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**‘I’ve learned that I function as the sort of interface’:
Supporting disabled PGRs to navigate the ‘faceless monster’ of university systems and processes.**

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Introduction

This paper presents the results of research into the experiences of supervisors of disabled PGRs at a UK public university.

Part of a larger project looking at the experiences of both disabled PGRs (O'Connor et al 2024) and their supervisors (Alvarez et al, forthcoming).

Background

- Small but increasing numbers of disabled doctoral students-
 - 9% in 2017/18, up to 14% in 2021/22 (HESA 2023)
 - 14% of those completing PRES survey in 2023 (Neves 2023)
- Analysis of PRES results shows that disabled students consistently less satisfied with their experiences (Neves 2023).
- Despite increasing emphasis on EDI in research, absence of discussion of disabled researchers in strategy and policy (see UKRI EDI strategy 2023)
- Little research on the experiences of disabled postgraduate research students (PGRs)
- Very little work done on the experiences of supervisors working with disabled PGRs (Collins 2015, Evans and Zhu 2022)

Defining disability

‘Medical model’ of disability dominates in UK statutory and policy environment

UK HESA draws on Equality Act 2010 to define disability as

‘a physical or mental impairment, and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (HESA 2023)

We take up a social model of disability which focuses on the ways that disabilities are the result of the social environment and systems surrounding disabled individuals (Spier and Natalier 2023)

Definitions are complex and contested- we draw on inclusive definitions to include neurodiversity, mental ill-health, energy limiting and intermittent conditions as well as physical and cognitive impairments.

We use the term ‘additional study needs’ to make visible experiences of conditions that require extra support (in an ableist, normative system) such as those of some neurodiverse scholars who may not identify as ‘disabled’.

About the study

- **PGRs-**
 - Online survey of PGRs who identified as having one or more disabilities, additional study needs or long-term health conditions (40 responses / 39% of 103 registered disabled PGRs)
 - Follow-up in- depth interviews lasting between 60-120 minutes interviews (8)
- **Supervisors-**
 - Online survey of supervisors with experience of supporting PGRs with disabilities/additional study needs or long-term health conditions (22 responses/ 3% of c. 750 supervisors)
 - Follow-up interviews (7)
- **Analysis-**
 - Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022)

Academic chrononormativity and crip time

Academia premised on a 'corporeal standard' (Campbell 2012):

- Non-disabled bodies working full-time in a culture that rewards perfectionism, productivity and excellence (Brewer 2022; Brown 2018)
- Chrononormativity - 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (Freeman 2010, p.3)
- Crip time- the non-normative temporalities experienced by disabled people (Kafer 2013, Samuels 2017)
- Disabled researchers need more flexibility, study breaks, more time to prepare (cf. Price 2021)
- They experience delays and obstacles negotiating access- the 'accommodations loop' (Price 2021)

