# Supporting students with disabilities within a UK university: lecturer perspectives

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Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2014) shows an increase in the number of UK students with disabilities entering Higher Education. This small-scale qualitative study within a UK university led to the identification of five main themes. Participants expressed concern that there were students who chose not to disclose a range of disabilities resulting in inadequate levels of support. Students who declared a disability were provided with Learning Support Plans (LSP), however, these were found to be needing improvement. The role of the writing support tutors and their varied approaches to supporting students raised concerns. Participants were amenable to making 'reasonable adjustments' for students with disabilities, it was unclear as to what these adjustments should be. Participants acknowledged the need for training especially in the area of mental health. This study may be used to inform university policy and practice and if necessary support the implementation of change.

**Keywords**: disability; higher education; Learning Support Plan (LSP); reasonable adjustments; training

## Introduction

Historically, students with disabilities were underrepresented in Higher Education (HE) (Hanafin et al. 2007; Madriaga 2007) and the sector was "untroubled by the requirement to provide higher education for people with disabilities" (Borland & James 1999:85). With increased inclusivity, students entering universities with a range of needs has risen (HESA 2014). As the nature of the student body changes, universities must understand the learning needs of students and provide necessary arrangements to support their experience. Whilst there is much written at school level, Pena (2014) writing from the USA suggests that the scholarship of understanding the needs of students with disabilities within HE may not be keeping pace with the growth of the population. This small-scale United Kingdom (UK) based study shares the voices of a set of university lecturers (n=20) who support students with learning needs i.e. mobility difficulties, mental health and specific difficulties such as dyslexia, adding to this much needed body of literature to support the sector in developing their practice in further understanding and supporting the student experience.

Within the UK, legislation around inclusion continues to develop. The Equality Act 2010, consolidated previous anti-discrimination laws, prohibiting universities from direct or indirect discrimination against students with disabilities. However, what this means in practice can vary in quality and approaches across institutions. Students come with an array of conditions, illnesses and physical disabilities (Hughes et al. 2016) which begins to indicate the complexity of creating inclusive practice. Literature suggests that universities may not prioritise this group of students in ways they may do for other cohorts (Hughes et al. 2016), in a system that is faced with significant reduction in funding per head (Riddell & Weedon 2014) this is cause for concern.

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HE institutions within the UK are required by law to make anticipatory reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities. Although not clearly defined what these should be, Elcock (2014) suggests that these are not only specific to each student but also to the requirements of the programme. Reasonable adjustments may include specialist equipment, accessibility to premises (Redpath et al. 2013) or adjustments in relation to learning, teaching and assessment (Riddell & Weedon 2014).

When students with disabilities apply to university, institutions may invite the student to an interview with student support services. This service helps a student to identify what needs to be put in place and an individual Learning Support Plan (LSP) is drawn up. Recommendations may include, early access to presentation slides, additional notes and access to a writing support tutor for guidance in essay planning for example. For HE sector guidance, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2015), provide examples of good practice in supporting students with disabilities. However, this is an area that is inconsistent between universities (Hall 2007) suggesting that not all students can access the same level of support.

Another problematic aspect of supporting students with disabilities is disclosure and what the students want the university to know about them. For additional support to be put in place, there is an expectation that a disability will be disclosed prior to entry into HE and institutions should actively encourage this (Jacklin 2011). However, as Carey (2012) acknowledges, there is no compulsion for individuals to disclose a disability. Whilst the benefits of disclosure are well documented (Cunnah 2015) there are those who choose not to for a range of reasons, including the perceived stigma associated with disability (Mortimore & Crozier 2006), concerns around being treated differently (Hargreaves et al. 2014) or not identifying with being disabled (Shakespeare 2006).

There are numerous studies around the negative and positive experiences of students with disabilities within HE (Hopkins 2011; Vickerman & Blundell 2010), but limited literature on lecturers' experiences of accommodating such a diverse range of needs (Cameron & Nunkoosing 2012). This paper contributes to this knowledge, exploring the challenges experienced by twenty lecturers from one university in supporting students with disabilities.

