

Exploring the Retention and Success of Students with Disability

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Research

Written by Professor Sue Kilpatrick, Dr Susan Johns, Dr Robin Barnes, Ms Darlene McLennan, Ms Sarah Fischer and Ms Kerri Magnussen (University of Tasmania)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The number of students with disability in higher education is increasing. National data reveal differences in the retention and success of these students across Australian higher education institutions but the reasons for this are not clear. The overarching aim of this study was to explore the relationship between supports and university adjustment for students with disability, and their retention and success.

Method

This exploratory study used a mixed methods approach. Institutional-level data from 2007 to 2013 from the Higher Education Student Data Collection were analysed by total disability students, by disability types and by the student disclosed need for services. Disability types were hearing, learning, mobility, visual, medical and other. Data were analysed using SPSS version 23, in terms of commencing and enrolled students, retention and success. Table A and one Table B providers were then categorised according to overall performance of students with disability, into high, medium, inconsistent and low. Three institutions from each category were invited to participate in semi-structured interview to identify similarities and differences in terms of their policy and practice approaches to the provision of adjustments for students with disability. Data were also collected from a desktop audit of all Table A and B providers via their disability service website, to provide an overview of policy, practice and institutional culture in relation to disability across the institutions.

Findings from National Data

Institutional-level data from 2007 to 2013 from the Higher Education Student Data Collection revealed that:

1. The percentage of both commencing students and total enrolled students with a disability at Australian universities increased from 2007 to 2013.
2. There are no real changes in the distribution of disability types across the years.
3. Smaller universities with 10000-30000 students have a larger proportion of commencing and enrolled students with disability, compared to large universities with more than 30000 students.
4. Students who identified as having a hearing disability were consistently the lowest group of commencing student while students who identifies as having a medical disability were consistently the largest group of commencing students across the seven years.
5. Students with disability have slightly lower success rate than the total student population.
6. Students who identify as having learning, other, or medical disability and requiring services consistently performed less well than total disability students across the years.
7. Students with disability are retained at a consistently lower rate than the total student population.
8. Students who identify as having learning disability were consistently retained at a higher rate than total disability

students.

9. Students who identify as having other disability and requiring services were consistently retained at a lower rate than total disability students.

10. There were no consistent significant differences in student enrolment, retention or success between university groupings.

11. Success rates of students with a disability according to university size have converged over time.

Findings from Website Audit and Interviews

Past performance as reflected in the quantitative, national data cannot necessarily be explained by current practice, as explored in the qualitative data. There were fewer differences between institutions in terms of policies and practices for students with disability, than the quantitative data would suggest. Differences across institutions were largely in relation to the maturity or stage of development of their inclusive policies and practices.

1. Most institutions described socially inclusive policies and practices and supportive leadership.

2. A number of institutions did not have a current disability action plan (DAP).

3. Few institutions involved students with disability in policy development.

4. Service units for students with disability were usually located within a broader student equity/support/wellbeing structure and disability support was generally a responsibility shared throughout institutions, and not just the responsibility of the disability support team, indicating the move from a medical model to an inclusion model.

5. Recruitment mechanisms that involve external linkages with schools, disability networks or others can assist in the transition of students with disability.

6. Collaborative approaches involving internal and external stakeholders can assist improve retention and success of students with disability.

7. The widespread implementation of learning access plans (LAPs) suggests an increasing importance being placed on formalised procedures for identifying and meeting student needs.

8. The provision of more services and better support for students with a mental health disability and those with autism is an area requiring further university investment.

9. Inconsistent categorisation of students with mental health disability in national and institution data collection makes targeting services and tracking institutional performance challenging. A socially inclusive framework that includes the concept of universal design is a mitigating strategy.

10. More training for academic and non-academic staff to better support students with disability is required, including participation in national training in relation to mental health.

Recommendations

1. A nationally consistent approach to categorising students with disability is required. In particular, students with mental health disability should be encouraged to identify in a single category.

2. Changes to policy and practice would increase enrolment, retention and success rates of students with disability toward the rates for all students. Higher education institutions should consider the following guiding principles for good practice when developing and implementing strategies and plans designed to support the enrolment, retention and success of students with disability.

a. Operate under a whole-of-university inclusive framework that includes the concept of universal design.

- b. Ensure the policy framework supporting students with disability is current, flexible and relevant to the institutional context.
- c. Ensure that financial resources, as well as human resources, are identified and flexible enough to fit student requirements, including the specific requirements associated with different disability types.
- d. Ensure disability support services are integrated with mainstream student support services.
- e. Have specialist disability support staff who have the knowledge and experience to identify appropriate adjustments.
- f. Provide regular training for disability practitioners and other staff with responsibility for supporting and advising students with disability.
- g. Develop a training and awareness communication strategy in relation to students with disability for all staff who have contact with students, and ensure sessional staff are included.
- h. Set up mechanisms to facilitate interpersonal relationships in three domains: between disability support staff and students; between disability support staff and both academic and professional staff, and amongst students with disability.
- i. Develop an appropriate and sensitive mechanism to identify those students with mental health disability to allow those students with a mental health condition who wish to disclose, or who have not considered disclosing before, to do so.
- j. Develop an appropriate and sensitive mechanism to identify those students with autism spectrum disorder to allow those students with autism spectrum disorder who wish to disclose, or who have not considered disclosing before, to do so.
- k. Regularly monitor student outcomes by collecting data on retention and success at course and faculty level, including at the level of disability type, and act on results of the data.
- l. Offer inclusive student wellbeing programs that promote and improve self-management and resilience.
- m. Develop formalised (written) learning access plans collaboratively with students that are owned by students. With the agreement of students, put mechanisms in place to ensure appropriate dissemination of plans to relevant staff.
- n. Consider students with disability from the perspective of the student lifecycle model, including recruitment and outreach strategies, and career transition strategies.
- o. Partnerships with external organisations that leverage resources are fundamental. Consider developing MOUs and service-level agreements with key disability organisations and stakeholders such as mental health, allied health and autism bodies, and NDCOs.
- p. Consider students with disability in the development and use of online learning resources (e.g. captioning, audio capture, audio description), as well as in learning support services.

Further Research

1. Further research should be conducted to identify appropriate methods of disclosure and data collection, including Commonwealth data collection and reporting, to more accurately reflect retention and success statistics for students by disability type.
2. Further research into the impact of relationships between NDCOs and universities on the recruitment of students with disability is recommended.

3. More research is needed into institutional and other factors that impact on the retention and success of students with disability, and particularly for different disability types. Such research should adopt a student lifecycle focus, incorporating outreach and recruitment, as well as transition out of university, including transition to a vocation or career.

Continue reading: [Exploring the Retention and Success of Students with Disability](#) (723Kb)

Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., McLennan, D., Fischer, S. & Magnussen, K. (2016). Exploring the Retention and Success of Students with Disability. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth.

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