



The Intersectional Disadvantages for Disabled Women Students in UK Higher Education.

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Plain English Summary

1 Introduction

My research used national data for all UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to examine the relative 'success' of Disabled women to, Disabled men, and non-disabled women and men. Rates of progression through courses, completion of courses and attainment levels were compared. The Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) collects data from all 'degree awarding' institutions in the UK each year, much of this data is freely available to the public, but specific datasets can be purchased for an administrative fee. The study described here used both freely available data and a small set of specific data. This study was conducted because there is well documented evidence of disadvantage for Disabled students in UK HEIs, combined with well documented disadvantages for women. There have been no studies examining Disability in combination with other types of disadvantaged identities - a gap in the research that this study begins the process of filling.

2 Summary of empirical research

Article 5 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities enshrines in international law that where a post-secondary education system exists, Disabled people should be able to access it on an equal footing to their non-disabled peers. Research across the 'Western' world has for decades shown that, in practice, all Higher Education systems discriminate against Disabled people, whether wilfully or through ignorance. For those Disabled people that do attend university, the decision of whether to disclose their disability becomes fraught with concerns about how their peers and their teaching staff will perceive and treat them. Disabled people are less likely to gain a Bachelor's degree, have higher drop-out rates, and report experiences of macro and micro-aggressions from their peers and from University staff. In the United States, Canada and the UK, students have even reported that they had teaching staff deny their legally required 'adjustments' on the grounds of it being 'unfair to other students'.

Women in UK HEIs have long documented experiences of sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence. So much so that after a documented 'crisis of sexual violence' in universities across the UK, Universities UK (the main HEI oversight body) published guidance on how HEIs should 'handle' allegations of sexual misconduct between students. Sexism in UK HEIs, however, goes beyond these overt displays, it is far more insidious. There have been found to be biases in recruitment, promotion, grants/funding, and publication which favour men.



Women also report struggling with accessing the network required for career progression, often reporting that 'the old boys club is alive and well'. These issues of sexism have deep roots in the history of Higher Education in the UK; universities were originally conceived of, built, and designed for young, wealthy, white, straight, able men; this is the 'standard person'. As a consequence, within the 'Western' world we are left with an image of an 'archetypal scholar' which fits with this same 'standard person', and this feeds down into students' perceptions of themselves and their peers. This archetypal scholar is rational, independent, competent; and if you are not those things, then the identity of 'scholar' doesn't 'stick' to you as well or as easily as it does for those who are.

Furthermore, there are inherent links between disability as a concept and being a woman: ideas of independence vs dependence, rational vs emotional, and the infantilization of both women and Disabled people. Women are deemed as 'less competent' because they are considered to be 'less rational', they are thus considered to be less independent and are infantilized. For Disabled women, this becomes compounded – they are considered incompetent both for being woman and for being Disabled.

This idea of the compounding of oppression has its roots in the work of Black women and other women of colour. As far back as the anti-slavery movement, black women were arguing that their experiences of both racism and sexism created a unique kind of oppression. In the late 1980s Kimberley Crenshaw used the metaphor of an intersection to explain how Black women 'fell through the cracks' of the justice system, when it focussed solely on gender or on race. The term 'intersectionality' is now widespread in academe, although understanding of the concept is muddled. As it has risen in popularity, intersectionality as a theory has been 'defanged' and whitewashed such that its focus on systems of power is often reduced to 'identity politics'. In its true form, intersectionality is not a theory of identity, it is a theory which describes the relatedness of systems of power and how the effects of those systems are different depending on one's identity.

3 Main findings

This research examined data relating to the 'success' of Disabled women in UK HEIs between academic years 2012/13 and 2017/18. The data was taken from the UK's Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA), and from AdvanceHE's collations of this data. The data represents every student enrolled in a UK HEI by academic year and a number of identifying categories. For the purposes of this research 'success' was defined in two ways: firstly, as the proportion of students achieving 'good honours' (1st or Upper 2nd Class honours) at the end of their undergraduate degree; and secondly, as continuing through a course to completion. The data was examined by degree level (undergraduate and post-graduate taught) and by self-reported disability status and gender, over each academic year.

The study found that for Undergraduate students there is an attainment gap for Disabled students, with those students earning 'good honours' as a lower rate than their non-disabled



peers. Disabled women however, retained the 'gender advantage' that is common in the UK and attained 'good honours' at a higher rate than both non-disabled and Disabled men.

At the Post-graduate Taught level however, there does appear to be an intersectional disadvantage for Disabled women; with them being more likely than any of their peers to either leave their course without an award, leave their course with a 'lesser' award (so, a post-graduate certificate instead of a Masters) or be 'dormant'. Disabled women were less likely to complete their course, more likely to leave early or to be on suspension of studies.

4 Main implications

The overall attainment gap seen in this data would suggest that Disabled students are not being sufficiently supported in the UK, because the research to date shows that when properly supported Disabled students can attain on par with non-disabled peers.

The higher drop-out rate or leaving with a lesser award at PGT level suggests that something extra is happening for this group that is to do in some way with the intersection of their disability and their sex. It would be prudent to target further research at this group of students to understand what is happening and why.

5 Further sources of information (hyperlinks below):

- [Arriving At Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all | Policy Connect](#)
- [Home • Disabled Students UK](#)
- [HE Student Data | HESA](#)

6 Author bio

Claire Meadows-Haworth is a neurodivergent, chronically ill, Disabled PhD researcher. She is continuing the work presented in this paper in her PhD research.

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