Graduating into Incompetence: Critical Social Justice Ideology, the Proliferation of Disability Adjustments, and the Crisis of Professional Preparation in UK Higher Education

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Abstract: This article argues that two interconnected developments in UK higher education are producing graduates in the human services who are inadequately prepared for professional practice. The first is the institutional capture of universities by Critical Social Justice (CSJ) Theory, which has imposed a framework of identity-based power and privilege on pedagogy, campus culture, and professional regulation, suppressing free inquiry, displacing material poverty as a focus of concern, and generating widespread self-censorship among students and staff. The second is the accelerating expansion of disability adjustments, driven in significant part by the same ideological framework, which has pathologised ordinary personality traits and skills deficits as protected conditions, and lowered professional standards in ways that compromise public safety. The article proceeds in three parts: part one examines the mechanisms by which CSJ ideology has come to dominate social work education and the wider university sector, generating self-censorship and a displacement of material poverty as a professional concern. Part two analyses the parallel expansion of disability adjustments and its ideological roots, arguing that the conflation of self-declared and genuine disability dilutes support and compromises professional standards; and part three makes the case for reclaiming liberal principles in human services education. The article concludes that genuine inclusion and authentic professional preparation require institutional courage, honest assessment, and a recovery of the liberal commitment to free inquiry, evidence, and the irreducible uniqueness of the individual.

Keywords: critical social justice theory; social work education; professional education; disability adjustments; liberalism; professional standards; higher education

INTRODUCTION

Something is failing in the preparation of graduates for the human services in the United Kingdom. The problem is not simply one of falling academic standards or the pressures of mass higher education, though both are contributing factors. It is something more ideological and, in important respects, more tractable: the systematic reshaping of higher education by a framework of ideas that prioritises identity, victimhood, and institutional protection (Campbell and Manning 2018) over competence, rigour, and professional readiness. This requires attention because students will graduate to interact with real world problems, sometimes in matters of grave importance. Some real world effects of the changes in professional education are suggested later in the article by the examination of some high profile and tragic incidents and, to be completely frank, this article is significantly motivated by my own experience of seeing

how the developments under discussion have led to unsuitable candidates, in social work and beyond, literally graduating into incompetence.

Two interconnected developments require examination. The first is the ideological capture of UK universities by Critical Social Justice (CSJ) Theory, which has reshaped campus culture, narrowed acceptable opinion, and encouraged a form of moral conformity that is antithetical to the critical thinking that professional education requires. The second is the explosive growth of disability adjustments, driven in significant part by the same ideological framework, which has led institutions to pathologise ordinary personality variation and basic skills deficits while simultaneously lowering the professional standards that exist to protect the public.

"Capture" here denotes a process by which a particular ideological framework becomes so embedded in institutional structures, regulatory requirements, hiring norms, and professional culture that it shapes what can be said and taught (Hearn and Macleod 2026) and researched and published in academic literature (Kaufmann 2021) without requiring any explicit enforcement. It is distinct from mere influence or prevalence. It should be noted that other forces contribute to the same landscape: the marketisation of higher education (Hearn and Macleod 2026), managerialist audit culture (MacAlpine 2026), political polarisation and the broader therapeutic turn in Western societies (Monteux and Murdoch 2026) all play a role. CSJ ideology is, however, the argument here, the distinctive and underexamined factor that connects ideological conformity to the specific features of professional education addressed below.

Social work provides a particularly revealing case study because the profession is, by its own regulatory definition, explicitly committed to social justice, anti-discriminatory practice, and the protection of vulnerable people. The professional body, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Social Work England, and the Scottish regulator, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), have all embedded CSJ language and concepts into mandatory standards (BASW 2021; Social Work England 2022; SSSC 2019, 2024). As Drake and Hodge (2022) have observed, social work appears to have reached a crossroads between Enlightenment-informed practice grounded in science, reason, and humanism, and a CSJ-informed practice centred on identity-based power and privilege. This article suggests that the profession has not merely reached that crossroads but turned decisively in the CSJ direction, with significant consequences for education and practice. It also suggests that this might be the case for other professions working in 'social justice' spaces, and advances an argument for reclaiming philosophically liberal principles as the foundation for professional education in the human services.

