Additional support services and the utilisation of teaching assistants in university settings: dissuading inclusive practice or improving academic outcomes?

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Abstract

This paper examines the perceptions of staff within a university in the UK, of the role of teaching

assistants and centrally located disability services. Staff were generally positive about support

available although when communication had broken down this led to a lack of trust with centrally

organised support. Staff were happy for support staff to be available within the classroom although

this role was misunderstood. At times tensions arose around adjustments to classroom practices

which were recommended by centrally located staff. Paradoxically, centrally organised support may

have acted as a barrier to more inclusive teaching practice: whilst teaching staff often disagreed with

recommendations for adjustments to teaching practice made by central staff they were nonetheless

reluctant to take on the role of acting as the expert in these situations. Implications for practice and

service delivery are discussed alongside suggestions for future research.

Keywords: **teaching assistants, higher education, disability services, academic staff.**

Introduction

In the UK, in the higher education (HE) sector, there are a range of staff who are based within disability service offices and are involved in the support of disabled students. A number of these staff are centrally located within a broader student services team and provide a coordination role, supporting disabled students in accessing such things as accommodation, assistive technology and additional funding. In addition, these central teams are often engaged in providing support in the classroom through the allocation and management of a range of additional support workers (similar to teaching assistants) including note takers, sign language interpreters, and personal assistants, who are normally referred to as non-medical helpers (NMH). There are also staff who provide support outside the classroom, mainly in the form of specialist mentoring or tuition.

Recently, there has been some downward pressure placed on the existence of these roles. For example, in 2016/17 the UK government announced that English universities would be expected to pay for non-specialist roles including note takers and personal assistants rather than funding being available from a non-means-tested grant which eligible disabled students can apply to. Nevertheless, because all UK universities have a legal obligation to provide support under the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, they must continue to fund these roles if the student requested them and if they are seen as the most appropriate mechanism. At the same time there has been a move towards more automation of recording of large group lectures within HEPs (Bos, Groeneveld, van Bruggen, & Brand-Gruwel, 2016; MacKay, 2019) which may mean that services such as note takers become diminished (Couzens, et al., 2015). This is particularly the case if seen within the context of a move towards more inclusive teaching and learning practices which might require a reconfiguration of centrally located provision (Brady & Flegg, 2017).

Teaching staff in the HE sector are often ambivalent towards the support provided by central services (Kendall, 2018). For example, Learning Support Plans which outline recommended support

mechanisms and are usually written by centrally located staff, are seen as inadequate and may lead to misconceptions on the part of the student (Kendall, 2018). On the other hand, some teaching staff believe that central services could do more to provide support and feel that there is too much onus placed on students to take responsibility (Cameron & Nunkoosing, 2012). Additionally, whilst recognising the benefits of specialist tuition, teaching staff have raised questions about its appropriateness in terms of predicting grades for pieces of work and possible over-supporting of students (Kendall, 2018). Nevertheless, some teaching staff take an active approach to support, liaising with what they perceive to be 'expert' staff in central services and encouraging students to seek support (Cameron & Nunkoosing, 2012).

Despite widespread utilisation, there have been no studies which have evaluated the impact of support workers in higher education settings. Therefore, in order to contextualise the current study, it is necessary to examine research into similar roles which has been undertaken in school settings. Whilst qualitative research from a variety of international settings has identified that teaching assistants (TAs) are appreciated by teachers, parents and pupils alike (Sharma & Salend, 2016), care must be taken when employing their services as there is empirical evidence to suggest that their use can have a negative impact on learning outcomes, social interactions with peers and independence for learners with SEN (Sharma & Salend, 2016). In a comprehensive review of international research, Masdeu Navarro (2015) suggested that positive impact outcomes of TAs are dependent on adequate training and the ways in which they are deployed. TAs can have a positive impact on learning outcomes when they are deployed into small group or one-to-one activities (Educational Endowment Foundation, 2019) and can have a positive impact on learners' and teachers' wellbeing through reducing workloads (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, & Webster, 2009). However, if TAs take on a more general support role, for example, through providing administrative support or working across the whole classroom, there is little evidence that they have a positive impact on educational outcomes (Educational Endowment Foundation, 2019).

