



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overview

The focus of this paper is upon the research process, data collection and analysis within the Disability and Effective Inclusion Policies (DEIP) Project. In common with others researching disability, the DEIP team sought to engage with the methodological considerations relating to disability research as well as the content. The DEIP project has explored the experiences and understanding of services with current disabled students and university policy makers and practitioners at Sussex and Lancaster, as well as the policies of these institutions. The views of UK disabled graduates and employers have provided a wider context of post university experience. The inter-relationship between the stakeholders is complex and in a state of constant change, with each stakeholder's perspective influenced by their position as a recipient or a provider of services. Consequently, each stakeholder influences the roles, responsibilities, expectations and actions of other stakeholders in the system either explicitly or implicitly, and to a greater or lesser extent. It is this complexity that provides the context for researching disabled people's experience of, and views about, the effectiveness and inclusiveness of policies.

This paper includes the following sections: DEIP Research questions ? ; DEIP research approach – including a discussion of the University case studies, online disabled graduate survey, and employer case studies; and ethical research considerations and dissemination strategies. It concludes with some recommendations ✓ for those interested in disability research and questions ? for future research and debate.

DEIP discussion papers

For further information about the thematic topics emerging from analysis of institutional policy please see Discussion Paper **DP1**. For a list of current and future briefing papers please see:

 <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html>

The DEIP project contributes to an increasing body of institutional research surrounding the experiences of disabled students in higher education. For an annotated bibliography of other relevant research exploring themes addressed within the DEIP project see **DP 12**

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 into employment.

The research is shaped by four research questions (below) 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 Research Questions

There are four main research questions:

1. To what extent have social and medical models of disability shaped UK policy around disability and how do these get interpreted, applied and developed within Higher Education?
2. What are the experiences of disabled students currently studying in Higher Education as they move through the student life cycle and what are their aspirations for when they leave the university?
3. What are the experiences of disabled graduates as they make a transition to work and how are their Higher Education experiences relevant to this?
4. What are the experiences of different employers working with disabled graduates?

DEIP Research Approach

The DEIP Project involved data collection at four discreet institutional sites: two universities and two local employers. This case study approach facilitated an in-depth consideration of issues facing disabled people and others in *specific* higher education and work contexts. The case study information collected across the four sites was also used to provide a thematic exploration of common issues, such as disclosure and transition. In addition, disabled graduates' perspectives were canvassed using an online graduate survey which provided a retrospective account of their education and transition into work.

The DEIP research team employed a mixed method approach and collected a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. The research tools developed and the data collection process were informed by analysis of policy and research literature including literature relating to models of disability.

1. The University Case Studies

Each of the university case studies involved a combination of interviews with staff and students and analysis of documentary evidence.

Documentary evidence

28 documents from the two institutions' web sites were collected during March 2005. These institutional policy and guideline documents relating to disability equality and general personal and academic support were analysed to explore the extent to which they followed and reproduced an individual medical or social model of disability. Selection was based on their public availability to potential and current students. Analysis was undertaken using Atlas Ti with a selection of key terms generated from the literature and emerging issues from student and staff interviews.

Student and Staff Interviews

Overall, 29 disabled students were interviewed in the two case study universities. The research focused on students with experience of dyslexia, mental health difficulties, and students with physical or sensory impairments. Interviews were conducted with twenty staff involved with disabled students at the two universities (e.g. those working in student support and learning support services, Equality and Diversity Unit, Careers Centre).

Interviews with both staff and students were taped, transcribed and analysed using Atlas ti.

The student recruitment process and interview schedule

Students were recruited through advertisements placed on the universities' websites and notice boards. Students who expressed an interest in the research received an information pack that contained:

- a summary of the project;

- an outline of what would be involved including details about confidentiality and what they needed to do next if they wished to be interviewed;
- a pre-interview questionnaire that was designed to collect background and personal information (students were advised that help completing this form would be available during the interview if they preferred);
- an access form to find out if they needed an interpreter, material in another format, or needed specific arrangements to be in place for the interview;
- details of the payment they would receive if they participated.

The importance of flexibility in the research process was important. For example, with the pre interview questionnaire students had the option of completing it before or during the interview. Several reported that they found it useful to be able to complete this before the interview because they disliked writing in front of other people. For students who did not bring the completed form it was possible for them to simply answer the questions. This process often provided a chance for students to discuss their dislike of forms and provided a useful opening to interview questions about the application process.

The interview schedule consisted of open questions. Additional prompts were used to encourage students to share their individual stories. The focus was on collecting individual accounts. Bailey, (2004) reviews the debates about the use of experience, and is critical of disability research that fails to take account of the experience of disabled people, whose individual experiences she believes can be used as the basis for wider exploration of the oppression faced by disabled people.

The semi-structured interviews included discussions around the following topics:

- personal experience and views of impairment and disability;
- recruitment and induction to HE (e.g. decision to apply, factors influencing choice of HE, attitudes and support of other people, the paperwork, initial experiences);
- experiences at university (e.g. teaching and learning, support, careers development, disclosure, social);
- progression to employment (e.g. future plans, work experience, use of careers service, awareness of support for disabled employees, such as Access to Work).

Staff recruitment and interview schedule

Contact with university staff was made by e-mail and in some cases was facilitated by previous interaction with colleagues through previous work. Colleagues were provided with a summary of the project and asked to participate or nominate a suitable colleague who could discuss the services provided.