**Method**

In order to gather participants' perceptions and expectations in supporting students with disabilities, this study adopted an interpretivist qualitative stance. Through semi-structured interviews, an in-depth level of detail was ascertained from individuals who had experience with working with the target group discussed within this paper. Interviews were chosen as the tool for data gathering to assist the capture of the participant's thoughts and ideas. Focusing on the meaning that the participants hold about working with students with disabilities (Creswell 2009) enables this study to add to the body of knowledge about this important area of work. The study gained university ethical approval and permission was gained from the Dean of Education for the study to proceed.

## *Unit of analysis and participants*

Participants for this study were all Education lecturers (n=48) based within one Faculty in a university in the North of England who were emailed asking if they would partake in the study. Twenty-three participants replied, three later withdrew and consequently twenty participants agreed to be interviewed (9 male and 11 female) forming the basis of this study. Participants were asked if they had experience of supporting students with disabilities and all stated that they had. Ten of the participants taught solely on the Initial Teaching Training Programme (ITT) focusing on training teachers, whilst the others taught on various Educational programmes within the Faculty. All respondents were informed about the research, the right of the participant to amend any transcribed work, to refuse to respond to any questions. Individuals were assured of confidentiality should they participate in the interviews.

## *Data collection and analysis*

The author of the paper conducted all the interviews to ensure reliability across the interviews. The researcher has significant experience working with individuals with disabilities and has experience of previous works and is aware of the difficulties that can arise when carrying out qualitative data. Once participants were contacted, a suitable time was arranged for the interview in a location of the participant's choice. The participant information sheet was read and consent forms signed before the interview commenced. The interview schedule was semi-structured to enable areas to be further explored. Interviews were conducted within a three month period, followed the same format and lasted between forty minutes and one hour. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed and a thematic data analysis approach was used to analyse the data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011). Using Bryman's (2008) stages of analysing qualitative data, interviews were read, re-read and coded into themes before being linked back to current literature. To check for accuracy of the analysis, a colleague read through the interviews and the coding, discussion followed and small adaptations were made to some of the themes.

## Findings

### *Declaring a disability*

All participants were committed to supporting students with disabilities but spoke of issues that caused frustration. In relation to hidden disabilities, they all gave examples where a student had not disclosed a learning need and when the assessment came in, there was an obvious problem but it was too late to offer any help for that piece of work. Across the group, issues relating to disclosure were discussed including, the student now knowing they had a specific need to not wanting to acknowledge the problem. A further sub-theme emerged relating to once an issue had been highlighted, students still did not disclose or seek support. Reluctance to access support is well documented within literature and findings suggest it is often a decision made by students to avoid what they perceive as discrimination and stigma (Riddell & Weedon 2014) with some students not wanting to identify themselves as being 'disabled' (Jacklin 2011). For example, one of the participants in this study stated:

*'The ones who haven't taken support continue to struggle… you know particular student needs additional support but because there is no specific diagnosis, you are unsure of what help to provide.' L2*

Participants (n=15) acknowledged that they were aware of students who had been diagnosed with a disability prior to university but were unwilling to disclose this on their application. A number of students having informed a lecturer about their disability did not want this to go any further. Participants stated that this was particularly pertinent to dyslexic students who wanted to become teachers.

*'I had a student who got her LSP in her final year even though I advised her two years ago to seek help…she didn't want it to be formally recorded because she was thinking of becoming a teacher.' L3*

Seven of the participants discussed students who had mental health difficulties. During critical points in the academic year e.g. prior to an assessment submission, it became evident they were experiencing difficulties. Whilst the participants acknowledged that students may not want to declare mental health issues due to perceived stigma, they felt this reticence to inform staff made it difficult to fully support the individual.

