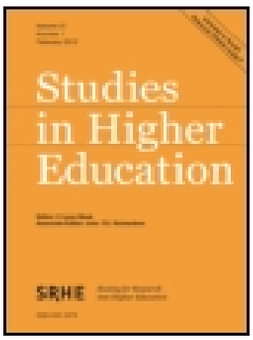

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Ayse Collins, Fara Azmat & Ruth Rentschler

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'Bringing everyone on the same journey': revisiting inclusion in higher education

Ayse Collins[a], Fara Azmat[b] and Ruth Rentschler[c]

[a]School of Applied Technology and Management, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey; [b]Department of Management, Deakin University, Burwood, Melbourne, Australia; [c]School of Management, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT

This study investigates inclusion in higher education, examining learning environments for students with physical disabilities (SWPD) and the challenges faced in promoting inclusive education, using an Australian university as a case study. Drawing from the social model of disability and interviews with 40 stakeholders, our findings suggest that despite marked progress towards inclusive education through *reasonable adjustments for all,* learning environments remain largely driven by adjustments for individual students, creating organisational and personal challenges. Four key challenges emerged: (1) staff perception about too many resources creating student dependencies; (2) staff training needs; (3) low representation of students with visible disabilities; and (4) moving inclusion beyond education into employment. Our findings emphasise the need to embed employability and skills development in all aspects of teaching and learning while moving towards inclusive education, to enable all students to develop professionally, and reinforcing calls for an inclusive workplace that values and accepts SWPD.

KEYWORDS

Australian university; higher education; inclusion; students with physical disabilities; social model of disability

Introduction

This study investigates inclusion in higher education (HE), examining learning environments of students with physical disabilities (SWPD) and the challenges facing inclusive education, using an Australian university as a case study. Inclusivity in HE is increasingly recognised as fundamental for promoting 'individuals' educational careers, not only for their own benefit but also for the positive impact that integration has on society as a whole' (Fuller et al. 2004; Matthews 2009; Redpath et al. 2013, 1334). Students with disabilities (SWD) face additional challenges when they seek to change their lives with education. They are disadvantaged by their disability and by other people's exclusion of them because of their disability. Thus, inclusion in HE is a topic of significance with far-reaching implications. However, the term 'inclusive education' remains obscure, lacking conceptual clarity and focus, despite receiving considerable attention (UNESCO 1994; Idol 2006; Shyman 2015). For the purpose of this study, we define 'inclusive education' as occurring when 'all individuals regardless of exceptionality, are entitled to the opportunity to be included in a regular classroom environment *while* receiving the supports necessary to facilitate accessibility to both environment and information' (Shyman 2015, 351). In these troubled times, when the focus on inclusion at policy and practice levels prompts media debate about its benefits, our study on inclusion in HE is both timely and important.

CONTACT Ayse Collins collins@bilkent.edu.tr School of Applied Technology and Management, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

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We answer the following research questions: How inclusive is the learning environment for SWPD? What are the challenges faced from multiple perspectives when moving towards inclusive education in an Australian university? We have chosen to focus on SWPD because there have been very few studies in this area. Existing studies on the experiences of disabled students in the HE sector in Australia (Gale and Parker 2013; Hartley 2015; Koshy and Seymour 2015) have mostly focused on school-aged students and students with mental and learning disabilities (Ryan 2007; Ganguly et al. 2015). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first of its type to include the voices of SWPD, non-disabled students (NDS), academic staff (AS) and staff working in the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) of a university; thus, it provides a holistic perspective on inclusion in the learning environment and its associated challenges.

We undertook this study examining the inclusion of SWPD from multiple perspectives in an Australian HE context for two key reasons. First, since the 1990s, there have been improvements in official policies and legislation relating to disabled students at government levels and, following on from this, a rise in the number of disabled students entering HE worldwide (Madriaga et al. 2010). Australia is no exception. An independent survey by Koshy and Seymour (2015) reported that between 2007 and 2013 enrolments of SWD in Australian universities increased by 57 per cent, representing the highest growth of any equity group. Similarly, the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE 2015) reported that undergraduate enrolments of SWD in Australia increased from 4.4 per cent in 2007 to 5.8 per cent in 2014. Therefore, the growing number of SWD in HE in Australia necessitates research to explore their inclusion, which remains under-researched (Richardson 2009; Newman et al. 2010; Snyder and Dillow 2010; Shyman 2015; Moriña 2017).

