

BARRIERS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR DISABLED STUDENTS

LITERATURE REVIEW

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Barriers into Higher Education for disabled students

Summary of research findings

This literature review investigated the barriers into Higher Education for disabled students. A prominent barrier that emerged in the research findings was issues with accessibility at university. Such as, an inconsistent willingness from tutors to make appropriate adjustments to assessments, a lack of understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) characteristics which prevented university from being accessible, and also individuals with Cerebral Palsy/walking disabilities not choosing a university with spread out campus buildings. Linked to this, it was noted that another barrier was a lack of accessible spaces for students with ASD to interact. This, coincided with the unique social environment of Higher Education, made students with ASD experience difficulties with connectedness and loneliness as they struggled to integrate. Furthermore, the perception of stigmatisation and discrimination of disclosing a disability was another key barrier into Higher Education. During the application process to university, students believed that they would jeopardise their chances of being accepted into their chosen Higher Education institution if they were to disclose their disability. This may have been attributed to reported limited perceptions of peers/society that they would be incapable of academic study.

Methodology

Used **Google Scholar** and **SHU library search** to identify appropriate research papers for the literature review. The search range was from **2012-2023** and the inclusion criteria was research papers that used students from the **United Kingdom**.

Search terms used for barriers into Higher Education (HE) for disabled students:

1. "Barriers" "disabled student*" "Higher Education" "UK".
2. "Barriers" "entering university" "disabled student*" "UK"

Search terms for barriers into HE for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):

1. "Autism" "transitioning" "university" "barriers" "UK".
2. "Autism" "access" "challenges" "higher education" "UK".
3. "Autism" "dropping out" "higher education" "UK".

Annotated references

Sources, author, date, and publication	Aim of paper	Motivation	Methods	Results/Findings	Impressions
Wray (2013)	To examine the barriers and enablers to accessing Higher Education (HE) for disabled students and comparing them to non-disabled peers.	Wishes to improve uptake of disabled students in HE in England.	Some students were recruited from further education and had not applied for HE. Focus groups were implemented, with a maximum group size of 6 learners (min of 2). Also interviewed disabled and non-disabled students from two universities.	Disabled learners reported more difficulties in their progression into HE than non-disabled learners. Financial issues, negative prior experiences at school (needs not met, bullying, isolation) along with potential accessibility issues at university were all reasons why some disabled students did not want to enter HE. Disabled and non-disabled students were similar regarding financial barriers, however, there were differences in their past school experiences. Enablers: Disabled students' personal motivation to succeed helped them pursue HE. The disabled student allowances were an enabler and the universities accommodation of extra time in exams was beneficial.	The sample size is not clearly stated and it is hard to determine the exact number of participants. However, it provides qualitative insight of the barriers into HE for disabled students.
Kendall (2016)	Seeks to identify disabled students' experiences of any inclusive	Due to students with disabilities being historically	Qualitative study of 13 students who declared a disability in a UK university.	Regarding barriers to participation: Students had to keep informing lecturers that they had a disability and what adjustments were needed.	Although it discusses barriers, these are in relation to disabled students at university, rather than students who

	practice and barriers for participation in UK universities.	underrepresented in HE.	Used one-to-one semi-structured interviews to gather perceptions and experiences. A thematic analysis approach was adopted.	<p>Issues accessing lecture notes/slides made them feel at a disadvantage.</p> <p>Inconsistent willingness of tutors to make appropriate adjustments or offer other forms of assessments to disabled students.</p> <p>Inclusive practice: Student support services were viewed as a positive resource. The service was efficient in organising specialist equipment, arranging writing support and contacting individuals on a regular basis.</p> <p>Each student was given a Learning Support Plan (LSP). This was viewed as beneficial as it allowed negotiations for extensions/ additional time which reduced the students' pressure.</p> <p>However, some students' thought the LSP was a 'one size fits all' approach to a particular disability.</p>	<p>are not in HE and are discussing their barriers entering HE.</p> <p>Still insightful and potentially useful to include further in the literature review.</p>
Redpath et al. (2013)	To provide a clear depiction of students' current provision in universities in Northern Ireland.	Northern Ireland has the lowest number of disabled university students (3.5%) when compared to the rest of	Worked with disability organisations to identify the target population. Young people with disabilities (i.e., Autism Spectrum Disorder, anxiety, depression and cerebral palsy) were contacted.	<p>One student (depression/anxiety) believed she would not be accepted if the university thought she was not capable, thus did not inform the university of her condition.</p> <p>Issues with pre-transition information/support. A lot of students felt that information did not always articulate the support available. Also,</p>	The research findings provide detailed insight into HE barriers for disabled students, also focusing on specific barriers for certain disabilities.

