**Perspectives on UK University Employment from Autistic Researchers and Lecturers**

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**Abstract**

Twelve autistic academics contributed to this small-scale study via questionnaire in response to a Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC) discussion. PARC is an unfunded autistic-led network of academics and allies. Responses revealed these scholars’ paths through academia to be littered with obstacles. Barriers included convoluted recruitment and administrative processes, insecure contracts, limited induction, ambiguous information, unboundaried communication and sensory overload. Tensions were apparent between the non-discriminatory rhetoric and practical enactment of the *Equality Act* *2010*. PARC was welcomed as an enabler along with supportive colleagues, inclusive, flexible work cultures and some forms of mentoring. Recommendations, potentially generally useful for diverse scholars, policy makers and others able to enact change, are informed by principles of Universal Design (UD) which emphasise valuing, assuming and planning for diversity. These include fair recruitment and contracting, practical inductions, straightforward administration, clear communication and easily accessible services within a positive workplace culture.

**Points of Interest**

* Autistic scholars with doctorates, peer reviewed publications and research skills reported difficulties in securing and maintaining UK university employment which is a good match with their proven abilities.
* Practical, structural and attitudinal obstacles to flourishing in the academy were evident in the accounts of autistic academics.
* The term ‘ableism’ can be applied to systems rooted in the idea that there is a way of ‘performing’ employment and any variance is somehow less acceptable. Autistic scholars have much to offer academia and ableism can get in their way.
* Autistic-led initiatives such as the (unfunded) Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC) provide some sort of grassroots supportive infrastructure for autistic academics.
* A supportive Universal Design (UD) informed approach to employment nurtures diversity. Universal Design is in keeping with expectations around non-discriminatory employment placed on universities by the *Equality Act 2010* and has the potentialto benefit a wide range of marginalised scholars.

**Introduction**

This small-scale unfunded work considers what universities might do better in relation to the employment of autistic researchers and/or lecturers. It is informed by questionnaire responses from twelve UK-based autistic academics. Autistic colleagues were involved in the development of this paper, but it is authored by a non-autistic neurodivergent academic ally. Allyship is demonstrated in working alongside, rather than taking over from, autistic scholars with a view to contributing to improving their working conditions. Information was gathered in 2019 before the global pandemic.

Thematic analysis of first-hand testimony underpinned by information from published sources revealed overarching themes. These point to obstacles to secure employment in higher education at every stage, from financing doctoral study, to recruitment practices, to navigating bureaucracy. Structures that are notionally designed to help appear somewhat impenetrable. Attitudinal barriers compound practical difficulties, whereas supportive cultures and practices reduce obstacles. Autistic scholars are networking through grassroots organisations such as PARC but have limited power to affect changes which would move the sector closer to compliance with the *Equality Act 2010*.

Outlined next is the approach taken to this study. PARC is explained in more detail as is it is referred to many times. Overarching themes are summarised and briefly discussed. This leads on to contextualising information about available services and underpinning legislation. A more detailed interrogation follows of barriers and enablers throughout the employment journey. Universal Design (UD) is considered as a useful framework, and the paper concludes with reflections on limitations, ideas for future research and recommendations for policy makers and others who may be able to affect positive change.

**Approach**

The idea for this work was mooted at a PARC meeting in response to a discussion about challenges that autistic lecturers and researchers, including doctoral students, experienced around university employment. Shortly afterwards a brief questionnaire was generated by the author. This was piloted by three autistic scholars and revised accordingly. Following ethical approval, it was forwarded individually to autistic contacts by Dr Nick Chown with an explanatory email. Chown is a well-published autistic scholar who is active within PARC. The email included an invitation to pass it on, so the number of people who saw the call is unknown. The study was not seeking a ‘representative sample’ of autistic academics. Twelve responses were received.

Open-ended questions covered barriers and enablers to flourishing in academia, and requested any demographic information that respondents deemed relevant. Thematic analysis of resulting first-hand commentary was scrutinised in tandem with relevant literature. The resulting draft was checked back with respondents and slightly amended in response to two feedback comments.