PART ONE: THE IDEOLOGICAL CAPTURE OF UK HIGHER EDUCATION

The Nature and Trajectory of Critical Social Justice Theory

CSJ Theory, as Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) have documented in detail, has its roots in postmodern French philosophy, subsequently absorbed and operationalised by activist academic fields including critical race theory, queer theory, intersectionality studies, and related disciplines. At its core, CSJ Theory organises the social world around a hierarchy of power and privilege, with straight, white, able-bodied men positioned at the apex and other identities arranged below according to their presumed proximity to oppression. The 'correct' moral orientation, within this framework, is to side with those positioned lower in the hierarchy, defer to their lived experience as epistemically privileged, and treat any challenge to claims made in the name of marginalised identity as itself a form of oppression.

Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) and Murray (2022) suggest that around 1989, postmodern theory solidified from a set of abstract epistemological positions into something more concrete and activist. The original postmodern scepticism about grand narratives and objective truth was repurposed as a tool for exposing and dismantling structures of power. Marcuse's (1965) concept of repressive tolerance, which held that free speech and liberal tolerance could only be genuinely neutral in conditions of absolute equality, provided an important intellectual foundation. Since power differentials persist, the censorship of

dominant voices and the protection of marginalised ones could be justified as a precondition of genuine freedom rather than a violation of it.

The results of this trajectory in the contemporary university are well documented. Kaufmann (2021) found that support for illiberalism and viewpoint intolerance was far higher among academics who identified as far left, activist, or far left activist, and that millennial academics were markedly more intolerant than those approaching retirement. The political composition of university social science departments had shifted dramatically, with 70 to 80 per cent of faculty identifying as left-leaning and only 5 to 10 per cent as right-leaning. As Kaufmann observes, this young, left-wing cohort is likely to grow as older academics retire, suggesting the trend will intensify rather than reverse.

In social work specifically, Fenton (2025) has demonstrated that the professional body and regulatory framework in the UK are thoroughly saturated with CSJ language and concepts. The SSSC (2024) now requires newly qualified social workers to develop an anti-racist, intersectional approach and to write personal reflections on their commitment to anti-racism and understanding their unconscious bias. Social Work England (2022, p. 1.10) asks that graduates demonstrate knowledge of 'how multiple and intersecting oppressions and disadvantages impact people, families, and communities'. The terms proactive anti-racism, unconscious bias and intersectionality employed in these requirements are direct references to CSJ theory (Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2020), and the framework within which they operate is one in which structural oppression is understood as hardwired into society and perpetuated, consciously and unconsciously, by dominant groups (Eddo-Lodge 2017; Kendi 2019).

The Mechanism of Conformity

The power of CSJ Theory in universities lies not primarily in its intellectual persuasiveness, which does not withstand rigorous scrutiny on several central points, but in the social and professional costs of dissent. Large institutions are susceptible to what might be called ideological groupthink: a convergence of opinion driven not by shared conviction but by shared risk-aversion. The Sullivan Review (Sullivan 2025) offers independent corroboration of these dynamics, documenting how ideological pressures within public institutions have led to systematic distortions in data collection and research, with professionals facing reputational and professional risk for adhering to empirical standards at odds with prevailing orthodoxies. Professor Kathleen Stock, for example, was driven from her employment at Sussex University such was the backlash from students and academics about her respectful and scholarly criticism of gender ideology (*The Telegraph,* 2021).

Advance HE's Race Equality Charter and Stonewall's Diversity Champions scheme, both widely adopted by UK universities, exemplify this dynamic (Fenton 2025). Universities sign up to these programmes primarily for the credentials they confer, the awards and kitemarks that signal inclusivity. The consequence is that academic staff who question the ideological assumptions embedded in these schemes are no longer simply critiquing a theory but taking a stance against their employer. This is a powerful deterrent to honest intellectual engagement.

Evidence of Classroom Conformity and Self-Censorship

Empirical evidence supports the claim that CSJ ideology has generated significant self-censorship among students. Hillman's (2016) study of 1,000 UK university students found that the majority favoured protection from offence over free speech, with women significantly more censorious than men. His 2022 follow-up study demonstrated that censorious attitudes had intensified: 79 per cent of students believed those who felt threatened should always have their demands for safety respected (up from 68 per cent in 2016), and 61 per cent believed their university should prioritise protection from discrimination over unlimited free speech (up from 37 per cent). The proportion who agreed that debating issues like sexism or racism runs the risk of legitimising them, had doubled to 35 per cent.