Since university teaching staff are critical of support systems which are intended to assist successful learning outcomes and because research from the schools' sector suggests that in-class additional support can be unproductive in some circumstances, it is pertinent to explore the arrangements which are currently in place in the HE sector. Therefore, this paper is intended to inform the debate about how these services are organised through a discussion of findings about from a research project which explored a range of viewpoints on how inclusive teaching and learning support is delivered in a university setting.

Institutional context

The institution where the research took place is based in the north of England and gained HE status after the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 placing it in the 'post-92' group of universities. The university has a history of delivering courses to under-represented groups and has made specific mention of widening participation and the inclusive nature of its provision in its two most recent 5-year strategic plans. In relation to disabled students, the university could be deemed to be performing well in comparison to other institutions in the UK with approximately 15% of its students declaring disability at the time of the research: ranking in the top 40 out of 160 providers.

Within the institution, support for disabled learners was organised within a learning support service which was an amalgamation of three teams – the disability team, the specialist tutor team (who mainly worked with students with dyslexia and students on the autistic spectrum) and the study skills team (working with students across the university). In addition, disability staff oversaw a team of thirty or more support workers, which mainly comprised of note takers and specialist mentors. The teams were organisationally located within student services which was housed in a centrally located building. No staff were based in academic faculties and this mirrored the general organisational set up of most HEPs in the UK. Thus, academic colleagues usually referred students to student services when a specific problem occurred such as when an individual student started to

struggle academically. This most often occurred when 'dyslexia-type' difficulties had been spotted within assignments.

Method

This article presents findings from a broader in-depth ethnographic case study which examined how approaches to disabled students in one HEP were influenced by national and local policy instruments. Data was gathered using a range of methods including semi-structured interviews and in-depth field notes. The research was cleared by the ethics committee at the institution where the researcher was studying and was also cleared through the research office within the case study university.

Table 1: Characteristics of interviewees

Faculty		
Arts	8	
Business & Languages	7	
Education & Theology	7	
Health and Life Sciences	8	
Central	4	
Gender	Male	Female
	11	23
Years of experience in HE		
	10.5	9.5

Results

After transcription, samples of text from the interviews and field notes were used in a first cycle of open coding (Saldana, 2013). Data was then transferred into NVivo and a second cycle of coding undertaken. A total of 75 codes were generated to provide an index for analysis. The discussion

below reports on relevant nodes (amalgamations of several of the codes from the index), which are pertinent to the topic of providing centrally organised disability support.

Support in the classroom

Academic staff described how they regularly came into contact with support workers and pointed out the benefits of these staff as well as the issues which may have been caused by their presence within teaching and learning situations. Note takers were discussed at several points in the interviews and staff were generally happy with the assistance which they provided:

> *'She needed someone to take notes for her in lectures all the time and I got to know her scribes… to talk to the them about her needs'*. **Teresa, lecturer, Education.**

Teaching staff had an awareness of support workers being in their classes and they saw this as a buffer from the additional support that disabled students may require from them:

> *'I know that quite often students come into the class with assistants they have note takers or assistants of some description so to a certain extent we're not expected to do it all as it were. I think it would probably be unfair for us to expect us to'*. **Elisabeth, lecturer, Health Sciences**

Although support staff are fellow members of staff, they often entered the teaching and learning space incognito and this presented issues in terms of establishing professional links:

> *'you have to work out who the note takers are, that's quite interesting when you ask people to join in and some are great and some will join in, but some students are very much I don't want to sit anywhere near their note taker'*. **Helen, lecturer/course leader, Psychology.**

