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'To prove I'm not incapable, I overcompensate': Disability, ideal workers, the academy

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Abstract
The experiences of academics with disability have received modest but growing attention internationally, but virtually none in the Australian context. This article outlines research findings from a study examining their experiences at a large Australian university. The article uses a materialist framework to demonstrate how capitalist social relations shape and demarcate an 'ideal university worker', how disabled workers find it difficult to meet this norm, and the limited assistance to do so provided by managers and labour relations policy frameworks. The research findings point to a profound policy gap between employer and government disability policy inclusion frameworks

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and the workplace experience of academics. This breach requires further investigation and, potentially, the development of alternate strategies for workplace management of disabilities if there are to be inroads towards equity.

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Keywords
Australia, disability, discrimination, labour, universities

Introduction

In the contemporary university, academics must be ideal workers. They need to be able to work long hours, continuously conduct and publish research to exacting deadlines, win grants, teach intensively to rigid timeframes, travel and network internationally, and demonstrate professionalism at all times. In Australia, job scarcity and insecure employment, including systemic unpaid work and overwork, also permeate the sector. Alongside this, academics work in a societal context that views disabled bodies as a problem. In relation to work, the disabled body is often viewed as 'an inevitable part of the "surplus" population, not quite fully human, unable to participate in society, at best a burden and at worst a drain' (Connor and Coughlin, 2017: 119–120).

Although university disability policies may emphasise diversity in recruitment, and wellbeing and inclusion in employment practices, present economic and labour market conditions generate significant obstacles in achieving this. Investigating the experience of disabled academics at a large Australian university, this research found significant equity, accessibility and health issues, and a significant gap between policy and everyday experience.[1] If this experience proves to be generalised across Australian universities, then institutional and employment policy frameworks that workers are meant to rely on are grossly inadequate to their task. This article argues there is a pressing need for more research into the experience of disabled academics in Australian institutions. It is hoped further research also considers new strategies to tackle the workplace 'policy to practice' breach identified in this project, a framework which currently focuses on individual rights within the labour relations system, rather than wider efforts to challenge contemporary constructions of disability and practices of exclusion in employment.

The first section of this article outlines the construction of disability within capitalist social relations and the notion of the ideal worker, before exploring recent research on academics with disabilities. Section two explains the project methodology. Section three presents the experience of the research participants, focussing on the volume and pace of work, workplace adjustments, workplace flexibility, job security and the impact of these on wellbeing. This data is presented in three themes: meeting the ideal worker norm; internalising the ideal worker norm; and the persistence of the ideal worker norm in the policy to practice nexus. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and questions for future research.

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Capitalism, disability and the ideal university worker

Disability and capitalism

Capitalism transforms, causes harm to, and disables the body. This is strikingly articulated in *Capital*, when Marx (1976) uses imagery of vampires, werewolves and Dante's 'Inferno' to illustrate the denigration of the body at the hands of capitalist social relations in factories in the 1800s. In the contemporary university, however, it is not the machinery of the factory floor but endemic stress, overwork and burnout that has widespread implications for health and wellbeing (Miller, 2019).

As Russell (2001: 87) notes, 'disability is a socially created category derived from labor relations, a product of the exploitative economic structure of capitalist society'. Bodies are valuable to the extent that they are useful. Capitalist social norms demarcate who is and is not disabled, then oppress the disabled body, with productivity and profits dictating the restrictions and what limited adjustments may be facilitated (Russell, 2001: 87). In this way, the disabled academic is immediately positioned as a problem and burden.

Cognisant of the relationship between capitalism and disability, the materialist social model of disability 'has had a huge impact in understanding disability in relation to social structures, barriers and exclusion' (Bengtsson, 2017: 151). This 'contrast[s] to the medical or individual model, [which] explains disability in relation to social barriers and the organization of society' – a society that disables the person or, in this research, the worker (Bengtsson, 2017: 152). Capitalism 'permits' some disabled bodies such as 'supercrips' – those that 'overcome' their disability and make productive contributions – which effectively designates other disabled people as not useful (Snyder and Mitchell, 2010). Society's (limited) support of disabled people is used to show how progressive and accommodating society is, ignoring that such support is highly inadequate and involves predominantly 'aesthetic efforts' (Snyder and Mitchell, 2010: 115). Disabled bodies are only useful in relation to productivity, thus demonstrating the bounds of acceptable citizenship.

