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The dyslexic academic: uncovering the challenges faced as neurodiverse in academia and establishing a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers some of the hidden challenges which may be faced by the neurodiverse academic. The neurodiverse academic, at times, can be seen as something 'hidden', remaining undisclosed due to the challenges which can be faced by making this declaration to colleagues and employers. As a result, our voices are often not heard, and, thus, the difficulties we face overlooked. This has begun to be addressed for the student within higher education, but not the academic. Within this paper I, therefore, reflect on my experience as a dyslexic academic. I consider the challenges of excess labour, increasingly needed to 'make it' in academia today, the pressures this creates and impact on mental health. I, also, highlight the divergence, from non-disabled colleagues, which can exist in access to development opportunities. I provide this account to challenge assumptions and spur a research agenda.

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Introduction

The neurodiverse academic (which I am) is likely not a rarity within academia. Yet we are seen, and talked about, in terms, often akin to something which is 'hidden'. An 'other' that exists, but are often reluctant to 'disclose' ourselves, so our voices are not heard (Brown and Leigh 2018). Therefore, 'this is a current issue because...'; due to our 'hidden' status we, neurodiverse academics, are rarely studied, and the challenges we face are, thus, seldom acknowledged in the higher education (HE) workspace. Within this paper, I reflect on my experience as a neurodiverse academic, to highlight some of the unacknowledged challenges which may be faced, to stimulate debate and a

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needed research agenda. This paper is, thus, inspired by the compelling current issue articles of Hannam-Swain (2018) and Inckle (2018), who discussed the extraordinary costs placed on the disabled academic.

Within this paper I focus on the dyslexic academic, as it is the condition I can talk about and reflect on autoethnographically, for the benefit of an academic audience. Neurodiversity can include, 'autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, Tourette's syndrome, acquired brain injury, and mental health disorders' (Farrant et al. 2022). Challenges are, therefore, likely to be wide, I, thus, do not presume to speak directly for each, but seek to focus on my own, to spur wider collective consideration of the neurodiverse academic.

Dyslexia is, prospectively, one of the most common life-long (symptoms can, also, manifest from acquired brain injury) learning difficulties within the general population. While different figures are projected, 1 in 10 (British Dyslexia Association 2019), of the British population (where I am based), are estimated to display indicators. Symptoms 'typically' (dyslexia can encompass a diverse range of symptoms, beyond the scope of accounting here) manifest as a difficulty processing language, exogenous of other cognitive or environmental factors. Personally, I experience a significantly higher degree of effort to read and write, with high accuracy, than non-disabled colleagues, minor difficulty with short-term recall of complex numerical information and slight weakness in spatial awareness. Each I have developed strategies to compensate for, to achieve attainment of a PhD and to begin to publish research in peer reviewed journals. Despite this achievement and compensatory strategies, some of which unhealthy, manifested from self-stigmatisation, systemic challenges continue.

The study of students with dyslexia in foundational and higher education, to successfully obtain learning outcomes and cope with academic pressures, has seen expansion. I am thankful for this, having experienced excellent and appalling (segregation and ill-informed re-diagnosis was common) approaches from teachers when I was in education. Yet, as noted by Hiscock and Leigh (2020), studies focused on the dyslexic academic have been almost non-existent. Statistics exist on neurodiversity in the population, and estimated HE student figures exist (Farrant et al. 2022), but I am unaware of data on the academic, with studies of this subject frequently justified on extrapolation from population or student numbers. This may be because, as Brown and Leigh (2018) indicate, we are a group which can be difficult to access.

The reason we are, potentially, difficult to access is, perhaps, best illustrated in media coverage, rather than academic material, thus far. One of the first articles you will come across when searching for the 'dyslexic academic', offers an excellent account of being a dyslexic academic, but appears under the byline 'Anonymous academic', and details the terrifying nature of coming

out, being entitled 'I've finally admitted that I'm a dyslexic academic – and I'm terrified' (The Guardian 2016). Mellifont (2023) does note negative experience as one emergent theme in their recent compelling narrative review of literature on neurodivergent HE staff. The implications of disclosure are, indeed, often feared.

While I will inform universities of my status before interview and employment (institutions within the UK, usually, employ equality statements during recruitment), and have crossed the Rubicon by writing this article, I have only told colleagues about my disability rarely. Where I have disclosed, this is usually in circumstances where I fear I cannot avoid letting a colleague down. Outside of this, I rarely disclose, or ask for help, as I have adopted a frame of self-stigmatisation, which is difficult to break. This follows findings of Stoeber and Rountree (2021) on the HE student with dyslexia. The student with dyslexia may not seek help as this could be admission something is 'wrong', making disclosure painful. Self-stigmatisation has been correlated by Stoeber and Rountree (2021) to a greater incidence of maladaptive coping, hidden from others, in the student, to deal with the challenges of HE. The extent that this is paralleled in the dyslexic academic requires attention, particularly as the pressures of academia are ever increasing. The hidden challenges we face, thus, become more dangerous, until uncovered and understood.

