

Inclusive Teaching and Learning: Meeting the Needs of Australian University Students with 'Hidden Disabilities' in the Classroom

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Inclusive Teaching and Learning: Meeting the Needs of Australian University Students with ‘Hidden Disabilities’ in the Classroom

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Abstract: Australian universities have a legal and ethical responsibility to create inclusive learning environments for all students with disability. This article explores the understanding of ‘hidden disability’ amongst a group of Australian university academics and the triumphs and challenges they face as they strive to provide and foster an inclusive classroom.

Keywords: Hidden Disability; Inclusion; University

Knowledge Focus: Research/Theory Focus

Topic Area: Inclusion; Post-Secondary Education

Introduction

For many young people, college or university can be seen as a rite of passage (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2014), as they transition from childhood to adulthood, and journey through the period of time that exists between school and adult work life. However, gaining access to university studies and achieving academic success has been a privilege that not all young people with disability around the world have been allowed to experience (Couzens et al., 2015; Griful-Freixenet, Struyven, Verstichele, & Andries, 2017; Moriña, 2019; Strnadová, Hájková, & Květoňová, 2015). Systemic barriers still exist which result in students with disability continuing to be excluded from achieving academic success at a tertiary level (Couzens et al., 2015). Universities in a range of countries have become obligated by the laws of the land to address these barriers and have been motivated by a desire to see a more diverse student population that reflected the demographics of the community, succeed in tertiary study (Buenestado-Fernández, Álvarez-Castillo, González-González, & Espino-Díaz, 2019).

While universities have attempted to address the barriers by a range of strategies such as developing equity scholarships, access and inclusion policies and individual access plans; lecturers are not always included in the consideration of how these initiatives can be implemented at a course, unit and individual student level. This disconnect has a negative impact both on the lecturers who feel ill equipped to work with students with disability, and on the students, themselves, whose disabilities are not readily recognized by others (Couzens et al., 2015).

This paper will explore the concept of ‘hidden disability’ amongst the university student population and the impact that non-disclosure has on the way that university lecturers structure

and facilitate the learning environment in an Australian university.

The Australian Tertiary Education Context

The 2005 Disability Standards for Education were formulated out of the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992, which is the federal legislation that covers all of the states and territories of Australia (Australian Government, 2005). The initial intention of the Disability Standards for Education was to ensure that students with disability have access to participate in all education and training opportunities alongside their peers from foundational learning in kindergarten, all the way through to tertiary education at university and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training [ADCET], 2020a).

Under the Disability Standards for Education (2005), every Australian university must have a Disability Access and Inclusion policy and an Action Plan to outline the university's responsibilities under the law, to provide the right environment and supports for students with disability to learn and experience educational success. Each university must provide 'reasonable accommodations and adjustments' to an individual student regarding attendance and assessment, while still upholding the inherent requirements of the course of study. The Disability Standards for Education (2005) cover the following areas of:

- *enrolment;*
- *participation;*
- *curriculum development, accreditation and delivery;*
- *student support services; and*
- *elimination of harassment and victimization.*

Australian tertiary institutions have focused on several different initiatives to decrease the barriers to student enrollments, attract more students with disability and to ensure greater student diversity. A couple of examples are initiatives such as the Educational Access scheme and Equity scholarships (Australian Government, 2020). The Educational Access scheme assigns additional points to a student with disability's selection ranking when they apply for a university course. Equity scholarships are offered by a tertiary institution for an individual student who can evidence a level of disadvantage. These initiatives and others have resulted in a significant increase of enrollments of students with disability nationwide (Koshy, 2014). More students with disability are also finishing year 12 in high school, with 33.4% of students with disability successfully completing in 2018, up from 31.4% in 2015 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018). As a result, an increased number of students with disability are becoming eligible to access more university places. However, the number of currently enrolled Australian university students with disability is difficult to gauge accurately, as there is no requirement to disclose an impairment upon enrollment.

