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Reasonable adjustment, unfair advantage or optional extra? Teaching staff attitudes towards reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This article explores staff awareness and confidence in implementing reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities in higher education (HE) contexts from a variety of faculty staff at one institution. The duty for UK HE providers to make reasonable adjustments was included in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 and later transposed into the Equality Act in 2010. This project aimed to explore current levels of teaching staff awareness concerning implementing reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities. Alongside this, the project also sought to better understand the attitudes towards reasonable adjustments that teaching staff currently hold. A small-scale survey-based study was conducted between July 2020 and October 2020, gaining qualitative data from 38 staff members across one HE provider. The data reveals staff committed to assisting students to access education. However, as with other literature, our findings demonstrate that there are high levels of staff anxiety around reasonable adjustments and a desire for further training and support. Significantly, the data also indicated a lack of understanding of the requirement to make reasonable adjustments as a legal obligation and duty as a means of combatting discrimination and exclusion.

Keywords: reasonable adjustments, disability, higher education, academic development

Introduction

The duty to make reasonable adjustments to educational provision in the United Kingdom (UK) was included in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 in recognition of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) which argues that disability is a result of society's inability to accommodate the needs of people living with impairments in terms of environmental, social and attitudinal barriers, rather than a medical diagnosis. The duty requires that service providers and public and private institutions remove or provide a way of avoiding barriers that place people with disabilities at a 'substantial disadvantage' compared to those without disabilities. Failure to make reasonable adjustments is, therefore, an act of discrimination. The duty was later transposed into the Equality Act in 2010 and an amendment to the DDA in 2005 imposed the duty on HE providers. The decision as to what is reasonable is made based on the resources available to the institution and the potential disruption of the adjustment to the running of the institution.

From 1990 to 2012, Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs) funded retroactive support measures to ensure that students with disabilities could access HE (Willets, 2014). However, in 2012 they were reformed to reflect Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) obligations to provide and fund reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 (Willets, 2014). Therefore, DSAs now only fund support which addresses barriers that

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cannot be addressed at the point of curriculum design (Bolt, 2018). These changes appear to have produced an anxious response within the sector. Kendall (2016) also highlights the need for disability equality training for staff. Previous studies also highlight the difficulties facing staff in navigating the relationship between the duty to make reasonable adjustments and competence standards for some programmes involved with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRB) (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015). Additionally, there is evidence that some staff members can view requests for reasonable adjustments with suspicion, as a way for students seeking to gain an unfair advantage over their peers (Cameron & Billington, 2017; Denhart, 2008; Partington, 2003). Indeed, a recent study involving 67 students with chronic illnesses found similar patterns of staff behaviour towards students with such illnesses and disabilities (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are entering HE each year (Avramidis & Skidmore, 2004; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019). Advance HE (2022) reported that the percentage of students (across both undergraduate and postgraduate study) disclosing a disability has risen almost threefold between 2003 and 2019, from 5.4% in 2003/4 to 15.2% in 2020/21. Disclosure is important in this context because it triggers a duty to make individualised reasonable adjustments, which provides additional coverage to the anticipatory duty to remove or respond to barriers creating substantial disadvantage that exists under section 20 of the Equality Act 2010.

The existing literature highlights that, despite suspicion in some quarters, there is a strong impetus to assist students with disabilities in being able to access the curriculum (Cameron & Billington, 2017; Fuller et al., 2004). However, this desire is often thwarted by a lack of clear and accessible information to assist them as non-specialists in equality and anti-discrimination law. Partington (2003) discussed how a lack of sufficient confidence and training in this area could “be at best causing unnecessary anxiety, reducing the likelihood of an incident being managed that protects the person’s dignity and, at worst, be compromising the health and safety of their students” (2003, p. 413). The discussions by Partington also note that this lack of knowledge creates a dual-deficit system, where staff may also be seen as lacking if students with disabilities perform more poorly than students without disabilities. Koutsouris et al. stated the importance of staff-student relationships in terms of transitioning into universities and negotiating the hidden curriculum: “During this challenging time, students tended to look towards teaching staff as an anchor, a type of linchpin holding their higher education experiences together – a crucial relationship through which they could access support and develop a sense of belonging” (2021, p. 141).

