



Fear of looking bad: Othering of students requiring a reasonable adjustment within professional and vocational practice placements

Paula Beesley, Leeds Beckett University

Paige Davies, Leeds Beckett University

Angela Murphy, Leeds Beckett University

Sharon Vincent, Leeds Beckett University

ABSTRACT

The research project was a cross-disciplinary, multi-methods research study to explore the effectiveness of reasonable adjustments in practice placements in one British university. The aim of the research was to understand the lived experience of procedural and practical use of reasonable adjustments on practice placement. The objective was to enable the facilitation of recommendations to enhance student outcomes including continuation and degree classification.

Thirty-four undergraduate and postgraduate students completed an anonymous questionnaire and nine students attended two focus groups. The research participants were students undertaking vocational degrees in occupational therapy, social work, childhood studies, biomedical science, sport and exercise therapy, dietetics, nursing, education and therapeutic counselling who had a diagnosis or self-disclosure of mental health, physical health, physical disability or neurodivergence.

The data were subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis, and the themes of 'need for clearer procedures', 'looking bad: stigma and negative perceptions of students', and 'experience on placement' were identified. This article presents the research findings and discusses the othering of students in practice placement. It concludes by firstly recommending that the procedural response to reasonable adjustments could be reviewed to incorporate practice accommodations. Secondly, it recommends that placement providers discuss students' reasonable adjustments more openly to align learning opportunities with those experienced by able-bodied and neurotypical students, to support the development of knowledge and skills of all students.

Keywords: reasonable adjustments, placement, disability, othering, accommodations

Introduction

Vocational courses often require students to undertake practice placements as part of their curriculum, enabling students to apply theory to practice and develop their professional knowledge, skills and values. Whilst placements vary in number and length, the core commonality is that they will be on placement alongside practicing professionals in a relevant setting (Baker et al., 2022; Beesley et al., np; Hill & Rogers, 2016; Johnston et al., 2016; King, 2019, 2024; Nolan et al., 2015; Sapey et al., 2004). Students will be supported on placement by what the article will refer to as a placement mentor (often referred to as a practice tutor, practice educator or practice

teacher, depending on terminology of the course) with the remote oversight of a university tutor. Predominantly, it is the expectation that the placement mentor, university tutor and student will communicate in relation to both the placement expectations and the student's needs, which facilitates the placement mentor's ability to ensure appropriate support is facilitated. Where a student requires a reasonable adjustment, this requires communication, yet this is fraught with challenge (Sapey et al., 2004), as will be discussed below.

Professional and vocational qualifications are difficult to access for disabled people, who bring much needed knowledge and strengths to educational provision (Van Herpen et al., 2020). Where students have additional learning needs universities have a responsibility to assess and provide any reasonable adjustments that may be required to enable them to engage with learning equitably. This research project explored the experiences of students in a British university to consider if reasonable adjustments are effective in facilitating equitable access to learning opportunities on placement. The research participants were students undertaking vocational degrees in occupational therapy, social work, childhood studies, biomedical science, sport and exercise therapy, dietetics, nursing, education and therapeutic counselling who had a diagnosis or self-disclosure of mental health, physical health, physical disability or neurodivergence.

Literature review

Reasonable adjustments

Disability prevalence amongst home university students in the United Kingdom was recorded at 17% in the academic year 2023/2024 (HESA, 2025), with 4.5% of students reporting having a mental health condition in the previous academic year (OfS, 2023). Both reports highlight reduced outcomes including non-completion or a lower degree classification, indicating the importance of taking account of and supporting their learning needs to address such inequality. Indeed, legislation in the UK (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, 2001, Equality Act, 2010) ensures that it is unlawful for universities to treat students unfairly or less favourably than their able-bodied or neurotypical peers. This covers all aspects of learning, including on-campus and off-campus activities, including practice placements. Instead, universities are required to provide a *reasonable adjustment* under the Equality Act 2010 to enable equitable engagement in learning opportunities. A reasonable adjustment may include a later or flexible assessment submission date, assistive technology or equipment, one-to-one support, a note taker, or accessible teaching spaces. This can be recorded as a Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) but can also be known as a Learning Access Plan (LAP) or Academic Accommodation (AA). Whilst these predominantly focus on the support that students will receive in their academic studies, the reasonable adjustments can also be applicable for students on practice placement. However, it is important to note for a student to request a reasonable adjustment they do not need to have a diagnosis, nor indeed do they need to have been assessed, as *The University of Bristol v Dr Robert Abrahart* (2024) Bristol

case established the precedent to provide reasonable adjustments to all students where requested.