In Victoria, nondisclosure of a disability means that many students are unable to access formalized services within the university (Couzens et al., 2015). Students need to provide written evidence of their diagnosis and the negative impacts this diagnosis or diagnoses have on their learning, in order to access formal supports on campus. It is a requirement of the university that this written documentation must be current and initial formal diagnoses can be costly to a student. As a result, this financial cost may also become an additional barrier to accessing the right services on campus. For example, a 19-year-old Victorian university student, deciding to seek a diagnosis for dyslexia would have to find over \$2000 for a comprehensive diagnosis in a private practice.

Universities are faced with a challenge of providing education to an ever-increasing diverse population. This challenge brings the effectiveness of current curriculum and delivery of courses into question, but also collides with as Madriaga (as cited in Kendall, 2016) describes the negative values and attitudes that staff hold towards students with disabilities in their classroom. It is clear that both the teaching practices and the deep-seated values and negative attitudes of the academic staff need to be challenged and changed for students with ‘hidden disabilities’ to experience success in university education.

Understanding Disability

Disability is often understood as a phenomenon, which affects a relatively small proportion of Australia’s population (Cameron & Valentine, 2001). In the broadest context, a disability is defined in Australia as any ‘limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities’ (ABS, 2018). In 2018, 17.7% of the Australian population identified as having a disability (ABS, 2018). This percentage has increased slowly over the past seven years. It is important to note that older Australians with impairments directly related to advancing age, are also included in these statistics. The prevalence of disability increases dramatically with age, from one in 9 people aged between 0-64, to one in two people aged over 65 years of age.

However, this definition still reflects the medical model of disability, which focuses on a problem existing with the human body. In stark contrast, the understanding and development of the social construction of disability has developed over more recent times. The Social Model of Disability contradicted and disrupted the previous positivist and deficit view of disability as shown in the medical model. According to the Social Model of Disability, disability is viewed as the result of a set of complex interactions between the individual with an impairment and a range of external factors that are barriers to active participation in the society (Barnes, 1991). The Social Model of Disability radically challenged the way that society viewed and valued people with impairments or medical diagnoses.

However, an impairment or medical diagnosis should not be the basis for labelling individuals as being ‘other’ abled (Ho, 2004). There are robust discussions within the disability

community about identity first language (disabled person) versus people-first language (person with disability). Language is powerful and should be used carefully to empower others, not disempower. Blaska notes that “Language is a reflection on how people in society see each other” (1993, p. 25). In both identity first language and people first language situations, the term ‘disability’ is used as a socio-political term referring to a process which happens “when one group of people create barriers by designing a world ... taking no account of the impairments of others” (Carroll et al., 2018, p. 1). ‘Person first’ language was introduced in the community to refocus society’s attention away from the impairment back to the person instead (Michalko, 2002). A call for the discontinuation of historical terms such as ‘crippled’ and ‘handicapped’ evidences this important shift in language. The inference that people with disability must come begging with a ‘cap in hand’ to receive charity does little to empower or affirm individuals in need of additional support. Rather, terms such as these seek to perpetuate a notion of disempowerment and inability, rather than ability and strength (Oliver, 1996). People with disability who are referred to in positive terms are more likely to see themselves as contributing members of the community (Blaska, 1993). This helps to prevent feelings of alienation and hopelessness. In Australia, people-first language has been adopted by Government and support agencies, as a result in this article, disability is used to refer to people who have one or more impairments and are experiencing barriers to active participation in community, and in this case, university life.

Almost a quarter of people with disability in Australia, report having a mental or behavioural condition, which had increased from 21.5% in 2015 (ABS, 2018). This is in contrast to over three quarters of Australians with disability reported as having a physical disability (ABS, 2018). Society has adapted and recognized the needs of people with physical disabilities by ensuring that physical access is becoming more readily available to facilities and services in the community.

In most inclusive settings, government building regulations including ramps, railings, accessible lifts and toilets are clearly defined in order to ensure ease of access and the prevention of exclusion is a fundamental aim. However, despite these improvements in creating an inclusive landscape, exclusion continues to occur. This is especially the case for people whose impairment is not easily identified by others. The Social Model of Disability is a foundational concept to understand as there are still underlying negative values and attitudes that result in the ongoing exclusion and stigmatization of students with ‘hidden disability’ on campus (Australian Government, 2012).