Simpson and Kaufmann (2019) found that only 30 per cent of a sample of 505 UK undergraduates would take a free speech position on contentious matters such as controversial speakers on campus, with a minimum of 20 per cent favouring no-platforming. The significance of an undecided majority was highlighted: students became 14 per cent more pro-censorship or pro-free speech depending on which narrative they had been primed with.

Fenton and Smith (2025) report findings from a study of 102 social work students across all eight Scottish universities offering full-time programmes. Sixty-seven per cent were reluctant to discuss at least one controversial subject, a figure comparable to the 60 per cent found in Heterodox Academy's larger American study (Heterodox Academy 2020). The main reason given was fear of criticism from other students, but a notably close second was the concern that honest engagement might cause psychological or emotional harm to others. This belief, Fenton and Smith argue, is itself a product of CSJ ideology: once it is accepted that words and ideas can cause harm by reinforcing power differentials, any contribution from a presumed dominant group becomes potentially harmful, and self-censorship becomes a moral obligation rather than intellectual timidity.

A particularly striking finding from Fenton (2025) was that students' perceptions of who was most reluctant to speak inverted the actual pattern. Students believed that white, straight, and male students would be the most comfortable speaking out. In practice, these groups demonstrated the greatest reluctance, especially on topics related to their presumed position in the power and privilege hierarchy. White students were most reluctant to discuss Black Lives Matter; straight students were most reluctant to discuss sexual orientation and transgender issues; men were most reluctant to discuss gender. Students had internalised a CSJ construct of society that was, demonstrably, at odds with reality.

The Displacement of Material Poverty

One of the most consequential and underappreciated effects of CSJ ideology in social work education is the displacement of material poverty from the centre of professional concern. CSJ Theory focuses on identity-based recognition as the primary axis of injustice, and as Fraser (2003, 2017) has argued, this orientation is compatible with, and can actively serve, neoliberal economics. If the goal is equity in group outcomes rather than redistribution of wealth, the economic hierarchy between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent remains unaddressed. Fraser calls this progressive neoliberalism: the pursuit of diversity, representation, and identity-based recognition within an overall economic structure that goes unchallenged.

The practical consequences for social work are documented in research by Morris et al. (2018), who found that social workers in the UK were in a moral muddle about poverty: they appeared reluctant to engage with poverty as a specific professional concern, treating it instead through the anti-discriminatory lens of not wishing to stigmatise people for their circumstances, while simultaneously adopting blaming narratives towards poor white service users. Cooley et al. (2019) found that teaching white privilege concepts to socially liberal students increased blaming attitudes towards poor white people, apparently by implying that their difficulties stemmed from a failure to exploit available racial advantage.

Cox et al. (2020), in a scoping review of social work curricula across six Anglophone countries, found that anti-oppressive, critical postmodern, and critical race frameworks dominated the literature, while poverty was backgrounded and not explicitly conceptualised. Fenton (2020) found that the newest generation of social work students demonstrated punitive and blaming responses to unemployed and poor service users. These findings suggest that CSJ ideology, far from advancing the traditional social work concern with structural inequality, is actively undermining it by redirecting professional attention from material hardship to identity recognition.

Standpoint Epistemology and the Erosion of Liberal Science

A further dimension of CSJ ideology with serious implications for professional education is its epistemological framework. The concept of standpoint epistemology, according to which members of oppressed groups have privileged access to truth by virtue of their lived experience, is widely promoted in CSJ-influenced curricula. Bailey (2017) articulates this position explicitly: when students counter lived experience accounts with facts or other evidence, they are not engaging in critical thinking but engaging in privilege-preserving epistemic pushback, and their challenges should be understood not as propositions to be assessed for their truth value, but as expressions of power. Collins (2017) goes further, arguing that treating standpoint epistemology as merely subjective knowledge constitutes epistemic oppression.

