

REFLECT



Non-visibly Disabled PGR Experiences of Studies and Careers

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Executive summary

This report is commissioned as part of a series of University and College Union (UCU) research on higher education policy. This research investigates the experiences of postgraduate research (PGR) students with non-visible disabilities. Non-visible disabilities cover a range of conditions that are usually not immediately observable, such as mental conditions, specific learning difficulties, and chronic illnesses (Disability Unit, 2020). This research is a collaboration between three researchers from different academic backgrounds, each of whom has personal experience with non-visible disabilities.

This study uses a sequential mixed methods design, and is based on 135 survey responses and 6 interviews with self-reported non-visibly disabled people doing postgraduate research degrees within the UK. A summary of the quantitative survey findings is available in the appendix. Our qualitative findings are summarised under three core streams: routes through research, pathways to support, and career ambitions.

Overall, we find that postgraduate research students with invisible disabilities often face challenges in accessing support, navigating systems that were primarily built with undergraduate students in mind. Caught between two unions, UCU and local student unions (the majority of which are affiliated with the National Union of Students (NUS)), PGRs often struggle to know where to go for support with their issues. Difficulties in accessing support lead many of our sampled students to pursue studies part-time, and to manage this financially we find that students have to create their own work opportunities. Studying part-time naturally leads to a greater range of interruptions and disruptions to the course of a research program, such as supervisors leaving or retiring. All of this has consequences for non-visibly disabled PGR students' career ambitions, especially for those who undertook PGR studies with a view to pursuing academic careers. From our research, we make a number of recommendations to unions and universities. In particular, we firmly believe that workplace adjustments for PGRs should follow similar protocols as for staff workplace adjustments.

Introduction

This research contributes toward UCU policy research. In this report, we focus on the context of non-visibly disabled postgraduate researchers, who are under-researched in the literature on doctoral students and early career researchers. Non-visible disabilities cover a range of conditions that are usually not immediately observable, such as mental conditions, specific learning difficulties, and chronic illnesses (Disability Unit, 2020). This is especially significant given the increasing prevalence of non-visible disability, particularly post-viral illnesses such as 'long COVID', in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (BMJ, 2022).

According to the Office for Students Data Dashboard, in the 21-22 academic year 14.2% of postgraduate researchers declared a disability (OfS, 2023). In the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), disabled PGRs are consistently less satisfied with their experiences in higher education than their peers. In 2023, 70% of disabled PGRs reported being satisfied with their experiences compared to 82% of those with no declared disabilities reporting being satisfied (Neves, 2023).

While 14.2% of postgraduate researchers may have declared a disability, it is likely that the true number of postgraduate researchers with a disability is higher. ONS data from 2021 for England and Wales suggests that 17.8% of the total population is disabled (Office for National Statistics, 2021), while data from the DWP shows that nearly 1 in 4 of the working age-population in the UK are classified as disabled (Department for Work & Pensions, 2023).

For non-visibly disabled people, identifying as disabled typically also requires disclosing one's disability, precisely because it is non-visible. Disclosure of health conditions is often a fraught issue, including in higher education (Osborne, 2019). Research shows that students have mismatches in their understanding of their entitlement to support and institutional categories used to allocate support (Hughes et al., 2016). This lack of alignment between the language that universities use to communicate and collect information about students' health conditions, and students' own understanding of their conditions, particularly affects students with non-visible conditions like chronic illness and mental health conditions. As a result, non-visibly disabled students may not declare disabilities to universities or seek support from universities for their disabilities during the course of their studies, despite being entitled to this support under legal definitions, (Hughes et al., 2016). Moreover, often students who do disclose disabilities in higher education find that they need to disclose their disabilities repeatedly to different parties in order to get support (Borkin, 2022, Osborne, 2019). This can become a barrier to accessing appropriate adjustments.

Disabled PGRs frequently have to juggle their health needs alongside their research, while also performing the additional labour of navigating institutional support systems (Hannam-Swaim, 2018). Contemporary research acknowledges that administrative load is one of the major barriers for disabled students. Studies have explored how large language models and AI can be used to help students with the administrative burden of disclosure processes (Lister et al., 2021). However, recent work by Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (2023) argues for the need to build trust with students to improve disclosure and to look for ways to reduce the need to repeatedly disclose.