Hidden Disability

The concept of ‘hidden disability’ refers to diagnoses and impairments that are not easily identified by an outside observer. Fitzgerald and Paterson (1995) also refer to impairments that lack external features or visible signs. Valeras (2010) explains that persons with a “‘hidden disability,’ ... make daily decisions about which identity to embody. They are constantly

negotiating when, where, why, and how to disclose and adopt the disability identity or to ‘pass’ and give society the impression of ‘able-bodiedness’” (p. 1) The daily decisions made by people with ‘hidden disability’ have lasting implications on the concept of self and relationships with others. It is interesting to note that during Fitzgerald and Paterson’s research in 1995, the term ‘hidden disability’ was not common amongst the literature. This suggests that it is a more recent term coined within the past 25 years, to describe a particular set of unique experiences that people with certain diagnoses share.

Students with ‘hidden disabilities’ are often made to feel like they don't belong in the academic learning environment. This is because there exists amongst the academic staff ‘normative views on ability’ (Ryan, 2007). Furthermore, tertiary learning environments have not been set up with their particular needs in mind. For example, according to Olney and Brockelman (2003) university students “strove to maintain a sense of self-worth and to prove their worth to others within the dominant culture that devalues the experience of disability” (p. 45). As a result, many academic staff are unaware of the barriers that these students are facing in academic studies and no reasonable adjustments are offered. With the students’ impairments being ‘invisible’ or hidden, it is easy for teachers to “invalidate or minimise the challenges faced by the student” (Olney & Brockelman, 2003, p. 45). ‘Hidden disability’ therefore is defined as an impairment that is not generally seen, recognized or understood by others (Couzens et al., 2015).

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) in 2012, released a set of guidelines in the U.S. that recommended that Disability Services within the university rely firstly on the student’s self-report and then secondly on the Disability Services staff observations and impressions. This relegated external expert reports to tertiary information gathered by the individual. While self-reporting plans can easily be implemented for students with physical impairments, questions were raised by Lovett, Nelson, and Lindstrom (2015) about the accuracy of self-reporting for students with hidden disability. Lovett et al. suggests that there is a potential for students to ‘port’ the system. Beilke and Yssel (1999) explain that there is also a belief by academic staff that students are ‘faking’ learning disabilities to gain preferential treatment, or are simply ‘lazy’ (Olney & Brockelman, 2003), uncovers deeply rooted negative attitudes by academic staff towards students with disabilities that are not initially apparent. On the part of the academic staff member, there is also a lack of understanding of the impact that a hidden disability may have on a student’s educational studies.

According to the 2020 Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) (2020b), common ‘hidden disabilities’ experienced by students at university are:

- Specific learning disabilities (SLD) such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and aphasia;
- Autism spectrum condition, including previously diagnosed Asperger’s syndrome;
- Attention deficit disorder (ADD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD);
- Acquired brain injury.

Agarwal, Moya, Yasui, and Seymour (2015) tells us that when a hidden disability is not recognized and acknowledged by others, both peers and academic staff in an educational setting, a student may face attitudinal, social and physical barriers while studying at university. This can impact on the quality of engagement in the classroom and a student's ability to flourish and succeed in their studies.

Students with 'hidden disabilities' are at times choosing not to disclose their impairment to the university. This may be due to the way that the question is asked on the enrolment form, a student's own understanding of disability and questions about identity, also may be due to previous negative experiences in learning and stigma due to labels (Kendall, 2016).

The University Academics and Their Perceptions

Eight academic staff members were invited to participate in the research project. Both male and female academic staff were interviewed with a range of university teaching experience from 3 years to 31 years. All academic staff came to the university from teaching/ training roles in their chosen industries. Interestingly, length of teaching experience did not equate to more confidence in supporting students with hidden disability in the classroom. The academic participants were asked to consider and analyse their personal values when teaching students with hidden disabilities. In addition, the teachers were asked to reflect on the pedagogical and curriculum approaches that were used when working with students with disabilities. Academic perceptions provided a window in which to understand their overall perceptions of working successfully or unsuccessfully with students who choose not to disclose their disability. Implicit in their reflections was a desire to make sense of the many challenges they faced when working with students who have diverse academic and social needs.