The implications for the classroom are profound. If factual challenge to lived experience accounts is itself an exercise of oppressive power, then the fundamental purpose of university education as the collective, critical pursuit of knowledge is abandoned. Rauch (1993) describes liberal science as a system in which the checking of each by each through public criticism is the only legitimate way to decide who is right. Where that system is replaced by one in which certain claims are protected from challenge by virtue of the identity of the claimant, knowledge ceases to advance and ideology takes its place. Van den Berg and Jeong (2022) observe that rejecting positivist aspirations to objectivity simply because they were historically associated with dominant groups is both foolish and self-defeating. Sheppard and Charles (2017) and Sheppard et al. (2018) have documented that social work graduates in the UK already demonstrate weak critical thinking skills. Promoting a single ideological standpoint to the exclusion of others will not improve this situation.

The power of standpoint epistemology is well illustrated by its pervasiveness well beyond the academy, for example in the Scottish Government's commitment to service user lived experience as the central epistemology through which the human services are encouraged to understand their practice and aims. The elevation of 'lived experience' and the downgrading of any other sources of knowledge has taken place without significant critique, discussion or academic engagement and can be considered as yet another example of 'capture' as discussed earlier (Monteux et al. 2026).

PART TWO: THE EXPLOSION OF DISABILITY ADJUSTMENTS AND ITS IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS

The Scale of the Change

Running in parallel with the ideological transformation of universities, and deeply connected to it, is what can only be described as a crisis in disability adjustments. Disabled students made up 19% of home student enrolments in 2021/22, a proportion that has roughly doubled since 2010, from 9.5% in 2010 to 19% by 2021/22 (Disabled Students UK 2023). In 2019/20 the most common reported disability category was specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD), followed by mental health conditions (Hubble and Bolton 2021). In 2022-23, more than 120,000 UK students reported mental health conditions, up from just 33,500 in 2014-15 (Rowsell 2025) and social work students are declaring disabilities at an even higher rate (Corten et al. 2025). In the light of this, the question of what adjustments are being made, on what programmes, and to what end demands serious scrutiny.

The concern is not with students who have genuine, formally diagnosed disabilities creating real barriers to learning. Universities have both a legal and a moral obligation to support such students, and they should do so robustly. The concern is with the vast expansion of the adjustment category to include conditions that were previously considered part of the normal range of human variation, and skills deficits that are, in the context of professional education, simply deficits. The conflation of these two categories causes harm to both. Firstly, students with genuine needs receive diluted services as resources are stretched. The Office for Students (2025), for example, note that rising numbers of disabled students with complex needs,

stretched specialist staff and budgets are impacting on a service extremely under pressure. Secondly, students without genuine disability may well be receiving credentials without the competence those credentials are supposed to represent.

Three Interconnected Causes

Three interconnected developments explain how this situation arose. The first is the expansion of the social model of disability beyond its original, coherent scope. When the social model was developed and gained traction in the early 1990s, it offered an important corrective to the medical model: disabled people are frequently disadvantaged not by their impairments but by a society not designed to accommodate them. Installing ramps, hearing loops, and accessible materials removes unfair structural barriers without requiring any change in the individual. This is sensible and humane.

The Equality Act 2010 and its accompanying guidance expanded this framework dramatically. Mental health conditions were placed on the same footing as physical impairments. Universities, under the Public Sector Equality Duty, were required to proactively anticipate the needs of anyone with a long-term condition substantially affecting their daily life. Crucially, self-declaration of conditions including anxiety, low mood, auditory processing difficulties, and personality disorders became permissible without formal clinical evidence, provided the student claimed substantial impact. The predictable consequence was that the population of students qualifying for adjustments expanded without effective limit.

The second cause is CSJ Theory's treatment of disability through the concept of ableism. Within the CSJ framework, able-bodied individuals are positioned as oppressors and disabled or self-declared disabled individuals as oppressed. Ableism, as deployed within this framework, refers not simply to discrimination against disabled people but to the structuring of society around able-bodied norms, such that disability is understood primarily as a product of social exclusion rather than impairment (Campbell, 2012). Applied to higher education, this framework generates an institutional imperative to eliminate any outcome differential between disabled and non-disabled students (Lynch and Macklin, 2020), without rigorous scrutiny of whether the differential reflects genuine barrier or genuine difference in capability. Universities, deeply invested in demonstrating their anti-ableist credentials, track programme completion rates by disability status and respond to any disparities by widening the scope of adjustments and relaxing performance expectations. Skills deficits are pathologised; pathologies become identities; identities become protected statuses.