Second, the bulk of research relating to disabled students and inclusion in HE has been conducted in countries such as the US, Finland, Ireland, Cyprus and, particularly, the UK. Very few studies of this nature have been undertaken in Australia. Several notable exceptions (Fuller et al. 2004; Madriaga et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013) have added useful insights into inclusion in HE from the perspectives of SWD; however, they lack multiple perspectives, particularly those of staff – both academic and administrative – to provide a deep, holistic view. Our study addresses this void.

Disability is a broad term that includes both mental and physical aspects. However, for the purpose of our investigation, SWD are limited to those with physical disabilities, specifically, mobility, hearing, and visual impairments. This is based on the findings of Fuller et al. (2004) who concluded that it is erroneous to treat disabled students as a single population given their diverse experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and needs. Our decision to limit our research to the physical aspects of disability is also in response to the limited number of studies undertaken on SWPD in the Australian HE context.

Theories underpinning inclusion in HE

Two models have been popular in conceptualising the term 'inclusive education' for SWD: the 'individual or medical model' and the 'social model' (Matthews 2009; Oliver and Barnes 2012). The medical model views disability as an 'individualised problem' (Armstrong and Barton 1999, 212); it focuses on what is 'wrong' with the individual rather than what the person 'needs'. This model proposes to fix the problem through therapies or 'special help' and diagnostic labels. Contrary to this approach, the social model does not see 'disability as a personal tragedy, an abnormality or a disease to be cured' (Barton 1998, 79); rather, it states that 'people are disabled by barriers that exist in society' (Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson 2004, 642). This model focuses on removing barriers and deficits in the environment that restrict life choices for disabled people so as they can enjoy equality of access.

Research suggests a number of educational and political problems in the medical model, including the false assumption that students with the same impairment have the same learning needs (Nes and Stromstad 2003; Roy 2003). This assumption highlights impairment pathologies for people with disabilities (Olney and Brockelman 2003, 45) and focuses on individual impairments, diverting

attention from the need for collective political solutions that can change disabling social and physical environments (Armstrong and Barton 1999, 223; Matthews 2009).

By contrast – and in response to such criticisms – the social model emphasises both the need to restructure educational environments in the HE sector to enable all students to flourish (rather than focusing on individual impairments) and teaching practices to facilitate all students' learning (Doyle and Robson 2002). In the last 5–10 years, further theoretical work has been undertaken to critique and advance the social model. As this model suggests that people are disabled by society, not by their bodies, one of the main criticisms relates to the neglect of impairment and its effect on disabled people's lives (Oliver 1996; Shakespeare 2004, 59). Shakespeare and Watson (2010, 63) argued that 'while environments and services can and should be adapted wherever possible, there remains disadvantage associated with having many impairments which no amount of environmental change could entirely eliminate'. He alluded to three challenges associated with social models of disability. First, even if social barriers are removed, it is disadvantageous to have multiple forms of impairment. Second, it is harder to celebrate disability compared to other forms of identity, such as gender, since recuperation from disability as a concept is difficult due to incapacity, impairment, limitation, and exclusion. Third, society needs to provide extra resources to emancipate disabled people, in particular, meeting needs that arise from impairment, not just those that arise from the removal of discrimination (Shakespeare 2006, 202).

In this paper, we support the social model; we do this while recognising its limitations in understanding the complex interplay of individual and environmental factors in the lives of disabled people, as well as the benefits of diagnostic labels in the medical model.

