

Environments Key findings and recommendations

On this page - written by Dr Armineh Soorenian and Dr Kirsty Liddiard - we detail some of key findings and recommendations

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Priority Area 1.1: Recruitment

Disclosure and Disability Confident Scheme

Summary

Participants expressed differing experiences and intentions of disclosure, including: expected, uncertain, forced, anxious, confident, and politically-inclined disclosures. They depicted a range of reasons for choosing to disclose their impairments. Some wanted to increase their chances of being offered an interview, whilst others felt it important to model being Disabled in order to raise awareness of disability or to open conversations with their students.

Depending on the types of impairment and access needs, some participants decided not to disclose. For some participants, fear of stigma, ableist stereotypes, and unfair treatment determined the timing of disclosure. Participants reflected on the dilemma between whether the receipt of appropriate support justified the possibility of negative prejudice related to disability disclosure. They shared thoughts on methods of disclosure and a wide array of responses.

Ableism was seen to be normalised in the context of disclosure and internalised by our participants. Some participants had to weigh the workplace culture and their own personal beliefs with their need for accommodation. For our participants, the consequences of ableism and hostile reactions to disclosure often included lack of job security. Thus, participants demonstrated how disclosure was a dynamic, relational, and ever-changing phenomenon.

Some participants thought that information about whom they needed to disclose their impairments with was limited and that, even after disclosure, the details of their disclosure were not shared with all the relevant people. Participants agreed that administering one model of response for disclosure was not working.

Awareness of the Disability Confident Scheme varied amongst participants, even extending to HR staff. Some participants had positive views of the scheme. They thought that it demonstrated that the university had a commitment to employing Disabled candidates. However, positive responses often came with caveats, whereby participants were unsure whether they were supposed to tick the box due to internalised ableism.

Criticisms of the scheme included that: it represented little more than window-dressing, which masked ongoing disadvantage; it did not go far enough; it was applied very differently across the university; in some cases, it was bypassed, as an employer could fabricate an argument for why an applicant would not fulfil all of the criteria and therefore did not have to be invited for an interview. The aforementioned internalised ableism led some participants to question their need or right to tick the Disability Confident box and they started doubting their needs for any adjustments.

Recommendations

- Disabled staff need to be encouraged to disclose their impairments and access needs on their own terms.
- Disabled staff need to know with whom they need to share the details of their impairment.
- Disabled staff need to know who will access the information which they share about their impairments and access needs.
- Opportunities to disclose need to be made available at different points throughout the recruitment and the on-boarding processes, as well as throughout the employee life cycle.
- To encourage disclosure, Disabled staff need to be made aware of the benefits of disclosure and the reasonable adjustments on offer.
- There needs to be a higher awareness of the Disability Confident Scheme, including its benefits and how it is applied.
- The application of the Disability Confident Scheme needs to be standardised across the university, with clear definitions of the essential criteria.

Emotional Impact

Summary

Participants reported a range of experiences in recruitment, disclosure and working practice. Structural issues, such as limited access to reasonable adjustments, exacerbated the inequities our participants experienced and impacted their emotional wellbeing. While some participants internalised prejudices, “othering” and non-disabled team members’ discriminatory views, others found themselves masking in order to conform to normative ways of being and working. Participants reflected on whether they felt themselves to be “disabled enough” to deserve certain accommodations. In any case, the impact of ableist practices on our participants resulted in harm to mental health, with participants reporting lowered self-esteem and feelings of exclusion. They highlighted that feelings of judgement could prevent Disabled people from disclosing their impairments, disabilities and neurodivergence, which would leave them struggling to manage due to a lack of access to reasonable adjustments. This was considered to be psychologically and physically damaging.

Recommendations

- Provide opportunities for Disabled staff to practice completing job applications and attending mock interviews.
- Provide detailed information about interview arrangements, such as the location and any access information.
- To help with reducing anxiety, have only a short lead time between the application deadline and the provision of feedback about the outcome of the interview.
- Provide unsuccessful interviewees feedback about how they performed in their interviews.
- Continually raise awareness of different needs amongst Occupational Health assessors, line managers and HR, familiarising them with the impact of ableism at work and encouraging them to support Disabled staff with disclosure and feeling believed and supported.

- Take seriously the needs of Disabled staff, discuss the range of reasonable adjustments available and implement any adjustments in a timely manner.

Ideal Recruitment and Onboarding

Summary

The significance of recruitment practices that were inclusive and encouraged applications from a wide range of applicants was highlighted. The inclusion of more disability-specific information and policies on disclosure in job adverts – instead of filling information packs with marketing materials – was seen as important. Participants preferred to see information about the types of support and adjustments available, as well as about how the Disability Confident Scheme was applied at the recruitment stage.

Participants thought that having creative and flexible practices was key to an inclusive recruitment experience. They wanted simplified and accessible processes in the application stage, along with clear definitions of complex terms and acronyms. The provision of detailed information about the interview process and interview questions in advance was considered helpful. Some participants suggested having a dedicated HR staff member, or someone familiar with university's disability support, present in interviews. Prior to their interviews, they wanted to have opportunities to divulge and disclose their impairments in detail and to explain how their specific conditions affected their work.

Participants advocated for continued opportunities for disclosure in the on-boarding stage. Accessible on-boarding processes were called for, along with the provision of detailed and relevant information about Access to Work, reasonable adjustments and a clear induction programme. Participants wanted to have better opportunities to integrate with their new teams over an extended time frame during on-boarding. Participants also highlighted the importance of re-induction processes after longer periods of leave, such as maternity or sick leave.

Recommendations

- Provide accessible and relevant information in job adverts about disability, disclosure and policies around the Disability Confident Scheme – as well as available reasonable adjustments during recruitment.
- Application forms need simpler steps and inclusive, comprehensible language.
- Applicants must be encouraged to request reasonable adjustments.
- Embed accessibility into the recruitment practices as standard by using an Interview Schedule, providing details and instructions of the interview, interview questions in advance, building a diverse interview panel, and ensuring shorter time lead between the application deadline and interview outcome.
- Provide feedback to applicants who have ticked the Disability Confident box.
- Prior to interview, identify a point of contact who would be able to respond to Disabled applicants' enquiries and collect information about their access needs.
- Make information available during or before on-boarding about topics including: Access to Work; the provision of reasonable adjustments; and important details about the workplace and culture.
- Ensure that new members of staff are able to disclose at any point during on-boarding and induction.
- Improve the quality and provision of integration opportunities for new staff members and staff members transferring to new teams.

