



Trinity
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ABLEISM IN ACADEMIA IN IRELAND:

EXPERIENCES OF
DISABLED ACADEMICS &
RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE FUTURE

2021

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN FORUM
FOR DISABLED STAFF AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

"FACE PAINT"

This image has been chosen to represent disguise, masking and the hiddenness of disabilities on the one hand, and diversity on the other.



Ableism in Academia in Ireland: Experiences of Disabled Academics & Recommendations for the Future

17 August 2021

A Report on the Seminar

Trinity College Dublin Forum for Disabled Staff & Postgraduate Students

Supported by the Office of the Associate Vice Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

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Contact us:

If you have any questions about this report, the Forum, or our activities please email Equality@tcd.ie and you will be put in touch.

Thank You

We would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to all the people who shared, and continue to share, their time, experiences, and stories to promote awareness of the barriers disabled people face in academia in Ireland. We would also like to thank the members of the Advisory Group, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit including, Trinity College Dublin, and especially Professor Michael Shevlin who has contributed so much to ensure the voice of disabled people is heard. Thank you to Dr Nina Shiel for her work on the report, Jessica Doyle for her assistance with the video editing, Jessica Mannion, and Haaris Sheikh for his wonderful cover.

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At a Glance

Forum for Disabled Staff and Postgraduate Students

Established in March 2020 by Dr Vivian Rath and supported by TCD's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit. Following the summer seminar in July 2020, at which 60 people attended. It was recognised that there was an appetite for a space within Higher Education to discuss topical issues relating to disabled staff and postgraduate students. It was agreed that the Forum would run an annual seminar.

This report is an outcome of the Forum's second summer seminar held in July 2021, titled ***Ableism in Academia***. This was the most successful online event yet with over 87 people attending.

What is ableism?

Ableism refers to a particular network of beliefs concerning a particular kind of body and a particular kind of mind, which are assumed to work "perfectly" according to the commonly accepted standard. This "perfect" working of the body and mind is considered to be the *norm*. Anything that diverges from this standard of body and mind is considered not quite perfect, and therefore seen as a disability; specifically, a diminished state of human being as the *exception*.

Key points from the Keynote

- Fewer people in academia have disclosed a disability than might be expected when compared with national statistics in the first place;
- Many disabled people drop out at different stages;
- Those who do continue in academia are less likely to disclose their disability.

Current Challenges – Panel Discussion and Lived Experience

- Feeling of being undervalued
- Support needs of staff and students differ
- Advocacy exhaustion
- Disclosing a disability
- Role of management
- Not all disabilities require the same kind of accommodations
- Career progression

Main recommendations

- Create an environment for disclosure
- Take a Whole of Staff Life-Cycle Approach to employment of disabled people
- Position Disability as an Equality and Diversity Consideration
- Cultural Change, Awareness & Education
- Universal Design Approach - Language and Communication
- National Policy Development

1. Forum for Disabled Staff and Postgraduate Students

Who we are

The Forum for Disabled Staff and Postgraduate Students was established in March 2020 to provide a platform for the voice of disability equality and as a social group within the University. It offers disabled people an opportunity to meet new people, share experiences and acts to inform and enhance institutional policy. The Forum was established and is led by Dr Vivian Rath, a disabled person, and has a large membership from across the University. It is supported by the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Unit.

Despite its very recent establishment, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Forum has already demonstrated a significant impact leading to the establishment and embedding of a structure within Trinity College Dublin to hear the voice of disabled staff and postgraduates. The Forum has increased awareness of the barriers that disabled staff and postgraduates face across higher education resulting in a national conversation and the review of equality policies.

The Forum has hosted a range of events on themes decided by the membership. These include:

1. 'Barriers and Enablers to Engagement in the TCD community', May 2020
2. 'Supports available for Disabled PhD Students', July 2020
3. International Day for Persons with Disabilities 'Building Back Better after Covid', December 2020

The organisation of these events has been supported by Forum members, a range of different departments and individuals from across college with an interest, lived experience or expertise in disability equality.

The activity and success of the Forum demonstrates the importance of providing a platform and structure to hear the voice of disabled people at the decision-making table.

Following the summer seminar in July 2020, at which 60 people attended, it was recognised that there was an appetite for a space within Higher Education to discuss topical issues relating to disabled staff and postgraduate students. It was agreed that the Forum would run an annual seminar.