The staff interview schedules included some general issues including:

- the barriers facing disabled students in HE;
- the significance of anti discrimination legislation;
- areas of good practice;
- suggestions for reducing barriers for disabled students.

Additional and specific prompts were prepared for each interviewee based on the existing knowledge of the REAP team and analysis of documentary evidence relating to a specific area of work.

A supplementary e-mail questionnaire for departmental representatives was distributed at one of the case study universities. This questionnaire provided additional feedback from x Number departments.

A danger of institutional research is familiarity with the research context, which results from insider researchers taking for granted or normalising the findings. Use of cross-institutional team analysis guarded against these dangers. A potential danger in institutional research conducted by current employees or 'insiders' is that, due to familiarity with the research context, findings will become normalised or will be 'taken-for-granted'. The use of cross-institutional team analysis helped to circumvent this potential difficulty.

2. National online questionnaire for disabled graduates

An online questionnaire was designed to explore experiences of university and employment with a national sample of disabled graduates. It was prepared using SNAP and completed electronically. The web link was distributed via a range of organisations (e.g. universities, national disability organisations, disability newspapers, careers services) and e-mail discussion groups. The introduction included details of how to obtain the questionnaire in an alternative format and provided contact details for participants wanting additional information. It included a series of closed questions using a Likert scale which were analysed using SPSS and open questions which enabled graduates to report on their experiences. Responses to the open questions were collated and analysed using Atlas Ti using a selection of key terms generated from the literature and other data. For a discussion of the findings see **DP 11**.

3. Employment Case Studies

Interviews were conducted with 8 disabled graduates and 3 Human Resources staff at two contrasting local workplaces including one public service employer and one corporate employer. Negotiating access with employers was a lengthy process and all institutional participants were offered and received customised feedback on the research findings. Employees were recruited via an e-mail prepared by the DEIP team and circulated by Human Resource staff within the organisation who confirmed institutional support for the research. The key issues explored in the interviews were: recruitment strategies; induction processes; work practices and policies designed to support disabled employees; and disclosure. The interviews were recorded and analysed in a similar way to student and staff interviews. The information collected was summarised for each employer in a confidential report. Issues raised were also used to inform the discussion paper on disabled graduates **DP11**.

Ethics and research considerations

This research has been undertaken within the British Educational Research Association code of practice. To ensure confidentiality the names of all participants within this research have been changed.

The decision to pay students with a voucher of their choice was an attempt to recompense them for their time. To minimise the participation of students who were solely interested in being paid details of the payment was not included in the initial flyer. Although details were provided in the information pack some students were surprised to hear about the voucher during the interview, suggesting that their decision to take part was motivated by a desire to share their story and contribute to bringing about change and improvements to the system.

Some participants found the interview process evoked unhappy memories or highlighted aspects of their current situation that remained problematic. For other students the interviews provided an opportunity to ask for information and advice. Both these issues were anticipated and required sensitivity on the part of the interviewers. Participants were given the opportunity of stopping or withdrawing from the interview at any time, a point included in the permission document and discussed before the interview began. Interviewers had general sources of information available and followed up specific requests. The graduate survey has continued to generate a number of requests for information, advice and guidance, suggesting that some disabled graduates feel quite isolated and unable to discuss their concerns with colleagues. The role of disabled people and their participation in the research process is a key consideration within all disability research. A common debate regarding disability research relates to who undertakes and participates in the various stages of the research process. The significance and respect given to the voice of the professional and the disabled person is often a source of tension. For instance, Holloway (2001) advocates the importance of involving disabled students in evaluating HE provision, Watson et. al.

(2004) express concern that the social model fails to recognise individual experience in all of its complexity, whereas Dewsbury et. al. (2004) express their scepticism about researchers who privilege personal experience.

The DEIP research team debated and at times experienced some of the complex issues that are associated with disability research. In addition, our team comprised researchers who had a diversity of both personal and professional experiences of disability that influenced decisions made during the research process and resulted in interesting reflections during analyses of the materials.

Research dissemination

Dissemination for awareness, understanding and change has taken place throughout the lifespan of the DEIP project and in future plan further dissemination in the form of journal articles.

The audience has included: participants, HE staff, employers, prospective disabled students, teachers and Connexions staff responsible for providing information advice and guidance, disability groups, researchers and policy makers. Colleagues in Canada who recognise the potential for a UK-Canadian comparative study have expressed an interest in this research. In this way, we hope that the DEIP research, while complete as a project, is merely the beginning of further work in this area.

We hope that the discussion papers will both contribute to ongoing debates and act as a stimulus for debate in the field of disability issues. The Discussion Paper Series is available on the following websites:

 <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/reap/projects/deip.htm>

 <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html>

✓ Recommendations

- To be aware of and recognize the difficulties of gaining access and the degree of institutional sensitivity with regard to research into disability issues
- To be aware of the complex power relations involved in disability research and how these are influenced by the relationships and shifting positionality and perspectives of disabled and non-disabled people in disability research
- To consider the possibility of paying student participants and providing follow up sources of information if this is requested
- To ensure that the research process is inclusive and accessible by providing alternative ways for disabled people to participate e.g. use of interpreters, materials in different formats

? Questions for further research and debate:

- How will disabled people be involved in different stages of the research process? Can disability research be undertaken without disabled researchers?
- How will proposals within HE for a single equality framework impact on disabled students?
- Given the resistance to scrutiny by employers how can the views of disabled employees be collected and shared with employers?
- What strategies can enable people who choose not to disclose their disability to contribute to research about disability issues?

For further information about DEIP Project

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