Transition to professional practice placements: improving the experience of disabled and non-disabled students

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents findings from research that investigated the experience of disabled and non-disabled students on practice placements, across six professional disciplines in a Scottish University. The results revealed that both disabled and non-disabled students reported positive placement experiences but also some challenges. In addition, the difficulties that were experienced by both groups of students, such as travelling to placement and developing relationships with placement staff, were exacerbated for some disabled students. This appeared to be primarily a consequence of the nature of the student's impairment and attitudes to disability. The results highlighted the importance of pre-placement planning and communication to support a positive transition to placement for both disabled and non-disabled students; particularly in relation to disability disclosure procedures, the expectations of students and the responsibilities of placement staff. The paper concludes by identifying recommendations for practice that aim to improve the placement experience of all students.

1. Introduction

There has been increasing Government emphasis in the UK on the expansion of higher education and widening access to those who would not have traditionally attended university (Mullen, 2010). This has led to an increasingly diverse student population with a wide range of needs and expectations; including students with caring responsibilities, international students and disabled students (Ramsden, 2008). Aligned to such policies, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of enhancing the student experience; in particular, providing opportunities for student feedback and identifying the action taken in response (Buckley, 2013).

Numerous legislative changes have also been introduced in the UK over the past twenty years that recognise and protect the rights of people with specific characteristics; most notably the rights of disabled people to equal access to employment, public services and education (Disability Discrimination Act, DDA, 1995; Equality Act, 2010). These rights were specifically extended to education in 2001 (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, SENDA, 2001), introducing the requirement for higher education institutions to anticipate the needs of disabled students and to make reasonable adjustments to all aspects of their services and activities.

Such legislative and policy changes have contributed to the increasing number of disabled students in UK higher education (e.g. Equality Challenge Unit, ECU, 2014) and prompted a raft of research on the experience of disabled students; including studies investigating students' transition to higher education (e.g. Hurst, 1993), the experience of students with different impairments (e.g. Bishop and Rhind, 2011), their experience in different learning

contexts, such as field trips (e.g. Hall, Healey and Harrison, 2002), and reviews of their higher education experience generally (e.g. Fuller et al, 2009). However, research on the experience of disabled students on professional programmes, such as medicine or teaching, is more limited.

A number of studies have investigated barriers to access to such programmes (e.g. Disability Rights Commission, DRC, 2007), the availability of information for prospective students on programme requirements (e.g. Tynan, 2004), the attitudes of others to the admission of disabled students (e.g. Roberts, Butler and Boursicot, 2004), issues around disclosure (e.g. Stanley, Ridley, Harris and Manthorpe, 2011), and disabled students' experience on the practice placement component of professional programmes (e.g. Wray, Fell, Stanley, Manthorpe and Coyne, 2005). However, very limited comparisons have been made between the experience of disabled students and their non-disabled peers (e.g. Madriaga et al, 2010) and none in the practice placement context before the research presented in this paper.

There are several key themes that are evident in the literature on the experience of disabled students on practice placements that can impact on their experience; including, the nature of the student's impairment (e.g. Matheson and Morris, 2011), the attitudes of placement staff (e.g. Riddick and English, 2006), the student's relationship with their placement mentor (e.g. White, 2007), the timing of disability disclosure (e.g. MacLeod and Cebula, 2009), and the availability of support (e.g. Morris and Turnbull, 2007). Students with similar disabilities can also have different experiences (e.g. Brown, James and MacKenzie, 2006) suggesting that several factors can combine to impact on their overall placement experience.

The student's relationship with their placement mentor can be supported by sufficient preparation for mentors to ensure they are confident in their role and understand their responsibilities in supporting disabled students (Tee and Cowan, 2012). Such preparation can be facilitated by a supportive framework that enables disabled students to gain experience in a range of practice environments through establishing effective partnerships between the placement provider, the placement facilitator and the university's disability service (Griffiths, Worth, Scullard and Gilbert, 2010). Effective pre-placement planning and communication with all stakeholders has also been found to be essential in this respect (Botham and Nicholson, 2014). In addition, encouraging early disclosure and ensuring an appropriate response (Simons, 2010), as well as monitoring the effectiveness of adjustments (Storr, Wray and Draper, 2011) can help to improve the experience of disabled students on placement.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Research Design

The central aims of this research were to identify ways to improve the accessibility of practice placements for disabled students and to enhance the practice placement experience of all students. The research questions therefore sought to investigate the differences, if any, in the practice placement experience of disabled students and non-disabled students, and the experience of disabled students in different professional disciplines.