Literature reviewing involved investigating reputable websites for applicable legislation and work-focussed initiatives, and searching relevant databases and Google Scholar for pertinent research. Search terms initially included ‘autism, employment, higher education’. Because this approach yielded minimal results, the trawl was broadened to encompass ‘university employment of disabled people’ then ‘autism/disability and employment’. The small number of articles found were interrogated specifically for mentions of autism and academic careers.

Following a discussion with two autistic colleagues, direct quotes were not identified with individuals in order to preserve anonymity and because of a high degree of commonality of experience. The final iteration includes illustrative quotes from the questionnaires alongside insights from the few published sources found. Information is presented this way to create substantial useful sections about aspects of employment which could potentially inform practical change.

PARC is explained below to provide necessary context as it is mentioned frequently by respondents and in cited published sources.

**Context: PARC Background**

PARC is a growing informal group led by autistic scholars and including a smaller number of allies. The website (accessed 29-09-20) provides more details (<https://participatoryautismresearch.wordpress.com/>).

PARC began in 2015, unfunded, at London South Bank University (LSBU) with the aim of facilitating collaborative autistic-led research and researcher development. Dr Damian Milton, an established autistic academic with an extensive publication record, is PARC’s national convenor. Events are now organised nationally, mainly by regional convenors. International interest is growing and distance collaborations via the internet facilitate participation. Activities are always free and include autistic-led seminars and researcher development workshops around themes such as presenting at conferences and writing funding applications. Allies are often employed in academia and therefore able to access university spaces for events (Milton et al, 2019). It not possible to quantify how many people are involved now because PARC has no formal membership or administrative support.

Regular paid academic employment is unusual within the PARC community, but being asked to offer expertise to research without renumeration is all too common. ‘Nothing about us without us’ (Charlton, 1998, p.1) reflects PARC’s commitment to the centrality of autistic researchers to autism research. Examples of publications by PARC members include: Arnold et al (2018); Chown et al (2015, 2017 and 2018); Loomes (2017, 2018); Milton (2017a and b); Milton et al (2016, 2017, 2019); Murray (2018); Ridout (2017); Ridout and Edmondson (2017); Woods (2017); Woods et al (2018); Woods and Waltz (2019). Much of this output arose from unfunded research. Work by autistic academics illuminates the experience of autism and enables an understanding which is not built on stereotypes (Chown et al, 2017; Loomes, 2018).

Typically, autistic scholars describe finding fulfilment from concentrating on developing expertise which relates to particular in-depth interests and passions, and having the ability to really focus (Murray, 2018; Woods and Waltz, 2019). These positive attributes lend themselves to effective academic work. Obstacles which get in the way of thriving in academia include interviews and doctoral vivas, in which judgements seem to be based on social conventions of communication which do not play to autistic strengths, such as dealing with ambiguous questions and making sustained eye contact (Chown et al, 2015). Anxiety-provoking factors include: systems which are never clearly explained, open plan offices which can cause sensory overload, expectations which are unclear, poor reliability, lack of boundaries and imprecise communication (Chown and Beavan, 2012; Milton, 2017a and b; Ridout and Edmondson, 2017). Autistic scholars offering suggestions about ways in which working conditions could be more conducive to success tend to demonstrate a great deal of clarity around practical solutions built on reliability, clarity and valuing diversity and diverse ways of working (Milton et al, 2016).

**Overarching Findings**

Male, female and non-binary autistic scholars completed the questionnaire. Their ages ranged from early thirties to mid-fifties. None specified their ethnic background. Because individuals were only representing themselves and numbers are small, demographics are not broken down further. Of the twelve respondents, three were doctoral students, four held positions which combined research, lecturing and PhD supervision and five were part-time researchers. Nobody had full-time permanent academic employment at the time of writing. Common to all was the feeling that the fit between themselves and academia was not an easy one. All described frustrations, and six discussed enabling factors including colleagues giving practical help rather than making ableist assumptions that everyone can automatically navigate confusing systems without explanation. PARC was cited as an enabler by nine.

A mismatch between the rhetoric of equality and inclusion and the practice was specifically mentioned by four people. One commented about ‘flag waving’, as in being called upon as an ambassador for inclusion when their research interest lay elsewhere. Three referenced the practice of Universal Design (UD) as a sensible way of enabling the whole workforce to contribute effectively.