Methodology

This study uses a mixed methods approach, combining survey and interview in an exploratory sequential design (Edmonds & Kennedy 2017). The survey was conducted first and was open between May 2022 and June 2022. Respondents were recruited through UCU's social media channels. The survey obtained 135 complete responses. Survey participants were 75% female, 13% male, 7% non-binary, 5% trans and other minority genders. 92% of our survey respondents identified as white. Only 37% of our sample reported being in receipt of disabled students allowance (DSA). 14% of our sample required a visa to study in the UK. On average, our survey respondents declared two or more disabilities, with the average number of conditions being 2.5 and the maximum number of conditions being 6. The most common disabilities represented in the sample were: long term health conditions (52%), mental health conditions (48%) and specific learning difficulties (39%). Respondents represented a broad range of subjects, covering 14 subject areas, with the largest subject categories being social, economic, and political studies (29%), humanities (17%), and computer science (8%). Subject areas are approximated based on reported area of study.

Interview questions were created drawing upon the results of the survey. Participants were invited to interview based on giving permission for further contact in the survey, and based on having identified their disabilities as being non-visible. Of the 73 who consented to further contact, 10 were contacted for interview. Participants were selected to cover a range of subjects, genders, nationalities, visa statuses, and disability types. A total of 6 semi-structured interviews were obtained, ranging between 43 minutes and 76 minutes in length. Interviews were conducted between October 2022 and August 2023. The interview participants included 1 man and 5 women, one of whom is transgender. The majority of our interviewees had multiple disabilities; the most frequently occurring disability categories in our interviewees were mental health conditions (5), physical impairment or mobility issues (3), and specific learning difficulties (2). Two of our interviewees identified as a minority ethnicity. Further demographics for interview participants are not given to avoid deanonymization. Interview participants were offered payment in the form of a voucher.

Pseudonym	Gender	Visa	Subject Area
Tara	Female	Yes	Computer Science
Jade	Female	No	Humanities
Hazel	Trans Female	No	Social, Economic and Political Studies
Adam	Male	No	Computer Sciences
Courtney	Female	Yes	Humanities
Vic	Female	Yes	Humanities

Respondents gave informed consent to participate in the study. All participants mentioned in this report are given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

The research team conducted analysis collaboratively, using an open coding process, focussing on narrative life events (Söderström 2020) and students' encounters with university processes (Murray 2020). Analysis was informed by a sensitivity to our own ethnographic positioning in relation to the subject matter.

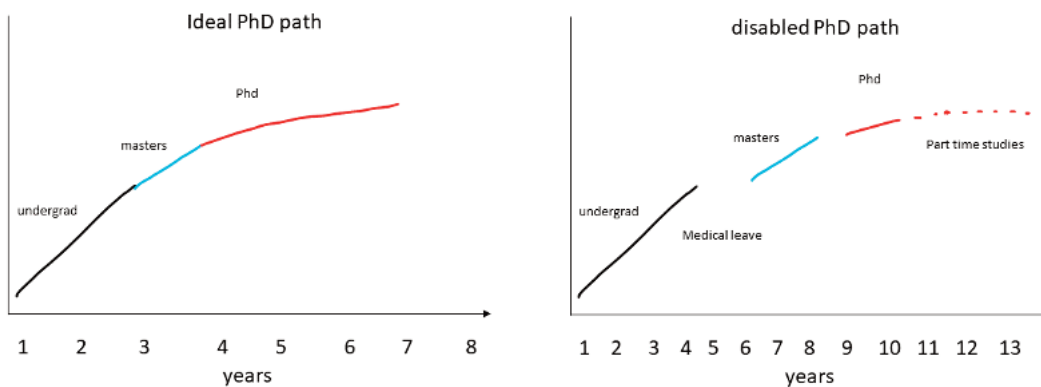
Findings

ROUTES THROUGH RESEARCH DEGREES

For the students in our sample, the trajectory of studies was often nonstandard. Research degrees are often started later in life, and include interruptions and leaves of absence. Many of the PGRs in our interview sample had moved on to part-time pathways, sometimes on the advice of their university or of their supervisors, and despite significant potential impacts on funding status and opportunities. Other research in the sector has noted that disabled students are encouraged into part-time studies almost as a substitute for more substantive support (Borkin 2022).

