



Disability and Entrepreneurship Workshop - 21st April 2016

This event was funded and organised by the Enterprise and Diversity Research Cluster at Birmingham Business School.

The workshop brought together scholars from across the UK working in the field of disability and entrepreneurship, including Dr Debbie Foster (Cardiff Business School), Dr Jannine Williams (University of Bradford School of Management), Nicola Patterson (Newcastle Business School), and Eva Kasperova (Kingston Business School). Both researchers and practitioners with a common interest in the subject were in attendance, and generated a range of questions and issues raised in the concluding panel chaired by Prof. Monder Ram. The event highlighted a breadth of issues around disability and entrepreneurship, from the practical to the theoretical, and illustrated the ways in which Business Schools can, and should, do more to address disability across the board. It presented an opportunity for critical engagement and reflections on how research can make an important difference, both in setting the policy agenda and supporting practitioners.



Dr Foster highlighted the current lack of research in business schools to address disability generally, and employment more broadly. She noted that disability is frequently handled under broader equality legislation, with institutional responses that follow the letter, rather than the spirit, of the law, if at all, resulting in a form of oppression by attrition. Citing Foucault's (1975) conception of the modern worker as mouldable and interchangeable, she noted its incompatibility with the realities of working over the life-course, particularly for disabled people. This is perhaps why disabled people are excluded from work and 'pushed' into self-employment in pursuit of flexibility, specificity and autonomy.



Dr Coogan looked at the motivations and assumptions behind schemes to support disability entrepreneurship. He noted that many things that we would assume important for entrepreneurial success, such as education, experience, networks and finance, are harder for disabled people to access, and that the life of the entrepreneur can be especially hostile to disabled people as it not only precludes certain support from the welfare system, but involves risk, stress, and long hours.



Dr Williams spoke about the need to establish appropriate intersectional theoretical frameworks within which to examine the experiences of disabled women entrepreneurs, which must allow for the participants to define their identities themselves. Although this work is theoretically complex, it is essential if the intricacies of intersectional identity are to be properly understood, with particular regard to disability.

Eva Kasperova examined the various techniques disabled entrepreneurs employ in handling their disability within an entrepreneurial context. She noted that the breadth of impairment categories allowed for a range of approaches, such as disabled entrepreneurs revealing their impairment, revealing it selectively, revealing it as a strategy, and concealing it (passing). This presentation tied together some of the themes raised by

the other speakers: in particular, that the conceptualisation of disability as a monolithic 'problem' in regard to entrepreneurial activity is reductive and inaccurate.

In conclusion, the workshop demonstrated that even in something as specific as disability and entrepreneurship there is a wealth of potential for future work of high impact, both theoretically and practically, and this is something that the participants are keen to develop.

For more information about disability and entrepreneurship, please contact Dr Tom Coogan: t.a.coogan@bham.ac.uk.