- Provide re-induction sessions for members of staff who are returning from an extended period of leave – particularly one relating to pregnancy, illness or disability.

Importance of Inclusive Recruitment and Onboarding

Summary

Participants shared their views on the importance of inclusive recruitment. They felt that it aided in bringing a wide range of skills and perspectives into the workplace and expanded the talent pool into one more reflective of wider society – helping to promote the understanding of others’ differences. Inclusive recruitment could help to diversify the workforce, raise awareness of a range of needs and create a more open working culture – one wherein staff feel welcomed, valued and supported. Participants thought that, by not being inclusive, universities were risking missing out on specific skills and talents, which could damage the reputation of institutions as well as having an adverse impact on individuals.

Recommendations

- Provide training for recruiters and interview panels on implicit biases.
- Diversify the university workforce, aiming to reflect and represent the population at large.
- Encourage an open culture, wherein staff feel comfortable disclosing their needs, feel listened to and their access needs are met.

Information and Application Forms

Summary

Participants reported that job adverts were often crammed with information which was not always helpful or relevant for a majority of applicants. These adverts were often extremely long and wordy documents. Participants were mostly interested to read about information on disability support and to find out about university’s approach to inclusion, when reading job descriptions.

Participants shared their experiences of the application process. While some recognised that the new recruitment system offers a better user experience, they noted that common barriers with application forms had not been remedied, including: inaccessible and difficult-to-use platforms; unclear instructions; and limited details on disability and available support. Participants commented on difficult-to-unpack and exclusionary job criteria. On the whole, participants felt the application process assumed the applicant was not neurodivergent.

Recommendations

- Recognise that gaps in employment and non-traditional work histories are to be expected with Disabled applicants, as changes in health and circumstances can be frequent. These gaps should not count against an applicant in the application process, however.
- Consider removing irrelevant information from the job adverts.
- Less complex wording should be used in job adverts; helpful and relevant information with accessible, clear and concise language should be included.
- Include, across all job descriptions, information on disability support in an accessible and easy-to-locate format – and regularly update this information.
- List all of the requirements of the job in the job description.
- The Person specification section needs to be more welcoming so that, if an applicant’s experience or skills do not directly align, they would still be willing to apply for a role.
- Improve the accessibility of the application portal.

- Professionally test the recruitment system for digital accessibility, including testing for screen reader accessibility and colour contrast.
- Ensure that application forms are accessible for individuals with dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia. Make sure to use clear, concise language – without unnecessary jargon – and try not to make sentences more complicated than they need to be.
- Remove built-in time-out mechanisms from application forms.
- Be clear when stating what information applicants should supply as part of their application. For example, provide clarity on whether candidates are expected to produce a supporting statement or a cover letter. Give clear explanations of both and clarify what needs to be included.
- Consider that some applicants may have less experience with workplace terminology – especially if they have been out of work due to their disability status.
- Where possible, provide alternative ways for a candidate to apply for a job. For example, allowing them to attach pre-made documents (such as a CV) instead of writing out answers to questions. Other examples include submitting a video or audio recording.
- Ensure that the job listing is available in alternative formats, such as a PDF or Word file.
- In considering the diversity of the pool of applicants, include statements or links to resources and relevant university policies which highlighting the support that is available for Disabled staff at the university.
- Make available the contact details of someone with knowledge of disability support, who would respond to requests for reasonable adjustments during recruitment.
- Emphasise the university's status as a Disability Confident Employer.

Occupational Health and Disability Assessment

Summary

Not all participants had undergone Occupational Health Assessments. Some thought a detailed discussion with Occupational Health assessors about their access needs could have been helpful.

Participants experienced barriers in Occupational Health Assessments, including: being unsure about the role of Occupational Health assessment; poor accessibility of what information was available; the bureaucratic nature of the process; the difficulty of physically accessing assessment centres; and the attitudes of the assessors. They perceived the assessments as box-ticking exercises, sometimes citing limited financial resources and complex processes as reasons why they may experience pushback. However, some participants found the Occupational Health Assessments to be positive and constructive.

Some participants had to wait for a long time for their Disability Support Assessment and, even after the assessments, the recommended adjustments were not automatically put in place. The participants often had to expend considerable amounts of time and energy in order to access the support they needed.

Recommendations

- Provide education to all employees about what reasonable adjustments are, as well as clear and accessible procedures for requesting an accommodation.
- Help employees understand that reasonable adjustments are not special treatment but, rather, necessary means to support Disabled staff at work.

- Arrange regular check-ins with new employees to establish any reasonable adjustments that they may need.
- Consider seriously what Disabled applicants and employees disclose – even if they do not have an official diagnosis, or have not had a Disability Support Assessment.
- Provide accessible information about Occupational Health Assessments in recruitment packs, on the university’s website, and during induction processes.
- Ensure that Occupational Health Assessments are timely, and that they are held in accessible locations or online platforms, and that these assessments are appropriate for the individual’s job.
- Make it clear to applicants and employees that they cannot “fail” an Occupational Health Assessment.
- Keep in mind that Occupational Health Assessments are not always accurate: Disabled staff may be given inappropriate equipment and support.
- Listen to employees and support them – the assessment should account for fluctuations in impairments.
- Have clear definitions, boundaries, overlaps and channels of communication between Occupational Health Assessment and Disability Support Assessment.
- Communicate more often and more transparently with employees during the assessment process once a request has been made.
- Regularly provide a space for employees to raise any new or modified adjustments that they may need, and ensure that the accommodations provided meet their needs and do not result in further disadvantage.
- If any of the reasonable adjustments that have been implemented for the employees are not working well, support them to resolve the issue quickly.
- Ensure more oversight of the reasonable adjustments process, to ensure that policies and procedures are followed correctly, and that accurate and timely communication is being provided to the employees.
- Make sure that applicants and employees are aware of the Access to Work scheme.

Onboarding and Induction

Summary

Participants discussed their experiences of onboarding. With little information available during onboarding, the quality of participants’ experiences was dependent on the support they received from their line managers. Without a good line manager, some participants found it difficult to navigate the system. They felt that the onus was all on them to find out about details such as where to go on their first day to meet their team, and where the IT department was. They reported that, without having appropriate adjustments in place, they felt very alone as Disabled staff when they first started. Not all participants enjoyed opportunities to meet with their colleagues.