A mixed methods approach was taken utilising an online survey and individual semi-structured interviews to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from disabled and non-disabled students. Comparisons were made of the responses of disabled students with those of non-disabled students across all questions. A comparison was also made of the responses of students in different professional disciplines, in particular to compare 'social'

and 'medical' discipline students' responses to explore the dichotomy between the social and medical approaches to disability. The medical model approach focuses on the impact of an individual's impairment and takes limited account of external influences or barriers to access. In contrast, the social model of disability recognises that disabled people have impairments but maintains that the difficulties they experience are caused by attitudinal and environmental barriers within society not their individual impairments (Oliver, 1990).

The variability in the sampling framework of the research and the nominal nature of the data necessitated the use of non-parametric statistics to analyse the quantitative data (Siegel and Castellan, 1988). The qualitative data from the survey and the interview transcripts were analysed utilising a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved many reviews of the transcripts and survey responses to categorise the data from each into descriptive codes, and subsequently to identify prevalent patterns or 'themes' that were common across the data codes. In order to obtain a fuller understanding of the students' placement experience, the student placement feedback that had been independently obtained by the individual disciplines during the period the research was also reviewed to identify any common themes.

2.2 Participants

The research was undertaken at a Scottish University that delivers a large number of programmes that confer professional qualifications and automatic entry into a recognised professional body. All students at this University who were studying undergraduate or postgraduate programmes leading to professional accreditation within the academic disciplines of medicine, dentistry, nursing and midwifery ('medical' group), and education, social work and community education ('social' group), and who had completed at least one practice placement, were invited to participate in the research. Participants were volunteers, over 18 years of age, with and without disclosed disabilities and reflected any gender, age or other bias inherent to such programmes.

All participants were given the opportunity to disclose a disability during the survey and interview stages of the research; the former on the basis of selecting from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) disability categories[1] provided on the survey and the latter in response to a yes/no question posed during the interview to confirm the student's disability status . Both forms of disclosure required the student to self-identify with the terms 'disabled' and 'disability'.

3. Results

In total, 353 students responded to the online survey including students from all six disciplines. The majority of respondents indicated that they were students in the discipline of nursing (43%), were female (88%), aged 25 and under (69%), were undergraduates (94%) and had completed more than one placement (95%); the latter minimising the potential for the results to be skewed by students' experience on a single placement. Fifty respondents (14%) indicated that they considered themselves to be disabled and the majority disclosed a specific learning difficulty or a mental health condition.

Chi square analyses revealed significant differences between the survey responses of disabled and non-disabled students, and between students in different academic disciplines on several of the survey questions. In particular:

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[1] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/manuals/13051/a/DISABLE

- Disabled students' overall rating for their placement experience was lower than that of non-disabled students;
- Disabled students indicated that they experienced difficulties on placement more often than non-disabled students;
- The 'medical' group of students did not feel as sufficiently prepared for placement as those in the 'social' group. Further analysis revealed that this was particularly the case for nursing students; and
- Disabled students in nursing and education were less likely to disclose their disability on placement than disabled students in other disciplines.

Of the 21 students who participated in an interview, 17 were female, 17 were undergraduates and 14 disclosed a disability. In addition, 18 students had completed more than one placement.

Comparison of the results from the online survey, interviews and the individual disciplines' placement feedback, revealed common themes in the students' responses. In particular, the majority of students were very positive about their placement experience and clearly valued this opportunity to develop their professional knowledge and skills, and to enhance their confidence in practice settings.

In addition, many students indicated a desire to spend more time on placement to help establish rapport, improve continuity of contact for the pupils, clients or patients they were supporting, and to further develop their relationships with placement staff. In relation to the latter, it was evident that a key aspect of many students' placement experience was the quality of their relationship with placement staff and the extent to which they felt supported by staff who were aware of their role and responsibilities to enable students' learning, and were skilled in doing so.

> "The main thing that has an impact on enjoyment of a placement, apart from whether you're interested in that field, is what the team and the members of staff are like. Sometimes it can ruin a block if you just have someone who is just unnecessarily unpleasant and doesn't want to give you the time of day...it discourages students from learning" (Paul, disabled medical student)[2].