Recent small-scale studies by Bunbury (2020) and Cameron et al. (2019) focus on the experiences of staff within UK law schools, highlighting the difficulties and anxieties that staff experience around interpreting what constitutes a reasonable adjustment, and that staff would like more assistance with this. These findings echo Partington’s work (2003) which found that anxiety was the most common feeling that teachers had, in their study, towards teaching students with disabilities – anxieties around deviating from the norm and having to rely on specialist services. Bunbury (2020) explored the potential of an inclusive curriculum at the point of design; however, they recognise that this would not be an automatic remedy to the issues highlighted in the study. If this is difficult for those versed in reading, understanding, and applying legislation, then the difficulties for those who are *not* become obvious.

Materials and methods

This small-scale qualitative project aimed to explore current levels of teaching staff awareness concerning reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities, exploring the practices, opportunities and challenges faced by academic staff. The term ‘reasonable adjustments’ was used throughout this project as this was the common terminology utilised at this particular institution to refer to what other colleagues in the sector may know as personalised learning plans (PLPs), or accommodations. The study took place at a university in the Midlands of England, which has departmental Disability Liaison Officers, an additional role taken on by

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teaching staff, and a centrally-based Dyslexia and Disability Support team. Alongside this, the project also sought to better understand the attitudes towards reasonable adjustments that teaching staff hold.

In order to explore these questions, a small-scale, survey-based study was conducted between July 2020 and October 2020. The research here was a component of a larger project aimed at gathering such data to inform the production of a suite of staff development resources initiated in January 2020. However, the sudden impact of Covid-19 and the indeterminate nature of sudden work-from-home regulations encouraged us to pivot online and collect data electronically as a means of continuing the project during this period of uncertainty. It was also hoped that the data may inform ongoing practices in pivoting teaching and learning to online platforms in response to Covid-19.

This study utilised an online survey to allow participants to better share their understanding of, and attitudes towards, reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities in relation to teaching and learning. The survey featured open-text qualitative questions that would allow freedom of expression and open discussion leading to rich data around attitudes and understanding (Fink, 2003). The questions explored participants' conceptual understandings of reasonable adjustments in relation to teaching and learning, their approaches to implementing them, and their experiences of any barriers to implementing reasonable adjustments they may have found. The following questions were asked in this qualitative survey:

1. Which school/faculty/directorate do you teach in?
2. What do 'reasonable adjustments' in relation to teaching and learning mean to you?
3. How do you approach 'reasonable adjustments' in teaching and learning?
4. Discuss any barriers to implementing reasonable adjustments in your practice.
5. If you have any other comments regarding 'reasonable adjustments' in relation to teaching and learning, please feel free to leave them here.

An online survey was chosen as this method offers a flexible, time-efficient and cost-effective way of gathering data from a number of colleagues across different faculties which can be easy to complete when designed effectively (Gillham, 2007). In order to maximise response rates, a number of strategies were adopted, including ensuring instructions were clear and simple, and making the terms of engagement with the survey more concrete through having clearly signposting time and date ranges for completion (Fink, 2003; Porter & Whitcomb, 2003). Additionally, the choice to adopt an online survey was influenced by sudden and ongoing restrictions caused by the Covid-19 global pandemic.

The survey was created using Microsoft Forms which allowed the researchers to create a free, anonymous survey using a software package that staff members at this HEI were familiar with. Microsoft Forms anonymised data at the source which meant that the researchers could never identify those who had completed the survey. This would offer reassurance to colleagues, encouraging them to speak freely about what is often a sensitive topic for teaching staff.

