

346 Teaching and Learning Practice and the Retention of Disabled Students in Scottish Higher Education

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Many Higher Education Institutions face low student retention rates amongst the whole body of students. Although disabled students seem to be at higher risk of leaving Higher Education (HE) before graduating, limited literature is available about the factors that impact these particularly low rates. Considering this, a PhD research study was designed to explore how teaching and learning practice - crucial to the student experience - shapes the intentions to persist of disabled students in Scottish HE. Preliminary findings, resulting from thematic and critical discourse analyses of semi-structured interviews, show a complex landscape where, although the flexibility brought by the pandemic benefited disabled students, online delivery seemed to be linked to isolation and low student engagement, which harmed their experience. In the future, participants would like accessibility and flexibility to be maintained in Scottish HE alongside high-quality educational practices that promote student engagement and a sense of belonging, which could enhance retention.

Full paper

Many higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide face low student retention rates, which are impacted by several different interacting and dynamic factors, such as students' individual circumstances or their social and academic engagement (Kirk, 2018; Manyanga, Sithole and Hanson, 2017; Munizaga, Cifuentes and Beltrán, 2018). Because of this, low student retention rates are deemed a "wicked problem" for which there are no simple solutions (Beer and Lawson, 2018, p. 773). Although these low student retention rates affect the whole body of students, certain groups seem to be at higher risk, one example being disabled students (Kilpatrick et al., 2016; Koch et al., 2018). Disabled students' particularly low retention rates could be the result of the interaction between the factors mentioned above and the additional challenges they still face in Higher Education (HE), such as negative attitudes or difficulties in accessing support, which can have an added negative impact on their intentions to persist (see Thompson-Ebanks, 2014). Still, limited research exploring the factors that influence the retention of disabled students in HE is available. Notably, there is a significant lack of qualitative studies that consider the perspectives of different stakeholders (Collins, Azmat and Rentschler, 2019), limiting the understanding of the complex factors shaping the retention of disabled students in HE.

Considering this, this PhD research project, based in Scotland, set out to explore the impact of one factor deemed essential to the student experience (Thomas, 2016): teaching and learning practice. The decision to focus on this particular factor was firstly based on its ubiquity, as the majority of students who join HE - even if they only stay for a week - will be involved in some teaching and learning experience. Additionally, the focus is on educational practice due to its potential impact on retention since, according to Tinto (2003, p.3), "students who learn are students who stay". Although there is evidence that teaching and learning practices that are not inclusive can act as a significant barrier for disabled students in HE (see Melero Aguilar, Morriña and Perera, 2019), the literature studying their impact on the retention of disabled students in the sector is scarce.

Consequently, this exploratory, qualitative PhD study was designed with the aim of addressing these gaps in knowledge. The main tool of data generation used was in-depth semi-structured interviews, selected to study a complex area that still raises many questions and to explore the subjective experience of disabled students, whose voices have been historically marginalised (see De Beer et al., 2022 and Thomson-Ebanks, 2014). As a result, 29 participants were interviewed to explore how teaching and learning practice shapes the retention of disabled students in Scottish HE from different perspectives while focusing on the experiences of disabled students. These 29 participants can be divided into the following three groups: staff working in Scottish HE (educators and disability advisors; N = 12), disabled students enrolled in Scottish HE (N = 14) and disabled people formerly enrolled in

Scottish HE (N = 3). Interviews were conducted mainly over video calls but also on-site, over the phone, via email and via chat to respect participants' preferences and accessibility needs. The data generated is being analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) to identify current educational practices in Scottish HE that could be shaping the retention of disabled students. Critical Discourse Analysis is also being used to identify prevalent discourses and relations of power that are shaping the beliefs, values, and practices of the participants regarding the subject matter (Aston, 2016).

Although this research is still underway, preliminary findings indicate that the move to online learning resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic created positive change within HEIs in Scotland. Therefore, disabled students who participated in this study seemed to benefit from increased accessibility and flexibility, something they felt was long overdue. However, online teaching and learning delivery was linked to severe challenges, such as reduced student engagement and satisfaction, alongside feelings of isolation. These preliminary results illustrate the complex HE landscape still existing in Scotland, where the needs of disabled students are not always effectively met, impacting their educational experience and intentions to persist. According to participants, some strategies that could help address these issues in the future include taking a proactive approach and promoting inclusion broadly to help upkeep the retention of disabled students in Scottish HE. Moving forward, participants would like HEIs to protect the accessibility and flexibility achieved during the pandemic while promoting high-quality educational practices that encourage student engagement and a sense of belonging.

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