Recommendations

- If appropriate, provide accessible opportunities for new employees to visit the university and their workplace prior to the start date.

- Provide information on disability accommodations for all employees and create a point of contact for further guidance and discussions.
- Help new staff understand their role and the University culture, so that they can identify any barriers and suggest adjustments that may be beneficial.
- Invite new staff to discuss any reasonable adjustments that they may need to support them in their role.
- If any adjustments are needed, start the process as soon as possible – and in advance of the start date.
- Remind new staff that, if they need to contact Access to Work, they need to do so within six weeks of starting their new role.
- Ensure that onboarding/induction has been structured, and inform new employees of any changes.
- Inform the wider team that a new colleague is starting and ensure that an access pass has been set up, if needed.
- Ensure that the access pass to the building and any other key areas is working.
- Introduce new staff to their team members and other key staff.
- Assist new employees to set up their workstation, ensuring that it is accessible.
- Support the new employee to log in to the IT system and navigate the intranet, team files and other relevant resources.
- Offer support in completing registration and paperwork.
- Arrange induction and any mandatory training – ensuring that these are accessible.
- Ensure that new employees can navigate external and internal areas of the physical workplace environment, including: accessible parking spaces, accessible toilets, kitchens, emergency exits, shared office facilities and meeting rooms.
- Provide an accessible workplace induction checklist and guide.
- Provide additional support to new Disabled international staff with the settling-in process.

Recruitment

Summary

Participants who worked in recruitment, HR and other professional services talked about the university's recruitment policies and the provision of reasonable adjustments during recruitment. The HR teams provided advice around reasonable adjustments and reminded managers of their duties under the Equality Act.

However, participants' accounts of recruitment varied considerably. Some reported having positive experiences whilst others were confronted with barriers during application processes and interviews. Some participants received a lack of details about their interviews, such as not being told where the interview was held. Others found various aspects of their interviews to be problematic, for example, assessment activities or tests, or being confronted with long-winded, multiple-part interview questions.

Some participants felt that being given additional time would have helped them in their interviews, yet they were reluctant to ask for this adjustment, fearing that they may be judged or perceived differently. Receiving interview questions in advance eased participants' concerns and gave them the opportunity to be as prepared as possible; however, some participants were met with pushback when they asked for interview questions in advance – either for themselves or for their interviewees. Reasonable adjustments were not always followed up on, even if they were offered on paper.

The rhetoric of reasonable adjustment provision did not always match the reality of candidates' support needs. Provision of reasonable adjustments was patchy, and not all participants felt comfortable with requesting accommodations. They internalised other people's assumptions, either doubting or minimising their access needs, or feeling anxious that asking for adjustments could disadvantage them in the process of job selection. Despite this, participants felt positive that there was guidance available around reasonable adjustments and around ensuring that candidates were provided with the best opportunities to showcase their abilities in interviews. However, they acknowledged that more work needed to be done to ensure that recruiters fully implemented those processes across the whole university.

Recommendations

- Regularly review institutional recruitment policies.
- Help recruiters understand that reasonable adjustments are not special treatment but, rather, essential to support Disabled staff at work.
- Prior to interview, identify a point of contact who would be able to respond to Disabled applicants' access needs.
- Have a conversation with candidates prior to the interview date and, if possible, more contact time with somebody who can provide more information about the reasonable adjustments offered by the university.
- Offer a range of interview dates to candidates and provide detailed information about the interview, as well as a full list of available reasonable adjustments for interviews.
- Ensure that accessible rooms are available for interview purposes.
- Ensure that any assessment activities are relevant to a given job role and are to be completed in a quiet space.
- Ensure that the length of interview is appropriate and offer break times at suitable intervals.
- Having an independent observer in interviews can help with transparency – as would a diverse panel.
- As reasonable adjustments, provide questions in advance – as well as a written copy in the interview setting. Also provide a glass of water and the option for the candidate to take notes.
- Ask interviewees how they would like interview questions to be presented.
- Avoid the use of multi-part questions.
- To aid with reducing anxiety, ensure a short lead time between the application deadline and the outcome of the interview.
- Upon request, provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants – even a short sentence could help applicants on their employment journeys.

Training

Summary

Participants talked about the range of mandatory training modules which they had completed.

Most participants agreed that, in order to challenge prejudice, unconscious bias and ableism in recruitment, recruiters needed to undertake EDI training to ensure that they were recruiting fairly and inclusively; however, concerns were expressed about the extent to which EDI training was capable of changing ableist attitudes. Participants thought that line managers – as well as recruiters – needed to have opportunities to complete disability awareness training, and that this training should be scenario-based, interactive and involving lived experience rather than online, click-through slide shows. They highlighted the importance of holding conversations on an individual basis with Disabled staff about various support needs and adjustments.

In general, it was reported that the disability awareness training opportunities available at the university were not of high quality. Participants felt that the training could only be effective when people were interested and wanting to hear discussions; otherwise, training became a mandatory tick-box exercise, attended only by people who already were familiar with disability issues rather than those who needed a broader awareness, perpetuating the problem. Therefore, participants called for more suitable, relevant and engaging training packs, exploring specific barriers experienced by Disabled people with different impairment types, within an inclusive context that acknowledged variations in peoples' experiences of disability.

The accessibility of some mandatory training modules was criticised. Issues raised included: heavy and complex wording; interactive systems which were inaccessible – particularly for screen reader users; and the repetitiveness and irrelevance of some training modules or courses.

Recommendations

- Make mandatory training fully-accessible and provide reasonable adjustments for Disabled staff who need access support with completing the training.
- Add EDI modules and/or build information into recruitment training, with the goal of educating recruiting managers about disability in recruitment.
- Signpost to disability awareness training opportunities, especially for recruiters and for line managers who support Disabled staff.
- In addition to, or instead of, online modules, in which staff have to click through slides, explore the provision of scenario-based, interactive training programmes, aimed at giving non-disabled employees a better understanding of practical applications and how to handle specific situations.
- Specific disability awareness training should be provided about different impairments, in order to help with understanding the ways that various conditions present in a work context, to meet diverse needs and to reduce the need for repeat disclosures and explanations. This should be co-produced and co-delivered by Disabled people.
- Peer learning opportunities must be made available.
- Hold conversations with Disabled staff members about their individual needs and adjustments. Whilst general awareness training is valuable for education, it cannot capture the diversity of Disabled people's needs and complex realities.
- Ensure that employees have discreet ways of opting out of mandatory training which involves – or may involve – difficult or triggering subjects.
- Training needs to be reduced, made consistent, streamlined, specific and suitable for the level of staff working at the university. It also needs to be more engaging and compliment

staff members' job roles.