The UK-based Disabled Students' Commission (2023) recognised that disabled students can excel in their studies when their support needs are met through the use of reasonable adjustments, which helps students to remain engaged with their learning and free of preventable distractions. However, students requiring reasonable adjustments often have to overcome more obstacles and invest more time and effort to achieve their goals (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Indeed, Canadian neurodiverse university students have been found to have lower academic self-efficacy and resilience (Casali et al., 2022), which the authors found may contribute in turn to lower academic outcomes.

Students requiring reasonable adjustments still face educational programmes that are insufficiently adapted to meet their needs in terms of the curricula, accessibility, resources and materials, and educator awareness (Edwards et al., 2022). The use of inclusive academic practice meets the need for universities to address the learning barriers of disabled students (Disabled Students' Commission (DSC), 2023) and enhances access for all students, so it is considered good practice. However, inclusive practice must not be at the expense of meeting individual needs (Moriña, 2024) and supporting students to develop academic and social skills is found to be beneficial to students' engagement and outcomes (Brewer et al., 2025; Davis et al., 2021).

For students on placement this is particularly important, with the most important criterion for effective learning on placement found to be the facilitation of individual reasonable adjustments (Johnston et al., 2016). The reasonable adjustments for students on placement in the literature include allowing more time for planning and writing notes (King, 2019), additional skills training, modified equipment, a quiet room, flexible working arrangements, frequent breaks, counselling (Griffiths et al., 2010), and assessment modifications (Johnston et al., 2016). Botham and Nicholson's (2014) research with physiotherapy students in the United Kingdom advocated encouraging students to disclose and discuss their reasonable adjustment requirements, forming a good rapport between placement mentors and students, and clear liaison between the mentor and other team members. Finally, regular reviews before and during placement were identified as positively impactful (Griffiths et al., 2010; Johnston et al., 2016; Wray et al., 2005).

Barriers to the implementation and effectiveness of reasonable adjustments in practice placements

A common theme that was identified in the literature was a reluctance from students to disclose reasonable adjustment requirements, which acts as a barrier to effective engagement with placement (Kendall, 2016). For example, Nolan et al. (2015) found that few students from an Irish university shared details of their reasonable adjustment requirements with their placement mentor due to lack of opportunity or fear of stigma. In addition, a systematic review found that this is particularly true for students with hidden disabilities such as dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Moriña, 2024), which the author identified may be due to stigma and negativity and a desire for normality.

Introduced by de Beauvoir (1949) and coined by Spivak (1995), 'othering' is the personal, cultural, social and structural divisions between groups of people, often those in the minority, being othered by those in the majority, for example based on race, gender, ability, faith, age or sexuality. Similarly, Becker (1963) discussed othering as the feeling of being an outsider, which is often experienced by disabled people. Othering comes from difference and the power held and is used to create exclusionary practices by those in the majority. Othering can result in those that are othered feeling isolated, excluded and marginalised. They can experience being othered through bias and assumptive lower expectations which further compound self-confidence and self-esteem. They are seen as different and made to feel different, often through the use of language and micro-aggressions that are entrenched in a society that does not value diversity. The social model of disability (Oliver, 1983) reflects that it is society's construction of ableism that disables the person, where an agreed contribution (often successful education and productive employment) affords value in society for the person. Indeed, Goodley (2014, p.52) argued that contemporary society expects every member of society to be "willing, capable and able", not to be different.

Studies have found that students' reluctance to disclose their needs stems from the negative attitudes they experienced in practice placements (Craig et al., 2023; Griffiths et al., 2010; Hill & Roger, 2016). This led to nursing students in Scotland expressing uncertainty about whether they should disclose their disability, how much detail to disclose, the timing of bringing this to light, and whom to tell (Craig et al., 2023). This may be compounded by students' awareness and experiences of negative attitudes towards disabled people more generally in society (Hill & Roger, 2016). Nevertheless, where problems on placement occurred, they were found to be more exaggerated where the student required a reasonable adjustment (Hill & Roger, 2016), albeit mitigated by the personal factors of students (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2021), including self-determination, self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-discipline, and self-esteem (Gow et al., 2020), and enhanced by social support and clear information on transitions (Chronopoulou & Polychronopoulou, 2024).

Students who disclosed learning needs reported feeling that their reasonable adjustments were dismissed by their placement mentor, and some even felt that their placement providers doubted the legitimacy of their disability (Baker et al., 2022), which according to Kendall (2016) can lead students to feel 'fobbed off'. In a study of neurodiverse students (Beck et al., 2022) less than half of the sixteen students interviewed felt that their expectations were met by their placement providers. Instead, students felt that responses were more of a tick box exercise, than a way to provide meaningful adjustments, which led to high levels of student dissatisfaction. Indeed, the research participants reported that their placement providers were unwilling to implement even the simplest of reasonable adjustments, and they felt that they had to constantly remind their providers about their requirements.