Each academic participant was given a pseudonym to encourage frank and honest discussion, ensure confidentiality of each of their stories and remove fear of professional repercussions. Thematic analysis was used to code the data of both the students and academic staff and discover overarching themes. This research utilises the interpretivist paradigm with a focus on how the academic staff participants find meaning in their teaching and learning experiences at university.

This article will firstly examine the academic staff and their understanding of the term hidden disability and then the following selection of overarching themes gleaned from the participant interviews:

**POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE**

**LIMITATIONS AND BARRIERS
GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Academic Staff Definitions of Hidden Disability

Bonnie has not really considered students with hidden disabilities in terms of her teaching

practice or the way she facilitates the classroom. We see this when she asserts:

I'm very aware and accommodating and flexible in terms of supporting students with presenting disability that I can see.... But if it is not something I can see and diagnose, that's difficult and I don't think that's something on my radar...

Matthew had also not really considered the concept of hidden disability much at all. He did say:

obviously, there are lots that are hidden and not noticeable...I have had students with disclosed autism, dyslexia and ADHD I have had some come with support plans and then I've read and looked at those, but many of those ones, do not have support plans at all.

Olive mentioned the identity questions that are raised for some students with hidden disability:

I've seen students who are very articulate about their disability and quite at home with them and others who are, who struggle with them every day.

Morris' understanding of students with hidden disability in the classroom is that their disability *'is not noticeable when you look at the person'*. According to **Morris**:

the impact that a hidden disability might have to students is it's not taken into account by both, by the teaching staff or the fellow students, simply because people are not aware of that and therefore learning or teaching style might not be adjusted to suit this particular student because of lack of awareness or knowledge about the hidden disability that the student might have.

Trevor considered hidden disability in terms of his:

own inexperience to deal with difference'. 'I would understand that hidden disability to me is probably more around my inability to understand the ways in which people.... I might be limiting people by my interactions with them I suppose rather than their disability in the sense that they've got something limiting them.

Pablo understood 'hidden disability' to mean any disability that is not obvious to the eye, *'it could be anything that I can't visually see.'* While Pablo had a range of strategies that he was implementing in the classroom, he was unsure of whether these strategies were meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Alison recognizes that hidden disability is *'anything that's not physically obvious, that's what I think hidden disability is..* The impact to a student when their barriers to study are not recognised means that *'if they don't feel that they are part of the learning or if they are struggling or for whatever the reason, they just don't come so they miss the learning.'*

Harriet is aware of university students who choose to not disclose that they have a 'hidden disability.' She believes that because the lecturer cannot see their disability when they walk in the room that this will have a negative impact on their learning. **Harriet** noted that if students are not actively seeking additional support then they are likely to face additional challenges in their

academic studies. As a teacher who is unaware of the disability that a student might have, **Harriet** says that she:

doesn't necessarily think they're going to require anything more to success, we just basket them in with everyone else and continue to deliver a session or materials as we always would, so we're already potentially setting them up for failure...

Positive Relationships

It was agreed by all academic participants that positive relationships between academic staff and students build trust and open communication channels. Often the first stage of considering teaching and learning strategies for individual students is when academic staff discover that a student has a diagnosis. There are many ways that this disclosure takes place and can include:

- Informal discussions with other academic staff;
- Student discloses on a confidential survey for placement;
- Approaches a lecturer after class;
- A lecturer receives an email from accessibility services on campus;
- The course coordinator provides information regarding a student;
- The lecturer's own observations or suspicions; or
- A student may disclose publicly in class that he or she has a disability.

The academics acknowledged the importance in building trust over time with students. All academics talked quite fondly about the privilege of building relationships with students over their learning journey, seeing the students grow and develop, experience academic success and then graduate. **Alison:**

I like that I am building these lovely relationships with these students where I'm able to have that sort of conversation. (A female student) had confidence now because we had that conversation and now that self-belief.... so (students need) time to know that we are invested in them.