The ideal worker

Capitalism, as a generalised mode of production, is predicated on the ideal worker. This worker is both readily exploitable and socially conditioned to workplace compliance. The ideal worker internalises 'worker' as an identity and is at odds with collective resistance and labour organising (Reid, 2015; Varje, 2018). The ideal worker is productive, can work long hours, is committed, constantly available for work and does not allow external distractions to interfere with their work (Howell et al., 2017; McClintock-Comeaux, 2013). The ideal worker 'is also contingent on the assumption of an able and resilient body, which can conform to the fluctuating demands of the employer' (Randle and Hardy, 2017: 449).

The concept of the ideal worker emerged in the early 20th century in the Global North, in a workplace context influenced by new managerial theories focussed on efficiency and productivity (Davies and Frink, 2014; McClintock-Comeaux, 2013). Developed primarily in relation to middle-class professional jobs, it adapted productivity

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norms from the factory (Davies and Frink, 2014). The corporate office – staffed with white-collar administrative, professional, management and executive workers – emerged to manage production, and these roles were occupied predominantly by white men (Davies and Frink, 2014). A society based on the separation between work and home aided the ideal worker to fulfil *his* role as part of a heavily gendered economic system (Davies and Frink, 2014; McClintock-Comeaux, 2013). As such, the ideal academic worker is gendered (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2016). Analysing the experiences of doctor-educators, Howell et al. (2017) state that their professional identity combined with the norm of the ideal worker identity creates conflict with non-work identity, work-life satisfaction, and creates barriers to taking advantage of institutionally flexible work options that might otherwise facilitate greater inclusion of women.

Positions designed around the notion of the ideal worker in a modern context render the disabled academic a misfit (Foster and Wass, 2012; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Waterfield et al., 2018). The ideal worker in an academic context has been explored previously (Howell et al., 2017; Kulp, 2016; Lester, 2016; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2016; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2016). Sang et al. (2015) highlight that the academic ideal worker works long hours, is willing and able to travel, is active and productive in the research arena, and participates in social networks that aid individual promotion. The academic's desire to succeed and the blurred boundaries of work and home are influenced by pressure to cultivate an ideal worker persona that meets output expectations (Sang et al., 2015). The notion of the ideal worker and the ever-increasing productivity demands of the neoliberal academy require the disabled academic to exceed their capacity, regardless of adjustments, to the detriment of their health and wellbeing (Brandão Dolan, 2018; Brown and Leigh, 2018; Dolmage, 2018; Horton and Tucker, 2014; Newton et al., 2018).

Existing discussion of the ideal worker in the academy and the neoliberalisation of higher education provide important insights for understanding the place of the disabled academic. However, analysis tends to fall silent on how these processes are embedded more broadly in capitalism. The need to extract value from labour, experienced in the academy as pressures around productivity and the extension of the working day, is fundamentally embedded into the labour-capital relation. Issues for disabled university workers cannot be resolved by a shift to a post- or non-neoliberal period, as literature can imply. The disabled body remains an objective challenge to the extraction of labour at the cheapest cost. How the social relations of capitalism and disability are interconnected has impacts for a policy framework premised on accommodations or adjustments to allow disabled bodies to participate equitably, and this is returned to in the conclusion.

Disability and the academy

There has been almost no attention paid to the experiences of academics with disabilities in Australia (see Mellifont et al., 2019 and Stafford, 2019 for author first person accounts). First person accounts and studies of academics with disabilities in the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US) and Canada provide important background for understanding experiences in other locations. However, it is important to explore experiences of disabled academics in Australia, which are shaped by local laws, regulations, policies and contexts.