This may be explained using the context that placement mentors and university staff do not always feel prepared to support the student's needs during placements (Botham & Nicholson, 2014; King,

2019, 2024). An understanding of what is reasonable in an adjustment must be considered by the placement mentor, often despite lacking management experience to understand such nuances, indicating a training requirement vacuum (King, 2024). Furthermore, placement mentors valued peer support from other practice mentors, which came in the form of sharing experiences and knowledge about supporting students requiring a reasonable adjustment (King, 2024) demonstrating the importance of continuing development and available support.

However, complications with meeting reasonable adjustments in placement may also stem from difficulties in defining reasonable adjustments and the perceived ambiguity surrounding this, as well as a lack of concrete guidelines, and uncertainty about how to make sure students are treated equally (Craig et al., 2023). In addition, the need for more effective communication and circulation of information concerning student's needs to ensure that the procedures are followed has been highlighted (Botham & Nicholson, 2014).

Further practical challenges are faced where services are stretched, which include sub-optimal staffing levels, patients with complex morbidities, and the pressures of meeting targets (Griffiths et al., 2010). This means placement mentors may find it difficult to incorporate further responsibilities into their already busy schedules, which in this study led to some negative attitudes being voiced in relation to mentoring disabled student nurses, particularly concerning difficulties with memory, recall, and reading. This type of stigmatisation can lower the confidence of students and lead to feelings of isolation which was also evident in the Beck et al. (2022) study. Due to the recurring nature of disclosure for students who attend multiple practice placements, this type of stigmatisation may contribute to students' reluctance to disclose their disability or reasonable adjustment (Griffiths et al., 2010; Shaw, 2024).

It can be seen that placement-based mentor support for students requiring a reasonable adjustment is not without its challenges. Nevertheless, it bears repeating that the most important criterion for effective learning on placement was found to be the facilitation of individual reasonable adjustments (Johnston et al., 2016; Krumpelman & Hord, 2021), locating the development of understanding of why reasonable adjustments are not implemented on practice placement as critical.

The evidence base is rather limited in terms of the experiences of students involved in practice-based placements. Current evidence is based on small sample sizes, in some instances, single case studies, and participants were often from one particular profession or focused on a specific type of disability (Baker et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2016).

It has been recommended that future research should explore how to engage students requiring a reasonable adjustment (Shaw, 2024) and focus on how to effectively implement reasonable adjustments in practice placements (Baker et al., 2022). This is recommended to be achieved by utilising an increased sample size in a wider range of placements and with a wider range of disability types and health needs (Baker et al., 2022; Beck et al., 2022). It has also been recommended that the student voice be considered and heard in future research to inform policy making (Shaw, 2024). Finally, it has been suggested that future research should be widely

disseminated as a way of sharing learning and contributing towards developing models of supporting students requiring a reasonable adjustment in practice placements (Griffiths et al., 2010). This study set out to address these gaps by researching these issues across professions. The aim of the research was to explore procedural and practical areas in relation to supporting students requiring a reasonable adjustment in the practice placement. It was anticipated that the findings would inform further work to develop good practice locally and on a wider scale.

Method

This was a qualitative, cross disciplinary multi-methods research project. The research question was 'how effective are reasonable adjustments in supporting students in professional practice placements?'. Ethical approval was gained from Leeds Beckett University School of Health Ethics Committee. Measures were taken to ensure informed consent, participant autonomy, beneficence, respect dignity and promote honesty and transparency. A small internal research grant enabled the inclusion of a research assistant and provided a small incentive to focus group participants. It should be noted that in terms of positionality the research team brought both personal lived experience and experience of working with and promoting the needs and rights of students requiring a reasonable adjustment.

Data collection and analysis

It was important to offer students an opportunity to provide information via an anonymous survey as they may have been reluctant to participate using face to face research methods due to stigma. All undergraduate and postgraduate students who had undertaken at least one practice placement and had a reasonable adjustment requirement were, therefore, invited to complete a questionnaire which was promoted within their course internal communication system. Thirty-four students responded. The questionnaire was hosted on the secure platform JISC online surveys. The questionnaire was designed to elicit data relating to a wide range of students' experiences; therefore, questions were predominantly open-ended and included demographics, placement preparation and experiences of the implementation of reasonable adjustments. Data gathered from the questionnaires were subjected to an initial reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is a process of interpretation and meaning making, using subjectivity as a strength rather than a bias, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2022). Analysis identified a number of initial codes (Braun & Clarke 2022): the need for clearer procedures, making comparisons between students and other employees, stigma and negative perceptions of disabled students, wanting to be seen as 'normal', poor experiences of placement mentor and RAP, positive experiences of placement mentor and RAP, and positive practice by the student.

