SRHE Society for Research into Higher Education

Class-based Disablism in the Academy

Research report

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Dr Alison Wilde & Dr Rebecca Fish,

Northumbria University

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

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Executive Summary

Introduction: Normative assumptions of the ideal 'unencumbered academic' are woven throughout university practice, and are inextricably bound to cultural capital, serving to exclude disabled people from all sides. These assumptions are deeply embedded within the disabling structures, practices, and processes of academic life, the 'hidden injuries of neoliberal academia'. This study combines a desk-based analysis of job adverts with interviews with disabled working-class academics and university staff involved in recruitment, to explore intersectional experiences of disablism and classism in the academy.

Recruitment: Our analysis of job advertisements demonstrates the opacity of articulated requirements. Recruitment staff were aware of the barriers in place for disabled and precarious applicants; for example: *They're asking for a lot of things that actually as someone in short-term contracts would find it quite hard to deliver on. (P39)*
Recommendation: Reform and standardisation of recruitment processes including advertisements, applications, interviews and feedback systems.

Culture: Much discussion in interviews was around the culture of academia. Early intersectional barriers of classism and ableism were described as related to cultural norms which stigmatise at every level; for example: *Disabled, working class – we would never be expected to go to university. (P3)*
Recommendation: Challenge ableist and classist narratives within academic cultures that equate professionalism with overwork, inaccessibility, or economic privilege.

Practices: Practice-related issues included the onerous process of requesting reasonable adjustments and accessibility failures at events and conferences. For example: *I think I spent my life trying to say these are my access needs (P17)*
Recommendation: Standardise accommodations processes across departments to remove inconsistencies and reduce the burden on individuals seeking support.

Conclusion: This report highlights the urgent need for higher education institutions to recognise and address the intersecting barriers faced by disabled working-class academics. By implementing structural, cultural, and policy reforms, institutions can move towards a more equitable and inclusive academic environment.

Class-based Disablism in Higher Education

Introduction

Universities play a key role in maintaining and upholding the 'meritocratic myth' [1]. Further, despite the ubiquity of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in UK universities, intersectional barriers experienced by disabled people in academia remain, having significant implications for academic diversity. Through Wilde's ongoing autoethnographic study of life in academia, and many discussions with disabled academics, we became aware that working-class disabled people bear a disproportionate range of burdens in meeting academic ideals. Thus, in this project, we set out to understand and challenge the cultural and regulative norms which govern academia, by contemplating disability and social class.

Normative assumptions of the ideal 'unencumbered academic' [1: 212] are woven throughout university practice, and are inextricably bound to cultural capital [2], serving to exclude disabled people from all sides. Idealised assumptions are deeply embedded within the disabling structures, practices, and processes of academic life, the 'hidden injuries of neoliberal academia' [3: 39], and they intensify when combined with other perceived norms, particularly those of social class, age, ethnicity, and gender [4-8]. Whilst meritocratic principles might be offset by positive diversity policies over recent years, there is little evidence that these have worked for the benefit of those who are already marginalised [9]. As described by Titchkosky [10:70], disability in the academy is seen as a problem rather than an "important form of critical knowledge production".

This focus on cultural capital reverberates in recent literature covering the experiences of marginalised academics, for example looking at precarity [11], class [12, 13], gender [14], and, in the current study, disability and class [4, 6]. Reading across these studies as well as those on ageism [15] and racism [16] in academia, it is unsurprising that academic cultures are often conceived as exclusionary.

These marginalising mechanisms are most salient within academic recruitment processes [17]. A clear example is the notion of the upward curve, a key indicator in recruitment, access to research funds, and for career progression [18]. Those not selected as potential academic 'stars' are more likely to remain in the academic precariat, with reduced opportunities to gain research funds and publications, in positions which are

more open to exploitation. Precarity therefore works towards slowing, halting, or reversing any such curve. Indeed, Olsen, Griffiths [19] and Jupille, Deloffre [20] have argued disabled academics are seen as an admin burden, or 'costers' rather than 'earners' in university business models.