Experiences of SWD inclusion in HE

Drawing on the social model of disability, studies of the experiences of SWD in HE worldwide have stressed the need to address several issues to make HE inclusive, such as: expanding variety and flexibility in all aspects of teaching and learning (Fuller et al. 2004); ensuring quality, as well as parity of provision, in comparison with NDS (Fuller et al. 2004); providing access to information and building networks of communication (Fuller et al. 2004; Redpath et al. 2013); and improving staff effectiveness (Gale 2002; Fuller et al. 2004; Redpath et al. 2013). Recent research has suggested that while SWD confront barriers of access in their learning and assessment, most of the challenges they face are also faced by NDS (Madriaga et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013). Lombardi, Murray, and Dallas (2013, 221) highlighted the need for staff to receive disability-related training to 'promote universal design for student participation and success *without* extensive individualised accommodations and support', and for staff to focus on SWD on a case-by-case basis. In a recent study, Richardson (2016) found that, given a choice between face-to-face and online tutorial support, students with and without disabilities were equally likely to choose online, rather than face-to-face, support. Such a finding supports the notion that universal design provides effective support in both modes and ensures accessibility to students both with and without disabilities (Richardson 2016). These findings reinforce the view that challenges in learning and assessment are not limited to disabled students and those inclusive practices and agendas that do not discriminate can benefit all students. Following on from this – and in line with the social model of disability – research is increasingly highlighting the need to 'inform inclusive policy and practice for the benefit of *all* students, disabled or non-disabled', gradually moving away from individual 'reasonable adjustments' towards inclusive education for all (Madriaga et al. 2010, 654; Redpath et al. 2013).

Attempts have been made within the Australian HE system to include SWD to varying degrees in response to legislation (Gale and Parker 2013). HE is a federal responsibility supported by national legislative frameworks such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Act, 1986, the Disability Discrimination Act, 1992, and the Disability Standards for Education, 2005. The first national Australian policy regarding inclusion in education was released in 1982 (McRae 1996) and led to subsequent policy development at state and federal government levels. However, inclusive education in HE

only attracted attention and interest after 1998 following the release of the Australian Higher Education Policy (Department of Education and Training 2015), which aimed to promote diversity, equality, and growth in the HE sector.

Although studies have been conducted on the experience of inclusive education in Australia (Gale and Parker 2013; Hartley 2015; Koshy and Seymour 2015), in comparison to those undertaken in other countries, few have focused on SWPD. Instead, studies on inclusion in HE in Australia have focused on students with mental disabilities (Ganguly et al. 2015) and learning disabilities (Ryan 2007), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and widening participation in general (Gale and Parker 2013), and on SWD at the primary school level. The few studies conducted in HE found that SWD were less successful and earned lower incomes than students without disabilities (Foreman et al. 2001). This is supported by recent research that highlights the entrenched nature of the disadvantages that SWD experience. Only 66.2 per cent of graduates with disabilities had full-time employment four months after course completion, compared with 76.3 per cent of all graduates (Gale and Parker 2013; Hartley 2015). Earlier research on students with learning difficulties (Gale 2002) concluded that universities and their AS had to take more responsibility for engaging students with learning difficulties. These findings were supported by Ryan's (2007) study on students with learning disabilities in HE, which reported: (a) the learning needs of SWD are not well-understood; (b) equal opportunity is often not implemented; and (c) students with learning difficulties believe that they do not 'belong' in HE. These challenges faced by SWD in HE in Australia are evidenced in the Australian University Student Experience Survey, 2013 (Koshy and Seymour 2015)). This showed that SWD were satisfied on one key focus area – student support – and were less satisfied on four key focus areas – skills development, learner engagement, teaching quality and learning resources.

Method

We undertook a qualitative study, using a single case study of a large, comprehensive HE institution in Australia to explore the inclusivity of the learning environment for SWPD from multiple perspectives. This well-known and established institution in Victoria is ranked among the top 2 per cent of universities worldwide, with approximately 4200 staff and 52,000 students on five campuses. In this university, 8.2 per cent of students have a disability (7 per cent domestic and 1.2 per cent international). We selected this institution for several reasons: it had a commitment to including students with a disability, as evidenced by its policies; it had established a DRC to look after the additional needs of SWD; and it was open to being studied. Some of the services provided by the DRC include learning action plans (LAP) for each registered SWPD, support workers to assist SWPD with note taking and laboratory work, library loans, assistive technologies (e.g. converting text to speech, screen magnifications, and on-screen keyboards), alternative assessments, accessible study materials, and support during practical sessions and placements. The DRC has eight staff members and the manager is on the senior management team of the university, which suggests that its role is taken seriously.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect our data, using an interview question guide for consistency. We interviewed 40 students and staff as the primary unit of analysis, using four subject groups: (1) SWPD, $n = 11$; (2) NDS, $n = 11$; (3) AS, $n = 13$, two of whom were visually impaired; and (4) DRC staff, $n = 5$. The interviews lasted 40–50 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. We interviewed students and staff until data saturation was achieved. Data saturation is important in qualitative studies as it supports data richness and data theorising (Morse 2015). Concurrent data collection and analysis enabled us to continue with the interviews until evidence-to-data saturation was reached. Data saturation in this study was reached with 10 respondents in each group, with the exception of the DRC, in which we interviewed five respondents.