- Consider applying the same toolkit that is already used to support postgraduate researchers for neurodivergent members of staff.
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Priority Area 1.2: Employment

Ableist Attitudes

Summary

Participants described how their academic workplaces presented challenging and often even toxic environments, within which ableist attitudes and derogatory comments were normalised. Judgements and assumptions were made about participants' impairments, capabilities and needs for reasonable adjustments – including how much these may cost. Sometimes, line managers endorsed stereotypical assumptions about the abilities of our participants, such as associating disability with higher costs and lower productivity. Line managers' and colleagues' lack of awareness surrounding disability; impairments; neurodivergent and health conditions; and the reasonable adjustments needed was highlighted by participants as being a frequent barrier in the workplace. This lack of understanding resulted in negative attitudes: participants were often subjected to stigmatising comments, workplace bullying and exclusion, resulting in them facing difficulties when trying to develop meaningful workplace relationships and socialise, presenting – on the extreme end – as complete isolation from team members.

Recommendations

- Develop policies and procedures to prevent ableism in the workplace, ensuring that these are carefully followed.
- Support a transition in attitude from tolerance to genuine inclusion, in order to better staff members' understandings of disability and the provision of reasonable adjustments.
- Integrate an EDI focus into general university development initiatives, instead of organising separate EDI training or workshops.
- Facilitate staff, with time and expert guidance, to design and implement changes in their work, involving the university's Disabled Staff Network in the co-production of these inclusive work practices.
- Provide genuine and practical institutional support. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in higher education cannot rely only on the efforts of individual Disabled staff; rather, it needs to be reinforced by inclusive policies, with a working means of accountability.

Access to Work

Summary

Uptake of the Access to Work scheme appeared be low. Participants' and the university's awarenesses of the scheme were variable. Most participants had heard about the scheme, although they were unsure about the extent of the available support. Specific information on what Access to Work could support with, as well as details about assessment processes and timelines, were missing.

Our participants did not report having experienced any specific barriers with Access to Work application forms, although the process of claiming back the money for Access to Work-funded support proved difficult.

Participants had contrasting experiences of their institutions providing support with applying for Access to Work. Some felt supported while others had to go through the entire process on their own.

The Access to Work application process was complicated and protracted. None of the participants reported having been contacted by their caseworkers while waiting to hear back about the outcome of their applications.

Participants talked about any reasonable adjustments that they had received through Access to Work. They discussed the generic nature and the unsuitability of some of these adjustments for their specific needs, such as how they did not have the licence to use specific software on their university-provided computers.

The time taken for Access to Work support to come through and the emotional labour that the whole process demanded were major barriers for our participants. They thought that, if the scheme was improved – that is, made more streamlined and easier to navigate – then Access to Work could become a valuable service with the potential to transform Disabled people's experiences of work.

Recommendations

For Access to Work

- Produce a step-by-step guide describing the different parts of the application process, the expected timelines and who is responsible at each stage. Our participants demonstrated a desire for clear information on what to expect – from the initial application through to the reimbursement stage.
- Have cover in place for staff leave so that cases are not put on hold until the caseworker returns.
- Recognise that some posts need to have flexibility and different ways of assessing disabled applicants' support needs, instead of relying on information shared in inaccessible forms.
- Offer a baseline level of human support to Disabled applicants to help them with their Access to Work applications and on-boarding before any decisions are made about their Access to Work award.
- Assign each applicant to a single caseworker, preventing cases from being passed around and further complicating an already-opaque system.
- Assign applicants to caseworkers with relevant knowledge of applicants' fields of work, who could provide suggestions of useful adjustments that are informed by knowledge of how the applicant's impairments may interact with field-specific barriers and guide the applicant through the application and assessment processes.
- Offer regular check-ins to ensure that any concerns are addressed and that adjustments are working effectively.

For the University

- Provide detailed and accessible information about Access to Work in recruitment packs, on the university's website and during induction processes.
- Ensure that applicants and employees are aware of the Access to Work scheme and what support it can offer – along with a clear expected time frame.
- Involve disabled staff in their own Access to Work application process.
- Be respectful of Disabled staff's experiences.

- Set out a clear work plan to help Disabled staff determine how much – and what type of – support they may need during their contract.
- Drawing on institutional knowledge, support Disabled staff with Access to Work application forms and with navigating the complex system.
- Create a small team who can support Disabled staff through the Access to Work journey and to cover leave.
- Have a dedicated member of staff who can provide bespoke support with navigating Access to Work to Disabled staff – both in terms of the application and of implementing any support and adjustments.
- To train professional services staff to be sensitive towards disabled staff's access needs and realise the significance of Access to Work support in their lives.
- Have Access to Work champions – people who are willing to talk about their experience of going through the application process, or who have worked in HR and are familiar with the system.
- Have a “Frequently Asked Questions About Access to Work” page on the university's website.
- Communicate – more often and more transparently – with employees during the application process.
- Liaise with an applicant's caseworker if the employee needs support with communication.
- Even after implementing support, continue to regularly communicate with Disabled staff in order to ensure that Access to Work adjustments are working effectively.
- Universities should adopt a proactive rather than reactive approach to Access to Work; channelling resources to properly support accessing and drawing down upon this support.

Barriers and Ableist Practices in Employment

Summary

Participants discussed the barriers they had experienced while working in the university. The procedural barriers during employment commonly appeared in the form of: inaccessible information and communication systems; inaccessible work structures and processes; and a lack of awareness and understanding of disability.

Physical barriers included the use of inaccessible pieces of collaboration software and inaccessible equipment and furniture in laboratories.

Participants often ran into major barriers around the provision of support and reasonable adjustments. Participants who had reasonable adjustments in place talked about the fact that they felt themselves to currently be in a privileged position – but feared that their situation could change if they had to move teams.

