Disabled Students in higher education: Experiences and outcomes

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Introduction

Before the 1990s, universities made very little provision for disabled students. Over the past fifteen years, many policy, legislation and funding measures have been introduced, including the extension of disability discrimination legislation to education in 2001. These measures have led to a marked increase in the proportion of disabled students participating in higher education. In order to assess the extent to which universities are becoming more inclusive, and to identify the barriers which still remain, this research tracked the experiences and outcomes of 31 students in four universities over three years.

Summary

Key findings:

- Support for disabled students has expanded and is now managed through centralised support units. In line with disability equality legislation, lecturers are expected to make reasonable and anticipatory adjustments to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices and students are legally entitled to these adjustments.

Major implications:
- Although lecturers are generally supportive of disabled students, they sometimes feel overwhelmed by requests for individualised adjustments and unsure about the balance between maintaining academic standards and accommodating the needs of disabled students.

Key findings:

- The adjustments which were made tended to be limited and formulaic, particularly in the area of assessment.

Major implications:
- The development of inclusive and flexible curricula would require fewer adjustments to be made and would ensure fairness for all whilst ensuring the maintenance of academic standards.

Key findings:

- Disclosure and acceptance of the label of disability was problematic for some students, especially those with unseen impairments.

Major implications:
- Better communication between and within central services and academic departments would ensure more effective support for all disabled students, not just those who contact the disability support office.

Key findings:

- Disabled students are a heterogeneous group and experiences and outcomes are variably linked to the nature of the student's impairment.

Major implications:
- More effective monitoring of the experiences and outcomes of disabled students by impairment should lead to more effective support for those most at risk of academic failure.

The Research

Background and rationale

The main aim of the study was to understand disabled students' social and academic experiences, and the extent to which these vary by impairment, subject studied and type of institution. The research team also wished to identify the extent to which different types of institution have become more inclusive, the barriers which remain and the changes which are needed in the future.

It differed from most previous research in that it focused on listening to the voices of students, academic staff, support staff and senior managers. Moreover it involved a longitudinal in-depth study which situated the understanding of disability in higher education in its institutional and departmental context. It also included a comparison of the experiences of disabled and non-disabled students.

The inclusion of disabled students in higher education has been supported by a number of measures, including the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and premium funding intended to improve institutional accessibility. Funding Council initiatives aimed at promoting adjustments to the curriculum and to assessment, as well as quality assurance requirements, have also promoted inclusion. The extension of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to education in 2001 was also important, since it placed a duty on institutions to make reasonable and anticipatory adjustments for disabled students in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. Whilst the legislation was generally welcomed, some uncertainties remain with regard to what counts as a reasonable adjustment and who is covered by the legislation. Previous research has shown that there have been major changes within UK higher education, as it has changed from being an elite system into a mass system catering for a diverse student population. Marked differences remain between the academic culture of the pre-92 universities, emphasising the acquisition of knowledge in traditionally defined subject areas, and the post-92 universities, where the acquisition of vocational knowledge and transferable skills has greater priority. Assessment practices have been particularly slow to change, despite the development of a body of research exploring the use of new assessment technologies.

Methods

The project included four universities: two pre-92 and two post-92 institutions. It used a range of methodologies including:

- A survey of attitudes and barriers to learning of all disabled students in the four universities, with a matched sample of non-disabled students for comparison in one institution;

- An analysis of the degree outcomes of disabled students in comparison with the wider student body;

- Case studies of the four universities to investigate differences in policy and practice with regard to disabled students' learning and assessment;

- Longitudinal case studies of 31 disabled students' learning experiences during the course of their undergraduate studies;

- Interviews with academic staff and observations of learning environments.

Findings

Examination of publicly gathered statistics showed that had been an increase from around 3.5 per cent of disabled undergraduate students in higher education in 1994-95 to around 7 per cent in 2004-05. The composition of the group has also changed. In 2004-05 around 50 per cent of this group was categorised as dyslexic in comparison to 15 per cent in 1994-95.

The institutions and key themes from the institutional case studies
There were significant differences between the four institutions in the proportion of students from less socially advantaged backgrounds and differences in the proportion of students who had disclosed a disability. In all case study institutions, students with a diagnosis of dyslexia represent by far the largest group.

