

Viewing academia as an exclusionary career ecosystem: Threats to the career sustainability of disabled scholars

Associate Professor William E. Donald ^a

^a *Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK;*

*corresponding author

w.e.donald@soton.ac.uk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3670-5374>

Funding Statement: No funding to report.

Disclosure Statement: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement: No dataset is associated with this manuscript.

To cite:

Donald, W. E. 2024. "Viewing academia as an exclusionary career ecosystem: Threats to the career sustainability of disabled scholars." *Disability & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2360432>

Viewing academia as an exclusionary career ecosystem: Threats to the career sustainability of disabled scholars

As a scholar confined to my home due to disability, academia often feels like an exclusionary career ecosystem that threatens my career sustainability. Sadly, such experiences, although not always talked about openly for fear of repercussions, are highly prevalent among the disabled community. In this short article, I begin by introducing the notions of a career ecosystem, a sustainable career, and their integration into a sustainable career ecosystem. Next, the focus shifts to considering three threats to the career sustainability of disabled scholars supported by insights from my lived experiences. Finally, I close with a call to action and some pragmatic suggestions that we can all undertake in the hope that academia can shift away from an exclusionary career ecosystem towards a more inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem.

Keywords: Academia; career ecosystem; disability; exclusion; sustainable career.

Submission Type: Current Issues

Word Count: 1,998

Setting the scene

Academia embodies a competitive and hierarchical career ecosystem where individuals in positions of power wield significant influence over the career sustainability of fellow scholars. A career ecosystem encompasses the interactions between various actors, acknowledging their interconnected and interdependent nature (Baruch 2013). Moreover, a sustainable career reflects the dynamic interplay between individual and contextual factors unfolding over time, with indicators such as health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden and De Vos 2015). The amalgamation of these two theories results in the formation of a sustainable career ecosystem (Donald, Van der Heijden and Baruch 2024), defined as

“a variety of *interconnected* and *interdependent actors* across higher education institutions [educational] and workplace *contexts*, whereby the lives and careers of *individuals* evolve and play out over *time* with an emphasis on *sustainable outcomes* for the individual, organizations, and broader society” (Donald 2023, xxvii, *emphasis added*).

However, based on my personal experiences spanning the last 12 years as a scholar confined to my home due to disability, it is evident that academia often perpetuates an exclusionary rather than a sustainable career ecosystem. In this short article, I delineate several challenges disabled scholars face, aiming to shed light on these issues. I then conclude with a call to action, proposing pragmatic steps that all actors can take to strive for an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem.

As a disclaimer, while this short article primarily delves into my experiences of exclusion, I want to express gratitude to the scholars who champion inclusivity and advocate for meaningful change. Your support is deeply valued, though regrettably, individuals like yourselves remain underrepresented among those in positions of power with the means to make meaningful changes to address the systemic issues.

Threats to the career sustainability of disabled scholars

Time constraints and lack of reasonable adjustments

Disabled scholars face a ‘double penalty’ stemming from the temporal aspect of career sustainability. Firstly, due to my disability, I require approximately 12 hours of sleep per day, significantly reducing my available waking hours compared to many other scholars. Secondly, some of my limited time must be allocated to advocating for reasonable adjustments. However, no adjustments are made based on the metrics used to measure my productivity against other scholars. This underscores the argument that excessive labor demanded to thrive in academia poses a substantial disadvantage for marginalized and disabled academics (Alexander 2024). Moreover, within academia's hierarchical and competitive landscape, requests for reasonable adjustments often necessitate engagement with fellow scholars. Unfortunately, unless it is their specific field of expertise, such scholars usually lack sufficient knowledge of diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation.

Here is an example. Due to being confined to my home, I cannot attend in-person-only events such as conferences, training sessions, or meetings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of social distancing measures resulted in the transition of many events to virtual platforms, which benefited individuals like me. However, despite this adaptation and the availability of technology to run a hybrid format, numerous events have since reverted to being exclusively in-person. Before the pandemic, the typical response to suggestions for virtual or hybrid events was that they were not feasible. Now, the prevailing response is that scholars prefer in-person-only events. This feels

problematic, considering that many academic conferences offer tracks focused on disability, equity, inclusion, technological advancement, and climate change.

In my situation, a reasonable adjustment under UK, EU or USA law would be to allow me to attend events remotely. However, such adjustments are seldom offered proactively. When I request it, approval is often contingent upon providing extensive medical documentation and/or awaiting committee approval because they do not have existing guidance. The situation is worse for scholars with invisible disabilities or those without a formal diagnosis, who often struggle the most to access the accommodations they need (Madikizela-Madiya and Mkhwanazi 2024). However, despite legal safeguards, approximately half of my reasonable accommodation requests are denied. In one instance, when I referenced the law, the response I received was dismissive, including the retort, ‘Oh, so you are menacing legal action now, are you?’.

These encounters highlight the systemic bias ingrained in the process of seeking reasonable adjustments, placing “an unfair and unrealistic burden on disabled people to access justice” (Ma 2023, 1). This issue persists despite the evident benefits of hybrid events, which extend beyond accommodating disabled scholars to facilitating valuable spaces for knowledge exchange for the broader academic community (Paul Vincent and Donald 2024). Equally worryingly, my attempts to engage conference organizers on disability, equity and inclusion matters often yield discouraging responses, such as ‘we already are inclusive’.

Reduced access to resources

Owing to my disability, I do not hold a salaried academic position, although I have visiting status at a higher education institution. Consequently, I lack access to funds to cover research or conference expenses. As a result, my ability to attend conferences is contingent on the availability of fee waivers. Unfortunately, I often find that such waivers are either not declared publicly or, if they are, only after the submission deadline has passed. Requests for assistance seem to be processed in an ad-hoc manner. Whether I can participate often feels arbitrary and reliant on the discretion of other scholars organizing such events.