Prior to the survey being released, ethical approval was formally sought and gained from the HEI in May 2020, via institutional educational research ethics procedures. In addition to this, the investigation was conducted in accordance with BERA ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Finally, as noted, the project involved completely voluntary participation in a survey where responses were anonymised at the source.

The survey was disseminated to teaching staff at the HEI via email by faculty heads of education asking for voluntary participation throughout the summer of 2020. The authors acknowledge that there may have been inherent power dynamics to having colleagues in a position of power asking for participation. However, as noted, the study here took place during the national Covid-19 restrictions in the UK and as such, this was the most efficient way of distributing the survey to teaching staff at a time when en-masse communications needed careful consideration and consistency.

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The emails to staff contained project information sheets, which detailed the project in full and its aims to support teaching staff development when adapting teaching materials for students with disabilities. This project information sheet also detailed the consent procedures that were in place. The project had no formal consent mechanism, such as completion of consent paperwork, in order to preserve participant anonymity. However, completion of the anonymous survey was considered, and approved by the HEI, as informed consent. This was communicated to all participants. The project information sheets also detailed that once responses had been submitted, due to their anonymous nature, they would be unable to be withdrawn from the project and its data analysis. All of the above were also restated in the introductory section of the survey itself.

The study was online, anonymous and entirely voluntary. Additionally, data collection occurred during the summer months when the availability of academic colleagues is often low. The HEI at which this took place has approximately 610 full-time teaching staff. This qualitative study gained 38 responses in total, representing around 6% of the academic staff body. The sample contained similar numbers of responses from the three educational faculties at this institution. The researchers decided not to ask for further identifying information when conducting this study in order to encourage a more honest disclosure from participants. As such, a more detailed breakdown of the profile of participants is not available. Minimising the amount of identifiable data also allowed the researchers to mitigate our familiarity with colleagues' work and the impact of any working relationships and biases we may have had.

Qualitative data were manually analysed utilising a thematic analysis approach, similar to Braun and Clarke's (2006) description of this approach. Individually, researchers familiarised themselves with the data before generating initial coding. Next, the researchers refocused their analysis at identifying broader levels of themes, rather than more granular codes, identifying "conceptual patterns" within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 7). These themes were then revised and reviewed before being defined, named, and grouped into topic summaries. Finally, the researchers brought themes and codes together into a narrative structure with illustrative quotations, considering, at this point, relevant theories and research that may help to support this narrative structure.

At the time of the research, the research team consisted of a disability law lecturer, who also works as Disability Liaison Officer, an academic developer and learning technologist. While researchers worked to allow the research process to unfold in the most inductive, data-driven way possible, we acknowledge that our own characteristics, beliefs and roles will undoubtedly have impacted on the analysis we brought to the data, as is the case with a significant amount of practitioner-based qualitative research.

While it would, of course, have been desirable to obtain a larger sample, the sample does contain sufficient responses from each faculty to be useful in this project. Furthermore, while a larger sample would have been preferred, the study utilised a qualitative approach. Therefore, sufficient rich data was able to be gained across the whole survey to allow this project to make a contribution to sector discussions around supporting reasonable adjustments and students with disabilities.

Findings

Firstly, it is important to note that the data showed a broad and encouraging will to support and best assist students with disabilities and to respond to reasonable adjustment requests in the most constructive and appropriate manner. Many responses spoke of a desire to make changes that increase accessibility for all students, not just those with learning difficulties or disabilities. While many responses spoke of a reactive approach, changing practice when a reasonable adjustment came in, a significant number of responses also referred to anticipatory adjustments that would better improve the learning experience for *all* students, not just those with disabilities, as shown by the following quote:

I actually try to design teaching and assessments in a way that is inclusive from the start, and doesn't require students to request reasonable adjustments (Participant 8, Psychology Lecturer).

