

An investigation into the supports for students with disabilities whilst on practice placement.

Introduction

In the Republic of Ireland the number of students with disabilities attending third level has risen from 450 in 2000, to over 7,947 in 2012 (AHEAD 2012). These figures highlight the increasing need to develop appropriate supports for these students with disabilities on professional courses as suggested by Andre and Manson (2004).

A need has been identified within this HEI, as issues and concerns have been highlighted by both students with disabilities and practice education staff in relation to professional placements. Professional placements demand standards of competency and proficiency which can present barriers for student with disabilities. Disability officers have been increasingly requested to assist with the provision of reasonable accommodations within the placement environment to support students with disabilities, but little is known about the issues and concerns both students with disabilities face on placement as well as the concerns and needs of the staff supporting these students. There appears to be no studies carried out within the Irish context exploring the needs for stakeholders in supporting students with disabilities including the students themselves. It is for this reason, this study was carried out to firstly investigate the needs of students with disabilities on placement as well as investigating the concerns and issues for practice educators in the provision of professional placements for students with disabilities on professional courses.

Aim

The aim of this study was to establish: 1. the concerns around disclosure; 2. the support for practice education staff and 3. the support for students with disabilities. A further aim was to establish; 4. what obstacles students with disabilities encountered on placement and 5. how students were included in the planning process for placement. Additionally, the practice education staff were asked about their training needs for supporting students with disabilities on placement.

Methodology

Study Design:

A quantitative approach using a survey design (Kielhofner & Fossey 2006) was employed to address the aims of the study. Two surveys were specifically designed for this study; the first for **practice educators** and the second for **students with disabilities** registered with the College Disability Service. The surveys had a mixture of both closed and open-ended questions related to the topics of disclosure, concerns, planning process for placement, reasonable accommodations, training and support needs of practice education staff and obstacles encountered by the students on placement. Forced choice questions, Likert scales and opportunity to comment questions were used to gather and collate the data so respondents could elaborate upon their answers. These surveys were hosted on **SurveyMonkey Inc.** in order to reach the large and geographically scattered target population.

Ethical Considerations:

This research received ethical approval from the University of Dublin, Faculty of Health Science Ethics Committee.

Recruitment:

There were 2 participant groups; practice educators and students with disabilities. An independent gatekeeper was used to circulate the information on the study and the appropriate survey link.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data from both surveys were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences V.19 (SPSS) and were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative descriptive analysis (Neergaard, et al., 2009) was employed to analysis the qualitative data that emerged from the key questions in each of the surveys.

Results

The results be presented in two parts; Section One will focus on the findings from the practice educators (PEs) (n=68) and section two will focus on the results from the surveys completed by the students with disabilities (n=63).

Section One: Practice Educators

Demographics

Demographics: 68 PEs responded, 82% of whom were female, and 18% male. Of the PEs that responded, 73.13% (n=49) had between two and ten years' experience of working as a PE. 66.7% (n=46) had experience of supervising a student with a disability.

Planning

PEs were asked if they had a choice in facilitating a student with a disability, of the 41 respondents to this question, 87.8% (n=36) said 'no', while only 12.2% (n=5) said 'yes'. The majority of PEs perceived that all students with disabilities/impairments would require some level of reasonable accommodation and that it should be tailored to the individual. When asked if they planned in collaboration with the student and HEI staff in preparation for the placement, 41.5% (n=17) stated 'yes' while 58.5% (n=24) said 'no'.

Disclosure

PEs were asked if any students disclosed a disability to them during their placement, of the 40 respondents, 57.5% (n=23) stated that students had disclosed a disability during the placement which they found 'very beneficial', while 42.5% (n=17) did not disclose a disability.

Concerns

PEs were asked to describe any concerns relating to the supervision of a student with a disability. Three main concerns emerged from their qualitative comments, which are illustrated in figure 1.

