Ableism in Academia

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Stand for ambition
Kent.ac.uk
What is equity?

What is *not* equitable?

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The predominant model of disability in science is the medical model of disability, which describes disability as a deficit of the individual, and allows disabled people to be seen as lesser or less human.

In contrast, the social model of disability recognises that people are impaired by restrictions within their environment and/or society, and focuses on the physical and cultural changes needed to bring about equality.
What is *not* equitable?
“In 2020 the employment rate for disabled people was 51.8%, compared to 81.6% for non-disabled people.”

TUC.org.uk
“Disabled people are made to feel grateful for having a job at all”

Frances Ryan, The Guardian, 2018
“Disability doesn’t make you exceptional, but questioning what you know about it does”

"That quote, 'the only disability in life is a bad attitude', the reason that's bullshit is ... No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. No amount of standing in the middle of a bookshelf and radiating a positive attitude is going to turn all those books into braille."

— Stella Young
How many people are disabled?

Proportion of the population with a long-term health condition, classed as disabled, including those limited a lot, people aged 16 to 64 years, UK, 2021/2022 (Office for National Statistics)
“Only 25% of disabled researchers apply for funding across all disciplines, with the average success rate and award amount consistently lower for disabled researchers than non-disabled researchers”
TigerInSTEMM.org
PAY GAPS: Higher education has a shocking record on equal pay

The gender pay gap in UK universities is 16%, whilst the disability pay gap is 9% and the race pay gap is up to 17%.

This is disgraceful from a sector which supposedly prides itself in equality

#ucuRISING
“The STEMM workforce is less diverse than the wider workforce”

(Report July 2021 All Party Parliamentary Group on Diversity and Inclusion in STEMM | British Science Association)
Fewer STEM staff disclose than non-STEM staff, and this varies with discipline, career stage, and gender - e.g. 2.3% disclose in Agriculture and 5.3% in Medicine.
Inaccessible Cultures

“I simply cannot work the long hours that I did before I was unwell. ... This makes it extremely challenging to be as productive as I used to be. I am certain that this will affect my ability to publish and “keep up” with my contemporaries, and so I suspect that this will affect how I am compared to others when applying for a permanent academic role and grants.”

(Female, ECR, Chemistry, Physical disability or health condition) Qualitative research on barriers to progression of disabled scientists; Report for The Royal Society, 2020.

Staff report being stigmatised, challenged and questioned.

Some have been told not to pursue a career in academia as they would fail anyway in this environment.

“Ivory tower ableism is not accepting of illnesses, and there is a culture of not taking holidays or sick leave”

PhD student

“I stayed at the same university because of support, but will there be consequences for that?” “yes” PDRA

“I would really struggle to stay studying in a lab now”

Senior clinical scientist
The Ideal Academic

- Works 24/7
- Networks
- Goes to conferences
- Changes topics easily
- Works independently
- Can lift heavy equipment
- Is a man
- Is a leader
- Attracts research funding
- Does excellent Research, Teaching, Impact, Engagement, Service
- Can think all the time
- Likes to chat

- Is mobile
- Works independently
- Doesn’t need to use the toilet
- Doesn’t have a body
- Doesn’t need financial security
- Can lift heavy equipment
- Is a man
- Networks
- Works independently
- Can think all the time
- Likes to chat

- Has no caring responsibilities
- Can think all the time
- Keeps quiet

- Has endless energy
- Strong
- Goes to conferences
- Changes topics easily
- Works independently
- Can lift heavy equipment
- Is a man
- Networks
- Works independently
- Can think all the time
- Likes to chat

- Doesn’t need quiet space
- Hides any doubts
- Has no dietary requirements

- Can walk up steps
- Doesn’t need quiet space

Sang, K (2017) “Disability and academic careers”
Probability of equity in research
So what can we do?
The Future of Laboratory Chemistry Learning and Teaching Must be Accessible

Orielle Egambergam, Kira Hilton, Jennifer Leight, Robert Richardson, Julie Sarju, Anne Slater, and Bethan Turner

The Future of Laboratory Chemistry Learning and Teaching Must be Accessible

This commentary is a call to make the future of chemistry laboratories accessible and inclusive. We draw from research and lived experience to put forward a list of recommendations for laboratory-based teaching. Our authorial team includes undergraduate and postgraduate chemistry students, graduate teaching assistants, research-focused and traditional research and teaching academics, and a Diversity Equality Inclusion (DEI/EDI) academic expert. We all have lived experiences of disability, chronic illness, neurodivergence, and other marginalizations related to race, religion, sexuality, or other characteristics. We believe that laboratory-based chemistry learning environments, teaching, assessment, and resources should be accessible to all students and staff.

