Professional Placement Planning: an integrated approach to supporting students with disabilities during clinical placements.

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Key words: Disability disclosure, fitness to practice, professional courses, placement supports, clinical based reasonable accommodations, regulations vs equality

Further information on research: http://www.tcd.ie/disability/strategic-plan/Research-proj/Pro-planning.php
**Background:** The number of students with disabilities accessing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including professional courses has increased substantially internationally. Supporting disabled students on professional placement and identifying fit for purpose clinical reasonable accommodations is identified as the next frontier for the Disability Service internationally. Disability Service providers in Universities in the provision of academic reasonable accommodations have developed significant expertise and experience but little significant developments have evolved in the professional placement arena (Andre and Manson, 2004). Conflicts arise between disclosure of disability and fitness to practice for disabled students and equality legislation that govern Universities who firmly support the inclusion of this student cohort. Lack of awareness of the needs of disabled students along with cultural and psychological barriers within professions leads to inconsistent support systems ultimately leading to a negative experience for some disabled students.

**Aim:** The study aims to identify the issues and concerns for practice educators (PEs) in supporting students with disabilities as well as exploring the concerns for students with disabilities on professional courses. Another aim is to evidence base the development of a professional placement planning process for disabled students in a University, which will allow for the development of effective support systems, which allow students participating in professional courses to be able to participate effectively in work-based placements.

**Methods:**

**Research strand:** A mixed methods approach was used with two strands. One strand involved a quantitative approach using a survey design (Kielhofner & Fossey 2006) was employed to answer the research questions. Two surveys were specifically designed for this study and were developed following a review of the literature, additionally a research team was established comprising of disability officers (n=2) and occupational therapists (n=2) that had experience and expertise in supporting students with disabilities on professional courses.
Disability Support Service strand: This stand followed the development of placement planning procedures and supports for students on professional courses, to ensure that systems are in place to support all stakeholders (student, course staff and workplace supervisors). Development of appropriate resources and supports to assist this process (process & guide for students, staff) were also trialed.

Findings:

Research strand: Findings revealed that Professional Educators were found to be concerned with students reaching the professional standard, and how to support disabled students. Students on the other hand identified stigma and disclosure of a disability as a concern. All stakeholders are receiving the placement planning process positively and work place educators are engaging in this process. Disclosure of disability is still a significant issue with over 50% of students on course such as nursing and medicine not disclosing a disability to the course or to the work place. There is significant disconnect between professional regulations, the laws governing professional registration and equality legislation in which universities are required to operate and the lack of consistent information at all levels form pre-entry, through the course material, learning outcomes and competencies on to employment for disabled students is an issue requiring attention.

Disability Support Service strand: The College had developed clear policies (Fitness to Practice policy specific section 4 dealt with reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities). The Disability Service developed a professional placement planning process which was trailed with 20 students in 2013-14. This process allowed for reasonable accommodations on placement to be discussed, developed and trialed on placement. Information and resources to support all stakeholders were developed:

- Guide for students with disabilities on professional placements;
- Professional Placement reasonable accommodations explained (website and booklet for practice educators and students – outlining all reasonable accommodations that can be applied to placement situations with real examples);
Discussion: This research strand study sheds some light on the issues, concerns and obstacles faced by Practice Educators and disabled students on professional courses. The literature highlighted the dearth of studies in relation to the level of clinical reasonable accommodation and supports needed for disabled students’ on professional courses and no literature was found within an Irish context. This study identified many tensions between the perception of PEs in accommodating students with disabilities and the students themselves in disclosing a disability. Practice Educators were worried about lowering their standards of proficiency, and given the economic climate with reduced resources and increased client demands, were concerned about being able to give extra time to students with disabilities. The perception is that students with disabilities would require this additional time and support, which may or may not be the case. These findings were similar to the findings in Tee et al’s (2010) study where the Practice Educators were concerned that fitness to practice standards would not be compromised. In this study, PEs were concerned about how to support students with mental health difficulties, which is similar to Claiborne, et al (2011) and Stein’s (2013) findings where the pathway to support students with mental health difficulties was unclear and it was unknown which accommodations would be helpful.

The professional placement planning process developed in Trinity has allowed all stakeholders to open a dialogue, discuss reasonable accommodations, implement in practice, feedback and ultimately develop a catalogue of clinical accommodations that can be further enhanced as the process is rolled out across the sixteen professional courses. Review of all information including documentation, medical forms and learning competencies has resulted in more inclusive practices. These add significantly to the professional bodies taking the disability reasonable accommodation agenda on and ensure good practice is developed. The professional placement planning process is being rolled out to all students on professional courses and students with disabilities on these course are being encouraged to identify what reasonable accommodation they may require and to learn self-management of the disabilities issues that arise.
Conclusions:

This work contributes to the student experience by improving the learning environment and allows students to have a greater confidence in being supported in the work placement element of their chosen course. Dealing positively and proactively with the management of disability disclosure increases students and practitioners' confidence and improves clinical practice and practice development. Methodological inferences based on the framework of this transformational ethos reveal the potential strength of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. A qualitative dimension gathers the community perspectives at each stage of the research process, while a quantitative dimension provides the opportunity to demonstrate outcomes that have credibility for community members and scholars. This study adds significant evidence to the need to develop effective professional placement planning for disabled students that involves all stakeholders and opens up changes that are real.
References


*Background lines on disability services, history of nursing entering teh academy, issue with disability and professional programmes etc*

In Ireland the number of disabled students attending third level has risen from 450 in 2000, to over 9,000 in 2012 representing 4% (6.4 % Trinity College Dublin (TCD)) of student population (AHEAD, 2013). Within TCD those registered on professional
courses has increased from 67 in 2006 to 259 in 2012-13. Twenty five per cent of disabled students in Trinity are studying in professional courses as opposed to 7% nationally (AHEAD, 2012). Alongside these increases in numbers has been a marked increase in the number of students with hidden disabilities accessing higher education (Anderson & Wylie, 2011). Of the total number of students registering with the Disability Service in TCD, the proportion of students registering with a mental health difficulty has grown from 5% in 2001-02 (n=11) to 19% in 2012-13 (n=200). These figures demonstrate not only the increasing need to develop appropriate supports for students experiencing mental health difficulties but also to develop supports for those students with disabilities on professional courses as suggested by Andre and Manson (2004) in their identification that the commencement of placements has been the most significant point of discrimination for students with disabilities.