Key characteristics of the four institutions:

Institution	*Type of Institution*	*Student Population*				
		per cent from state schools	per cent low participation neighbourhood	per cent from social class IIIM, IV and V	per cent in receipt of DSA	per cent disclosed disability 2003-2004
University 1	Pre-92	65.7	8.9	17.8	2.8	6
University 2	Pre-92	90.7	10.2	19.0	2.1	5.3
University 3	Post-92	94.2	12.5	31.1	3.2	10
University 4	Post-92	96.6	19.2	36.2	3.2	4.3 (2002-03)

- In the two pre-92 universities, disabled students were only loosely associated with the widening access agenda. In University 4, including students from low participation neighbourhoods was a major focus of activity. Only in University 3, a new university, were disabled students seen as being at the forefront of the widening access agenda.
- The quality assurance regime was resented by some staff in the two pre-92 institutions, and the RAE was seen in the two pre-92 universities as a major policy driver, focusing staff attention on research. In University 4, the focus was on the drive to improve retention rates, and this was having an impact on admissions policy, with less tolerance for students who might fail to complete the programme.
- All respondents recognised the significance of the Disability Discrimination Act as a major impulse for action. Respondents in all four institutions were concerned about compromising academic standards, particularly in relation to students with dyslexia.
- The extensive use of equality audit appears to have had some success in improving the position of disabled students. All institutions saw the DDA as a major shaping influence, and no institution wished to be found in breach of the legislation and publicly shamed through a court case.

Statistical analysis of degree outcomes
- Data comparing the outcomes of disabled and non-disabled students was only available in three institutions. In two of these, disabled students did less well than non-disabled students. In the third they did equally well.
- In two of the institutions, disabled students were more likely to complete their course than non-disabled students.
- The outcomes from the case study data shows that dyslexic students do well in comparison with non-disabled students but students with other unseen impairments are more likely to do less well.

Survey
Comparison of disabled and non-disabled students showed that, in general, disabled students experienced greater difficulties with some aspects of university work, although there were specific areas where this did not appear to be the case. The majority of disabled students in higher education have a diagnosis of dyslexia, and this probably accounts for the fact that disabled students had more difficulties with written work and reported fewer difficulties with oral work and group presentations than non-disabled students. There was also some evidence from the dyslexic students that those from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to be critical of the support provided and expect higher levels of support.

Individual case studies
The following broad findings emerged from the student case studies:

- The majority of adjustments were formulaic, e.g. provision of a laptop, lecture notes and extra time in examinations. Students found they had to engage in multiple negotiations with different lecturers to ensure that agreements on reasonable adjustments were understood by all. There were major differences within departments in lecturers' willingness to make adjustments, and in the inclusiveness of their teaching style.

- In some disciplines there was evidence of willingness to make adjustments to pedagogy to accommodate different students' needs, for example 'virtual' field trips for students with physical impairments. There was very little evidence of any move towards adjustments in modes of assessment.

- It is invidious to treat disabled students as a separate category; they fall along a continuum of learner differences and share challenges and difficulties with other higher education students. Sometimes the barriers are more severe for them, but sometimes they are not. Two students with the same disability may have widely different experiences.

- Using a catch-all category of 'disabled students' is problematic. For the most part, disabled students have similar experiences of learning and assessment to non-disabled students. However, disability-related barriers have had a significant impact on their experiences of learning and assessment in a minority of situations.

- The main beneficiaries of disability legislation may be non-disabled students. Many of the adjustments introduced to help disabled students, such as well-prepared handouts, instructions given in writing as well as orally, notes put on-line, and variety and flexibility in forms of assessment, are good teaching and learning practices which benefit all students.

- Many students were happy with the adjustments which were made, but many were unhappy about having to accept the label of disability. Some students adopt disability as part of their identity during their time at university in order to obtain reasonable adjustments. Many students discard disability as a component of their identity when they leave university, in order to avoid discrimination in the labour market.

- Students with unseen impairments, particularly those with fluctuating conditions such as mental health difficulties, were least satisfied with the adjustments made and were least likely to complete their course.

- Most lecturers were supportive of disabled students and the broad principle of making adjustments to the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. There was uncertainty about what counted as a 'reasonable adjustment', and the extent to which allowances should be made in marking assignments, for example, whether students with a diagnosis of dyslexia should be penalised for errors in spelling, grammar and structure.

- Linked to the above were concerns about standards and fairness. Some lecturers felt it was potentially unfair to make adjustments for students with a diagnosis of dyslexia, but not for students for whom English was their second or third language.

- There were marked institutional differences in the way that staff perceived the value of the Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching in Higher Education, which addresses inclusive educational practices. The contrast was most marked between University 1, where most staff did not see it as essential for their professional development and believed it was not an institutional priority, and University 3, where it was prioritised by management.

- There were specific issues in relation to fitness to practise standards in Education. Students were concerned about disclosing an impairment when leaving their course and entering work. Staff in the institutions and in the schools had concerns about disabled students being 'fit to practise'.

- Longitudinal data gathered during this project indicate that transitions pose additional challenges for some disabled students as a result of social, academic and identity challenges.

Major Implications

The findings from this project have a number of implications affecting how higher education institutions develop their policies and practices to ensure inclusion of all disabled students. It is clear that institutions have, and are continuing to develop, support services for disabled students. It is also evident that students appreciate the support they are offered. However, different types of institutions experience a range of tensions. The way that support is developed further in these institutions will need to take these into account. For example, we found that teaching in pre-92 institutions is affected more severely than in post-92 ones by staff research commitments. In spite of these differences, there are some challenges which apply to all institutions.