Data analysis

The data were collected over three months, allowing ample time for simultaneous analysis. We used thematic analysis on the verbatim responses of the interviewees, developing codes to establish themes. Three independent authors conducted a thematic analysis of the data and sorted them into an emergent set of categories until data saturation occurred. The interview data were triangulated with the secondary data in the form of policies, legislation, and historical accounts of inclusion of SWD (Krippendorff 1980) to provide a detailed and clear understanding of inclusion from multiple perspectives. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the subjects in the study.

Findings

Our discussion is based on the themes that featured prominently in the interviews. In presenting the results, we use numbers to protect interviewee anonymity and use quotations that are representative of the sample unless otherwise mentioned.

Reasonable adjustments for inclusive education

Most respondents from all groups described the learning environment at the university as inclusive. The university had undertaken several 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure SWPD were not disadvantaged in using its services. In recognition of the fact that SWD have varying needs (Fuller et al. 2004), the adjustments offered by the university included 'variety' and 'flexibility'. In terms of physical infrastructure, with few exceptions, respondents spoke positively about the facilities provided by the university, such as wheelchair access, ramps, toilets, disabled parking, signage, and supportive lecture theatres. In addition to improvements in the physical infrastructure, other varied and flexible provisions for assistance for SWPD included scribes; note takers; technologies for digital accessibility, such as recorded lectures; caption videos for hearing-impaired students; extensions for assessments; and provision to sit exams separately with a computer and typing assistance. These options address many of the barriers reported by SWD in the study by Fuller et al. (2004). Regardless of whether they accepted it, the overall perception was that there was a great deal of support available for SWPD; this was also acknowledged by SWPDs. For example, one SWPD commented:

> I have required modifications to my exams with a different support chair, extra break times and so on to deal with the difficulties of sitting for a longer period, all of which have made the process a lot less stressful and painful. (Male wheelchair enabled SWD, 7)

Although the learning environment was perceived in positive terms by the majority of respondents, some SWPDs mentioned problems with physical accessibility, including parking being too far away, old buildings that were not wheelchair accessible, accessibility of forms and readability of slides. For example, one vision-impaired student explained: 'Notes are put up in PowerPoint, which is not 100 per cent fantastic with screen reader software, but it is do-able' (Female, blind SWPD, 5). In line with such comments, some staff acknowledged there were opportunities for improvement. One staff member from DRC explained:

> I don't think we have found the best way for them to access things like graphics, design and engineering and things like that, so we still have a way to go to help the people who are blind or vision-impaired. (Female DRC Staff, 1)

Echoing earlier research (Madriaga et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013; Hartley 2015), some staff conceptualised inclusion as not just making individual adjustments, but also 'bringing everybody on the same higher education journey, to have equal opportunities to access learning and teaching'. A vision-impaired academic elaborated:

Table 1. Background information of subjects ($n = 40$).

	SWPD ($n = 11$)		SWPD code 1–11		NDS ($n = 11$)		NDS code 1–11		AS ($n = 13$)		AS code 1–13		DRCS ($n = 5$)		DRCS code 1–5	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
No. of participants	7	4	2,3,4,5,8,9,11	1,6,7,10	3	8	3,5,10	1,2,4,6,7,8,9,11	6	7	1,3,4, 5, 9, 11	2,6,7,8,10,12,13	5	0	1,2,3,4,5	0
Age																
18–20	0	1		1	2	1	3,5	1								
21–25	2	0	8, 9		0	3		2,4,6								
26–30	0	1		10	1	3	10	7,8,9								
30+	5	2	2,3,4,5,11	6,7	0	1		11	6	7	1,3,4,5,9,11	2,6,7,8,10,12,13				
Education																
Postgrad	4	1	2,4,5,11	10	1	6	10	2,4,7,8,9,11								
Undergrad	3	3	3,8,9	1,6,7	2	2	3,5	1,6								
PhD+	0	0							6	7	1,3,4,5,9,11	2,6,7,8,10,12,13				
Physical disability																
Mobility	4	3	2,3,8,9	6,7,10					0	0						
Mobility/ partially blind	1	0	11						0	0						
Visual impairment	2	1	4,5	1					0	2		10, 13				
Hearing impairment	0	0							0	0						

Notes: SWPD = students with physical disabilities, NDS = non-disabled students, DRCS = disability resource centre staff, AS = academic staff.