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Since the 1980s, the Australian higher education sector has undergone a significant neoliberal transformation (Sims, 2019). As Blackmore (2015: 7) notes about changes to the student population in universities: 'Elitism still exists, strongly in tension with a trend towards inclusivity'. This is also true of the hiring practices for university staff, in particular academics. Thus, while the waning of elitism in universities might be seen to open doors to those who have previously been excluded, other shifts have mitigated this – such as the shift from collegial to managerial (Bergquist, 1992: 6–7, cited in Blackmore, 2015) and from collegium to enterprise (McNay, 1995: 6–7, cited in Blackmore, 2015). Further, within the general policy orientation that increasingly approaches investment in higher education as primarily being about 'economic growth, through the production of a highly educated workforce and application of the outcomes of excellent research, there is a clear tension between the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and for an economic purpose' (Blackmore, 2015: 8).

Neoliberalism in the context of universities has involved the marketisation of education, more closely aligning courses to industry needs, declining public funding per student, the undermining of tenure-like employment conditions and the casualisation of the workforce, greater managerialism, increased expectations around workload and publication outputs, pressure to obtain external grants, and greater punitive responses when targets are not met (Brandão Dolan, 2018; Brown and Leigh, 2018; Ross and Savage, 2021). Working extra hours is not only considered routine, but academic staff feel the need to work outside of standard hours to make the necessary contributions to be respected (Brown and Leigh, 2018). Unpaid labour expectations of casual staff to develop skills, networks and reputation are also typical (Mellifont et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). Overarching workplace expectations include academic progression assumptions for staff who are expected to want – and to be always working towards – progression to the next pay, title and responsibility level, which deepens the relentless productivity of the workplace (Shahjahan, 2015).

Academia features implicit and explicit rules about productivity and performance, setting expectations that people with disabilities may find difficult to achieve (Morrissey, 2013). Dolmage (2018) suggests that disability has been '. . . constructed as the antithesis of higher education, often positioned as a distraction, a drain, a problem to be solved' (n.p.). Ability, especially the ability of academics to routinely devote extended hours to research and writing, is normalised, valorised and rewarded, and disablising attributes or characteristics are stigmatised as 'excuses' (Brandão Dolan, 2018; Oud, 2018). Disability is framed as a risk to a person's capability to meet the required standards and expectations (Waterfield et al., 2018). This has led to a rise in the underlying belief that disabled academics must justify their ability to fully participate in academia (Waterfield et al., 2018), and they may thus overcompensate, which can further exacerbate disability as well as cause new health problems (Newton et al., 2018; Olsen et al., 2020). For casually employed academics, there is a hesitance to say 'no' to unreasonable requests when relying on tenuous income, coupled with the hopes of making an impression as a 'good' worker (Mellifont et al., 2019). Moreover, the experience of academics with disabilities is differentiated, with those who are (for example) outside the dominant racial and gender groups experiencing further challenges and forms of discrimination (Kerschbaum et al., 2017).

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Workplace and colleague perspectives around marginalised groups often celebrate diversity and inclusion, rather than address the material inequalities at play (Deem and Morley, 2006; Martin, 2020). Apart from rudimentary adjustments, such as computer, screen, desk or chair, adjustments have been shown to be particularly difficult to obtain. For example, Shigaki et al. (2012) note in their US study that requests for workspace adjustments are more likely to be met than requests for duty or workload adjustments. International literature also identifies significant gaps between policy and practice, as well as difficulty in maintaining accommodations once obtained (Stone et al., 2013; Williams and Mavin, 2015). In the university context, managers are key figures in providing workplace adjustments (Emira et al., 2018). Managers may determine what assistance is provided and what is considered reasonable (Corlett and Williams, 2011; Gregly, 2017 in Newton et al., 2018). This may translate to insufficient access to accommodations despite laws and university policies to address barriers. Foster (2007) concluded that adjustments granted varied greatly across individuals, were difficult to obtain and were often dependent upon line managers. Outside of academia, Werth (2015) argued that the social attitudes of managers to illness can also play a role in determining adjustments, regardless of policy. Employees provided with appropriate support and flexibility, including in relation to the variability of illness, had better working outcomes (Werth, 2015).

