity known at the beginning of the interview. This will also leave room for further discussion as/if it emerges. This is intended to not take up much time as the focus is on participants and their student experiences. Further discussion may be facilitated if participants have questions or as discussion points emerge. This is also intended as a way of facilitating openness, transparency, and help create rapport with participants. While there may not be instant rapport built with participants, it is my hope and intention that being open and transparent may help facilitate rapport. Openness and transparency with my research participants who are providing their time and sharing their stories, without any financial incentivisation, is my preferred mode of communication and building relationships. I will be respectful of all of my participants. I will listen carefully to their stories they are telling me, particularly given the nature of the research topic and how close and personal some experiences may be for participants. I will approach sensitive questions and topics tentatively, and I will be attentive to how my participants may be feeling (for further see Sensitive and Distressing Topics Discussed). While this may not eliminate power dynamics, this is intended for creating greater rapport between myself and my participants as the interview continues.

Data Protection and Management:

OneDrive will be used for saving and organising of data.

Demographic information (e.g., name, age etc.) will be stored on a password protected Strathclyde OneDrive student's account and be held on Qualtrics. Other data (e.g., pseudonyms, transcripts, audio recordings) will be stored on a secure and password protected Strathclyde OneDrive account. Audio recordings will be stored until transcribed and then deleted. The institutions they attend will not be named but described as a 'type' of university (e.g., Russell Group, post-1992; Reay et al. 2001).

Interviews will be transcribed and anonymised prior to analysis by the researcher using Microsoft Word via OneDrive Strathclyde account. Audio recordings of interviews will be deleted as soon as transcripts are produced and checked for accuracy by the researcher (e.g., re-listening to audio recording and comparing against transcript). Personal information that could identify the participants will be anonymised in the transcripts. Pseudonyms will be used to anonymise information and protect participant anonymity in the final thesis and/or subsequent publications. Participants can choose their own pseudonym, or I can assign. (e.g. including in the case of duplication). Data will be coded and stored with pseudonyms separate from the file containing the participants' real names.

Who Has Access to What Data:

The researcher (Jack McKinlay) will have access to

- original audio recording
- contact information
- personal identifying information
- anonymised data (transcript)
- anonymised extracts of data

The supervisory team (Professor Yvette Taylor/ Dr Claire Wilson) will have access to

- anonymised data (transcript)
- anonymised extracts of data

Anonymised extracts of data will be shared widely (e.g., PhD thesis, articles in peer reviewed journals, publications, conference papers/presentations). Any breach will be reported to the relevant authorities promptly (e.g., data management team).

Sensitive and Distressing Topics Discussed:

The focus of the study is on experiences of higher education and may trigger emotions. Though, it is important to note awareness that the experience of story telling always hold the potential for emotions arising. As part of the researcher's previous MSc, he has already been provided with training around issues of distress within in-depth interviewing and how to handle if such issues arise. In addition, the researcher's own supervisors for his PhD are highly skilled academics who have previous experience of conducting qualitative interviews around 'sensitive' and emotional topics (e.g., disability in education, working-class queers). Therefore, given ongoing training (e.g., ~~UaSS~~ Graduate School, PGR Doctoral Training), and current support from supervisors, the researcher is prepared to attend to any sensitive or distressing topics.

In preparation for the current project and utilising the researcher's current training to date, the following protocol has been developed should a participant display distress (e.g., becomes tearful, looks upset about a topic or question) during the interview session:

1. Participant displays distress, interview and recording may be paused
2. Participant is asked how they are feeling and if they would like a break
3. Participant will be reminded it is their choice to continue, or if they would like to finish the interview. Participants will be under no pressure to continue
4. Support resources (see PIS) will be relayed to the participant in a calm, respectful and empathetic manner
5. Verbal informed consent will be obtained before the interview commences
6. If the participant wishes to finish, they shall be thanked for their time, and the debriefing process will be actioned (see below)

Upon completion of the interview the debrief will be given and the researcher will enquire if they are okay and ready for the session to close. A Debrief Form (Appendix 5) will provide a list of numbers to support services the participant can get in contact with if they wish to discuss anything distressing, with the researcher signposting the participants to these support numbers during the interview if required. The Debrief Form will also be sent to participants via email after the interview is complete. The PIS shall have a list of numbers to support services to which participants may contact if they so wish to.