The development of inclusive curricula

- To circumvent the problem posed by the requirement for individual adjustments, there should be a greater focus on the development of inclusive curricula, based on the principles of universal design. The key is to make adjustments and choices available for all, not just disabled students. Wherever possible the environment for teaching, learning and assessment should be designed so that disabled students do not face barriers and become disabled by their environment. This would circumvent the problem of students having to disclose a disability in order to obtain additional support, which was resented by many who did not feel comfortable with being labelled as disabled. However, it was recognised that some students would always require very specific individual adjustments.

Examination of fitness to practise standards

- Fitness to practise standards represent an additional hurdle to be surmounted by disabled students and should be replaced by professional standards with which all practitioners should comply. In addition, there is a need for greater awareness amongst staff of the extent to which an impairment will actually impact on a student's ability to become an effective practitioner within their chosen profession.

Support for students when on placement or year abroad

- Institutions would benefit from ensuring that they have good communication with placement providers and that support is in place whilst students undertake practical placements. This area is also covered by the legislation. There is a need for guidance on whether students are required to disclose their impairment and who should be informed within the practice location. There is also a need to clarify what support is available for students studying or working away from the institution, for example, for language students undertaking compulsory placement abroad or students on Erasmus exchange programmes.

Understanding the impact of social and emotional aspects of learning

- This research focused mainly on learning, teaching and assessment. However, it was clear from the student interviews that there was considerable variation between students in their ability to engage with the social aspects of university life. This suggests that there is a need to pay greater attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning in higher education, including additional support for vulnerable students at points of transition. The interviews also indicated that students felt best supported in situations where they could build effective personal relationships with academic and support staff.

Understanding the impact of transitions

- Entry into, transition through and exit from the university posed additional problems for disabled students. They had to make decisions on disclosure at many points, including entry to the labour market, where they had little guidance or support.

Analysis of the outcomes of students by impairment

- The statistical data gathered by the institutions allowed only for a comparison between disabled and non-disabled students. More detailed analysis of completion rates and outcomes by impairment at institutional level may allow for more targeted support of students with other, unseen impairments who may be more reluctant to contact the disability services. In addition, cross-variable analysis including factors such as social class and disability may show that more effective support is required for particular groups of students.

Further information

The following publications are based on the research:

Healey M., Fuller M., Bradley A., and Hall T. (2006) Listening to students: the experiences of disabled students of learning at university, in Adams, M. and Brown, S. (Eds) *Towards Inclusive Learning in Higher Education: Developing Curricula for Disabled Students.* London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp.32-43.

Healey, M., Roberts, H., Fuller, M., Georgeson, J. Hurst, A., Kelly, K., Riddell, S. and Weedon, E. (2008) 'Reasonable adjustments and disabled students' experiences of learning, teaching and assessment' *TLA Interchange 2* www.tla.ed.ac.uk/interchange.

Hurst, A. (2007) 'Students with disabilities in HE in the twenty first century' In Barnes, L. et al. (eds.) *Deaf Students in Higher Education* Coleford, Glos: Douglas McLean.

Riddell, S., Weedon, E. Fuller, M., Healey, M., Hurst, A., Kelly, K. and Piggott, L., (2007) '*Managerialism and equalities: tensions within widening access policies for disabled students in UK universities'*, *Higher Education*, 54, 4, 615-628.

Weedon, E. and Riddell, S. (2007) 'To those who have shall be given?' Differing expectations of support among dyslexic students' in Osborne, M., Houston, M. and Toman, N. (eds) *The Pedagogy of Lifelong Learning* London: Routledge

Forthcoming publications:
Fuller, M., Georgeson, J. Healey, M., Hurst, A., Riddell, S., Roberts, H. and Weedon, E. (2008 forthcoming) *Enhancing the Quality and Outcomes of Disabled Students' Learning in Higher Education* London: Routledge.

Weedon, E. and Riddell, S. (2008 forthcoming) 'Disabled students and transitions in higher education' in Ecclestone, K. (ed) in *Lost in Transition: Change and Becoming Through Education and the Lifecourse* London: Routledge.

The warrant

The research used a variety of methods including the following: a survey of all disabled students in four universities and a small sample of non-disabled students for comparison; case studies of four universities based on key informant interviews; statistical and documentary analysis; and longitudinal case studies of 31 disabled students in four universities. The student case studies were based on up to eight semi-structured interviews with the students, as well as interviews with academic and support staff working with the students and observations of the student in different classes.

The project was informed by work on widening access to higher education for under-represented groups, which formed an important strand of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. In addition, the research was informed by and contributed to work on student transitions, a TLRP cross-cutting theme.

All future briefings will be available in hardcopies, as an email or to download on www.creid.ed.ac.uk. If you would like to receive a briefing in a particular format or be removed from the distribution list, please contact Fannie Kong (creid@ed.ac.uk).