Recommendations

- Use flexible processes and inclusive systems, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all model of working practice.
- Ensure that any information and communication systems used are accessible for all staff, and that instruction and guidance on their use are provided in different formats.

- Offer opportunities for regular conversations and feedback in different formats – for both employees and employers.
- Hold regular conversations about access needs and preferred ways of communication and style of work, with the aim of reducing emotional labour.
- Provide reasonable adjustments and one-to-one support where a need has been identified.

Career Development Opportunities

Summary

Participants discussed the precarious nature of their contracts and the impact which this may have on Disabled staff members' progression opportunities. Participants thought that they were not given suitable options for career development and that progression opportunities were limited. They recognised that access to professional development opportunities may be a concern for all staff; however, this was a greater barrier for neurodivergent individuals, due to the limited number of accessible opportunities available. Participation in professional development opportunities depended heavily on how supportive one's line managers were. Although a strategic career pathway was in place to progress all academic staff, professional services participants reported a lack of career development opportunities.

Barriers such as inadequate adjustments, stigma, and limited opportunities for advancement were felt, which participants considered maintained a 'glass ceiling', preventing Disabled staff from accessing promotion and progression. Most participants who were able to utilise development resources experienced access and attitude barriers, including inaccessible training platforms and systems. Opportunities that required attendance over set days, such as full-day conferences, or involved traveling did not fit into our participants' schedules because of the time commitment. Pre-conceptions and low expectations were placed on some Disabled staff, which impacted their progression.

Participants reported that guidance on how to get promoted was poor. They were unsure how they could use reasonable adjustments, such as extra time, when applying to external funding sources. It appeared that the researchers were expected to prove that they were good enough to get the promotion. Without having a willing and supportive line manager to allow protected time to work on promotion applications, participants discussed how it was difficult to dedicate time to working towards promotion. They criticised the culture of overworking as an unreasonable expectation, particularly where it concerned the demanding leadership criteria within the Academic Career Pathway, and discussed limitations in their capacity to deal with the increased workload associated with formal leadership positions. Feeling forced to disclose their disabilities, impairments, and personal circumstances in order to be supported with promotion applications by their head of departments was considered to be problematic. On the whole, there was a noted expectation of staff to work long hours – beyond those contracted; be productive and motivated; and be responsive to precarious contracts and inflexible funding streams.

Recommendations

- Provide detailed information on contracts and offer opportunities to meet with Disabled staff to go through the contracts and highlight sources of ambiguity.
- Accessible information and guidance surrounding professional development and progression opportunities should be readily available.
- Specific pots of funding should be allocated, which would provide discipline-specific bespoke training options rather than generic training.
- Line managers should be able to identify how the impact of a particular impairment can interact in complex ways with institutional barriers, leading to Disabled staff being disadvantaged in terms of career development and progression prospects.
- Line managers must be made aware of their legal duty to make reasonable adjustments for promotion opportunities.

- Professional development opportunities should be delivered in inclusive, accessible and hybrid ways.
- Academic Career Pathway criteria need to be reviewed and the issue of disclosing personal circumstances in order to be supported with promotion applications carefully reconsidered.
- Line managers should be encouraged to allow protected time for Disabled staff to work towards promotion.
- Offer one-to-one support to Disabled applicants with applying for project funding, covering a range of topics from identifying suitable internal and external funding sources to submitting applications.
- Having more Disabled people in leadership positions and more representation within senior management could help with the implementation and upholding of inclusive policies and practices.
- The same quality of career progression opportunities that is made available to academic staff should be offered to professional services staff.

Emotional Impact

Summary

Participants presented a range of emotional responses to ableist structures within their work environments, including: the loss of self-confidence and motivation; frustration at inflexible working practices; persistent feelings of shame; and experiencing debilitating panic attacks. With little support from the university, participants felt frustrated and exhausted from having to perform the emotional labour of advocating for their disability support needs. They shared how, despite feeling validated by being diagnosed as neurodivergent later on in life, they felt that they had missed out on support that was available.

Despite experiencing stress and anxiety, participants explored different ways to manage their identities at work. Some participants internalised others' perceptions and found themselves masking; others recognised that they had poor work-life balances and were not managing their symptoms well. Some participants used Cognitive Behavioural techniques as self-care strategies, while others considered leaving their positions and moving to a different team – or to another institution altogether.

Recommendations

- Match work expectations with individuals' skillsets and make training opportunities available to encourage learning new skills.
- Provide regular feedback opportunities in different formats on an individual's work performance.
- Hold regular, open conversations about workload, and check-ins about personal and professional boundaries.
- If an issue arises with a Disabled employee's ability to undertake a task, communicate with them as to whether there is a reason or a barrier for the difficulty.
- Training must be made available to promote understanding and awareness about the long-term emotional impact of attitudinal and access barriers.
- Hold regular conversations about access needs, preferred methods of communication and styles of work to reduce emotional labour.

Employment

Summary

Participants who shared their accounts of transitioning from education or another position of employment to their current role were generally satisfied with the process, although participants who moved to a new team reported feeling isolated, initially. The majority of the participants felt supported and included in their work teams. The work culture and structures, as well as the bureaucratic nature of academia, were given as reasons for not feeling included. Colleagues' lack of awareness of different impairment needs often led to miscommunication and misunderstandings. Receiving a formal diagnosis helped some participants understand and advocate for their access needs.

Recommendations

- Ensure that support and reasonable adjustments are implemented either before – or shortly after – a Disabled employee has started their new role.
- Provide social integration opportunities during transition periods.
- Hold weekly or fortnightly one-to-one check-ins with Disabled employees to discuss support needs in relation to work content, to monitor workload and to address any new barriers.
- Improve the quality of training to help raise awareness of intersectional barriers and support the creation of a culture that implements accessible and inclusive policies, structures and systems.
- Continually raise awareness amongst line managers of different needs – particularly of staff with unidentified or invisible impairments.
- Help line managers to understand that reasonable adjustments are not special treatment but rather essential to support Disabled staff at work.

Equality Issues

Summary

Participants thought that, although diversity policies and strategies may seek to broaden the participation of particular minoritised individuals in a numerical sense, genuine inclusion must demand accountability for those diversity efforts to transform to more equitable access and participation practices for all those with protected characteristics. Participants explored the idea that an open university culture, which intentionally makes an effort to remove barriers while critically engaging in these practices, contributes to the elimination of bias and discrimination.