The safety of the researcher (i.e., psychological harm) is also for consideration due to the possibly sensitive and personal attachment to the topic. To avoid this, the researcher shall inform his supervisors if he wishes to discuss any matters further upon completing an interview. The researcher shall also contact the support services outlined in the PIS and Debrief Form if required.

Participant Safety and Comfort:

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the environment in which a participant is being interviewed in should be one that is conformable and safe for the participant.

A location that is suitable for the participant and researcher will be discussed ahead of the interview (preferably Strathclyde university). The researcher shall book a quiet and comfortable room ahead of time and in line with Strathclyde university opening times. Booking private meeting rooms within the University of Strathclyde. (e.g., Lord Hope building). The Lord Hope building will be most appropriate to book. This building has appropriately sized lift access and wheelchair access from on street. A meeting point outside of Lord Hope building will also be discussed allowing the participant to meet with the researcher, and the researcher to show the participant to the room that is booked. This may **alleviate** any confusion of navigating Strathclyde campus for any participants, as well as create greater rapport. In-person interviews may be advantageous as there may be greater rapport built with in-person communication, thus allowing for greater depth of conversation.

If interviews are conducted over Zoom (participant choice), the researcher shall ask the participant to choose a place that is comfortable and quiet for them. The participant then has control where the interview is conducted, and allows them to complete the interview in an environment they feel is safe and comfortable for them.

Before the interview begins, the researcher will ask the participant if they are in a comfortable place to be interviewed, or if they need to get anything beforehand (e.g., a glass of water), and if the participant understands the content, intent, and implications of the PIS. The researcher shall also discuss his positionality, identities, and why he is interested in the research topic. This conversation may also have the benefit of increasing the rapport between researcher and participant to improve the communication between both parties and ensure any final concerns for the participants are alleviated. The researcher shall also make it clear that if, for whatever reason, the participant has to leave the interview early and abruptly then that is fine, and there is no judgement from the researcher.

There will be multiple check-in points throughout the interview (e.g., "Are you okay?", "Do you need a break?", "Are you okay to discuss this further?") as a way of re-assuring and putting the participant at ease throughout the interview. Participants will be offered breaks as needed and reminded that they do not need to share any information that feels uncomfortable.

Unforeseen Ethical Issues:

While the researcher has tried to think of all ethical issues and considerations there may be unforeseen ethical issues that arise while in the field. The University of Strathclyde, Ethical Guidelines on Research with Human Participants was used to develop understanding of any ethical issues in the research project, and will be used to guide the researcher through any further ethical considerations that arise. The researcher will continue to stay in contact with his supervisors, and stay up to date on recommendations and publications emergent from this research and other contemporary research as relevant to the project.

The researcher will also continue to consult guidelines provided by various research organisations on ethical practice, the following are relevant and referred to in Bryman (2012): British Sociological Association (BSA), *Statement of ethical practice*, Social Research Association (SRA), *Ethical guidelines*; British Psychological Society (BPS), *Code of conduct, ethical principles and guidelines*, American Sociological Association (ASA), *Code of ethics*, The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), *Framework for Research Ethics*.

Ultimately, the researcher intends to remain reflexive (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) throughout the research project and tend to any additional ethical concerns as they arise during the investigation.

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11. Objectives of investigation (including the academic rationale and justification for the investigation)

Please use plain English.

