Breaking Down Barriers: Supporting disabled students in the transition from further to higher education in the UK

Introduction

There is a major 'disability education gap' in the UK. An undergraduate Law student (Raj) and an early-career academic (Rebecca) designed a project that aimed to detail disabled undergraduate students' experiences and prompt a discussion about higher education from a disability studies and human rights perspective. It also aimed to develop policy recommendations on improving inclusion at universities. The project was a useful starting point for identifying and exploring some of the barriers facing disabled students at university. Prompting in-depth discussion and change was more difficult. This article discusses the project's aims, methods, and findings, as well as the authors' reflections on carrying out socially engaged research in neoliberal universities.

Summary of approach

We used international human rights law, disability studies, and critical approach to develop this project's framework. Its principles were multidisciplinarity, centring a social and human rights model of disability, active participation by disabled people, and providing accessible and user-friendly information for disabled people. We used mixed methods to collect and analyse data, i.e., a survey (quantitative) and a focus group (qualitative).

The survey was sent from a university staff email to university student email accounts. 30 students completed the survey. The average age of respondents was 19. Twenty-three participants listed their gender as female, 6 as male and 1 as non-binary. 15 respondents listed their race/ethnicity as white, 6 listed Black, 6 listed South Asian, and 3 listed mixed race. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to opt into a focus group and three participants attended online using MS Teams.

Main findings

The main barriers identified by students were:
- Barriers going from further to higher education: loss of support systems; issues getting specialist equipment; applying for the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA); accessibility (on campus and in accommodation); issues with the reasonable adjustments procedure.
- Physical barriers: lack of accessible toilets; insufficient lifts; issues with whiteboards and visual aids; no/few quiet spaces.
- Bureaucratic barriers: confusing procedures; lack of and delays in communication; delays in receiving supports.
- Attitudinal barriers: lack of awareness among staff and students, and explicitly negative attitudes among staff and students.

The following ways were suggested to address these barriers:
- More lifts, ramps, and accessible toilets

- More disability support team staff
- In-depth training on inclusive practices and inclusive teaching
- Training/awareness raising for staff and students
- Including disability issues on the curriculum
- Events, campaigns, and workshops by the students' union, clubs, and societies.

The main themes from the focus group discussion were:

1. Experiencing and internalising ableism

Having to adapt to a system that is not designed with disabled people in mind leads to frustration, hurt, and alienation, and resentment. For some participants, finally having a diagnosis of a particular impairment was initially a relief but it also made them worry about how to cope with studying, continuing part-time work, or getting decent work after their studies. Participants also discussed "misconceptions" among family members and across wider society about their impairment: beliefs that they are lazy, that they should be pitied. Participants also discussed how frustrating it is to have to constantly remind university staff about their specific needs. All of these issues contribute to "a feeling of me being the other", of having to make non-disabled people "feel comfortable" around them, and of their impairment being an individual problem for them to solve alone. However, alongside these negative emotions and experiences, participants also showed an awareness of their value as disabled people, and a sense of humour and defiance in response to the barriers they face.

2. Inadequate support services

Although certain individuals were helpful, participants felt that disability support at university was not good enough. Raj and focus group participants also experienced issues ensuring the specific supports they were supposed to have arrived on time and were consistently available. Their discussion highlighted that disability support services at university need to be better resourced, staffed with adequately trained people suited to the role, coordinated, and adapted to recognise and meet students' needs.

3. The negative interaction between disability and neoliberal, marketized higher education

When discussing what education's purpose should be, participants said it should be for "the pursuit of knowledge", "unlocking creative abilities of everyone, unlocking the thing they're passionate about," and "expanding your knowledge of the world, possibly changing things in the world." In contrast to this understanding of what education should be for, as students in general and disabled students in particular, they felt that higher education was often "one-dimensional…just about getting qualifications so that you can get a job and that be your entire life."

Main implications

Our research provides an up-to-date account of ableism in higher education. Sadly, it confirms that very little has changed in the past twenty years and that there is an urgent need to address the systemic issues preventing disabled people from fully enjoying higher education. Undertaking this research project was very difficult emotionally. We share this as

a reminder that disabled people, and their allies, need to take care of each other when doing socially engaged research that relates directly to their own negative experiences. Based on our research findings, we developed a manifesto for breaking down barriers that contains recommendations on how universities can change buildings, services, teaching, research, and student life by adopting a social and human rights model of disability. We encourage others to read, adopt, and implement this manifesto. The manifesto is in part five of the article and can be sent by email upon request.

More information

Rajun Dhami completed his LLB at Birmingham City University in 2024 and is hoping to pursue a career in disability rights/justice. Dr Rebecca Smyth is a Lecturer in Law at Birmingham City University. She specialises in critical approaches to human rights, including feminist, queer, disability, and postcolonial approaches.