The third cause is the broader cultural shift towards what Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) call safetyism: the prioritisation of emotional and psychological safety over other values, including the development of resilience. Scotland now reports that 43 per cent of schoolchildren have additional support needs, twice the rate of England and Wales, attributable largely to exceptionally broad definitional criteria (Scottish Children's Services Coalition, 2023). This is not an epidemiological phenomenon but a cultural one. Definitions expand as expectations contract, and students arrive at university having already been taught that difficulty and challenge are threats requiring institutional intervention rather than experiences that build capacity.

Fenton and Smith (2025) note that the idea that words and ideas can cause psychological harm, now widely held among students, functions as a primer: it primes students to interpret ordinary intellectual challenge as threatening, and to seek protection from it. The research by Celniker et al. (2022) found that higher cognitive distortion scores were significantly correlated with more profound safetyism beliefs and with support for measures such as trigger warnings, and that safetyism beliefs were negatively correlated with analytical thinking and resilience. Universities that endorse demands for safe spaces and trigger warnings may, paradoxically, be reinforcing the very fragility they claim to address.

Adjustments in Professional Programmes

The most serious dimension of the adjustment crisis arises in professional programmes where the competencies being adjusted for are not peripheral academic skills but core professional requirements. In social work, the examples are unambiguous. Adjustments are routinely requested and granted for students with auditory processing disorder, defined as difficulty processing verbal information. Yet listening is a fundamental professional skill: a social worker who cannot reliably hear and process what a distressed, frightened, or angry service user is communicating cannot practise safely. The adjustment cannot be made in any meaningful sense.

Other adjustments concern deadline management, attendance, and organisational competency. These are not peripheral niceties but requirements mandated by the SSSC's standards for social work education (SSSC 2019). A practitioner who routinely fails to submit reports on time or cannot manage their professional obligations places service users at risk. Yet disability services within universities appear to operate on the principle that there are no circumstances in which an adjustment can be refused. The consequence is the systematic production of graduates who hold professional credentials that do not represent the competencies those credentials are supposed to certify.

Students who perform poorly have learned that repeated appeals citing inadequately adjusted conditions can push them through programmes for which they are ill-equipped. Four or five appeal cycles are not unusual. Universities, fearful of Equality Act litigation and sensitive to retention statistics, comply. This is not inclusion. It is the dilution of the professional standards that exist to protect the public, and it is a dereliction of the duty that universities owe both to their students and to the people those students will serve.

The Perverse Consequences

Several perverse consequences flow from this situation. The pattern is an instance of what has been called the "cobra effect": an intervention producing outcomes that are the opposite of those intended, because the incentive structure it creates systematically undermines the original goal (Warczak 2021). Here, policies designed to support disabled students generate an expanding category of adjustments that dilutes support for those most in need and credentials graduates who lack the competencies those credentials are meant to certify. Students with genuine, formally diagnosed and evidenced disabilities experience diluted support as services are stretched across an ever-expanding population of self-declared conditions (Office for Students 2025). The resources available to those with the most serious needs are reduced precisely as a consequence of the policy claimed to serve them.

There is also a financial dimension. Disability services now consume substantial resources in large universities: personal assistants, extended deadline arrangements, alternative assessment processes, repeated appeal procedures. When these resources are distributed across a population in which significant numbers of students require some form of adjustment, the system is stretched beyond capacity. This is not a small efficiency concern. It represents a significant misallocation of public resources in circumstances where the resulting graduates may not be competent to practise safely.

