

7 Disabled Student Experiences in Higher Education

Gayle Brewer, Emily Urwin, Beth Witham

University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Disabled students remain systematically disadvantaged compared to their non-disabled peers. It is essential that educational practitioners and policy makers appreciate the complexity of the disabled student experience in order to address this issue. In the present study, we identified 60 online forum posts (and 31 replies to the posts) discussing personal experiences of disability and Higher Education. Online posts (and their replies) were subject to inductive thematic analysis and six themes were extracted from the data. These themes were (i) Impact on education, (ii) Isolation from peers, (iii) Seeking advice and support, (iv) Barriers to assistance and accommodations, (v) Impact of accommodations, and (vi) Providing guidance and support. Recommendations for practice focus on the practical and social support required to ensure that disabled students are neither marginalized nor disadvantaged.

Full paper

Despite an apparent commitment to creating an inclusive and accessible environment, disabled students remain systematically disadvantaged compared to their non-disabled peers. For example, it may be more difficult for disabled students to access information during lectures (e.g., taking notes), participate in class activities (e.g., group-work), and complete assessments (e.g., oral presentations, written examinations) compared to non-disabled peers (Fuller et al., 2004). It is essential that education practitioners and policy makers appreciate the complexity of the disabled student experience in order to address this issue. For example, disabled students may be concerned that a request for accommodations makes them 'extravisible' (Goode, 2007) in an environment where disabled students are more likely to experience isolation, self-consciousness, fear of stigmatization, bullying and rejection (Shaw & Anderson, 2018). The present study investigates disabled student experiences of Higher Education through analysis of online forum posts. We identified 60 online forum posts (and 31 replies to the posts) discussing personal experiences of disability and Higher Education. Posts (and their replies) were subject to inductive thematic analysis.

We identified six themes relating to disabled students' experiences of Higher Education. Theme 1: Impact on education (67% of original posts, 23% of responses). Students feared falling behind with their studies and were aware of the impact that disability had on their grades. As a consequence, a number of posts described suspension or a reduction in the number of classes taken. Students were aware of the additional challenges they experienced compared to their non-disabled peers. In particular, disabled students were aware that they needed to work harder than non-disabled students and were often underestimated or dismissed. Theme 2: Isolation from peers (18% of original posts, 3% of responses). Posts described an isolation from peers. In part, this reflected avoidance and othering from non-disabled peers. Isolation was also a consequence of the challenges posed by disability, especially in relation to the limited energy and time available to disabled students. Theme 3: Seeking advice and support (62% of original posts, 0% of responses). Posts often requested guidance from other forum users. Students were especially interested in advice related to engaging with disability services and advice was particularly valued by those in similar circumstances or with relevant experience.

Theme 4: Barriers to assistance and accommodations (47% of original posts, 16% of responses). The challenges experienced by students seeking assistance and accommodations were clear. For example, posts outlined the length of time required to arrange accommodations and denial of appropriate support. Where accommodations had been provided, some students reported a reluctance to use them. This reluctance reflected a range of issues including concerns that they were not 'disabled enough' or that they would be perceived 'differently' to their non-disabled peers by academics. Theme 5: Impact of accommodations (23% of original posts, 29% of responses). Posts often discussed the impact of accommodations. These included both the benefits afforded by accommodations and the limitations of these. The accommodations received did not, however, fully address the challenges experienced by disabled students. In part, limitations of the accommodations provided were a consequence of unsupportive disability services.

Theme 6: Providing guidance and support (0% of original posts, 81% of responses). Responses to posts were typically focused on providing guidance and support. Guidance addressed both general health issues and academic studies and placed particular emphasis on engagement with disability services or academics and obtaining accommodations. Responses also provided emotional support and solidarity. To conclude, themes demonstrated the manner in which educational achievement and the broader student experience were affected by disability. Recommendations for practice focus on the practical and social support required to ensure that disabled students are neither marginalized nor disadvantaged.

References

Fuller, M., Bradley, A., & Healey, M. (2004). Incorporating disabled students within an inclusive higher education environment. *Disability & Society* 19(5), 455-468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759042000235307>

Goode, J. (2007). 'Managing' disability: Early experiences of university students with disabilities. *Disability & Society*, 22(1), 35-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759060105620>

Shaw, S. C., & Anderson, J. L. (2018). The experiences of medical students with dyslexia: An interpretive phenomenological study. *Dyslexia*, 24(3), 220-233. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1587>