



James Prime was a postgraduate researcher at UCL for three years and is now a Digital Accessibility Assistant in UCL's Digital Accessibility Team. James is autistic, so as well as sharing details of his current role and career path to provide inspiration to all, he offers valuable insights that may chime especially with neurodivergent researchers.

Tell us about your current role and organisation.

I joined UCL's Digital Accessibility Team as Digital Accessibility Assistant in February 2023. Our team provides direct and indirect support to disabled students and staff, delivers training to the wider UCL community, raises awareness via social media and in-person events, and advocates for systemic changes. My role is technically a general support role, so I have been involved in a wide range of projects across the breadth of our overall responsibilities, but my day-to-day work is primarily behind the scenes: data analysis and reporting, programming, accessibility auditing, and writing guidance.

How did you move from academia to your current role?

The Digital Accessibility Hub is a physical support space for disabled students on campus run by our team, providing access to assistive technology and in-person support. I used the space as a disabled student and later worked there flexibly while studying. I had enjoyed working with data and programming during my postgraduate studies but suffered from acute anxiety talking about my research. At the same time, the more direct support work I'd been doing in the Hub had been very fulfilling, so I was hoping to find a niche where I could keep working in the background but have a meaningful impact on others' lives in the process.

By the time I was actively looking for work, the Digital Accessibility Team at UCL was expanding to include two new Hubs in UCL's East campus, and there was a lot of focus on developing a more data-driven approach to improving accessibility university-wide. I was invited to apply for this role by my now-manager, who very kindly talked me through both the expectations for the role and the upcoming recruitment process in advance of my application. Although the manager had never met me before writing the documents, when I read the job description and person specification for the role it felt like they had been written with me specifically in mind, which was really encouraging.

I had gained a lot of the required experience through my previous work at the Hub, which involved accessibility auditing as well as providing technological and academic support, and I made use of numerous opportunities for assistive technology training during my time there. My personal experience of navigating UCL as a disabled student also lent me valuable insight! Data analysis was also specified as a desirable skill, which I could bring to the role from my postgraduate work.

The toughest part was the recruitment process itself, because I am especially prone to anxiety about interviews. Luckily for me, my now-manager had already advocated for and successfully implemented an accessible interview process long before the role was advertised, and I was given all the questions in advance so I could prepare without fear of losing my words under pressure on the day. I also benefitted from the support of the UCL Careers Service through the application process and interview preparation. Combined, this support reduced my anxiety significantly, enabling me to present myself in a way that reflects how I would interact every day in a job, rather than only how I behave when stressed by an interview!

How has being neurodivergent impacted your career?

This is definitely a “pros and cons” answer!

I have significant social anxiety that impacts all parts of my life, so every process involved in finding a job is extremely daunting, and the anxiety does not disappear once in the role. This anxiety applies to interviews as aforementioned, but also to ordinary meetings and presenting my work to others. The upside of this is that thanks to the support of my team and wider department, I am gaining confidence in many of these areas, and have received a lot of reassurance about my skills.

On a more positive note, I am also focused, meticulous, skilled at creative problem solving and writing guidance, and I am heavily motivated by interest and learning, so I learn new things quickly when they interest me (and everything in this field interests me!).

What does a normal working day look like for you?

My ideal day would be spent in big blocks of Focus Mode, working on a single project at a time with minimal interruptions. However, often we will receive requests for accessibility auditing at short notice with equally short deadlines, and several members of the team will work on it together at the expense of any other planned work. This is definitely a challenge for me, but I'm learning to adapt as best I can, and it's very rewarding to have completed the work even when time's been against us. I don't generally have many meetings in my calendar, although they tend to come in waves at certain times of year.

What are the best things about working in your role?

I love that I'm able to use my strongest skills in an impactful way, and that I'm supported in developing my least confident areas without pressure. There is a lot of flexibility in my role, so I am able to work almost entirely from home, and having control over my environment enables me to be more productive at work. I'm also really enjoying being part of a strong, cohesive team, and my colleagues are fantastic.

What are the biggest challenges?

Sudden changes in existing plans are probably my most regular hurdles. They are expected to a degree, because we're a small team and sometimes we will have to drop everything to focus on the most urgent work, but of course I still can't plan for them. My particular flavour of neurodivergence is really thrown when I'm pulled out of Focus Mode unexpectedly, but I tend to

approach this as a problem in need of a creative solution when it happens, which helps channel the energy in a more productive way.

My role is quite solitary, and I spend lots of time working on solutions to problems, without input from or collaboration with others until the problems are solved. I really like this aspect of the role, but I appreciate that many may not!

Is a PhD essential for your role?

It's not essential, but data analysis was a small part of the "desirable skills" section of the original role, and has since evolved into the most important part of my day-to-day work.

What skills from your PhD do you utilise in your career?

Data analysis is the main skill I use, alongside programming – mostly alongside or in aid of the data analysis – and writing, particularly reports and guidance. It's also useful that I understand the higher education environment and the staff and students I'm helping.

What's the progression like?

There are many ways to develop in this field without necessarily needing to move towards management, although that route is always an option. I am personally much more interested in lateral progression, so I am being supported in developing my areas of interest to better specialise in those.

You could branch out into student or staff support, which would require an understanding of different disabilities and the effects they can have, as well as an awareness of assistive technologies and ergonomic equipment and their respective benefits. Digital accessibility is a developing area, so you could work towards roles in outreach, for example using social media to spread awareness and organising events to demonstrate its importance, and running training events for interested groups. There is also a lot of strategic work happening at higher levels to influence policy, which is always in need of level-headed, diplomatic people to advocate for the digital accessibility agenda in a fair and compassionate way.

What top tips would you give researchers wanting to move into this type of work?

The most important awareness to have is how (in)accessibility affects people's lives, and so speaking to and working with disabled people is the best way to gain that understanding and empathy. Beyond that, learning about assistive technologies, accessible web design, and the accessibility auditing process will provide a lot of useful background. But these aspects can be taught, while compassion for the impact of inaccessibility cannot, so I would advise focusing on the human element first and then expanding your practical knowledge.

The digital accessibility community is relatively small, so for networking, I would just advise to join in where you can, listen and learn, and take opportunities to contribute when they present themselves.

Are there any extra tips you might offer to neurodivergent researchers?

Work with yourself rather than against yourself. My job is enjoyable because I'm doing all the things I most enjoy, even though I'm aware many people wouldn't enjoy the same things.

In this field, you're highly likely to be working with compassionate people, and so if you're finding something difficult or needing accommodations, I would encourage you to speak up and make your working environment work as well as possible for you.