In figure 1, we visualise how the study trajectories for the students in our sample differ from the imagined ideal of a PhD path, inspired by life diagrams (Söderström 2020).

Figure 1: Routes through the PhD



While an ideal imagined path to a PhD might simply encompass three years of undergraduate study, one year of masters study and then a three year PhD, with little or no gaps between, the lived experience of disabled PhD students and PGRs does not tend to follow this trajectory. Non-visibly disabled PGRs may have their studies interrupted for diagnostic reasons, and may be more prone to burnout while trying to keep up with an ideal trajectory. One of our interview informants, Jade, talks about pushing through her medical conditions as well as a serious bereavement in order to study according to the imagined ideal path. These compound pressures combine with deleterious effects on mental and physical health, as Jade tells us, reflecting on coming to terms with an event that caused her PTSD:

I haven't really had the chance, prior to the PhD, to kind of process any of that. And of course, when you're doing a PhD and running a business all at the same time, and everything's kind of full-time, even though it's really not (Jade)

The nature of researching part-time leads to other complications in a student's trajectory of studies. Studying over longer periods of time makes it more likely that students will need to either change supervisors or follow a supervisor to a new institution. Several of our interview respondents had changed supervisors during the course of their studies. This can affect a student's momentum of research, as Jade tells us:

I had, like, an initial meeting with the new supervisor I was going to get and it was just like [...] “This isn’t good.” And I pretty much essentially just stopped working. Like, I stopped making progress instantly. Almost instantly after that. Because I was so demotivated. (Jade)

Since supervision is often based on personal relationships along with a niche understanding of a topic, moving supervisors midway through a PhD project can lead to mismatches in expectations about the focus of research and how research is conducted. This can have knock-on effects on a student’s ability to carry out their project, and has the potential to cause delay if substantial changes to research approach are necessitated. In some situations, particularly where a student needs to change institutions, this change can negatively impact continuity of support and may even require students restart administrative processes to access support, creating further barriers to PGR progress.

Being a part-time student also leads to financial pressure, since funding for part-time study is often significantly lower than funding for full-time study. This means that rather than prioritising health and rest alongside part-time studies, non-visibly disabled students must take on additional work to meet their basic living costs, as well as covering tuition fees where their studies are self-funded. This is exacerbated by a social and political context of increasingly limited availability of social security to support disabled people, whether in or out of work. For the students in our sample, this was rarely as simple as taking on a part-time job. Those who had tried to balance teaching or a standard part-time job around their research often found that this exacerbated their health problems:

So there've been times when I was like not making so much focus on my PhD because I've just taken on too much TA. So it was a bit like counterproductive at times where I was like working more than I would've done like full-time and was you know, having a detrimental effect on the disability stuff I was hoping to kind of like protect a bit... (Hazel)

“TA” in this excerpt refers to “teaching assistant”, and is often used as a shorthand for teaching seminar groups or assisting with running modules. While moving to part-time pathways may seem to offer space and relief for research students to manage their health, the decrease in funding, and subsequent need to take on additional work, may have the opposite effect.

For migrant disabled students, the picture can be complicated by a combination of visa restrictions on working hours per week, as well as the financial pressures of NHS surcharges and visa fees. As Vic noted:

Being a migrant is fun because you save up all your money and then every couple of years you dump your entire savings to pay for a visa. [...] Being a migrant really fucks your sense of financial security because you know that every couple years down the line you're going to have to pay upwards of like £6000 quid for your fees. (Vic)

Non-visibly disabled PGRs require work opportunities consistent with their needs and impairments, with enough flexibility to facilitate continuation of their studies. To solve this issue, Jade had started her own business, which we discuss later in the careers section of this report. This aligns with a report from the DWP that finds disabled people are more likely to be self-employed, with around one third of all disabled people working part-time (Department for Work & Pensions, 2023). Navigating self-employment alongside studies

substantially adds to the administrative load that such students face, even if it may increase accessibility in other ways. Additionally, information and support for students who work does not tend to consider the needs or circumstances of self-employed people or business directors; conversely, support for students starting businesses tends not to consider the needs or circumstances of current PGRs or disabled students.

While UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) have rejected the idea that postgraduates in the UK should be treated as staff (Grove, 2023), students in our survey sample overwhelmingly supported the idea of being treated as staff, with 93% agreeing that PGRs should have the same rights as staff and 89% agreeing that PGRs should be employed by universities. In our interviews, we found that a large motivation for this was the perception that it would result in better recognition for sick leave and entitlements to sick pay, as well as the possibility of phased returns to work.

One consistent hurdle faced by interviewees was restrictions on union memberships. With longer study trajectories, interruptions, and unforeseen circumstances, we found that interviewees ran out of time on free student UCU memberships and started to fall further between the support gaps between the UCU and their student union. We also found that our interviewees were frequently confused about their eligibility to access support from UCU, and about which memberships they were eligible to use, particularly because their working patterns with respect to teaching were often non-standard compared with non-student teaching staff.

RECOMMENDATION

- ➔ Unions should consider removing or clarifying the limit on the duration of free student memberships.
- ➔ Unions should consider carrying out an impact analysis exploring which groups are currently affected by changes to existing student and postgraduate membership categories.



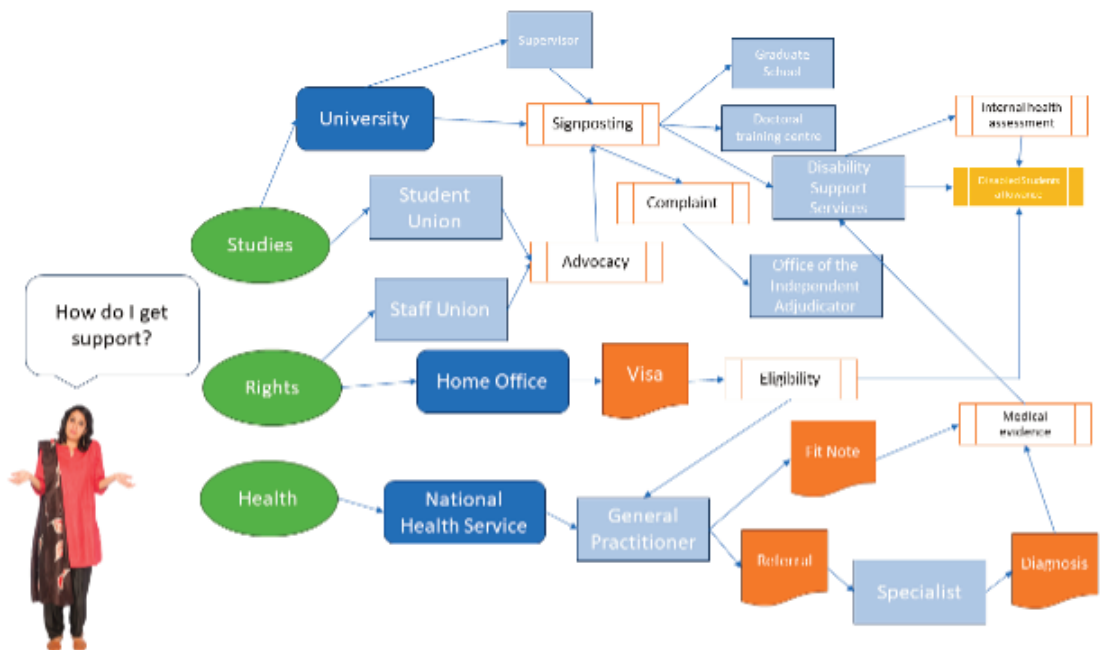


Pathways to support

Obtaining support as a postgraduate researcher can be a complicated process, fraught with administration, and can take years. In many cases, it is unclear to postgraduate researchers what kinds of support is even possible. In our survey, only 33% of respondents felt that the University had made them aware of the support available. Due to the nature of research work, adjustments more often have to be made in the local working environment. While 79% of our survey respondents felt that supervisors were willing to accommodate adjustments, only 44% felt that their supervisors had enough time to implement adjustments.

