

History and archival work with, by and for disabled staff and students: a case study of the University of Lincoln

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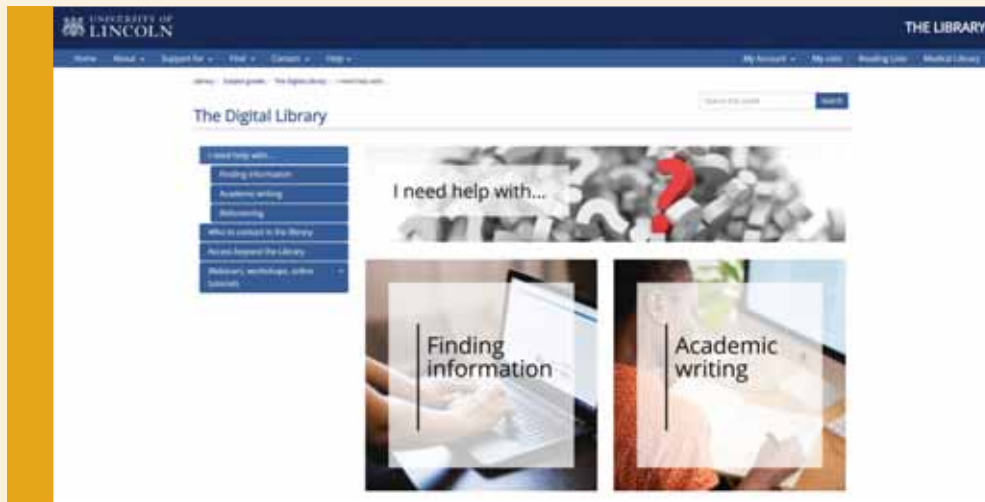
A representative archive. Copyright Pixnio.com

Unlike the stereotypical archaeologist undertaking physically demanding fieldwork (Hunt 2022), historians seem to require less stamina and are more commonly depicted in an office. Well-known from documentaries, those appearing on British television are often white and male (Gray and Bell 2013), and non-(physically) disabled. For audiences, then, a limited vision of who might be a historian is offered, although young people are undeterred – a significant minority of history undergraduates identify as disabled (Advance HE 2021).

The impact of Covid lockdown on disabled students and staff in history and related disciplines

The experiences of history students differ little from those of disabled students in other parts of the university, but key areas were brought into sharp relief during and shortly after the end of the periods of lockdown experienced in the UK in 2020 and 2021. During lockdown, students and staff were unable to access archives. For many undertaking dissertations, reframing their research to use online material such as the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database was sufficient; archives too worked to make their collections more accessible and freely available online, although this had begun years earlier (TNA 2019). Clearly it benefited all students, although for some undertaking planned postgraduate research, limited access to archives impacted mental wellbeing (PEARL 2021). In addition, for medically vulnerable students with compromised immune systems or reliant on particular medication, the vaccine roll-out in late 2020 was of limited use as the vaccine was unsuitable, and self-isolation continued. Trips to re-opened archives

Screenshot of the University of Lincoln digital library. Credit: University of Lincoln



... disability remains uninterrogated, although at least one in seven working-age UK adults are disabled

were impossible, and reliance on published collections of primary sources continued; the potential to discover fresh material was replaced by a need to use different approaches to well-known resources. The same applies to disabled historians; even after the vaccine’s release, disabled and medically vulnerable staff were implicitly expected to risk their health to undertake archive trips needed to gather material and meet unwavering expectations of research productivity and ‘individual excellence’ (Bothwell 2020).



Old books. Credit Dana Ward on Unsplash

The experience of disabled historians: a gap in research and practice

That little has been done to address the specific experiences of disabled historians in recent years should perhaps not be surprising given the Royal Historical Society (RHS)’s lack of interest. Asserting that they are a ‘voice for equality’, there has been timely focus on race and ethnicity (RHS 2022) and some on gender equality (2015) and LGBT+ histories and historians (2020), but disability remains uninterrogated, although at least one in seven working-age UK adults are disabled (University of St Andrews nd).

Historians and archivists have, however, engaged with diverse audiences. Before, during and after lockdown, the HLF-funded *Change minds* project has encouraged people with mental health conditions to work on County Asylum records. The benefits are not simply that participants develop research skills – although this can have a positive impact on wellbeing (eg Lewis et al 2022) – but also lie in participants’ greater self-confidence. Historical and archival research, then, may have demonstrably positive effects for those involved. Similarly, engagement by universities and related bodies includes activities planned by the Lincoln Historical Association, such as talks for those with dementia. Gaining a sense of the value of the past to communities unable to visit archives, such events enable HE to develop networks with wider communities, and share expertise to benefit the wellbeing of all involved. More broadly, the

Historical Association nationally has noted a lack of historical work recognising disability, and marks Disability History Month (see eg Rieser 2021).

Conclusion

There are clearly gaps in what is offered: pressure on staff to produce work at a rate comparable to non-disabled colleagues is problematic for those concerned about coming back to whole-group teaching and to archives. The archival sector, necessitated in part by the pandemic, offers a greater range of material online, and is demonstrably working to support diversity of archive users, generally to the benefit of visitors' wellbeing. It is the responsibility of universities to offer the same to staff and students,

especially in the aftermath of a global health catastrophe which has left about 1.5 per cent of UK citizens disabled (extrapolated from CDC 2022 statistics), and was disproportionately detrimental to around 14 per cent of the disabled people in the UK population (UK government 2021) including at least 5.5 per cent of disabled teaching staff – that this is a much smaller proportion than undergraduates identifying as disabled may suggest unwillingness to disclose, itself a matter of concern (Advance HE 2021). The same groups were left behind by national recovery plans (Kubenz 2022) – much as some institutions may wish to ignore such reports' implications – and experienced disproportionate levels of disruption. Lack of sector-wide consistency in addressing the needs of disabled staff is certainly problematic.

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