
International literature on the retention of students with disabilities

Introduction

This paper is presented as a summary of the international literature on the retention of students with disabilities. It is taken from a literature review section of my doctoral thesis completed in 2017. I have an ongoing interest in this area and time allowing, will seek to share findings on the retention of students with disabilities in an Irish context. Readers in HEIs in Ireland and elsewhere may find this paper useful in reflecting on how students with disabilities are doing in terms of progression and completion in their HEIs. Data collection on retention generally omits details on students with disabilities as a category and this is unfortunate as it offers an objective indicator of the value and effectiveness of reasonable accommodations and universal design.

Disability is a very small sub-category within the main body of research on student retention. The majority of authors in the area rarely mention disability, let alone identify it as a subcategory worthy of consideration. The literature that does focus on the retention of students with disabilities is dominated by research from the US and the UK. Collectively this paper presents a range of findings from different settings that do not easily concur or reach definitive conclusions. A brief discussion on how best to track retention and what factors may make a difference to retention will be left to the end of this paper.

Assumptions about students with disabilities

While there is general consensus that supports are needed and what HEIs do does matter, it is less clear which supports work best and to what extent they are effective. Alternative assumptions persist about whether or not students with disabilities in higher education are more or less likely to persist and complete their courses compared to their non-disabled peers.

One well supported view is that students with disabilities are less likely to persist in higher education compared to their non-disabled peers (Covington-Smith, 2008; Crosling et al., 2009; deFur et al., 1996; Jones, 2008; Wessel et al., 2009). In an exploration of minority student retention in the US, Swail et al., (2003) refer to students with disabilities among those who have always 'lagged behind' in terms of 'access and completion rates.

Access and completion rates for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students have always lagged behind white and Asian students, as have those for low-income students and students with disabilities (Swail et al., 2003: v).

In the US, in 2013, national data on high school graduation rates showed that as a group, those with disabilities were falling significantly behind their non-disabled peers:

In 2013, the national average graduation rate for students with disabilities hit 61.9 percent – nearly 20 points lower than the average graduation rate for all students (DePaoli et al., 2015: 48).

However several studies have shown that this phenomenon does not necessarily transfer to higher education. For example, Blake (as cited in Paul, 2000) found no such tendency. Huger (2009) found from a national sample of 22,180 students with learning difficulties at 4 year institutions in the US that 75.2% of these students had persisted two years later compared to 68.8% of students with no disability. However, just because students with disabilities persist for longer (beyond the first or second year) compared to their non-disabled peers, this does not necessarily mean that they are more likely to complete their degrees. Instead, it could mean that the decision to withdraw is being delayed.

In Australia, van Stolk et al., (2007) found that the retention rates for all equity groups measured nationally (including students with disabilities) between 1997 and 2004 'did not differ considerably from the average retention rate for all other groups' (van Stolk et al., 2007: 12). However, Barnes et al., (2015) found that students with disabilities were among the more likely students to leave early from the University of Sydney.

As research into the retention of students with disabilities in higher education is carried out with a variety of different methods and over different time scales within the higher education system, these alternative assumptions persist about whether or not students with disabilities in higher education are more or less likely to complete their courses compared to their non-disabled peers. Some reports in the UK indicate that those students with disabilities who are in receipt of DSA do better in terms of retention than those who are not funded.

We found that students receiving an Allowance are much more likely to continue their course than other students selfdeclaring a disability and, indeed, than students who are not disabled (National Audit Office, 2007: 12).

...both full and part-time students who declare a disability are slightly more likely to continue than those without a (declared) disability when all other factors are held constant (National Audit Office, 2007: 20).

However, HESA statistics indicate DSA receipt as an indicator for higher risk of withdrawal (Brown, 2011) and in the US students with disabilities are marked out as more likely to withdraw from education:

Students with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable populations for school dropout and are twice as likely to drop out as compared to their non-disabled peers. The highest dropout rates for students with disabilities exist among students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance (Covington Smith, 2008: 3).

Research at a national level indicates that the completion rate for students with disabilities in higher education in the US is lower in comparison with non-disabled students (Jones, 2008; Wessel et al., 2009). As one study summarised, 'the likelihood of earning a degree is decreased by the presence of a disability' (deFur et al., 1996: 232). In 2012 the United States Department of Education reported that 58% of students without disabilities attained a degree while Newman et al., (2010) found that only 34% of students with disabilities completed their degrees. Also, some single institution research found that the graduate rate for both disabled and non-disabled students was similar (Jorgensen et al., 2005).