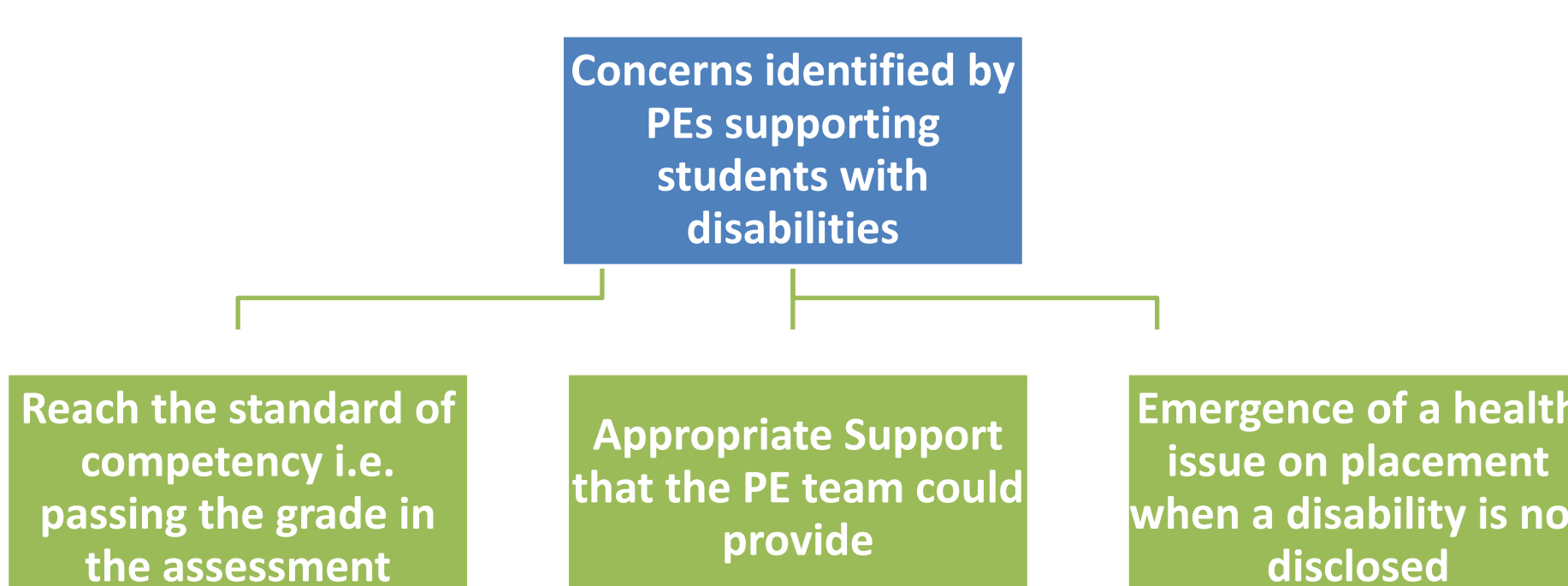


Figure 1. Concerns of Practice Educators when supervising a student with a disability

Reach the Standard: Whether or not the student is able to 'do the job' and manage 'duty of care' was a significant concern for practice educators in placement environments; **'Are they able to carry out the day to day duties (physical requirements, communication with patients and other staff) commonly encountered on placement and for future as a working professional?'**

Appropriate Support: Another concern identified was how to determine the level of support while addressing the need to reach professional standards.

'At times I have concerns that accommodations don't reflect the requirements that will be in place after placement - impact on patient care.'

Emergence of a health issue:

PE's expressed uncertainty about how to manage when a mental health difficulty emerged for the student: **'Where things really begin to break down is usually when the disability is not disclosed and is then disclosed mid-placement.'**

Section Two: Students with Disabilities

Demographics: 63 students with disabilities on professional courses completed the survey from a sample of 251 students in total registered on professional courses with the Disability Service, giving a response rate of 40%. The largest cohorts represented in the study were students with SpLDs (29.5%), Significant On-going Illness (23%), and Mental Health Difficulties (21.3%).

Planning

The students were asked a number of questions around planning for placement.

		% of students responses	Numbers (n=) of students
Did you have an opportunity to discuss disability specific needs with a staff member prior to placement? (n=50)	Yes	32%	16
	No	68%	34
Did you have a choice in where you were placed? (n=50)	Yes	28%	14
	No	72%	36
Did you have an opportunity to prepare/plan for placement with the department/school staff?	Yes	54%	27
	No	46%	23
Did you discuss placement with your Disability Officer before placement commenced?	Yes	20%	10
	No	80%	41
At any point during your course, from registration up to completing a placement, were you asked to complete a health self-declaration form or formally disclose a medical condition or disability?	Yes	58%	30
	No	42%	22

In preparation for placement, four students maintained that they needed to know their own limitations of their disability. Seven students identified that they engaged in pre-reading before placement. A strategy students with disabilities used to manage placement was to be organised. **'A site visit to familiarise with the setting'** **'Planning the journey and doing a "dummy run"'**

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to examine the concerns and issues for practice education staff related to professional placements and students with disabilities, through the use of a survey. The main results indicated that PEs either did not receive a LENS or if they did, they maintained that it was more academically focused and not useful for professional practice. The concerns of the PEs were related to the student with a disability not reaching the standard of professional competency required; the LENS report not being provided and when it was; it not being relevant to the placement. Additionally, the non-disclosure of a disability prior to the placement; which affected their ability to provide reasonable accommodations and the emergence of a mental health issue during the placement were identified as further concerns.

PEs expressed a need for further training in supporting students with disabilities on placement, to understand how to devise and implement reasonable accommodations which could in turn feed into the LENS report thus bridging the gap between academic learning and professional placement supports.

A further recommendation for the PE staff would be that they provide a job description to students prior to placement which would enable students with disabilities to understand the demands of that particular placement and better support them

Students expressed particular concern and anticipation related to negative attitudes they might encounter whilst on placement and therefore choose not to disclose a disability. Attitudes within professions to disability need to be challenged and debated as perhaps professions are not as open to disabilities as they think. Students in this study did not discuss their placement and their needs with the HEI staff prior to the placement, therefore a future recommendation would be that students need to be encouraged to plan for their placement and to discuss their disability with the relevant HEI staff thus allowing reasonable accommodations to be put in place prior to the commencement of the placement. Additionally, students need training and skill building in knowing how and when to disclose.

As we move forward in supporting students with disabilities on their professional placements, a clearer pathway needs to be developed for staff and students when they disclose during a placement. The issue of when something is considered a health issue versus when it is a disability issue needs further debate as emerging health issues on placement are a challenge for practice educators.

To conclude, this study has highlighted a number of important issues that need to be addressed to enhance the experience of students with disabilities on professional courses. More debate between HEIs and the practice education providers needs to occur to challenge some of the issues raised within this study in relation to attitudes to disability and the assessment of competency. Better policy provision and procedures around accommodating students with disabilities need to be developed in conjunction with students, HEI staff and the placement settings. Support processes need to be more closely examined within each of the professional courses in order to tailor reasonable accommodations for each individual student..

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