Using the interview data, we built a mapping of the ways that postgraduate research students navigate support pathways, focussing on the texts and processes that are mentioned (Murray 2020). This mapping is shown in Figure 2. In this figure, domains of support are shown in green ovals, main organisations are shown in dark blue rounded boxes, local contacts are shown in light blue square boxes, processes are shown in rectangle boxes, important documents are shown in orange boxes with a wave, and disabled student allowance is shown in yellow.

Figure 2: Mapping of support pathway



For half of our interview sample, a valid visa was the first hurdle towards getting support. Without the correct visa status, it was not possible to start the process of gathering medical evidence in support of a disability. After that, the next challenge is to pursue a diagnosis. Very few of our interviewees entered their studies with a stable diagnosis: the vast majority either had no pre-existing diagnosis or were in the process of re-diagnosis. For example, one of our interviewees, Jade, accrued different diagnoses during different points of her studies; one during undergraduate studies, two during masters studies, and one further during PhD studies. Since disability support allowance (DSA) is diagnosis specific, Jade discussed the complications of needing to re-apply to DSA under new diagnosis. A very similar event

happened to Hazel. Our interviewees found that this process could take years, and could be hampered by bureaucratic measures. One of our interviewees, Adam, told us that he had been on the waiting list for a diagnostic referral for two years, after the already lengthy process of gaining a referral from a doctor. Dishearteningly, many of our interviewees told us that they were offered inappropriate adjustments primarily geared towards undergraduate or postgraduate taught courses, like additional time in exams, once they had managed to complete the cycle and apply for DSA.

Speaking about her experiences soliciting adjustments from university disability services, Courtney told us:

They're like, 'Oh, well, let your instructors know if you, like, can't turn up for class for whatever reason.' And it's like, 'Well, that's great, but I am the instructor.' (Courtney)

Similarly, Adam told us about his friends who had adjustments suggested by disability services that were inappropriate for postgraduate researchers:

I know so many people, like, who are like, you know, "I'm dyslexic," and he went for the Disability Service and it's like, "Hey, I might need these things." And they're like, "Oh, well, like we could give you extra time in the exams." Like, I don't have exams. That's not the thing. (Adam)

These interactions with disability support services highlight that such services are not well-informed about the types of work and assessment that PGR students may undertake, nor are they well-informed about the role of PGRs in the institution. This inevitably causes frustration and diminishes trust, as well as delays to accessing efficacious support.

Cultural expectations about medicine, as well as prevailing cultural perceptions of disability and chronic illness, had prevented some of our interviewees from obtaining a diagnosis prior to commencing studies. For some, the increased accessibility of healthcare in the UK enabled them to take more control of their health and start the process of finding answers to long term health concerns. Vic told us:

Seeing myself as disabled didn't really happen until I moved here. [...] I think a lot of it also has to do with just the impact of having healthcare [...] And like it was really interesting to do that and then see like I've basically always been disabled. I just internalised ableism so badly. (Vic)

Starting to work with the system in the UK also required Vic to internalise and accept the label of 'being disabled' in order to access appropriate support. Understanding herself as 'unwell' was in many respects a new experience. Students can thus enter their research studies with very little prior knowledge of how to manage their conditions, and with very little prior experience in navigating the healthcare system.

In cases where people have more complex support needs emerging not just from disability, adequate healthcare support requires being able to seek support from multiple different services to cover all needs. This was the case for Hazel who requires gender affirming care in addition to care for her mental health and long-term illnesses. This increased complexity can create additional administrative burdens, and deepen the challenges faced in securing institutional recognition for these complexities both within the healthcare and university systems.

The complex support landscape means that the information provided by the university and by the unions was formative in how successfully students could obtain support for their

studies in a timely manner. Unfortunately for our interviewees, signposting processes were often ineffective, leaving students frequently caught in a loop between different points of contact and services until they were eventually able to pin down a route to support. Often signposting seemed to fail because the assumed end goal was to get the student access to DSA. However, the strict requirements on medical evidence for DSA were often prohibitive, and while equipment allowances were considered helpful, other adjustments available through DSA were often inappropriate to the level of study, or the context of access needs required. In general, the kinds of adjustments our interviewees required were closer in nature to the kinds of workplace adjustments required by members of staff, but lines of responsibility for providing those adjustments were generally unclear. These results mirror those reported in independent research commissioned by Disabled Students UK (Disabled Students UK and Pete Quinn Consulting Ltd, 2023).