Doctoral researchers worried about money and making the transition from student to employee. None anticipated that this would be straightforward. Recruitment practices were not considered autistic-friendly by three of the four people who commented. One researcher was pleasantly surprised by a single good interview, which resulted in employment, after several which were unsuccessful. Another talked about hiding their autism at interview for fear of discrimination.

Induction was considered by four to lack practical information around procedures and where to find support if necessary. Even when systems were explained, the information was perceived as confusing and inconsistent and this caused a great deal of anxiety. One person discussed considering seeking assistance from ‘Access to Work (AtW)’ but finding the requirement for a diagnostic label somewhat off-putting. Nobody else mentioned AtW.

Three cited open-plan offices and hot-desking as sources of stress because of the potential for sensory overload and unregulated, unboundaried communication. Remote working was specifically mentioned by two people, who both found that they could be more productive when left to get on without the stress of travel and office culture.

Responses to social aspects of university life, including exchanges with students and colleagues, were mixed. Boundaries around interactions were identified as important in four responses. Perceived pressure to mask autistic characteristics in order to fit in was cited as a cause of anxiety by four, who also said that they felt better when other people were accepting of autism as a valued part of diversity.

Respondents were universally enthusiastic about their academic interests and committed to working hard and being productive. Two commented that it was important not to assume that autistic researchers necessarily researched autism or automatically wanted to be a spokesperson for diversity.

There was general agreement that what worked best was being allowed to get on with academic work, rather than spending time trying to navigate poorly explained bureaucracy without a clear road map or solid idea about where to turn to for advice. Those who liked remote working commented that they also enjoyed talking about their academic work with peers who had similar interests.

Suggestions for best practice involved universities having an autistic-informed anticipatory understanding of likely barriers in order to demolish them before they got in the way. Team culture accepting of different but complementary ways of working was mentioned by three, who also advocated a Universal Design (UD) approach in which diversity was celebrated and accommodated. Four referenced the *Equality Act 2010* as a potential lever for UD. Non-discriminatory recruitment practices, including predictability being built into interview processes, were recommended frequently. Following appointment, a practical and somewhat bespoke induction was advocated by many. This would include clearly explaining expectations and systems and identifying sources of assistance if necessary. For some the opportunity to just get on with the job, sometimes at a distance, was helpful, while others enjoyed being in amongst a team with shared interests. Colleagues’ attitudes and behaviours were referenced frequently, either as enablers or barriers. Supportive acceptance, clear negotiated expectations and unambiguous communication certainly helped. Mentoring was mentioned by three as potentially helpful, provided the mentor was in tune with the mentee and committed to helping them to work out their own goals and solutions. The peer support offered by networks such as PARC was universally valued, whether online or face to face.

Information about relevant legislation and initiatives designed to address barriers to employment follows, to contextualise a more detailed unpacking of the overarching findings and emerging themes previously considered.

**Context: Legislation and Employment Initiatives**

The *Autism Act* *2009* and subsequent *Fulfilling and rewarding lives: the strategy for adults with autism in England* report highlight the importance of employment (Department of Health (DoH), 2010; Parkin, 2016). Workplace equity is emphasised in the *Equality Act 2010* and internationally the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006). The *Children and Families Act* *2014* (*CFA*) extended access to education, including work preparation, to disabled learners with Education and Health Care Plans up to the age of 24 (Brett, 2016). Further education and apprenticeships were identified as routes into employment by the *CFA* which unhelpfully failed to mention the option of university or Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) (Wilson and Martin, 2017).

Section 5 of the *Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives* strategy (DoH, 2010) aimed to improve approaches to the employment of autistic people in England (Aylott, 2011; Walsh and Hall, 2012). Recommendations included simplifying managing portfolios of part-time work and benefits, and clarifying information for employers (National Autistic Society [NAS], 2016). McCarthy et al (2015) described progress of the strategy as patchy. Various other private, charity and public sector initiatives have been tried but evaluations are limited (Barnham, 2016; Blamires, 2015; Flower et al, 2019).