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This quote exemplifies responses showing that many colleagues want to do the right thing and make their teaching and learning practices as accessible, inclusive, and impactful as possible for all students.

Beyond this, three closely linked themes emerged in the data. Firstly, the paper will discuss the general challenges reported by participants in practically applying reasonable adjustments in their teaching and learning practice. Then data will be presented which speaks to challenges faced in addressing reasonable adjustment requirements in vocational or professionally accredited programmes. Finally, the paper will discuss the legal duty surrounding the implementation of reasonable adjustments in relation to reasonable adjustments.

General challenges in implementing reasonable adjustments

One of the most dominant themes found in the open-text responses speaks to a general lack of confidence when implementing reasonable adjustments for varying reasons, with 58% of all responses explicitly mentioning a lack of confidence in their knowledge of how best to apply reasonable adjustments. The reasons for this lack of confidence typically centred upon a lack of specific targeted training and a lack of appropriate information sharing.

Across the responses to all questions, participants frequently raised the need for further meaningful training in how to best understand and implement reasonable adjustments. The following quote is illustrative of the general theme of further, more focused, training being required:

Teaching staff are currently given no advice or training about reasonable adjustments beyond simply being informed that a given student requires them. Some adjustments are very vague (e.g. 'Instructions Clarified' - I would always clarify any instructions when any student asked me about them, so with this adjustment, it isn't clear what, if anything, I'm required to do beyond the usual). Given that, it would be helpful to have either some form of training or some document that gave more information about the specific kinds of help that a tutor might offer such a student.
(Participant 20, Humanities Lecturer)

Several respondents note that while training is provided on implementing reasonable adjustments, it perhaps does not currently explore the practicalities of implementing them. Here it is noted that the focus of in-house training tends to be upon legal frameworks as opposed to practical next steps for teaching staff, as shown in the following quote:

The training I have received so far deals with the legislative framework and when and what adjustments should be put in place. What it has failed to do is tell me how to put in place those adjustments where they are difficult or where to seek assistance in doing so. For example - as far as I know we could have a blind student enlist on our programme next month. If they did so, we would be completely at sea over what to do in order to provide reasonable adjustments. We know that adjustments have to be made, but how could they participate in laboratory experiments; how do we get stuff produced in braille etc., etc.? Too much is simply devolved to academic members of staff and School budgets and there should be more central support for these students. (Participant 7, Chemical and Physical Sciences Lecturer)

As the following quote shows, there is a significant amount of goodwill and passion from teaching staff surveyed who want to do the best job they can do for their students:

Some personal or year tutors are really proactive in contacting the students, contacting disability services and advocating for their students, but not all [...] there's a real need for staff development in raising awareness of what living with a disability/medical condition is like. People don't understand that it is literally having a full-time job of managing 'disability life' on top of 'normal life' stuff and managing full-time study. (Participant 1, Chemical and Physical Sciences Lecturer)

The data found here makes a convincing case for a rethinking of training for teaching staff around reasonable adjustments and how to best support students with disabilities.

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The survey responses also demonstrate a need for the greater sharing of student reasonable adjustment data, in order to better facilitate anticipatory curriculum planning and inclusive design of learning. Our data presents a frustration with how this student information is shared amongst teaching teams, with teaching staff often getting instructions concerning required reasonable adjustments but little other information to contextualise or justify these requests:

Whilst we receive instructions, we have no insight or input into why adjustments are being made and almost no assistance with or practical training about how to make those adjustments where they are difficult or cumbersome. (Participant 7, Chemical and Physical Sciences Lecturer)

The consequence of this lack of holistic information is that practitioners reported feeling detached from the process of creating inclusive learning and teaching. Across the responses generated here, there were frequent referrals to localised practices, as opposed to standardised programme-wide practices, because of a lack of detailed information. It is easy to see how such variance could occur if teaching staff do not have sufficient information in certain cases and how this could lead to colleagues adopting a variable approach to implementing reasonable adjustments. Again, it is worth reiterating the good intentions of all parties involved here, as shown in the following quote:

I honestly have little idea of what works and what doesn't work for different groups of students [...] Honestly, I wish I had more time to think about how to do this. My approach is more 'reactive' than proactive. Sometimes I literally have less than an hour to put together a new teaching session and I might only be aware that there is an issue when a student tells me (we don't all have access to student requirements via records - the system requires module leaders to pass this information on). (Participant 19, Geology, Geography and the Environment Lecturer)

The responses above do not speak of a lack of will to implement reasonable adjustments from either institution or individual, but rather a frustration with the way in which data is shared.

Reasonable adjustments in professional accredited disciplines

A third of the colleagues who responded to this survey work in a faculty which delivers medical vocational degrees such as Medicine, Physiotherapy and Nursing, amongst others. As such, the data also showed some concerns about having to make fundamental changes to the nature of vocational degrees by virtue of reasonable adjustment:

Sometimes a location cannot be changed. e.g., laboratories.
Sometimes a thing/idea is visual, and cannot be recreated for visually impaired people.
Sometimes diagnostic decisions are based on sight, sound or smell, and there is no way to make an adjustment for someone incapable of seeing/hearing/smelling.
Difficulties with understanding/reading (e.g. dyslexia) are sometimes addressed by providing more time to a student. But, a practicing medic would not have more time, and so this is an unrealistic adjustment, with which to assess whether the student could perform as a medical professional.
Also, inability to identify/distinguish drugs by name is a serious risk to patients, and so 'adjustments' during training/testing may be unreasonable. (Participant 10, Medicine Lecturer)

The concerns shown above are entirely valid. However, the Equality Act 2010 does not require universities or professional bodies to alter competency standards. There were also concerns that students were accepted on to courses where their reasonable adjustments could not be made in practical settings:

Not all adjustments are manageable given the nature of the role and responsibilities of clinical performance and expectations. Not being able to meet adjustments required leads to health and conduct review which is stressful for the student and staff members. (Participant 5, Nursing and Midwifery Lecturer)

These responses speak to a desire to avoid disappointment and stress for both staff and students, and how both of these may be exacerbated or indeed caused by a lack of understanding of the purpose and limits of

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the duty to make reasonable adjustments in relation to competence standards. Several comments demonstrate misplaced frustration with the students, for being granted reasonable adjustments which would not be considered reasonable under the exemption for competency standards for certain professions and qualifications under section 14b of the Equality Act 2010, rather than focusing on the procedural changes that might be made to prevent these issues in the future. They also raise procedural issues about the point at which disability-related information is shared, with the institution as a whole and with individual schools. This is a multifaceted process, due to reluctance to disclose on the part of students in some cases, but also the bureaucracy around receiving, recording, and communicating diagnoses in general.

Some staff do have an understanding of the above, but they were in the minority in this sample, with just two colleagues noting that unreasonable changes – in their PSRB contexts such as wards, laboratories, and clinics – were not a mandatory change:

These are entirely individual based but cannot exceed the professional requirements for the job that the student is training for. For instance, the professional requirement is for clinical placement, but the student has OCD and is germ-phobic, then the student should be counselled to undertake another profession as this is not reasonable. However, the student has a specific learning disability but can still perform the professional requirements then this is a reasonable adjustment or if a mother cannot work longer shifts due to caring then this is reasonable adjustment. Of course, these cannot go against course regulations such as 100% attendance either. (Participant 24, Allied Health Professionals Lecturer)

Professional requirements i.e. “not be put on the spot for questions” is not a reasonable adjustment as a student needs to be able to respond to patient queries, often on the spot about their disease / exercises etc. (Participant 27, Allied Health Professionals Lecturer)

There is clearly a need to make this point more widely known to colleagues and for this to be considered in relation to admissions on to programmes for students with pre-disclosed disabilities and to have delicate and sensitive discussions with students who disclose disabilities that impact on their ability to conduct the duties required by their PSRB mid-way through study.

