





PHYSICAL AND SENSORY IMPAIRMENT: EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS AND STAFF


The focus of this discussion paper is on physical and sensory impairments, specifically the experiences of students with physical impairment and staff who are involved in supporting these students. This group of students is heterogeneous and consequently have a diversity of support requirements. The issues are drawn from interviews with six HE students (three who were wheelchair users, one who was a wheelchair user and visually impaired, and two who were hearing impaired) and interviews with a variety of members of staff across two HEIs. The paper explores  Physical and sensory terminology; a range of  Students' views and experiences about academic assessment, disclosure, choice of university, the role of their peers and opportunities for change. It concludes with  recommendations and  questions for further research and debate.

DEIP: an introduction

This paper is one of a series of discussion papers produced by the Disability and Effective Inclusion Policies (DEIP) project that was funded by the European Social Fund. The DEIP project is a piece of collaborative research undertaken by Sussex and Lancaster Universities. The project aims to explore ways in which higher education institutions support disabled students through higher education and on into employment.

The research is shaped by four research questions (see **DP1**) which provided the opportunity for considering the influence of disability models with respect to: sector and institutional HE policy; practice as reported by disabled students and university staff at Sussex and Lancaster Universities; the experience of disabled graduates making the transition into employment and the views of employers.

DEIP discussion papers

The DEIP project contributes to an increasing body of institutional research surrounding the experiences of disabled students in higher education. For a list of current and future DEIP project Discussion Papers (DP) see:  <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html>. For details of the thematic topics emerging from analysis of institutional policy see **DP1**, methodology **DP2**, an annotated bibliography of other relevant research **DP13** and for further details on issues relating to hearing impaired students **DP9**.

Physical and sensory impairment


The terms physical and sensory impairment are used to refer to a wide diversity of impairments, and individuals with such impairments consequently have different support requirements. Individuals with physical impairments include students who are wheelchair users, and others who experience a wide range of mobility difficulties. Individuals with sensory impairment encompass blind / partially sighted individuals and D/deaf / hard of hearing, people with hearing loss or a hearing impairment.

Statistical evidence suggests that for 2004-5, amongst those UK domiciled first year HE students (undergraduate and postgraduate) declaring a disability, approximately 4.4% disclosed that they were wheelchair users or had mobility difficulties, 2.7% blind or partially sighted, and 5.6% Deaf or hearing impaired.

 <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/holisdocs/pubinfo/student/disab0405.htm>

While these broad categories maybe useful for statistical purposes, it is a constant challenge to raise awareness about the diversity of possible strategies institutions might adopt in order to make 'reasonable adjustment' and take 'anticipatory' action as required by the Special Educational Needs Disability Act (SENDA, 2001).

The inclusive teaching website developed by the Open University and HEFCE provides a wealth of relevant information and support for teaching staff and others to assist them in understanding the impact of physical and sensory impairments on learning and life in general.

 www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/understanding-and-awareness/types-of-deafness.php. Please see **DP13** for additional resources for staff.

Students' views and experiences: emerging themes

Perhaps the defining characteristics when reviewing students' views are the diversity of experiences, the range of obstacles faced by students, and the solutions they devised and strategies they developed. The following discussion highlights a few key issues that illustrate some common experiences:

Choice of University

For those students with physical impairments, considerations such as the geography of area and the accessibility of facilities were important. Some students expressed definite preference for a Campus University where all facilities and teaching areas are located in relatively small area.

I wanted somewhere where I didn't have to go to the other side of campus for a lesson. It's all centralized. (Pam)

For one student who was a wheelchair user, accessibility was crucial in influencing her choice of university and she visited ten universities prior to applying. Although she recognised this was time consuming, she found it helpful to actually see the environment for herself but, perhaps more importantly, meet the people and gain a sense of how they would respond to her requirements. Some students had limited their choice according to the proximity of the institution to home, regardless of other factors such as academic considerations. For example, Sally, who has ME, said that she:

...decided [this university] was best, not on academic grounds, but because it was here.

Visible impairment and (mistaken) assumptions?

Just because a physical impairment is visible it is not always possible to make assumptions about the support needs of an individual student. For instance, though physical accessibility is crucial for a wheelchair user, it is important not to assume that providing a ramp is the complete answer. Accessible routes may be longer which means that a student may be fatigued by the exertion of getting to a session. In addition, there are sometimes obstacles that may be unrelated to the 'visible impairment'. For instance, one student with ME experienced difficulties in reading and although she was a wheelchair user, the difficulties she experienced tended to relate her visual impairment:

I don't read much text. a couple of months before university I was getting papers through my door, it was overwhelming, I couldn't cope with it, I just threw it in the bin, there was stuff from student support, I just couldn't keep up with it, my eyes were very bad at that point. (Sally)

This example suggests the value of encouraging students to disclose details of their impairment to tutors in order to avoid mistaken assumptions. It also highlights that where possible, it is important and beneficial to consider a student's support requirements during the application process and not only when they start their course.

