

ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

The employment and earnings of UK academic staff with disabilities¹

Summary

This briefing paper attempts to provide an employment profile of UK academic staff with disabilities. It also considers the evidence for the claim that people with disabilities are seriously under-represented amongst UK academic staff, particularly within the higher grades.² It is probable that disabled people are under-represented, but the analysis presented here indicates that Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data are not valid indicators of the numbers of disabled academic staff, and that many staff do not reveal their disability status for fear of discrimination.

The main findings of this research are:

HESA data suggest that a mere 0.9 per cent of academic staff are disabled. But the disability status of a high proportion of staff, 11 per cent, is unknown.

Against expectation the HESA data suggest that people with disabilities are better represented among the more senior grades of academic staff, and are less likely to be in fixed-term or hourly paid employment. Pay data suggest that disabled academics are better paid than their non-disabled colleagues. However, these findings are unlikely to reflect the real situation of disabled academic staff.

Alternative data sources suggest that, although disabled people are under-represented among academic staff as a whole, the proportion of people with disabilities among academic staff is between 10 and 12 per cent: in other words, HESA has 'lost' approximately 14,000 disabled academic staff.

The reasons for the low HESA figures are likely to be found in inadequate data collection procedures, and in the reluctance of some disabled academics to reveal their disability status, especially staff in the more junior posts and/or non-permanent staff.

The inadequacy of the HESA data and the reluctance of disabled academics to reveal their status are serious problems which HESA and individual HEIs must address particularly in the light of the current passage of the SEN and Disability Rights in Education Bill through Parliament.

1. The HESA data³

1.1 Employment data

According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS)⁴, the working age population of Great Britain is 36.3 million. Of these 6.7 million people – i.e. 19 per cent – have some form of disability (taken as either having health problems or disabilities which affect the kind of paid work they can do, or which fit the Disability Discrimination Act definition of disability, or both⁵).

According to HESA data⁶, the proportion of academic staff reported to have a disability is a mere 0.9 per cent:

Table one: proportion of academic staff with disabilities⁷

Staff category	No of staff	% of total*
Disabled	1060	0.9
Not known to be disabled	115440	88.0
Unknown	14640	11.2
Grand total	131140	100.0

* totals may differ due to rounding

So, according to the HESA data, the proportion of academic staff with disabilities is much lower than the proportion of people with disabilities in the working population as a whole. It is important to note that the disability status of large number of academic staff, 11 per cent of the total, is unknown.

Table two shows the proportion of disabled and non-disabled academic staff in each grade group.⁸

Table two: grade by disability status

	% disabled	% not known to be disabled	Total %	% unknown
Professors	1.2	98.8	100	9.8
Senior Lecturers & Researchers	1.1	98.9	100	9.0
Lecturers	0.9	99.1	100	9.1
Researchers	0.7	99.3	100	15.1
Other Grades	0.8	99.2	100	13.3

Table two indicates that disabled people are severely under-represented in all grades. Against expectation, however, the level of representation decreases slightly in the more junior grades: for example, 0.6 per cent of researchers are disabled compared to 1.1 per cent of senior lecturers and researchers.

The junior grades have a higher proportion of staff for whom disability status is unknown: for example, 15 per cent of researchers compared to 9 per cent of senior lecturers and researchers were reported as 'disability status unknown'.

Table three indicates that disabled people are more likely than non-disabled people to be in a senior post: for example, 21 per cent of disabled academics are senior lecturers or researchers compared with 17 per cent of staff not known to be disabled.

Table three: disability status by grade

	Professors	Senior Lecturers & Researchers	Lecturers	Researchers	Other Grades	<i>Total</i>
Disabled	10.8%	21.2%	39.0%	19.8%	9.2%	100%
Not known to be disabled	8.3%	16.8%	39.1%	25.5%	10.3%	100%
Unknown	7.2%	13.2%	31.1%	36.0%	12.5%	100%

Table four shows that the proportion of staff whose disability status is unknown is higher in the teaching-only and research-only categories than in the teaching-and-research category.