Disabled working-class academics are rare; only 6% of UK academics and just 4% of senior faculty report a disability. In comparison, roughly 13–16% of students are disabled. Disabled students therefore rarely encounter disabled lecturers, reinforcing the notion that such careers are unattainable [21]. Disabled faculty from working-class backgrounds thus face a compounded invisibility; they must negotiate both ableist assumptions and classist ones. In many cases, institutions expect staff members to conform to “elite” cultural norms, privileging those with insider networks or independent means, to take on extra work (often unpaid or not added to workload details). For example, on the occasions where universities recognise a need for action against institutionalised disablism, disabled people are invariably expected to do this work on a voluntary basis, much like the ways in which diversity work on racism is expected of, and ‘thrust’ on, academics from minoritised ethnic communities (Thomas, 2020), However, in many contexts, disclosure of disability (or class background) is discouraged, and those with impairments can face subtle “inspiration porn” – where their presence is treated as exceptional or token [22]

The exclusions facing disabled academics have received more attention in academic research over the last decade, e.g., Martin's study of academics in leadership roles [23], and Brown and Leigh's collection (2020). As an emerging field of study, disablism can be discerned in earlier criticisms of HE, and in studies of the experiences and expectations of disabled students. Most research on disabled academics has been undertaken with academics who are in secure forms of employment, and none have focused directly on intersections between disability and class. Hence there is little research on the ways in which precarious and working-class disabled people are excluded, integrated or included. Moreover, Gill [3] describes the 'silence', and 'secret conversations', that bring about the 'hidden injuries of neoliberal academia' (Gill, 2009, 39) including the growth of 'fast academia' (45), exacerbating assumptions that disabled people do not fit. As difficult as the workloads are for many academics, these are likely to hit disabled people and working-class people particularly hard [19, 24]. Hence a consideration of the intersection of disability and class background is crucial in order to account for a meaningful

understanding of exclusionary practices. Research in the growing body of work on class backgrounds and academia lacks a consideration of disability, and equally, a consideration of class is absent in research on studies of disability in Higher Education.

This study therefore, fills a gap in the literature by being the first study to consider the intersection of disability and social-class in academia.

Method

The project consisted of the following steps:

- Interviews with forty disabled participants, each lasting between 50 minutes and 1.5 hours. Most identified as working-class and most precarious, although a small number identified as middle-class.
- Interviews with fifteen people involved in recruitment – some were disabled, mixed class positions, working in academic roles, in HR, with some EDI staff and/or IT/digital staff. Interview participants were from a wide range of universities and consisted of people with a range of impairment and identity types. Ethical steps were adhered to and all interviews were anonymised on transcription.
- Desk-based analysis taken from one's day's job advertisements in February 2025 (n=219).
- Analysis of themes arising from all three stages using NVIVO.

Results

Results were themed into three overarching categories: Recruitment; culture; and practices. Here we will give a summary of each using representative quotes.

Recruitment

This theme incorporated data from interviews with disabled people and recruiters, as well as from the job vacancy analysis. The vacancy analysis found the following categories of social science academic jobs detailed in Table 1 taken from a single day in February 2025. Some of these overlapped, with a small number of roles being offered across Professorial to Lecturer ranges.

Table 1: Job categories

Job	Number
Professors	7
Associate Professors	10
Deans/Heads of Centres	5
Senior Lecturers/ Assistant Professors	13
Lecturers	23
Associate Lecturer	1
Hourly Paid	2
Senior Research Fellow	13
Research Fellow	60
Research Assistant	12
Other Research Posts - organisations	3
Teaching Fellow / Assistant	2
Other teaching	3
Postgraduate research posts	23
PhDs	42

The table shows that the majority of job vacancies are short-term research posts, and whilst there were 42 PhD vacancies, entry-level lecturer vacancies only numbered 23. Further, in the textual analysis of job adverts, it became clear that the criteria for success were neither neutral nor objective, for example the candidate for an entry-level lectureship was required to demonstrate all of the following:

> *…the excellent interpersonal skills necessary for teaching high-achieving students; a track record of obtaining research funding, evidence of research accomplishment and future potential, with a demonstrable commitment to [] *, and the collaboration and leadership skills necessary to manage excellent research programmes and to attract external funding.*

Candidates were also required to research potential departments and staff to make sure their 'track record' fit with the existing areas of scholarship. This was very much open to interpretation and interviewer bias, as 'complementary' could mean convergent or divergent:

Research interests which are complementary to those in our existing research community.

Job advertisements generally specified the university's commitment to diversity, but disability and class were rarely mentioned and the statement was speculative in terms of using the word 'may' to modify and potentially discount their EDI pledges:

Preference may be given to candidates with research interests in gender and sexuality, environment, race or religion. Applications are encouraged from women and black and minority ethnic candidates, who are underrepresented in academic posts.