Keywords: First-Year Undergraduate/General, Second-Year Undergraduate, Upper-Division Undergraduate, Graduate Education/Research, Laboratory Instruction, Safety/Hazards
Use inclusive research approaches
Build networks and communities
National Association of Disabled Staff Networks (NADSN)
An Area-Specific, International Community-Led Approach to Understanding and Addressing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Issues within Supramolecular Chemistry

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Abstract: Diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) are pressing issues in chemistry and the natural sciences. In this Essay we share how an area-specific approach is "calling in" the community so that it can act to address EDI issues, and support those who are marginalised. Women In Supramolecular Chemistry (WISC) is an international network that aims to support equality, diversity, and inclusion within supramolecular chemistry. WISC has taken a field-specific approach using qualitative research methods with scientists to identify the support that is needed and the problems the supramolecular community needs to address. Herein, we present survey data from the community which highlights the barriers that are faced by those who take career breaks for any reason, a common example is maternity leave, and the importance of mentoring to aid progression post-PhD. In conclusion, we set out an interdisciplinary and creative approach to addressing EDI issues within supramolecular chemistry.

Keywords: DEI - EDI - gender - marginalisation - supramolecular chemistry

Inclusion (DEI/EDI), and the accompanying actions that will achieve change to be brought into the mainstream. A slow of chemistry editorial boards have appeared setting out the need for the discipline to address issues of sexism and racism, and to move beyond words and into action. In this Essay we will share how, in one field—Supramolecular Chemistry—we have initiated a new network that is listening to the needs of the community, then bringing this community together to support marginalised scientists. Marginalisation can come about for a multitude of reasons, and within academia it is often thought to correlate with characteristics of the individual such as colour, ethnicity, disability, class, and access. In terms of gender, it is well-established that women in academia are disproportionately affected by funding structures, academic and non-academic career pathways, and explicit and implicit bias.

This lack of diversity among scientific leaders may mean that research has bias and flaws that are unintentional and underdiscussed. The international Women In Supramolecular Chemistry (WISC) network has taken a creative and reflexive approach to harnessing the reasons why equality work is critical. In 1979, Andrew Lovelock, a self-proclaimed Black feminist, poet and writer, and if we want to change things, we need to do them differently. We aspire to be an agent of change. Instead of calling out, WISC calls in. Rather than pointing the finger at others, calling in is an invitation to discuss something that might be uncomfortable in a safe environment without fear of getting it wrong, and then to pull together the community as a whole to make positive changes.

All too often, EDI work is approached from a general perspective but each field has its own specific context and challenges. This is why WISC focused on supramolecular chemistry and not women in the whole of chemistry for them. We were also cautious of projecting our own experiences and assumptions onto others. Therefore, we set out to survey members of the supramolecular community to ask what their perceptions of marginalisation were, what their opinions were on a number of different proposed initiatives, and what they would like to see happen to support those who are marginalised by these kinds of research techniques. So, just as a chemist working to test out a new compound on a cell line would collaborate with a biochemist, WISC would adopt an 'insider' social scientist onto the board to ensure that this research was carried out with the community, and with due regard to rigorous, validity and ethics. It can be intimidating to talk openly about personal live while academia remains a stereotypically masculine place where children, relationships and personal problems are not meant to intrude. However, many people felt able to share their stories with us, validating our approach.

Respondents wanted mentoring, more visibility for women and marginalised groups, and confirmed that career breaks and the transition towards becoming an independent principal investigator are crucial times when extra support or guidance is needed if we want to ensure women can progress. WISC has also received overwhelming support from those most senior in the field, with words of encouragement and offers to mentor more junior colleagues, showing that the deliberately inclusive and non-confrontational approach of "calling in" the community is working.

WISC was launched in November 2019, and we are at the beginning of our work. We are following up the survey with a mentoring scheme and a series of career workshops.
Many researchers are now feeling the effects of additional emotional burdens.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been labelled a mass global trauma event, with all-encompassing effects similar to that of the second world war. It remains too early to estimate the full impact of these events on the health or career progression of marginalised individuals, but early results highlight that many experienced significant challenges.

The International Women in Supramolecular Chemistry (Wisc) network began a programme of research into lived experiences of life inside and outside the lab in September 2020. Although it had not been designed to capture Covid experiences, the timing meant that it was perfectly situated to do so. The chemical science community shared the general shock of lockdowns and lab closures, with the corresponding challenges of home-schooling, isolation and keeping research groups going. To capture the emotional and embodied experiences that these situations produced, Wisc used a variety of creative and qualitative research methods. These data were collected through reflective work with research groups and collaborative autoethnography, alongside qualitative surveys that received responses from supramolecular researchers across five continents.

Autoethnography is the study of the self in relation to the social environment and context. It is commonly used to explore subjects that are sensitive, contentious and that have personal meaning to the researcher. Autoethnography demands a lot from a researcher, more use to methods from within the chemical sciences. It interprets validity, rigour and repeatability differently; for example, an autoethnographic study gains validity by the researcher reflecting on their past in events and the impact and implications their actions.
Comment Pieces on Family Life for Nature Reviews Chemistry

Pregnancy in the Lab

Planning a Family

Listening to Fathers
Women In Supramolecular Chemistry: Collectively crafting the rhythms of our work and lives in STEM


Available Open Access from:
https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/women-in-supramolecular-chemistry
Thank you.