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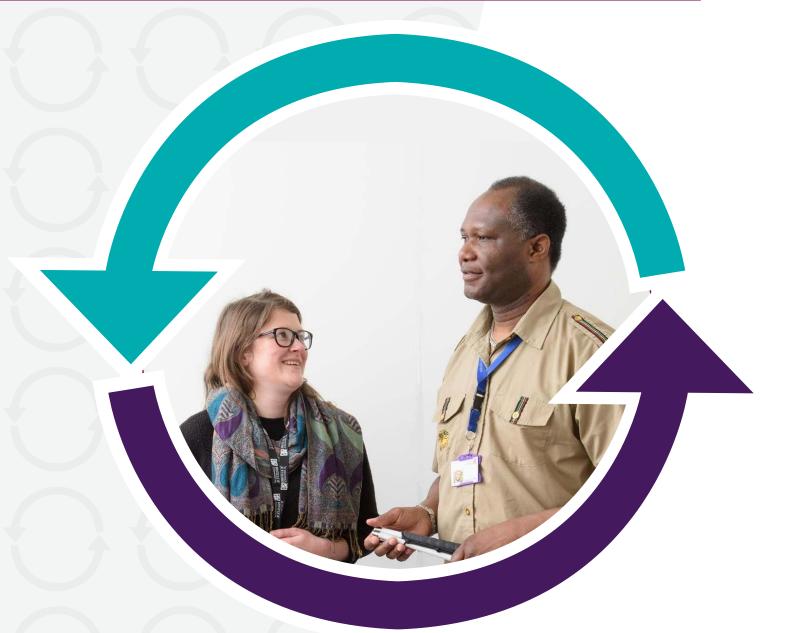
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Universities need to develop more inclusive practices to attract and to value disabled staff and students

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Getting Things Changed

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Valuing disabled academics makes for a more welcoming environment for all students.

About the research

Inclusive teaching and learning are strategically and legally a key part of the duty of Higher Education Institutions in the UK, with guidance for vice chancellors and senior managers[1] published in January 2017. Disabled people form approximately 20% of the UK population, however, only 12% of university students and 5% of staff disclose a disability. Despite the Equality Act 2010 duties, these figures suggest that considerable challenges remain in ensuring that disabled people can access academia.

This research was co-produced with disabled students and staff from the University of Bristol.

Our focus was on understanding the lived experiences of disabled people within academia, and their recommendations for how universities could be made more inclusive and accessible. Qualitative data were gathered by disabled staff via an auto-ethnographic action approach supplemented by 11 qualitative interviews. A research group of nine disabled students contributed personal reflections and collective writing, as well as conducting 16 interviews and running a forum theatre event (www.bris.ac.uk/fssl/festival/programme/2016-/).

Policy implications

- The diversity and disability strategies of universities should be centred on the social model of Disability, and reinforced via disability equality training co-created by disabled staff and students, so that the focus is on finding solutions to disabling barriers and creating a more inclusive and valuing approach.

- Disabled staff and students should have their own forums to enable them to meet, building networks across universities to support each other and to have a voice. Each forum should be consulted on a continuous basis around university issues that need to be addressed.

- Monitoring of progress towards inclusion should be trialled with tools focused on social practices such as that created by this research.

- Disabled applicants for jobs or study should be encouraged to discuss any support needs they may have, such as arranging flexible working or Access to Work support. Universities should support this process through centralised resources for reasonable adjustments, dedicated services, and training for all staff.

- Any new buildings or refurbishments should follow accessibility standards reviewed by expert disabled people and staff, and be discussed with disabled people's groups.

- Departmental heads and deans should adjust the way academic outputs are linked to individuals, so that research assessment and review processes recognise the value of team work.

Key findings

- Both for students and staff, university language and practice reinforced a culture of individualised and ableist assumptions of disability being a 'problem' to be solved. The Higher Education sector was largely failing to understand what a social model of disability would look like in practice.

- University practices such as the Research Evaluation Framework for staff and progression reviews for PhD students created time pressures for everyone to achieve equally, without recognising and valuing diversity.

- The University where this research took place faced considerable challenges with physical access issues in geographical location and buildings, but these were exacerbated by defeatist justifications for non-action, poor signage and an absence of access maps. During the research, disabled people became involved in advising on new building projects, creating more promising future opportunities.

- Positive inclusive changes which affected all staff or students were appreciated, for example Mediasite recording of lectures.

- University practices such as timetabling were focused on disability as a student issue, and tended to ignore the interconnection between practices and the issues faced by disabled staff.

- Despite many good reports of disability services, some disabled students reported that they had to manage complex interactions between departments by themselves.

- Disabled staff faced considerable extra labour because of their disability related needs, but also because of having to devote up to 60% of their contracted work hours to Access to Work arrangements.

- The Staff Disability Forum was a strong and growing force in the University, but disabled students did not have a regular way of meeting and forming their own collective, other than via the research.

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I've had to fight for everything I've had to do in my life; I'm as capable as anybody else. **(Disabled student)**

I spend about three days a week – three full-time days a week – arranging my own travel, booking it all, researching it, filing my university claims – and then the Access to Work claim. **(Disabled staff member)**

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