The inclusion of disabled students in European higher education: progress and challenges

Sheila Riddell and Elisabet Weedon,
Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity,
University of Edinburgh
www.creid.ed.ac.uk
Expansion of participation in higher education across Europe since 1990s driven by both economic and social justice concerns.

Participation by students from middle class backgrounds already at saturation point

Creation of ‘knowledge society’ therefore requires higher rates of participation by ‘non traditional’ groups, including disabled students

Despite official rhetoric on widening participation, progress appears to be slow – this presentation asks why this is the case and what measures may promote change
Structure

- Overview of European policy on widening access to higher education
- The construction of disability and national participation rates
- Policy and practice in the UK and Sweden
- British data on the social characteristics of disabled students, including some intersectional analysis.
- Short case studies illustrating intersections of disability and social class
- Summary and discussion of key points.
Key policy documents and strategies

- The Bologna Process focuses on harmonisation of HE across European Higher Education Area
- Social dimension developed from 2001 onwards
- Focus on increasing participation and diversity
- ‘The student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations’ (EACA, 2012)
- Supported by the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and the Education and Training within Europe 2020 Strategy
Progress towards EU benchmark on HE participation – By 2020, 40% of 30-34 year olds should have completed third level education.
Understandings of ‘non-traditional’ students vary across Europe

- Eurydice report suggests that most countries have few or no targets and limited data gathering.

- Data may be gathered in relation to:
  - Qualification prior to entry (27 jurisdictions)
  - Socioeconomic status (19 jurisdictions)
  - Disability (17 jurisdictions)
  - Labour market status prior to entry (13 jurisdictions)
  - Labour market status during studies (12 jurisdictions)
  - Ethnic/cultural/linguistic minority status (8 jurisdictions)
  - Migrant status (13 jurisdictions)
Eurostudent Survey shows national differences in disabled students’ participation
Cultural differences in understanding of disability?
Sweden and Scotland have adopted different approaches to promoting access for disabled students

- Both countries committed to widening access and have comprehensive equalities legislation
- Sweden – hub at Stockholm University distributes funding to institutions and collates data. Does not use benchmarks and targets.
- UK – tighter national regulation. Data on each institution’s performance published annually and benchmarked against comparator institutions.
- Institutions obliged to submit annual widening access outcome agreements – potentially financial penalties for failure to meet targets
● Outcomes of UK approach......
# Increases and changes in categories (full-time undergraduate) UK, HESA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of impairment</th>
<th>1994-95</th>
<th>2004-05</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unseen disability</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyslexia <em>(Specific learning difficulty)</em></td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other disability <em>(or medical condition)</em></td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf/hard of hearing</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair/mobility difficulties <em>(A physical impairment or mobility issues)</em></td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blind/partially sighted</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple disabilities <em>(Two or more conditions)</em></td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health difficulties</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal care support</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Social communication and)</em> Autistic spectrum disorder</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of all F-T first degree students</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Under-representation of disabled and non-disabled students from poorest neighbourhoods – particularly in most selective universities
Disabled university students come from more socially advantaged neighbourhoods – but variations by nature of impairment
Comparison of students ‘drop out’ rates – those from poorer backgrounds mature students and disabled students particularly at risk

The proportion of full-time first year Scottish-domiciled entrants from different protected characteristic groups returning to study in year two

Source: HESA
Labour market outcomes of disabled graduates only slightly worse than those of non-disabled graduates – disabled people with few or no qualifications fare much worse.
Case studies of deaf students from different social class backgrounds

- Sophie – more advantaged background

- Isla – less advantaged background

- Illustrate different access to economic, social and cultural capital
Conclusion

- Marked expansion of higher education systems across Europe since 1990s
- Strong emphasis on inclusion in policy rhetoric – but difficult to know which groups have benefited due to lack of comparable data
- Disability particularly complex area because of differences in cultural understandings
- British data shows importance of inter-sectional analysis – increase in participation rates of disabled students, but disproportionately from middle class backgrounds and with diagnosis of specific learning difficulties/dyslexia
Lessons for the future

- Policy rhetoric must be accompanied by robust data gathering systems
- Targets and benchmarks may encourage change
- Additional resources need to be targeted at institutions and disabled students
- Social class remains the major cause of unequal participation – affects both disabled and non-disabled students
- Inter-sectional analysis essential
- Public sector austerity may reduce or halt progress