219

Retention of disabled students in Scottish higher education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Despite efforts to widen participation in higher education (HE), the sector still poses numerous challenges for disabled students who seem to be graduating at lower rates than their non-disabled peers. This study explores the impact of current educational practices in Scottish HE on the retention of disabled students. Following a qualitative approach, 29 participants (14 disabled students currently enrolled in Scottish HE, three disabled people formerly enrolled, and 12 people working in the sector) contributed to this research by participating in semi-structured interviews. Preliminary findings show that some disabled students have to constantly fight the urge to leave HE due to the countless barriers they face. However, adequate support provision and the positive role of staff could act as protective factors enhancing disabled students' intentions to persist. The shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic provided disabled students with increased flexibility, but it also led to isolation and disengagement.

Full paper

Background
Low student retention rates are a difficulty experienced by higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide (Manyanga, Sithole and Hanson, 2017, Kirk, 2018, Munizaga, Cifuentes and Beltrán, 2018). These rates are negatively impacted by different interacting and

dynamic factors that shape the intentions to persist of the general body of students (Schmitt and Santos, 2013). Because of this, low retention rates are deemed a wicked problem: one for which there are no simple solutions (Beer and Lawson, 2018). In the case of disabled students in higher education (HE), those factors (i.e. personal characteristics, social and academic engagement) also interact with the additional barriers this group of students face (i.e. negative attitudes, difficulties in accessing supports), negatively impacting their intentions to persist (see Fichten et al., 2014, Thompson-Ebanks, 2014). Therefore, despite efforts to widen participation in HE, the sector still poses countless challenges for disabled students who seem to be graduating at lower rates than their non-disabled peers (Kilpatrick et al., 2016, Koch et al., 2018). The aim of this study, developed in Scotland, is to explore the effect of one of the factors that might be shaping the intentions to persist of disabled students: teaching and learning practice.

Methods
Following a qualitative approach, three groups of participants (n=29) contributed to this study by taking part in semi-structured interviews. The first of these three groups of participants was made up of disabled students currently enrolled in Scottish HE (n=14), who took part in two interviews. The second group consisted of disabled people formerly enrolled in Scottish HE (n=3), and the third group comprised those working in Scottish HEIs (educators and disability advisers; n=12). In these last two cases, each contributor participated in one semi-structured interview.

Preliminary findings
While this research is still a work in progress, initial findings show that some disabled students have to constantly fight the urge to leave HE due to the numerous barriers they face. In this sense, making decisions about leaving or staying in HE is something that seemed to be constantly assessed by some participants, who had to continuously examine the balance between the effect of the barriers they were facing, and their motivation to stay in HE. Although adequate support provision and the positive role of certain staff members seem to act as protective factors that enhance their intentions to persist, not all participants had access to these resources and support. Furthermore, the shift to online learning

adopted since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was an opportunity to provide disabled students with increased flexibility, something from which many of the participants in this research benefited. However, online learning and the particular situation caused by the pandemic also led to feelings of isolation and disengagement, negatively affecting their academic sense of belonging and experience as HE students. Additionally, the participants who work in Scottish HE identified good educational and support practices and believed that online learning allowed the sector to do things differently, which benefited disabled students. Still, some believed that there was room to enhance those practices.

Moving forward, participants would like to see that the flexibility brought by the pandemic is maintained while ensuring access to high-quality educational experiences. In addition, according to some participants, easing the processes to access supports and refining what is being done regarding inclusion and accessibility could help improve the student experience and promote the retention of disabled students. Similarly, the participants would like to see increased inter-team collaboration and institutions getting to know the body of students and their needs better, which they believe could also positively impact the educational experience and retention of disabled students.

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