It was anticipated that questionnaire responses might be brief or not provided, as this is a common limitation of questionnaires (Fink, 2010). In order to elicit greater depth of data we, therefore, also decided to offer those students who did feel confident to share their experiences, an opportunity to participate in a focus group. Eight participants indicated in the questionnaire

that they would be willing to participate in a focus group and an additional social work student asked to participate after hearing about it from a peer. Two focus groups were undertaken online via Microsoft Teams. They were recorded and transcribed and the recording was then deleted. Focus groups explored positive and negative experiences prior to and on placement to gather greater depth of understanding of the students' experiences than was provided by the anonymous questionnaire. Hearing students' reflective narratives on their experiences was an effective data collection method. Focus group data were reflexively thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2022) using the initial codes that were identified when analysing the questionnaire data. Interrater reliability (Fink, 2010) was applied with data coded and thematically analysed by two members of the research team, to collaboratively gain richer nuanced insights. The same three key themes - 'need for clearer procedures', 'looking bad: stigma and negativity', and 'experience on placement' were identified by both researchers across both data sets.

Due to confidentiality and small sample size, the data analysis is not publicly available in accordance with Leeds Beckett University procedure. However, it can be obtained upon request.

Research participants

Table one presents demographic data for both the questionnaire and focus group research participants.

Table 1 Research participant identity

		Questionnaire		Focus Group	
		34	%	9	%
Gender	Female	29	85%	7	78%
	Male	4	12%	2	22%
	Did not disclose	1	3%	0	
Ethnicity	White	26	75%	6	67%
	Global majority	5	15%	2	22%
	International students	3	10%	1	11%
Age	18-21	9	26%	2	22%
	22-30	15	44%	4	45%
	30-40	6	18%	2	22%
	40-50	2	6%	1	11%
	50+	2	6%	0	
Disability	Neurodivergent	15	44%	3	33.5%
	Mental health	4	12%	1	11%

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	Multiple issues	6	18%	3	33.5%
	Physical disability	2	6%	0	
	Physical health	7	20%	2	22%
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Course	Biomedical Science	1	3%	1	11%
	Childhood Studies	2	6%	0	
	Counselling and psychotherapy	2	6%	1	11%
	Dietetics	3	9%	0	
	Education	9	26%	1	11%
	Nursing	7	20%	0	
	Occupational Therapy	4	12%	2	22%
	Physiotherapy	1	3%	0	
	Social Work	3	9%	4	45%
	Sports and Exercise Therapy	2	6%	0	

A higher percentage of focus group participants had multiple issues than questionnaire participants, whilst there was a higher proportion of neurodivergent students (dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, ADHD, etc) in the questionnaire sample with no discernible reason why. In addition, a reduced range of courses was represented in the focus groups.

Research findings and discussion

Key findings from the analysis of questionnaire and focus group data are presented in an integrated findings and discussion section below.

Need for clearer procedures

A strong theme that emerged from both focus groups and the questionnaires was the need for clearer placement procedures. Research participants identified that it would be helpful if there were a more consistent approach and clearer procedures to support students on placement:

I think what we're seeing here is that a lot of people are getting told different things. ... So, you want to put your best foot forward. I actually was unsure whether it was on me to send my RAP, or whether the placement teams kind of did that. ... So I was kind of a bit unsure of whether they [the placement] knew or not, and I wish it was maybe communicated a bit better on when we first shared the RAP, whether it was on me or on them to need to send it through. (Focus group Participant 5)

I assumed, and [tutor] kind of wasn't sure to be honest, from the feedback that I was getting, that it had all been sent off, it will be shared with placement. To then realising that

actually, the Friday before my placement started, nobody had a clue. (Focus group Participant 6)

This included research participants being unclear of how to communicate their reasonable adjustment needs to the placement and the university's role in this, where research participants felt that "more communication ... would be like really useful" (Focus group Participant 5). Indeed, one research participant suggested "more guidance into how a student can be supported on placement" (Questionnaire participant 27). This aligns with findings that students requiring a reasonable adjustment (Beesley et al., np; Davis et al., 2021) value understanding about what is expected of them and what they can expect so that they feel secure in engaging with learning opportunities. This is an area that could be developed by universities to ensure that students feel safer in raising their learning needs.

