



Disabled students in higher education: Discourses of disability and the negotiation of identity[☆]



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ABSTRACT

University is a critical arena for young disabled people in the construction of an adult identity and in obtaining higher level qualifications which have a major impact on future labour market opportunities. In Scotland, statistics show that there has been a steady increase in the proportion of students who are disabled. However, adopting the identity of a disabled person at university is far from straightforward, in part because of the conflicting discourses surrounding disability which are encountered. This article draws on data from a project on the experiences and outcomes of disabled students in UK universities, focusing on a case study of a particular student undertaking a Bachelor of Education degree in an elite Scottish university. The article illustrates the way in which positive and negative discourses of disability, reflected in learning, teaching and assessment practices and work placement experiences, impact on the identity of the student. The article also illustrates the importance of the social context in which disability is experienced. Whilst the student chooses to adopt the identity of disabled person during her time at university, this identity is rejected when she moves into the workplace. This is because the benefits of being identified as a disabled person at university outweigh the negative aspects, whilst in the post-university environment the reverse is the case.

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1. Introduction

The period spent in higher education is likely to be a critical time in the formation of individual and group identity. For some, attending university may provide the opportunity to develop a new life course trajectory, for example, rejecting aspects of a working class upbringing and embracing aspects of a middle class identity. For others, time at university may involve the exploration of identity as a free individual, before embarking on the family formation stage of life. Disabled students are likely to be involved in many different aspects of identity exploration and development whilst at university, and addressing their relationship to the construct of disability is only one aspect of a much wider process. In this article, we use case studies of disabled students taking Education courses at an old Scottish university to explore the way in which their identity as disabled students is handled in different contexts and articulates with wider aspects of identity formation. For most students, there is a separation between life as a student and life as a worker, and it may be possible to include disability as part of one's identity at university, whilst subsequently abandoning it on moving into the workplace. For students with

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significant impairments which are visible to others, disability is likely to be a constant aspect of their identity, but those with invisible impairments, who account for the majority of disabled students (see below), there may be a degree of choice as to whether disability is a permanent or transient feature of identity. Students in vocational areas of study such as Education, who undertake work placements alongside their academic studies, are a particularly interesting group to study, since the process of professional enculturation runs in parallel to other aspects of identity formation.

2. The research

This article draws on data from a research project funded by the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Fuller et al., 2009). The study, conducted between 2004 and 2007, was longitudinal and investigated the experiences and outcomes of a cohort of disabled students in four universities over a period of four years. Profiles of the four institutions were compiled, drawing on key informant data, statistical information for that institution and the sector generally and official documents. A questionnaire was administered to disabled students in each institution, and case studies of students were subsequently undertaken. The case studies involved interviews with students and their lecturers at intervals during their university career and observations of the students in particular learning contexts, such as seminars, lectures and laboratory work. The sample of case study students was selected in order to reflect the social profile of students within that particular institution.

This article presents a case study of a student undertaking the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme at a traditional Scottish university. The case study was based on five interviews with the student during the course of her four year programme, six interviews with lecturers and three observations of the student in different learning environments. In this article, the following questions are addressed:

- How does the student understand their disability and how does this understanding appear to have evolved during the course of their school and university education?
- At what point has the student chosen to disclose and why?
- What impact has the wider institutional and social context had on the decision to disclose a disability?
- Do ideas about 'fitness to teach' appear to have had an impact on the student's decision to disclose a disability?
- What has been the effect of disclosure on the individual's access to reasonable adjustments in the university and work placement?

3. The UK higher education environment

Over the past two decades, higher education in the UK has transformed from an elite to a mass system, with a significant reduction in per capita funding. At the same time, new public management has grown in influence, reflected in accountability regimes such as the Research Assessment Exercise and Teaching Quality Assessment. Managerialist techniques have also been used to promote equality. For example, universities are now required to return information to the Higher Education Statistics Agency on the number of disabled students in specific categories and premium funding is awarded on the basis of the number of students claiming the Disabled Students' Allowance. From 2006, universities have also been required to produce disability equality schemes, establishing milestones and targets to chart institutional progress towards greater equality for disabled staff and students. Managerialist methods have thus been used to provide both sticks and carrots to the promotion of equality for disabled students. These require systems to be in place to distinguish between the disabled and non-disabled student populations, which are likely to have knock-on effects on students' construction of self.

Universities' duties to avoid discriminatory practices were given a strong push forward by the implementation of part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), which came into effect in 2002. The legislation has far-reaching implications in terms of its requirement for reasonable adjustments to be made to the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, but in order to claim their right to such an adjustment, an individual student must be able to demonstrate that he or she is disabled. Depending on the nature and cost of the adjustment which is required, students may be eligible for the Disabled Students' Allowance. Under the terms of the Act, a person is disabled if he or she has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal day-to-day activities. A medical certificate is generally required to prove that a student has a particular impairment. Students are given the opportunity to disclose a disability when they first apply for admission to the institution or at a later point, since it is recognised that a student may become aware of an impairment, or may develop a condition for the first time, during their time at university. Drawing a binary divide between disabled and non-disabled students is thus incentivised at the level of the institution and the individual student. The nature of the categories employed is discussed below.

4. The profile of disabled students in higher education

As noted above, when students apply to study at UK universities, they are requested, but not required, to provide information on their disability status. The university application form includes nine categories of impairment of different order; some are medical or quasi-medical categories (e.g. blind/partially sighted, dyslexia), whilst others relate to the type of support needed by the student (e.g. personal care support). The last three categories (unseen disability, multiple disabilities

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