Support workers are not supposed to actively join in with learning and as the quote above shows, teachers can be confused about to work with them. These situations present unique challenges within HE scenarios in which learner autonomy and rights come into play.:

'she had someone with her so they [the other students in the class] weren't going to bother, so that did require a bit of management but I frequently… will get people to change partners and work with somebody else'. **Lena, lecturer, Business.**

This type of scenario presents a dilemma for disability services who would be reluctant for support workers to act as a barrier to relationships which students might develop with staff and fellow students. However, these difficulties are perhaps unavoidable given the complexity of the situations in which the support was being delivered and the need for careful classroom management.

Relationship with central service provision

Teaching staff were generally positive about the support services which were provided within the university although issues sometimes arose around the mechanisms for implementing this provision. Interviewees seemed to be confident in the services provided and were aware of the boundaries of their role and therefore when referral was appropriate. Some seemed to be heavily engaged in understanding the needs of all their students but were also aware of their limitations:

'we had a thing last year with a student being bullied which has led to her being diagnosed with depression and having panic attacks and obviously you offer the support but… you have to realise it's not academic and I find that quite difficult because immediately I want to say come in and talk'. **Helen, lecturer/course leader, Psychology.**

However, there were occasions when communication broke down between the disability services at the university and academic departments. This had led to some distrust on the part of academic staff who felt that they were not being given all the necessary information with which to support disabled students. And this was also illustrated through missing linkages between the support being implemented and teaching practice:

'a second challenge and where it breaks down is: I think often there's quite a lot of distance between what we do in a classroom on a Monday morning at 9 o'clock and the support that they get from the centre'. **William, lecturer/course leader, Sports.**

'You know one of the frustrations is you get one of the support tutors working with them on a subject that they know nothing about, they are doing their best but… And then the other scenario when they are advised to do something which isn't really a good idea whereas if you were able to join up more with the academics then you'd probably get a closer answer the first time than having a to and fro.' **John, head of subject, Arts.**

In HE in the UK, recommendations for support mechanisms are written into reports which release government funding to pay for additional provision. These are usually then re-envisioned into reports written by staff within central services which are disseminated for implementation across the institution. There was a reticence to engage with recommendations made within these specialist support plans:

'I encouraged her to have an assessment done related to her needs both within the university and within the school and she did that and I had a full report sent which was really a bit unrealistic in terms of expectations and all that we might provide... Obviously to be aware of what her condition is and to try and manage it but the resources they suggested were just not practical or sensible.' **Christina, lecturer, Education.**

There was also unease about the way in which the support plans may have been constructed:

'I would assume, and I don't think they are written in a very understandable way to a module tutor, but you'd sift through and go OK yeah it looks like they've pulled the last report off the shelf and changed the name but OK let's try and sift through it.' **John, head of subject, Arts.**

Paradoxically, interviewees did not see themselves as having expertise about disability in the learning space and deferred to central support services on these matters:

> ' the university does have support systems in place such as writing services, dyslexia, disability service and I would look to them really for guidance if I felt I needed it on any particular issues that might arrive.' **Elisabeth, lecturer, Health Sciences.**

> 'at HE level I suppose we don't think that we have the expertise that you would have so do we perhaps shove it over to you because you know about the way that people can be supported best and you perhaps know have specialist knowledge about particular disabilities and the routes that people go down.' **Philip, course leader, Education.**

Perhaps due to this availability of support services, teaching staff within the university may have become reliant on the additional support that was provided and this may have been an impediment to delivery of inclusive teaching and learning. A lack of any adjustments to teaching practice was evident:

> 'To be brutally honest I don't think I have altered my practice and I think very practically where things have altered that I can think of now is a student might come in and say that based upon a special need that they've got an iPad and they want to be able to take notes on their iPad 'do I mind if they do that?' And of course, not... but I suppose that's been very student driven.' **William, lecturer/course leader, Sports.**

Similarly, strategies which disabled students had adopted themselves were seen as the appropriate mechanisms for negotiating the learning space in an accessible manner and this could lead to a lack of engagement in inclusive teaching practice.