However, there was clear agreement that the placement provider should be aware of the student's reasonable adjustment before the placement started:

It would have been beneficial for them to know in advance. It could just be emailed to them clearly stating what it is and the reason behind it. (Questionnaire participant 21)

Placements should be aware of this in advance, it is a difficult conversation to have and in most places I haven't mentioned my RAP. (Questionnaire participant 22)

School was not informed of my RAP and they were shocked when I brought it up. (Questionnaire participant 24)

Here a dilemma was raised. These research participants felt that it was the university's responsibility to share the Reasonable Adjustment Plan created with them by the university. However, the documentation cannot be shared by the university with the placement provider to adhere to the British Data Protection Act 2018. Instead, often alternative documents are created that focus on placement-orientated reasonable adjustments completed in partnership by the student and tutor or the student is required to determine if they wish to self-advocate their needs. It became apparent that for some research participants that this had not been communicated clearly to them, which created tension at the start of the placement.

As such, the research participants reflected that they did not feel that the RAP was fit for purpose to use in relation to placement experiences, as it was often academically-focused:

There wasn't a lot written in the RAP, specifically for placement. (Focus group participant 7)

My RAP was kind of specific to uni and it didn't have a section that was just placement, which it would have been quite useful to be split up because with these courses that are quite heavy placement ... So having it that's actually specific to coming on placement and the techniques that are used there would have been quite useful. (Focus group participant 9)

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Here research participants reflected that the RAP could be used more productively to include placement-based reasonable adjustments rather than assuming the student was an expert in their own needs, or the tutor was knowledgeable enough to advise how they could best be supported in placement. This indicates that they also saw the RAP as the preferred site of advice and guidance for themselves on how to best manage placement challenges, as well as being a productive, informed and evidence-based way to start a discussion with the placement mentor.

Nevertheless, the research participants reflected on their own positive practices of sharing their learning needs, where some spoke about being transparent about their needs:

And I remember [lecturer] saying in one of our lectures at the start like just be transparent, be honest, be truthful and that's what I really took on board this year. I have not held back about how I'm feeling and what support I need. (Focus group participant 1)

I would send mine over in the initial email, or say here is my reasonable adjustment plan, and I would say can we talk about it like, can we discuss it on my first day or something? ... So, then I'll sit and kind of go through it all with them. (Focus group participant 2)

I feel like sometimes you know, they could be kind of more of a public conversation with, you know, your personal tutors at Uni first as to how you kind of want to approach a conversation about your RAP with your placement, whether you know that takes place as an informal conversation just between you and your practice educator, whether they bring it up to practice educator or, you know, whether you bring it up at the PLA meeting. I mean, you really discuss it. I think that kind of option allows us to feel more empowered. (Focus group participant 8)

The overwhelming sense was the importance of pre-placement communication about the student's reasonable adjustment to facilitate them being met during placement. Finally, there was an overwhelming agreement that placement providers needed to be aware of how to respond to assessed reasonable adjustments, which they felt was the university's responsibility to facilitate prior to placement:

I think there should be clear guidelines for educators instead of the placement section being very limited. (Questionnaire participant 27)

This demonstrated that research participants felt that clearer procedures would have been helpful to enhance the effectiveness of reasonable adjustment in practice placements.

Looking bad: stigma and negativity

The second identified theme, a consistent point that was referred to in the questionnaires and both focus groups, was in relation to the stigma of having an additional learning need and the negativity attached to it. The research participants felt worried that they would be perceived as having more areas for development than the average student:

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It's basically just like a massive list of things that you're not very good at, which feels very negative. ... And you don't want to be like a difficult student like, you know, someone that has loads of needs that they need to meet. And it just ends up being like a pain for them. (Focus group participant 2)

This located reasonable adjustments as deficit-orientated setting out what a student cannot do, a negative approach that both focus groups discussed as impacting on their own self-confidence and the placement mentor's first impression of them:

I think I was less confident going in and sending them my reasonable adjustment plan. [...] I didn't want to look bad. (Focus group participant 5)

I didn't want them to think less of me, so I told them about my learning difficulty and once they knew they were supportive. (Questionnaire participant 18)

Research participants did not want to "look bad" or have the placement mentor "think less" of them because of their additional learning needs and they preferred being able to talk about their needs, instead of sending a written summary to the placement, to emphasise the most important elements to them. Indeed, the previous research participant went on to add:

So, I think I always say, can we talk about it so I can tell them what I really need, and what is less important so I don't, you know, like you don't want to come across like you can't do a lot of stuff, if that makes sense? (Focus group participant 2)

Students requiring a reasonable adjustment often have to work harder to achieve the same outcomes as able bodied and neurotypical students. They have often experienced educational experiences that have been critical of inability where educators did not have a diagnosis to centre and explain the challenges the student faced in engaging with learning or educators that did not understand or care about their learning needs. It is not unusual for students requiring a reasonable adjustment to have low self-esteem and confidence (Gow et al., 2020). As such, having to share their deficits from before the placement begins compounds the feeling of being *less than* right from the start.

