RESEARCH PAPER

Students with Disability: Beyond reasonable adjustments

Edwina Newham*
Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

In the Australian Higher Education sector, Students with Disability are one of the equity groups designated by the Federal government as a target cohort of students who are not represented in the same numbers as their non-disabled peers. It has been the goal of policymakers to seek to increase students’ participation and representation from within the equity categories, underpinned by assumptions this would also lead to associated social and economic benefits. This push is associated with discussions and findings of policy papers such as ‘the Dawkins Review’ (1988) and A Fair Chance for All (1990), which put into action a formalised effort to increase access and participation for historically underrepresented groups in the higher education sector, including Students with Disability. The practice of making reasonable adjustments to accommodate the effects that disability has on students is now commonplace.

Assuming ‘Students with Disability’ are a homogenous equity group, neatly categorised and measurable, is inherently problematic. A diversity of disabilities and corresponding diverse impacts of disability occur within and across the group. In addition, it is difficult for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to understand whether or how reasonable adjustment regimes are working to support the participation and inclusion of Students with Disabilities. This paper conducts a scoping study to discuss how researchers, practitioners and policymakers can move toward better understanding Students with Disability inside the Widening Participation field by examining the dilemma of disclosure. This scoping study also identifies the medicalised, deficit discourse of disability within higher education and looks at the case of international Students with Disability.

Keywords: disability; widening participation; reasonable adjustment; homogeneity; disclosure; international students

Introduction

This paper is a scoping study that explores the idea of reasonable adjustments for Students with Disability by looking at the definition of disability used by universities and the dilemma of disclosure. In examining the dilemma of disclosure, this paper discusses the significance of stigma, the use of quantitative data to measure participation, as well as the question of international students with disabilities.

Students with Disability represent a small but important part of the equity landscape in the higher education sector in Australia. Statistics show an increase in students with disabilities’

*Email: enewham@swin.edu.au
participation over recent years, with 6.8 per cent of all domestic undergraduates in 2017, an increase from 6.4 per cent on the previous year (Department of Education and Training, 2018). However, the group is difficult to ‘capture’ in a quantitative sense as completion of degrees cannot show how an individual student with a disability may have overcome many difficulties to complete their qualification. The lack of comprehensive available data illustrates an ongoing invisibility of students with disabilities and might explain why this group is not achieving the completion rates of other equity groups.

This scoping study is informed by my work as an AccessAbility Advisor. In this role, I meet students who disclose and are assessed on a set of criteria based on the definition of a disability aligned with the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) (the DDA). This work involves the negotiation and approval of reasonable adjustment provisions to counter inaccessible or challenging obstacles for students with disabilities to support full participation in higher education. The work is at times complex and multi-layered. No two students are the same. My motivation for this scoping study is informed by a perceived need to identify where there are shortcomings in practice which can lead to recommendations for future research, practice and policymaking.

The role of an AccessAbility Advisor is significant in the lives of students who rely on these services and the position often aims to challenge established patterns and attitudes. Rooney (2019) reflects this view, stating “The positioning of students with disability as ‘disadvantaged’ has highlighted the complex interplay between social background, life circumstances, access to education, academic achievement and inequality” (p. 38). My experience has been that disability in higher education is often mired in a deficit discourse. Students have to go out of their way to contact AccessAbility services and prove their disability and resulting impacts with documented evidence, such as a report by their General Practitioner (GP) or treating health practitioner. This is required whether it be so the student can have extra writing time for an exam, or receive reformatted learning material in a particular size or colour for a student with a print disability, or have extensions for episodic medical conditions. Acceptance of the need for adjustments is not automatic and is led by the student or often their parent or caregiver. As Gibson (2015) has shown, we often see in this context that “‘Disability’ has historically been excluded from the discourse of social justice and diversity due to its viewing ‘disability’ as pathology, taking a medicalised traditional hegemonic perspective (Guillaume, 2011; Liasidou, 2014)” (p. 882). This medicalised model of disability and difference is reflected in practices within universities in Australia and can affect whether a student discloses and how they go about seeking assistance.

University Disability Liaison Units (DLU) or AccessAbility services operate their services under the DDA and the instrument of that act, the Disability Standards for Education (2005). This sets out what is required in higher education to accommodate students with disabilities by implementing reasonable adjustments. The Act covers disabilities that range from physical disabilities, hearing or vision disabilities, medical conditions, neurological disability, through to learning disabilities and mental health conditions. The legislation requires that a university and its staff, facilities and practices (such as the enrolment process) are accessible to students with disabilities, on par with students without disabilities. The legislation guides the university to implement and negotiate reasonable adjustments with academic staff in consultation with the individual student.