This report is an outcome of the Forum's second summer seminar held in July 2021, titled ***Ableism in Academia***. This was the most successful online Forum event yet with over 87 people attending.

Achievements to date

Following the thematic events and a period of negotiation, lobbying and discussion, the Forum has been able to achieve the following:

- Appointment of a 4th Level Disability Officer within Trinity College Dublin Disability Service
- Appointment of a Graduate Students' Union Disability Rights Officer
- Establishment of a Trinity College Dublin Staff Disability Working Group
- Monthly Virtual Tea social event, combatting loneliness and isolation particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Meeting with the Minister for Further and Higher Education

- Proposal to establish a National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee reporting to the Minister for Further and Higher Education
- AHEAD Conference Presentation – ‘Hearing the Voice of Disabled Staff, Postgrad, Post-Docs & PhD Students in Trinity College Dublin
- USI Postgraduate Voice Conference Presentation, ‘Hearing the Voice of Disabled Post-graduates’
- Trinity College Dublin Graduate Studies presentation on the ‘Disabled Student & Postgraduate Student Relationship’

Report Aims

The seminar titled “Ableism in Academia in Ireland” was the first seminar on this topic to be held in Ireland. We recognise that not everything relating to ableism in academia has been covered. We see this seminar and its follow on report as a catalyst for:

- Further discussion and action within academia;
- Facilitating the development of policy and practice at both institutional and national level;
- Informing developments at national level involving the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

2. Disability as an Equality Issue

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) is one of the nine United Nations international human rights instruments.¹ It defines disabled persons as **“those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”** (Article 1, UNCRPD)

An ESRI study published in September 2021, commissioned by the National Disability Authority, found that among the EU countries Ireland had the fourth lowest employment rate among disabled persons of working age in 2018, at 36%.² The same report notes that a much smaller percentage of disabled persons have a third-level qualification compared to those without disabilities: 29.6 per cent in 2016 compared to 47.0 per cent among those without disabilities (ESRI report Table 5.7). The study found that only one third of working age disabled persons were in employment, compared to two-thirds of those without disabilities. Disabled persons are more than twice as likely to experience poverty and social exclusion as those without disabilities. Ireland is among the EU countries with the largest differences in the at-risk of poverty rate between working people with and without disabilities, at 6 percentage points in 2018.

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (UNCRPD)
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>

² *Identification of Skills Gaps Among Persons With Disabilities and Their Employment Prospects. ESRI SURVEY AND STATISTICAL REPORT SERIES NUMBER 107.* Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/identification-of-skills-gaps-among-persons-with-disabilities-and-their-employment>.

The social model of disability states that the barriers experienced by disabled persons are caused by society's lack of adaptation to differences: attitudes and societal structures that assume a "one size fits all" approach based on preconceptions on mental and physical ability. This is in contrast to the medical model of disability, which considers a disabled person's differences as the root cause of any barriers to that person's opportunities to live an equal and independent life. The medical model assumes that a disability is a negative characteristic in a person, which in ideal circumstances would be "cured". According to the social model, a disability is a neutral aspect of being a person, and consequently it is more important to change the environment of the disabled person to match that person's needs than to change the person themselves.

The human rights model of disability is based on basic human rights principles. The human rights model acknowledges that disability is a natural part of human diversity that must be respected and supported, and disabled people have the same rights as everyone else in society. Consequently, impairment must not be used as an excuse to deny or restrict people's rights.

The National Disability Authority of Ireland published a landmark document in 1996 entitled *A Strategy for Equality* following a major consultative process involving disabled persons.³ This report adopted three guiding principles: (1) Equality; (2) Maximising participation; (3) Enabling independence and choice. Subsequently, in 2000, the Government adopted the principle that mainstream Government Departments and public services should encompass people with disabilities. This became legal effect in the Disability Act 2005. Further legislation has been put in place to outlaw discrimination on grounds of disability in employment (Employment Equality Acts) and in the provision of goods and services (Equal Status Acts). This legislation is supported by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, an independent public body that accounts to the Oireachtas, with a mandate established under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 (IHREC Act 2014)⁴.

