

# **An Investigation into International Disabled Students' Experiences in Higher Education in England**

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This presentation into disabled international students' experiences in British higher education (HE) is a report of my Ph.D *research project in progress*. It is founded on my personal experience in this area and the desire to have a positive impact on this group's educational life. The research thus far indicates that there is a clear lack of data about disabled international students studying in the UK and conducting such research appears to be timely.

Subsequently, this presentation will discuss the background to the current work. The research questions, aims and objectives will be highlighted. The data collection strategies chosen for conducting the research will also be addressed.

Background

The drive for starting this research was the inequalities I have experienced in the British HE system over the last six years. Considering the growing number of disabled international students in this country, this drive is further strengthened by the academic appropriateness and the originality of the current study.

Indeed, on the national level, the data available from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) and Skill: the National Bureau of Students with Disabilities, shows that there was a 40.5% increase in disabled domestic student numbers in British HE from the academic year 2000/01 to the year 2003/04. This increase can be partly attributed to Part IV of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in the name of Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA), which came into force in 2001, removing the previous exemption of education from the DDA (1995).

The inclusive policies adopted by the Labour government to accommodate diversity within the student population, including untraditional and under-represented groups in HE, may also have contributed to the increase of disabled domestic students' numbers (Brown & Simpson:2004; Riddell et al:2005). It can also be argued that the possibility of accessing different funds such as Disability Support Allowance (DSA), Access Funds, Discretionary Awards and Social Security Benefits to help with impairment related costs has made the transition of disabled domestic students from Further Education (FE) to mainstream HE somewhat smoother. Yet, as far back as 1995, due to the impact of anti-discrimination legislation, Hurst was optimistic about the development of policies and provisions for disabled students in HE.

All these facts suggest a positive move towards the social interpretation of disability in education. This view recognises various

educational/environmental/social barriers obstructing disabled students' progress rather than seeing individual students' impairments as the "problem" (Riddell et al:2005). Therefore, it advocates for the changes in society/educational systems to accommodate 'all' students rather than holding individual disabled students responsible for their failure to access education.

In a traditional educational system, the assumption of what was "normal" underlined the construction and the provision of education. In other words, the conventional system was geared towards serving the needs of those students who were perceived to be "normal", assuming that university was not the place for disabled students (Riddell et al:2005).

Docherty et al (2004) examine the exclusionary treatment of people with learning difficulties by the academy. They state the relationship between the academy and this group has been disabling. This is

not surprising, when, as argued above, entering any education system has been largely based on the selection of the elite and the exclusion of those who were deemed to be educationally incompetent (Tomlinson:1982).

Despite this documented recent progress in access to education for disabled students, the research conducted by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) (2002) into young disabled adults' lives found that 30% of those who had not progressed onto FE or HE, felt they were prevented from doing so for a reason relating to their impairment. This indicates that with a traditional view of disability, the participants in this research may have considered their own impairments as a major factor for excluding them from participation in FE/HE, rather than acknowledging the external disabling barriers present in these institutions.

However, ample research has criticised HE, the support it offers to disabled students and the relevant

funding bodies. I will refer to a few of these studies here. In their research, conducted prior to the introduction of DSA, Stone et al (1998), for example, were critical of the inadequacy of the governmental financial support available, particularly to disabled part-timers, and their unnecessary, yet essential reliance on charitable trusts such as the Snowdon Scheme for funding.

In another account, Parker (1999) explores disabled students' experiences in using the crucial support services of Personal Assistants (PAs) at the University of East London, questioning the suitability of the system for the students' self-development and confidence. Barriers such as physical access, curriculum delivery and assessment procedures are criticized by Shevlin et al (2004).

Borland and James (1999) highlight the issues of central concern to students' learning experiences, including policy implications and the social values of

disability that underpin the framework of support for disabled students. They categorise and discuss these in four broad areas: disclosure, access, quality assurance and the moral positions of the institution in relation to disabled students. Konur (2000) argues that disabled students have been subjected to potential legal discrimination by the HE system at every stage including: recruitment, admission, service-provision, placement, and graduation.

Hence, it appears that disabled students are often expected to go to extreme lengths and display skills beyond those required of their non-disabled counterparts in order to merely access the same opportunities to succeed and achieve the same entitlements as non-disabled students. Preece (1995) believes that barriers in HE reflect both attitudinal and practical access issues, considering underachievement to often be the consequence of oppression from a variety of sources.

Furthermore, Beauchamp-Pryor (2004) believes that the representations of disabled students in HE are very much based on the individual/medical/charity discourses of disability with their views being unheard and unconsidered. Thus according to Beauchamp-Pryor, the power, policy, provision of services and legislation in HE, adopt a needs-based rather than a rights-based approach.

Similarly, in theorizing disability in HE, Brown and Simpson (2004) point to the lack of theoretical clarity in the way disability is defined and how disabled students are consequently treated in HE. Yet, they believe that HE is more inclined towards adopting the medical interpretation of disability. They see the Universities and Colleges Admission Service's (UCAS) medical classification of disability as yet another hindrance for disabled students, criticizing the issues of accuracy and validity in measuring certain impairments.