Olive: *They do want time with you, they want time to hear their stories told.*

Sometimes it took teaching a student over an entire semester or through several units before they disclosed information to the academic. **Harriet:** *students either telling me eventually, not necessarily on the first class but eventually coming up or emailing me personally.*

Bonnie:

the way that those conversations might happen with students would be one on one conversations where I would suggest most of those conversations come at some kind of crisis point. Sometimes it's even in an informal chat at the end.

Alison:

if I taught over a 12week period, I'd say by week 9, week 8 or week 9 the student might tell me, so that is my first way of knowing because it does take time to build trust and build that relationship for them to actually tell me their story.

For all academics, there were a small number of students that were proactive in sharing the information from their access plan, or about their learning, before the unit of study began, **Pablo** tells a story about one of his female students:

she said I want you to know I have a hearing impairment and I have strategies to use and I manage, Pablo asked what are they, and she said I always ask the teacher to make eye contact with me when they're speaking so I can see their mouth, umm and I may move around in classrooms to different positions so I can hear.

However, these stories were in the minority. It was felt that students with hidden disability were not always able to articulate what they needed in the classroom, or weren't always aware of how their learning was being impacted. There was an acknowledgement that the learning of a student with a hidden disability is negatively impacted if it is not disclosed. **Harriet** shared:

I think if a student doesn't have a visible or an obvious disability then that will impact their learning because as a teacher we don't necessarily think they're going to require anything more to succeed we just basket them in with everyone else and continue to deliver a session or materials as we always would, so we're already potentially setting them up for failure.

It was also interesting to note that the timing of information sharing also became a barrier for academics. Trevor acknowledged: *I think within the shorter period of time I know anybody, the less time I have to pick up that hidden disability.* **Bonnie:** *I think another challenge is that I'm a sessional teacher so the ongoing relationships with students, I don't have those so often.*

If the academic staff were not informed before the unit of study began, there was limited time to prepare additional content, or modify tasks to meet the needs of the student. In addition to this, the student may have already become overwhelmed with the unit and then reach a crisis point. Teaching and learning strategies that a student can benefit from may also be included in the disclosure, but this is dependent on each situation. For example, **Morris** explained: *'an instance where I have received an email from disability services that said this student has identified that they have a hearing impairment and therefore appropriate strategies should be adopted to accommodate this student's learning'*. **Bonnie** describes a situation where her academic support provided to a student led to them acknowledging their barriers to study without actually receiving a formal diagnosis.

I think in terms some of the more academic content that I support students with, the kind of academic skills, that's possibly an opportunity where a student then also will share with me the challenges in "I sat down and tried to read these 14 times but I can't."

All academic staff interviewed in this project had previous experience teaching and facilitating learning experiences in diverse settings with different age groups. They all reported having significant skills in building relationships and rapport with students. This is certainly a contributing factor for students many of whom spoke favourably of the academic staff who understood their needs and provided flexibility inside and outside of the classroom. Even though staff indicated that they felt under resourced and ill equipped to meet the needs of students with hidden disabilities, interestingly at times this did not come across to the students.

Limitations and Barriers

University systems that hindered or encouraged academic success were a common theme in the academic staff discussions. Harriet mentioned the benefits that on campus Disability Services can provide in streamlining the process for the student, so that the student doesn't have to repeat their story to each lecturer. This however, was the only positive mention of the university systems assisting students with their learning. Overwhelming, the university systems were seen by the academic staff as impeding the student's access to education. Disability Services were seen as overworked, and so there was a delay in the student receiving the supports. In addition to the delays, this service didn't always meet the needs of the student, which could then become a further example of exclusion and isolation for the student.

From both the student and staff perspectives, the formal supports on campus are perceived as highly bureaucratic, with a high amount of documentation or evidence required from the student. At times this was another barrier placed in front of the student, resulting in the student disengaging with the process. Information being passed from Disability Services to the teaching staff can be delayed depending on when the student receives the diagnosis or when the student discloses or engages with support on campus. Another complication is that there are times when Disability Access Plans are developed in the middle or at the end of semester. This makes modification difficult as curriculum and content has already been planned and sometimes already delivered. According to Harriet, the process of developing Disability Access Plans appears to be one way, and there has been no accountability of academic staff to implement and evaluate the effectiveness of the plan with the student.