*'In terms of mental health difficulties, some students don't disclose their difficulties. You tend to pick it up on the grapevine that they are experiencing mental health issues. Whilst some students are happy to discuss how they can be helped, others won't …it makes it really difficult. I want to help them but what can you do?' L6*

### *Training*

The second theme arising from the interviews was around lecturer knowledge and skills in supporting students with disabilities. All but one of the participants identified a need for disability training. However, how they thought this could be conducted varied greatly. A minority (n=2) believed training should be compulsory and on a regular basis as proposed by Hopkins (2011) with one person suggesting it should be a legal requirement. Other participants felt this would not be helpful but agreed that it was important to have a basic knowledge of some of the more common disabilities. They all acknowledged that they would like training in the area of mental health.

*'I don't think that I have the time to embark on something in depth and lengthy, but something short and smart. It's important to know the basics in order to support your students.' L7*

In alignment with what is considered good practice by Cameron and Nunkoosing (2012), all participants stressed the importance of meeting with students who had disabilities to discuss support and then have some theoretical input from outside agencies. Three participants suggested that case conferences involving the student and other relevant parties were useful in terms of compiling a package of support.

*'I would also like to hear the voice of the students and discuss what they would like. What would help and support them.' L6*

One tutor stated;

*'A person from the RNIB phoned me because I have a student who is visually impaired. He wanted me to know that anytime I required any support then I could give him a ring. I thought, that is more useful than going on a one day training course.' L10*


### Making reasonable adjustments

An aspect of concern from participants was knowing how to make adequate reasonable adjustments. This was more than just training in dealing with individual issues, it related to aspects of the wider practice of teaching and learning. All participants were committed to implementing inclusive practice and expressed concerns about actually making this happen. This was linked by the majority (n=18) to the increase in recruitment to courses and how it was becoming difficult to meet the needs as the cohort size increased. Participants discussed feeling overwhelmed, under pressure and fearful of being accused of discrimination suggesting that doing things right is emotive for staff.  Eight participants also felt that some students had unreasonable expectations of what constituted a 'reasonable adjustment' and in their opinion made unreasonable demands.

*'They do misunderstand and overestimate sometimes the possibilities of reasonable adjustment. They think that the whole world has to revolve around them and adjust completely to their environment as opposed to reasonable adjustment.' L11*

The environment was also an issue raised. Participants spoke of being in a lecture theatre where the loop system for a hearing impaired student was not working or being in rooms where seating was inappropriate for those with posture problems. The participants reported that they had discussed the student needs with rooming services but because for example the number of students, the room was allocated according to size rather than suitability for students. This caused frustration as they felt they were not meeting the needs of students because of issues beyond their control.

Trying to accommodate everyone equally was another issue when it came to reasonable adjustments. Similar to Wright (2005), participants felt that in meeting the needs of one student with a particular disability they then did not meet the needs of others. One example given, related to the background and font colour of presentation slides and how one colour may not meet the needs of everybody. To some extent this issue was dealt with by students using their own laptops. This however created another difficulty as it meant that the slides had to be available for the students to change the background and font colour in advance, which some of the participants found problematic due to time constraints. Another example related to lights;

*'I had to keep the lights up in lecture theatres because a student needs to lip read, but then other students complain that they can't see the presentation. That's just the tip of the iceberg in trying to meet all of the student's needs.' L11*

Audio recording of lectures was also an issue of contention. Fifteen of the participants felt 'uneasy' at being recorded as they did not know where it would be used and by whom concurring with Mortimore's (2013) findings. Guest speakers were discussed as a potential problem point, as they may discuss sensitive issues that they do not want recorded. Students had disclosed to participants that they were reticent in responding to

questions during teaching sessions because they were being recorded. Other students in tutorial groups objected to being recorded creating conflict between the students who had a LSP and the rest of the class.

Another specific issue was the availability of PowerPoint slides prior to lectures, as discussed by Hopkins (2011). For example, participants who worked on many modules found it difficult to have the slides prepared a couple of days in advance, especially if they were asked to cover for staff absence. Making reasonable adjustments is not easy, takes time, prior planning and attention to detail especially for large classes with a diverse range of needs.