Finally, and most troublingly, there is the question of the service users who will encounter these graduates. In social work, nursing, education, medicine, psychology, and related fields, incompetent practitioners do not merely underperform. They may make poor decisions, miss warning signs, fail to challenge, and cause harm. The possibility that professional education is producing a meaningful proportion of graduates who lack the resilience, critical thinking, and core competencies required for safe practice represents not an abstract educational concern but a direct public safety issue. There are already documented instances in which CSJ-inflected professional reasoning has contributed to catastrophic failures of risk assessment. This is not to claim that those workers were subject to adjustments masking actual skills deficits, but rather to illustrate how workers not up to the job may well fall back on uncritically accepted

CSJ tropes. The public inquiry into the 2023 Nottingham murders, for example, in which Valdo Calocane, a man with paranoid schizophrenia, killed three people, heard that mental health professionals who had been inclined to detain him considered "the research evidence that shows over-representation of young black males in detention" and released him into the community instead (Nottingham Inquiry 2026, p. 53). He was not sectioned; the attack followed. The 2026 Southport Inquiry, examining the murders of three young girls by Axel Rudakubana, found that the headteacher of his specialist school, Joanne Hodson, had described him as "very high risk" from his first day, and had asked colleagues to search him regularly for knives. When she raised her concerns with a children's mental health worker, she was told that her assessment of the risk he posed reflected her perceiving him as "a black boy with a knife." Hodson told the inquiry that the accusation had "effectively shut me up" (Fulford 2026). Parts of his education, health and care plan were subsequently rewritten; language describing his internet activity as "sinister" was replaced with "inappropriate." Inquiry chairman Sir Adrian Fulford concluded that it had been "unwise" to raise racial stereotyping in this context, and that doing so had served to "close down" Hodson from pursuing a valid risk assessment. These are not isolated failures of individual judgment. They are the predictable consequence of training human services professionals within an ideological framework in which race-conscious reasoning overrides clinical and safeguarding obligations.

PART THREE: LIBERAL PRINCIPLES AS THE FOUNDATION FOR PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

What Liberalism Actually Offers

The arguments advanced in Parts One and Two are not arguments against genuine inclusion, against real and evidenced disability support, or against the aspiration to make higher education accessible to students from all backgrounds. The liberal tradition is not indifferent to injustice. On the contrary, it insists on engaging with injustice honestly, addressing it with evidence, and tackling it at its structural roots.

Fenton (2022) has argued that the liberal principles of the Enlightenment, as articulated by Pinker (2018) and others, offer a more robust and more genuinely progressive foundation for human services education than CSJ Theory. These principles include: the uniqueness and irreducible individuality of every person; a universal humanism that insists on common humanity across all group boundaries; legal equality and equality of opportunity; and the commitment to science, evidence, and reasoned debate as the means by which knowledge advances and injustice is identified and addressed.

Fenton (2025) uses Rawlsian liberalism to ground this argument more precisely. Rawls' first principle of equal basic liberties for all people, and his difference principle that social and economic inequalities should be arranged to benefit the least advantaged, provide a philosophical foundation that is genuinely egalitarian and genuinely progressive. It is also more compatible with social work's core concern with material poverty than CSJ Theory, which, as Fraser (2017) has shown as mentioned previously, tends to produce a form of progressive neoliberalism in which identity-based equity is pursued within an unchallenged economic hierarchy.

What Needs to Change in Higher Education

Universities need to recover the ability to distinguish between genuine disability and the ordinary challenges of student life. Professional programmes need the authority to articulate, clearly and without apology, that certain competencies are non-negotiable, that certain adjustments are incompatible with safe practice, and that graduating a student who cannot meet professional standards is not an act of inclusion but a failure of duty.

The culture of conformity generated by CSJ ideology needs to be named and challenged. This means creating conditions in which honest disagreement, including disagreement with prevailing orthodoxies,

can occur without professional penalty. It means treating students as adults capable of engaging with difficult ideas rather than as fragile beings requiring protection from them. And it means recovering J. S. Mill's (Mill 1859/2011) insight that the value of free expression lies precisely in its openness to discomfort: the sceptic, the dissenter, and the awkward questioner are not threats to education but its lifeblood.

Fenton and Smith (2025) suggest that one response is to model constructive disagreement explicitly in the classroom: to demonstrate to students that engaging honestly with contested ideas causes no harm, that intellectual challenge is generative rather than threatening, and that genuine solidarity with service users is built through honest engagement rather than performed agreement. Fenton (2025) proposes Rawls' concept of reflective equilibrium as a pedagogical tool for helping students with diverse worldviews to reconcile their own moral frameworks with the liberal values at the heart of the profession.