Table four: employment function by disability status

	% disabled	% not known to be disabled	Total %	% unknown
Teaching-only	1.0	99.0	100	14.3
Research-only	0.7	99.3	100	14.8
Teaching-and-research	1.0	99.0	100	8.9

Table five shows that very high proportion of non-permanent staff (fixed-term and hourly paid) are 'unknown' in terms of disability status.

Table five: terms of employment by disability status

	% disabled	% not known to be disabled	% unknown	<i>Total</i>
Permanent	1.1	98.9	8.5	100

Fixed term contract	0.7	99.3	13.6	100
Hourly paid/casual	0.7	99.3	27.6	100
Other	0.0	100.0	32.4	100

Table six shows that disabled academics are more likely to be employed on a permanent contract, and less likely to be fixed-term or hourly paid, than other staff.

Table six: disability status by terms of employment

	Permanent	Fixed-term	Hourly paid/casual	Other	Total
Disabled	66.4%	32.1%	1.5%	0.0%	100%
Not known to be disabled	56.7%	41.1%	2.1%	0.1%	100%
Unknown	41.9%	51.4%	6.4%	0.3%	100%

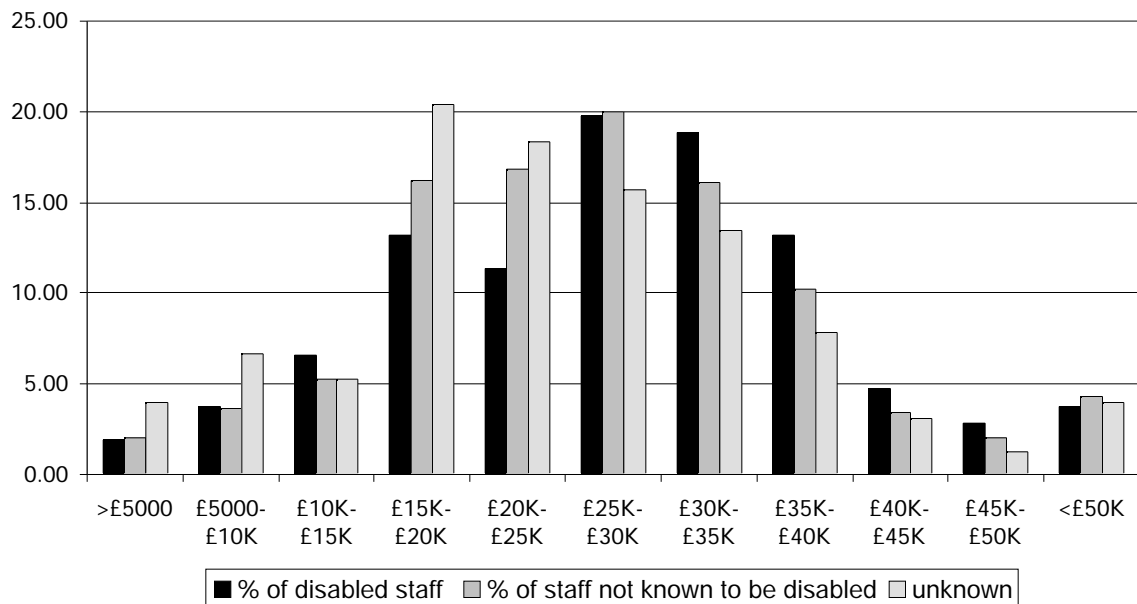
1.2 Pay data

In this section we use HESA data to examine the salaries of academic staff by disability status.