Reasonable adjustments and the legal duty

The dataset contains only one reference to the provision of reasonable adjustment as a legal duty, but the respondent was incorrect in their belief that only anticipatory adjustments fell within the scope of the legal duty; individualised adjustments fall into the scope as soon as the barrier is highlighted:

Anticipatory reasonable adjustments are a legal obligation to ensure that learning and teaching activities and resources are accessible to people with disabilities and learning difficulties. There's also reasonable adjustments specific to students that student services notify us of and I understand these are made as suggestions to accommodate where possible. (Participant 1, Chemical and Physical Sciences Lecturer)

The above quote is indicative of a number of responses indicating an understanding of reasonable adjustments as something to incorporate where possible. There were also numerous references to *trying* to implement reasonable adjustments and references to time constraints:

With reductions in academic teaching staff and increasing Staff-student ratios, we simply don't have the necessary time to be able to adequately implement reasonable adjustments - indeed, we barely have enough time to carry out the teaching before reasonable adjustments. This is regretful. (Participant 16, Humanities Lecturer)

These statements could be read in one of two ways – staff are trying their best to implement reasonable adjustments with limited understanding and contextual pressures; or that reasonable adjustments are viewed as something staff try to implement when they remember or believe them to be necessary. Our

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data also shows how some staff are endeavoring to implement reasonable adjustments but that this can also be challenging when fellow staff do not see the necessity of reasonable adjustments:

I understand reasonable adjustments to be putting educational provision or support in place to ensure all students can access education equally and will have an equal opportunity to achieve their grades. This is not giving students with educational needs or disability an advantage, but working to minimise the impact of their difficulties on their education. Additionally, when reasonable adjustments have to be agreed between multiple members of staff, it can often be difficult to come to agreements when some staff aren't as supportive of reasonable adjustments, e.g. alternative assessments. (Participant 31, Psychology Lecturer)

There were also references to reasonable adjustments as being excessive:

The "reasonable adjustments" for students with diagnosed disabilities are given on the VLE for students on my modules. Some of them seem excessive in the number of adjustments to be made. I wonder if a lot are put down by student support staff who do not see first-hand the problems caused by some of them. For example, many of our students now need individual rooms to do tests and exams, and this causes problems in finding sufficient rooms and invigilators to run the tests and exams. (Participant 17, Physics Lecturer)

The above quote aligns with the previously noted work of scholars who have found that staff members can interpret such requests with suspicion, sometimes 'policing' such requests (Cameron & Billington, 2017; Denhart, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2021; Partington, 2003). There is a clear need here for universities to provide better training, and space in workloads to accommodate such reasonable adjustments in order to avoid positioning staff and students at odds with one another.

However, this comment from Participant 17 did not understand that both anticipatory and reactive adjustments have the same legal basis. There was also a suggestion that staff should be the ones to decide which adjustments are required, rather than disability advisers. The reference to the need for individual rooms being the 'problem', rather than the adequate provision of such rooms, neatly captures the importance of understanding the social model of disability, which acknowledges the barriers imposed by the environment.

Another response stated that the respondent understood there to be a legal requirement to 'consider making reasonable adjustments':

Changes to normal practice that would aid a teacher/learner, with minimal interference to other teachers/learners; typically based on a disability or health condition. There is a legal requirement to consider making reasonable adjustments. But, 'reasonable' means that ultimately a human may make a subjective decision, disagreeable to some. (Participant 10, Medicine Lecturer)

The above demonstrates an absence of understanding that the duty encompasses the need to actually make adjustments that do not entail unreasonable cost or disruption to the institution's functioning, as per section 21 of the Equality Act 2010, not to merely consider making them.

Discussion

This study is small-scale in nature, looking to provide insight and exploration of the breadth of data we have gathered. It is intended that these findings contribute to the existing field of knowledge, potentially providing fellow practitioners with justification for taking their own reasonable adjustments training further at their own HEIs.

