

Disabled researcher calls for better support for faculty

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An MRI with increased signal in the posterior part of the internal capsule which can be tracked to the motor cortex consistent with the diagnosis of ALS. Credit: Frank Gaillard/Wikipedia

Academic institutions need to do much more to support faculty members with disabilities and to create an environment in which they can thrive, argues a commentary published May 18 in the journal *Trends in Neurosciences*. The paper was written by Justin Yerbury, a cell and molecular neurobiologist who has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and his wife, Rachel Yerbury, a research psychologist.

"We want people to understand how tough life is for people with a disability," says Justin Yerbury, a professor at the University of Wollongong in Australia. "When you add academia on top of that, it's just incredible that disabled academics like me can actually continue to contribute in the way that we do."

He uses a wheelchair, is unable to speak, and types by using eye movement, which means that typing a document takes him about ten times as long as it does for someone who types using their hands or voice commands. His research is focused on the molecular processes that underpin ALS, a disease that has affected many members of his family.

The commentary discusses how several aspects of academia create barriers for disabled investigators. Many of these obstacles are driven by high demands for bringing in grant money and producing frequent research publications. These challenges, which result in reduced funding when they are not met, in turn make it difficult to retain staff. This creates a cycle in which it's very difficult for disabled academics to perform their jobs and carry out their research.

The authors note that visible [disabilities](#), such as the one that Justin Yerbury has, as well as invisible disabilities, such as those people with most [mental health disorders](#) or people with autism who have typical functioning in most cognitive domains have, need to be taken into account when one considers constraints that make it difficult for people to compete at the academic level. They say that underrepresentation of people with disabilities in academia is not related to lack of interest on the part of people who might choose to enter the field but to the difficulties created by the high expectations of the profession.

In the commentary, the Yerburies point out that although universities offer accommodations and adjustments for disabled students, they don't extend the same measures to faculty. "Perhaps it's easier for universities to make adjustments for students, or perhaps it's expected that if you get to the academic level, you can compete, cope, and flourish regardless," says Rachel Yerbury, who is a research psychologist at the University of Wollongong and studies how nature affects mental health and well-being. She adds that universities might support students with disabilities because they don't want to risk discrimination claims.

The Yerburies highlight several ways in which academia could improve. These changes include leveling the playing field and focusing on equity rather than equality; reducing the pressure to compete for all academics, which makes the field almost impossible for disabled academics and dissuades them from entering it in the first place; and challenging ableism in the academy. "Ableism, or the expectations of being able-bodied or able-minded, can be subtle and underhanded," Rachel Yerbury says. "Many academics and institutions may not even realize that they labor under these assumptions."

She adds that this problem is not unique to academia either. "I think most industries have a long way to go in terms of discrimination and ableism."

More information: *Trends in Neurosciences*, Yerbury et al.: "Disabled in the Academia: To be or not to be, that is the question"

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