Shortfalls in workplace equity are greatly underestimated by non-marginalised groups, including those who dominate management and senior roles (Deem and Morley, 2006; Oud, 2018). Efforts to institute policies may involve non-disabled staff designing policy, assessing disabled staff's needs and implementing plans (Newton et al., 2018; Olsen et al., 2020). These opinions might be prioritised over those of disabled academics, resulting in the perspective of disabled academics being ignored (Olsen et al., 2020). While human resources (HR) and equity departments tend to have specialised training around policies and procedures, such expert staff can also fall short, proving unhelpful or ill equipped to facilitate access to adjustments (Newton et al., 2018). Failures in implementation can also mean staff must navigate access on their own to determine their rights, entitlements and potential adjustments (Campbell, 2020; Corlett and Williams, 2011). This amounts to time and energy exerted – more work – in organising adjustments (LeGier and Owen, 2018). This often results in only limited support and does not resolve a range of systemic tensions (Stafford, 2019).

Methodology

It was in this context that a multi-institution research team of academics with disabilities and their allies commenced a project on 'Scholarship Disabled'. The findings presented in this article forms part of the pilot stage of this project, which took place at a large, multi-site university in an Australian capital city.

The goal of the pilot project was to explore the suitability of the methodology, research instruments and direction of inquiry, and to gain deeper insight into a complex phenomenon before undertaking a national study. Following Malmqvist et al. (2019: 10), a pilot study can provide greater insight on a particular issue, beyond the standard literature review, and assist in developing instruments that are consistent and well tested. This, in

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turn, 'increases confidence in the trustworthiness of the data that may be obtained' and can 'ensure high research quality when a depth of understanding is sought' (Malmqvist et al., 2019: 10). The publication of the pilot project findings are intended to enable dialogue with other academics with disabilities, including researchers nationally and internationally, to inform the national phase of the project.

The pilot stage included a survey ($n=20$), followed by semi-structured interviews with participants who opted-in ($n=8$). Recruitment materials sought university staff who 'identify as disabled, a person with disability, or have been disabled by people, policies or practices at [Redacted University]'. As based on a definition used by Horton and Tucker (2014: 79), recruitment material defined disability as including: 'long-term illness; mobility difficulties; sensory impairments; mental health problems; compulsive behaviours; alcohol/substance misuse; dyslexia; learning/communication difficulties; debilitating injuries; chronic pain; autistic spectrum conditions; or "hidden" disabilities'. Recruitment advertisements were placed around multiple campus locations, including staff rooms and bathrooms, and shared across social media platforms and researchers' networks.

Of the 20 staff surveyed, 15 were academics and five professional staff members. Of the eight interviewed, seven were academics and one was a professional staff member. While most international research has focussed on the experiences of academics, the pilot study enabled us to include professional university staff to consider whether the same research instruments are suitable for both groups. In general, there were analogous experiences and issues raised by academic and professional staff related to accommodations, attitudes to disability in the workplace, and the tension between the university policy and worker experience. The key difference was that professional workers did not raise workload demands as prominently as academics, but this is a tentative observation given the small number of professional staff who participated. The reporting of data in this article focuses primarily on the experience of academic staff, and when reporting the experiences of professional staff this is made explicit.

The survey instrument included a potential 97 questions, which took around 35 minutes to complete. Questions inquired into demographic and personal details, the nature of the person's disability, university work expectations, how these are or are not met, the impact of these expectations on disability and wellbeing, and their experience of university disability and labour management policies and practices. Interviews were approximately 1 hour in length, using broad questions to examine workers' experiences across performing their role, recruitment, disclosure, adjustments for disabilities, promotion, exclusion and discrimination. The eight interview participants represented a range of disability types, and included seven women and one man. Interviewees included staff employed honorarily, casually, on a part-time basis and full-time. Participants were in both ongoing (tenure-like conditions) and non-ongoing roles. The interviews were organised and coded in NVivo, with key themes identified through inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning is an approach common to exploratory qualitative research aiming to find new theories, concepts or modes of interpretation (Silverman, 2011). The initial themes were discussed in the research team, and the interviews were then coded further, in greater depth. Themes highlighted in the second round of coding included: workplace impacts on health; the notion of the ideal worker; how participants do or do not fit this

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notion; the impacts of trying to meet this norm; 'self-exploitation'; and the tension between disability policies and participants' experience. This article includes excerpts and details from the interviews and the open-ended survey responses, the latter coded with the interview data. Interviewees (IR) and survey respondents (SR) have been assigned a unique identifier to protect identity and additional details de-identified.

