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Disability Inclusive Science Careers

Reimagining academia

#InclusionMatters

Vignettes:

1. Alex: Experiencing endometriosis, co-morbid with mental health conditions

2. Hazel: Experiencing chronic fatigue syndrome

3. Michael: Managing STEM employees

4. Elizabeth: Works in Human Resources for a large university

Alex

Alex is gender non-binary. They experience endometriosis, heavy periods, a respiratory condition and have been diagnosed with mental health issues. They have also been diagnosed with autism but do not consider that diagnosis a disability. They often use a wheelchair. They are completing a PhD in Geosciences. Alex's colleagues know that they are disabled, and they have disclosed their mental health issues to their line manager.

During their PhD they took a substantial leave of absence and have formal agreement in place to complete their PhD part time. They have informal arrangements with their line manager regarding their use of the lab and flexible hours. To enter the workplace, Alex passes through an area where people congregate to smoke causing them discomfort. The lift in their workplace is regularly out of service. They work in an open plan office, which makes them uncomfortable as they like to be able to see who is coming and going. They also work in a lab that requires specific cleanliness conditions. Conferences are often inaccessible to Alex, as are their institution's teaching rooms, meaning they can't teach.

The team that Alex is part of often go to the local pub for socials that are in a city centre and not accessible or require PGR students attend away days without giving adequate information about location and asking students to provide justifications for non-attendance.

Hazel

Hazel has chronic fatigue. She is a post-doctoral researcher on a three year research council funded contract. Though she was ill before her contract started, she was diagnosed with chronic fatigue while taking sick leave from work with a recurring respiratory illness. She had a phased return to work, but after a while was reduced to part time hours. She occasionally does tutoring at her employing institution to subsidise her income.

Her line manager is not aware that disability is a protected characteristic and is reluctant to offer her additional workplace support. She has a suspicion that he told a colleague advertising some hours not to employ her. She has additional concerns that there are gaps in her CV, and that her publication record is not as strong as it should be because of the gaps in her employment trajectory and reduced work hours.

Michael

Michael is a Head of School, and Principal Investigator on a large project in a physics department. In his role he has been responsible for the interviewing and recruiting of over 250 staff. He isn't aware of any of those applicants/appointees being disabled. He only had examples of employees who acquired an impairment during their employment.

One of the post-doctoral researchers, on a fixed term contract, became suddenly unwell. The illness resulted in an acquired brain injury. After receiving treatment, the researcher returned to work. Michael felt that the researcher did not return to their previous level of productivity and capability.

He referred the staff member to occupational health. Some small adjustments were made to the employee's working environment. Michael continued to access occupational health advice, which he described as 'reasonable' and 'professional'. He explained how occupational health professionals advised that the researcher was expected to recover further, but that this recovery would extend beyond the length of their contract. The researcher left the university. Michael said that he had thought the outcome was positive, and that the researcher was satisfied with the support they received. However, he has heard that since leaving the researcher has expressed negative views about his experience in the school.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a senior HR advisor who has worked in HE for over ten years. She explained how across universities, less academics disclose being disabled or having a long term condition than professional services staff.

She explained that university policies relating to disability are due to be reviewed, but said it wasn't a priority because other policies were more out of date. The relevant policies included absence management, capability and performance management. For Elizabeth it is important to treat everyone the same, and not identify anyone as 'special'. To explain her point, she pointed out that people in the Deaf community do not consider themselves disabled.

She explained how reasonable adjustments for academics in STEM might include to extended paid sick leave, but that things like that were, and should be decided on a case by case basis. She also said that keeping somebody on full pay when they're doing part-time hours isn't a reasonable adjustment. Lastly, she described how if an employee is unable to do their job through ill health but they are deemed able to do a different job, the university she works for can provide a protected period for the staff member so that they can keep their salary until it drops to the salary assigned to the new role

Vignette-based workshop I

- What are the workplace barriers which are raised by the vignettes?
  - In general
  - Specific to STEM

- What adjustments are required to promote workplace (lab) accessibility?

- How might non-binary and other LGBT+ identities impact on experiences of obtaining reasonable adjustments/being welcomed to STEM careers?