In general, Participants were affected negatively, because of the intersectionality of their identities. They faced combined and compounded barriers of prejudice due to multiple protected characteristics. Characteristics such as age, cultural background, gender, and socioeconomic status impacted how included and accommodated participants felt in their work environments.

Recommendations

- The university's inclusion and diversity targets and initiatives must be meaningful, rather than performative. They need to focus on all protected characteristics and endorse an intersectional framework that recognises the impact of intersectional discrimination.
- An open and safe environment needs to exist, in which Disabled people are encouraged to access employment at the university and enabled to disclose and discuss their needs openly with their team – if they choose to do so.

- Hold the university accountable to their policies and working practices with regular monitoring and review procedures in place, thus ensuring that these policies are accessible, up-to-date, inclusive and subject to Equality Impact Assessments.
- Improve the quality of training to help raise awareness of intersectional barriers and support the creation of a university culture that implements inclusive policies, structures and systems.

Feeling Included in the Team

Summary

Participants talked about how included they felt within their work environments. Some felt fully included and spoke about their positive professional interactions, sometimes comparing their current experiences with previous, less-inclusive roles. On the whole, relational practices supported workplace inclusion and made our participants want to stay in the same post. Participants attributed their levels of satisfaction to having supportive line managers, colleagues who understood their needs and accessible and suitable work arrangements. The hybrid-as-standard culture in one of our participants' departments, for example, helped with the sense of inclusion she felt – especially when faced with access barriers. Another participant commented on the office layout and how having a separate workspace to that of her line manager helped her bond with her other team members better, consequently increasing her sense of belonging.

In positions where participants felt less included, this lack of inclusion was generally in relation to having less-supportive line managers and colleagues. Participants often internalised feelings of being not good enough. Some participants felt that there were a low awareness and appreciation of their support needs, and that different ways of working were not validated.

It appeared that little consideration was given to big, department- or faculty-wide events. This presented barriers to participants' sense of inclusion – as did working in less-diverse teams. Full-department, away-day-type events – as well as social activities that were organised around drinking or spending money – were not inclusive for all participants; participants offered suggestions of alternative forms of socialisation.

Recommendations

- Raise awareness of different impairments, disabilities and forms of neurodivergence; how these impact work; and how to create a supportive workplace.
- Hold regular conversations with Disabled staff to learn about different access needs, ways of working and what types of support are most effective at bringing out the best in individuals.
- Develop a collective understanding of disability from an intersectional perspective, in order to best understand staff members' individual experiences of disability and how these intersect with other aspects of their identities.
- Provide alternative, accessible opportunities for socialising.
- Promote diversity in the workforce.

Lab Work

Summary

Participants described impairment-specific barriers which they had encountered in university lab settings. They recognised the lab spaces were not always designed with access in mind.

People with hearing and visual impairments may need different types of equipment to enable them to engage with an experiment.

In terms of barriers for people with physical impairments, tabletops may be too high – or too short – for prolonged use that is both accessible and comfortable.

Staff engagement in a lab setting can, therefore, be heavily impacted by the barriers. To address underrepresentation of Disabled people in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, deeper conversations must be held about access needs, in order to identify and remove barriers and to normalise a broad range of needs.

Recommendations

- Improve the physical accessibility of laboratory spaces for Disabled staff with a range of access needs.
- Foster a culture wherein open discussions about the safety issues of lab work are encouraged.
- In physical sciences, provide training to safety officers about different access needs and opportunities for discussions to fully recognise the impact of intersectional barriers in laboratories.
- Any risk assessment must ensure the safety of Disabled staff and their co-workers, and should be made in conjunction with an Occupational Health assessment, bearing in mind the legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments.
- Provide support workers in laboratories to assist Disabled staff.
- Promote a culture of working in pairs in laboratories.
- Have a more flexible approach to start and end times, in order to help Disabled staff manage their working day in the lab and expose them to less sensory stressors.

Library Facilities and Digital Services

Summary

Participants had only occasionally used the physical university libraries. The barriers which they encountered were physical in nature and included: the libraries' open plan layouts; narrow aisles; lighting; and limited lift facilities. The distance between libraries was noted as a problem for staff who had mobility difficulties – especially if they needed to access multiple textbooks that were only available at different libraries. Participants commented on how knowledgeable and supportive they found the librarians to be. Having good access to online journals was critical for our participants.

Participants shared their experiences of using assistive technology. Only a few participants were offered this support and, of these, those who had accepted the support were generally satisfied. It took a while for some of the participants to learn how to work with Google product; they thought that the university might be one of the only higher education institutions that used Google Suite over Microsoft Office and Outlook.

Recommendations

- Academic libraries must regularly review their EDI policies to ensure that these reflect their commitment to Disabled people's inclusion in library facilities and information provision.
- Resources (i.e. time and funds) must be allocated to train staff on the design of digital platforms, how to check the accessibility of library resources and webpages and how to use accessibility features and tools.
- Librarians must be trained and retrained on how to relate to Disabled people.

- Provide essential staff training in offering better services and practical assistance to Disabled staff, in terms of gaining knowledge and experience.
- Library staff must be aware of the barriers that may be present in libraries. They must be familiar with what support might be required by Disabled staff during a library visit.
- A Disability Support Services Unit must be created in academic libraries. The unit should assign a librarian to be the Disability Services Librarian, who would monitor and advocate for the needs of Disabled staff and support the delivery of inclusive library services with assistive technologies. This will enhance the support strategies and digital accessibility practices used by the library.
- Ensure that inclusive facilities are provided, including: ramps, lifts, secure and accessible aisles, appropriate lighting, accessible toilets, quiet/sensory reading rooms, signs for locations and library materials offered in different formats.
- Arrange training/orientation for Disabled staff on the effective use of library services.
- Inform and train Disabled staff about current assistive technology support.
- Create a partnership with publishers and other libraries to enrich library resources and services for Disabled staff. Advocate for more accessible electronic resources. Engage publishers in the discussion and hold them accountable for the accessibility of their publications.
- Before procuring any assistive technologies, the libraries should consult with Disabled staff to confirm their accessibility needs for implementing improvements in services and to discuss different means for their development, ensuring the purchase of the most suitable assistive technologies, and preventing wasting resources.
- Involve Disabled staff in the planning and implementation phases of library services to help with identifying gaps in services and suggesting practical improvements.
- Collaborative effort needs to happen between library professionals, educational leaders, policymakers and the Disabled Staff Network to develop and implement comprehensive strategies that assess and enhance digital accessibility and inclusivity in academic libraries.
- Improvement and adaptation of library services should be continuous to keep pace with technological advancements and evolving accessibility standards.