The Irish Government has adopted the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities to champion and promote disabled people entering work force, job retention, equal pay and skill, capacity and independence building.⁵ Significantly in relation to Irish universities, the public service employment target of disabled people is to be increased on a phased basis from 3% to 6%.

Work on reasonable accommodations to disabled people in accessing, progressing in and retaining employment was undertaken by the NDA in context of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy.⁶ The integration of reasonable accommodations into routine recruitment and employment processes is an important element in addressing the individual and structural barriers and challenges that adversely affect the employment of disabled people. Reasonable accommodations are effective and practical changes that an employer is required to put in place to enable a disabled person to carry out their work on an equal footing with others. Reasonable accommodations take a variety of forms and can include flexible working arrangements, assistive technology or an adaptation of the physical

³ <https://nda.ie/Disability-overview/Key-Policy-Documents/Report-of-the-Commission-on-the-Status-of-People-with-Disabilities/A-Strategy-for-Equality.html>

⁴ www.ihrec.ie

⁵

<https://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf/Files/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

⁶ Reasonable Accommodations: Obstacles and Opportunities to the Employment of Persons with a Disability. NDA. 2019. Available at: <https://nda.ie/publications/employment/employment-publications/reasonable-accommodations-obstacles-and-opportunities-to-the-employment-of-persons-with-a-disability1.pdf>

workplace. The report found that common obstacles to reasonable accommodations include reluctance to disclose a disability, lack of policies and procedures, lack of awareness, negative attitudes, and limitations of financial supports.

Despite greater efforts in the recent years to lower barriers to equal participation akin to the efforts put in place to address the experiences of other diversity groups, the Forum has found that disabled people still feel regularly excluded from the diversity agenda. Often, diversity issues focus on other groups, such as race, gender, socio-economic background, etc., with disability considered as a domain unto itself. However, the human rights model draws a clear connection between disabled persons and other diversity groups and the need to take an intersectional approach. The Forum argues that unless we start to see disability as an important part of the diversity agenda, we are going to continue to experience ableism in all parts of life.

“Invisible” disabilities

The concept of invisible disability refers to a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not immediately obvious to an onlooker. Examples include neurodivergence (autism, ADHD, etc), fibromyalgia, chronic physical and mental illnesses. Such conditions can have a profound impact on a person’s day-to-day life at home, in social life as well as in the workplace.

What is ableism?

Ableism refers to a particular network of beliefs concerning a particular kind of body and a particular kind of mind, which are assumed to work “perfectly” according to the commonly accepted standard. This “perfect” working of the body and mind is considered to be the *norm*. Anything that diverges from this standard of body and mind is considered not quite perfect, and therefore seen as a disability. Further, a disability is assumed to indicate a diminished state of human being as the *exception*.

Ableism can be external and/or internal.

External ableism indicates an environment or attitude affecting a disabled individual or group from the outside. This can take many forms, including but not limited to: lack of physical accessibility, networking situations planned in terms of able-bodied people, diminished career prospects because of ableist assumptions regarding conferences and grant applications, making decisions regarding disabled people without the active involvement of disabled people themselves.

Internal ableism refers to internalised ideas of our own bodies and minds. We may expect that our bodies and minds will not stop working properly until old age, in which case a disability may cause issues with our confidence and self-perception. Internal ableism may also cause the disabled person to believe that they themselves are the problem, and this can leave them less willing to seek out support and accommodations.

3. Ableism in Academia in Ireland

Background

Although there have been greater numbers of disabled students progressing to higher education in the last decade⁷ there have been far lower transition rates into postgraduate study. Disabled undergraduates represent 7.1% of the student population, this compares to only 2.4% at postgraduate level (ibid), and the number progressing to on to academia is expected to be lower. Disabled people in academia report facing a range of barriers to a successful transition and experiences of ableism in academia is endemic⁸ resulting in a fear of disclosure of disability and/or reluctance in seeking reasonable accommodations. This is due to ableist attitudes and outdated perceptions as demonstrated by the Forum for Disabled Staff & Postgraduates Students 2021 survey. Little is known about the wider experiences of disabled people in academia in Ireland. The July 2021 seminar, *Ableism in Academia*, aimed to explore ableism in academia in Ireland, provide a platform to share experiences of disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent staff.

This seminar was open to members of the disabled community working in the academic environment in higher education including academic, administrative, and casual staff, postgraduates and postdoctoral.

