

**Title:** Scholarship Disabled: Experiences of ableism within Australian higher education

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**Introduction:**

Federal legislative requirements require Australian universities to apply ‘reasonable’ adjustments so that disabled undergraduate students can apply, enrol, participate, and be assessed in their studies. This has allowed increasing numbers of disabled undergraduate students to become part of the university community. Nevertheless, disabled undergraduate students still face barriers to equitable education opportunities and experiences.

While there is significant research on disabled students, research on disabled staff in higher education is an emerging topic. The academy seems promising for disabled staff, particularly academics; a workplace that widely espouses to be inclusive, equitable, and welcoming of diversity. Yet disabled university staff continue to face significant social, cultural, and institutional barriers working against their workplace participation. There remains a gap between policy and the workplace experiences of disabled staff in the academy.

**Methodology:**

In 2019, we formed a cross-institutional team of disabled and non-disabled Australian academics that we named “Scholarship Disabled”. From the beginning, our desire has been to explore and examine the experiences of disabled professional and academic staff in Australian higher education. After gaining a small grant, we were able to launch our pilot study, which focused on a large, multi-site university within one of Australia’s largest capital cities. Survey (n=20) and interview (n=8) data were collected. While the participant numbers are small, our pilot study provides us with greater insight into the issues facing disabled staff in the academy and assists us to refine the study for a larger project. The interview transcripts and open-ended survey questions were manually coded in NVivo and subjected to thematic analysis. We focus here on the qualitative data.

## **Results:**

Our participants noted that within the academy, they are meant to be 'ideal' workers—someone who internalises 'work' as their identity, labours long hours, is constantly available for workplace demands, and is highly productive. However, disabled workers note they are not provided the resources and support to become the ideal worker; an expectation that they find ableist. Disabled staff within higher education report that they are expected to exceed their capacity and to accept the impact on their health and wellbeing, and consistently experience requests for reasonable adjustment denied. Furthermore, by not being an ideal worker, leadership and promotion opportunities are denied to them, and they are often seen as unproductive, inflexible, or lack a willingness to work hard. In the face of such barriers, disabled staff often felt that they needed to overcompensate. The pacing and scheduling of working life in the academy was reported as misaligning with the time it took to do tasks, and this was particularly profound for disabled academics whereby their temporalities are neglected in the rigid metricisation of their productivity and performance.

## **Conclusion:**

Disabled workers in the academy consistently face marginalisation and are ignored or considered to be 'problematic' when raising their concerns. The neoliberalisation of Australian higher education, which has resulted in reduced funding and increased workloads performance expectations, has entrenched these issues. Notably, what disabled staff consistently face are structural problems, with a reluctance of managers to provide suitable working conditions even when these are available. Therefore, disability is seen as an individual problem, and the disabled person as burdensome. This entrenchment of ableism works against claims of the academy being inclusive, equitable, and welcoming diversity. In the face of such difficulties, it is unsurprising that some of our participants had not disclosed their disability within the workplace, with the fear of what disclosure could mean. Our work reveals the need for an inclusive revolution within higher education.

## **Selected References:**

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