

Inclusive university courses for students living with disability: Could universal design for instruction fulfil that promise?

Miriam Edwards

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract

More university students are seeking academic accommodations due to disability with a growing percentage reporting 'hidden' disabilities such as mental health concerns. As universities have an obligation to offer equitable learning opportunities, this study asks *how might disability among students be better anticipated, and in doing so, offer a more inclusive learning experience to all?* Underpinned by the concept of universal design, this mixed-methods study asked disability support staff and curriculum designers about current practice. Findings indicate that while barriers exist for those wishing to develop a curriculum based on universal design principles, recent institutional responses to Covid-19 have indeed focussed on inclusive learning and teaching as well as student wellbeing. This study furthers conversation around the potential of universal design within higher education and argues for a contextualised, institutional approach. This is a timely conversation as universities continue to re-imagine new learning experiences for increasingly diverse cohorts.

Full paper

Introduction

Broadening participation has been a goal of higher education reform since the 1980s with targeted groups including those living with

disability. While progress continues to be critiqued, numbers of students registering for assistance continues to grow. Their motivation for doing so increasingly stems from 'hidden' disability such as a learning difficulty or mental health concerns. In an attempt to promote equity and inclusion, universities have traditionally provided reasonable adjustments for students who self-report disability. But reliance on such an individualised, reactive approach seems unsustainable given society's evolving view of disability and recent disruptions within higher education. As a result, this study asks *how might universities better anticipate disability among students, and in doing so, offer a more inclusive learning experience to all?*

Literature Review

The literature review informing this study considered policy, experiences of students living with disability, and the potential impact of universal design (UD) (CUD, 1997) to provide inclusion (author). It was found that while there are many UD advocates within higher education, research supporting its efficacy is emergent (Kimball et al., 2016; Fleet & Kondrashov, 2019). Findings also suggested stakeholders not commonly involved in related critical dialogue should be heard (Seale, 2014).

Methods

With the aim of identifying inclusive learning and teaching practice, disability support staff and curriculum designers from all Australian universities were recruited as participants. Both groups were surveyed and invited to take part in individual semi-structured interviews (early 2021: completed). Resulting data was complemented with a desktop environmental scan of disability action plans (DAPs) published by the universities. This research design provided a structure for reporting on the realities of both the curriculum design process and accommodations needed by students. In addition, it contextualised those experiences within the relevant university's stated aspirations.

The 9 principles of universal design for instruction (UDI) (Scott et al., 2003) provided a framework for this study. Best described as the inverse of reasonable adjustments, UDI requires educators to

consider the diversity of their student cohort at the onset of the curriculum design process (McGuire & Scott, 2006). Surveys for both the designers and support staff asked about professional practice based on the UDI principles: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for errors, low physical effort, size and space, community of learners, and instructional climate (Scott et al., 2003). While designers were prompted to describe how they addressed each, support staff were asked about student needs as they related to the principles. As is common practice in disability studies, the follow-on interviews focused on barriers and enablers more broadly (Toutain, 2019).

Survey responses and interview transcripts were coded using causal layered analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 1998) in the hope of identifying causes and to potentially describe alternative futures. Sometimes likened to an iceberg, CLA proposes that qualitative data be separated into 4 layers: litany, social causal, worldview, and myth/metaphor, in order to 'look beneath the surface' for a clearer understanding of the issue's size and depth (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). At the same time, a thematic analysis of the DAPs from universities in which participants worked was conducted.

Findings

It was found that although reference to UD is appearing more often within Australian university DAPs, most participants described actions taken to address disability as retrospective in nature. In instances where disability was anticipated, it tended to focus on physical impairments. Additionally, it was found that institutional responses to Covid-19 featured inclusive teaching strategies as well as empathy towards the mental health of students.

While both participant groups demonstrated a sound understanding of UDI principles, they reported challenges when it came to embedding such practices within the curriculum. These included demands on the academics' time, a lack of influence, and general ignorance towards disability. In contrast, one designer described a major initiative allowing UD principles to be incorporated into all courses. In this instance, the university's DAP identified all members of their community as change agents within a UD framework.

Significance of this Study and Potential Contribution

This study contributes to a growing body of literature promoting UD within higher education (Cumming & Rose, 2021). More specifically it supports the notion that strategies should be contextualised within each institution and that teaching interventions employed during the pandemic be considered in future planning (Burgstahler, 2021; Fovet, 2021). This way responsibility for an inclusive environment is shared across the learning community. In doing so it is proposed disability be normalised and the benefits UD affords all students made apparent.

References

- Bishop, B. J., & Dzidic, P. L. (2014). Dealing with wicked problems: Conducting a causal layered analysis of complex social psychological issues. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 53*(1-2), 13-24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-013-9611-5>
- Burgstahler, S. (2021). What higher education learned about the accessibility of online opportunities during a pandemic. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 21*(7), 160-170. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v21i7.4493>
- Centre for Universal Design [CUD]. (1997). *The Principles of Universal Design, version 2.0*. North Carolina State University website. https://projects.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/udprinciplestext.html
- Cumming, T. M., & Rose, M. C. (2021). Exploring universal design for learning as an accessibility tool in higher education: a review of the current literature. *The Australian Educational Researcher: A Publication of the Australian Association for Research in Education, 1*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00471-7>
- Fleet, C., & Kondrashov, O. (2019). Universal design on university campuses: A literature review. *Exceptionality Education International, 29*(1), 136-148.

Fovet, F. (2021). Developing an ecological approach to the strategic implementation of UDL in higher education. *Journal of Education and Learning, 10*(4), 27-39.

Inayatullah, S. (1998). Causal layered analysis: Poststructuralism as method. *Futures, 30*(8), 815-829.

Kimball, E. W., Wells, R. S., Ostiguy, B. J., Manly, C. A., & Lauterbach, A. A. (2016). Students with disabilities in higher education: A review of the literature and an agenda for future research. In *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 91-156). Springer, Cham.

McGuire, J. M., & Scott, S. S. (2006). Universal design for instruction: Extending the universal design paradigm to college instruction. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 19*(2), 124-134.

Scott, S., McGuire, J., & Shaw, S. (2003). Universal design for instruction - A new paradigm for adult instruction in postsecondary education. *Remedial and Special Education, 24*(6), 369-379.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325030240060801>

Seale, J. (2014). *E-learning and disability in higher education: Accessibility research and practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Toutain, C. (2019). Barriers to Accommodations for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: A Literature Review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 32*(3), 297-310.