Rationale:

Policy, action, and government legislation promotes diversifying the student population (e.g., Public Sector Equality Duty; Athena Swan; UN SDG; Equality Act 2010). Consequently, increasing numbers of diverse, marginalised and non-normative students are attending and advancing to higher education (Hillier et al., 2018; Duran, 2019). University and campus life offers new social and educational opportunities (e.g., leaving home, living independently, coming out, obtaining graduate attributes). However, there is a divide between the normative student experience (e.g., male, White, young, heterosexual, able-bodied), and the non-normative one (Lackie, 2012; Miller, 2015; Palmer, Chau and Simmons, 2021), with those who experience intersecting inequalities being overlooked in research fields (Taylor, 2012; Miller, 2020). Furthermore, a plethora of educational research and studies focus on primary and secondary education (Wilson, Marks Woolfson and Durkin, 2020), and thus, overlooking higher educational experiences. Yet this field is beginning to grow (Hillier et al., 2018; Duran, 2019).

Researchers have argued that disabled-queers are overlooked within research fields (Miller, 2015; Miller, Wynn and Webb, 2019). Morgan et al., (2011) suggested that disabled-queer students are arguably a marginalised student population on university settings. Within the area of research that does exist, experiential results are conflicting. Some argue that disabled-queer experiences are usually negative due to feeling unwelcomed and unaccepted, and consequently disabled-queer students feel the need to hide and suppress their identity (Miller, 2015, 2020). However, others have suggested that higher education allows disabled-queer students to gain a sense of belonging, thus, shaping their identity (Falconer and Taylor, 2017; Graham, 2019; Eisenman et al., 2020).

Often disabled-queer student research has focused on how disabled-queers navigate their identity while attending higher education (Miller, 2015, 2020). As such, other university and student experiences are neglected and overlooked (e.g., leaving home, sense of comfort and belonging to a student society, disclosing one's disability and queerness to peers). Arguably, these experiences are just as important as identity formation and development (Laird, Pulkari and Koyu, 2013). Research exploring disabled-queer students' experiences is growing momentum in the UK (e.g., Toft, Franklin and Langley, 2019). Given the political and educational differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK, it is worth exploring disabled-queer student experiences of Scottish higher education.

In summary, the purpose and aim of the study is to:

- Explore, understand and produce data that tells the story of disabled-queer student experiences of higher education in Scotland whose experiences may be less frequent and unheard on campus environments (Abes and Wallace, 2018; ~~Exposito et al., 2020~~)
- Expand and contribute towards the limited literature on disabled-queer student experiences of higher education in Scotland
- Aid discussion/thinking on queering, transforming and scrutinising higher education normativity (Miller and Downey, 2020)

Theoretical Basis

To consider disabled-queer student experiences, the project will draw on concepts from intersectional queer-disability theory known as Crip Theory. Reclaiming the derogatory term 'crip' to be one of pride and interrogation, Crip Theory centres around disabled-queer experiences, and how these transform a 'normative' world (McRuer, 2006). Crip Theory challenges prevailing ideas of able-bodiedness, heterosexuality and normality, while aiming to comprehend the realities and perspectives of those who sit at the intersection between disability and queerness (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013; Schalk, 2013; ~~Webb and Watson, 2014; Bone, 2017; Kimball et al., 2018~~). Kafer (2013) said Crip Theory is a site for understanding fluidity and intersectionality by deconstructing the binary between disability and able-bodied queers. Crip Theory can be used to investigate beyond questions of access, but focus on how hetero-normativity and ~~able-bodiedness~~ interact and combine in places of dominance like the home, the classroom, and the workplace (McRuer, 2006). Crip theorists focus on critiquing heterosexuality, ability, and normativity, rather than challenging homosexuality and disability as previously seen in Gay and Lesbian Studies and Disability Studies/Medical Model of Disability (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013). Crip Theory can be effective in rejecting hierarchical language binarism and encouraging the right to self-identification, and ~~cripping~~ normativity (Mery Karlsson and ~~Rydström, 2023~~). Crip Theory is backed and encouraged by strong empirical data within educational fields (Henry, ~~Euerth~~ and Figliozi, 2010; Miller, 2015, 2020; Miller, Wynn and Webb, 2019; Miller et al., 2021).

The current study aims to answer the research questions:

1. What are disabled-queer students' experiences in Scottish higher education?
2. To what extent do disabled-queer student ~~experiences~~ matter?