Implementing reasonable adjustments is dependent on a student disclosing that they have a disability in need of reasonable adjustments in the first place. There is also great variation of the impact of the disability (impairment) amongst students with disabilities, which further
complicates the provision of support needed for the student to effectively participate, and this is reflected in the various forms of assistance provided to students with disabilities. As Kendall (2016) has stated, “Issues and difficulties encountered by individual students will vary not only within but also between disability-specific groups” (p. 3). Not all students who have similar conditions need similar forms of support.

Students with Disabilities are a diverse equity group and it is difficult for universities and researchers to measure the effectiveness of support put in place by reasonable adjustments. Although being able to measure this group’s success is important, it is not easy to demonstrate, using the current performance indicators, whether these measures are indicative of success (or failure) for this group. The definition of Students with Disability is important, as it influences how we analyse their participation in Australian Higher Education. It is a standard process for students to apply for disability support based on the definition of disability as outlined in the DDA. Also important is when and how data is captured on students who have disabilities and what the consequences are for those students with disabilities who, for a multitude of reasons, do not disclose. This paper also draws attention to the number of international students who have disabilities not captured by any official statistics. Whilst it is recognised that equity statistics are drawn from domestic (Australian) student enrolments, it must be acknowledged that many international students study and work in Australia, and may go on to become Australian citizens. Analysis of the participation of international students with disabilities is missing and is effectively left out of equity considerations altogether.

Methodology

This paper, a scoping study, involves the “synthesis and analysis of a wide range of research and non-research material to provide greater conceptual clarity about a specific topic or field of evidence” (Davis, Drey & Gould, 2009, p. 1386) as well as “the breadth and depth of a field” (Levac, Colquhoun & O’Brien, 2010, p. 1). I have also drawn on my personal observations in my role as an AccessAbility advisor. As the range of disabilities and scope of adjustments is diverse, it is difficult for researchers and practitioners alike to show that reasonable adjustment regimes are working and to demonstrate areas, trends and avenues for improvement. This scoping study aims to draw together material that examines the dilemmas of disclosure and how aspects of this dilemma relate to the challenge of making reasonable adjustments.

Literature used in this scoping study is limited to Australian and UK sources. Restricting the search to Australian and British studies was for comparative analyses, as they have similar processes and legislation to support students with disabilities in higher education. In the UK, universities are required to make provisions to support students with disabilities and have disability advisors akin to Australian universities to implement the reasonable adjustments.

The study looked at research and policy documents ranging from 1996 through to 2019. Of note is that the collection of statistics in Australia for Students with Disability only commenced in 1996 and “The reference value of students with disability in comparison to the rest of the Australian population is also based on census data from 1986 and this value has not been revised since” (James et al., 2004, p. 7). Correspondingly, while the Bradley Review of 2008 identifies low funding of Students with Disabilities, it does not identify any other of the many factors that affect participation of this group of students. The age of the articles varied, which may show the limited breadth of data available.

In locating literature for this review, key word searches were limited to Disability/disabilities in combination with the words: Equity, Access, Higher Education, Widening Participation, and ‘A
Fair Chance for All’ (in reference to the Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training discussion paper of 1990). Key word searches were made of Australian library databases. The methodological key word search enabled a targeted search of material pertaining to higher education students. Material relating to support of students with disabilities in primary and secondary schools was excluded to keep the focus on higher education. Once gathered, I then thematically analysed the material which lead to the themes discussed below. Materials analysed for this study were drawn from the following sources: five academic journals, one conference paper, one literature review, one review paper, one parliamentary report, two discussion papers, one analytical report, one eBook chapter and one book, *The Dawkins Revolution 25 Years On* (Croucher, Marginson, Norton & Wells, 2013).

**Deficit discourse**

The dilemmas associated with reasonable adjustments are discussed by disability studies scholars who have spoken of “the cultural, discursive and relational undergirdings of the disability experience” (Goodley, 2012, p. 634). The literature looks beyond the physical form of a disabled body, to foreground the social and cultural undertones of disability, and how this also affects access to education. For example, the way students must opt-in to disability services in order to receive support, makes the disability a problem of the individual, rather than making inclusive education a sector-wide responsibility. Indeed, writers have pointed to this as a deficit or short-coming whereby “the tendency to expand the category of special education needs to include those experiencing social disadvantage, thus enabling a discourse of individual deficit to override those of social disadvantage” (Tomlinson, as cited in Riddell & Weedon, 2014, p. 10).