> *'The workload that is put upon lecturers is immense. Our class sizes have increased, and therefore the students with disabilities have increased, you still only have the same time to prepare and now you have to prepare well in advance the presentations and notes. It's really stressful!' L7*

An example of supporting one particular student was given by a lecturer who talked about a new module commencing at the start of the academic year, with a student enrolled on it who was blind. Three months prior to the course starting the participant was asked to provide the module handbook, outline of the module and lectures for the whole year in advance, so that they could be brailed for the student. This participant comments;

> *'I feel under pressure having to send all the handbooks, lectures etc by the beginning of June! It was too much, too high an expectation of people to have…after many heated debates, I have agreed to write six lectures at a time but where is the spontaneity? I may want to change something but I can't…how long does it take to Braille some notes?' L13*

Research acknowledges that students with disabilities often experience difficulties when faced with particular forms of assessment and there is a need for more equitable assessment (Hanafin et al. 2007). All of the participants were amenable to making 'reasonable adjustments' to support students with disabilities. Although constrained by the forms of assessment within the validated documents of the course, participants used a range of assessments within modules but this good practice was becoming difficult to maintain.

### *Learning support plans*

LSPs are provided for students who disclose a disability. The LSPs are to support the staff and students in ways to enhance learning however, participants did not think they were useful or even appropriate. Only one lecturer felt that the LSPs were useful, considering them to be a good resource, but lacking in detail. The participants suggested that following discussions with individual students about their LSP, many of the recommendations and support offered were inaccurate and often did not reflect the actual requirements. Comments suggested that the LSPs were generic, inadequate, and tokenistic, remaining the same each year and not specific enough, especially in the areas of dyslexia and mental health.

> *'They [LSPs] are very generic, especially in relation to mental health issues … there is nothing that helps me to support the student. They are absolutely useless; I would prefer the plans to be more specific.' L8*

Linking back to the issues in regard to reasonable adjustments, concern was raised by the participants about some students using the LSP unfairly to gain an advantage in terms of both time and grades. Examples given, included students challenging the mark they had been given because they had an LSP and felt that this entitled them to be given a better grade. Participants expressed their concerns about maintaining academic standards within the university, an issue also raised by Smith (2010).

> *'Some students use it as an excuse; they are quick to let you know that they have an LSP if they get a poor grade. However, academic standards need to be maintained. I can't pass someone if the work isn't an acceptable standard!' L10*

The majority of participants suggested that there was an unreasonable expectation by many students with a LSP that assignments would be proof read prior to submission. In terms of equity, participants felt that if they proof read the work of students with a LSP they should read the work of the entire cohort.

> *'I tend to feel that it is not just students with disabilities who want that support especially just before an assignment submission. The ones with LSP's have already got that extra support so I always stress to them that we are not proof readers and I tend to give them the same as I give everyone.' L8*

### Writing support tutors

At the university where this study was located, students who had a LSP were entitled to additional hours with a writing support tutor. This is an under-researched area and the participants in this study offered a mixed opinion on this aspect of support. Whilst all acknowledged that students who had a disability may require additional support and generally the tutors did a good job, over half expressed concerns. One of which, centred on the writing support tutor advising students that assignments would be given a specific grade.

> *'I have had students who, after having received work back have said that their writing tutor told them that they would have given them an A or B for their work when in fact, the work is just about scraping through a D or C for content.' L14*

Another area of concern was the issue of assignments not being the sole work of the student. Participants questioned whose work was actually being marked, how much had been written by the student and how much by the tutor. Furthermore, the participants felt that this disadvantaged non disabled students who did not have access to this service.

