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# A case study on inclusive practice: Deciding who's different and what's needed

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## **Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme Guidance on writing the final report**

*Please read this guidance prior to producing the final report for your Teaching Fellowship Project.*

The final report should consist of a brief (1-2 pages) summary of the project and findings, together with a number of more detailed appendices (possibly in the form of conference papers or articles for publication). The summary will be transferred directly onto the Pedagogic Research and Development Database (see [www.pedres.net](http://www.pedres.net)) Please follow the format below as closely as possible to enable this transfer of information.

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**Title of project:** A case study on inclusive practice: Deciding who's different and what's needed

**Type of project** (e.g. Survey/ Case Study/ Action Research/ Development)

Case Study

You may also include appropriate evidence in your appendices, e.g. Information/letter on ethics approval, Ethics approval,

**Information/progress on conditions** (If your initial TFAS application was 'approved with conditions', please provide evidence that these conditions have been met in at least one of the reports.)

Please provide some information about the project, in the format below: (1-2 pages)

**Aims of project**

**Background to project** (or context)

**Methods**

**Results**

**Associated publications** (these should relate to the project, and give full reference)

Workshop presented at the Vice-Chancellor's Teaching and Learning Conference 2012

**Website** (if directly connected to the project)

VCT&L Conference 2012 [www2.plymouth.ac.uk/vcsconference](http://www2.plymouth.ac.uk/vcsconference)

**Keywords** (one or more if possible – see 'pedres' database for examples)

disability, support, inclusive practice,

Please forward the final report to [rebecca.turner@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.turner@plymouth.ac.uk) by the **28<sup>th</sup> of September 2012**

## **Aims**

Using a case study design this project considers the challenges of implementing inclusive practice in order to enhance the quality of learning and teaching at an individual and subject level. Ultimately the aim was to identify systemic barriers to inclusion and suggest strategies that can be employed to mediate the effects.

## **Background**

Previous research has highlighted practices that promote inclusive practice (Waterfield & West, 2002). Checklists and advice are widely available to institutions who are keen to promote the inclusion of disabled learners. This research builds upon this knowledge and considers why these practices fail to meet the desired aims.

Contextual factors are likely to have an impact on inclusive practice. For example, funding to support inclusive practice is likely to influence how this is provided. Whilst wider contextual issues are likely to have an influence other factors such as individual staff attitudes are also likely to play a part. Using a case study approach allows the phenomenon to be studied so that both contextual and attitudinal issues can be considered.

The literature review confirmed many core themes in relation to including disabled learners. Whilst there is a wealth of research available on inclusive practices there is acknowledgement that more needs to happen. The HEFCE review of its policy as it relates to disabled students concludes that whilst much progress has been made still more needs to be done to move towards disability equality (Arnold, 2009). The report recommends developing ‘.. inclusive institutional cultures that embody a social model of disability .. that are anticipatory, proactive and flexible in nature.’ This suggests that wider reforms need to take place rather than piecemeal changes.

Other authors also promote social model practices (Barnes, 2006; Shakespeare & Watson, 1997) and practitioners called on to anticipate adjustments and comply with Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) (SENDA). The literature highlights a wealth of information suggesting how the environment can be altered and teaching and learning adjusted so that it provides an inclusive experience (Thomas & May, 2010). Despite legislation and guidelines on inclusive practices some difficulties still remain. Most notably some students are still reluctant to disclose disability for fear of stigma and prejudice and also because they do not identify with the term disability (Borland & James, 1999). Disabled students who do not disclose still need adjustments and institutions therefore need to consider inclusive practices that can accommodate these needs. This project explores how inclusive practice is provided and how these difficulties are addressed. The literature suggests that ‘how to’ guides are useful but cultural change is needed to ensure a more inclusive experience for disabled learners.

## **Methods**

A case study design was appropriate to use as inclusive practice is intricately connected to political, social, historical and personal issues (Yin, 2008). Detailed, contextual analysis of the experiences of students, tutors and trainee tutors was carried out using focus groups.

Four focus groups took place over a period of four months. Participants were trainee tutors at a University and a college providing HE courses. This group of participants included trainee tutors some of whom identified as being disabled. Other participants, whilst not formally identifying themselves as disabled, identified themselves as having some additional support need. This cohort reflected on their own experiences both as tutors and as students thus providing a unique insight into how support is provided and received at the two institutions.

## Findings

Funding for HE students means that independent providers deliver much of the support identified in the support needs assessment. Independent providers work closely with individual students, typically providing assistive technology and specialist individual tuition. However, class tutors may not be fully aware of the support and in particular understand how this support works in the context of the classroom or workshop environment. There is limited interaction between the specialist tutors and the subject tutors resulting in additional support operating as a stand-alone service. Consequently, tutors were unsure what their role was in relation to inclusive practice. Other students were aware that some students received additional services leaving them questioning why some individual received this input whilst others did not. In some cases staff from additional support services were provided for in class support although the tutor did not know who was being supported and did not know how they might adjust the way they delivered the session to ensure it met the needs of a particular individual.

Inclusive practice is responsive to a wide range of individual support needs as well and accommodating individual differences. If individuals do not talk to tutors about their particular requirements then the tutor may not be able to accommodate these wishes. Tutors felt unsure where they could turn to for advice and considered that the confidentiality issues meant that they felt unable to talk to students directly. As a result of tutors feeling unsure about who to ask and being unclear about whether it was their responsibility to ask students about reasonable adjustments a culture had developed that stopped open communication taking place. In effect, the system had hushed the voices of disabled students encouraging them to access an independent service rather than supporting them to articulate their needs and requirements to tutors who were in a position to develop inclusive practice. (Hughes & Paterson, 1997) suggest that there needs to be a transformation of the body from a reactionary to emancipatory concept and this research lends support to this proposal. More needs to be done to ensure disabled people are supported to articulate their needs so that existing structures are altered to accommodate needs. Providing add-on services to support individuals' results in mainstream services acting as referral agents to the independent provider thus abdicating their responsibility for developing fully inclusive services.

Individual tutors keen to provide an inclusive services often felt unsure about their areas of responsibility and what dialogue they could have with individual students. Tutors described being concerned about individual learners but equally feeling concerned that they should not talk to the student as this may breach some code of confidentiality. This sometimes resulted in a disrupted learning environment for other learners and ultimately a sense of powerlessness from tutors.

There was no clear distinction between someone who is identified as a disabled and someone who is not. Tutors were aware that they should ask students to self-disclose. However the system of disclosure meant that this information was often held on a

database that was not shared with tutors. Tutors were aware that students were asked to disclose at enrolment and therefore were reluctant to ask again. These systemic issues need to be resolved if a culture of inclusion is to be implemented.

## Conclusion

The findings from this short research project provide a limited insight into the experiences of disabled students. What it does highlight is the constraints in place which limit the voices of disabled people. Disabled students are supported by add-on services rather than the focus being on institutions considering ways to develop a more inclusive culture.

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