Accessibility

While virtual events remove many physical and financial barriers to participation, it does not follow that hosting an event online automatically makes it accessible. The voice of disabled people is often excluded when online events are being planned. Even the pandemic-imposed large-scale shift to virtual engagement prioritised the needs of industry and education in ways that meant that accessibility needs lagged behind. For instance, it took Zoom until February 2021 to announce that automatic closed captioning would be available to all users by the autumn of that year, having previously been available only to those who had paid for accounts.

The Forum decided that the Ableism in Academia seminar would be different. As the majority of the organising committee had lived experience of disability, different elements of accessibility were at the forefront of the event planning from the start. This event set out to challenge the *status quo*, and whilst doing so, it would implement the principles of universal design for learning (UDL): that is, ensuring the possibility for multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action/expression.

⁷ Association for Higher Education Access & Disability. (2019). *Numbers of students with disabilities studying in higher education in Ireland 2017/18*. Dublin: AHEAD.

⁸ Brown, N. (Ed.). (2021). *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education*. Policy Press.

Steps taken to improve accessibility included the following:

- Online registration form, with the option to register by email and support offered with registration
- Option on the registration form to request supports at the event
- We chose to use Zoom, a platform considered the most accessible
- Presentations were sent out in advance in alternative formats
- Irish Sign Language (ISL)/English interpreting was available
- Live captioning was available
- A meeting was held with ISL interpreting team & presenters in advance of event to ensure that speakers spoke at a pace that was the most accessible
- Chat box was made available to allow those who felt uncomfortable speaking in public to contribute
- A recording of the seminar was made available

Feedback from the event:

“This was one of the most accessible events I have ever been at and is an example of how it should be done. Well done”

Keynote Presentation: Dr Nicole Brown

Dr Nicole Brown is a [Lecturer in Education at UCL Institute of Education and Director of Social Research & Practice and Education Ltd.](#)

Nicole gained her PhD in Sociology at the University of Kent for her research into the construction of academic identity under the influence of fibromyalgia.



She has edited [Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education](#) and [Ableism in Academia: Theorising Experiences of Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education](#), co-authored [Embodied Inquiry: Research Methods](#), and [Making the Most of Your Research Journal](#).

Nicole's research interests relate to physical and material representations and metaphors, the generation of knowledge and, more generally, research methods and approaches to explore identity and body work. She tweets as **@ncjbrown**, **@FibroIdentity** and **@AbleismAcademia**.

Key points from the keynote

Dr Brown identified three primary trends regarding the barriers disabled people face when engaging with academia:

- (1) Fewer people in academia have disclosed a disability than might be expected when compared with national statistics in the first place;
- (2) Many disabled people drop out at different stages;
- (3) Those who do continue in academia are less likely to disclose their disability.

Different disabilities have very different needs regarding accommodations and supports, but this plurality of needs is not always reflected in the institutional considerations of accessibility. Moreover, a university tends to be seen, internally and externally, as an elite institution, the members of which are seen as privileged and exceptionally capable and productive. There is an expectation that in such an environment, everyone is constantly fully functional and able bodied. The mental health of academic and research staff under constantly increasing pressures has been a topic of conversation in the recent years. For disabled staff, the mental and physical toll can be even worse. Lack of awareness of what it feels like to be disabled can cause unintentional hurt from even well-meaning colleagues.

As noted above, some disabilities and chronic illnesses are less evident than others and securing of supports and accommodations requires disclosing of disability. Such invisible disabilities are particularly exhausting due to overlooked needs and misconceptions, as well as the potential psychological uncertainty of the disabled academic regarding any consequences of disclosure. Forum members pointed out that even those colleagues and managers with the best of intentions may forget the impact of an invisible disability on a person. This effect is particularly pronounced if the impact of the invisible disability varies, with the disabled person, for instance, having much more energy at certain times and much less at other times.

Some disabilities can be easier to disclose than others depending on perceptions surrounding particular disabilities. For example, a person disclosing that they have cancer may expect a more sympathetic response than a person disclosing schizophrenia. A further complication is caused by the fact that neurodivergent people or people with chronic illnesses may not necessarily define themselves as disabled, and therefore may feel excluded from some of the discourses on disability.

