

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ar Anabledd a Chyflogaeth

This response was submitted to the Equality and Social Justice Committee consultation on Disability and Employment

DE17

**Ymateb gan: Yr Athro Brian Garrod, Dr Marcus Hansen | Response from:
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Response to Consultation: Disability and Employment

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Notes: Our evidence is being submitted as individuals and we are both over 18 years old. We are happy for our names and institutional affiliations to be published. None of our evidence needs to be treated as confidential.

Our work in neurodiversity and employment

Our research is into disability and employment, with a particular focus on people with neurodivergent conditions, especially young people with autism. Our enquiry is driven by statistics such as those published by the DWP, and quoted in the Buckland Report earlier this year, that only 3 in 10 autistic people of working age is in employment in the UK. This compares with 5 in 10 for disabled people and around 8 in 10 for the working population generally. Neurodivergent people are, it would seem, structurally prevented from full participation in the workplace.

We have undertaken work with undergraduate and postgraduate university students, looking at their career aspirations and their experiences of finding, securing, starting, remaining in and leaving work. We have also undertaken work with managers and business owners who currently employ neurodivergent people in their workforce. The aim has been to gain a better understanding of their attitudes towards employing neurodivergent people, barriers they face in employing neurodivergent people, how neurodivergent persons fare in their recruitment processes, and the means at their disposal of supporting them.

By undertaking work both with prospective employees and employers, we have been able to gain an understanding of both sides of the coin. This is important since one of the things we are clear about is that the intersection of employment and neurodiversity is highly complex, with many actors, interactions and effects, many of which are unknowing and unintended.

How is the social model of disability being used to underpin employment and recruitment practices?

Our research suggests that the social model is not widely used to underpin employment and recruitment practices. Disability continues to be framed and addressed in medical terms. This implies that disability is seen as a personal weakness that raises costly problems for the organisation that need to be solved.

If the social model was to be employed, however, it would lead to positive systemic changes throughout the recruitment and employment process. The social model is predicated on the belief that it is society that effectively disables people, with particular focus on physical, attitudinal and informational constraints. Moreover, whilst our research indicates that physical (infrastructural) constraints to employment for disabled applicants do exist, the key areas of concern remain around attitudinal and informational constraints.

What barriers continue to exist throughout society that impact on access to work (i.e. transport, attitudes)?

Some studies have divided the barriers to participation by disabled people in specific activities into three groups: physical, informational and attitudinal. Our work suggests that the barriers to access to employment for neurodivergent people tend to be primarily attitudinal rather than informational or physical. This is not to dismiss physical and information barriers entirely: merely to suggest that attitudinal barriers dominate.

Much of the existing research base suggests that it is employers' attitudes that are the problem. Our research, however, suggests that there are two sides to the coin. Neurodivergent people may also have unhelpful attitudes to finding and being in work. It is known, for example, that many neurodivergent people have a strong emotional response to perceived failure (rejection sensitive dysphoria). If they fare badly in a job interview, it can make them less likely to persist in applying for jobs.

Our research has also shown that attitudes on the part of employers are of the utmost importance. Many employers seem reluctant to consider neurodivergent job applicants. Often it is because they do not know many neurodivergent people and therefore have stereotypical, often highly negative impressions of their mannerisms, skills and abilities.

Many employers consider employing neurodivergent people to be too risky. They may, for example, hold stereotypical views that the neurodivergent person will be difficult to manage, take too much sick leave, or insist upon costly workplace adjustments.

Our research shows that such attitudes can and must change, and the key to this is outreach and education. Accordingly, we are in the process of developing educational materials that are intended to assist both neurodivergent people and employers in better understanding one another.

Neurodiversity: A Guide and Resource Directory for University Careers Advisers: <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/som/research/researchimpact/neurodiversity-research/>

Neurodiversity: A Guide for Small Business Employers: Under development (with the cooperation of the Small Business Federation).

What further policy measures are needed to support disabled people, young disabled people and employers to increase participation rates?

The key to supporting disabled people is to remove the barriers to employment. This can be through education, improved awareness and access to information both for prospective employees and employers. The stereotypical views of disability held by many employers are due to a lack of awareness and understanding. Training and education for employers is therefore essential. Policies that offer resources and training for employers, educating them on the benefits of an inclusive workforce and how to effectively integrate disabled employees is therefore essential.

Awareness campaigns supporting the employment of disabled people and highlighting the benefits of doing so are required. Research indicates that employers are more likely to support policies if they believe there are benefits specific to them and their organisation as well. Our research indicates that employers tend not to see the benefits associated with employing disabled people.

In view of the current skills shortage across various industries in the UK, hiring disabled people should be encouraged. Disabled people represent a largely undervalued and therefore largely untapped demographic. Incentives should be provided and highlighted to encourage the hiring of disabled people. This could be in the form of tax breaks or grants, as is currently available. More importantly, perhaps, resources and consultancy services are needed as part of a wider awareness campaign.

Current recruitment processes are also discriminating by their very nature and represent critical barriers to employment for disabled people. Our research indicates that neurodivergent people struggle throughout the recruitment process, but especially during the interview process. Traditional interview practices tend to privilege neurotypical applicants. This may be due to neurodivergent applicants being weaker in inter-personal communication skills, such as non-verbal communication and social communication skills. Likewise, many neurodivergent people find abstract questions difficult and tend to be more literal in their way of thinking, yet these are the types of questions that are asked in interviews. Policies promoting the use of practical assessments in job interviews would be more appropriate, providing the neurodivergent person the opportunity to showcase their strengths to the potential employer. This would also be true of many people who have other forms of disability.

The provision of temporary placement/internship opportunities could be particularly beneficial for both prospective employees and the employers. These should be funded (either fully or partly) to encourage employers to create the positions, whilst also advertised widely for disabled people. These should function as opportunities for disabled people to join the workforce and gain crucial work experience, whilst employers would experience the benefits of hiring disabled people.

What can be learned from elsewhere?

Other countries have managed to successfully encourage the employment of disabled people. In Spain, organisations with a disabled workforce of 70-90% are exempt from VAT, whilst those at 90% or above receive financial bonuses. Within the public sector, 5% of all jobs are reserved for disabled people.

Post-Covid, Portugal has successfully launched the ATIVAR.PT program which encourages the hiring of disabled people through incentives and training/education. This was in response to a considerable skills shortage and high unemployment rate in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. Under this program, organisations employ disabled people for a period of 6 months and in return receive financial benefits. Organisations that convert the 6-month job role into a permanent contract are further financially rewarded through a “conversion award” of up to €10k.

In Sweden, the government offers financial subsidies for organisations employing disabled people, training and education of employers to encourage the employment of disabled people and grants for employers to adjust the workplace.