

## **Transformational learning about disability rights at the Festival of Creative Learning**

Two students at the University of Edinburgh share their experiences of participating in our event at the Festival of Creative Learning. Jinghua Qian and Yu Fang are from China. They are post-graduate students at the University of Edinburgh, one in education and the other in social science. They met each other at a Festival of Creative Learning event, hosted by Disability Research Edinburgh network.

### ***What we did***

The one-day event was to engage the participants with the idea of participatory and inclusive approach to disability research.

In the morning, we listened to a panel discussion between 4 invited speakers from different disciplines. They have extensive research and practice experiences in areas like social inclusion, disability and medical informatics. They shared their insights into the participatory and inclusive approach, and discussed a range of perspectives informed by academic research and also their own professional experiences.

After the panel discussion, we were divided into small groups based on our interests, such as learning disabilities, mental health or care services. Led by the panel speakers, participants were expected to work together to develop cases of inclusive research design. The group we were in designed a research project on disability and higher education. We discussed many important issues including equal access, barriers, and policies to support international students with additional learning needs.

In the afternoon, we watched a film 'Defiant Lives', which was about disability rights movements. There was also an open discussion following the screening. The film showed the history of how disabled people were maltreated, segregated and discriminated, and how they struggled for their rights. The documentary made us understand better of the difficulties for realising human rights, and made us reflect on how to make a difference.

### ***What we learned***

Before this event, we rarely came across topics related to disability in our own study. For example, in the Chinese context, ensuring access of disabled students to higher education has not been an important agenda, because disabled young people are usually expected to seek jobs to support themselves financially. It was really beneficial to have participants from different cultural backgrounds to exchange ideas, so the discussion was extended greatly.

The film screening made an often 'invisible' group visible to us. From an Asian culture in which 'harmony weighs more than anything else', we were rather surprised to see that disabled people in Western countries opted for a violent approach to fight for their rights. We asked: Why would people choose the most radical way? Why would they rather hurt

themselves to protest against something? We realised that at that time disabled people had no other choices – the indifferent society was hurting them even more.

### ***What we would like to do next***

Jinghua Qian: Only after taking the optional course on inclusive and special education, I have started to know more about the circumstances for disabled children in different countries. It was great that with group members at the workshop, we could discuss the reality of inclusive and special education in our own contexts. Looking back at my experience of being a student in China, I never had any disabled child as a classmate. Compared to Scotland where the majority of students with additional support needs are enrolled in mainstream schools, China still has a long way to go to realise inclusive education. I would like to address the issue of inclusive practice in my future work.

Yu Fang: As a student interested in public policies, the event pushed me to think hard about policy implementation. For example, why would the public transports remain inaccessible to wheelchair users after law enforcement? Such support is not provided even though the government has given its promise, then who should be held accountable for such failure? Attending the event broadened my understandings and I found new topics that I would like to learn more about. I have enjoyed the festival because it gave us the opportunities to explore issues that we might have long overlooked, such as the social rights we tend to take for granted. I would definitely continue to follow the updates about future events organised by the Festival of Creative Learning and Disability Research Edinburgh network.

Qianjing Hua and Yu Fang,  
Interview by Dr Yuchen Wang.

**Jinghua Qian** is a postgraduate student in MSc Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). She studied on a course ‘Comparative Approaches to Inclusive and Special Education’, which made her more aware of the international challenges for providing educational opportunities for disabled children.

**Yu Fang** is a postgraduate student in MSc Policy Studies. She became interested in disability research after volunteering with the programme ‘Home for the Elderly’.

**Dr Yuchen Wang** is a post-doctoral research associate at Moray House School of Education

The events were organised by [Disability Research Edinburgh](#) as part of Edinburgh University’s [Festival of Creative Learning](#) in February 2018