Accommodating students with physical disabilities on placement in the human services

Summary report of key findings

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Research Aims and Approach

This research study aimed to:

1. Investigate how the needs of students with physical disabilities are accommodated on placement.
2. Understand the impact of the placement experience on the professional identity and career development of students with physical disabilities in the human services.

- The study was designed using the Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology to incorporate the diverse placement experiences of participants into generating placement accommodation strategies.
- Data was collected through an online questionnaire, document analysis of disability and placement policy documents, and a policy analysis of these documents, using Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach.
- Data was analysed through descriptive statistics analysis and CGT coding.

Key Points in the Literature

- Placement is a practical learning opportunity that facilitates the development of university students into professional practitioners by providing students with real-life work experience during their studies (Bogo 2015).
- Students with physical disabilities on placement encounter:
    o Inaccessible buildings and facilities (Baron, Phillips & Stalker 1996; Jackson 2018; El-Khoury Antonios 2019).
    o Negative attitudes and stigma about disability, including the tension of disclosing disability to request accommodations (Cunnah 2015; Dollinger et al. 2024).
    o Placement agency staff's lack of understanding about their roles and responsibilities in implementing reasonable adjustments (Ryan 2011).

- Equally, students with physical disabilities are able to increase their practice confidence on placement by demonstrating their advocacy, determination and transferrable qualities and skills (El-Khoury Antonios 2019; Caspersen & Smeby 2021; Chhetry et al. 2022).

Key Findings

Contextual findings

- 15 questionnaire responses were received.
    o 11 respondents identified as having completed, or currently completing a social work course.
    o Eight respondents identified as a student/graduate/practitioner with a physical disability.

- o Five respondents identified as a placement agency staff member or a university placement staff member.
  - o One respondent identified as being in both groups.
  - o One respondent did not identify which group they belonged to.
- 52 disability and placement policy documents were analysed for the document analysis and the policy analysis.

Theoretical findings

Reasonable adjustments

- The study found that reasonable adjustments were denied on placement due to:
  - o The legislative provision of unjustifiable hardship.
  - o Rigid inherent course and placement requirements.
  - o Negative attitudes and perceptions of disability by university placement staff and placement agency staff.
  - o Inadequate policy coverage of accessibility and reasonable adjustment issues.
  - o Lack of understanding and resourcing to implement reasonable adjustments.

- *"Physical location of placements were sometimes difficult to access without a driver's license (my disability precludes me from driving). My university made it clear I was difficult to place because of my physical disability and inability to drive to outer locations. I also needed additional time to complete my clinical notes and this was not accommodated.*

- *"I was also encouraged to drop out rather than any support or accommodations made for me. I had to escalate to complaints and it's still semi unresolved. Only once I got to complaints was, I taken seriously but until then I did not feel supported or respected by my disability support worker or the welfare team."*

- *"There's no accessibility clauses, no one knows or understands the actual disability. Therefore, there's a big issue around confidentiality as well. If I didn't want to disclose my physical disability because I hide it well, I would have to be forced to if I'm on placement. Do people understand what the disability is?"*

- *"Our primary responsibility as an accredited professional course is to ensure that students are capable of carrying out the role so as to not detrimentally affect clients."*

Positive placement accommodation experiences

- The study highlighted positive placement accommodation experiences, including:
  - o Proactive communication with students to identify and implement reasonable adjustments.
  - o Developing understandings of different practice areas.

- o Positive feedback from supervisors.
- o Determination to succeed.
- o Learning how to manage disability and emerging practitioner identities in the workplace.

- *"The biggest positives [were] the feedback from patients who had similar physical disability to me. I think they very much appreciated a therapist with who they could connect and understand their challenges. The feedback I received on placements allowed me to build my confidence as a practitioner and to understand that my disability was not going to impact on my career development or ability to be a professional speech therapist."*

- *"It was also very helpful when the placement provider contacted me before the placement to ask what supports I required. This made me feel accepted and respected."*

Accommodating physical disability on placement

The following placement accommodation strategies were proposed:

- **University-specific strategies**

  - o Self- selection of placements.

  - o Greater collaboration between universities and placement agencies in the placement process.

- **Placement agency specific strategies**

  - o Co-designed approach to implementing reasonable adjustments with students with physical disabilities on placement.

  - o Access to on-site medical support.

  - o Disability awareness and knowledge training.

  - o Accessibility auditing and pre-placement site visit.

  - o Flexible placement arrangements (working from home options, covering transport costs).

  - o Documenting placement expectations.

- **Policy and professional accreditation-specific strategies**

  - o Flexible placement hours.

  - o Flexible enforcement of inherent course and placement requirements to respond to and accommodate diverse student needs and expertise.

  - o Paid placements- consideration of expanding the Commonwealth Prac Payment.

o Establishment of high-level government guidance on universal practitioner requirements in the human services.

Implications of Findings

- The findings of this study will contribute to:
  - o Improving disability inclusion practices in higher education, to ensure equitable participation by students with disabilities.
  - o Supporting placement agencies to more effectively accommodate students with physical disabilities on placement.
  - o Increasing the participation of people with disabilities in the workforce, by improving placement experiences to support the transition to professional practice.

- The study will also inform future research on:
  - o Improving disability inclusion practices in higher education, to ensure equitable participation by students with disabilities.
  - o Supporting placement agencies to more effectively accommodate students with physical disabilities on placement.
  - o Increasing the participation of people with disabilities in the workforce, by improving placement experiences to support the transition to professional practice.
  - o Examining placement experiences in vocational education and training.

Summary Report References

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