Broadly, our data followed the patterns identified in the literature that staff have limited understanding of the translation of reasonable adjustments into the classroom context in practice. This is something that they would appreciate greater assistance with through guidance and training at an institutional level. This training needs to focus on how to implement changes within specific contexts, for example in rooms where

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equipment may not be able to be moved elsewhere, or greater explanation of the interaction between the requirements to make reasonable adjustments in the context of professional standards, such as in the case of Medicine or Nursing. A particular example is a worry that implementing reasonable adjustments might lead to students having qualifications that they would be unable to make use of in the future because it would be impossible to make adjustments in the workplace. The Equality Act 2010 section 54 does not require that reasonable adjustments be made to competency standards, as long as the imposition of such a standard is in pursuit of a legitimate aim, such as public safety. This followed Bunbury's (2020) findings, that despite greater familiarity with interpreting legislation, law lecturers also experienced anxiety and a lack of understanding of their legal duties concerning adjustment, explaining the views of non-legal staff in our data. These particular issues could be addressed by a greater understanding of the role of in-person support to assist those in carrying out work in seemingly inaccessible environments. Additionally, these issues could be better supported by increasing awareness and training about advances in assistive technologies, specific career paths and role models for students with disabilities (Upchurch & Vann, 2021).

The findings demonstrate a strong desire amongst respondents to assist students with disabilities, which is underlined by an element of frustration about the lack of transparency and information sharing between central services and the departments and staff. This highlights a need for the role of departmental links with central services such as that of the Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) to be more widely and clearly communicated within the department. One of our researchers fulfils this role themselves and has experience of staff not understanding their role as a consultant on how to address accessibility issues or the implementation of reasonable adjustments in practice. Colleagues taking on these link roles also require specialist and improved training to ensure that they are sufficiently confident in their understanding of both the legal framework and its purpose to be able to guide colleagues in making appropriate and effective adjustments for students. The need for ease of information sharing, balanced with confidentiality, needs to involve other areas of institutions such as central IT services who design and maintain student administration systems and virtual learning environments. Adding features such as a glossary of accommodations, explaining what barrier such an adjustment overcomes and with examples of how these accommodations might be achieved in practice, would help to address staff confusion and anxiety when faced with a 'long list' of adjustments. It might also be helpful to create regular drop-in sessions or meetings for staff to ask for advice around common issues, or for proactive 'trouble shooting' of potential barriers created by changes to teaching or assessments over time. This might help colleagues to feel more confident in seeking guidance when necessary.

Training or discussions around pedagogical innovation should also involve roles such as DLOs to build accessibility at the point of design and delivery, in line with obligations on HEIs under the Equality Act 2010 and changes to DSA payments, which will no longer fund all retroactive accessibility measures. Though our data also mirrored Bunbury's (2020) focus on inclusive and universal design in order to lessen the need for reasonable adjustments by focusing on making resources accessible to all. Whilst this is a positive approach to remedying the need for retroactive adjustments, care should be taken in presenting universal and inclusive design as a panacea preventing the need for reasonable adjustments. This is because there may always be an individual barrier that cannot be anticipated and proactively addressed, and students who require further adjustments beyond the anticipatory adjustments may feel a double sense of 'failure' and 'exclusion' because they do not conform to the standard approach to adjustment and may feel further marked as 'other' (Reeve, 2013). These situations could also lead to similar feelings for staff, who may become despondent about what else to do should the supposedly 'universal' design not provide the level of access promised.