In interviews, participants pointed out the huge burden of labour that recruitment processes presented, and their dwindling capacities to trust these hypothetical assurances, often seen as performative in substance. It was clear that this began well before any interviews; the toil involved much time spent researching departments and various staff members' areas of research to seek out areas of 'complementarity' according to the varying interpretations of the word. There was also much time spent on adapting application forms and covering letters, varying between one whole day and a week, and a further three to five days preparing interview answers. Many complained about being rejected at shortlisting or interview stage:

I'd submit about 20 or 30 applications to universities and I have been shortlisted for a full-time position just once. Just once. Very long, it took the whole day. The application form is very complicated and it is designated by each institution. (P12)

Recruitment staff were aware of the barriers in place for disabled and precarious applicants:

So, if you look at things like the adverts for posts. They're asking for a lot of things that actually as someone in short-term contracts would find it quite hard to deliver on. Publications and funding, all of those things are actually quite difficult when you're on short-term contracts to get. (P39)

Recruitment staff also described the normative interview processes and requirements as disabling:

Presentation in interviews I think is another thing. I think there's very much an unwritten rule about how an academic presents themselves. So, you know, if a

> *disabled person doesn't quite fit that role, and if people in that room don't necessarily understand, or they ask questions in those convoluted ways, ridiculous double questions that don't make sense to anyone really. It feels very much stacked against a disabled person. (P39)*

When discussing the feedback, they had received, participants often felt short-changed and quite distressed, concerned that there were other reasons for lack of 'fit': It was common for participants to inform us that they eventually discovered that the chosen candidate was under-qualified for the position. It was clear that personalised feedback was a rarity, and one participant said:

> *If you're rejected from a job, then there should be in-depth feedback to say what reason, and it can be because the other person had more experience or more relevant expertise in a field that they're interested in, that kind of thing. But they have to be clear on that so that you don't wonder, is it because I asked for the ground floor interview room? (P3)*

Selection criteria and career norms clearly disfavour those who do not match the traditional academic image. It was often perceived that reviews of candidates tend to reward extroverted, unencumbered candidates, who can display cultural capital. Interview stages also tend to focus on short-term, high-pressure tasks, such as teaching demos, and multi-location visits which work towards disadvantaging disabled candidates.

Culture

Much discussion in interviews was around the culture of academia. Early intersectional barriers of classism and ableism were described as related to the cultural norm:

> *Disabled, working class – we would never be expected to go to university. (P3)*

However, all participants described that they entered and stayed in academia due to the learning culture which continued their passion for reading, teaching, and lifelong learning:

> *I love this opportunity to always learn and I like teaching. (P3)*

Further, the ability to combine activism with research of personal relevance was welcomed, creating deep motivation for continuing. Flexibility and autonomy in academic culture was also a highlight.

I mean it's an honour to do my job. I can sit in cafes and write a book... What I love about the job is the flexibility - what do I want to research? (P40)

A clear passion to academic excellence shone through their accounts. Disabled academics also felt the power of community building and connecting with disabled students through shared experiences:

She said, 'You're the first ever academic who has even recognised that I've got a support plan'. (P17)

Nevertheless, academia was disabling for many due to the expected extra labour and emotional load. Disabled and working-class academics said they were disproportionately burdened by emotional and administrative tasks:

I used to have queues of students... mostly other people's students. (P5)

Institutional demands were described as exacerbating impairments, underlining intersectional marginalisation, and undermining well-being:

And because I need more time, it means that I'm often dedicating a lot of time to tasks that for other people don't require that much time. I was essentially working myself to the brim to try and meet the standards that everyone else was meeting. (p10)

It would put so much pressure on me... I would be digging myself out. (P18)

These feelings of marginalisation often led to over-work, with the additional burden of labour on participants:

The focus on trying to overachieve or to try and prove your worth, not just for existing and being a human being, but also sometimes to kind of compensate for errors that might be perceived as weaknesses. I think that's really problematic, because there's a lot of additional pressure put on you. (P17)

Practices

Supportive Practices in Academia were described by some as providing effective and respectful accommodations that consisted of timely and proactive institutional support:

All credit to HR... within a week my requested accommodations were made. (P3)

However, practice-related issues such as the onerous process of requesting reasonable adjustments and universities failing to take into account accessibility requirements were often described, such as accessibility failures at events and conferences:

> *I think I spent my life trying to say these are my access needs. This is how much it's going to cost me personally if I'm going to an event that the university or the funding body is putting on. This is never thought through and it just makes me feel like I'm not welcomed in those spaces. (P17)*

> *It's so ironic when you go to a disability conference - least accessible places. (P3)*

Further, structural inequality in funding processes were discussed, alongside the lack of transparency of which applications are successful as disadvantaging non-elite institutions and academics:

> *My university is a nothing university for the funders. (P40)*

These practices were created and compounded by the university practices that worked towards the proliferation of precarity and therefore financial insecurity, which were key intersectional barriers against job progression for disabled working-class academics:

> *Year after year after year of zero hours, precarious contracts. (P18)*

Recommendations to address practices and processes featured abundantly in the interviews. This academic who was disabled but also involved in recruitment, articulated her recommendations in a nutshell:

> *It's a big issue, but academia, if they really want to be supportive of disabled people, then it has to go right from the beginning. From undergraduate all the way along, in terms of actually making everything accessible. And if they want to employ disabled people, then address that precarity of contracts and provide a proper career path for people. If you're disabled, you don't have flexibility to make those massive personal sacrifices to have a career. I also think there's something about changing attitudes. I think we've still got such a medicalised, deficit understanding of disability that I still see people who assume that disabled people haven't something to contribute. It makes me quite angry. It needs a social model, there's processes, there's systems, there's barriers, and all those things need to change. You know, attitudes - we just need to change them. (P39)*

Recommendations

Our analysis highlights the many structural barriers encountered by working-class disabled people wanting to enter, and remain in, academia. As Wilson (2023) has argued, meritocracy in the academic workforce is a myth, rationalising employment for 'superhuman' roles with ill-defined forms of objectivity and the continuing existence of nepotism and patronage. Those who are perceived as an ill-fit for the mould of this idea unencumbered academic figure, usually corresponds to membership of social groups who already bear the burden of social inequalities [12, 18, 25, 26].

Interviewees provided many recommendations for change, and these revolved around two different polarities.

First, most people believed that the barriers and problems they encountered are deep-rooted, embedded in the cultural relations of research production, career building and the normalisation of academic nepotism, including the designation of academic stars (on normative grounds of age, time elapsed, and bodily 'attractiveness') and the conservative and unjust practices of research funding.

Second, there were many practical suggestions; these included a multitude of good ideas, from shortening the initial average application time from around a week to less than ten minutes and giving honest feedback, valuing experiences and transferable skills which differed from their own- a good addition rather than a good fit, and an appreciation of those who are committed to research or teaching quality with or without the 'normal' signifiers of aspiration. A summary of recommendations is as follows:

1. Recruitment reform

- Revise recruitment and promotion policies to account for class and disability-related barriers, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable academic pipeline, in terms of:
    - Job adverts and transparency of requirements
    - Application forms including time taken to complete them
    - Interview questions and practices
    - Mechanisms to prevent nepotistic practices and processes, and to challenge cultures of patronage and their effects in undermining EDI policies.

    - Feedback processes.

2. Career development and mentorship

- Create tailored mentorship programs that pair disabled working-class academics with senior staff who understand and actively support intersectional equity.
- Ensure career progression frameworks are flexible and account for non-traditional pathways, including interrupted careers or part-time roles.
- Fund professional development opportunities specifically aimed at disabled and working-class scholars (e.g., fellowships, research grants, conference travel).

3. Cultural and attitudinal change

- Promote unconscious bias training for all academic and administrative staff, especially those in decision-making roles.
- Challenge ableist and classist narratives within academic cultures that equate professionalism with overwork, inaccessibility, or economic privilege.
- Foster inclusive leadership that values diverse ways of working, including remote and flexible arrangements as legitimate modes of academic labour.

4. Practices – improving accessibility, recognition and support for invisible labour

- Standardize accommodations processes across departments to remove inconsistencies and reduce the burden on individuals seeking support.
- Formally acknowledge emotional work advocacy and other invisible labour (e.g., mentoring marginalized students, equity work) in performance reviews and promotions.
- Develop support networks and affinity groups for disabled working-class academics to counter isolation and validate shared experiences.

5. Policy and governance representation

- Ensure disabled working-class academics have a voice in governance and policymaking through work-loaded representation on key committees.
- Embed accountability measures into institutional equity plans, with regular reporting on outcomes related to disability and social class inclusion.

Conclusion

This report highlights the urgent need for higher education institutions to recognise and address the intersecting barriers faced by disabled working-class academics. By implementing structural, cultural, and policy reforms, institutions can move towards a more equitable and inclusive academic environment. These changes must be driven not only by compliance but by a genuine commitment to justice, care, and transformation. Without more inclusion, universities are much poorer, literally and epistemologically, especially in terms of the adverse impacts on the deepening of inequalities, and the quality of research and teaching.

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- Redacted for anonymity