References:

- Abes, E.S. and Wallace, M.M. (2018) "People See Me, But They Don't See Me": An Intersectional Study of College Students ~~With Physical Disabilities~~', *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(5), pp. 545–562. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0052>.
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12. Participants

Please detail the nature of the participants:

The participants of the study will:

- (1) be at least 18 years old; and
- (2) are presently enrolled as an undergraduate or postgraduate student at a Scottish university; and
- (3) self-identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer); and
- (4) self-identify as having a disability of any kind

Given the crip stance guiding the research, a fluid and self-identification approach to identity categories will be taken. Participants will self-identify with being LGBTQ+ and disabled. Participants will not need to ‘prove’ or provide ‘evidence’ of their disability to take part in the study.

LGBTQ+ is an umbrella acronym including all those who identify as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans or who define their sexual, romantic or gender identity outside of the heterosexual/cisgender one.

Summarise the number and age (range) of each group of participants:

Number: 15+

Age (range): 18+

Given there is no age limit to attending university, there is no upper age limit for the current study. It is hoped that a broad age range of participants will come forward, as well as there being a preference for different institutions and locations. The research aims to recruit a minimum of 15 participants, a small sample of participants methodologically selected to allow space and time for the complexity of the topic, with in-depth interviews and analysis.

This sample size is picked as it will provide the research with depth to participant experiences, rather than gaining breadth. The sample size is also picked as the population may be a hard-to-reach group, therefore a smaller sample is more appropriate. There will be flexibility around the sample size; this will be determined during the data collection phase of the research. Selection process of participants may be deployed. This is intended as a way of aiming for diversity and representation in the sample. Selection of participants is also intended as a way of making space for other disabled-queers in the sample and in the sharing of stories. Selection process will be an on-going discussion with the supervisory team. Discussion will include 'who' my current participants are, and 'who' may be missing in the current sample. There will be discussion around 'who' I may now be looking for in the study aiming to provide representation and diversity. I will then discuss ways of recruiting and gaining access to such potential participants with the supervisory team.

Selecting participants may be determined on a number of factors; geographical (e.g., students who live rurally); age; disability; gender; sexuality; and type of university (e.g., Russell Group, post-1992). Other factors may arise in the fieldwork and will be discussed as and when with the supervisory team.

If potential participant(s) are demographically similar (i.e., determined in supervisory meetings) to others in the study the researcher shall explain that he is looking for potential participant(s) that may not be as represented in the current sample. The researcher shall note potential participant(s) interest, and may return to interview expressions of interest should he not be able to access a diverse sample. This strategy will allow time from circulation of request, to interview uptake, where typically more 'privileged' groups come forward first (Taylor, 2023).

Please detail any inclusion/exclusion criteria and any further screening procedures to be used:

All interviewees will be 18 years old and over.

All interviewees will identify within all categories outlined above.

All interviewees will provide informed consent in accordance with the BERA Ethical Guidelines (e.g., via PIS & Consent for Interview forms).

Interviewees will be excluded if they do not meet the categories outlined above.

13. Nature of the participants

Please note that investigations governed by the Code of Practice that involve any of the types of participants listed in B1(b) must be submitted to the University Ethics Committee (UEC) rather than DEC/SEC for approval.

Do any of the participants fall into a category listed in Section B1(b) (participant considerations) applicable in this investigation? Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, please detail which category (and submit this application to the UEC):

14. Method of recruitment

Describe the method of recruitment (see section B4 of the Code of Practice), providing information on any payments, expenses or other incentives.

Participants will be recruited in a few ways.

The researcher shall create a social media post (call for participants; Appendix 1). This will be posted on the researcher's personal Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, as well as emailed out on email lists. This

post will have the Qualtrics link/QR code (the link with the PIS, Consent Form, demographic information for signing up to an interview). The researcher's email will be on the post should any potential interviewees have questions and queries before signing up to the study. To complement the social media post, the researcher shall ask friends and family to share the post on social media, thereby facilitating a snowballing recruitment technique. Participants will also be asked to share the link, but not forced to. Arguably, this is an effective recruitment strategy which is both time and resource efficient.