Moreover, many international students on visas are not eligible for DSA or other forms of public funds given the prohibition on recourse to public funds (NRPF). This is so even if they are entitled to reasonable adjustments and other forms of support from their institution. For Vic, being a PGR on a student visa significantly impacted her access to support. She told us:

Especially as a migrant, you know [...] it's hard to know which services I can actually use and what I can't. So, you know, a lot of times I just kind of assume that I'm on my own [...] Like, being disabled is so impacted by my migrant status and vice versa that it's hard not to talk about one without the other. (Vic)

Migrant status also complicates disabled PGR access to healthcare. As Vic explained, her visa status requires that she pay an up-front, lump-sum surcharge to access the NHS of nearly £700:

They make you pay the NHS surcharge up front. So it's like £640 for a year depending on how long your visa is. You have to pay that as a lump sum (Vic)

When attempts to seek support break down, students are often left with little recourse than to rely on complaints. Students may initially proceed via internal processes, and then move to external bodies. In our sample, Tara needed to escalate her complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Unfortunately, following this procedure can contribute to worsening relationships between research students and supervisors, and can negatively impact relationships with other members of staff, leaving students with fewer sources of advocacy or support. Tara experienced a very difficult breakdown in relationships in her department following a lack of sufficient adjustments after a mental health crisis. Navigating these situations becomes complicated, and missing steps or information about processes can cause serious upsets, including the possibility of jeopardising a student's likelihood of completing their studies or obtaining professional references. These consequences can be especially acute when a student's presence in UK higher education is conditional on a visa.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➔ Unions should work with other organisations to coordinate collating and sharing best practice around adjustments for PGRs, with sensitivity to differences arising due to different fields of specialisation and differing study and work requirements (e.g. desk work and lab work, versus field work).

- Unions should consider where the line between student union support and staff union support should be and improve available information to help postgraduate researchers understand which union they should contact.
- Unions should foster improved collaboration and coordination between student unions and staff unions for PGRs relying on both in different contexts and circumstances.
- Universities should consider the overlap between reasonable adjustment for students and for staff; recognizing that adjustments at this level of study are likely to be more similar to staff adjustments than student adjustments given the nature of postgraduate research as an apprenticeship to professional academic employment.



Career ambitions

While 63% of our survey respondents were interested in pursuing an academic career, only 47% felt that they had good access to career information. This highlights a general need to improve career related information for PGRs.

In our interviews, people spoke about the importance of careers being accessible and fitting around their needs. One of our interviewees, Jade, had started her businesses in order to fill this gap. On the whole, Jade had done this without any support or resources from her university. Generally, our interviewees felt that while universities claim to encourage entrepreneurship, most only offer support for a narrow range of start-up businesses. Our interviewees were generally learning on the fly.

For many, accessible work means work that can be done flexibly from home. The perception that academic careers cannot offer that flexibility is a barrier to continuing in an academic environment. Hazel told us:

I did originally want to carry on. And I think up until I got COVID I probably was going to try and go down the route of doing a postdoc and giving it a shot. But I think now I can't, still can't, really imagine going back into an office situation. And I'm going to try to look for something where I can be at least part-time or hopefully remote... (Hazel)

Some of our interviewees pointed out that mobility expectations at postdoc were a potential issue for them in progressing a career. Vic told us:

...as a disabled person, like the whole network, my support network's here. I have like a very intricate between family and friends who can help me with accommodation like needs and things like that. I cannot move from this space because I'd have to like redo that whole thing. (Vic)

While the expectation that early career researchers relocate for postdoctoral work is common, this expectation often places a magnified burden on early career researchers across a range of underrepresented groups (Burgio et al., 2010). For Hazel and Vic, this expectation could ultimately prevent them from pursuing further careers in academia despite their desire to continue in teaching and research. This hints at a need to be introspective about the benefits of mobility during early career research, and examine if the barriers presented by the expectation of mobility unfairly impact early career researchers from underrepresented groups.