Line Management

Summary

Participants' relationships with their line managers varied. It appeared that, instead of being dependent upon good practice and policy, Disabled employees were reliant upon the goodwill of individual line managers for successful adjustments. This turned what should have been a legal obligation into a personal lottery (Foster, 2007). Sometimes, it appeared that the fact that line managers had the power to make the provision of reasonable adjustments possible was a barrier in itself.

Participants mentioned that there was an element of luck as to who they had as their line manager. Some participants had a trusting and supportive relationship with their line manager, wherein they felt shielded from HR by their line manager. Those who referred to their line managers as "supportive" did so because they felt that their expertise about the type of adjustments which they needed was acknowledged, helping them to feel empowered. Other participants did not feel comfortable sharing their support needs with their line managers. Line managers' time being highly demanded was cited as a reason for them being unavailable and unresponsive to access needs – or to be disapproving of adjustments outright.

Recommendations

- Have regular, one-to-one check-ins with employees to build rapport, address any emerging barriers, discuss access needs, monitor workload and approve leave.
- Modify workload, types of activity or workspace where adjustments have been identified and requested by Disabled employees.
- Training opportunities and mentoring schemes must be made available for all employees.
- Human Resources professionals and line managers need to undertake mandatory training about their legal duties under the Equality Act 2010 in relation to the provision of reasonable adjustments.
- Senior management should display a genuine commitment to and support for the realisation of strategic inclusion policies, plans and practices.

Other Topics

Summary

Participants shared their experiences related to a range of topics in their academic environment. In particular, the inaccessibility of PEEP was highlighted. Other issues, including a lack of diversity in teams and understanding of lived experiences of disability at work – particularly during social times – were cited as problematic.

Recommendations

- Provide opportunities for Disabled staff to have detailed discussions about their needs in case of a fire evacuation. Speak to them about whether they need a PEEP. Ensure they are familiar with the emergency evacuation plan.
- PEEP documents must be reviewed regularly and updated as Disabled staff's roles and needs change and evolve.
- Provide a range of accessible online and in-person social opportunities to meet as a team – not only during induction period, but also throughout the employee life cycle – to help with feeling included.

Physical Access

Summary

While some participants were satisfied with the level of accessibility present in their work environments – at least, in relation to their access needs – they recognised that staff with other impairments, particularly those using wheelchairs or with mobility impairments, would find these buildings problematic. Other participants reported that physical barriers in their work environment and a lack of accommodations hindered their employment prospects.

Physical barriers which participants noted included: poor interview settings; inaccessible buildings; narrow doors; a lack of visual signage; and a lack of accessible car parking spaces. Opening heavy doors, particularly when carrying equipment, was exhausting for some participants.

Noise levels and other distractions in open-plan offices were also challenging and added to participants' fatigue. Unsuitable furniture, poor lighting and limited control over the workspace negatively impacted participants. Several participants raised concerns about buildings with or no limited accessible toilets, or no lifts. Where there were lifts, participants felt that ableist assumptions were made about who should and should not use them. Some participants believed that little consideration was given to the layout of office spaces, causing them to need to plan ahead at every step in order to avoid barriers.

A lack of awareness of different impairments and neurodivergence, as well as a limited understanding of the impact of these on participants' ability to work, were felt clearly. It was evident that the complexity of ableism manifested across the entire employment cycle, impacting every stage.

Some participants preferred to work from home due to these challenges; other participants used noise-cancelling headphones or changed desks in order to manage distractions in their offices. Other self-accommodations – ways to make the environment work, in the absence of institutional adjustments – included: developing accessible working systems; choosing to arrive early to the training sessions to assess the accessibility of a space; and paying out of pocket for a private parking place.

Recommendations

- Ensure that accessible rooms are available for interviews.
- Ensure that Disabled staff have accessible ways and routes to access their office spaces and other facilities.
- Provide Disabled staff their own office space.
- Ensure accessibility of offices and workspaces by providing an adequate number of lifts; wide, electric doors; appropriate lighting (dimmable and low lighting are preferred, while fluorescent, bright, white lights should be avoided); furniture; and adequate signage.
- Instead of making assumptions about who should and should not use lifts, raise awareness of different needs across teams to help with the general understanding of a range of disabilities, impairments, health and neurodivergent conditions.
- Ensure that there are an appropriate number of accessible toilets in university buildings to accommodate Disabled staff as well as visitors.
- Ensure that quiet spaces are available for staff who need time away from busy, open-plan office spaces.
- Make accessible, small meeting rooms available.
- Consider how to accommodate and involve Disabled staff in meetings.
- Provide height-adjustable worktops in labs.
- Implement flexible systems and work environments to reflect the needs of a diverse range of employees.
- Check the accessibility of font and colour usage in university branding and materials for people with visual impairments and dyslexia – as well as other neurodivergent conditions.
- Ensure that sign language interpreters are available for university-organised events as standard.
- Ensure that there are an appropriate number of accessible car parking spaces around university buildings for Disabled staff and visitors.
- Regularly consult with Disabled staff about the accessibility of university buildings and practices and provide opportunities for meaningful conversations and feedback, ensuring that Disabled staff feel engaged with.

Recommendations

Summary

Overwhelmingly, participants recommended an open and safe university culture that allows people to voice their needs and where conversations about working together to remove barriers are encouraged along with quicker and more suitable systems for adjustments. Participants thought that, in a flexible, supportive, honest and trusting work environment, they would be able to disclose their impairments, raise their concerns and feel empowered to challenge barriers. In addition, participants discussed working in diverse teams where they would have more opportunities for collaboration and where different ideas were respected and valued. They highlighted the importance of having positive and trusting relationships with line managers who understood the barriers and challenges they were facing. In the on-boarding stage, they wanted to be believed and not judged about their access needs. Participants recognised that, on an institutional level, there was low awareness of Access to Work.