Disability Employment Advisors (DEAs) in Job Centres can provide information about Access to Work (AtW) funding, which can contribute to disability-related costs in seeking and keeping employment, including internships. Recommendations following assessment may include assistive technology, transport costs and job coaching (Sayce, 2015). 36,470 people used the service in 2015 (Department for Work and Pensions [DWP], 2016). McCarthy et al (2015) found little evidence of DEAs receiving autism-focussed training despite this being recommended in the 2014 iteration of the Adult Autism Strategy (DoH, 2015). Training arrangements for staff delivering AtW services are also unclear (DWP, 2019). In a 2017 study, disabled university leaders revealed limited coordination between AtW and university systems which made operationalising support problematic (Martin, 2017). Autistic academics will not necessarily go near Job Centres or come across information about schemes such as AtW from other quarters.

In 2014 the DWP launched the ‘Disability Confident’ campaign aiming to create a snowball effect, based on good news stories, to encourage employers to be more proactive about recruiting disabled people. Pring’s (2019) review disappointingly revealed that although 13,600 employers signed up, Disability Confident had only resulted in 8,763 paid jobs by 2018. The scheme is not high profile in the university sector. There is no evidence to date to suggest that the ‘apprenticeship levy’ (HM Revenue & Customs, 2016) has helped autistic academics, although it was set up to incentivise employers to provide paid apprenticeships alongside study.

Some private sector businesses and corporations offer paid internships. Participant evaluations available via Google are mixed, as illustrated by the following contrasting comments:

‘I have been working at XXX (More than 3 years). **Pros**: Good culture and global team. **Cons**: Not sure about cons. Good place to work.

‘I was put in a team which had only been formed the previous year, with a manager who was too busy to schedule regular meetings with me (in blatant disregard of the recommendations of the firm's occupational health adviser). The "work" I did consisted of tweaking a spreadsheet for a few hours each day. I tried to look for work elsewhere for after the placement, but I was held back by being unable to explain exactly what I was doing at XXX as I didn't know myself! Considering that the scheme has been in existence for 10 years now, I expected better. More fool me, you may say.’

(Glass Door, 2015)

Small charities such as Employment Autism operate with modest budgets, and sustainability cannot be assured (Barnham and Martin, 2017). Even the National Autistic Society (NAS), a large established charity, could not sustain its flagship employment programme, Prospects (Howlin et al, 2005). Various work-focussed initiatives are referenced on the NAS website. Workplace assessment is currently mothballed, although the NAS website advertises a half-day training for employers on recruitment at £1295 plus VAT for up to 25 delegates. An autistic job seeker offered the following advice via the NAS website:

‘People with autism have some very valuable skills which can be applied in the workplace. They might have very good attention to detail or be good at sticking to routines and timetables. Therefore, are likely to be very punctual and reliable. Everyone has different skills but there will always be something.’

(National Autistic Society, 2016)

Research Autism’s (2018) comprehensive UK review evidences the requirement for more joined-up thinking around providing a workable infrastructure to help autistic people with employment. Australian and American studies reached similar conclusions (Hedley et al, 2016; Wehman et al, 2016, 2017).

With the benefit of contextual information about relevant legislation and employment initiatives, the next section unpacks in more detail the themes which emerged from this study.

**Emerging Themes**

This section focusses chronologically on the employment journey in order to shine a light on points at which the university could do better by autistic academics. The following comment merits attention before drilling down into specific moments:

‘While universities might “traditionally” have … suited autistic academic employees very well, these days are long gone. Nowadays, the ever-changing face of HE means that demands are myriad and varied, lack tangibility and could pose frustrating challenges to an otherwise exceptionally competent autistic academic.'

No one completing the questionnaire was employed full time in academia. All described barriers throughout the employment journey which were also reflected in the literature. Insecure contracts leading to financial insecurity were a common experience, which chimes with evidence that globally, disabled people are less likely than non-disabled people to be employed and more likely to experience financial hardship (Baumberg et al, 2015). Insecure employment has implications for pension arrangements, which will have knock on financial effects into old age (Martin and Krupa, 2017).