This led to some research participants expressing fears about coming across as not being a "good enough" (Focus group participant 1) student and being perceived by their placement as being a hindrance or as "difficult" (Questionnaire participant 34, Focus group participant 2) students. As such some research participants reflected that they were apprehensive to share their reasonable adjustments because of potential preconceptions and subconscious bias: they did not want the placement to view them differently, wanting to be seen as "normal" (Focus group participant 3). One research participant had a "fear of communicating one's needs" (Questionnaire participant 22). This was explored by other research participants who reflected:

I felt as though maybe that put a hindrance on me and my capabilities on placement as well. I didn't want to come across as though I'm not a good enough student. (Focus group participant 1)

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You don't want to go into it [the placement] thinking that people have preconceptions of how you're going to be, and even if, like you know, on the surface, everything is fine and obviously they're not going to, like, say, anything outright, it's that kind of like subconscious bias that you don't want people to have any sort of preconceptions and bias when they meet you. I think that's the really difficult thing. (Focus group participant 2)

The fear of being seen as different and setting themselves up as less than echoed across the research participants. Goodley (p.103, 2014) challenged “compulsory normativity” instead suggesting that disabled students provide a rich resource and a means to challenge the oppressive norms of society as they facilitate the questioning of why things happen that way and demand change for more inclusive practice for themselves and their service provision. This may not be easy for the student who has to be cognisant of the power differential not just in the able-bodied/ disabled relationship but also held in their education and assessment within the placement and academic career, creating a “culture of silence” (Freire, 1970), and no research participants commented that this was a role they took. Freire (1970) believed that education should empower students. Applying this to students on practice placement, it can be seen that empowering students requiring a reasonable adjustment to understand and see their worth, engaging their willingness and challenging them to fulfil their capabilities (Goodley, 2014) by providing robust and appropriately scaffolded learning opportunities can both enhance student outcomes and begin to address social change.

Once the placement was underway, some research participants did not feel comfortable asking for help because they were worried about having their ability/suitability for the role questioned:

I found it hard to implement my RAP without feeling "different" or "difficult" compared to other students. ... Sometimes I would need a break and either not be able to have one, or struggle to ask for one. Sometimes due to the stigma in the workplace. (Questionnaire participant 34)

So, it makes you feel like although the support is there on the placement, almost that you can't take it because then they'll just think, why are you trying to be a secondary school teacher. (Focus group participant 5)

But you don't want to ask too much to show them that this is too much pressure on me, but I try as much as possible to be like a normal person, yeah. (Focus group participant 3)

I kind of think like they're just going to think that I'm just not even a functional person. (Focus group participant 2)

However, some research participants reflected that it was just too challenging to share their learning needs:

I just felt as though they didn't look into it and I just felt as though it wasn't considered that my, you know, I do have a reasonable adjustment plan, but I just felt as though my voice wasn't enough. (Focus group participant 1)

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Like this is a situation where I am having to try so much harder than the average person because they're not listening to my reasonable adjustment plan and I don't feel comfortable telling them about it. (Focus group participant 2)

I think there was just, yeah, I just found it really hard to talk to them and for them to understand how I was feeling. So, I couldn't really share how I was finding things. And it was just, yeah, it wasn't great. (Focus group participant 7)

Some research participants felt that the placement provider's negative attitude was the barrier to them accessing support, so they felt they just had to get on with the placement without the reasonable adjustments being recognised or made, which was summarised by focus group participant 4 saying "I'm just lumping it. I'm just doing the best I can." Whilst this represents the feeling of the dejected student who has not been engaged in discussion by the placement mentor, it represents a worrying positionality that students requiring a reasonable adjustment fall into: that of acceptance of lack of support. This is clearly an attitude we want to proactively discourage as educators.