Reasonable adjustments are “a measure or action taken to assist a Student with a Disability to participate in education and training on the same basis as other students” (*Disability Standards for Education*, 2005, Section 3.3). However, this practice requires that Students with Disability have the burden of obtaining support placed on them, as individuals. As Gale (2012) explains, “students are not just ‘supported’ but positioned as requiring change, adjustment, up-skilling, additional resources, and soon, in order to fit in to established patterns of participation” (p. 249).

Universal design for learning is not in place across the university sector. Indeed, the inclusion of students with disabilities continues to be approached with a focus on inability rather than ability, whereby an individual student requires adjustment so as to be able to participate. The deficit model of support services is reliant on an individual student disclosing to the education provider. This can lead to negative experiences for students with disabilities and teaching staff where there are “reactive”, “deficit” models and “Ad hoc” types of support (Ryan, 2011, p. 78). For example, non-obvious conditions like mental health conditions need to be disclosed to obtain support, and in doing so a deficit view of disability emerges which “acts to stigmatize, disempower and marginalize such individuals, and constructs ‘different’, ‘deficient’ or ‘deviant’ identities for them” (Gee et al., as cited in Ryan & Struhs, 2004, p. 76). The construction of a disabled identity, where an individual student may not consider themselves to be disabled, is therefore required in Higher Education. The disclosure of disability to student support staff, like AccessAbility services, is often made after a student has not been successful with their studies, or has submitted recurrent medical certificates and special consideration applications that eventually get knocked back. Thus, a student will register with AccessAbility services and assume the disabled student, one whom ‘needs help’.

It is important in any discussion to acknowledge that the experience of Students with Disability in higher education is not smooth and can be particularly challenging. The barriers to full
participation are multi-faceted and students have to negotiate and obtain assistance because of the inaccessible environment of the university. Literature discusses that students with disabilities are often made to feel like they are the problem and that they need to take steps to get around their problems, instead of a universal acceptance and support. An Education Access Plan (also known as a Learning Access Plan) is written which acts as official documentation of a student’s deficits (under the guise of “impact of disability”) and communicated to academic staff (Kilpatrick et al., 2017, p. 754).

The deficit view of disability could be challenged by moving towards a sharing of responsibility for addressing inaccessible environments and materials. Nuanced and differentiated support should be automatic for all students at university, however, it seems the sector considers having a disability to be a problem of an individual, instead of social, cultural and learning environment structures that influence and limit opportunities and access. Universal Design for Learning recognises that each student learns differently. Its principles are inclusive and puts the responsibility back on the educational institution to open up learning. “We are steadily moving away from the vision of the normal curve, where ‘average students’ can be counted upon to experience curriculum and to act in an ‘average’ way. We now know that variability is the rule both within and between all individuals” (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014, p. 82).

**Identification of Students with Disability and “hidden disabilities”**

Students with Disability do not fit neatly into the presumed homogeneity of the equity group, as ascribed by policy. The experience of disability, and the associated experience of access and disadvantage, is varied for students within and across this group. Disability and its impacts cannot be standardised into a one-size-fits-all approach.

The identification of Students with Disability is dependent on an individual student disclosing that they have a disability. Upon enrolment, students are asked: “Do you have a disability/impairment/medical condition?” (The answer categories are: Acquired Brain Impairment; Hearing/Deaf; Intellectual; Learning; Medical Condition; Mental Illness; Other; Physical; Vision). Students are then asked: “Would you like to receive advice on support services, equipment and facilities which may assist you?” Student responses to the enrolment declaration enable routine reporting of access rates, participation rates, participation ratios, success ratios and retention ratios” (Brett, 2010, p. 4). While these appear as straightforward questions, students may be reluctant to indicate that they have a disability, due to, for example, a fear of affecting the success of their application. In other cases, students may not identify as having a disability or have “concerns about the stigmatizing nature of the disclosure, as such disclosure means the acceptance of the label of ‘disabled’” (Konur, 2006, p. 357).

Only if a student answers ‘yes’ to the question at enrolment, do they receive an email with information about AccessAbility services. That is, a student must be proactive and register with AccessAbility services to receive support. To register for reasonable adjustment support, the student must take steps to provide evidence of their disability and provide recommendations for reasonable adjustment, as made by a qualified practitioner.