Earlier educational obstacles made getting to interview challenging and difficulties continued post recruitment. Promotion conventions lacked transparency or felt too daunting (Chown et al, 2015). Roulstone and Williams (2014) found that disabled people in supportive teams tended to think twice about promotion, in case effective support was not replicated.

**Transition from Doctoral Student to Paid Academic Work**

Student experience research is more prolific than that which focusses on staff; examples include: Atkinson et al (2011); Beardon et al (2009); Cain and Richdale (2016); Gelbar et al (2014); Hastwell et al (2012, 2013, 2017); Madriaga et al (2008); Martin (2005, 2008); Van Hees et al (2015). While these studies generally emphasise the importance of smooth transitions, few focus on transitioning into and through doctoral study and from university into work.

Autistic students have described myriad barriers prior to starting their doctorate. Disabled learners often follow non-traditional paths through education, leading to CVs with gaps around traditional entry qualifications and work experience (Barnham, 2016; Brede et al, 2017; Douglas et al, 2016; Gilson et al, 2017, Sproston et al, 2017; Young-Southward et al*,* 2017). One respondent described school having knocked their confidence. ‘My experiences as a SEND student…made me reflect on how many times I’ve hidden experiences of disability and of related oppressions out of shame, guilt, fear.’

Enhancing one’s CV with unpaid internships is impossible without monetary backing, and financial hardship is often a reality for autistic students who are less likely than non-disabled peers to work part-time while studying (Hannam-Swain, 2018; Malcolm, 2015; Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer, 2016). The following response is from someone with minimal financial support: ‘Although I won a studentship award for my PhD it equates to minimum wage and that is not a lot to live on.’

Chown et al (2016) documented ways in which the social communication demands of doctoral vivas can disadvantage autistic candidates. In between acceptance to study for a doctorate and a successful viva, pitfalls tended to mirror those highlighted by employees, including poor induction, impenetrable systems and ambiguous communication. The following example highlights various systems which could work better:

‘Complex convoluted online systems, programmes, labyrinthine networks of people to call or email to get things done or fixed...  £100 loan computers for disabled students that haven't been updated or maintained properly so they don't work. Most ironic was trying to submit my ethical application for data collection, where I was outlining steps I'd taken to ensure forms and procedures were accessible to autistic participants, and struggling and failing to submit it through an impossibly challenging online system that was both visually impossible to navigate and not designed in a way that would be accessible to anyone, let alone an autistic student. It left me with the sense that – this system is not for “people like me”. Either the university did not expect “people like me” to progress this far, or they simply don't want me here.’

As the *Equality Act 2010* covers all university services, post-doctoral assistance in securing employment should be available from alumni careers services. Nobody mentioned receiving any input from this quarter and only one respondent named Access to Work (AtW) which is notionally available during transition. Evidence suggests that potentially useful arrangements tend to fall apart in the liminal space between studying and employment (Lucas and James, 2018; Siew et al, 2017; Sims et al, 2016).

None of the doctoral student respondents anticipated that finding and keeping university work would be easy. The following comments are typical:

‘It has been absolutely gruelling. I feel, at every turn, particularly as an autistic PhD candidate in a small department, that I am carving the way for people like me and it is taking a significant effort.’

‘\*IF\* I make it through my PhD (which will feel like an overly tremendous achievement) I do not know how I will find a place in academia. I hope I will be able to find a department where my needs will be taken into account, I will be supported to thrive and undertake work that, in turn, will hopefully benefit more autistic people in its manner of engagement and co-production, and applications of findings.’

**Recruitment**

Interviews are almost always part of recruitment and do not routinely play to autistic strengths (Sarrett, 2017). In such high-stakes situations, as in the doctoral viva (Chown et al, 2015), autistic applicants may dry up or find it hard to fulfil neurotypical expectations about, for example, eye contact. Unconscious bias can disadvantage candidates not conforming to the underlying expectations of interviewers (Mariani, 2019; Sheridan et al, 2015). Although duties under the *Equality Act 2010* are anticipatory, only one example of good practice was given in which the interview process was explained clearly, written questions were supplied in advance and a calm predictable environment was created.