Another method will be to engage with disability and LGBTQ+ societies/services at Scottish universities. These groups/societies/services are established to provide support and advice for local populations and by engaging with them it is the intent of this project to provide an additional avenue to promote their work and to ingratiate with target participants more effectively.

Further questions for consideration emerge relating to the hierarchy of institutions (Reay et al., 2001). It would be beneficial to recruit participants from different 'types' of universities including older, more 'prestigious' universities and newer institutions to understand their experiences. However, this will be determined by the participants that the researcher is able to recruit through proposed methods: Twitter advertisement, asking people to retweet, emailing university services, societies and charities asking to distribute the call for participants.

A potential limitation of this approach to participant recruitment is that social media and university services and societies may draw a particular pool of people already engaged in work in the field. Taylor (2004) notes that the idea of 'hard to reach' groups perhaps signify that researchers need to adapt their approaches to recruitment, for example, using magazines and posters as methods of calling for participants, which in the case of the current study might mean posting on university notice boards etc. Recruitment posters will be posted in a range of physical locations. Physical locations may include Scottish universities, student societies, LGBTQ+ groups/charities, disability groups/charities. Additional locations will be added as recruitment progresses.

Participants will not be paid or receive incentives for their time.

15. Participant consent

Please state the groups from whom consent/assent will be sought (please refer to the Guidance Document). The PIS and Consent Form(s) to be used should be attached to this application form.

Qualtrics will be used for handling administration work.

Participants may reach out to the researcher themselves (e.g., via email – see following paragraph), or they may click the link in the social media post. This social media link will take participants to Qualtrics. Qualtrics will be used for handling sign-up of interview/administration work of PIS, Consent Form, inclusion criteria, and demographic information. Once the social media link has been clicked, the PIS is shown outlining the information about the study and participation, as well as what will be done with participants' data. Participants are then shown the Consent Form and will have to digitally consent. Participants are then shown the inclusion criteria and asked to confirm if they meet these criteria. Next, the participants will outline all demographic information including, name, age, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, and disability. Participants are asked if they would prefer an in-person or Zoom interview. Participants are asked what university they attend (exact universities will not be included in the final written thesis or subsequent publications, but this is asked to understand the type of universities participants are attending). Participants are then asked to fill out what days best suit them for an interview. The Qualtrics site is set up that participants have to answer questions via a 'Forced Response'. The site is set up so that any participant who ticks a box out with the inclusion criteria their response will be terminated, deleted automatically and not stored.

If participants reach out in other ways (e.g., via email) any questions they may have will be answered. Participants will also be given the Qualtrics link to follow (see procedure above). If the participant does not wish to fill out the Qualtrics link, the email will contain the PIS for the project which will outline information about the scope and intent of the project and will make clear what taking part in the project will entail. Participants will be further asked to confirm their consent to the project by returning a complete (and signed) informed consent form (if not completed on Qualtrics). Consent forms may also be completed on the day of the interview if done in-person, but participants will be asked to read and make sure they understand the consent form ahead of time. Demographic information will be collected on day of interview. Participants will be invited to outline whether they would like an in-person or Zoom interview, and when best would suit them for this. These initial emails may also serve to create rapport between the participant and researcher. This can prove particularly useful in the context of remote interviewing where the benefits of physical proximity are not present and where concerns around using technology (such as Zoom) might be a barrier to successful interviewing.

As per the BERA Ethical Guidelines, the researcher will make it explicitly clear that participation is voluntary and that participants may withdraw their consent to be included in the project at any time during the interview, and up to 1-week after the interview has finished. Withdrawing from the study will be without prejudice or explanation.

Once participants have completed their interview, their involvement is complete.

Participants may ask to have a helper or support worker with them during the interview. This will be allowed. The participant will consent to having the support workers there for interpretation, aide and support for and to the participant.

16. Methodology

Investigations governed by the Code of Practice which involve any of the types of projects listed in B1(a) must be submitted to the University Ethics Committee rather than DEC/SEC for approval.