> 'they sort of know what they need usually and so they are usually just able to switch the screen to a different colour if that's what they want and quite often they'll have an assistant who will help them so I usually just check that they are OK... I tend to just deal

with things on a one to one basis as and when, rather than kind of uniformly doing

things.' **Gina, lecturer, IT.**

Difficulties with recording lecture content

There were two main ways in which support was provided to capture the content of teaching and

learning sessions but these activities were sometimes a source of tension within the classroom. Most

frequently, students were advised to record lectures on digital recording devices which were paid for

through government funding. Additionally, it was quite common for a support worker to be provided

by the disability team in order to take notes on behalf of the student. Both these support

mechanisms were put in place for a variety of reasons related to a range of impairments and would

have varying degrees of success depending on the teaching and learning scenario. For instance,

either mechanism could be put in place for students with dyslexia who might find it particularly

difficult to concentrate on the content of a lecture and write legibly in order to make coherent notes

at a pace which would keep up with the delivery.

There were times, such as on more practical courses, when this support was questioned, since there

were issues arising from the requirement to meet professional standards which were set by

organisations outside of the university. Staff questioned why this support mechanism was necessary

and it was regarded as something which would not be relevant to qualifying as a competent

professional nor as something which could be implemented in the workplace. These practices were

also questioned as a practical support solution during more interactive teaching sessions because of

worries about the ability of all students to engage fully in the activities which were taking place

when support staff were present. Concerns were expressed in relation to times when there were

more personal conversations being held, such as during seminars in which individual's experiences

were shared or students were asked to reflect on their own practice. Similarly, it was not seen as

appropriate during times when students might be asked to recite their work or during peer review of

work. Staff in one of the departments felt that academic expression was being stymied because of

these support practices. This suggestion was also reiterated by academic managers in that subject area. This led to a local policy decision being made to write to all students on those courses to tell them that they could not record any future teaching situations without the permission of the group or without the individual lecturer's permission.

Discussion

Generally, there was a good level of awareness of the support services available in the institution and staff were happy to direct disabled students towards these centrally organised services. Participants were familiar with provision such as specialist tuition which dyslexic students received, and most had encountered notetakers during their teaching sessions. However, whilst these services were based on efforts to provide individualised support, the research highlighted tensions which seemed to be underpinned by the way in which these services were delivered.

Firstly, when support staff were available within teaching situations they acted as a mechanism that militates against inclusive practice. Teaching staff did not see the importance of making their own teaching more inclusive since these reasonable adjustments were present in the classroom and were organised and provided by central services which are out with the department. This was possibly being further exacerbated because support was paid for by a central government grant which necessitates central services playing a significant role in supporting students to claim.

That is not to say that departmental staff did not collaborate with central services, but it seemed to lead to a false divide between what was happening in the classroom and the intended outcomes of the support arrangements. This divide was evident in misunderstandings about what the roles of the support staff were. These seemed to stem from difficulties in communicating across a large complex organisation such as a university in which there are a large number of staff engaging with learners on a termly basis (unlike in schools where the classroom team is relatively static during the course of an academic year).

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The main policy instrument for these interventions at the time of the research was the learning support plan. These plans outline support arrangements across a range of services which could be provided by the university, including in learning contexts. However, the responsibility for the production and dissemination of the plans also lay with disability staff within central services. These were a further source of tension as teaching staff were not always in agreement with the arrangements suggested. An example of such tension was that caused by recording teaching sessions which created difficulties related to the practicalities of specific classroom scenarios.