The following comment illustrates complex challenges around recruitment processes, including navigating international bureaucracy:

‘I am a productive impactful specialist autism/neurodiversity research fellow. Amid a competitive academic environment and with the difficulties I have faced in interviews, I had needed to look for employment globally. Yet I have run into visa issues… a cancelled offer and an interview not taking place despite enthusiastic interest from the recruiters.’

Once academic employment has been secured, workplace systems can be stressful and hard to navigate (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007; Chown and Beavan, 2012; Chown et al, 2018; Hadley et al 2016; Hastwell et al, 2012, 2013, 2017; Milton, 2017a, 2017b). Wellbeing impacts are illustrated in the following contribution:

'I've had a lengthy career outside academia…. However, my one month in an academic post came to a grinding halt when I was found wandering in a daze outside the offices…. I stopped working for the university for the sake of my mental health. …This is the only time I have been unable to cope with employment.’

A potential role for PARC was suggested by one respondent.

‘While PARC is not specifically about employment, participants are highly motivated both to develop their employability skills and to contribute to research which will improve job prospects of others.’

**Environment**

Shakespeare (2013) contends that impairment impacts (such as sensory sensitivities) can be exacerbated by environmental factors (such as harshly lit, noisy open-plan offices). This echoed the experience of three respondents who specifically discussed environment, two of whom highlighted the benefits of home working. One lecturer described hot desking as anxiety-provoking and explained that they needed their own desk in a quiet space. Another talked about travelling to work and the campus environment being stressful and distracting. The following particularly graphic example is from a doctoral student:

‘Physical barriers include sensory environments being like hell. Classrooms full of strip lighting that bleaches my eyes and makes a hideous whirring sound. Room booking for private meetings seem impossible, so supervisions take place in crowded areas or what is basically a broom cupboard. No dedicated space for PhD students which creates a situation where I work from home. For someone already at higher risk of social isolation who could benefit from support to access university this feels like an extra daily hurdle. I have to use busy cafés; spend money I haven't got.’

**Induction, Administrative Systems and Bureaucracy**

Four respondents discussed inadequate, generic or non-existent induction, when what was required was a practical focus on familiarisation technology and processes (including systems for getting paid). They talked about feeling pressured to fake understanding and feeling alienated by comments like, ‘It’s intuitive, you will work it out as you go along’. Negative implications of masking, passing, camouflaging and being stereotyped are well documented (Cliff, 2008; Hull et al, 2017; Richards, 2008).The following comment evidences frustration and stress: ‘Misunderstanding of my needs, negotiating bureaucracy and unwritten cultural expectations, jumping through hoops.’

**Cultural and Social Aspects of Work**

An institutional culture apparently insensitive to diversity is indicative of ableism whereby everyone is expected to perform work in the same way (Angell-Wells 2019; Campbell, 2009; Jammaers et al, 2013; Kattari et al, 2018). A Universal Design (UD) approach requires educational establishments to operate with an understanding that people vary, and will not all intuit everything they need to know by a process of osmosis (Milton et al, 2017; Newbutt et al, 2016).

UD culture is built on the premise that nurturing all the talents allows the institution to benefit from the cross-fertilisation of ideas available within a diverse workforce. Autistic academics have much to bring to the party, particularly in situations which play to their strengths. Concentrated attention to detail, especially when directed towards an in-depth interest, is associated with autism and essential to effective research (Chown et al, 2018; Milton, 2017b; Sturgess, 2018). Logically, a focussed and thorough autistic person with an absolute passion for their academic area should be an asset in academia, but sadly opportunities to shine are limited by cultures and conditions which are often not conducive to success.

The following quotation highlights the problem of pigeonholing autistic academics: ‘Autism is not my academic area. I am an autistic researcher, not an autism researcher.’ Another autistic researcher commented that their capabilities extended beyond sharing personal perspectives: ‘Make space for autistic researchers to do all kinds of autism-relevant research, informed by, but not limited to our perspectives as autistic people.’