> *'When you are marking, it is almost, how much value do you attach to that piece of work, has it been completely produced by the student or has it been produced by the support worker or a mixture of both?' L18*

**Discussion**

This study has found a complex picture around supporting students with disabilities in HE in the UK. There is a juxtaposition created with participants wanting to do their best to support students whilst at the same time being anxious about the practicalities of making this happen and managing all student expectations fairly. Given the increase in students with disabilities entering HE and the diversity of this growing population, the issue of student support for this particular sector is in need of further research and understanding. This paper builds on the work of others, exploring the concerns and issues of staff who have to manage the day to day interaction with students. The findings from the small sample group of participants involved in the study cannot be generalised across the sector but their voices can raise the issues and reassure others they are not alone in their struggles.

All of the participants were committed to implementing inclusive practice, benefitting all students not just those with disabilities (Grace & Gravestock 2009). However, they also expressed concerns in making this happen. The disclosure to the university of a disability was seen as an issue by the participants and aligns with other research in this area (Cunnah, 2015). There is obviously a problem with students feeling they want to or can tell the university about any specific needs they may have. From a staff perspective this becomes difficult to manage. This did not just occur as students started university but was an issue at other points during their time studying, participants perceived that students did not always follow up on advice to get help therefore, putting themselves at a disadvantage. These findings are similar to Madriaga (2007) who suggests students do not disclose for fear of being viewed as a problem. Knott and Taylor (2014) acknowledge that students are often anxious about disclosure therefore, there needs to be more of an emphasis on encouraging students prior to entry into university to disclose and hopefully remove associated stigmas. Participants suggested that this process could begin at recruitment fairs or university open days, an idea also discussed by Mortimore (2013).

Whilst committed to inclusive practice, the issue of reasonable adjustments was an emotive area for the participants, associated with doubt and fear regarding what they needed to do and how they could do it. In order to support their students, participants identified the need for further training within the area of disabilities.

Similar to the findings of Mortimore and Crozier (2006), the LSPs were an issue for the participants as they felt they did not provide the information they needed, being too generic. It was difficult at times to get students to disclose and the information received might not be helpful. This again, added more pressure on staff causing anxiety. Participants suggested that it would be beneficial if LSPs gave guidelines as to what would be considered 'reasonable adjustments' for individual students.

The final area that the study explored was around writing support tutors. Participants expressed concerns over whose work they were marking and what the student thought their mark would be after discussion with a support tutor. There were concerns that writing support tutors varied in their approaches and degree of support. To address these concerns, it was suggested that a meeting be held at the start of the academic year between teaching and writing support staff, setting out expectations with continued liaison throughout the academic year. Whilst Couzens et al. (2015) acknowledge writing support tutors within HE, there is limited literature that discusses their role. This is an area for further research.

## Conclusion

The complexity of supporting students with disabilities means that there will be many questions left unanswered by studies exploring this topic. This article has highlighted the juxtaposition between wanting to do the best for each student and the problems of delivering this in practice. The key challenges for the university sector lie in empowering students to be able to comfortably disclose their disability, enabling staff to support whilst also enhancing the LSPs as a tool to direct support. There is a need to further explore and understand the role that study support tutors can play in enhancing learning without becoming part of the marked work. Reasonable adjustments are vital to support individuals but they do not come without problems and issues. This article clearly shows that there are a multitude of stakeholders involved in supporting the learning needs of students and it is important that the environment, support services, lecturer support are all aligned and working together for the good of all.

## Recommendations

Universities should consider when to start the conversations about students declaring a disability, this study suggests that open days and recruitment fairs maybe a good starting point. LSPs need to be completely overhauled across the sector, looking at how best to capture the data, acknowledging the situation and recommending reasonable adjustments. Universities need to acknowledge within their workload model the time it takes to support students per se, particularly students who require additional support. Training was highlighted as a key factor and further research is needed in relation to how this could happen in practice.

## Notes on contributor

Lynne Kendall is a Senior lecturer and Programme Leader for the BA Education Studies and Special and Inclusive Needs at Liverpool John Moores University. Prior to working in HE, Lynne was a teacher for 25 years, working with children with special educational needs in special and mainstream schools.

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