Experience on placement

The third and final theme identified was students' experience on placement. Where students did share their required reasonable adjustments, their learning needs were often not met, with research participants reflecting on a range of problematic experiences which included:

Physical access was difficult due to the lay of the land. Parking was a nightmare, blue badge spaces often misused, I escalated this but nothing happened to improve things. (Questionnaire participant 6)

There is not always a place where I could go if I needed to. It was hard to be away from the class; there was no one to cover me. (Questionnaire participant 21)

My disability was not taken into account when on placement. It was a very challenging time. ... I felt like I was doing everything wrong. ... I was unable to handle the workload a lot of the time and was not able to work in a way that works for me. I was extremely stressed for the entire time I was on placement and my mental health suffered. (Questionnaire participant 23)

I suspect that if I had any noise cancelling headphones and a microphone I could do what hearing impaired students do, and mic the voice I need and block out sound that I don't need, but I'm not allowed those accommodations because C-PTSD doesn't come with hearing impairment as a listed side effect. So, I've just been told no. (Focus group participant 4)

These research participants' reflections represent the range of issues that a student requiring a reasonable adjustment may experience on placement. It can be helpful for the able-bodied, neurotypical mentor to appreciate the challenges that students requiring a reasonable adjustment

have to overcome to begin to engage with learning opportunities, as it may result in a more empathic understanding of their learning needs.

In contrast, some research participants felt their placement mentors were overly cautious and “wary” about giving the students responsibilities because of their additional learning needs, thus leaving them feeling that they had had less learning opportunities than their peers. This reinforced the idea that they were not seen to be as competent as other students:

I felt like I didn't have the same responsibilities [as their peers] or they're a bit more wary. (Focus group participant 7)

Where students do share their learning needs but are treated with a reluctance to be trusted to fully engage with learning outcomes, this compounds the stigma they feel further. Returning to society's expectation that everyone is “willing, capable and able” Goodley (2014, p.52), it can be seen that placement mentors did not always feel that students were capable to complete more complex tasks and learning opportunities and protected them from failure by not challenging their capabilities. This was usually despite a willingness by the students: “I was definitely wanting to challenge myself.” This disempowering approach and microaggression othered those students who required a reasonable adjustment on multiple layers: lack of discussion, assumption of lack of capability and limited experiences in comparison to their peers.

Finally, some research participants developed their own strategies for managing their workload and disabilities:

I think I'm impressed with how I've done and how I've managed it and what's really supported me really as well is I have a to-do list every day, and every week I go through that and it helps me to keep on track. (Focus group participant 1)

How I manage things is by being really organised like I have to be that with everything, every single thing that I do goes straight in my outlook calendar because I'll just forget and I will remember like three months later randomly I'll be like, oh, I'm supposed to send that e-mail. (Focus group participant 2)

I always have a notepad with me when I'm on placement. It's how I remember everything, especially when I'm writing up patient notes, I scribble everything down because I just won't be able to remember it. And then I guess, remembering to take things like coloured overlay coloured paper, because that's something that's never been available unless I take it with me. (Focus group participant 7)

It is arguably this sense of having to adapt and blend in, to look ‘normal’ that often drives students to develop these coping strategies. This is important for the student's engagement with placement and development, yet it also allows the othering to continue: it is the individual student's difference that is the problem, and it is perceived as easier to allow them to resolve the issue themselves than talk about the problem (Mik-Meyer, 2016):

I think that can be a bit of an issue sometimes that goes a bit unspoken about. (Focus group participant 8)

Normative expectations of students include engagement, achievement and conformative behaviour within traditional teaching routines that may be more challenging for disabled students (Goodley, 2014; Brewer, 2025), ensuring they are immediately othered by capable educators and students as different than the norm. This is not to say that they are not willing, capable or able, but they have to work harder to achieve goals, yet it is the assumption of lack of capability that others them.

Limitations

This research was undertaken in one university. Future research should, therefore, seek to achieve a larger sample and consider comparative studies to enable different academic procedures to be considered. A further limitation was that we were unable to establish the total number of students across the various courses, nor the number of students with a reasonable adjustment so we were unable to establish an overall response rate. Furthermore, the research only represents the views of those students who chose to participate. As previously outlined many students who require a reasonable adjustment do not want to disclose their learning needs and may not want to engage in research which is why we wanted to give students an opportunity to share their views anonymously. This research explored student views but future research that explores placement mentors' experiences would also be beneficial.

Practice recommendations

Firstly, the research project identified that Reasonable Adjustment Plans (RAPs) are not as effective in addressing student's *placement* learning needs as they are in relation to *academic* reasonable adjustments. A review of the procedural support available for students who have a diagnosis or self-disclosure of mental health, physical health, physical disability or neurodivergence and require a reasonable adjustment, is, therefore, recommended to ensure that they are fit for purpose in practice placement settings. Consideration should be given to a more robust section of advice and required reasonable adjustments in relation to placement learning needs being provided within the RAP. Some educational institutions refer to reasonable adjustments as Academic Accommodations: the development of *Practice Accommodations* would also be helpful to ensure placement-based students' reasonable adjustments to enhance are articulated clearly and understood.