Disclosure potentially presents challenges in terms of personal commitment and public statement. A disabled academic may struggle with their identity if they feel that their needs conflict with the (external or internal) perception that an academic must be a 'super performer'. In such a situation, the disabled academic may feel that they are not good enough in their job and they may end up leaving academia.

Dr Brown noted that students and staff members are in unequal positions regarding disclosure of disability. Typically, a student benefits from disclosure, as universities are able to provide a range of supports to the student population. In contrast, universities tend to provide little in the way of staff support, which means that a staff member benefits far less from disclosing a disability – and may feel that a disclosure would be to their disadvantage.

Those who successfully disclose their disability and secure supports that match their needs may still end up with additional workload. As with any diversity group, advocacy for disability issues tends to land on disabled people themselves. This may mean taking on additional commitments to raise greater awareness, such as participating in panels or working groups, serving on committees, participating in grant applications not directly related to the academic's own work, among others. The disabled academic may also find themselves becoming the "face" or "voice" of disability matters in their workplace, which may draw focus and attention away from their own work, which may be in a completely unrelated area.

Panel discussion

Panel members

Dr Patricia McCarthy

Vice-Convenor, TCD Forum for Disabled Staff & Postgraduate Students,
Trinity College Dublin



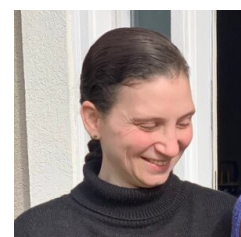
Dr Deirdre O'Connor

Chair of the Staff Disability Committee,
University College Dublin



Dr Sara Hope Kift

Graduate Students' Union Postgraduate Disability Officer
Trinity College Dublin



Three panellists were invited to discuss their experiences as disabled people in academia. This was chaired by Dr Vivian Rath.

The main points arising from the conversation were as follows:

1. **Feeling of being undervalued.** Many disabled academics are in precarious part time positions for many years, often on a temporary contract. Without access to training and development opportunities, conference bursaries, leadership development and pathways to promotion. This creates a lack of security, which is increased further by the fact that the holders of such roles are rarely included in decision making bodies and processes.
2. **Support Needs of Staff and Students Differ:** It was made clear that the needs of disabled staff and postgraduates differ from the undergraduate student population, a fact that is often not recognised. The panel members agreed with Dr Brown that a variety of accommodations and supports are available to the undergraduate student population. Whereas there is not an identified and established system in place for disabled staff to seek reasonable accommodations across higher education. Those services that are available are poorly promoted and often positioned in the undergraduate student services departments.

3. **Advocacy Exhaustion.** Panel members raised the issue of advocacy exhaustion. This was particularly in situations where they were forced to constantly advocate for their reasonable accommodations. Those with invisible disabilities found that their request for accommodations are more likely to be contested. For example, an assessment with an Occupational Health doctor may lead to the disabled applicant feeling that they need to justify why they can do the job they have said they can do. This creates a lack of trust from the outset, which increases the feeling of being undervalued. Another significant point made, was the question of who gets to define what is reasonable in terms of reasonable accommodations.
4. **Disclosing a Disability.** The panel commented that the language around the concept of making a disability known, “disclosure” comes across as negative: as though a shameful or a frightening thing is revealed. The panellists proposed that it was necessary to carefully consider the language and attitudes we choose to use around disability and disclosure, with “informing” and “declaring.” The panellists also reflected on the difficulty identifying who to disclose to and what happened to the information following disclosure. Fundamentally, disclosure requires psychological safety: acceptance of self, and trust that there will be no repercussions from disclosure.

Hearing the lived experience

Following the panel discussion seminar attendees were divided into breakout groups for a 15-minute discussion and opportunity to share their experiences. The following questions were provided to stimulate the conversation:

- **As a disabled person, what barriers do you face when working in higher education?**
- **What does your employer do to support you, and what more could they do?**
- **What could/should be done to encourage members of academia to disclose their concerns/disabilities?**

The following main points emerged from the breakout groups:

Supports: The breakout groups observed that having to reapply for supports at each stage of life (primary/secondary school, higher education, work) is a huge additional burden, because it is necessary to justify your needs over and over again. Financial support was also identified as problematic, as disabled people may lose support if they earn above a certain amount. This can contribute to disabled people ending up in part-time jobs, which increases their experience of insecurity.

