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Article

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Although researchers with disabilities are an exceptional category, they are a still very much underrepresented group in Academia worldwide. With 1.5 billion people with disabilities worldwide, the percentage of academic positions filled in by academics with disabilities is surprisingly low. For example at the University of California at Berkeley, it was indicated that of 1,522 full-time faculty members, only 24 (approximately 1.5 percent) are disabled (Grigely 2017). We still lack the data on employment of academics with disabilities for many academic institutions. Nevertheless, some national scale reports suggest that academics with disabilities are twice as likely to work only part-time, and about half as likely to have jobs in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields in comparison to their non-disabled peers (CaSE 2014). Another report by the National Science Foundation in the U.S.A states that "about one in nine scientists and engineers ages 75 and younger has a disability. Scientists and engineers with disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to be unemployed or out of the labour force" (National Science Foundation 2015).

The low number/percentage of Academics with disabilities in top class universities and other research institutions is alarming, and we have to ask why this is the case and what are possible solutions to change this situation for the better.

Answering this question is particularly important in light of the fact that in 2006 the United Nations (UN) adopted the hitherto most comprehensive Human Rights treaty, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), that has been ratified by 177 members, emphasising the importance of education and employment for disabled people.

Though some laws and policies prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of disability do exist, they are still very rarely followed or implemented. For example, sentences in job advertisements such as "Disabled applicants with identical experience are preferred" or "Taking Action for Equality" or "Disability Confident Employer." What does this really mean for disabled researchers? There is still misinterpretation of the phrases 'equal opportunity' or 'equal opportunity employer.' The principle of equality, which is guaranteed and supported by non-discrimination laws, precludes comparable situations from being treated differently, and different situations from being treated the same way.

Hence, any direct comparison with non-disabled applicants in the job screening process is a presentation of inequality, discrimination and unfortunately just creates an illusion of equality.

Historically, persons with disabilities have faced higher unemployment rates and "many persons with disabilities are denied employment or given only menial and poorly remunerated jobs" plus they have lower access to education (Degener and Koster-Dresse 1995).

Moreover, in some developed countries the rate of unemployment among job-seekers with disabilities is double that of able-bodied applicants 'Persons with disabilities still face hurdles in job market', (The Washington Times, 5 December 2005). "Persons with disabilities are frequently not considered potential members of the workforce. Perception, fear, myth and prejudice continue to limit understanding and acceptance of disability in workplaces everywhere." (UN 2018).

Universities worldwide are generally perceived as the fore-runners in promoting a progressive social agenda advancing society towards human rights, justice and equity. Therefore, Academia should serve as a leading example, at the fore-front of ensuring that people with disabilities have the abilities for employment and higher education and most importantly, we have the skills, ability and education to work as Professors, Lecturers and/or Researchers. Disabled academics can be role models and mentors to disabled and non-disabled students alike. Employing disabled academics reinforces the process of raising awareness in civil society. Universities represent the top of the educational pyramid, and they need to provide not only intellectual encouragement for all but also be proactive recruiting and learning to properly value the contributions of disabled professors/lecturers or researchers. In this way Academia can put to the end the centuries of exclusion and marginalization.

To be at the fore-front of progressive social change, academic institutions should demonstrate how to embrace diversity and inclusion. Developed countries may have access to more resources to accommodate academics and students with disabilities, as these are not temporarily and spatially homogeneous (Hansen and Philo 2007). Academia is not free from larger social perceptions concerning disability (e.g. associating disability with lower productivity), and this might explain in part why non-disabled academics may not fully understand that the academic path of disabled researchers may differ from theirs (Hansen 2009). For example, we may approach fieldwork from a different angle and 'Speed' and timing may differ from non-disabled scientists and researchers. Is it fair or reasonable then to expect that our research output (i.e. papers, books) will be of the same quantity as those of non-disabled researchers? Furthermore, the measured pace of research sometimes impacts quantity, but not necessarily the quality of the work.

Thus far, mainstream academy discussions on the experiences of researchers with disabilities have focused on accommodation and architectural barriers, whereas there is very little discussion on the qualitative differences in paths or trajectories of non-disabled and disabled researchers. Hence, there is a lack of understanding the causal effect of the circumstances (Grigely 2017) and how they affect researchers with disabilities over time.

Following along from the concept of "perfect body syndrome," disability is looked at only from a negative perspective without consideration of various positive attributes (Hansen 2009). Academia benefits from a more diverse workforce (Schaal 2018), and yes, disability does not need to come always with a negative sign. Many people with disabilities have

developed numerous proficiencies (i.e. creativity, concentration, flexibility, coping with adversity, peak under pressure, etc.). Therefore, some scientists believe that the "challenges of everyday life have helped them to develop unusual skills and expertise" (Brown 2016). However, these positive traits are rarely emphasised, as they are still unknown to the non-disabled population due to a lack of understanding and the fear of someone who is 'different.' Academia urgently needs to facilitate a shift in the current negative perception and "understandings" (Hansen 2009), and in that way reduce the stigma around disability. This will not only support the inclusion of people with disabilities but also contribute to the efforts of the UN towards the global goals of sustainable development.

Important Considerations Moving Forward

- There a serious need to raise the awareness for the needs of persons with disabilities in Academia
- the University Administration must take action and show leadership by opening Academic positions for and recruiting disabled researchers.
- Arrange a setting for specific cooperation to jointly work on solutions AND promote and examine individual/personal/specific solutions if necessary
- Monitor and evaluate the success of strategies for an inclusive university

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