What the research participants told us

Meeting the ideal worker norm

As emphasised in the literature, ideal workers can meet the normative time and productivity demands of the workplace and do so without complaint (Howell et al., 2017; McClintock-Comeaux, 2013; Sang et al., 2015). The academic workplace is different from many others, however, in that it combines a significant degree of self-direction and autonomy with overload: 'There is no upper limit on the working week for academics' (Gornall and Salisbury, 2012: 138). However, the nature of disability means such workers can struggle to achieve what are considered normal or desirable requirements of employment contracts. One worker raised the problem of full-time work being the norm, and how this prevented them from applying for a more senior role. Newly created positions in their discipline required a full-time employee while they needed to work part-time to manage their disability. Even after raising this issue with management, the situation did not change. This same worker also reflected on how part-time positions, in the context of high teaching loads and the peaks of this work, can effectively be more than full-time during marking periods. The rigidities of the teaching component of academic roles, which supervisors were unwilling to vary because of potential higher costs, was something raised widely by participants and is returned to below.

Participants reflected that they must always be available for work, must work more than contracted hours, and often at an intensity that had consequences for their disability. They were aware of their inability to meet the ideal worker norm, which in some cases was made explicit to them by managers, as in the case of this professional worker: 'my line manager said it would be too complicated for HR to administer the compressed work week . . . she was like, oh, but if you need to have a meeting with the Vice Chancellor, you don't get to pick the day. So you need to be available' [IR2]. In an environment where this is seen as a personal incapacity or unwillingness to work hard, rather than a structural issue, negotiating workplace adjustments became impossible. Casual workers also found it difficult to maintain balance and sustainably manage their disability, given they need to be always available, and flexible to scheduling requirements they have no say in. One respondent highlighted the burden of needing to negotiate schedules and hours afresh every semester, often with more than one supervisor concurrently. The participants' responses highlighted how hours of availability and relentless productivity are key to the ideal academic worker, regardless of their employment type.

Academics are generally required to be on campus in person and available to interact with their colleagues and students, as well as being able to have their productivity monitored (to a degree) (Sang et al., 2015; Urciuoli, 2008). Some participants identified the necessity of being present in a physical workplace on workdays during working hours,

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as a problem. They raised the difficulty of obtaining flexible working arrangements and working from home in the pre-COVID-19 period. Participants noted that this inflexibility persisted even when they needed to be at home for a documented medical reason, such as one worker whose trial of a new medication had a risk of a seizure. Despite approvals being granted in this and another case, and as Waterfield et al. (2018) found in relation to disabled Canadian academics, workers were required to govern themselves in accordance with normalised standards of productivity and to ensure their accommodation requests did not deviate too far from a very rigid norm.[2]

Respondents also identified how the physical structures of workplaces disable them, which is a problem compounded when action on accommodations was not taken. One respondent with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder was required to work in a shared hot desk office, despite letters from multiple medical specialists stating this was an unsuitable environment. In a somewhat more successful outcome, one respondent outlined a range of challenges related to their autism, including fluorescent lighting, high pitched-noises and obscure political games and language, which they noted as embedded in university life. This worker noted some changes that were implemented to minimise the impact of the built environment, but interestingly these were implemented outside of the formal processes for workplace adjustments.

Participants in this study advised they were hesitant to disclose their disability, in fear that they would 'rock the boat'. This is consistent with international research, where academics were fearful of disclosure leading to greater scrutiny, discrimination or dismissal (Horton and Tucker, 2014; Stanley et al., 2011; Waterfield et al., 2018). Such fears were not without basis, as participants detailed negative outcomes or encounters after making supervisors and others aware of their needs.

> [My manager] used like this claim that I was working, but not really working from home as a reason [to dismiss me from a role]. That's what frustrated me. And it also created an atmosphere which I felt that he could, at any time, hint to people about my medical condition and use that as a weapon against me. [IR7]

Across interviews and open-ended survey responses, research participants demonstrated keen awareness of the many ways that they do not meet the ideal worker expectation.