Ground-breaking academics such as Einstein, Wittgenstein and Newton may (or may not) have been autistic (Fitzgerald, 2004; Sacks, 2004). It is interesting to contemplate how they might have navigated the neoliberal marketized culture of contemporary academia. There may well be autistic academics today who are not necessarily out and proud. Some may be thriving within a supportive workplace culture which values and facilitates their contribution, and others may be struggling. It is likely that they will appear in greater numbers in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) as these subjects typically play to autistic strengths (Sturgess, 2018). Silicon Valley is associated with above-average levels of autism and above-average levels of brilliance. Reasonable adjustments to enable autistic talent to thrive are likely to be built into the fabric of companies like Microsoft and Google (Morris et al, 2015; Romoser, 2000).

In addition to grappling with institutional failure to pay enough attention to clarity and usefulness of induction and systems, respondents commonly described social and logistical pressures. Grandin (1999), a successful autistic professor with exemplary visual processing abilities, acknowledges difficulties with social communication which are accommodated within her team. The following comments are typical:

‘Academia involves profile-raising activities like attending conferences, which are not routinely autism friendly. Networking and working the room requires a range of social competences and motivations not necessarily traditionally associated with autistic dispositions. Before even getting to the conference, lots of paperwork piles on the stress, and then there is the journey.’

‘I spoke at three international conferences last year; all were incredibly terrifying, and none were paid... but I understand that this is how it works in the conference circuit. I was able to claim back expenses from my studentship pot. Without this I would not have been able to go. Now I have some experience of travelling to and speaking at conferences I don't feel I can do that without some practical support. I'm not sure how to get accommodations so I've put conferences off for now.’

**Communication**

The following quotations echo research which suggests that unclear communication creates unnecessary stress (Chown et al, 2015; Milton et al, 2017):

‘The most prohibitive barriers have been those relating to communication. There is only so many times I can clearly, kindly, explicitly explain my needs in relation to being autistic (sensory environment, clear instructions and timeframes, etc...) and they are ignored. I’m assuming that my difficulties are overlooked because I appear competent in other areas, I've explained in plain terms that I am a “vulnerable person” to be told that my non-disabled supervisor also thinks of himself as vulnerable. Incomplete and conflicting information make supervision exhausting and confusing. I felt like quitting many times, despite loving my research and find academic work itself not at all challenging.’

‘The main challenge I experience working as a lecturer for the past year is that communication between colleagues is very rushed and focused on informal “chats” rather than clear conversations with possibilities for clarification. Inability to switch between tasks to participate in these conversations is tricky. Among more “old school” colleagues, there also seems to be reluctance to provide explicit instructions. Apparently, it is up to individuals to make up their own way of doing things. Generally, later it is revealed that the only way to do things was their way (which they did not communicate). This seems to be a way to maintain existing power structures and hierarchies. Students are often treated the same way (which I have found quite shocking and distressing).’

The myth that all autistic people seek to avoid social interaction is busted in the following example:

‘The pressures everyone is under (teaching far more hours than before due to staff cuts), often leads to misunderstandings, and not just for me as an autistic person…The ethos of the university HR management seems to focus on removal of possibilities for meaningful human relations between people (since it is a “time of austerity”), unless they are made outside the workplace. Because I have been commuting to work it has not been possible for me.’

It would be unfair to assume that autistic lecturers may not communicate effectively with their students. Contrary evidence from MA Education/Autism students at LSBU, for example, evidences a preference for autistic lecturers because of their insider perspectives and clarity. Similar feedback came from recipients of mentor training delivered by autistic researchers (Sims et al, 2016). Covid-19 lockdown has accelerated working via technological platforms which may well play to autistic strengths. One contributor expressed a preference for the telephone to avoid visual distraction and was glad to find colleagues supportive of this way of working.

Fuzzy boundaries were characterised as problematic by four respondents, as evidenced in the following quotation:

‘Clashes between students' expectations (of having a “buddy” rather than a teacher) and realities of teaching (when they will be one of many students the lecturer is responsible for), are very distressing.’

Preference were expressed for clear rules of engagement, including students reading feedback in advance and respecting office hours, and meetings with a clearly defined purpose.

**Peer Support**

PARC was mentioned by nine respondents as a source of peer support. One commented that the internet hosts many useful networks of autistic scholars. While the following comment is typical, one person expressed disappointment that PARC could not offer them more practical help than is possible from an unfunded informal group of volunteers.