These problems can be exacerbated by considerations around visa eligibility. Courtney expressed concerns about applying for work opportunities in certain countries with her disability:

It directly affects what countries I can apply to to work in, because countries like Australia if they see [my disability] they're not going to give me a visa to be able to go work there because they have ableist immigration policies. So it's like, why even put myself through that if I know they're not even going to give me a visa? (Courtney)

Generally, our interviewees want to continue on in research, but want to do this in a more flexible way, with part-time or distance working. Jade told us:

I want to just, you know, have my own businesses, get it to—grow them, get them to a point where they sort of take out—look after themselves to some degree, and maybe just be in the research community in some way. (Jade)

For Jade, continuing flexibly in research is an optimal path. While the pandemic gave Jade a tantalising hint at how a flexible academic career might look, the return to status quo has in many ways been disheartening. There is a clear need among our respondents for flexible career paths within academia, and for a more diverse range of working patterns.

Other students in our sample were drawn to policy work and advocacy. Adam and Courtney had found themselves working on disability advocacy during their studies. In some cases, this work added to the emotional labour of being a disabled PhD student:

I was getting younger students and younger researchers coming to me and being like, "Can you be a mentor? Oh, this is going on." And they'll share things [...] and then you feel like emotionally obligated to, like, help them because you didn't get that help yourself. (Courtney)

As people already experienced in the work of navigating institutional processes, non-visibly disabled students may find themselves acting as experts and mentors to others who are also navigating the same processes. This work is not necessarily recognised or remunerated.

In other cases, this work had been fulfilling, and was shaping career ambitions:

...what I'd really like is some kind of a hybrid position where I'm both doing some research, maybe some teaching, and also doing some work in terms of, like, policy and just improving the state of academia. (Adam)

The expertise that non-visibly disabled students build in how to navigate the institution could leave them excellently positioned to influence and change policy for the better.

Overall, our research reveals a need for Universities to think differently about the kinds of careers support available to PGRs. In particular we highlight a gap in relation to support for those who are interested in becoming self-employed or starting a small business. We also find that PGRs are put off from pursuing further careers in academic work because of the perception that geographical mobility is a requirement for success as a postdoctoral researcher or as an early career researcher. We recommend further policy development and research in this area.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➔ Universities should consider how they can better provide support and advice for students who are starting businesses, especially in consulting or the tertiary sector.
- ➔ Universities should consider what support they can offer to postgraduate researchers in finding fairly remunerated part-time, flexible, accessible work, especially which supports career progression within academia.
- ➔ Universities should evaluate the necessity of international travel and study abroad participation as a requirement for postdoctoral positions, versus remote and even hybrid opportunities within their own institution and in partnership with research partners abroad.
- ➔ Universities should communicate clearly which postdocs and research positions offer flexible working and work from home opportunities, and seek opportunities to maximise the availability of such positions, including both research and teaching dimensions.



Conclusion and recommendations

Our research traces a number of unique challenges faced by non-visibly disabled PGRs in UK Higher Education. We highlight three core features of PGR experiences in our work. Firstly, we underline that for many non-visibly disabled PGR students, the route to research is not often a straight line but can frequently be punctuated and extended by diagnostic processes, medical leave and part-time study. Secondly, as disabled students seek support from HEIs they are met with a convoluted set of systems that they must navigate. These systems are often not designed to recognise the specific needs arising from PGR study and professional activities, like teaching. Thirdly, as disabled PGRs enter the workforce they frequently have to create their own opportunities, but generally lack appropriate support and advice on how to find suitable opportunities within traditional forms of academic employment, how to be successfully self-employed as disabled entrepreneurs within existing start-up support ecosystems, or confront a lack of opportunities which meet their needs for flexible, hybrid, remote, or part-time work.

