Student diversity, the institutional context and the challenge of creating an inclusive learning environment

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Introduction
Since the early 1990’s, those of us teaching in higher education / university have been bombarded with a plethora of labels to describe the students or learners with whom we engage, including those that describe specific groups such as mature students and umbrella terms associated with wider educational and social policy agenda. These changes in terminology have reflected subtly changing agendas, for example widening access, widening participation, lifelong learning, and have impacted on both sector and institutional policy and practice. Each change has also challenged teachers, tutors or lecturers with providing equal opportunity, fair access, and an inclusive learning environment that addresses issues of equity and diversity for the different group of continuing education (CE) and undergraduate (UG) students we encounter. This paper reflects on the implications for adult educators who teach disabled students, including those who do and those who do not choose to disclose their impairment and assume the disability label. The issues of identity and disclosure are complex and influenced by individual views about disability as well as institutional policy and procedure (Watson, 2002).

To provide a context for our discussion of the challenges facing adult educators, we outline briefly the vast array of external policy and disability legislation that influence and shape the current teaching and learning context. It could be argued that the current climate is supportive of our adult education commitment to actively involve and facilitate learning experiences that foster independent, self-directed and autonomous students whose own experiences we seek to value (Brookfield, 1995). However, based on empirical research undertaken in the Disability Effective Inclusive Policies – the DEIP project (Coare, Houghton and McDonnell, 2007) we suggest that the challenges arise because of a discrepancy between the reasons for supporting the creation of an inclusive learning environment and an institutional context in which legislation increases student and staff expectations and the potential for litigation. This threat, together with other pressures on staff, for example, uncertainty of contracts due to funding changes relating to ELQs (Equivalent or Lower Qualifications) and the processes of ‘respectable-isation, demoralisation and responsible-isation’ identified by Ian Martin, combine to ‘estrange us from the idea of social purpose and political engagement’ (Martin, 2006, pp.288).

In addition to external policy and legislation which shapes the institutional context, the challenges facing adult educators relate to the administrative and pedagogical/curriculum issues and the subsequent development of an inclusive learning experience for all learners. Finally, due to the opportunities and access of different groups of adult educators to staff development about student diversity, they experience these challenges differentially with potential implications for the learners and learning environments they create.
Disability Legislation

External policy drivers play a key role in helping to bring about change in the attitudes of and commitment to disability amongst institutional policy makers and practitioners, so that there is a critical mass who are in a position to provide the impetus and momentum for wider change. The challenges faced by adult educators are multi-faceted: time, or lack of it, due to competing pressures is a common complaint within the academy; pressures to deliver high quality research, quality assurance procedures, income generation, as well as increasing student numbers and diversity within the student body are all contributing to the pressure experienced by individuals. Consequently, the institutional response or motivation for change is often one of compliance with legislation rather than inspired by a real desire to change the culture and sustained by a longer term commitment. Institutional policy and action plans operate as the public response to the raft of equality legislation of the past 10 years. In the wider context of creating an inclusive learning environment for all students, one might compare the different requirements for statements, action plans etcetera for different groups and consider whether it is stick or carrot that brings about most change (Taylor, 2003).

For disabled students there are both sticks and carrots relating to the disability legislation. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) attempted to place national policy for change within the context of the social model of disability. This was a change from the previously dominant medical model which attributed limitations and problems about accessing learning to the individual. In contrast, the social model of disability supports the notion that disability arises because of societal structures and systems as well as the physical environment (see Houghton, 2005 and 2006 for an earlier discussion of the models of disability). However, a declared intention to and support for the social model does not guarantee its adoption. In fact, accessing financial support via the Disabled Student’s Allowance (DSA), requires students to declare their impairment and is thus dependent on attributing limitations to the individual. In effect, whilst the social model may motivate the DSA system it remains dependent on medical model ideas for its implementation.

The DDA (1995) included a definition of who was disabled and eight sections covering all aspects of disabled people’s lives. Part 4 related directly to education and required universities to produce a ‘disability statement’ that contained details about facilities available for disabled learners. It was not until the Special Educational Needs Disability Act (SENDA, 2001) that amendments to the 1995 DDA stated that ‘Disabled students must not to be substantially disadvantaged’ (para 28), which meant that HEIs needed to make ‘reasonable adjustment’ to ensure that disabled students were not ‘treated less favourably’. What this meant in practice was open to discussion; as Lord Lester noted at the time the legislation was: ‘rippled with vague, slippery and elusive exceptions making it so full of holes that it is more like a colander than a binding code’ (cited by Konur, 2000, pp.1060). To clarify the changing expectations, the QAA produced a ‘Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education’ which included 24 precepts covering the environment, admissions, through to teaching, learning and assessment.