	% of disabled staff	% of staff not known to be disabled	% unknown
>£5000	1.6	2.1	3.9
£5000-£10K	3.8	3.6	6.7
£10K-£15K	7.0	5.3	5.3
£15K-£20K	13.5	16.2	20.3
£20K-£25K	10.9	16.8	18.4
£25K-£30K	20.1	20.0	15.7
£30K-£35K	18.5	16.1	13.5
£35K-£40K	13.5	10.2	7.9
£40K-£45K	4.7	3.5	3.1
£45K-£50K	2.5	2.0	1.3
<£50K	3.9	4.3	3.9
Total	100	100	100

Table seven and the chart indicate that academics with disabilities are not

Distribution of earnings of academic staff by disability status



subject to discrimination over pay: higher proportions of disabled staff, compared with non-disabled staff, are in the higher salary bands. Again this is surprising

since disabled people in employment generally earn 15 per cent less than the non-disabled.⁹

Staff whose disability status is unknown are more likely to be in the lower salary bands.

2. The LFS data

There is a large discrepancy between the HESA employment data and Labour Force Survey (LFS) data. 127,000 people are classified as 'university teachers' in the LFS returns. (This will not necessarily represent all academic staff since some may place themselves under different occupational headings). Of these 15,240, i.e. 12 per cent, are disabled under either the LFS or DDA definitions, or both. We can also use LFS data to look at those HE staff with postgraduate degrees (which may include some academic related staff but, again, not necessarily all academic staff). 388,000 people work in HE of which 147,000, i.e. 38 per cent, have a postgraduate degree. Of these 14,000, i.e. 9.5 per cent, are disabled under either the LFS or DDA definitions, or both. These figures can be compared to the HESA figure of 1060 disabled academic staff, i.e. 0.9 per cent of the total. The extent of disability is more than 10 times higher than that reported by HESA.

3. The problems with the HESA data

The differences between the HESA and LFS data are very large. The discrepancy may be exaggerated as we are dealing with relatively small populations and sample sizes. However, it is the way that the questions are asked which may lie at the root of the problem. LFS uses face-to-face interviewing at home (60,000 households are visited), and HESA uses staff returns from personnel offices most of which, in turn, use information from job applications or joining questionnaires. Two main factors may therefore be operating.

First, given that HESA uses information from job applications or joining questionnaires, disabled academics who developed their disability after taking up their employment would not show up in the data. Also, information will not be available on those disabled academics who took up their posts before job application forms or joining questionnaires included information on disability.

Secondly, given the high proportion of academic staff whose disability status is unknown, there is the possibility that disabled academics do not reveal their disability status on application forms for fear of being subjected to discrimination. An informal email survey of members of the AUT disabled members' network confirms that this is a factor, and that such fears are widespread.

Here are some typical comments:

By declaring [a disability] at interview there is always the chance that one may be asked inappropriate questions about "difficulties".

Forms may ask for inappropriate information and ask for it at inappropriate times. For example, asking for a list of "special equipment" one may need prior to any discussion of the post and what it might entail.

So long as people equate disability with illness, and the medical model of disability still appears rampant so this is likely to be a long time, people will be reluctant to declare a disability for fear of this affecting their employment opportunities. It doesn't matter that it's not supposed to – it's almost impossible to prove when it has.

Those with hidden disabilities or Multiple Sclerosis, for example, often worry that their disability will be noticed. This problem extends after the point of entry into a post, to such matters as being reluctant to apply for a special car parking permit if the fact of a disability has to be declared. One member of the network reported that women in particular feel that they might be targeted in any redundancy situation.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that application forms tend to ask about disability in the same section as health matters with the implication that to be a disabled person is to be unhealthy. Differences in perception of disability come into play here. Some people with disabilities do not report them as such, for example: insulin dependent diabetics; people living with chronic pain; or people whose workplaces might have been adapted or who otherwise do not experience problems at work concerned with their disability.

The HESA data become more intelligible if we accept the proposition that some disabled staff do not reveal their status. Thus, the fact that the proportion of people with disabilities decreases slightly in the junior grades may mean that disabled staff in these grades are less likely to declare their disability status. Similarly, the fact that disabled academic staff are more likely to be employed on permanent contracts may mean that fixed-term contract disabled staff are not declaring their status. Finally, the finding that disabled academics are more likely to be in the higher pay bands may be due to the fact that disabled staff in the lower salary bands are not declaring their disability status.