Lack of staff support: It was emphasised that universities have very little in place in terms of meeting the needs of staff members, in contrast to the supports made available to students. The lack of central funding in universities for reasonable accommodations for staff was identified as a major problem, leading to minimal staff support. Different universities diverge in terms of the levels of support and investment provided, but in general inclusions and accommodations are provided reactively rather than proactively.

Role of management: Management was identified as having a crucial role in establishing the workplace culture. To this end, managers need education on inclusive hiring processes as well as the kinds of accommodations that could be made available in their institution.

One size does not fit all: The breakout groups emphasised that not all disabilities require the same kind of accommodations.

Career progression: The breakout groups observed that established and new staff have different support needs, with established colleagues potentially feeling much more secure in their positions with regard to discomfort around disclosure. The groups expressed concern that impairments may negatively affect a disabled person's hiring and promotion prospects.

Provost Linda Doyle

The seminar was attended in its entirety by Dr Linda Doyle, Provost of Trinity College Dublin, who addressed the attendees at the opening and closing of the event.

The Provost recognised that this seminar was the first event focusing on the topic of ableism in academia in Ireland. She acknowledged that prior to the event she would not have used the word ableism herself, which made her consider how much of an unconscious perpetrator of ableism many of us can be. She noted that as she is at the start of her tenure as Provost, this was a good opportunity for her to learn and to reflect how to make a real change and difference in the world.

The Provost used [Open Scholarship](#) as a related example of how academia is in the process of fundamentally changing and how work is being done on inclusion, hearing different voices, leadership, and transparency. She observed that she had found out anecdotally about barriers to progress of disabled people in conversations during the Provost election campaign.

She identified the following points as her take-aways from the seminar:

- Awareness is not an end point, but it is very important. Using herself as an example, she observed that her own way of giving presentations with visual slides will not suit everyone. Similarly, the informal networking and exchange of ideas known as “water cooler conversations”, which are not possible during remote working under Covid-19, may not suit everyone even in non-pandemic times.
- Systematic means systematic, and we have a hugely systematic problem. The Provost noted that she is very interested in dealing with precarious labour and with the systematic issues around lack of support for staff.
- If we want to change the system, we need to find practical approaches, and identify which ones need more investment.

She also acknowledged the complexity of disability issues, but noted that academic life should be about embracing complexity, nuance, and a variety of identities, and using our collective creativity to take the system and make it better.

Finally, she thanked the Office of the Associate Vice Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Dr Vivian Rath, the convenor of the Forum; Dr Patricia McCarthy, the vice convener of the Forum; and Professor Michael Shevlin, for all their work.

4. Recommendations

The following recommendations arose from the seminar.

Create an Environment for Disclosure

The Ableism in Academia seminar clearly demonstrates that disabled people are reluctant to disclose their disability for fear of repercussions. Those who are interested in disclosing reported being uncertain about who to disclose to and where the information goes. Those who did disclose report negative experiences of not having their reasonable accommodations met, an ambiguity about accessing services, a silo-ing within disability services, or not having the opportunity to progress in their chosen field.

Instead of considering accessibility measures and disclosure as a statistical matter, there is a necessity to go further and incorporate disabled staff and accessibility norms as core aspects of HEI life, to the extent that the staff in higher education should reflect the diversity of the wider population (NADSN, 2020). It is necessary to create an environment in which all staff feel like they can be their authentic self.

This can be done if:

- Appropriate structures are put in place to allow disabled people disclose. This involves moving from loaded language such as “disclose a disability” (with a sense of revealing something negative) to more neutral language, e.g. “inform about/declare a disability”.
- These structures are fully transparent and embedded within a rights-based climate of openness and honesty leading to trust.
- Central to this is clear communication and signposting of information on who to engage with, and what to expect.

Take a Whole of Staff Life-Cycle Approach to Employment of Disabled People

There is a need to consider disabled staff engagement at every point of the staff-lifecycle to include attraction, recruitment, on boarding, development, retention, and separation. To achieve this there is a need across HEI for:

- Responsive systems in place that are regularly reviewed,
- Development of a code of practice for the employment of disabled people,
- Direct input from disabled people,
- Designation of responsibility within HEI for the support of disabled employees.
- Greater and swifter action needs to be taken to meet HEI’s obligations under the Comprehensive Employment Strategy and the Public Sector Duty.

