

## Participating in the Disability Studies Conference 2024 at the University of Leeds

Kazunori Yamaguchi\*

*\* Doctoral Student, Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan*

This article serves as a report on my participation in the Disability Studies Conference (DSC) 2024, held at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom from September 2 to 5, 2024. The DSC is a major international conference where researchers share and discuss their latest findings in the field of disability studies.

### **Venue Overview**

The University of Leeds is one of the leading institutions for disability studies in the UK. Located in a vibrant northern English city, the University of Leeds stands as one of the UK's foremost institutions for disability studies. Leeds is home to the Centre for Disability Studies (CDS), founded by Colin Barnes. The CDS has significantly contributed to the field of disability studies, and its digital archive, The Disability Archive, provides researchers with a wealth of materials. Barnes once visited Ritsumeikan University in 2010 to offer an intensive lecture series at the Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences.

The University of Leeds campus offers outstanding facilities within its thoughtfully designed grounds. It has a pond, dedicated pedestrian areas, and brick-built campus buildings. I even spotted squirrels and rabbits on the lawns—there were especially many rabbits. During my stay at Morris Hall, one of the university's on-campus residences, I was impressed by its well-designed accessibility features. It seemed that the wider city of Leeds also had accessibility considerations in place, from public buildings to sidewalks.

### **Travel and Conference Participation**

My journey began on the evening of September 1st from Kansai International Airport, with a connecting flight through Abu Dhabi before reaching Manchester International Airport the following day. The weather in Leeds was cloudy and somewhat chilly, akin to mid-October in Japan.

Two participants from Institute of Ars Vivendi, Ritsumeikan University, Kasumi Ito and myself, attended the DSC in person. The on-site conference fee was £450 (approximately ¥80,000 at a rate of ¥185 to the pound) reflecting the conference's large scale. According to the conference organizers, there were around 400 in-person participants, and additional online participants as well. An official app allowed attendees to check session schedules, speaker bios, and fellow participants' institutional affiliations, which enhanced accessibility to conference information.

### **Day 1 (September 2): Post-Graduate Symposium**

The conference began for me on September 2nd with the Post-Graduate Symposium, a pre-conference session designed specifically for doctoral students. The conference began for me on September 2nd with the Post-Graduate Symposium, a pre-conference session designed specifically for doctoral students. Schalk, an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, offered valuable insights into integrating disability studies with intersectional approaches involving race and gender.

In the afternoon, we attended a lecture and discussion featuring a dialogue between Tasnim Hassan and Schalk. Hassan, who is a doctoral student and co-representative of Black Disabled Lives Matter, was very engaging and welcoming during the break when we spoke with them. The symposium was organized by a graduate student team from the CDS, aiming to foster connections among emerging scholars in disability studies. I was pleased to exchange contact information with several participants, sharing concerns and visions for the future of the field.

### **Main Conference Program**

From September 3 to 5, the main DSC program took place. It included keynote lectures by Marie Sépulchre, Bob Williams-Findlay, Miro Griffiths, and Sami Schalk, as well as multiple parallel paper sessions and poster presentations. Attendees were primarily from Europe, though some hailed from Asia, including a few from Japan, as well as from Australia, India, Israel, and other regions. It was notable how many participants with disabilities were visibly present,

including wheelchair users, people with guide dogs, and those accompany with personal assistants. However, I did not encounter many sign-language conversations, which may reflect the linguistic and regional diversity of the participants.

### **September 3:**

The first keynote was delivered by Marie S  pulchre, a senior lecturer at Lund University in Sweden who researches anti-discrimination laws and citizenship for disabled people. Her presentation explored the concept of “freedom” by analyzing concrete examples of oppression, and it provoked lively questions from the audience.

During the lunch break, I joined researchers from Sweden and the UK. We found that, despite different national contexts, our research interests often overlapped. The lunch itself consisted mainly of sandwiches, but they were offered in diverse varieties, including gluten-free, vegetarian, and vegan options marked with clear labels. These arrangements reflected a broad consideration for different dietary needs.

In a 90-minute afternoon paper session, three presenters, including CDS Deputy Director Miro Griffiths, addressed “The Future of Disability Studies”. The session addressed “the future of disability studies,” focusing on the role of social media activism, the impact of COVID-19, and generational gaps in disability movements. Another session I joined focused on decision-making in disability contexts.

### **September 4:**

The morning of September 4 featured a keynote by Bob Williams-Findlay, a prominent Birmingham-based disability rights advocate. The Q&A was quite animated, and I sensed it was the most intense discussion among the keynotes. I then participated in a paper session on art and culture in disability studies.

In the afternoon, Griffiths delivered a keynote discussing research on the participation of young disabled people in disability movements across Europe. One of the key points was that younger generations might be moving away from traditional activist frameworks—something that can also be seen in Japan. I found the parallels between Europe and Japan particularly fascinating. After the keynote, I joined two additional paper sessions and reconnected with participants from the graduate student symposium on the first day.

### **September 5:**

On the final day, I attended a morning session focusing on Crip Theory. The room was crowded, and discussions were vibrant, reflecting a strong interest in queer and intersectional approaches to disability studies.

The conference concluded with Schalk's keynote on solidarity between the Black Panther Party and the disability rights movement. As my research examines connections between the New Left Movement and disability activism, her analysis provided valuable insights that deeply resonated with my work. The opportunity to engage with this scholarship in person proved especially meaningful.

### **Reflections and Acknowledgments**

Overall, the DSC 2024 showcased notable trends among younger scholars, particularly an interest in integrating disability studies with queer studies, intersectionality, and broader social justice movements. I was repeatedly struck by discussions on how to apply disability studies to real-world challenges and how to transform social structures. Generational differences in methods - for instance, the use of the internet in activism - were frequently debated, underscoring the diverse directions in which disability studies is evolving.

This participation was made possible with the support of the International Collaborative Research Promotion Program (Collaborative research type) of Ritsumeikan University. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to participate in international scholarly exchange.

Moreover, this visit was part of broader efforts to strengthen research collaboration between the Leeds CDS and the Institute of Ars Vivendi. The experience proved immensely valuable, not only for my own scholarly development but also as a foundation for future partnerships that may advance disability studies globally.