Participants felt removing barriers appeared to be easier for staff with physical impairments and with neurodivergent conditions compared to for staff with neurological conditions or hidden impairments. They suggested that the hiring of Disabled staff should be viewed as providing opportunities to gain different insights instead of perceiving them through deficit perspectives.

Recommendations

- Encourage creation of an open and diverse work culture, wherein staff feel safe to disclose, share their access needs and express their views without fear of being judged.
- A dedicated staff member with an Occupational Health background could be involved in supporting Disabled staff during their employment.
- The natural sciences (physics, engineering, chemistry and biology) disciplines need to have protocols and forums for a safety culture, which considers different needs and supports safety officers to have those discussions with Disabled staff.
- A diverse range of accessible social opportunities and more accessible parking spaces must be made available.
- Opportunities must be offered to receive constructive feedback on Disabled staff's application forms and interviews.
- Induction sessions must be relevant, effective and include information on disability support to help Disabled staff feel settled and ensure a positive experience.
- More transparency and detailed information are needed about the support available with opportunities to share Disabled staff's lived experiences across the university as case studies.
- The university needs to make more resources on Access to Work widely available and to empower Disabled staff by letting them know what support they could expect.

Work Patterns

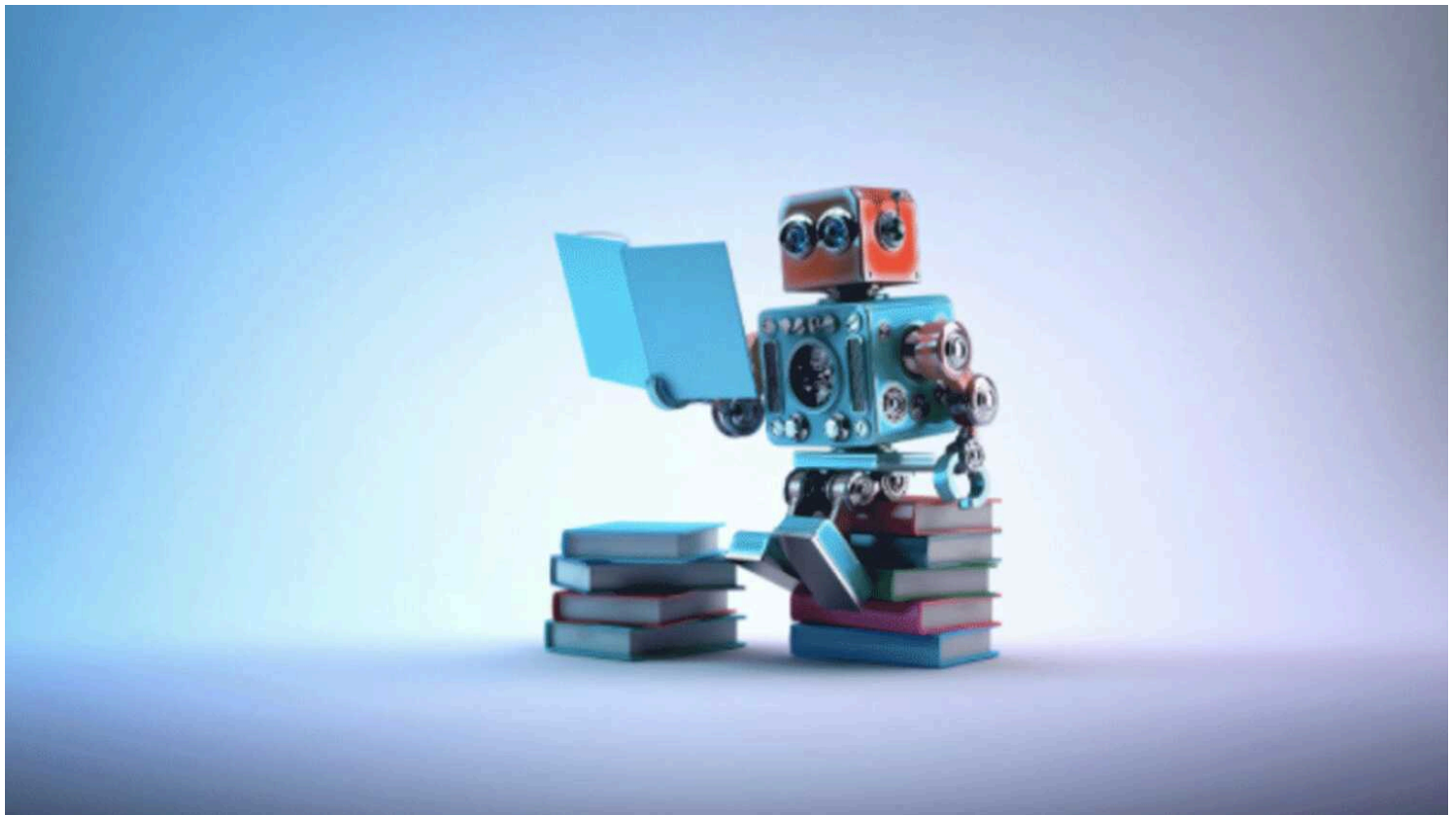
Summary

Participants appeared to have a general understanding that the provision of flexible working and disability leave may help to reduce the impairing effects of interacting with a disabling working environment (Sang et al., 2021). Working from home was considered an accommodation that removed concerns associated with traveling and commuting. Having opportunities to work in a hybrid fashion helped our participants with their access needs and with working independently. They recognised that having trusting and respectful relationships with their line managers enabled them to work flexibly without feeling judged.

Managers who were aware of and open to the challenges of disability allowed our participants to informally report sick leave without having to go through the formal process. Participants found this route more accessible and easier to navigate. They did, however, acknowledge that not all line managers were quite as understanding and, if they were to get a new line manager, they would need to have discussions about sick leave and update their Disability Passports to reflect their current, flexible arrangements.

Recommendations

- Discuss working patterns with new employees, including:
 - The length of the working day and any fixed start and finish times.
 - Any core hours, during which employees are expected to be in the office or online.
 - How to record working hours, if required; and
 - When – and for how long – employees are permitted to take breaks.
- Explain the process for taking leave.
- Ensure that any system for requesting leave is accessible. Alternatively, discuss alternate arrangements, which are accessible for Disabled employees.



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