Table 2. Measures taken for inclusive education in our case university.

Measures taken	Systemic change for inclusive education	Individual adjustment	Comment
• Recorded lectures • Powerpoint lectures, handouts uploaded online • Online tutorials	✓		Web supported learning environments harnessing technology
• Specialist welfare, learner support services • Note takers • Lab assistants • Exam hall support (desk, computer)		✓	Welfare and learner support services based on students' individual needs
• Availability of information in a range of formats (braille, sign language)	✓		
• Wheelchair accessibility to buildings, lecture theatres	✓		Improved access to wheelchair unfriendly buildings, lecture theatres, tutorial labs
• Individual LAPs		✓	Individual learning plans based on unique needs of students

> Including the visually impaired person into the general population is no longer a model that fits. That is not inclusion. That is integration. We need to think a lot more broadly about how we can make environments accessible to everyone, absolutely everyone. (Male AS, 10)

This attempt to move towards making reasonable adjustments was also reflected in the interview with staff from the DRC. They explained how they were moving away from making reasonable adjustments for individuals to being *inclusive to all,* while at the same time offering opportunities to individuals with varied needs to participate. One DRC staff member explained:

> Previously, we used to send PowerPoints to particular students with vision impairments. Now all of them are available online so we don't have to ask to make a difference to any particular students. It is there for everyone. We don't have to ask for that adjustment. (Female DRC Staff, 1)

Overall, we found that the university was committed to making the learning environment inclusive, by making attempts to design universal learning materials and support infrastructure. This corresponds with the main tenets of the social model, namely, that people are disabled by society, not their bodies. As a result, with the exception of a few students, SWPDs were satisfied with the learning environment and perceived it as inclusive. However, our findings suggest that the university's attempts to be inclusive were largely driven by the provision of support and reasonable adjustments for individual students, as shown in Table 2. As discussed below, this creates organisational and individual challenges that highlight the need to move towards becoming *inclusive to all*.

Challenge 1: too many resources create dependence

The perception among the majority of AS was that the move towards individual adjustments for heavily resourced SWPD created a sense of dependence and, sometimes, avenues for exploitation. One AS member commented: 'There should be more accountability if students enter into the LAP. I think too many of them see it as an excuse, not as resources to assist them and to learn' (Female AS, 4). Another AS member observed:

> I have often been amazed by the amount of resources the university makes available to support SWPD. I have often found it creates a further disability with many of them, in that they end up with an attitude of disability. (Female AS, 3)

This concern about students not receiving the same level of support in real-world workplaces was shared by another AS member who stated:

> They are getting, perhaps, what seemingly might be very good assistance support here. Do they still get the same level of assistance when they leave? … I don't know any job, for instance, where this person might get two signers and a scribe to support her. (Male AS, 2)

One SWPD supported this view:

> I was given too much, too many options. It would be very easy to exploit those options, take advantage of things like automatic extensions for assignments. It would be very tempting to use it, so I deliberately decided not to use it and have that on my support plan. (Male, wheelchair enabled SWD, 6)

In brief, more so than other respondents, AS perceived that offering too many resources to SWPD created a sense of dependence and could also create avenues for exploitation. This view, which may be explained by the personal views (or implicit biases) of AS towards SWD, reinforces the importance of two issues reported in earlier research. First, it highlights the need to move towards the adoption of *inclusive* instructional practices and universal designs that promote participation and access for all students *without* extensive individualised accommodation and support (Madriaga et al. 2010, 654; Lombardi, Murray, and Dallas 2013; Redpath et al. 2013). Second, it highlights the need for staff training to increase disability awareness and the adoption of inclusive instructional practices (Fuller et al. 2004; Redpath et al. 2013; Ganguly et al. 2015).

