

Reasonable adjustment, unfair advantage or optional extra?

Teaching staff attitudes towards reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities

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Context

- 14.6% of undergraduate students disclose a disability [1].
- Reforms to Disabled Students Allowance in 2014 make anticipatory adjustments mandatory for universities [2].
- Reasonable adjustments (RA) must be made to ensure people with disabilities are not 'substantially disadvantaged' – Equality Act 2010 [3].
- Teaching staff often lack understanding training and confidence in relation to RA [4].
- Cited lack of information, understanding and conflicts with PSRB requirements [5].
- Suspicion of misusing RA to gain an unfair advantage [6].

Project aims

- To explore staff awareness and confidence in implementing reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities at one HEI.

Methodology

- Small-scale qualitative survey project conducted July 2020-October 2020 using MS Forms (n=38 FT Lecturers).
- Ethical approval awarded by HEI, study conducted according to BERA guidelines [7].
- Open questions to allow freedom of expression and generation of rich data [8].
- Anonymised at source by MS Forms.
- Responses evenly distributed across universities three teaching faculties.
- Data was thematically analysed [9].

"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".

"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".

"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. "

"Not all adjustments are manageable given the nature of the role and responsibilities of clinical performance and expectations".

"The "reasonable adjustments" for students with diagnosed disabilities are given on the KLE for students on my modules. Some of them seem excessive in the number of adjustments to be made".

"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".

Summary of Findings

1. General challenges in practically applying RAs.
2. Challenges between RA requirements and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory bodies (PSRBs).
3. Misunderstandings of the legal duty to implement RAs.

Discussion

- Staff want to assist students with disabilities.
- Frustration with information sharing across the HEI.
- Lack of understanding of RAs and PSRBs – RAs not mandatory when public safety is considered (Equality Act 2010) raises challenges around disclosure.
- Some staff do view RAs with suspicion, as a way of students seeking an unfair advantage.
- Need to change terminologies – e.g. "Extra time" becomes "Additional processing time".
- Focus on the impact of failing to make adjustments.
- Staff require and want contextualised training on understanding and implementing RAs.
- Training should be systematic and focus on the processes of RAs, involving teaching colleagues.
- RA processes should be integrated into Widening Participation and Representation strategies.
- Institutional 'wins' - a 'selling point' for universities?



References

