**Experiences of GEES staff with mental health conditions**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents findings from research with 75 Anglophone Geographers and Earth/Environmental Scientists who describe themselves as having a ‘disability’. The discussion focuses on one key finding from this project: the large proportion of respondents who indicated that they suffered from a ‘disabling’ mental health condition. Our research suggests that GEES practitioners with mental health conditions typically experience significant adverse effects in terms of teaching/learning, research and career development. The paper concludes by presenting questions and prompts for discussion to support the development of practice in GEES departments in relation to these issues.

**Introduction**

In the last decade, new legislative and Quality Assurance measures have prompted UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to recognise differences and diversity in students’ experiences and needs. For example, following the Quality Assurance Agency’s (2000) *Code of Practice - Students with Disabilities*, and the extension of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (HMSO, 1995) to Higher Education via the *Special Education Needs and Disability Act* (HMSO, 2001), HEIs are legally obliged to attend, practically and pedagogically, to the diverse needs of students with disabilities or special educational needs. Consequently there has been an upsurge of research regarding the provision of learning support for this group. In the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) disciplines there is now a considerable body of literature addressing this issue (Healey *et al*., 2001, 2002, Marshall *et al*., 2002), often with a substantive focus upon the manifold issues which off-site activities (e.g. fieldwork) pose for students with disabilities such as impaired mobility (Gardiner and Anwar, 2001), vision (Shepherd, 2001) or hearing (Wareham *et al*., 2001), mental health difficulties (Birnie and Grant, 2001) or hidden disabilities and dyslexia (Chalkley and Waterfield, 2001).

However, in the GEES disciplines, and in the HE sector at large (see Equality Challenge Unit, 2004), this commitment to support the learning of students with disabilities has seldom been matched by an attention to the issues and needs of HE *staff* with disabilities. In this context, an anonymous online survey was devised to gather baseline information about experiences and issues of GEES practitioners with diverse disabilities.

**The Research Project**

An anonymous online survey was circulated to GEES practitioners via a range of subject-specific mailing lists and professional bodies. The survey called for respondents who defined themselves as having a disability in terms of the UK *Disability Discrimination Act* (HMSO, 1995, 2005: section 1.1): “a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on… [one’s] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”. Seventy-five people opted to complete the survey. The respondents represented diverse roles, disciplinary backgrounds, length of service and type of institution, as well as diverse disabilities (Table 1). Note that rather broad brush categories of ‘disability’ are reported here, principally to prevent identification of individuals.

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| --- | --- |
| **Role** | PhD student/Graduate Teaching Assistant: 11%Researcher: 29%Lecturer (in post 0-4 years): 20%Lecturer (in post 5+ years): 15%Senior Lecturer: 16%Professor: 9% |
| **Disciplinary background** | Human Geography: 36%Physical Geography: 21%Earth Sciences: 27%Environmental Sciences: 12%GIS: 4% |
| **Country where employed** | UK: 70%Eire: 3%USA: 17%Canada: 9%Australia: 1% |
| **Type of institution (UK-based staff)** | Pre-1992 University: 40%Post-1992 University: 24%Russell Group University: 36% |
| **Type of disability** | Mental health condition: 64%Sensory impairment: 8%Mobility impairment: 8%Long term illness: 20% |

Table 1 Characteristics of sample

**Findings**

Some preliminary findings are reported below, with a particular focus upon just one key finding: the negative experiences of respondents with mental health conditions (especially forms of Depression) within their departments, institutions and disciplines. The following sections present data which briefly illustrate these respondents’ experiences in relation to teaching/learning, research, and career development.

***Impacts on teaching***

Many respondents with mental health conditions described teaching as an ‘ordeal’. Off-site activities, such as fieldwork, were often seen to be particularly challenging.

*“Teaching and depression do not mix! Practically my whole teaching practice is about dealing with my anxieties. Teaching can play on my mind for long afterwards.”*

*“I find fieldwork an ordeal – forced into social interactions with colleagues and students.”*

***Impacts on research***

Most respondents with mental health conditions reported adverse impacts on their research. These impacts fall into four categories:

* poor productivity

*“Even the most straightforward task can become a marathon. Worse, I sometimes can’t confront writing or organising research, so just avoid it.”*

* difficulties networking

*“Find it difficult to establish links/contacts/collaborators for research projects.”*

* lost opportunities

*“I have stopped putting myself forward for grant applications, some collaborative projects etc. I have seriously let people down in the last few years because of my condition.”*

* disruption to/non-completion of projects

*“When I am [ill] it is impossible to meet deadlines, deliver presentations etc.”*

***Impacts on career development***

Impacts on career development were differentiated by type of ‘disabling’ condition. A small number of participants with sensory impairments, mobility impairments or long-term illnesses/conditions reported that their ‘disability’ had no impact on their career development or had provided opportunities to enhance promotion prospects. Those with mental health conditions, however, reported that promotion was difficult because of the impact their condition had on their working lives. Chances of promotion were reportedly hampered by:

* low self-esteem

*“I am terrible at 'selling myself' at conferences, seminars, promotion committees etc. Have been to conferences where I have had bad experiences - the aggressive 'grilling' and 'posturing' can affect me for a long period afterwards.”*

* reliance on existing support networks

*“I am very reliant on hometown links and support group. I'm not sure I could move elsewhere to a more illustrious university. I also find conferences, socialising, meeting & greeting etc very difficult.”*

* the demands of academia

*“Not sure I am cut out for this career. Plan to leave ASAP. Academia messes with your head! I'm not being flippant - I really think there are a series of pressures and strains which are conducive to poor mental health”*

* stigma of disclosure

*“Prefer not to advertise [my condition] – partly out of difficulty of confronting problems, partly out of anxieties about job security.”*

**Conclusions**

***Recommendations for GEES departments***

Participants were asked what practical recommendations they would make to other GEES departments to support staff with their condition. Those with mental health conditions recommended:

* improving understanding of mental health conditions
* changes to working practices
* enhancing support networks

Some practical ways in which GEES departments might begin to respond to these recommendations are as follows:

* provide or signpost CPD opportunities designed to foster understanding of impacts of mental health conditions and stress-related illnesses within the workplace;
* review ways in which academic departments may be stressful, exclusionary and anxiety-inducing for all employees;
* publicise – or alternatively encourage the formation of – peer-support groups for staff with diverse disabilities;
* use the data presented in this paper as prompts to open up discussion – not only within GEES departments but across academic institutions and subdisciplines more widely.

***Further information and future research***

Further and more detailed findings will be reported in forthcoming papers: working papers are available from the authors on request.

In the course of our research we identified three groups who – though they may not define themselves as having a disability – would often benefit from additional support when contributing to teaching/learning within academic disciplines, institutions and departments. These groups are:

* HE staff who care for someone (e.g. a spouse, parent or child) with a disability or long-term illness;
* HE staff with a cognitive or learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia, some autistic spectrum conditions);
* HE staff experiencing stress/anxiety-related ill-health (e.g. linked to workload or uncertainty about future).

However, we note that relatively little research has explored the experiences, issues and needs of these groups. It is our intention to conduct research on the experiences and needs of these groups in the near future.

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