A Risky Business: preparing students for professional practice

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Abstract
The Disability Discrimination act of 2005 has mandated universities not to discriminate against students on the basis of disability. Thus people who might previously have been excluded, or excluded themselves from a desired profession because of real or perceived difficulties related to impairment are now more likely to apply and to be accepted onto courses. This challenges Higher Education policy on admissions, curriculum design and delivery.
Three funded research projects at Huddersfield and Bradford over the past four years have explored the experience of disabled students entering universities and the specific difficulties of translating inclusive practice and reasonable adjustment into placement settings outside the university.
Two tensions have been highlighted by these projects between:
- performance in the relatively safe environment of the university and the world of work

- the rights of disabled students to inclusion and the responsibility of the university and placement providers for risk management of public and student safety.

The work has highlighted the need for a structured pre-placement review that helps students to identify their preparedness for placement and the action planning needed to minimise risk, enabling a safe and successful outcome.

Keyword: Risk assessment, Disability, Placement, Professional practice

Introduction
The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA 2005) states that all public bodies within the United Kingdom (UK) now have a legal responsibility to ensure that the needs of disabled people are anticipated and met so that they are not discriminated against. Thus universities when recruiting, teaching and assessing disabled people and partners offering practice placements and subsequent employment need to eliminate discrimination and harassment, ensuring that their policies meet the needs of disabled people.
Prior to the 2005 DDA, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, (SENDA 2001) had explicitly included education into disability legislation, which led to significant changes in the Higher Education (HE) sector. Student entitlement at each stage of the process is now built into policy and practice but the focus is necessarily on adjustments within the educational setting and does not fully address the issues of fitness or competence to practice in a placement setting. Work undertaken by Sapey, Turner and Orton *(*2004) and French (2004) suggests that disabled people continue to face barriers to qualifying as health professionals. Reviewing standards for teaching, nursing and social work the Disability Rights Commission (DRC 2007) supports this claim by concluding that health standards can be discriminatory and can deter disabled students from applying for these courses. Research is needed to understand the issues with regard to disability and professional practice in order to develop shared practice that is inclusive.

Funded projects
Three funded projects, undertaken in West Yorkshire over the past four years, have informed this project:

Mobile Enabled Disabled Students (MEDS) was undertaken at the University of Bradford to identify the barriers and benefits of mobile devices to support disabled students in their learning. This project was funded by the Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (http://www.alps-cetl.ac.uk) and supported the development of the ALPS mobile assessment tools. Students, particularly those with impairments related to dyslexia, identified how the use of mobile devices aided their practice by providing additional means of time management, information retention and memory (Dearnley and Walker 2009). Further details can be found at http://www.alps-cetl.ac.uk/capacityfund.html

Disability in Transition was a three year Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund project at the University of Huddersfield. It evaluated disabled students' experience of the transition into Higher Education, explored the knowledge skills and attitudes of Higher Education Staff to disability and created staff development opportunities with an aim of developing inclusive practice. The web site can be found at: http://www.hud.ac.uk/tqef/1d.html. Three findings of particular relevance to this current work fall into two separate themes: Firstly disabled students expressed heightened anxieties when they contemplated their placement experience. This led some of them to feel that disclosing their disability to placement staff would jeopardise their chances of a fair assessment of their competence whilst on the course and of employment after qualification. Secondly methodologically we struggled to identify what we felt was the complete population of disabled students within the School from which to select a sample.   Students appeared to fall into four distinct categories:
1. Disabled students listed as disabled and receiving support from Disability Support. This is the most visible and 'reachable' group
2. Disabled students not listed as disabled on the Schools records but receiving support from Disability Support. This group may include students who benefit from support, but who wish to avoid being treated differently by other students and/or staff. These students may not be identifiable as disabled by teaching and administrative staff in the School and thus forfeit the right to any reasonable adjustments.
3. Disabled students listed as disabled but not receiving additional support from Disability Support; and
4. Disabled students not identified on any system, who may or may not be aware that they are disabled.

This clearly identified that trying to focus support and services on disabled students ran the risk of missing many who might benefit, running counter to the cultural shift to inclusivity required by the 2005 DDA.
These two projects culminated in join, Strategic Health Authority funded work,

Managing Impairment in Professional Practice (http://cms-app.cen.brad.ac.uk/mipp/). This project went a significant stage further, attempting to identify the perceptions of disabled health professional students and disabled and non-disabled qualified health professionals. It was hoped that in doing this we might find a balance between the demands of professional health care practice and the rights of disabled students and staff. Data analysis for this project is in the process of completion. Emergent findings support the two earlier projects in two important ways:
Firstly there is an ambivalence, felt by both students and qualified practitioners about what it might mean to be 'disabled' in a professional context. This is an interesting phenomena, which does not neatly fit with current social and medical models of disability; it is not necessarily prejudicial, but does seem to suggest that disabled practitioners place (or feel they are expected to place) their own needs and impairments at a point of lesser importance than the needs of people they are responsible for and the smooth running of the service they work in.
Secondly disabled people in the workplace do not always declare their disability to colleagues, preferring to make their own risk assessments with regard to their personal safety and the safety of people they have responsibility for. This does not appear to be a

reckless desire to 'hide' disability; rather, as above, it reflects self awareness and their judgements about the relative importance of their own needs and rights.

Risk assessment and disclosure
As we analysed data and discussed our findings with students and colleagues it became clear that disclosure of disabilities prior to placements was an issue that we were not addressing as well as we needed to. A number of related problems were identified:

- Whilst students who declare their disability are entitled to assessment and support we now know that not all students who may have an impairment of relevance to their placement safety are fully identified within our systems.

- The adjustments suggested within Personal Learning Support Plans may not be feasible in placements settings

- Disability that has little impact or can be compensated for in the HEI environment may be more significant in a placement setting.

- The DDA (2005) does not require disclosure – indeed – student are entitled to confidentiality. However placement providers, where students will have contact with the public and professional bodies, who govern professional education, require transparency as evidence of professional responsibility and public protection.

Through this analysis we identified that the development of a risk assessment tool, completed by all students prior to placement experience, would empower them to develop the self awareness and confidence to analyse their own strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, they will identify the level of disclosure necessary to demonstrate professional decision making. We also hope that this will help students to develop mechanisms for maintaining a healthy balance between their own needs and those of their employer and profession in the future.

Developing and piloting a risk assessment tool
Although there are a number of pre-placement preparation and action plan guides, there does not appear to be a risk assessment that could be embedded into Personal Development Planning to help students prepare for placements and make decisions about appropriate and responsible disclosure. The next phase of development will be to develop and pilot such a tool. This will include:

- Reviewing tools already in use.

- Developing a risk assessment/ placement preparation tool for Huddersfield.

- Piloting this with placement providers and students.

This phase of the work will be reported on in 2011.

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