Institutional environments trap disabled geoscientists between a rock and a workplace

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Inaccessible workplaces, normative departmental cultures and ableist academic systems have all contributed to the continued underrepresentation and exclusion of disabled researchers in the

Geosciences, according to an article published Thursday 8 June in *Nature Geoscience*.

The article argues that changes to both working spaces and attitudes are urgently needed if institutions are to attract, safeguard and retain people with disabilities.

Anya Lawrence, a disabled early career researcher in the University of Birmingham's School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Science and author of the piece says that "disabled geoscientists like myself face barrier after barrier on a daily basis just to get by in academia. My aim, in writing this article, was to capture some of the shared difficulties that disabled geoscientists experience, particularly struggles that may be less obvious or less apparent at a surficial level, but are significant nonetheless. For example, I think it may come as a surprise to some that traditional workplace cultures like communal coffee breaks can actually be a source of exclusion for those with disabilities. Likewise, 'feeling sorry' and showing pity for disabled colleagues could seem well-meaning but just serves to reinforce negative stereotypes towards disability."

The article makes a series of suggestions about how those with disabilities can be attracted, supported and retained in academic geosciences such as university leaders taking advice from outside agencies with experience in embedding inclusion in the workplace, along with making visible commitments to disability-hiring initiatives.

Anya adds that she thinks "lots of examples of best practice are already out there in other sectors. It's a case of whether people across the various different levels of the academic hierarchy from those in the highest leadership roles to the academics 'on the ground' and doing the research in Geoscience departments, are committed to creating respectful cultures and welcoming spaces for disabled scholars."

"Although I have encountered many hurdles myself, I am very fortunate in that I have an amazingly supportive supervisor and head of school and also my parents who everyday face the challenge of caring for a disabled child with nothing but great courage and selflessness. I realize that so many disabled researchers just don't have this kind of close support network and are quite isolated and alone in academia."

Another potential initiative outlined in the article is increased collaborative research involving mixed groups of disabled and non-disabled geoscientists.

"Collaborating with other geoscientists without disabilities or with different disabilities to me has been really beneficial not only at a personal level but for the research itself," says Anya. "By working with people who have different opinions, life experiences and areas of expertise from myself I have learnt so much; I have been prompted to try new methods and analytical techniques, publish my findings in outlets I hadn't even heard of and think critically about my research at every stage of the process—all of which wouldn't have been possible had I kept going it alone."

"It's also just nice to feel included and valued- working with people who appreciate my involvement and view disability as being different, not deficient, means the world to me. To this end I would like to thank the editors of *Nature Geoscience*, especially Dr. James Super and Dr. Simon Harold for being sensitive and deeply respectful in their communication and, most of all, for inviting someone with lived experience of disability to contribute to the discussion on disability in the geosciences."

More information: Lawrence, A. Between a rock and a workplace. *Nat. Geosci.* (2021). doi.org/10.1038/s41561-021-00775-4

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