One reason for the resulting tensions could be that teaching staff were not solely concerned with issues of inclusive practice: rather inclusive practice is just one concern amongst many vying for teachers' attention and resources. The context for this discussion of support arrangements is that the education sector is experiencing a policy epidemic (Levin, 1998) in which the practice of teaching is increasingly dominated by managerialism and marketisation discourse (Ball, 2003; Stevenson & Wood, 2013). Resulting tensions could relate to teaching staff trying to maintain control within the classroom and this was expressed in this institution partly through the vernacularisation (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010) of equality policy in which the 'rights' of all learners were given precedence over protected groups of learners (Wray & Houghton, 2019). At the same time, teaching staff were presented with practices which were instigated in order to ensure that individual students were not discriminated against and could be included without undue barriers to the learning.

These issues illustrate policy tensions which seemed to be a result of a clash between inclusive practice and classroom practice. Teaching staff faced a dilemma, ensuring that what went on in the classroom would result in the best experience for the majority of learners whilst interpreting and implementing equality policy. Support was put into place and in the practice of teaching, reflection arose regarding the mechanisms for supporting the students. Sometimes the ways in which this was handled was through putting in place wholesale policy without thinking about the individualisation of the teaching. This may have been related to issues of expediency and pragmatic choices but these

solutions appear reminiscent of 'street level bureaucracy' in which public sector workers implement strategies to deal with unlimited demand for limited services (Lipsky, 1980).

It is possible that the way in which disability support was organised within the university was undermining efforts to drive forward an inclusive policy agenda. Since teaching staff encountered a number of competing policy implementation demands and because services were organised centrally, disability staff were perceived to be the ones responsible for disabled students. One solution is to locate disability support within academic departments (Koca-Atabey, 2017) so that it becomes part and parcel of what academic staff encounter in their day-to-day work practice.

Related to the issue of control over classroom practice was the key role that the learning support plan played as a policy instrument. However, since this was not a central focus of the study it is suggested that further research needs to take place into how these plans facilitate student achievement. In addition, there needs to be an exploration of the different adjustments which are being recommended in the classroom, whether they are practicable, and the extent to which they are effective, as these often created tensions for teaching and learning staff. Through action research, academic departments could undertake explorations of barriers to inclusive teaching and learning practice and develop solutions from within the academy.

Conclusions

This article explored the perceptions of teaching and professional services staff, towards support arrangements which are implemented by centrally located disability service personnel. Whilst staff were appreciative of the additional support which is provided from within central services, tensions arose relating to this provision. Little previous research has focussed on the role of centrally based services in providing in-class support and the understanding of these roles by other staff within a higher education provider.

The findings suggest that the way in which support arrangements are centrally organised in higher education creates tensions within teaching and learning contexts. This is partly a result of communication difficulties and partly a result of a lack of ownership of support arrangements from within academic departments. This lack of ownership could lead to difficulties for the overarching aim of support which is to provide an inclusive environment for disabled learners.

A solution to the communication issues presented in the findings might be to move the responsibility for developing recommendations for changes to teaching practice into academic departments since staff in these areas are the ones implementing the changes. Academic development units may have a role to play in this respect but accommodations can only be agreed when they are practicable given the curriculum, localised constraints on provision and academic standards. Relatedly, inclusive teaching and learning can only happen when reasonable adjustments are provided through allocation of additional resources and specialised staffing. Central staff in disability services should not be left to drive forward policy implementation in this area when change is sought to teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Higher education providers might consider ways in which support services could be embedded into the day to day work of academic departments. Central services could remain responsible for reasonable adjustments which are required by the legislative framework whilst academic staff develop a set of core skills for inclusive teaching and learning practice (Rose, 2009). Inclusive teaching practices which have been perceived as unachievable adjustments in the past, have already become embedded into everyday practice in some institutions e.g. providing copies of handouts in advance of lectures (Martin, et al., 2019). It is suggested therefore, that the way in which support is organised and disability services portrayed ought to be reconsidered if efforts to implement inclusive teaching and learning approaches are to be achieved successfully.

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