Are any of the categories mentioned in the Code of Practice Section B1(a) (project considerations) applicable in this investigation? ☐ Yes ☒ No

If 'yes' please detail:

What specific techniques will be employed and what exactly is asked of the participants? Please identify any non-validated scale or measure and include any scale and measures charts as an Appendix to this application. Please include questionnaires, interview schedules or any other non-standardised method of data collection as appendices to this application.

Timeline

February (2024): submit/respond to ethics committee feedback and resubmit. As soon as ethics has been approved, advertise study.

March (2024): participant recruitment (subject to ethical approval). Share on Twitter, email contacts asking to share call for participants with networks. Organise interviews and book rooms, subject to ethical approval.

March (2024) – September/October (2024): in-depth semi-structured interviews (15+ participants). Transcription and analysis taking place alongside.

August (2024) – May/June (2025): analysis (stages of thematic analysis), chapter writing, feedback, response, regular supervision... etc. Thesis chapter writing, engaging with theoretical literature, academic reading and writing, conferences, continue to attend seminars and RPD as relevant, tutoring (to be discussed and decided in future annual reviews and PhD planning).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews have been selected as the best exploratory method for this topic to avoid imposing my own ideas about higher education and that of the existing literature. Fielding (1993) notes that this non-standardised approach to interviewing is valuable where the subject matter is sensitive or complicated, allowing the interviewer and interviewees to “take their own path” (Fielding, 1993, p.136) within certain guidelines.

Asking open ended questions encouraging participants to share their stories, with probes such as ‘and then what happened?’ and ‘what do you think about that’ and ‘can you speak a little more about that?’. An interview schedule (Appendix 4) has been created to help guide the interview. Although there is an interview schedule, this is not fixed, and a fluid approach to this will be given. Interview questions are posed to help the researcher guide conversation if needed. Participants will have space to discuss topics and issues that they feel are important to them. Interview questions are set to address and help answer the research questions set out in section 11.

The interviews will last for approximately 60-90 minutes, for depth and flexibility, allowing participants the space to tell their stories but keeping time bound with the option to extend the length if they feel comfortable and happy to do so. I will advise participants up front that the estimate length of the interview is 60-90 minutes. There will be flexibility in the length of interview, but participants will be asked how long they have before the interview commences. The researcher will be willing to extend longer due to conducting with a small number of participants compared with other qualitative PhD research projects. However, an attentiveness and awareness of participants, will be maintained throughout for example, by offering breaks as needed.

My time will be organised so that I am undertaking one, maximum of two, interviews per week. During this time my primary focus in relation to the PhD project will be interviewing, data collection, transcription with additional activities (e.g., attending on-campus PGR activities), kept to minimum, still attending regular writing groups as is useful to me and to this project.

Where an independent reviewer is not used, then the UEC, DEC or SEC reserves the right to scrutinise the methodology. Has this methodology been subject to independent scrutiny? Yes ☒ No ☐

If yes, please provide the name and contact details of the independent reviewer:

My draft methodology chapter is available to share as required, and has been reviewed by supervisors with feedback provided. This chapter will be added to upon data collection being completed.

17. Previous experience of the investigator(s) with the procedures involved. Experience should demonstrate an ability to carry out the proposed research in accordance with the written methodology.

Jack has conducted a variety of research projects all with qualitative methodologies and ranging from autism inclusion to domestic abuse. These projects were all sensitive in nature, therefore meaning Jack has sufficient previous knowledge and experience on how to handle sensitive topics and conduct qualitative investigations. In preparation for the current project and utilising Jack's current training to date, protocol has been developed should a participant display distress during the interview session (see section 10).

The supervisory team (Prof Yvette Taylor and Dr Claire Wilson) are both experienced researchers in qualitative methodologies and in PhD supervision.

18. Data collection, storage and security

How and where are data handled? Please specify whether it will be fully anonymous (i.e. the identity unknown even to the researchers) or pseudo-anonymised (i.e. the raw data is anonymised and given a code name, with the key for code names being stored in a separate location from the raw data) - if

neither please justify.