Excess labour

'Unpaid labour' is the most obvious, but least understood, by the non-disabled colleague, challenge the disabled academic faces in the HE workspace. Hannam-Swain (2018) and Inckle (2018) illustrate this and have helped to promote a research agenda. The dyslexic academic, however, likely faces both similar and divergent costs, to what has been uncovered so far. As heightened effort must be placed into processing of language, reaching well-beyond the non-disabled colleague's input into an equivalent task, the price paid to achieve similar outcomes is deviating.

To demonstrate how this challenge manifests, in the academic space, I have rarely taken time-off, from the commencement of my PhD into employment and paid academic work. Weekends usually include some work, and the last holiday I took, booked, and approved by a line-manager, was to (undeclared to the line-manager) attend a conference and allow extra time to organise a complex set of research interviews. While this is too common in academia, overwork is increasingly normalised, for the dyslexic academic this is additionally unhealthy, even a dangerous practice, particularly as we are often hiding the mental health impact to remain undisclosed.

Personally, the result of the excessive input, increasingly required to 'make it' (I am currently in that awkward post-doctoral position, seeking to break out of casual work into full-time employment) in academia, and achieve required

outcomes e.g. high impact publications, after-hours accredited training, etc, is extreme low-mood and physical exhaustion. This is a typical outcome of additional effort and dyslexia. Dyslexia has been correlated with heightened risk of mental health issues (Alexander-Passe 2015) in the general population, due to the excess effort and unaccommodated difficulties often encountered, and, potentially, reduced willingness in students to seek help (Stoeber and Rountree 2021). Admitting difficulty can be difficult, and failure can be met with internalised despair, seen as confirmation something is 'broken', running counter to the expectation in academia for stoicism, thus, must be hidden and rarely addressed emotionally, if not to deviate from expected behaviour.

A response I have received when I have disclosed my status, however, is often not to be treated differently. By this I mean there is, often honest empathy, but an absence of preexisting understanding of what the struggles could be. Appearing non-disabled, also, means that disclosure of challenge can be quickly forgotten by others. I have expressed a difficulty to a colleague, needing extra time to revise an article, for a similar request for updates to be made with a similarly unrealistic deadline, requiring the repeat of an awkward conversation, you would feel best avoiding - and usually do, just meeting the deadline. This is, also, part of the reason I do not express my status commonly, I have found it does not make a difference in the expectations you must meet.

Differentiated opportunities

A secondary hidden challenge I have, also, found, is a variance in career development opportunities. The demands of academia are ever growing. To gain an entry level position, the early career researcher increasingly requires something which 10 years ago could have been akin to a middle of career profile to stand out, a noteworthy volume of impactful research, advanced teaching qualifications, funding and, even, some management experience.

This leaves the disabled academic in somewhat of an awkward position, particularly when looking to make the transition from PhD into employment. You must find the time, excess often of paid hours, while you are likely already near your physical limits, to attend and participate in events, such as on curriculum design, method training, etc, to expand your CV in line with colleagues and be competitive in the academic job market. This will leave the disabled academic exerting potentially more effort than non-disabled peers, while facing restrictions preventing participation in career development programmes, due to the excessive demands of additional labour.

Positives

While this paper has, thus far, highlighted the challenges, I believe it is important to finish briefly on some of the benefits I experience as a

neurodiverse academic. For example, in teaching, while facing all the challenges detailed, I have experienced rewarding outcomes of disclosure. By declaring to my students, I am dyslexic and, thus, express experience of similar struggles, as the teacher, as they can as students, I hope to weaken some of the learning barriers (the scholar in ivory tower, you approach at your peril!) which can prevent active engagement and act as hindrance to collaborative teaching methods. The students' attitudes towards engaging academics with disabilities, seen and unseen, has begun to be explored (see, Hiscock and Leigh 2020), but deserves further consideration.

To conclude, based on my experience, I would argue empirical study is needed to better understand topics such as, excess labour, coping strategies, and divergent access to development opportunities. The rationale that has driven improved understanding for the neurodiverse HE student, is still apt for the neurodiverse academic. It is only with study and understanding, can our voices be heard, and we may be more willing to come out about the difficulties we face in academic society.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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