Also, students who are wheelchair users are not a homogeneous group. They include students with cerebral palsy, ME, brittle bone disease, and students who use a wheelchair intermittently depending on their impairment. Discussing arrangements and not making assumptions about what might be the best solutions is therefore important.

One size doesn't fit all

Issues concerning teaching and learning were also raised in the interviews with students with physical and sensory impairments. Though awareness of the needs of other disabled students such as those with dyslexia appears to be improving, the ways in which courses need to be made more accessible to all students including those with physical and sensory impairments continues to require consideration. A solution for one person may prove useless for another.

Amongst hearing-impaired individuals there is a wide variation in their ability to hear the spoken word. Technology is sometimes seen as a panacea, yet a lack of awareness about its capability and a person's needs may lead to ineffective use and subsequent disappointment. For example, the hearing loop system is not suitable for all hearing impaired students and though lecture notes may be provided for these students, transcripts of the audio-visual material used in lectures (e.g. videos) also need to be made available.

Specific courses may raise particular issues; a student's need for an adaptation may only emerge in relation to specific activities, for example, during a work placement or field trip. In these instances, innovative adaptations need to be made to ensure accessibility for all students. One example of such an adaptation was reported by a tutor who described a recent field trip involving a visit to a cave. In order to include a student who was a wheelchair user in the experience, a digital camera was taken underground so the student could sit at the cave entrance and watch the other students move through the cave. For further information on inclusive teaching in geography, earth and environmental sciences and related disciplines see:

<http://www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/icp/details.htm>

Hidden impairment and repeated disclosures

In addition to the general dilemmas concerning disclosure (see **DP3**), some hearing impaired students may find themselves needing to make repeated disclosures to peers and staff to avoid exclusion. In this way, there is a lack of choice over whether or not to disclose their impairment to others. There are also implications for their identity and how others see them, the hidden nature of their impairment may mean they 'pass' as a non-disabled person but to be included requires repeated disclosure which they may resent and resist.

Also, some impairments may have unexpected implications in terms of the barriers encountered. For example, one hearing impaired student discussed her fears of travelling into town alone due to not being able to hear people approaching and feeling unsafe. While she was not considered to have limited mobility, as noted above, it is not always the case that barriers encountered will be 'obvious' from an individual's impairment.

Peers: friends (and foe)?

Amongst those students with physical and sensory impairments, there were mixed experiences of their interactions with peers. For one student who was a wheelchair user, her friends had been an invaluable source of support:

I also struggled to get note takers [and] it was hit and miss if I got my lectures, I had to rely on my friends. And my whole university life is based on relying on friends.

Others reported difficulties in participating in social events: "*it is all well and good them organising a coach, but that's no good if you can't get in it!*".

However, some students talked about the difficulties they experienced in communicating with peers. For example, one student needed to continually remind fellow students of her hearing impairment to be included in conversations and had encountered negative reactions from her peers to her request for them to use a microphone during group work in a seminar. For further examples of issues relating to hearing-impaired students see **DP9**.

Disabled and *disabled*?

While attitudes and practices are changing towards the greater inclusion of disabled students, there appears to be differences between impairments. In some ways, there seems to be a hierarchy of acceptability, with some impairments appearing to be 'more acceptable' than others. As one student observed:

I actually think most uni[s]...would much prefer I was dyslexic than in a wheelchair, because the things you have to do to enable someone to access education are quite major, but not as major in a physical sense as a wheelchair, but you get as much money and status as you do for someone with dyslexia so why bother having a wheelchair user in terms of people don't want [to make] the effort. (Paula)

Riddell et. al. (2005: 636) argue that 'as long as they qualify for the DSA, students with less significant impairments may be more attractive customers than those with higher support needs, who may require adapted accommodation and more adjustments to the physical and learning environment.' It also appears from university disability policies that while specific policies exist relating to dyslexia, there is less awareness of the support needs of other disabled students (see **DP1** for further discussion of institutional policies).

✓ **Recommendations**

- To provide training for staff (and student) awareness which includes information on supporting the learning of students with physical and sensory impairments and emphasises the importance of recognising diversity amongst these students
- To continue to improve both the accessibility of buildings and course materials (e.g. transcriptions of audio material, availability of readings in different print formats)
- To recognise the varying character / severity of impairment over time as opposed to conceptualising impairment as static (Riddell et. al. 2005)
- To assist students to appreciate the effectiveness of strategies that they have developed over time and the value of these strategies in their future employment

? Questions for further research and debate:

- How could the structure and administration of HE courses be changed to enable more flexibility to students' varying needs?
- To what extent are university courses being reviewed to assess their inclusiveness?
- What changes are being made to courses involving fieldwork and overseas visits to ensure accessibility for all students?

For further information about DEIP Project

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