Internalising the ideal worker

The internalisation of ideal worker norms was discussed at length by academic and professional staff alike. This process of internalisation was particularly related to decisions not to raise issues about workloads or its health consequences (for fear of being seen as lazy, incapable or simply becoming more 'visible') as well as when discussing the requirement to be constantly available to work. As one professional member of staff put it: 'I think I've always felt that way. Just to prove I'm not incapable, I overcompensate in the other direction'. The participants worked to uphold ideal worker norms, often causing themselves great harm. One staff member had persisted through an undiagnosed serious infection that required emergency intervention, because of their propensity to 'just keep working'. Another participant had not worked for 14 months at the time of

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interview due to a profound deterioration in their health from continuing to push through anxiety that was triggered by overwork in an inappropriately adjusted environment.

Productivity and time devoted to work were central to many of the stories told by participants. They noted the disabled academic pushes themselves to achieve the norm of the ideal worker by extending the hours of work and working more intensely within their standard hours. Participants managed their lack of capacity to meet this norm – or their fears around this – by pushing themselves, often beyond capacity. This was internalised with constant worry about not working hard enough (see also Waterfield et al., 2018).

Workers indicated they were conscious of the potential harm working extended hours or work intensification might bring, but they saw little choice if they were to prove themselves as 'fit' for work and an ideal worker. One permanent worker explained it can also be a strategic gamble to work more intensively now to get out of junior and teaching intensive roles, despite the possibility of a deterioration to their already compromised health and wellbeing. Casual and contract workers felt the need to model an ideal of the always available worker who does not complain or request adjustments, for fear of losing future work. Participants indicated their hesitancy to take time off when ill, despite their uncertainty about being able to bounce back afterwards or the potential impact on their long-term employability. One interviewee discussed the internalisation process, and how they pushed through pain, illness and a potential health crisis to maintain the image of an ideal worker who does not get sick. In this academic's story, it became clear that that ideal worker is understood by them as one who also does the emotional labour of hiding pain and discomfort: 'I always think I should just push through. And I just really want to push through. But I can push through' [IR7].

Although it exposed them to significant risk, participants believed they must keep working and not seek to use their legal entitlements (such as regular sick leave and disability adjustments) because of internalised workplace norms, which were often accompanied by internalised or external ableist attitudes. Ableism is discrimination against or negative social attitudes towards disabled people. For example,

> I did really try to say to myself 'oh get over yourself' or 'suck it up' or 'just keep going', or 'you have people relying on you' or 'get it together and stop making excuses'. I get frustrated with people who don't have a strong work ethic and don't contribute to a team. So even if I was feeling unwell, I would push myself. . . . I do become a bit ableist towards myself like 'you should be able to do this, why can't you do this'. [IR6]

Such behaviour had significant and extreme impacts for some of the participants, as it did in international studies where disabled academics reported emotional, physical and work quality consequences (Olsen et al., 2020; Waterfield et al., 2018). These experiences are at odds with legal and policy obligations around accommodations and workplace health and safety.

The policy to practice gap

Labour relations frameworks on campuses, including equity and accessibility policies, set out how employers will include and manage disabled staff. Broader legislative

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requirements outline how failing to make reasonable adjustments, once requested, can be considered discrimination (*Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth)). Russell's (2001: 87) thesis – that disability is a socially created category arising from capitalist social relations, and that the disabled body is accepted in the workplace only to the extent it is productive (and thus useful) to the economic mode of production – is borne out in Australia's legal structures governing disability inclusion and discrimination. This is evident in the way disability accommodations ('reasonable adjustments') are enshrined in institutional policy, only to the extent that they do not impose 'unjustifiable hardship' on an institution (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). If it is too expensive or too difficult to fully accommodate a person's employment, then an institution is not required to provide such adjustments. This sort of response to disabled productivity is firmly located within a liberal framework, as it 'fails to expose either the way society is organized for the production of the material conditions of its existence or that the mode of production plays the chief causal role in determining oppressive social outcomes' (Russell, 2001: 87).