Furthermore, many of the students' responses highlighted the need for clarity in the expectations of students on placement and the responsibilities of placement staff. Indeed, it was clear from some of the students' responses that further preparation for the placement experience was considered particularly beneficial in this respect.

> "I feel there's quite a big build up to the placement but in terms of actual input into what we're going to do we got a one hour lecture…I think the idea is that you're learning whilst you're on placement as well but I felt myself continually saying, oh I haven't done that yet, I'm very green" (Debbie, non-disabled nursing student).

The logistics of travelling to placements also clearly had an influence on the placement experience for many students. Specifically, the time required to identify and negotiate transport to placements made it difficult in some cases for students to manage their placement responsibilities and their academic workload. These difficulties made the placement experience more challenging for some disabled students, particularly when travelling to placement had a direct bearing on the management of their disability-related needs or interacted with the demands of shift work.

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[2] Pseudonyms have been used in quotes and any identifying information has been removed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

> "My first placement I was relying on public transport which adds you know a good chunk on your commute...and I found that because of adding that extra bit of time on and how tired that was then making me as well as the whole placement, I wasn't able to read in the evenings etc. and my (impairment) was noticeably worse to me" (Moira, disabled social work student).

In addition, it was evident from the survey results that only a minority of disabled students who had disclosed their disability to their placement provider had reasonable adjustments in place in the placement setting, reinforcing the importance of ensuring that such adjustments are considered during pre-placement planning.

> "Really and truly your first meeting with the school is the day you arrive to start the placement but I was a little bit concerned with that, actually I was quite terrified at the idea of turning up on day one of my placement...but the school said I could come in for a meeting the week before and the university had done the groundwork which was really good" (Susan, disabled teaching student).

It was also evident from the survey results that disabled students were less positive about their placement experience overall and that they experienced more difficulties than their non-disabled peers. Analysis of the qualitative survey results suggested that these difficulties were related to the impact of the student's disability-related needs, including as a consequence of the additional stress that can arise in the placement setting, the volume of work, and the perceived lack of support from placement staff. Some disabled students also recognised that they needed to be more proactive in seeking support in the same way that they would advise those they were supporting in their practitioner role to do this.

> "I think before, I would have said one thing to a service user you know about them speaking up for their rights and I would have a different rule for myself and now I'm able to see myself more as a resource and sort of guard against spending that up" (Liz, disabled social work student).

The key distinguishing factor, however, between the experience of disabled and non-disabled students on placement related primarily to disability disclosure and the reaction of others to this. In particular, although adverse reactions to disclosure were reported by disabled students in all disciplines, there was evidence to suggest that such reactions and a medical model approach to disability generally, were more prevalent in medicine and nursing.

> "I haven't really had great reactions in the past from doctors…I spoke to someone else and he kinda looked at me like I'd grown another head you know, it looked as if like how are you going to do your job, how are you going to cope" (Karen, disabled medical student).

4. Discussion

Examination of the narratives of disabled and non-disabled students provided useful insight into students' experience on placement and enabled clarification of the qualitative differences in their respective experiences. Specifically, although both disabled and non-disabled students identified difficulties, particularly with travelling to placements and in their relationships with placement staff, these were exacerbated for some disabled students and appeared to be amplified in the placement context. This was particularly evident in relation to disclosure of their disability to staff outwith the University and managing the impact of their

impairment in an off-campus environment. The evidence for limited provision of reasonable adjustments in the placement context, for those students who had disclosed their disability, may also have contributed to these difficulties.

A key finding from this research was that students' experience on practice placements is heavily influenced by their relationships with placement staff and the organisational culture of the placement setting. In particular, staff who were aware of their role in supporting and enabling the learning of students on placement and, importantly, had the time and skills to progress this, clearly had a positive influence on students' experience. This substantiates previous research that emphasised the importance of matching students to appropriate placements and with skilled placement supervisors (Wray et al, 2005).

Arising from the wider research on students' placement experience is the importance of pre-placement planning and the effectiveness of the communication between the university and placement provider (Andrews et al, 2006), ensuring that all stakeholders are aware of their roles and responsibilities for the student's placement experience. This is supported by the results of this research that indicated that specific information in advance of the placement would help to ensure placement staff were aware of students' prior skills and experience; the latter to enable students' practice on placement to be better matched to their development needs. This was particularly evident for disabled students who felt that advance contact with the placement provider would help to ensure the placement was suitable and that staff were prepared to accommodate their support requirements. Indeed, increased involvement and communication with placement staff prior to the placement has been shown to have a positive impact on the experience of disabled students (Botham and Nicholson, 2014).