‘I am very positive about PARC. Events are accessible (financially and expectation-wise) and a great way to share differing viewpoints. The only thing is getting the confidence to go and finding such networks exist in the first place.’

Positive interactions with colleagues were mentioned as enablers by seven respondents. Statutory systems such as AtW or formal university structures, including online staff development modules, were not described by anyone as enabling. One helpful intervention described by an autistic lecturer was the provision of a few hours’ administrative assistance from a PhD student. Roulstone and Williams (2014) found disabled HE employees choosing not to go for promotion in order to stick with a supportive team. The following contributions reveals both that supportive colleagues are enabling and that things could fall apart:

‘I have found my colleagues mainly supportive when I disclose my autism.’

‘Some people are very understanding, others not. I love learning, thinking, writing and playing with ideas and theories. It depends on the people and the team – in terms of vibe but also accessibility too.’

‘I have learned about oppression that, even when people or organisations are nice, you can’t assume that it will continue. The rug can be pulled out at any time. This makes it hard to feel safe’.

**General Conclusions**

This small-scale study revealed barriers at every stage of the employment journey for autistic academics and highlighted relatively straightforward ways of circumventing them based on principles of Universal Design. Initiatives designed to assist disabled workers in general, and autistic employees in particular, were not well known or well used, and rhetoric underpinning the *Equality Act* *2010* did not necessarily translate into practice. Autistic scholars were most likely to thrive when working with supportive colleagues within a culture that values diversity. Autistic peer support via networks such as PARC were identified as enabling. The following section translates the findings of this study into practical recommendations.

**Recommendations informed by Principles of Universal Design**

Policy makers and others able to effect change to further equality could usefully adopt principles and practices of Universal Design (UD). Compliance with equalities legislation is not enough if rhetoric is not translated into policy, practices and procedures which enable diverse ways of engaging with the academy. Institutional culture built on ableism is inherently discriminatory. UD requires advanced planning based on the assumption that people vary so will have a range of access requirements relating to environments, systems, interactions and everything else (Jorgenson et al, 2013; Milton et al, 2016).

The benefits of UD do not just apply to disabled people. Ramps and automatic doors, for example, help wheelchair users, parents pushing buggies and anyone moving anything on wheels. Heteronormativity and gender normativity are not the default positions in UD, so gender neutral toilets reinforce belonging and ‘they’ is a helpful default pronoun. Intersectionality is understood as ordinary within a UD paradigm and is an important consideration. Despite their potential broader usefulness, initiatives targeted too specifically at populations may be behind a wall to others who could well find them helpful.

Understanding and appreciating the value to society of diversity and utilizing UD to enable full participation is the gold standard. Disability is however frequently problematized when other diversity strands under the *Equality Act 2010* are celebrated (Martin and Fraser, 2012). UD deproblematises difference by proactively planning for inclusion and is congruent with the anticipatory duty articulated in the *Equality Act 2010*.

Principles of UD are relevant to the entire employment journey, including recruitment, induction, day-to-day working environments, professional development and promotion. Educational disadvantage and unconscious bias can contribute to slamming the university door before potentially excellent autistic academics even get started.

A culture of UD is built on the idea of nurturing all the talents. By taking ideas built on the foundations of UD forward and being critically aware of things like unconscious bias in employment, universities could do better by their autistic employees as well as benefitting from their contributions.

Mechanisms in place to assist disabled employees and job seekers (such as Access to Work) do not appear to be well used in the university sector and could provide valuable resources. Arrangements tend to fall apart in transition and fray at the interface between external agencies and the academy, resulting in practical obstacles which could be circumvented with the help of joined-up thinking.

Supportive workplace cultures and colleagues and peer support can be enabling. Organisations offering peer support, such as PARC, could do more with financial assistance.

**Areas for Future research**

This tiny study reflects the perspectives of twelve respondents and a limited amount of published research. Questionnaires only allow for a snapshot of thinking at a moment in time. Quantifying numbers of autistic academics is not part of this study. It is possible that the ideas presented here are not representative and there could be many autistic scholars functioning productively and happily in UK academia. Future research could usefully focus on the practical translation of principles of UD to practices which enable people from diverse backgrounds, with diverse talents, to contribute effectively and happily within the university sector.

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