Within the variety of these findings and perhaps going some way to explain them, are a number of issues which make accurate comparisons difficult. **Firstly**, US legislation prohibits universities from gathering data on disability among applicants. This means data collection is entirely dependent on individual disclosure at a local level, where typically Disability Services categorise disability in many different ways (Tarnai et al, 2009). Therefore any attempt at accurate data accumulation at state or national level is fraught with problems.

Secondly, these problems are evident in the persistent methodological issues that arise with research which seeks to make comparisons between one cohort of students with disabilities and other groups. For example, 'students with learning difficulties' are often assumed to be synonymous with 'students with disabilities' and students registered with a Disability Service (who have provided a certain standard of documentation) have been compared to those who sought unsuccessfully to register for support (Herbert et al., 2014). **Thirdly**, writing in the *Journal of College Student Retention*, Belch (2004) identified several factors associated with affecting the retention of students with disabilities in higher education in the US. These factors include initiatives and programs that specifically target students with disabilities in key areas of success, such as: transition planning, fostering belonging, involvement, purpose and self-determination. The importance of universal design principles is also emphasised. Examples of promising practices are provided from three universities which attempt to apply these principles in targeted programmes. Belch (2004: 17) concludes:

The influx of students with disabilities and the diversity among them mandates a broader view of learning and development on college campuses. These students enhance the diversity of the college population and challenge practitioners and faculty to re-examine teaching and learning strategies and techniques.

Getzel (2008) looked at the areas that students with disabilities should focus on if they are to successfully deal with all the challenges of higher education. These areas are self-determination skills, self-management skills, exposure to assistive technology and the promotion of career development. Getzel argues that these personal skills must be developed by students with disabilities if they are to narrow the gap in completion rates (Getzel 2008: 207). Academic staff can also assist this process by increasing their awareness about the needs of students with disabilities and incorporate principles of universal design into their teaching practices. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a growing area of research (Bruner, 2016; Martyn and Gibberd, 2016) and is a key theme in Ireland where Ahead (2015) state that UDL is a central anchor of their strategic plan for 2015- 2018.

Research by disability type

There is a general absence of research material on the retention rates of students based on disability type. Green

& Rabiner (2012) looked at rates of participation, diagnosis and treatment of students with ADHD and acknowledged the lack of data available on graduation rates. One study on predictors of graduation among students with disabilities states:

students with a cognitive disability were only one half as likely to graduate as a student with a physical disability, and students with a mental disability were only one third as likely to graduate as a student with a physical disability (Pingry O'Neil et al., 2012: 29).

The numbers of students making up these ratios were not provided and the remaining data in the study provided coefficients based on the outcome of graduation success linked to student factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, programme level and types of supports received.

Lichiello (2012) acknowledged that the literature on retention and graduation rates for students with disabilities in higher education is limited. In her literature review she also identifies some contradictions in previous studies, citing deFur et al., (1996: 232) where 'the likelihood of earning a degree is decreased by the presence of a disability' and contrasting it with the longitudinal study carried out by Wessel et al., (2009) at one college where out of 11,317 students comparable retention and graduation rates were experienced by students with and without disabilities. Herbert et al., (2014) found in a 10 year tracking of 545 students with disabilities in one large university in the US that 66.5% of students with disabilities graduated compared with 86.7% of the general student population. The study also found that students with disabilities who registered for support took longer to complete their degrees. However, the study also revealed that gender, race/ethnicity, disability and living on or off campus were not significant factors in degree completion.

While some of the research from the US on the retention of students with disabilities shows that having a disability lowers the chance of completion, the UK based research identifies more qualified findings, differentiating between students with disabilities on the basis of receipt of financial assistance and finding that students with disabilities are in fact more likely to continue on their courses than those not declaring a disability. In Ireland, where the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) is accessed and managed by the Access or Disability Service, the completion rates of students with disabilities who entered higher education in 2005 was recorded at 85.4% compared to the general student population nationally with a completion rate of 83% (based on a 2004 intake) (Pathways to Education, 2010). Since 2010, there has been no large scale research following up on the retention of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland.

Final comments

Those of us working in the area know that supports do work. The best supports are those that most closely meet the needs of particular students in specific situations. But HEIs need to be able to show this via reliable data. Students with disabilities should be included in annual data collection in HEIs on retention and completion. For Access and Disability Support Offices, data on retention and completion can help to guide the use of funded supports and other resources. In an Irish context, cohort analysis is a useful starting place as students can be easily tracked and monitored based on year of entry and entry route until completion, for example, CAO/DARE/HEAR/Mature. Course and disability type are two additional areas worth monitoring as supports are relevant to

these.

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