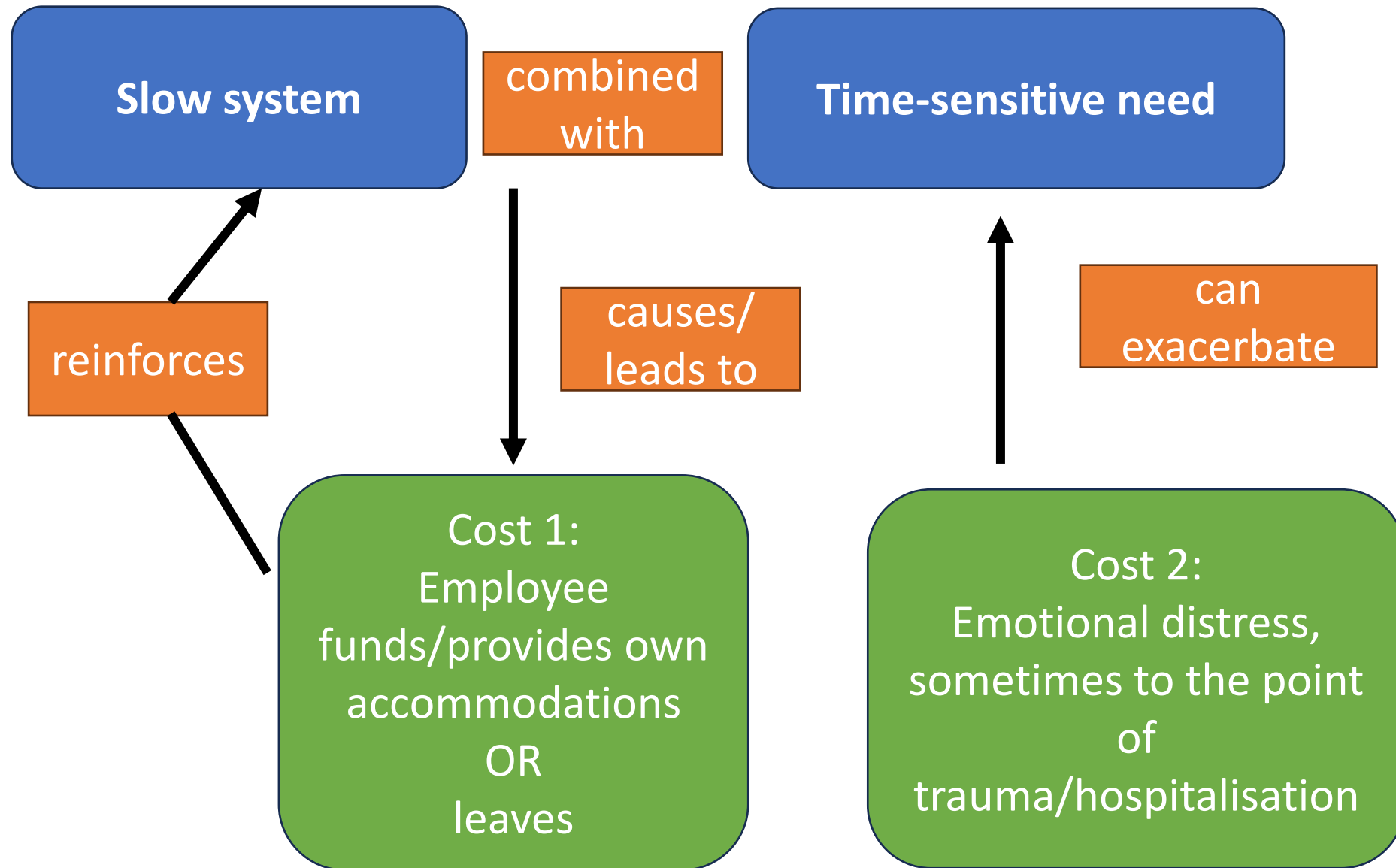


Critiques of individual accommodation approaches

- Responsibility for inclusion rests with student rather than institution
- Need to prove entitlement to accommodations (bio-certification)
- Intersectional implications
- Bureaucracy and workload implications for students and staff
- Difficult for staff to build expertise

(Angerhausen and Mishra 2024, Price 2024)

The accommodations loop (adapted from Price, 2021)



Barriers to study for disabled PGRs

[\(O'Connor et al 2024\)](#)

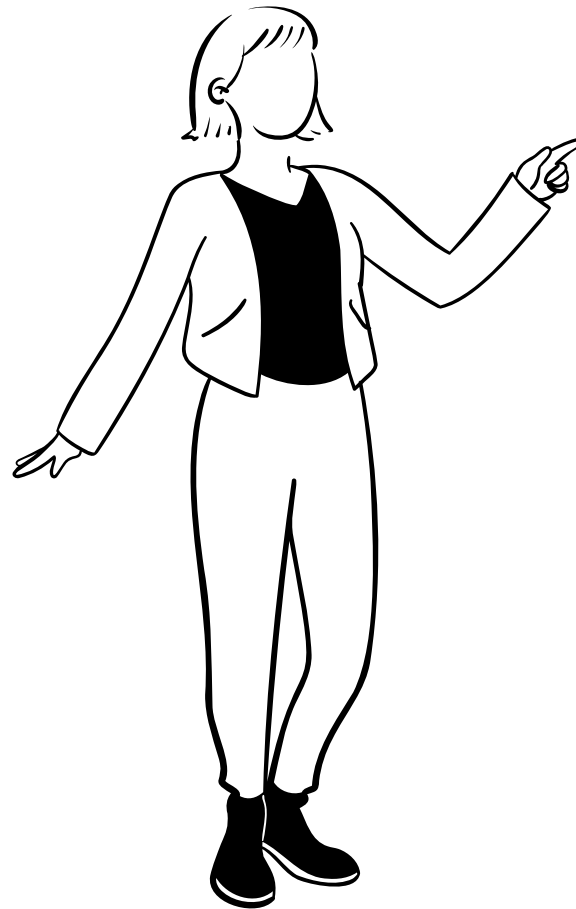


- **Institutional barriers**
 - Over a third of students felt that university support never (21.1%) or rarely (13.2%) helped them. 'It is an uphill battle to get things done'
 - Accessing support generates workload
 - Support is aimed at taught students not PGRs
- **Chrononormativity**
 - Only about 10% felt that they could produce work of an acceptable quality within accepted deadlines. Students needed to work at a pace not consistent with the requirements of the programme
 - Switching to part-time study a common strategy
- **Complex/unclear systems and processes**
 - Flexibility is possible within regulations but not advertised



PGR

- Time-sensitive access needs
- Need for breaks/flexibility
- Administrative burden



Supervisor

- Lack of training
- Extra time
- Administrative burden

**Disability
support
services**



- delays
- services aimed at taught students



- bureaucracy
- rigidity

Supervisors as the interface between student and system

When you've been supervising students, any students that you've had who had additional study needs, what have you learnt from the process, what new insights have you gained from them?