Challenge 2: staff training needs

The problems of unhelpful staff attitudes have been discussed in previous studies (Fuller et al. 2004; Redpath et al. 2013; Ganguly et al. 2015). Lombardi, Murray, and Dallas (2013, 221) suggested that 'malleable factors', such as training opportunities, positively affect faculty attitudes towards disability and help to promote universal design, which in turn encourages inclusive student participation and achievement, rather than an individualised focus. In our study, most SWPD made positive comments about AS, describing them as accommodating and flexible. However, not all of SWPD shared this view. Some SWPD described their lecturers and tutors as unhelpful and lacking in awareness about their needs, which added to their problems, as the following statements attest:

> My problems are more about teaching staff, certain unit structures or lack of skills by some staff members, which make learning difficult subjects even harder. (Female, wheelchair enabled SWPD, 9)

Likewise:

> Disability was an easy way of blaming me for problems I had in the course structure. It was quite destructive really. (Male, wheelchair enabled SWPD, 10)

While the administrative staff at the DRC had been trained in disability support, we found that there was a need for AS development. None of the academics had received training on how to interact with SWPD. Both SWPD and NDS agreed on the need for staff training; they felt there was not enough information for AS to know how to handle the needs of SWPD. AS members, however, were divided in their views. Some agreed with the need for training; for example: 'I have never received formal training. I really don't understand all the requirements and I am not up-to-date with the technology that's now emerging that can support or assist' (Male AS, 12). However, others argued that:

> Maybe training is good, but it's not necessary. I will help if I can, I will not go out of my way, bearing in mind equity of all students and doing too much for one student because they have a disability. (Male AS, 8)

Another academic commented: 'It's extra work for academics. It's something you don't get any credit for' (Male AS, 6). When asked about the need to create awareness about SWPD, the perception among AS was that awareness was already there, as reflected in the integration and acceptance of SWPD by

staff and students. 'Too much awareness is as bad as too little' was a common response. For example: 'Awareness creation could be counterproductive – that's the other thing: you don't want to stigmatise SWPD on the grounds that they take up a great deal of time' (Male AS, 6).

Challenge 3: low representation of SWPD

In line with the findings of other studies (Matthews 2009; Ganguly et al. 2015), respondents informed us that few students with visible physical disabilities were seen in the university. Reflecting on their own experiences, some AS said that they were aware of students with visible disabilities who had not registered with the DRC. Multiple reasons were cited, including lack of awareness about the DRC, too much information creating an overload, the stigma attached to having a disability and the issue of acceptance within the mainstream group. The following comments from AS members are representative:

> Maybe they are not aware of DRC and what it does; the opportunities available to them or maybe students are marginalised for having a disability. They don't want that. (Male AS, 8)

> When they join university there is information overload. They are not too sure where to go and a few of them came to me and said, 'will that affect my studies?' 'Will there be a stigma attached?' And I said 'no, it's between you and DRC and the lecturer and nothing will go beyond that, it's confidential'. (Female AS, 1)

> There are social barriers. It might be difficult for someone to be accepted into a group if they turn up in somebody's house in a wheelchair. (Female AS, 5)

> People don't want to feel separated out by being treated completely differently. (Male AS, 2)

These explanations for why some SWPD did not register with the DRC were supported by SWPDs themselves. One student with vision impairment spoke about inclusiveness and stereotyping:

> There is an attitude component to it … This is how this disability is viewed in society … there are times, from my experience, when I have been in the shop and people speak louder, well, I can't see but I can hear perfectly. (Female, blind SWPD, 5)

This statement exemplifies the attitudinal barriers and stereotypes that people with disabilities face in their everyday life, as explained by the social model of disability. Representing similar views, an AS member with vision impairment explained that some SWD chose not to disclose their disability owing to society's attitude. He argued that 'there doesn't need to be special treatment for one lot of people and not for the other. To disclose a disability to the university sets up a thing about the identity of that person' (Male AS, 13). He continued:

> Can I put it to you like this? A person who's from a low socioeconomic background doesn't need to disclose something special to the DRC but a person with a disability is encouraged to, and then we get a learning access plan. But what about all the other people who can't necessarily access work? (Male AS, 13)

This demonstrates that societal barriers not only still exist, but also that they 'disable' people. This thus reflects the arguments of the social model of disability – that attitudinal, communication, and social environments need to change to enable people living with impairments to participate in society on an equal basis. It also pinpoints the ways in which SWPD are speaking up about their needs and sharing their observations about the environment they find themselves in when they identify as disabled.

