A Qualitative Content Analysis of Welsh Universities’ Disability Service Websites and Consideration of their Potential Impact on the Recruitment of Diverse Learners: A Critical Disability Studies Perspective

Dr. Beth Pickard, University of South Wales

Introduction
While Higher Education largely interprets and responds to the construct of disability in accordance with the Equality Act (2010), social constructionism (Rapley, 2010) and Critical Disability Studies (Goodley, 2013, 2017) assert that the construct of disability is socially negotiated and perpetuated. As such, institutions such as universities have significant voice and influence in defining what constitutes ability, knowledge, expertise and power (Dolmage, 2017). In line with this epistemology, this research study analyses the web pages of all nine Welsh universities’ ‘Disability Service’ pages and considers their potential impact on the recruitment, retention and student experience of diverse learners (Pickard, In Press).

Methodology
The method of Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier, 2012) enabled consideration of multiple components including use of language, terminology and photography, as well as discussion of academic, cultural, social and logistical aspects of student life. The development of a concept-driven coding frame enabled consideration of the absence of certain criteria as well as the frequency and prominence of others. The ensuing discussion considers, from a Critical Disability Studies perspective (Watson and Vehmas, 2020), the potential influence of semantic choices, layout, accessibility and elements considered relevant for discussion and highlighting relating to disabled students’ experiences.

Results
Findings include the erasure of disabled students’ presence and insights on these websites, considered from a testimonial injustice perspective (Fricker, 2007). Further, the epistemic invalidation (Wendell, 1996) of disabled students’ experiences is evidenced in the language and information that is privileged in the sources. The holistic nature of the student experience (Jones, 2018) is overall not reflected in the information provided, with emphasis on classroom provision and financial dimensions, in alignment with Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA). This study identifies some examples of good practice and recognition of a neurodiversity paradigm as well as a continuing alignment with a deficit-based model which could contribute to the under-representation of disabled students in Higher Education (Department for Education, 2019) and the professions and workforce that degrees feed. As Beauchamp-Pryor asserted in 2013, there is still alignment with a ‘needs-based’ rather than a ‘rights-based’ discourse in Higher Education in Wales, and arguably the wider UK. These perspectives limit the potential to learn from disabled students and to diversify our workforce, enabling reflection of the diversity of service user populations in professional populations.

Suggested

Challenging

Constructive

Findings

• Some recognition of universities’ responsibility to remove barriers to student engagement.
• Some social model and neurodiversity perspectives on the inaccessibility of the university experience and language that reflects this.
• Lots of valuable and constructive information and resources for applicants and students.
• Some examples of good practice to be disseminated and learned from.