Well, I think I've learnt that I function as the kind of interface between them and the bureaucracy of the system, because all large institutions, any university has a bureaucracy which has to be negotiated. Mostly the students rely on the supervisors to tell them how to negotiate it and it does fall to the supervisors I would say. Again we don't have a student support team, so I'm not saying oh I'm not quite sure which form you're meant to fill in for that, so go to X, Y or Z and find out, I have to go and find out or fill it in for them or whatever.

(Supervisor 3)

Gaps between systems

With this current student I actually knew [about her disability] before she applied for the PhD [...] So I was expecting she'll have said it on her form and then the supervisor will be told, you've got this student and this is what you need to do; in the same way that our associate lecturers get to know that their [undergraduate] students have got disabilities. So I expected a process that would seamlessly come in and whilst I did get told, I didn't feel I knew where to go to get any help for that. (...)

*I got an email from the disabled students' team and that was associated with the results of her needs assessment.(..) And then my question was what do I do with this? So I didn't actually know what I was supposed to do with this. And who paid for what? She needed software and she needed, oh my god I've forgotten the name of the thing, but a non-medical support, study skills support person. And that was organised centrally, but things like the school had to pay for the software that she needed. And as a supervisor I didn't know any of that. **(Supervisor 2)***

Navigating bureaucracy

And maybe it's the experience I have, I've not had a problem in getting the extensions that they needed. But I know it is hard work and it adds a lot of additional burden on the supervisor to get that wording right. And it also is a lot of experience that younger, earlier, less experienced supervisors might not have, that you need to start on day one of first year, to document delays that you incur due to, for example, software not arriving and so on and so forth.

*To then be able at the end to say look, yes we should have compensated but because it kept on being a problem we couldn't compensate. And yes we already have tailored and you need to know the right words and that's where [university] systems can be very tricky. If you know how to play it from the get-go and I personally had fantastic mentors when I encountered the first student who told me look, oh, that's what you have, this is what you need to do. Just get a little booklet, like this one here and just document everything, just write it down, you will forget, just write it down. And it's these things that you need to know where the [university] systems can let you down. Because if you come to the problem in third year and you haven't had that... [...] then it can get really tricky. **(Supervisor 6)***

The 'faceless monster'

'I think it's the systems I find challenging, that I feel I need to fight with my students against the university rather than 'my university helps me with my students'. [...] The (student management system) is like a horrible beast that needs to get fed otherwise it comes and gets you. It's not something that supports us [...] it's the sort of faceless monster that [student] perceives the university in and that the university sort of treats her as if she is lazy and delinquent.'

(Supervisor 5)

The 'time penalty' for disabled PGRs and their supervisors

Results exemplify the problems with 'individual accommodation' approaches to disabled inclusion in HE

- In theory these remove barriers to participation by taking individual needs into account
- But in practice these approaches can be disabling
- They also require supervisors to take on an expanded role supporting students to navigate these processes.
- Students and supervisors are caught between the competing demands of a system that both slows them down and demands timely completion.

What can universities do? The 5 Cs.

- Advance HE Disabled Students Commitment sets out 4Cs
 - Certainty – Certainty that support for their disability will be in place at the commencement of their studies, and in the event of a delay or shortfall, interim support will be available.
 - Consistency – Consistency across different university departments around disability support availability and regular updates on proposed or actioned changes.
 - Communication – Continual engagement with disabled students, including communicating when policies change.
 - Choice – A choice in teaching, learning and assessment practices that support and accommodate individual requirements.
- Disability Inclusion Institutional Framework adds a 5th C:
 - Confidence building – building the confidence of the whole HEI community to engage in discussions around disability and empowering disabled students and staff to self-advocate effectively within and across organisations.

What can universities do? Believe disabled students

‘This work will take a long time. It will be an ongoing practice, not an event, and I can’t predict how it will unfold. But I’ll leave you with this one suggestion for breaking out of the accommodation loop, one step toward collective accountability in crip time: the next time someone tells you they need something- anything, any accommodation, for any reason- *believe them.*’

Price (2021) ‘Time Harms: Disabled Faculty Navigating the Accommodations Loop’

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