Demographic information (e.g., name, age etc.) will be stored on a password protected Strathclyde OneDrive student's account and be held on Qualtrics. Other data (e.g., pseudonyms, transcripts, audio recordings) will be stored on a secure and password protected Strathclyde OneDrive account. Audio recordings will be stored until transcribed and then deleted. The institutions they attend will not be named but described as a 'type' of university (Reay et al. 2001).

Interviews will be transcribed and anonymised prior to analysis. Audio recordings of interviews will be deleted as soon as transcripts are produced and checked for accuracy by the researcher (e.g., re-listening to audio recording and comparing against transcript). Transcripts will be securely stored until the end of the study unless there is any identifiable reason to keep for longer, at which point storage will be reviewed. Personal information that could identify the participants will be anonymised in the transcripts. Pseudonyms will be used to anonymise information and protect participant anonymity in the final thesis and/or subsequent publications. Participants can choose their own pseudonym or the researcher will choose. Data will be coded and stored with pseudonyms separated from the file containing the participants' real names. Access to any such information obtained during this project is restricted only to those directly involved therein. Any breach will be reported to the relevant authorities promptly.

Explain how and where it will be stored, who has access to it, how long it will be stored and whether it will be securely destroyed after use:

As of June 2020, the University of Strathclyde and Zoom have a Data Protection agreement ensuring that any cloud (i.e., OneDrive) saved data from Zoom will remain encrypted and private (confirmed by the Legal Compliance team). As such, any interview over Zoom will be conducted using the researcher's Strathclyde Zoom account.

All computer-held data will be password-protected via OneDrive. The requirements of the Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act will be observed. Interview recordings will be held on OneDrive until transcription process is complete and then deleted upon listening to make sure interviews have been transcribed verbatim.

A Dictaphone will be used for audio recording interviews. The audio will then be transferred to the researcher's Strathclyde OneDrive account and deleted from the Dictaphone.

All written data will be stored with pseudonyms in a secure location (University of Strathclyde, OneDrive). Audio data and transcripts will also be backed up on an encrypted hard drive and removed as soon as transcripts are produced and checked. Paper copies of transcripts will be secured in locked cupboard in my home. All data will be stored and managed in alignment with the university's Data Management and Data Protection policies.

Will anyone other than the named investigators have access to the data? Yes ☐ No ☒

If 'yes' please explain:

19. Potential risks or hazards

Briefly describe the potential Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) hazards and risks associated with the investigation:

If in-person interview: The researcher shall book a quiet, comfortable room at a place that is convenient for both the interviewer and interviewee (e.g., the University of Strathclyde).

If Zoom interview: Participants will be encouraged to find a quiet, softly furnished, comfortable and

confidential space available for the duration of the Zoom interview to minimise the risk of disturbance and to improve audio quality for recording purposes.

Based on the 'likelihood of harm' flowchart in the Principle and Practice of Risk Assessment course undertaken on My Place:

- The likelihood of physical harm to participants is very unlikely (may only occur in exceptional circumstances).
- The likelihood of emotional harm to participants is unlikely (may occur given unlikely sequence of events/failures).
- The consequence (severity) of harm is insignificant, no injury requiring first aid.
- Low risk – no further action but ensure risk control measures remain effective.

To contact safety, health and wellbeing if required within the university, phone extension 2726 or email safety@strath.ac.uk

OHS Risk Assessment (S20) was completed (ID number 8919).

Please attach a completed OHS Risk Assessment (S20) for the research. Further Guidance on Risk Assessment and Form can be obtained on Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing's webpages

20. What method will you use to communicate the outcomes and any additional relevant details of the study to the participants?

The outcomes and relevant details will be communicated to participants via email.

21. How will the outcomes of the study be disseminated (e.g. will you seek to publish the results and, if relevant, how will you protect the identities of your participants in said dissemination)?

The outcomes of this project will be disseminated through the resulting PhD thesis and made available via the Strathclyde University Library online thesis repositories. The results will also potentially be disseminated through other publications (e.g., articles in peer reviewed journals, papers presented to conferences etc.). There may be wider access via subsequent publications. Data derived from interviewees will only be included subject to the interviewees' indication of consent. Such dissemination will only include small extracts of participant anonymised data. This information is outlined in the PIS.

