Chapter 10

Support for Disabled Students in Higher Education: A Move Towards Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Disabled students can expect adjustments and practical support when commencing their studies at a university in the United Kingdom. Many institutions, however, strive to provide disabled students with an ‘inclusive’ experience, beyond that which is required legally.

In this chapter, the authors will offer an insight into how disabled students are supported at Leeds Metropolitan University in the North of England. After introducing the relevant legislative framework, they outline how this has been interpreted at Leeds Metropolitan University. The authors then discuss the challenges that a higher education institution faces when striving to be an inclusive university and argue that there is a dichotomy between the current individual funding model and inclusive university provision. Finally, they look to the future of support for disabled students and make suggestions for further research.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we provide an insight into how disabled students are supported at a large higher education institution in the United Kingdom (UK), using Leeds Metropolitan University as a case study. We discuss how a higher education institution the size of Leeds Metropolitan University can make adjustments for disabled students and we outline some of the adjustments currently in place as the university strives to be inclusive to all students, including those with disabilities.

The chapter begins by introducing two models of disability—the medical and social model—which
are commonly used to theorise about disability. We then introduce a third term, inclusion, by which we mean the equitable participation of diverse students in higher education (see also HEA, 2010). Following this, we offer some background to the legislative framework relevant to the area of higher education in the context of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The legislative landscape regarding the provision of education to disabled students has changed significantly over the past twenty years and in this chapter we draw attention to the most relevant points. This includes a critical review of the United Kingdom’s current funding model.

We consider how the complex legislative framework has been interpreted by the higher education sector as well as the practical steps that have been implemented at Leeds Metropolitan University to conform to legislative requirements. We then provide some background information to the university as well as a detailed outline of the structure of the disability services provided by Leeds Metropolitan University to allow the reader to make a comparison to their own experience.

Following this we highlight a number of issues and controversies around the concept of inclusion, disabled learners’ identity and the current funding model for disabled students. We discuss whether higher education institutions can be fully inclusive in terms of their provision and we consider the dichotomy between the concept of inclusion and the current individual funding model operated by the current funding bodies.

Finally, we argue that inclusivity should be built into a university’s service provision which would mean that adjustments would not need to be made specifically for every disabled student’s needs. But instead the university is adjusted to meet the needs of all students, including those with disabilities.

We conclude by looking to the future and offering a view to a possible solution to achieve the aim of providing an inclusive university to disabled students.

BACKGROUND

Disabled or Impaired? A Clarification of Terminology

Traditionally disabled people were described in what we now consider to be negative terms. Terms such as cripple, handicapped, deaf and dumb are just a few examples of words used to describe, and define, people with a specific disability. One of the problems with these and similar terms is that they are frequently used to define the whole person. By that we mean that a cripple was just that, the person was lost within the term and whatever else they may have become becomes irrelevant. This leads to a debate as to what do we describe people as today. In the UK the term ‘impairment’ has gathered favour, for example it is used by the Quality Assurance Agency (2010) and the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). Hence people may be described as having physical impairments, or perhaps sensory impairments, and this is the term we will use in this chapter. A further debate in the UK centres on the two descriptions ‘person with a disability’ and the alternative ‘disabled person’. We use the second of these descriptions throughout this chapter, following the social model convention that a person is disabled by society therefore it is through their interactions with society that they become a disabled person. We describe this model in more detail in the next section of our chapter.

Models of Disability

There are different ways of thinking and theorising about disability and the experiences of disabled people. An acknowledgement and brief explanation of two of the main models of disability, the medical or individual model and the social model, provides a starting point for our discussion on disability. The origin of these two models lies with disabled people in the United Kingdom who began articulating their experiences from a social interpretation perspective, notably