		the UK. Northern Ireland is also falling short of addressing the barriers into HE for disabled students.	13, one hour long semi structured interviews were conducted (one-to-one).	<p>there was a lack of clarity around what the course would entail (i.e., assessments/exams) which particularly affected students with mental health conditions.</p> <p>Students with cerebral palsy and a walking disability felt they could not choose a university where the buildings were spread out.</p> <p>Some students reported the limited perceptions of peers, family, and schools as a barrier to progression into HE – viewed as incapable of academic study.</p>	
Eccles et al. (2018)	To explore first year undergraduate disabled university students' (UK) views and experiences on disabilities and why they may not be disclosed on an application to HE.	Despite sector wide criteria of a disability, many students are still not disclosing a disability at the application stage.	<p>Interpretative approach – used students as co-researchers to illicit honest thoughts / perceptions from participants.</p> <p>Focus group methods were chosen – 18 participants were split across 4 focus groups, 5 males and 13 females. First year students were recruited as they would have most recently completed the UCAS application.</p>	<p>The data was coded and then themed.</p> <p>Main theme of interest: 'institutional'</p> <p>(Sub-theme) Perceived stigma and discrimination</p> <p>Fear that disclosing a disability on the UCAS application would jeopardise chances of getting into HE based on 'wider society's' views on disabilities. Perceptions of discrimination and stigma were deep rooted for respondents.</p> <p>(Sub-theme) Unknown impact of declaring information</p> <p>Uncertainty whether universities would receive this information from the UCAS form – concerned they would be discriminated against and not offered a</p>	<p>Findings suggest that disclosing a disability on applications were perceived as a potential barrier to HE.</p> <p>Although the qualitative data was gathered from university students it provides insight into why some disabled students may wish not to apply to HE.</p>

				place. Instead, they disclosed this information after gaining a place at university.	
Toor, Hanley & Hebron (2016)	To understand the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in order to assist educators in enabling a range of academic and supportive accommodations essential to academic success.	Because many students with ASD find aspects of FE and HE life challenging.	Systematic review of qualitative research in the area. 12 studies met the inclusion criteria and a thematic analysis of these papers identified 6 super-ordinate themes.	<p>Theme: Environmental factors (barriers) Excessive noise, large crowds and feeling frightened about facing new surrounds/structures were considered barriers.</p> <p>Theme: Social factors (barriers) Some students reported difficulties with connectedness and loneliness – there is a lack of accessible spaces for ASD students to engage socially at university.</p>	Provides insight into the specific barriers to HE that students with ASD may experience. There are other themes not included in the summary that may be useful.
Lambe et al. (2019)	Aim is to understand the perspectives of ASD students transitioning to university in the UK.	Although many aspire to attend university, many autistic students do not seek/gain entry or drop out of university permanently.	<p>Participants were 25 ASD A-level students (20 male/5 female) who had applied for university and were attending a transitional programme.</p> <p>Sent a questionnaire asking them to list their worries/what they were looking forward to about attending university. These were used to</p>	<p>Themes (5 total) around challenges transitioning into HE:</p> <p>Social world: Unstructured socialising makes participants experience high levels of anxiety and discomfort. Participants felt it was unsafe due to past experiences of bullying. Fears around the unique social experiences at university (i.e., freshers). Felt they may experience barriers integrating successfully at university, such as saying/doing the wrong thing (social norms).</p>	The participants have not yet started university, so the findings provide good insight into the barriers/worries of entering HE for autistic students.

			<p>generate prompts for focus groups.</p> <p>Three focus groups were conducted with 8-9 participants in each.</p>	<p>Academic demands: Worried about failing due to increased academic demands. Time management, meeting deadlines and managing different demands were the main issues.</p> <p>Practicalities of university living: Anxiety of having to move to an unfamiliar place. Worried about falling behind in the interim between starting university and receiving support from the UK government.</p> <p>Leaving the scaffolding of home: shared worries about losing family support, reassurance and predictability of home after leaving for university. Changes in routine/predictability from small changes to the day to loss of valued activities that make up home life.</p> <p>Transition to adulthood: Potential to develop independence and have new experiences (Scary/ 'taking the crutch away').</p>	
Cage & Howes (2020)	<p>To understand autistic students' experiences of dropping out of university. Find out the reasons for them dropping out.</p>	<p>This issue is under researched but is important due to students with ASD having poorer</p>	<p>14 autistic participants from the UK. Inclusion criteria of experience of studying in the UK and had dropped out, along with a diagnosis of ASD.</p>	<p>Themes are organised as systematic issues, challenges at university or life after dropping out.</p> <p>Systematic issues – A lack of autism understanding: Participants felt there was a lack of understanding and appreciation for</p>	

		employment outcomes.	<p>Semi structured interviews were conducted. Question topics included: transitioning to university, social experiences, academic experiences and support, and reasons for dropping out.</p>	<p>autistic characteristics which prevented university from being accessible.</p> <p>Systematic issues – the strain on mental health: Students who had experienced mental health difficulties in the past felt their symptoms had worsened at university – intense stress made them feel unable to continue with their degree.</p> <p>Systematic issues – outsider status: Difficulties navigating social spaces at university. Despite trying to get involved, they still felt positioned on the outside – similar feelings felt prior to university.</p>	
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Knowledge Applied