UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL

Fostering disability as an asset within the higher education context in the UK

Getting Things Changed

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Introduction

In our project, we unpick the ways that universities "do things", known as social practices, which disadvantage disabled people. For example, disabled students and staff might experience difficulties in navigating inaccessible university buildings or procedures, simply because the views of disabled people have not been considered or consulted. These disabling social practices can lead to disabled students and staff feeling as though they are a problem for universities, rather than assets. We asked disabled students and staff within the University of Bristol to share their experiences of accessing the university, and their recommendations for change.

Findings and Recommendations

Being the problem

Disabled students and staff spoke of the numerous disabling social practices they experienced in the university's own culture.

"…I spend about three days a week – three full-time days a week – arranging my own travel, booking it all, researching it, filing my university claims –because everything has to be claimed through the university first – and then the Access to Work claim."

But things can be changed

Social practices can be redesigned to be more inclusive. For example, a disabled student was challenged for not 'looking' disabled when using a library lift. The student then complained to library staff, and policies were updated.

Disabled students also had problems parking and finding time to access the library. But library systems are now much more easily accessible online, which means that any group of students can meet together and find material they need, whether or not they are disabled.

Valuing disabled students and staff as assets to universities

Our research suggests disabled students and staff see the social world and how things get 'done' (social practices) more clearly than their non-disabled peers. They become excellent problem-solvers and networkers because they must remove barriers in the ableist culture of academia. By routinely questioning assumptions, they understand how organisations can lead through innovation. Universities must not treat disabled people as problems, but as valued assets; this will incentivise going beyond diversity tokenism to embedding diversity and inclusion for all in the academy.

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