The university in this study has several disability inclusion and anti-discrimination strategic plans and policies governing labour relations. Disabled employees can access adjustment plans, developed between equity and diversity staff and the worker, which aim to support and enable them to undertake the 'inherent requirements of the position'. Policy states the university will ensure reasonable adjustments that meet the specific requirements of a staff member. This can include: flexible work arrangements; modifications to work premises and equipment; changes to job design, working hours and schedules or other work practices; and provision of training or other assistance.

Research participants who had formal adjustment plans ($n=4/20$) discussed how the arrangements were not actioned, insufficiently actioned, or begrudgingly actioned in managing their employment. Three of these four respondents said that their plan did not fully provide the support they needed to do their job. The survey instrument was not able to identify academics who previously had plans but currently do not because of past experiences, or those who never attempted to establish plans (be that because of perceived uselessness, possible negative repercussions or the effort involved). This is something to be addressed in future surveys.

Despite general commitments to equity and the wide scope of available adjustments articulated in university policy, underpinned by campus labour management frameworks and the law, participants identified policy to practice tensions at all levels of the university and the employment relationship. This included problems with human resources staff and processes, equity and diversity staff and processes, line managers and supervisors, and colleagues, as well as university strategy and the built environment. Many were aware of the relevant policies and how they were being violated, or were aware that something was 'not right' about their experiences with campus management and supervisors. Some of those who attempted to address problems were stymied, and others took no action because they thought there would be no change or there would be negative repercussions.

Comments from participants detailed ways that their experiences diverged from university policy. Some workers encountered resistance from responsible staff members or found the implementation of their accommodations deemed low priority despite

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appropriate approvals being in place and management being aware of their needs. As reported in the international literature, problems with the facilitation of accommodations were not confined to line managers, and workers involved in this study also encountered issues with specialist equity and diversity staff. One interviewee remarked: 'I had to keep chasing [the equity staff member] for things to be implemented and I remember calling her one time and she just said "I have a lot of people who are more unwell than you, you are just not a priority"' [IR6].

Workers noted that managing the tensions between policy or adjustment plans required a level of self-advocacy that led others to see them as a problem or being difficult. As discussed above, the ideal worker is also one that does not make a fuss:

> . . . so it's a double-edged sword, self-advocacy, because I make the situation better for myself. If it goes well. And there are flawed effects for others who come to university as well, right? But because I am so outspoken, I am known. And this means that I can be seen. If people don't understand the principles of advocacy, like making the situation better for someone creating change, then, then you can be viewed as a complainant . . . there's a thing over your head. [IR8]

While this study identified policy transgressions across all levels of implementation, failures related to timetable adjustments and teaching allocations were particularly prominent. These issues were connected to both the potential impact on school or faculty level budgets, and the rigidities in timetable and teaching planning processes. Such adjustments can produce ongoing organisational costs compared to the standard worker's teaching load. As Olsen et al. (2020) argue, universities perceive students and academics as 'earners' or 'costers', and disabled academics are considered costers who require investment to be included. A casual worker is (legally) more disposable and replaceable, and the participants in the study were keenly aware of this and cognisant that there is an extensive pool of workers available for casual teaching roles (Karanikolas, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). Casual staff felt they were viewed as too complex to manage or adjust for, and if they spoke up, they would risk getting no work at all.

Lack of adherence to workplace plans by supervisors or managers meant additional efforts on the part of workers advocating for themselves, and often eventual acquiescence or exclusion. Workers were either: forced to tolerate the situation (for some until breaking point); pushed out of the situation (e.g. particular roles); or forced to make alternate arrangements to avoid the situation (e.g. some ceased teaching and took on additional governance roles). The participants in this study demonstrate that for these 20 workers the policy frameworks were experienced as predominantly aesthetic efforts that did little to support workplace inclusion or best practice.