Another instance highlighting this theme pertains to open-access publishing. Many publishers have arrangements with universities, allowing their faculty to publish open-access articles at no cost for a set duration in return for an initial payment by the university

(Donald 2024). However, such agreements do not cover scholars with visiting status to those institutions. I frequently face a dilemma: either (a) publish my work in a higher-ranked journal behind a paywall or (b) choose a lower-ranked one that offers open access. When my work is published behind a paywall, other scholars enjoy increased visibility and citations by publishing open-access articles in the same journal. However, opting for a lower-ranked but open-access journal often leads to my work being perceived as lower in quality by some scholars who equate journal rankings with the caliber of research.

Reputational risk

The “denial of social and physical access to various spaces has epistemic and professional advancement implications” (Madikizela-Madiya and Mkhwanazi 2024, 1). These repercussions extend beyond the two themes mentioned above and affect one’s reputation.

I advocate for approximately 50 scholars who feel unable to voice their concerns due to potential repercussions, and these fears are not unfounded. In 2023, several scholars who supported my calls for a particular conference to adopt a hybrid format were reprimanded by their institutions and compelled to write formal letters of apology to the conference organizers. As an independent scholar, I am fortunate not to be subject to coercion by actors seeking to maintain the status quo within the academic career ecosystem. However, such advocacy work entails a significant responsibility, which inevitably impacts my mental health and physical wellbeing. Moreover, individuals in positions of power who may exert influence in other domains (such as serving on a journal’s editorial team) possess extensive networks of influential scholars. Consequently, advocating for inclusion carries considerable risk to one’s reputation, mainly when such individuals are indifferent or perceive themselves to already be inclusive in their actions despite evidence to the contrary.

Call to action

I now offer a call to action for disabled scholars, those in positions of power to enact meaningful change, and other colleagues to promote a sustainable career ecosystem.

The impediments confronting disabled scholars are entrenched within systemic structures (Ma 2023), rendering superficial adjustments inadequate for resolving the underlying challenges. Therefore, a paradigm shift is imperative, one that prioritizes inclusivity as the cornerstone of decision-making processes. Meaningful consultation with disabled

scholars, preferably compensated for their expertise, is essential. However, the responsibility for generating solutions rests upon those in positions of authority capable of effecting substantive change (Paul Vincent and Donald, 2024). Crucially, when disabled scholars voice concerns regarding inclusivity, these must be acknowledged and acted upon promptly. A default stance of affirmative action, rather than denial, should characterize responses to requests for reasonable accommodations. Ideally, proactive measures should be implemented, obviating the need for reactive adjustments.

Furthermore, dismissal, abuse of authority, and gaslighting are egregious responses that must not be directed towards disabled scholars. Those in positions of power should reflect on how their conduct may support or hinder inclusion. Responses such as ‘it is not an issue for others’ or ‘granting your accommodation will set a precedent which we do not want’ are inappropriate and fail to acknowledge the broader benefits of inclusive design, which extend beyond individual requests. Moreover, it is essential to recognize the compounded impacts of intersectionality on the experiences of disabled scholars, including those sharing similar conditions.

Other actors across the academic landscape can play a crucial role in supporting disabled scholars. Start by engaging directly with these scholars to understand their needs and advocate for them. Emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependent nature of all actors within the ecosystem and the necessity for workplace environments to cultivate inclusivity rather than erect barriers. In performance and promotion evaluations, refrain from comparing productivity metrics between disabled and non-disabled scholars or even between disabled scholars with similar or different conditions. All actors should also facilitate disabled colleagues’ access to resources through institutional affiliations, professional associations, or open-access initiatives facilitated by journal publishers. Finally, researchers exploring disability, equity, and inclusion must translate their findings into actionable practices within academia to demonstrate tangible real-world impact.

In conclusion, academia provides significant autonomy, which is particularly beneficial for individuals with specific disabilities. We must engage in constructive dialogue, establish actionable recommendations, and promptly implement them to harness these advantages. Let us commit to transitioning from an exclusionary to a sustainable career ecosystem.

References

- Alexander, D. 2024. "The dyslexic academic: Uncovering the challenges faced as neurodiverse in academia and establishing a research agenda." *Disability & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2312227>
- Baruch, Y. 2015. "Organizational and labor market as career eco-system." In *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Careers*, edited by A. De Vos and B. Van der Heijden, 164–180. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Donald, W., ed. 2023. *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Career Ecosystems for University Students and Graduates*. Pennsylvania: IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2287407>
- Donald, W., 2024. *The Double-Edged Sword of Open Access Publishing*. London, UK: Times Higher Education. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29819.69921>
- Donald, W., B. Van der Heijden, and Y. Baruch. 2024. "Introducing a sustainable career ecosystem: Theoretical perspectives, conceptualization, and future research agenda." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 151: 103989.
- Ma, G. 2023. "Critiquing reasonable adjustment: calling for positive action to tackle disability discrimination." *Disability & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2287407>
- Madikizela-Madiya, N. and S. Mkhwanazi. 2024. "Academic identities and socio-spatial exclusions of academics with disabilities: A capabilities approach." *Disability & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2311357>
- Paul Vincent, M. and W. Donald. 2024. "The unheard voices of academia: Overcoming systemic barriers and fostering inclusive spaces for knowledge exchange." *Disability & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2312220>
- Van der Heijden, B. and A. De Vos. 2015. "Sustainable careers: Introductory chapter." In *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Careers*, edited by A. De Vos and B. Van der Heijden, 1-19. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.