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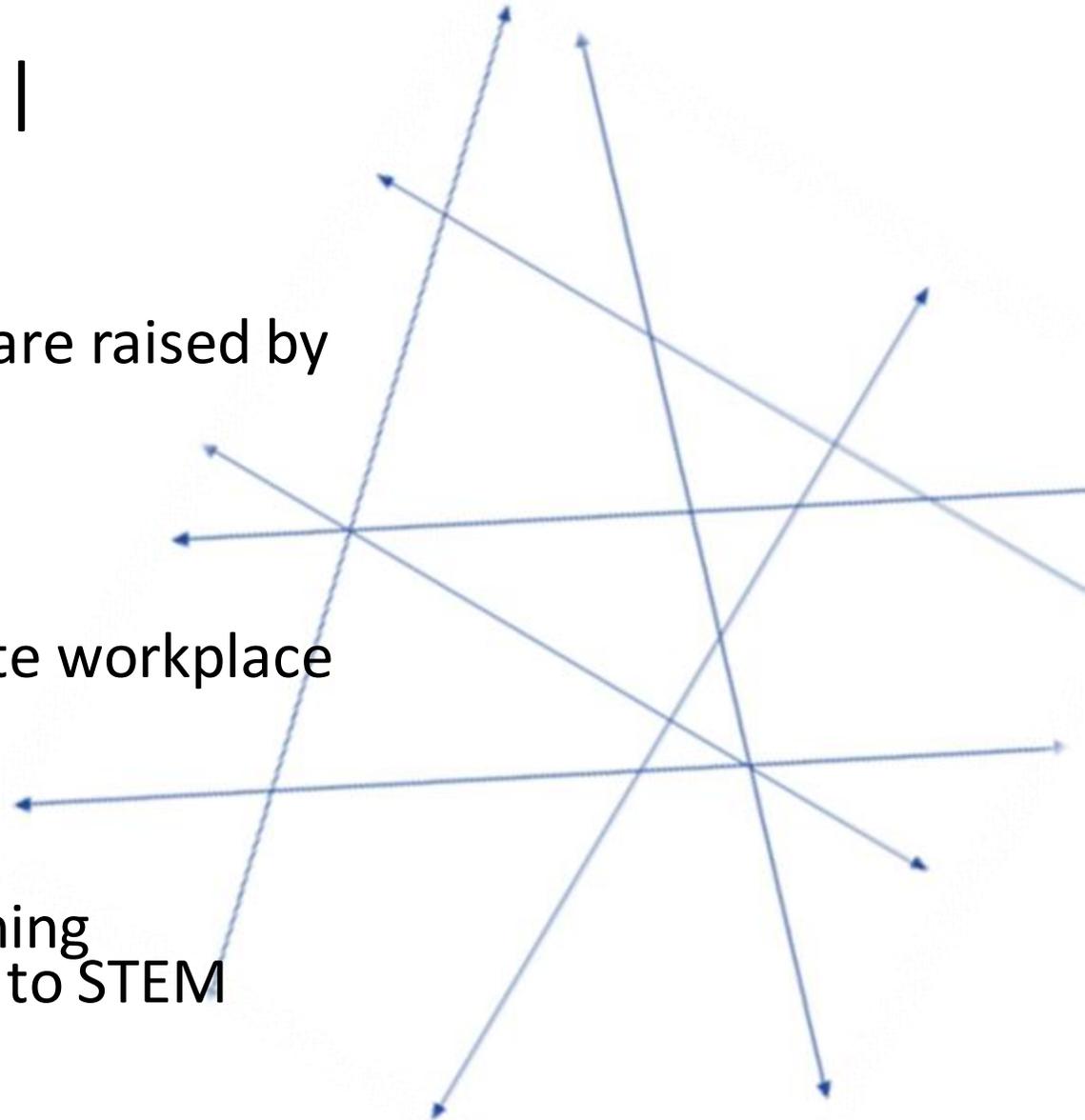
Vignette-based workshop II

- What structural and cultural changes and/or training is required to move from individual 'reasonable' adjustments to creating environments that value disabled LGBT+ people and enable them to reach their potential?

- How could disability staff networks, the UCU and other disability and LGBT+ advocacy groups support the efforts in questions 2-4?

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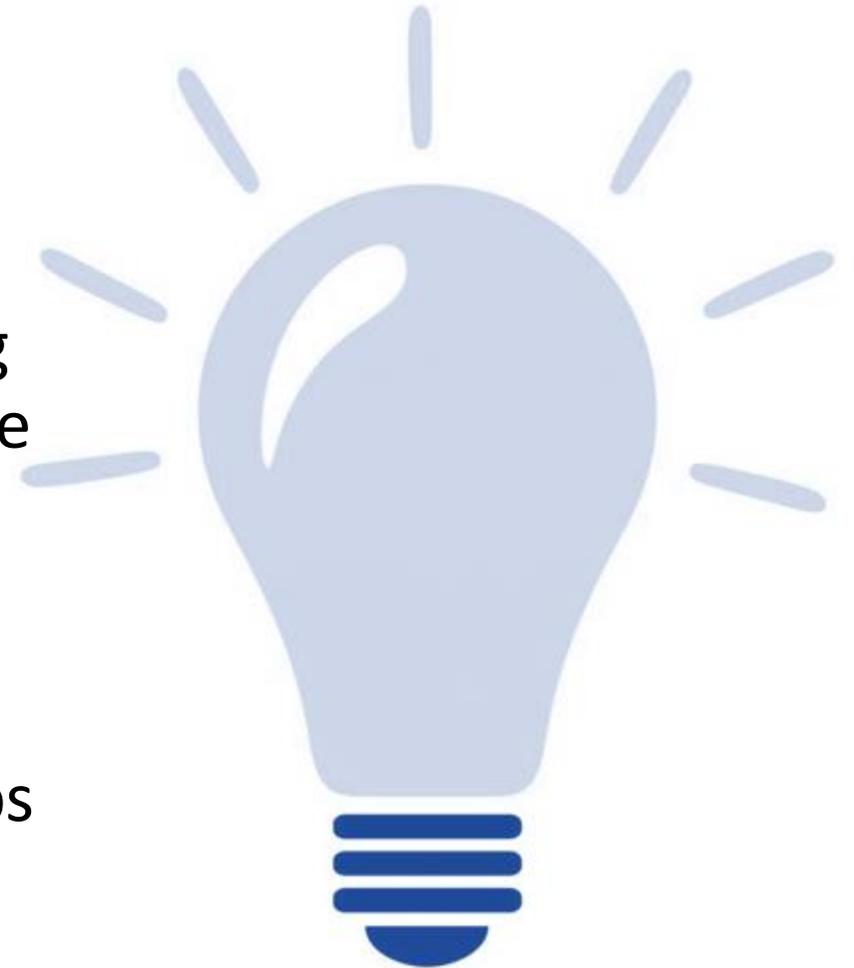
Stay in touch

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Disability Inclusive Science Careers

An EPSRC funded project to improve disability inclusion in science careers

HERIOT WATT UNIVERSITY

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The DISC team

The DISC team:

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advice and guidance. And in terms of STEM subjects, I'm trying to think whether

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