Until recently the response to legislation was largely reactive, with individual educators often operating in isolation with limited awareness of the information, advice, guidance (IAG) and resources available to support them with the challenge of creating an inclusive learning environment. Knowledge of policy changes amongst staff interviewed in the DEIP research was primarily limited to staff who had specific responsibility for disability. Awareness of institutional guidance, support systems and who to approach for help was more widely known. However, knowledge was often patchy and, inevitably, it was
educators’ experience of specific impairments associated with recent disabled students that determined their knowledge base and practice. Unfortunately some staff still see disability, like other equity issues, as marginal and associate it with the widening participation agenda, which despite evidence to the contrary they connect with ‘dumbing down’, high drop out rates (NAO, 2008) and unnecessary hard work. In this context, whilst the student population may become more diverse and the widening participation agenda, amongst others, increase the numbers of disabled students, the challenge to create an inclusive learning environment is one of choice rather than necessity or legal responsibility.

The context in which adult educators operate however is constantly changing, with the DDA (2005) bringing significant changes that require institutions, and the individuals within them, to adopt a proactive stance towards disability and the learning environment. For instance, it places a general duty (para 49) that tackles ‘discrimination’, ‘harassment’, ‘promotes equality of opportunity’, ‘promotes positive attitudes’ towards and ‘encourages participation by disabled persons’. To demonstrate this ongoing proactive response, HEIs like other public bodies must produce a Disability Equality Statement and action plan that moves beyond adjustment to demonstrating an anticipatory approach. (For a useful summary of disability legislation outlining an institutional response see Mulderigg et al., 2006).

The anticipatory nature of the Disability Equality Duty (DED) potentially alters the challenge faced by adult educators. Whereas in the past they responded to individual need, now they need to think about issues of inclusion from the course design process through to the delivery of teaching, learning and assessment. For instance, their commitment to identifying, monitoring and reviewing current provision is by ‘seeking a variety of means of contact with students who have rights under disability legislation, but who do not define themselves as disabled, in order to provide fair and consistent levels of support’. One of the challenges universities need to address is how to respond to the ‘increasing regulation of the University's degrees by a range of quality assurance processes, particularly subject benchmarks and occupational standards (with their) potential for discrimination … we (the university) remain conscious of the need to view these regulations critically to ensure accessibility’ (Lancaster DES, 2006).

**Student diversity the impact of disability and disclosure**

Disabled students are only one of many student groups who add to the overall diversity of the student population. Diversity in the academy is not only between groups of students but depends on how the individual attributes come together in unique ways for each individual. However, the ways in which the term ‘disability’ is mobilised in the discourse has important implications for understanding issues of identity. Living in a culture in which the medical or individual model has dominated thinking and practice means that it is important to consider how people’s views and interactions influence a disabled person’s self-concept. As Reeve (2002) points out, oppression may be internalised such that a person may not feel entitled to claim their rights and may not feel able to use the label positively as a platform for political action.

Although there is a tendency towards viewing disability in a static way, it is important to recognise ‘disability identity as multi-faceted and fluid, rather than a fixed concept’ (Reeve, 2002). Changing identities may be associated with a change in the learning context, the demands of different curriculum, the teaching and learning approaches used and the assessment strategies. An individual’s response to their impairment, including their disclosure, will vary as will their age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, faith, marital status, caring responsibilities, social class and educational qualification. These multiple and changing
identities may also fluctuate with regard to particular impairments; similarly disabled students’ support requirements and engagement in the learning environment may change over time, depending on the extent to which university curricula are inclusive. For example, Megan stated: ‘Now that the panic attacks don’t affect me as badly I would be less inclined to state them’. Mark, who had Asperger Syndrome and dyspraxia, said: ‘I’m not really sure if I see myself as someone with a disability. Someday I do and someday I don’t, it really does vary. Some days I can see myself without it and other times I realise my limitations and in some contexts I can function almost normally and in other I can’t so yes and no is probably the best answer’. Thus the nature of the impairment, together with the institutional context, influences the decision to disclose.

With dyslexia, students may resist asking for help because they want to avoid drawing attention to themselves: this may depend on the status of their assessment and existing coping strategies. Mental Health Difficulties (MHD) may not be immediately obvious to the observer or may fluctuate over time, which can make the decision to disclose more complicated. The visibility of physical impairments raises different issues, as the student is unable to make a choice about disclosure, while sensory impairments may or may not be visible.

The DEIP research suggested that for each student the decision and manner in which they choose to disclose was personal and for many was a complex process (Watson, 2002). Key findings included the following:

- There does not seem to be a definite point of time to disclose which suits all students. Each student has different expectations in terms of how they need people to react to disclosure.
- Most students seem to learn by experience how they feel about disclosing. Melanie felt that disclosure of her MHD in the past had made people uncomfortable, but was still prepared to disclose and felt that it was important to do so. Paula, a wheelchair user, wished she could have chosen when to disclose, rather than having to fit in with application requirements and in hindsight, Mary wished that she had taken the opportunity to disclose.
- Students may be selective about what and to whom they disclose. For instance, Dan said: ‘I’ve not really disclosed to tutors, I have used yellow sticker [scheme for indicating dyslexia], but I just assume they know, but if they don’t I’m not fussed’.
- Disclosure is also source of worry and sometimes criticism from other students. It brings its own consequences in terms of both positive and negative reactions from others; for instance students can be reluctant and resist support that marks them out as a ‘special case’ or if they appear to be seen as receiving favours.
- The nature of the impairment sometimes dictates whether disclosure is necessary. Those with visible impairments may have no choice about whether to disclose. Students with MHD may be particularly fearful that the consequences of disclosure will be rejection.
- For students with a hidden impairment it may be possible to ‘pass’ as a non-disabled student, however, in deciding on this course of action students may be reducing the extent to which an institution is able to provide appropriate support.