Regarding disability adjustments specifically, the combination of institutional pressure, legal risk-aversion, and CSJ-inflected ableism discourse that has driven the expansion of adjustments needs to be honestly examined. Universities need mechanisms to have frank conversations about professional fitness that do not immediately collapse into accusations of discrimination. Disability services and programme teams need to be able to say, together and clearly, that some adjustments are incompatible with some professional roles, and that this is not a failure of inclusion but a requirement of professional integrity. The liberal ideal of meritocracy needs to be properly reinstated as a legitimate aim.

The Stakes

The human services are among the most demanding and most important areas of professional life. Social workers make decisions about the safety of vulnerable children and adults in circumstances of acute stress and moral complexity. Nurses provide care to people at their most dependent and distressed. Teachers shape the intellectual and moral development of children at their most formative. Psychologists support people whose relationship with reality may be fragile. These professions do not merely require knowledge. They require judgment, resilience, intellectual honesty, and the capacity to sit with uncertainty and complexity rather than resolving it prematurely into the categories of oppressor and oppressed.

A graduate who has been trained into ideological certainty rather than intellectual openness, into the performance of the correct values rather than their genuine enactment, and into a relationship with difficulty and challenge that treats them as threats to be managed, is not prepared for this work. Research has indicated that contemporary social work education, for example, can produce graduates with weak critical thinking skills (Sheppard and Charles 2017), punitive attitudes towards poor service users (Fenton 2020), and significant reluctance to engage honestly with contested professional questions (Fenton 2025; Fenton and Smith 2025). These are not peripheral concerns. They are failures at the core of professional formation.

The Rawlsian framework that Fenton (2025) proposes offers a principled basis for addressing those problems. If social work and the human services more broadly are grounded in the first principle of equal basic liberties for all people and the difference principle that inequalities should benefit the least advantaged, then the profession has a philosophical basis that is genuinely egalitarian, genuinely committed to challenging structural injustice, and genuinely hospitable to the diversity of worldviews that students bring. It is also a basis that insists on the professional standards, the honest assessment, and the intellectual rigour that vulnerable service users deserve.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that two interconnected forces, the ideological capture of universities by CSJ Theory and the uncontrolled expansion of disability adjustments driven in significant part by that same ideology, may well produce graduates in the human services who lack the competence, the resilience, and the intellectual honesty that professional life requires. The argument is supported by empirical research demonstrating widespread self-censorship among social work students (Fenton 2025; Fenton and Smith 2025),

evidence of punitive attitudes towards poor service users linked to CSJ pedagogical frameworks (Cooley et al. 2019; Fenton 2020), and the documented proliferation of adjustments that are, in the context of professional education, incompatible with safe practice.

These are not inevitable developments. They are the result of institutional choices made under ideological and legal pressure that can be identified, analysed, and reversed. Reversal requires what has so far been largely absent: institutional courage. It requires universities to name the problem clearly, to resist the social and professional pressures that have made honest engagement with these questions so costly, and to recover the liberal principles that universities were founded to uphold and that the human services cannot function without.

The students preparing for professional practice in social work, nursing, teaching, and related fields will be making consequential decisions about vulnerable people within a few years of graduation. They deserve an education that equips them honestly for that responsibility. So, above all, do the service users who will depend on their professional judgment.

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NOTES

1 The *politics of faith* is committed to perfectibility and conceives of government as an activity without inherent limits, directed toward the construction of an ideal society (Oakeshott 2018).

2 The *politics of scepticism* is detached from the pursuit of human perfection and takes the maintenance of order as its principal aim. It represents an attempt to preserve order and the natural course of things in light of the constraints imposed by reality and by the operations of contingency. Politicians and society, in this context, readjust themselves to prevailing conditions so as to improve them in accordance with the surrounding reality (Oakeshott 2018).

3 *Rationalism in politics*, being based entirely on the power of reason, seeks to reduce all human experience to a set of abstract values. In Oakeshott's conception, the rationalist mind stands opposed to inherited traditions, customs, and habits. Oakeshott fiercely criticizes rationalism, emphasizing the impossibility of set human experience into mere abstractions derived only from reason (Oakeshott 1991).