The evidence from the survey of disabled AUT members suggests that it is likely that staff are not declaring their disability status. For example:

For staff, like myself, who are on short-term and/or rolling contracts there is always the fear that by disclosing that you are a disabled person you will jeopardise future employment.

4. Conclusions

It may be the case that people with disabilities are under-represented within UK academic staff, particularly within the higher grades. This would be consistent with trends in other sectors. But it also the case that the official data upon which policy is developed are invalid. This is a major problem in the context of the SEN and Disability Rights in Education Bill which is currently being debated in Parliament. There is an urgent need for improved data gathering, and for research to be carried out into such processes as the recruitment, dismissal, and promotion of disabled people in higher education. HESA should collect information on employees' disability after entry into employment, and consider recommending to HEIs that they guarantee the confidential collection of disability data.

This research has also shown that there is a fear of discrimination amongst disabled academic staff (especially concerning recruitment, redundancy and the renewal of fixed-term contracts) which must be allayed if valid information is to be collected. One study of employment in various sectors has shown that, of those looking for work, 62 per cent of disabled people felt that they have been refused a job or interview because of their disability. 85 per cent of disabled people looking for work thought that employers were reluctant to offer them jobs because of their disability.¹⁰

In this respect, a strong case has been for more money to be spent on recruiting disabled staff. Also, if the SEN and Disability Rights in Education Bill becomes law, staff in HE will need training, for example, on deafness awareness, and communication with deaf students. As one member of the AUT disabled members' network put it:

The solutions are training for managers so that they operate from an equal opportunities perspective and are aware of Access to Work and other sources of support, training for all employees so that disabled colleagues are not seen as a liability, and support systems for disabled staff, particularly for those who acquire an impairment during their employment.

Notes

¹ This paper has benefited from comments made by members of the AUT disabled members network.

² THES, 14/7/00, '1.2% of profs, 11% of the UK workforce'.

³ The number of academic and related staff with disabilities is relatively small. Caution should be exercised, therefore, when drawing conclusions from the data. The findings can be taken as indicative only.

⁴ The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a quarterly sample survey carried out by interviewing people about their personal circumstances and work, and is the largest regular household survey conducted in Great Britain. LFS interviews cover about 150,000 people living at a representative

sample of some 60,000 private addresses. Details of around 120,000 people aged 16 and over form the basis for labour force estimates. The LFS is conducted by the Office for National Statistics, on behalf of the DfEE. LFS figures cover GB only i.e. Northern Ireland is excluded.

⁵ LFS, spring 2000. A disabled person under the Disability Discrimination Act is anyone with "a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities".

⁶ Except where indicated all HESA data is for 1998/99. 'Academic' staff comprise those whose primary employment function is teaching only, teaching and research and research only. HESA does not collect data on academic employees who work less than 25% of a FTE. This criterion excludes many part-time employees.

⁷ HESA does not define 'disabled' but simply requires individual HEIs to return the information under whatever definition they see fit. This, in turn, is usually self-defined by staff. There is undoubted confusion as to what constitutes 'disability' and whether it should be reported. Some staff still regard 'registered' disabled as a category to be reported despite the fact that the Disability Discrimination Act ended the process of registration.

⁸ 'Professors' includes post-92 university heads of departments, pre-92 university professors and grade IV researchers, clinical professors and those appointed professors on a locally determined scale. 'Senior lecturers and researchers' includes post-92 university principal lecturers, pre-92 university senior lecturers and grade III Researchers, clinical senior lecturers and those appointed senior or principal lecturers on a locally determined scale. 'Lecturers' includes pre-92 lecturers, post-92 university senior lecturers, clinical lecturers and those appointed lecturers on a locally determined scale. 'Researchers' includes all research grades not listed above and those researchers appointed on a locally determined scale. 'Other grades' includes other grades of academic staff not listed above.

⁹ Institute for Employment Research, Bulletin, no. 56, 2000.

¹⁰ Memorandum by Scope to House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment, Ninth report, Session 1998-99.

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