Amongst some of the disabled students and staff, there was a perception that there are differing degrees of acceptability, and knowledge about, different disabilities (i.e. a hierarchy), which also seems reflected in some institutional policies (e.g. specific policies for students with dyslexia but not for other disabled students). The interconnectedness of issues associated with disclosure means that the complexity and challenge of disclosure
impacts not only on the individual student, but also their peers, the teaching staff, the wider university and its support systems. The numbers of disabled students, the potential diversity of their needs, the disability legislation, quality assurance requirements, and wide range of teaching learning and assessment approaches place additional expectations on adult educators. Ironically, whilst their need for continuing professional development (cpd) continues to increase, the additional pressures and multiple demands on them restricts the time they have available.

The professional challenge of creating an inclusive learning environment

Whilst the growth in student diversity has placed additional legal and professional responsibilities on higher education institutions, the responsibility for ensuring an inclusive curriculum falls on adult educators. This applies to both their own teaching practice as well as their engagement with the processes and procedures of the institution.

In designing a course or programme, for instance, an adult educator can either embed practices that facilitate inclusion automatically or can create unnecessary hurdles for students to overcome. Within the institutional course approval process systems can help or hinder educators by encouraging them to think through issues at the outset. For instance, one Disability Equality Statement (DES) indicates that: 'Work already started with the Teaching Quality Support Office will continue, to embed consideration of equality issues, including disability issues, in the processes of course approval and departmental annual and periodic review'.

Ideally the course approval process should provide staff with an opportunity for continuing professional development (cpd) that allows them to explore and understand how they might develop an inclusive course, rather than simply providing them with a list of bureaucratic changes that satisfy the paper trail but do not bring about change in practice. Course design and module development is, however, only one way in which the institutional quality assurance systems can provide a source of cpd; others include peer review, and specific cpd sessions for developing and delivering inclusive learning.

Heralded as the new panacea, additional technology does not automatically provide the anticipated benefits; these are often dependent on staff and students receiving additional training in its use and application. The potential of technologies in some areas also seemed underutilized (e.g. in the field of mental health), whilst in other areas, such as hearing impairment, there appears to be a misplaced reliance upon technologies - including the hearing loop - which do not always work effectively for students.

In many HEIs, Associate Tutors who have little or no formal teacher training or practice undertake undergraduate teaching. For such tutors, the challenge of teaching more diverse students groups may not currently be supported by adequate or appropriate induction, institutional support or cpd opportunities. One tutor commented that ‘although I attended a (adult teaching) training programme, no-one suggested I might have to deal with students who were struggling with mental health issues, … I didn’t know how to broach the subject directly with the student’. Another more experienced tutor, reflecting on the changing student body said ‘I’ve not been used to working with people who need specific help; the course is just not set up for people who need that level of support’. Another said ‘I don’t really know what the problem is with the student, but I don’t know if it’s okay to ask either. They aren’t “flagged” on their student file, so haven’t disclosed any sort of disability’.

Academics are also facing the challenge of working with a more diverse student body and
are often equally at a loss of how to design and deliver an inclusive curricula. A lecturer attending an equality and diversity cpd session said 'I'm here to teach (my subject), I shouldn’t have to be spending all this time preparing additional materials, and I thought they were supposed to get help'. Another who had taught several students with dyslexia in the past expressed their frustration associated with the level of information received, 'students think you know what they need, I know they are all different but the information you get, if you get it in time, doesn’t always help'. Even where new lecturers are keen to adapt their practice they often report feeling overwhelmed by the potential enormity of the task of trying to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. One lecturer noted at the end of a cpd session, 'I didn’t realise there was so much information available to help you, I know it’s exciting but I don’t know where to begin and where I will find the time'.

Whilst recent legislation has prompted many visible changes in the physical environment of HEIs, less tangible changes are of equal, if not more, importance. The attitudes of staff members and changes in curricula are vital for implementation of effective inclusion. If we are to respond effectively as a profession, there is an urgent need to address the issue of continuing professional development (cpd), including questions of what, when and for who, and institutions will need to make appropriate resources available to ensure we are all fully equipped to work within an inclusive learning and teaching environment.

References


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Watson N (2002) ‘Well, I know this is going to sound very strange to you, but I don't see
myself as a disabled person: identity and disability’ Disability and Society, 17, 5, pp.509-527.

With thanks to the staff and students who allowed us to quote their words.

Notes

1 DSA is the funding given to disabled students to purchase equipment or pay for note takers.

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