Additionally, there is evidence that some staff members can view requests for reasonable adjustments with suspicion, as a way of students seeking to gain an unfair advantage over their peers (Cameron & Billington 2017; Denhart 2008; Partington, 2003). This is possibly driven by an inability of staff without experience of difficulties in accessing learning and teaching, being unable to understand, as well as the impact of the failure to implement the reasonable adjustment for a student who is unable to engage with standard methods or requires more time or assistance to complete processes which may be quicker or automatic for

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some. For those who come from a positive or neutral experience of learning, they may only be able to conceptualise more time or a different means of engagement as positive or advantageous rather than a *necessity*. Consequently, we propose that future training in relation to reasonable adjustment should focus on demonstrating the impact of failing to make adjustments, rather than simply explaining adjustments to colleagues. Furthermore, we suggest that the language used to describe certain adjustments might underline beliefs about students playing the system to gain an advantage over their peers. 'Extra time' is a particularly common example of this, for those who are able to access learning without impediment, the concept of 25% more time to complete a task will seem like an advantage, because they would be able to generate more output as a result. If, however, this adjustment were redesignated as 'additional processing time' this would state why the additional time is needed.

Implications for practice

This research and the wider literature indicate the need for greater sector investment in staff and student partnership in relation to accessibility. It needs to focus particularly on legal responsibilities and duties that staff have and ensure that admissions staff and lecturers on PSRB-accredited programmes know that they do not have to implement reasonable adjustments if it compromises competency standards. This could help to increase confidence and positive practice as well as challenging negative attitudes and perceptions. Additionally, more time and resources need to be devoted to staff training to assist them in gaining the necessary understanding to support practical implementation of adjustments and their legal genesis. Many of our responses spoke of needing more training and time to properly understand what is required and how best to implement it. This training should be systematic and focus on the processes of reasonable adjustments, and organisers of training should involve and consult with teaching colleagues where necessary. Moreover, these processes should be integrated into widening participation and representation strategies and should be viewed as a 'selling point' for institutions. This would help to remove the perception that accessibility is negotiable or the province of a few time-rich or invested colleagues. Training should also focus on building a vocabulary around disability that is fully accessible to staff, rather than simply assuming that logical understanding of words will lead to practical implementation, particularly where staff have no personal experience of barriers to accessing learning.

Limitations

Our study here is small-scale and located in just one HEI. Additionally, the study was conducted during the remote working conditions enforced by the Covid-19 pandemic and, as such, teaching staff were working with lots of challenging situations in their daily practice. Staff were required to pivot to online delivery almost immediately from March 2020, whilst often caring for others and moving to flexible and demanding work patterns. As such, we do not claim that these findings represent the views of all HE practitioners across this particular institution, the sector, or during 'normal' teaching patterns. Furthermore, the study gathered no demographic data concerning the sample population. Future studies would look into how the experiences and attitudes discussed above differ across demographic characteristics and other categories such as number of years teaching. The findings here do, however, point to a need for more detailed and significant training for teaching staff in relation to implementing reasonable adjustments. However, to provide a conclusive case for this, more data and pilot studies are needed as well as longitudinal data, supported by engagement with students so that any approach is shaped by their perspectives and experiences. While the results of this small-scale study do show a need for further staff training around reasonable adjustments and legal duty, the data also showed a significant number of staff working towards making their teaching as inclusive as possible, responding to reasonable adjustments professionally and proactively.

Conclusions

Reasonable adjustment, unfair advantage or optional extra? Teaching staff attitudes towards reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities

As with other literature, our findings demonstrate that there are high levels of anxiety around reasonable adjustments and a desire for further training and support. However, the data also indicated a lack of understanding of the requirement for reasonable adjustments as a legal obligation and duty as a means of combatting discrimination and exclusion within the context of HE under anti-discrimination legislation, rather than an optional element of 'good practice' or inclusive educational design. The data reveals staff are committed to assisting students to access education but that further training, workload time and clarity are needed in order to create an environment where reasonable adjustments are implemented by all staff, as a legal 'must do' rather than something else on an ever-growing 'nice to have' list. If this training and space can be given then the outcomes of all students, not just those with disabilities, would undoubtedly be improved.

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