Our findings suggested that SWPD were well-accepted by other NDS and that NDS were willing to work with SWPD. However, some NDS mentioned feeling unsure about how to interact with SWPD respectfully without offending them; some were unsure about how to approach SWPD. Most NDS valued the opportunity to work with SWPD, viewing it as personally enriching. The following comments from NDS are representative of such views:

> I don't think we know how to integrate with them or what their needs are. (Male NDS, 11)

> I would presume their physical disability would not make them any less competent to achieve high grades … They may have different life experiences and skills that they could bring to the group. (Female NDS, 10)

Such views were supported by SWPD:

> Because of my positive experiences of being included in the learning environment, if fieldwork or placement comes up, I have no doubt that I will be able to get help if I require it. (Female, wheelchair enabled SWD, 8)

These comments suggest that, even though acceptance among mainstream students was perceived by SWPD as one of the underlying reasons for not registering with the DRC, staff, students, and the learning environment were generally supportive of them. Non-acceptance did not emerge in the interviews as an issue.

Challenge 4: moving inclusion beyond education and into employment

The view that education makes SWPD confident and aware of their strengths and weaknesses in terms of strategically positioning themselves for future job opportunities was shared by all respondents. However, they all agreed that the employment sector is not as accommodating as the education sector. As one AS member explained:

> It is possible to get an education. Then you go out and actually try to find a professional job. It is really hard in this country and even harder for individuals with a disability of some sort. It is very steeped in neoliberal traditions. (Male AS, 13)

Consequently, universities were identified as having an important role to play in preparing SWPD for a competitive environment. Both students and academics questioned the role of the university in making SWPD ready for professional life. For example, one AS commented that 'students get very good assistance and support here', but 'do they still get that same level of assistance when they leave or are in jobs?' Other AS voiced similar concerns:

> Does that mean that we have to look at things a little bit differently? Yes, it's great to provide support, but do we need to provide, not just support, but a mechanism for how they can support themselves in the real world with a level of resourcing that might be less than what they might be able to acquire here? (Female AS, 2)

A number of factors were identified that could be changed to improve the employment prospects of SWPD. For example, it was suggested that the skills and confidence of SWPD could be developed through networks and educational events, mentors could be provided to share their experiences and professional challenges could be embedded in the teaching and learning space. Stressing the need for developing the skills of SWPD, one AS member explained:

> You are not going to have a carer with you in the workplace to take notes for you. You need to be developing skills to do these things yourselves. Even if you are doing it poorly or badly, at least you are doing it yourself. (Male AS, 8)

In line with such comments, SWPD also stressed the need for arrangements between universities and the employment sector so that the needs of students trying to enter the workforce were considered. SWPD also talked about forging stronger links between the employment sector and the university, linking students with industry and creating internships and networking opportunities. Importantly, the need for skills development was highlighted as an area of concern in the 2013 Australian University Student Experience Survey (Koshy and Seymour 2015). Our findings suggest that inclusion in HE needs to extend beyond universities to the workplace and that more needs to be done to integrate SWPD into the workforce once they leave university.

Discussion and conclusion

Incorporating the voices of SWPD, as well as the perspectives of NDS, AS, and staff from a DRC, our aim was to undertake a holistic study from individual and organisational perspectives, focusing on the

inclusivity of the learning environment in an Australian HE institution. In line with earlier studies conducted in the UK (Healey et al. 2006; Madriaga et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013), our findings suggest that our case study institution is moving away from making *individual reasonable adjustments* towards inclusive education, providing all students with an equal chance of success by making environments accessible. This is evidenced in numerous ways; for example, through the institution's attempts to make learning resources accessible through recorded lectures and handouts uploaded online; online tutorials that leverage technology; making information available in a range of formats, such as Braille or Sign Language; and addressing physical barriers with wheelchair friendly buildings and lecture theatre access (see Table 2). The social model of disability, which suggests the SWD face barriers because they are 'negotiating an environment that is not designed for them' underpins this move (Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson 2004, 642). However, despite these achievements towards inclusive education, we found that the university is still largely driven to provide individual reasonable adjustments, particularly in relation to learner support services (see Table 2). As each student's position is unique (Redpath et al. 2013), this is understandable; a generic solution will not cover everyone. However, our findings highlight the challenges associated with individual adjustments, suggesting the need to move towards inclusive education *for all* – but with room for individualised treatment for exceptional cases.