Position Disability as an Equality and Diversity Consideration

Disability has been found to fall down the priority list in a competitive agenda within EDI in Higher Education. This situation needs to be addressed through:

- Strategic focus on disability as equality, diversity and inclusion concern is needed,
- Policies must be put in place along with financial commitment and accountability,
- Implementation of policies e.g. Accessibility Policy, across all sections of the institution,
- Policies must be informed and shaped by the lived experience of disabled people.

Cultural Change, Awareness & Education

Ensuring cultural change and awareness is essential in developing an inclusive community. Key to this is fostering an effective and flexible organisation, which values all members of the academic community. To this it is necessary to:

- Adopt a universal design approach to systems and structures
- Ensure visibility of disabled people in senior and leadership roles within the College community.
- Adopt an intersectional approach that recognises that different types of diversity may intersect and interact
- Demonstrate at an institutional level that disabled peoples' lived experiences are valued by actively listening to disabled staff, postgraduates, and students.
- Visibility of disabled people in HEI has been found to be critical to achieving a sense of belonging for other disabled people in the wider institutional community⁹
- Appointment of equality champions to spearhead developments and increase awareness across all levels of the institution, inclusion is everyone's business

Universal Design Approach - Language and Communication

A college wide strategy is essential to design and implement a universal design approach to all aspects of institutional life.

- Accessibility must be a core criterion for planning work, events, talks, and presentations.
- Assistive technologies should be seen as the norm. Regardless of whether a disability has been disclosed, microphones, closed captions, etc. should be used.
- Irish Sign Language/English interpreting provision should be built into all event planning considerations. Colleges should recruit in-house ISL/English interpreters.
- Review institutional communications policies and practices to ensure that they are fully accessible to a diverse community.

National Policy Development

The discussion and debate from this seminar can feed into the national policy on the employment of disabled people within the public sector. The Higher Education sector is well positioned to make a positive contribution to promoting the employment of disabled people.

This report acts to highlight the barriers that exist to the employment and full engagement of disabled people in the academic sphere. Enabling national policies need to be enacted including:

- Positive-discrimination employment policy to establish disabled academics/administrators within the community.

⁹ Rath, Vivian, *The Social Engagement Experiences of Disabled Students in Higher Education in Ireland.*, Trinity College Dublin. School of Education, 2021

- Providing contracts that suit the needs of disabled staff such as part-time flexible arrangements. We need to address the current situation which sees many disabled people engaged in precarious employment with little hope of progression.
- Revision of the Athena Swan Ireland Charter includes intersectional inequalities as a distinct area requiring focus by HEIs through their work on the Charter, this requires development and attention and can connect to work on disability. Future revisions of the Charter should include disability as a distinct individual category that requires development and proactive measures.

Conclusion

This report has brought together the main outputs from the seminar ‘Ableism in Academia in Ireland’ which took place in August 2021. Through the keynote presentation given and the experiences shared it can be clearly seen that ableist practices are acting as a barrier to the transition to and full participation of disabled people in all aspects of academic employment within higher education. The report outlines six recommendations for future to action under the following headings 1) Create and Environment for Disclosure, 2) Position Disability as an Equality and Diversity Consideration, 3) Take a Whole of Staff Life-Cycle to the Employment of Disabled People, 4) Cultural Change, Awareness & Education, 5) Universal Design Approach – Language & Communication, 6) National Policy Development. This report recognises that there is a need to further investigate ableism in academia and to support disabled people to have their voice heard and share their experiences. The Ableism in Academia in Ireland seminar organised by disabled people in the Trinity College Dublin Forum for Disabled Staff and Postgraduate Students was a key moment in disabled academic activism. It has acted as a catalyst for further discussion and debate on the position of disabled people in academia in Ireland. It is hoped that this report and the recommendations within will act as the spark for future developments and equality for all.

Appendix

Forum Advisory Committee

This Committee was established in 2020 to oversee the organisation of the Forum and coordinate the first forum events.

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Dr Vivian Rath | School of Education |
| Dr Patricia McCarthy | School of Education |
| Prof Michael Shevlin | School of Education |
| Dr Clodagh Brook | Associate Vice-Provost Equality, Diversity and Inclusion |
| Declan Treanor | Disability Service Director |
| Claire Marshall | Equality Officer |



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