The individualized approach also has challenges when the support cannot be tailored for the student. Note takers are sourced from external agencies and often don't have access to the classroom materials. This can limit the support provided to the student. In addition, a student may have a different note taker each week, so this impacts on the capacity of the support to be consistent and to form a trusting relationship. Bonnie spoke of the challenge of limited time as a sessional lecturer to build relationships and rapport with students.

The staff participants expressed frustration with university systems that are currently a one size fits all, with similar classroom delivery style across all units. Class days, times and learning spaces are all predetermined, with little flexibility once semester has started.

Assessments are structured in a set way to meet certain learning outcomes. As **Morris** stated: *the underlying assumption is that everybody should fit the model and adapt to the delivery styles and if there are some exceptions to the rule, well then, we look into how we can support them extra so that ... at the end conform, and still fit within the model that we have.*

Trevor was also concerned about the ever-present push towards standardization, and in this process, the tertiary institution is he put it *'pushing more students with disabilities to the fringes so we are creating more disability, we are creating less opportunities for people to be able to engage in ways that might suit them.'* Olive also acknowledged the institutional pressures to increase tutorial class sizes but decrease face to face class time also puts the depth of learning opportunities at risk.

Reflective Practices

Reflective practices that academics undertake in the classroom lead to a more self-aware and inclusive learning environment. When it came to the teaching and learning strategies that lecturers use in the classroom, **Harriet** understood these strategies:

to be teaching and learning that incorporates everybody, no matter their potential circumstance might be so umm, it's something that provides a space where everybody in the classroom feels like they belong, everyone in the classroom feels like they are valued, everyone in the classroom feels like they can contribute something.

Academic staff talked about the combination of curriculum, assessments, classroom discussions as vital elements of inclusive teaching and learning strategies. **Trevor's** approach was to design a curriculum that is responsive, multi model, interactive, and offers students chances to have lots of opportunities for that curriculum. And a curriculum that has student input into it. **Matthew** agreed, although he acknowledged that it was important to strike the right balance (with material), having that appropriate material; not having too much, not having too little. And for students to have ongoing access to class materials in the digital space, so **Matthew's** preference was to set up his online class space early.

Assessments are the traditional way that students evidence the learning outcomes of each unit of study. **Bonnie, Alison** and **Trevor** all discussed the importance of a variety of assessment methods. According to **Alison**, this variety allows students to utilize their strengths and also work on areas to improve within the single unit. **Bonnie** found that embedding academic support into assessments began to change the student culture around asking for additional support. This was an inclusive teaching strategy as it wasn't specifically targeted at a particular group of students. The addition of a complementary academic Writing Club has also meant that academic supports are being brought to the student space, rather than expecting the students to access the supports external to the course. In **Trevor's** classroom, there are regular conversations about inclusion, acceptance, difference and differentiation, it was his belief that these concepts also had

to be modelled through assessment variety.

The faculty within the university had moved away from the lecture hall format, to tutorial style workshops and as a result the participants all spoke about the role that class discussions have in ensuring an inclusive environment for all students. **Olive**'s approach is to explicitly talk about inclusion a lot, and create learning activities that model an inclusive approach. **Alison**'s words here, sharing a practical example of these learning activities:

I am really explicit in why I do things, so if I am using different coloured sheets of paper, I'm saying this is a really good strategy to draw your attention to something rather than just using white, but also, I would use this for students who need this for their reading or for dyslexia and I am always explicit in saying why I do what I do and grouping and the way that I group my students. So, in the class, not just grouping students who are alike because that sharing from different perspectives is so important.

When it came to the teaching and learning strategies that lecturers use in the classroom, **Morris** claimed to have little experience. However, he did discuss closed captions and providing transcripts for students who faced barriers to hearing videos in the classroom. **Matthew** wrote agenda's and learning intentions on the board at the beginning of class, to demonstrate to students different teaching and learning techniques.