Our findings highlight four key challenges associated with inclusivity in the learning environment that, we argue, can be addressed with the move towards inclusive education: resources creating dependence, insufficient staff training, low representation of students with visible disabilities, and poor links between education and employment. Two of these challenges – staff training and low representation of SWDs – are reported in earlier findings (Fuller et al. 2004; Redpath et al. 2013; Ganguly et al. 2015) and can be addressed by inclusive education for all; as in an inclusive environment, SWD would not need special attention or support which would then eliminate the necessity to disclose their disability. The move towards inclusive education corresponds with the social model of disability, which recommends changing society and environments to accommodate people who live with impairment, rather than changing individuals with impairment to accommodate society. The remaining two challenges also offer insights that can be addressed by inclusive education for all. The perception, expressed mainly by AS, that too many resources create dependencies among SWPD, reinforces the need to move towards the use of *inclusive* instructional practices that promote participation and access for all students, including SWD (Madriaga et al. 2010, 654; Lombardi, Murray, and Dallas 2013; Redpath et al. 2013). As inclusive education caters to the needs of all students, it provides an environment that promotes open access and equal participation opportunities. Rather than focusing on costly individual adjustments, a move towards inclusive education is likely to free up resources that could be used to develop the skills of all students, including SWPD, to prepare for employment. Enabling SWPD to participate in internships, networking events, and mentoring is also likely to produce beneficial results. Currently, employability is not the main focus in inclusive education; other issues, such as support and making education accessible, take precedence. However, we argue that the employability of SWPD requires greater attention.

While our findings suggest that HE has increased the confidence and self-esteem levels of SWPD, more can be done to develop their professional capabilities. A holistic approach to inclusive education is suggested, with embedded skills development and employability to benefit all students. However, for inclusive education to translate effectively into the employment sector, the boundaries of the HE institution need to expand; this highlights the necessity for an inclusive workplace that is 'representative of the wider community and values the knowledge, skills and experiences that people with disabilities bring to their learning, ultimately becoming places where people with disabilities can flourish' (Hartley 2015, 413).

Our study makes several contributions to institutional inclusive policy and praxis. First, it adds to the literature of HE inclusion by suggesting the need to gradually move away from reasonable individual adjustments towards inclusive education for all. Underpinned by the social model of disability, this finding corresponds with earlier studies that suggest similar moves (Healey et al. 2006; Madriaga et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013). We extend these findings by highlighting how individual

adjustments lead to different challenges related to staff and allocation of resources to develop SWPD, both personally and professionally. We argue that a move towards inclusive education helps to address these challenges and highlight the need to embed employability and skills development in all aspects of teaching and learning. Our findings stress that, for inclusive education to translate effectively into the workplace, the boundaries of HE need to expand and inclusive workplaces that value the knowledge, skills, and experiences of SWPD need to be created.

Second, our study contributes to the literature on inclusivity in HE for SWPD in the Australian context. Although studies on the experiences of disabled students in the HE sector have been conducted in the UK and Europe (Fuller et al. 2004; Madriaga et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013), studies in Australia have focused on school-aged students, specifically those with mental and learning disabilities. There are limited studies in HE that focus on SWPD. Our study is one of the few that focus on the growing number of SWPD in the Australian HE context. Our findings are useful for both policy and praxis, as they highlight the need to prepare SWPD for the workplace, and reinforce the need to take everyone on the same inclusive journey in HE.

Finally, existing studies have tended to focus on the perspectives of SWD. Few studies have incorporated multiple perspectives. Our study overcomes this lacuna, not only at the individual level of analysis (as a study of perceptions of SWPD), but also at the level of stakeholder analysis. It investigates inclusivity in the learning environment from both the individual student and organisational perspectives, using the voices of SWPD students, NDS, AS, and administrative staff working in a DRC. Using multiple perspectives enabled us to view the inclusivity of learning environments holistically, and to develop insights into practices that inform policy. Future studies can build upon these insights. However, as our study focuses on students with physical disability only, we acknowledge that findings may be different for other forms of disability, such as students with mental or learning disabilities. Therefore, we stress the need to replicate this study with students having different forms of disability to provide a holistic picture of inclusion in HE.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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