Table 1 (below) illustrates the different levels of access to participant's data:

		Who will have access to me data?		
		Jack McKinlay (Researcher)	Professor Yvette Taylor/Dr Claire Wilson (Supervisors)	Wider access (articles in peer reviewed journals, papers presented to conferences etc.)
Form of Information:	Original audio recording	X		
	Contact information	X		
	Personal identifying information	X		
	Anonymised data (transcript)	X	X	

	Anonymised extracts of participant data	X	X	X
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Checklist	Enclosed	N/A
Participant Information Sheet(s)	☒	☐
Consent Form(s)	☒	☐
Sample questionnaire(s)	☐	☒
Sample interview format(s)	☒	☐
Sample advertisement(s)	☒	☐
OHS Risk Assessment (S20)	☒	☐
Any other documents (please specify below)	☐	☐
	☐	☐
	☐	☐
Debrief Form	☒	☐

22. Chief Investigator and Head of Department Declaration

Please note that unsigned applications will not be accepted and both signatures are required

I have read the University's Code of Practice on Investigations involving Human Beings and have completed this application accordingly. By signing below, I acknowledge that I am aware of and accept my responsibilities as Chief Investigator under Clauses 3.11 – 3.13 of the Research Governance Framework and that this investigation cannot proceed before all approvals required have been obtained.

Signature of Chief Investigator	
Please also type name here: Yvette Taylor	
I confirm I have read this application, I am happy that the study is consistent with departmental strategy, that the staff and/or students involved have the appropriate expertise to undertake the study and that adequate arrangements are in place to supervise any students that might be acting as investigators, that the study has access to the resources needed to conduct the proposed research successfully, and that there are no other departmental-specific issues relating to the study of which I am aware.	
Signature of Head of Department	
Please also type name here	
Date:	

23. Only for University sponsored projects under the remit of the DEC/SEC, with no external funding and no NHS involvement

Head of Department statement on Sponsorship

This application requires the University to sponsor the investigation. This is done by the Head of Department for all DEC applications with exception of those that are externally funded and those which are connected to the NHS (those exceptions should be submitted to R&KES). I am aware of the implications of University sponsorship of the investigation and have assessed this investigation with respect to sponsorship and management risk. As this particular investigation is within the remit of the DEC and has no external funding and no NHS involvement, I agree on behalf of the University that the University is the appropriate sponsor of the investigation and there are no management risks posed by the investigation.

If not applicable, tick here ☐

Signature of Head of Department	
Please also type name here	
Date:	

For applications to the University Ethics Committee, the completed form should be sent to ethics@strath.ac.uk with the relevant electronic signatures.

Appendix 10: Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Below is the questionnaire administered to participants prior to the semi-structured interviews. This form was used to gather demographic data and logistical preferences for scheduling.

Section 1: Contact and Identifying Information

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Contact Information (*Please provide your phone number and/or email address (for contacting you regarding the interview):*)

Section 2: Demographics and Identity

4. What gender/s do you identify with?
5. What are your pronouns?
6. What sexuality/ies do you identify with?
7. What disability/ies do you identify with?
8. What race/ethnicity do you identify with?
9. What social class do you identify with?

Section 3: Academic Background

10. What level of study are you? (*e.g., Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught (e.g., Master's), Postgraduate Research (e.g., PhD)*)
11. What are you currently studying? (*e.g., BSc Psychology*)
12. What university do you attend? (*e.g., University of Strathclyde*)

Section 4: Interview Logistics

13. Would you preference an in-person or Zoom interview, or no preference?
14. When works best for an interview? *Please indicate your general availability in the table below:*

<u>Day of the Week</u>	<u>Morning</u>	<u>Afternoon</u>	<u>Evening</u>
<u>Monday</u>			
<u>Tuesday</u>			
<u>Wednesday</u>			

<u>Day of the Week</u>	<u>Morning</u>	<u>Afternoon</u>	<u>Evening</u>
<u>Thursday</u>			
<u>Friday</u>			
<u>Saturday</u>			
<u>Sunday</u>			