Gaps and Recommendations

The academic staff participants in this study all believed that they needed professional development opportunities, disability training and guidance in a range of strategies to use in the classroom. A lack of these opportunities to build skills and knowledge was the major gap in the current teaching practice. **Morris** suggested that an online teaching and learning space for academic staff, dedicated to examples of inclusive teaching and learning strategies would be useful, as well as increasing the staff knowledge of the external support services available to students in order to refer students with disability appropriately.

The research showed informal referrals, meetings between staff and the individual student occur to get a better understanding of the needs of the individual student. Both **Trevor** and **Olive**'s biggest desire was for more time with their students, and for that time to be recognized and valued by the university within their staff work plans: **Trevor** shared:

I would like more time to work with students in a one to one space, not a one to one, a face to face space. To understand someone's hidden disability, I need to understand that person, it's as simple as that, I need to have time to listen to them, I need to have time to be present with them, I need to have time to value their journey, and their story and Olive went on: best support I can give is the time, usually before and after class and sometimes in my office. I think that is the best support I can give and on the phone and on the email, all that informal stuff that you do, acknowledging someone's disability, supporting them, letting them know that you want them to succeed, you know being in it together to get

them through, around that disability if they need, or celebrating that disability.

Ongoing support from Disability Services on campus is required to plan and evaluate the strategies set out in the student Disability Access Plans. **Harriet** said that it ‘would be nice to know based on some theory or some kind of best practice that this is what a student would need.’ **Morris** talked about the desire ‘to learn the pedagogical approaches to engaging students with hidden disabilities in the classroom.’ This education could be delivered as part of the ongoing staff performance strategy for academic staff and assist in building better relationships between Disability Services and academic staff.

The question that still remains is, can universal design and inclusive teaching and learning strategies meet the diverse and varied needs of all university students with hidden disabilities across the university? Understanding lecturers, flexibility regarding assessment submission and equity of access to the information needed to complete assessments are all key to a student with ‘hidden disabilities’ experiencing academic success. Further research is required to examine the experiences of students and academic staff across different disciplines and faculties of the university. This will strengthen the limited findings of this report so that they can be more generalizable.

Conclusion

The understanding and development of the social construction of disability has developed over time. The Social Model of Disability makes the clear distinction between the impairment or diagnosis that an individual has and the barriers that this individual face when participating in everyday life. When an impairment is not easily identifiable by others, this may lead to additional attitudinal, social and communication barriers.

Society has evolved and there is still a long way to go for students with ‘hidden disability’ in terms of equity to access, resources and interactions on par with their peers at university. However, there is an opportunity to celebrate the genuine achievement of students who face additional barriers to study. Future research would need to be transformative in nature in order to respect the participants as change agents and remove the systemic disadvantage that currently exists. This research project acknowledges the structural disadvantages that students with hidden disabilities face while studying at a university level (Couzens et al., 2015). These university structures need to be reviewed and changes made to the way that students disclose their impairment to the university and apply for formal supports. Administrative barriers should be reduced and removed to ensure that students are not discouraged from engaging with the supports. A simplified and streamlined formal support is needed for both staff and students, with clear direction and strategies for staff to follow in order to implement inclusive teaching strategies in the classroom. This support could be complemented with targeted professional development to teaching teams.

Further research will seek to determine the impact of targeted professional development on assisting academics to teach in more inclusive ways. In addition, potential gaps and areas to improve on, in terms of inclusive teaching and learning strategies. The academic staff all shared a genuine desire to see students with disability succeed in their studies, they were willing to face unconscious bias and assumptions held about students with a hidden disability and wanted to be better equipped to support all students in their learning journeys. As a university, there also lies the necessity to continue to advocate for the removal of these barriers for current and commencing students with disability. There is every reason to cultivate a sense of hope for the future.

Authors



Jane Hickey is an Australian university lecturer who is passionate about removing the societal barriers that exist for young people with disability. She is currently completing research in the area of university inclusive teaching and learning practices for her PhD.

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