An added challenge for disabled students' relationships on placement is deciding whether or not to disclose their disability and dealing with the reaction to disclosure. It was suggested from the narratives of disabled students in this research that supportive attitudes were more evident where placement staff appeared to have prior knowledge or experience of disability issues or were interested in the positive contribution the student's perspective on disability could bring to their practice, reflecting the results of previous research (e.g. Griffiths, 2012). Such positive relationships with supportive placement staff can also help to encourage disability disclosure and ensure disabled students' individual needs are met (White, 2007). It is therefore clear that effective, positive relationships with placement staff are central to students' experience whether or not they have a disability but can be particularly important to ensure disabled students are not disadvantaged in this context and feel confident to disclose.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations for Practice

5.1 Conclusion

This research has provided insight into the experience of disabled and non-disabled students on practice placements across six professional disciplines. Similarities and differences in the students' experiences were identified, reflecting previous research in other higher education contexts, suggesting that the placement setting is no different in this respect. In addition, this research confirmed that disabled and non-disabled students experienced similar issues that, if addressed, could help to improve the placement experience of all students. This confirmation may help to support an inclusive approach to the delivery of the practice placement component of professional training, making implementation of the recommended practice more manageable for staff and therefore potentially more likely to be implemented (Madriaga et al, 2010).

The challenges identified in previous research for disabled students studying professional programmes were clearly still evident in the results of this research however, and limited progress appears to have been made in this respect since the Disability Rights Commission's formal investigation into professional fitness standards (DRC, 2007). In particular, it was clear from this research that disabled students still experience negative attitudes to disability in the placement context, particularly in medical disciplines, and can therefore remain reluctant to disclose. Indeed, some students may not identify with a disability label at all and need further clarification before disclosing (Evans, 2013). In addition, it was clear that disabled students continue to experience additional challenges on practice placements over and above those experienced by other students; therefore the importance of identifying and implementing individual adjustments for disabled students in the practice placement context remains.

5.2 Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations are primarily intended for placement and university staff involved in delivering or supporting the practice placement component of professional programmes. They are made on the basis of the results of this research study, recognising the limitations in generalising the findings to other contexts, with the aim of improving the practice placement experience of all students and ensuring that the needs of disabled students in such contexts are consistently and appropriately met.

5.2.1 Recommendations for all students:

- Provide additional clarification of the role of placement staff to ensure they are sufficiently prepared to support students and given allocated time to do so.

- Ensure placement staff are aware of the expectations of students on placement and students' prior experience and skills to ensure, as far as possible, that students' placement experience is matched to their professional development needs.

- Identify placement staff who are best placed to undertake the placement supervisor role, particularly in terms of their personal interest, skills and experience.

- Provide students with advance notice of placement locations to facilitate early contact with placement staff.

- Facilitate peer support for students on placement.

- Provide additional support with travel arrangements and directions to placements.

- Ensure ongoing monitoring and communication with students, by university and placement staff, so that any issues can be identified and resolved quickly.

- Assess the extent to which the placement experience is inclusive, taking into account feedback obtained from students with specific protected characteristics.

5.2.2 Additional recommendations for disabled students:

- Review pre-placement planning procedures to ensure the needs of disabled students are considered in advance, particularly in relation to placement allocation.

- Review procedures for disability disclosure, including clarifying the implications of disclosure and ensuring consent, increasing disclosure opportunities and providing options that give disabled students greater control of the timing and nature of disclosure.

- Facilitate prior contact with placement providers to assess the suitability of the placement, to enable disabled students' support needs to be discussed in advance with their consent, and for individual adjustments to be agreed.

- Establish a written agreement with placement providers that sets out the respective responsibilities of the placement provider and the university for the implementation of adjustments and the provision of support.

- Ensure that an individual assessment of a student's disability-related needs is undertaken where appropriate, with support from those with expertise in student-centred needs assessment.

- Monitor implementation of disability-related support and request specific feedback from disabled students to assess the suitability of the support provided and the awareness of placement staff of disability issues.

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