Disclosure of a disability for many students is fraught with trepidation as they may fear disclosure could lead to a misunderstanding of their needs by academic staff or to being treated unfavourably. There are also fears that it could compromise subsequent job opportunities or study options. “Disclosure, and decisions to not disclose, weigh heavily on people’s minds due to concerns about managing the ways others perceive disabled people” (Evans, 2019, p. 738). A student gives much deliberation before they may seek help for their disability related study
Correspondingly, Barnes (2007) states that “disabled students are reluctant to adopt a disabled identity” (p. 142). Barnes (2007) also makes reference to an arbitrary prioritising of students with disabilities and says that those who have benefited the most are “more likely to come from upper/middle-class backgrounds and are less likely to be members of minority ethnic groups” (p. 141). This in part is due to costs associated with obtaining formal diagnoses by a qualified health practitioner, or due to different cultural attitudes and practices.

Stigma is an important consideration when discussing disclosure by students with disabilities and why there may be reluctance to do so. Stigma and the poor treatment of people with mental health conditions, for example, still have resonance today. We see that “stigma associated with mental illness and the hidden nature of the disability […] constitute powerful barriers to students seeking and receiving assistance” (Martin & Oswin, as cited in Martin, 2010, p. 260). Disclosure and stigma are related and greatly affect this cohort’s experience in higher education. Effectively, stigma can limit a student’s access to support and have detrimental effect on their participation and achievement. The “divergence between staff perspectives of equity numbers and services and student perspectives indicate a critical gap in service delivery and/or information sharing between staff and students” (Clark, Wilkinson & Kusevskis-Hayes, 2018, p. 34).

Inaccurate or non-disclosures lead to the underrepresentation of students with disabilities, not only in numbers but also in promotion of their needs. Students with Disability are often reluctant to disclose their condition for fear of discrimination, so these students remain hidden, and as such, the numbers included in the research literature may not be reflective of actual numbers of students needing support. A literature review by Clark, Wilkinson and Kusevskis-Hayes (2018), found methodological challenges studying “non-disclosing populations” as these students are effectively invisible and not given recognition. They also refer to disclosure rates that affect students with “hidden disabilities”. Hidden disabilities may not be obvious to a teacher in the class but can manifest, for example, where a student has trouble acquiring knowledge.

Basing the inclusion of Students with Disability upon the definition in the DDA may lead to excluding students with conditions that do not neatly fit within the disability categories on which the eligibility criteria for University AccessAbility services are based. We are faced with the dilemmas of our reliance on formal diagnoses to implement reasonable adjustments. Students may not have access to these diagnoses for many reasons, for example they may not have funds to pay for a formal assessment of their condition, such as a cognitive assessment, which can cost several hundreds of dollars. Without information or an assessment that adequately informs what adjustments are reasonable, a student will not be provided with this support.

**International Students**

A cohort of students who are often excluded from disability statistics and support are international students. There were some 399,078 International students enrolled in higher education in 2018 (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Indeed, “in 2017–18, international education was worth $32.4 billion to the Australian economy, up from $28.1 billion in 2016–17” (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019, p. 1). The omission of international students in official statistics gives rise to the underrepresentation of students who have disabilities. Relying on domestic students alone who have identified as having a disability creates a significant shortcoming in data. Data that is collected by the Department of Education and Training does not include students where the permanent home address is overseas (Department of Education and Training, 2015). The omission of international students who have disabilities is considerable
especially when many of these students will become Australian citizens or work in Australia during or after completion of their studies.

My experience in the field tends toward the claim that there is an increasing number of International students presenting with a range of disabilities that include mental health, physical and medical disabilities. An international student will usually contact AccessAbility services after they are enrolled and are possibly struggling with their studies. The visa requirements in Australia stipulate that students must carry a full-time study load, except in exceptional circumstances, which can be an extremely challenging requirement for students with disabilities. Linking international students with the right supports and approving reasonable adjustments, however minor they may be, is often reactive. Support for international students with disabilities can be more difficult as there may not be a formal diagnosis of a disability, and for reasons that relate to cultural, social and financial factors it may be difficult to obtain records of diagnosis. Similarly, students who are from refugee backgrounds or students from non-English speaking backgrounds often do not have any evidence of their disability and are not able to easily obtain a diagnosis that is aligned with the eligibility criteria of a university AccessAbility service.