Discussion and conclusions

For the disabled academic, '[t]ime and the use of time mark unruly bodies as out of place in academic institutions' (Shahjahan, 2015: 492). Time is the 'key coercive force in the neoliberal academy that prompts us to view our own potential "lack of fit" as a form of failure' (Shahjahan, 2015: 491). While the neoliberal era may have intensified certain dynamics, it is capitalist norms that mark out the disabled body and economic factors that dictate restrictions and limited (possible) adjustments.

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Our participants' stories have provided a rich insight into a complex workplace and labour relations experience. Their responses allow some provisional conclusions to be made, as well as comments about future directions for research. The project also provided the research team with an opportunity to refine the research instruments and judge the resources necessary to undertake a national study.

Disabled academics are expected to be ideal workers, but many are not able to or are not supported sufficiently to become such. This research suggests barriers arise for disabled academics for three related reasons. Firstly, and more broadly than just the university setting, capitalism requires a certain type of worker that models an ideal many people with disabilities struggle to achieve. At the extreme, meeting the academic worker ideal requires staff to go above and beyond the formal requirements of their role and their limits, impacting their health and wellbeing. Secondly, the processes of neoliberalisation have heightened the work intensity and performance expectations in recent decades, which presents sharp challenges for academics with disabilities. As an aside, this situation appears to have further intensified due to the economic impact of COVID-19 on Australian universities, as a result of: border closures; low international student income; sector-wide mass redundancies; and fiscal restraint placed on the sector by the federal government. Thirdly, there is a profound tension between well-established objectives of inclusion and equity for academics with disabilities, and the policies that manage labour relations in this regard, and the realities disabled workers face in relying on and mobilising these frameworks to build sustainable careers. Perhaps the disconnect between policy and practice on campuses is irresolvable, given the individualised nature of these frameworks and the embedded social relations that frame and delimit disabled people.

The struggles of these research participants – their efforts to meet the ideal worker norm, their failures to do so, and the lack of managerial and institutional support in practice – are being experienced in isolated and individualised ways. This should not come as a surprise, as legal and institutional policy processes for disabled people, including those that pertain to labour relations, traditionally involve the codification of an individual's rights and how they can 'access' them, which can 'facilitate the attitude that disability is an *individual* "problem"' (Foster, 2007: 79, emphasis in original). In this project only one respondent reported contacting their union for assistance, and another staff member outlined that their self-advocacy had positive flow-on effects for other disabled staff. However, no participants mentioned any collective effort to address the challenges disabled staff face.

If the experience of participants in this study proves to be even partially replicated across the sector, future research must consider whether the current disability policy frameworks as they relate to employment are significantly flawed. In the Australian context, based on this study and the limited other literature, current frameworks may simply be incapable of integrating, supporting and protecting workers with disabilities. It is essential to explore this apparent policy to practice gap in greater detail. Further research must consider whether individualised strategies around rights can shift the wider terrain to the extent that is needed. Broader inquiry into this question may open new horizons for inclusion and equity in workplaces, including ones where collectivist approaches might strategically be centred over the pursuit of individual rights and

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claims. As such, research should ask explicitly about workers' involvement in more 'collective' approaches to disability rights, such as through their trade unions and staff disability networks. Further, issues pertaining to disability in the workplace must be understood as industrial issues related to labour relations and the policing of disabled workers, as opposed to questions simply about acceptance and discrimination – including by unions themselves.

A useful supplemental line of inquiry in future research might seek out the experience of disabled staff who were successful in utilising policy frameworks or other mechanisms, even if these are few, to establish the conditions of possibility within the current labour relations and policy frameworks on campuses. Such an approach could eschew a deficit lens and emphasise how disabled people succeed despite challenges, as well as assess common elements when staff have positive or successful experiences,

Ultimately, the implications of this study firmly highlight the profound policy gap between management of staff with disabilities by employers, government legal and disability policy inclusion frameworks, and the day-to-day experience of academics in the workplace.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article terminology is interchanged between 'academics/workers/staff with disability' and 'disabled academics/workers/staff'. Both terms are used by participants and disabled researchers on this project team.
2. COVID-19 shutdowns across Australia have significantly changed acceptance around working from home, where previously such a notion was often met with resistance or hostility. Whether this new flexibility lasts in the wake of mass vaccination will be important to examine in further research (see also, Brown, 2021).

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