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It's not just for ME I ask

15 May 2008

Academia needs to be more accommodating to those who cannot or choose not to work full time, argues Keith Kahn-Harris

The image of the comfortably sinecured academic, puffing on his (sic) pipe in his leather armchair by a roaring fire in a book-lined study has been anachronistic for some decades now. I cannot be the only one who, as an undergraduate, had this image at the back of my mind when contemplating an academic career. Nor am I the only one to have found the realities of an academic career much less comfortable than I had hoped. Nonetheless, I would like to share my own experience to highlight some of the more problematic aspects of the contemporary British academy.

I was halfway through my undergraduate course when I contracted glandular fever. Although the illness laid me low, I managed to leave university with an upper second-class degree and every expectation of a full recovery. Fifteen years later, I am still waiting for that recovery. I have had persistent mild to moderate myalgic encephalopathy (ME, commonly known as chronic fatigue syndrome) since graduating. I need to sleep longer than most other 36-year-olds do; without my afternoon nap I'm a mess; I am periodically bedridden for days at a time; too much stress or physical exertion can lay me low. The chances of complete recovery at this stage are so small that I have what some patient groups call an "invisible disability". Indeed, were I to need them, I would be eligible for disability benefits.

Over 15 years, I have learnt to manage my condition so that I can live a full life. Sometimes my life feels so "normal" that only the periodic sharp relapses remind me of the need to pace myself. I have a wife and two children. I have gained a BA, an MA and a PhD. I have published widely, including one sole-authored book and two edited volumes. I have had several rewarding research commissions. I can work for several hours on most days, and on occasions I throw caution to the wind and immerse myself in the late nights and high-octane stimulation of a conference for two or three days (accepting the inevitable crash that usually follows).

But there is one thing I cannot do: work full time. What is impossible for me is the day-in, day-out commitment to eight hours-plus at the desk or regular commuting. These limitations have meant that, since finishing my PhD in 2001, I have had to subsist on a succession of short-term contracts, consultancies and fellowships. My current portfolio of work is varied and interesting: a half-time two-year research post at Goldsmiths, University of London, a small amount of teaching with The Open University and some freelance consulting and writing. I have been fortunate in that my department at Goldsmiths has been highly supportive and has given me a home from which to bid for research grants. But what is missing is stability: other than my limited amount of teaching at The Open University, I have no continuous source of income, and my career depends on my endlessly filling in grant application forms.

I understand that many other academics also live hand to mouth in this way. But at least they can hope for a permanent position somewhere along the line (something that recent reforms have made a little easier). I look regularly at the job ads in *Times Higher Education*, and I simply do not see any permanent part-time positions that would be suitable for me. I have to admit to finding it depressing to contemplate the next 20 to 30 years of working without job security and with no hope of promotion.

Although my position may be unusual, I believe there are two wider lessons to be drawn: first, definitions of disability within academia should be wider so as to encompass those who are incapable of full-time work. The assumption that with the appropriate aids and adjustments a disabled person can work like any other academic is not always correct. Second, permanent part-time positions within academia need to be established for those who cannot or choose not to go down the full-time track. This issue is not just one for those of us with disabilities, but also applies to (for example) carers or parents.

Academia has not been a soft career option for many years; the ivory tower has long been demolished. An academic career requires serious commitment and serious amounts of work. Nevertheless, it is surely reasonable to hope that physical limitations should not preclude those who choose the scholarly life from some degree of security.

Postscript :

Keith Kahn-Harris is research associate, the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths, University of London. His website is www.kahn-harris.org

ME Awareness Week is 11-18 May.

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