There are additional challenges for international students who have disabilities, as they may not be able to have access to support needed to participate in higher education in Australia. The student is often lacking family or social supports, or secure housing and employment, while also navigating life in a new country with a disability. As McLean et al. (2003) have stated, “A cross-cultural experience goes beyond the classroom and generally in Australia, disability supports are linked directly to the educational experience” (p. 223). AccessAbility often ask a student whether they have had educational support in their secondary schooling, as this is often an indicator of having a permanent disability such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or a specific learning difference that can be used to verify a student’s support needs and replicate approval of reasonable adjustments. A local student may have had a cognitive assessment carried out by an educational psychologist while they were at school that can provide recommendations for teaching and learning strategies. This can support the approval of reasonable adjustments as outlined in an education access plan or learning access plan that is distributed to teaching staff. For international students, getting these assessments of a disability can be very difficult, as they are costly and may not be feasible owing to English language proficiency requirements:

The use of standardised tests may not always be possible, and this is where the psychologist must consider the potential impact of the person’s culture, life experience and proficiency in English to form a judgement about whether administration of a standardised test will provide valid information. (Khawaja, 2019, np)

**Discussion**

The idea of reasonable adjustments for Students with Disability is an important yet fraught area of research, practice and policymaking. The dilemma of disclosure is complicated by the significance of stigma and the ‘hidden’ presence of many students with disabilities who could benefit from adjustments, including international students.

Having a disability does not mean the same thing for different students, even with the same type of disability or diagnosis. There is great variability amongst the group. Students do not experience the same level of impairment relating to their disability and associated educational or access to education disadvantage, therefore it is hard to assess what strategies, reasonable adjustments or support services are helping or not. This is echoed in “the current measures of ‘success’ with regard to student equity outcomes [that] are too narrow, one-dimensional and
reliant on quantitative indicators” (Zacharias & Brett, 2018, p. 12). The data collected on Students with Disability in higher education does not give an accurate picture of disability. As per Coates and Krause (2005), the “access data for students with disabilities illustrates the need for more refined data approaches to performance indicators in the equity framework” (p. 40). The data does not provide the opportunity to show a multi-dimensional view of disability, rather the data “encompasses enrolments, equivalent full-time student load (unit of study data) and completions, and includes all higher education institutions that have been approved under the Higher Education Support Act 2003” (Australian Government, 2019). There is no correlation made between the relationship of Students with Disability who may have another equity indication and the possible impacts of this potential ‘multiple disadvantage’.

Consideration of the variety of ways students participate and engage in education, rather than viewing success through limited performance indicators, may give researchers and policy makers a more rounded view of students with disabilities. We should acknowledge that for many students with disabilities, participating in some form of study, albeit a single unit of study or undertaking a degree part-time, and factoring in consideration for leave of absences and breaks, may in itself be a reasonable adjustment and a contributing factor for a student’s success. The data currently collected is unlikely to give an accurate picture of students with disabilities’ achievements in higher education. For example, a student who has a chronic condition that requires part-time study will take longer to complete a program. This may be a necessary step for the student to complete their degree. Harvey, Burnheim and Brett (2016) state that “Consideration of student achievement and outcomes beyond participation rates is increasingly important” (p.16).

Recognition of the multiple intersecting factors and different experiences of Students with Disability is essential. Recognition of the role stigma plays in the self-reporting practices of Students with Disability is important for developing support process for students. Recognition of hidden disabilities and invisible or absent students, such as international students, in the disability sector is important for understanding the equity group and supports provided. Finally, an expansion of qualitative research in the area of Students with Disability, that draws in the voices of Students with Disability and captures the everyday experiences of students, may support policy-makers and practitioners to identify and implement key changes that will enable these voices to be heard.

Conclusion
This paper has sought to highlight the dilemmas faced in working to address the needs of Students with Disability and the limitations of current measures of participation and success for this equity group. It is evident that relying on the existing reporting methods and performance indicators does not give a holistic representation of how students with disabilities are tracking. Greater recognition of other important factors that influence student disclosure, or non-disclosure, and the compounding effect this has on official statistics, is required. Current performance measures do not factor in the experience of students with disabilities who very often do not follow a linear pathway from enrolment through to course completion. Nor do they consider that Students with Disabilities may also be members of other equity groups, which can further compound difficult experiences of university study. This scoping review has been informed by a view to shift from the deficit-based and reactive approach of current ‘reasonable adjustments’, as part of a movement towards recognising and engaging dilemmas so that we might better support Students with Disability in Australian higher education.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr Steven Threadgold from the University of Newcastle, and to the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education.

References