Furthermore, it is recommended that universities review the formulation of advice of placement-based advisory adjustments and support. In order to achieve this, it is recognised that the development of a guide and/or training may be helpful to the staff assessing their needs. This should be undertaken in consultation with students with lived experience of requiring a reasonable adjustment, placement providers and placement-orientated academics to ensure that the disability support workers undertaking the RAP assessments are knowledgeable about the

implementation of placement-based adjustments and support. Nevertheless, it is recognised that resource-led decision-making remains impactful, and a review should also take account of an understanding of student learning needs but also employer expectations, resources, abilities and limitations to develop appropriate and reasonable placement-based adjustments that enhance placement mentor understanding and student experiences on practice placement. Finally, it should be made clear to students how their reasonable adjustment will be communicated to a potential placement provider, and support offered in this process.

Secondly, the research project considered the use of reasonable adjustments in practice placements. Oliver (1983) highlights the importance of understanding that it is society's reaction to the disabled person, in this case a wariness and the reduction of learning opportunities for students who require a reasonable adjustment, that leaves them disadvantaged within the practice placement learning environment. This then implies a simple fix that placement providers are supported by higher education institutions that use them to educate and develop their students' knowledge and skills in an experiential learning environment. Nevertheless, he went on to argue that disabled people experience othering by society (Oliver, 2004), which Mik-Meyer (2016) applies to the othering of disabled people specifically in work environments. Mik-Meyer argues that disabled people are seen by their limitations rather than their strengths and their contributions to the workplace, which is often restricted due to the assumptive limitations that are applied to their work opportunities.

In this research we saw this applied in practice: the placement providers othered those students who required a reasonable adjustment and they were afforded less challenging learning opportunities. This has been reflected on by research participants as being treated differently than their able-bodied and neurotypical peers through lower expectations, inadequate support and lack of provision of recommended reasonable adjustments and support. Research participants in this study highlighted a further important contributor to othering of disabled people: that of not talking about the disability, mirroring previous findings (Mik-Mayer, 2016). This took the form of not feeling able to discuss their learning needs as they did not want to look bad and of a stigma when they had tried to do so. Conversely, where students and mentors did discuss their learning needs, research participants felt heard, supported and empowered to engage with learning opportunities: arguably the antidote to othering. Further research that explores the othering of higher education students who require a reasonable adjustment, particularly on practice placement, is recommended to develop the evidence-base and enhance practice guidance.

It is important to acknowledge that whilst this article represents the majority voice of the research participants who expressed areas for development, where a placement mentor *did* support the student's learning needs it was found to be positively impactful. This was reported to be achieved when the placement mentor asked them about their learning needs rather than making assumptions and provided reassurance, support, and simpler (and often repeated) instructions to ensure they knew what was expected of them, arguably the opposite of othering. This gives grounds for hope that if educators and placement providers can 'get it right' by listening to the voice of those with lived experience: the students themselves; that students will be supported in

placement to meet their assessed reasonable adjustment needs and provide robust placement learning opportunities to maximise the development of their knowledge, skills and values. As such, it is recommended that placement provision should develop strategies to address students' experiences of othering, a clear area for future research.

Conclusion

This research project explored the effectiveness of reasonable adjustments in professional and vocational practice placements. Thirty-four undergraduate and postgraduate students undertaking degrees in occupational therapy, social work, childhood studies, biomedical science, sport and exercise therapy, dietetics, nursing, education and therapeutic counselling who had a diagnosis or self-disclosure of mental health, physical health, physical disability or neurodivergence, participated in questionnaires and focus groups. Data were subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis, and the themes of 'need for clearer procedures', 'looking bad: stigma and negative perceptions of students', and 'experience on placement' were identified.

A number of recommendations have been made. Firstly, it is recommended that the procedural response to reasonable adjustments could be reviewed to incorporate practice accommodations. Secondly, it is recommended that placement providers discuss students' reasonable adjustments more openly to align learning opportunities with those experienced by able-bodied and neurotypical students, to support the development of knowledge and skills of all students. Finally, future research that focuses on developing strategies to address students' experiences of othering is recommended.

Biographies

Paula Beesley is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Academic Practice Lead at Leeds Beckett University, educator, researcher and author. As a qualified social worker with much experience in the field, her research interests focus on pedagogical development and experiences of education, particularly in relation to practice placements. P.h.beesley@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Paige Davies is a research assistant at Leeds Beckett University. Her doctoral research was a mixed methods study to investigate the relationship between maternity care satisfaction ratings and symptoms of postnatal depression, in women from various birth categories.

Angela Murphy is a Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy and has been leading and carrying out Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science research for many years within higher education and health and social care.

Sharon Vincent is Professor of Social Work at Leeds Beckett University. She has been undertaking research related to social work and social work education for 25 years.

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