According to the studies cited above, there are certain barriers to disabled domestic students' access into HE but very little is written about disabled international students. Only three of these studies (Brown & Simpson:2004; Riddell et al:2005; Stone et al:1998) refer to disabled international students' experiences. Interestingly, all three are in the context of the limited financial support open to disabled international students.

Additionally, Brown and Simpson (2004) and Preece (1995) refer to the experiences of domestic disabled students with an ethnic minority background without acknowledging disabled international students. With no specific reference to disabled international students' experiences, Riddell et al (2004b) focus on the way disabled students with different backgrounds such as social class, impairments, gender and ethnicity negotiate and prioritise their multiple, yet fluid identities in their specific institutional context.

Despite the clear lack of research in this area, since 2000/01 disabled international students' numbers have been on the increase (an increase of 38.2%). This proportion is larger compared to the increase of non-disabled international students (32.5%).

This amount of growth once again highlights the necessity of research into disabled international students' experiences. In the literature studied thus far, disabled international students' needs are often associated with Skill and the Council for International Education (UKCOSA). Yet, neither of these organizations appear to be specifically concerned with the provision for this group. This indicates a lack of an organization being solely responsible for disabled international students' affairs, including representation, advisory service, policy-making and campaigning.

In addition to the cultural/linguistic barriers experienced by most non-disabled international

students, the disabled international students may face unique impairment related barriers. For example, the facts prepared by UKCOSA and Skill (<http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/disabilityfaqs.doc>) emphasise that there are no available specific grants for disabled international students to meet their impairment related costs. They are only allowed to remain in the UK with the condition that they make no recourse to public funds including such welfare benefits as DSA, and therefore they have to rely on the discretion of their university.

Consequently, disabled international students may feel their presence and difficulties are 'irrelevant' or 'added on as an optional extra' (Vernon 1999:391). Contrary to Skill's statement, they may feel rejected from both disabled domestic students' and non-disabled international students' groups, feeling marginalized and discriminated against.

‘Disabled students come under the Act [SENDA] no matter what their status: part-time, overseas, evening class, postgraduate, undergraduate, distance learning, etc.’ (DEMOS:2003 <http://jarmin.com/demos/course/send/index.html>).

Hence through the following questions, this research aims to explore different aspects of disabled international students’ experiences in British HE. It will identify and examine their additional difficulties to the barriers pointed out above. It will also suggest ways in which these barriers can be removed.

### Research Questions

Q1 “What is known at present about disabled international students’ status in British HE and the kind of services they receive?”

Q2 “What are disabled international participants’ opinions and experiences on the services they

receive concerning their impairment-related difficulties?”

Q3 “What are disabled international participants’ opinions and experiences on encountering difficulties in HE?”

Q4 “What are disabled international participants’ opinions and experiences with regard to the levels of inclusion they experience in their respective universities?”

### Aims

These research questions will be answered by addressing the following aims:

- Critically analysing the policies and the extent and kind of support available in the selected universities.

- Documenting, comparing and evaluating disabled international students' experiences in the selected universities.

## Objectives

The aims will be achieved through the following means:

1. Reviewing the secondary literature.
2. Identifying university locations for study.
3. Examining policy documents in the located universities.
4. Identifying samples of students for focus groups within the selected universities.
5. Carrying out focus groups with the sample of students.
6. Identifying samples of students and staff for semi-structured interviews within the selected universities.
7. Carrying out semi-structured interviews with the sample of students and staff.
8. Analysing the data.

9. Comparing students' experiences in different universities in the locations selected.

10. Comparing these experiences with staff statements and the universities' claims on the support provision based on the literature produced.

### Methodology and Data Collection Strategy

This section will address the mixed qualitative data collection strategies through which the objectives above will be fulfilled. The ontological position of this research is based on my personal reality of being a disabled international student in British HE and viewing the barriers I have encountered from a social model perspective. The epistemological position of this study is a social model interpretation of disability.

The four locations for this study will be selected on snowball/convenience sampling procedures.

Consequently, the universities selected (two old, and two new) will be a mixture of those in the Yorkshire

area and those which will respond favourably to my initial research request.

The data generating strategies will include a review of relevant literature and previous research to identify key themes. The content analysis of the equal opportunities policies and the literature on service provision in all selected universities will be considered. This will refine the themes found in the literature review and clarify topics for discussion in the focus groups. During the time of content analysis, the student/staff samples in each university will be determined.

One focus group with students in each university will be conducted. The focus group will act as a sample recruiting strategy for semi-structured interviews. It will refine and validate general topics for the semi-structured interviews.



Based on the themes discussed in the focus groups, a semi-structured interview with five student participants in each university is planned. Two representatives from each university as well as two officials from two national educational bodies, such as Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Council for International Students (CIS) will also be interviewed. Finally, the content of all transcripts will be thematically analysed and interpreted, the result of which is hoped to be presented at the next DSA conference.