We present a small but focussed number of recommendations aimed at unions and universities to help improve the experience for non-visibly disabled PGRs. Many of our recommendations are echoed in the recent Disabled Students UK report on PhD experiences in science, technology and engineering (Disabled Students UK and Pete Quinn Consulting Ltd, 2023), to some extent showing that many of these issues apply regardless of subject of study. Future directions for research might explore specifically pathways into self-employment, entrepreneurship and start-ups.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

To unions:

- ➔ Consider removing or clarifying the limit on duration of free student memberships.
- ➔ Consider carrying out an impact analysis exploring which groups are currently affected by changes to existing student membership categories.
- ➔ Unions should work with other organisations to coordinate collating and sharing best practice around adjustments for PGRs, with sensitivity to differences arising due to different fields of specialisation and differing study and work requirements (e.g. desk work and lab work, versus field work).
- ➔ Unions should consider where the line between student union support and staff union support should be and improve available information to help postgraduate researchers understand which union they should contact.
- ➔ Unions should foster improved collaboration and coordination between student unions and staff unions for PGRs relying on both in different contexts and circumstances.

To universities:

- ➔ Consider the overlap between reasonable adjustment for students and for staff; recognizing that adjustments at this level of study are likely to be more similar to staff adjustments than student adjustments given the nature of postgraduate research as an apprenticeship to professional academic employment.

- ➔ Consider how to better provide support and advice for students who are starting businesses, especially in consulting or the tertiary sector.
 - ➔ Consider what support they can offer to postgraduate researchers in finding fairly remunerated part-time, flexible, accessible work, especially which supports career progression within academia.
 - ➔ Evaluate the necessity of international travel and study abroad participation as a requirement for postdoctoral positions, versus remote and even hybrid opportunities within their own institution and in partnership with research partners abroad.
 - ➔ Communicate clearly which postdocs and research positions offer flexible working and work from home opportunities, and seek opportunities to maximise the availability of such positions, including both research and teaching dimensions.
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Appendix: Survey results overview

Results below exclude “not applicable” responses and responses left blank.

Thinking about your experience so far as a PhD student, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
I am happy with the support I receive as a PhD student	48	35.6%	27	20.0%	60	44.4%
I feel I am able to balance my work life with my personal life	49	36.3%	15	11.1%	71	52.6%
I feel that I have been given good support to plan for my upgrade	44	42.3%	30	28.8%	30	28.8%
I feel that I have been given good support to plan for my viva	40	42.6%	24	25.5%	30	31.9%
I require, or have required, adjustments to my work or work environment as a result of my condition(s)	92	68.7%	29	21.6%	13	9.7%

Thinking about the access needs you may have as a result of your condition(s), to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
Supervisors have been accommodating with respect to my adjustment needs	97	79.5%	12	9.8%	13	10.7%
Supervisors have been allocated enough time to implement my adjustment needs	48	44.0%	19	17.4%	42	38.5%
The university has provided resources to meet my adjustment needs	40	33.9%	28	23.7%	50	42.4%
The university has made me aware of the types of adjustments available	42	33.1%	15	11.8%	70	55.1%
I have similar opportunities to my peers with respect to opportunities to teach	78	64.5%	13	10.7%	30	24.8%

Thinking about career planning, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
I have a strong idea about what kind of work I want to do after I complete my PhD	82	62.6%	19	14.5%	30	22.9%
I am interested in having an academic career after I complete my PhD	83	63.4%	21	16.0%	27	20.6%
I have good access to career information in my subject area	60	47.2%	26	20.5%	41	32.3%
I have access to career appropriate networking or mentoring opportunities	61	47.3%	19	14.7%	49	38.0%

Thinking about the future of PhD study, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
PhD candidates should be employed by universities	119 88.8%	12 9.0%	3 2.2%
PhD candidates should have the same rights as academic staff	124 93.2%	7 5.3%	2 1.5%

How have other global events affected your PhD studies?

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
My studies have been negatively impacted by Covid-19	107 82.9%	13 10.1%	9 7.0%
My studies have been positively impacted by Covid-19	32 25.4%	20 15.9%	74 58.7%
Accessibility of lectures, seminars, etc, was improved during the Covid-19 pandemic	75 67.0%	24 21.4%	13 11.6%
Accessibility of lectures, seminars, etc has improved after the Covid-19 lockdowns	44 39.3%	31 27.7%	37 33.0%

	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied
How satisfied are you overall with your experience as a PhD student?	67 51.5%	25 19.2%	38 29.2%

