

Chapter 4

Inherent Requirements and Social Work Education: Issues of Access and Equity

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to contribute to addressing issues of access and equity in social work education for people with mental health disabilities. The objective is to carefully consider the introduction of inherent requirements in universities, and particularly in relation to social work education, in Australia. A targeted review of relevant literature including legislation, policy, and practice standards frameworks identifies the parameters of inherent requirements and possible areas of discrimination. Consideration of the use of inherent requirements in social work education is from a human rights social justice perspective that acknowledges the strength and resources of people and communities and actively advocates for the protection of disability rights.

INTRODUCTION

The generation of knowledge through research is not a neutral activity. What is investigated, how and by whom is intrinsically political and invites the question, what is the purpose of this inquiry? This is particularly true when it comes to studies which serve to delineate the terms on which historically oppressed groups are to be granted access to mainstream activities. As I consider literature relating to the participation of “mad” students in tertiary education I believe that it is essential for me to clearly state my own experience, position and purposes.

I am a person whose life and perspectives have been fundamentally shaped by the experience of disability, both physical and psychological. Furthermore, I have worked as an advocate within the tertiary sector and in an organisation which has encouraged me to dedicate myself to actively fighting against discrimination alongside students with disability. My approach to research comes from an originally Marxist understanding of how experience is shaped through social processes of class based oppression,

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deepened by the application of critical disability studies to understand how the material experience of living within a 'disabled' body/mind is mediated by discourses, physical and social structures which serve to limit and marginalise the participation (and perspective) of those who deviate from a medicalised 'norm'. For me, the purpose of scholarship is to take a side and consciously work to develop tools for change.

The management of disability within the western tertiary sector is a complex and contested space (Bessant, 2012). Despite the rights of students with disabilities being protected by legislation, critical authors have noted that university practices focus on short term individualised accommodation, within existing educational practices, at the expense of change towards a more truly inclusive system (Jung, 2003; Meacham, Tandy, Giddings, Vodde, Curington, Morris, & Holliman, 2004). From a disability rights perspective, disability is tolerated on the proviso that individual students comply with institutionalised rituals and norms within a system which often considers 'it' to pose a threat to underlying academic and professional standards (Poole, Jivraj, Arslanian, Bellows, Chiasson, Hakimy, Pasini, & Reid, 2012; Price, 2011; Quinn, Wilson, MacIntyre, & Tinklin, 2009).

A growing trend with Australian universities has been to articulate statements of 'inherent requirements' in order to help programs define their standards in relation to disability (Brett, Harvey, Funston, Spicer, & Wood, 2016). To date these statements have received little critical scrutiny despite their apparently pivotal significance in drawing boundaries to inclusion (McNaught, 2013). Whether these statements will act as a platform for more inclusive practice or create further rationales for limiting the participation of students with disabilities remains to be determined.

The literature review in this chapter provides a background for an investigation into the potential impact of the statements in social work, a discipline with both a long history of managing 'unsuitable' behaviour and an active commitment to inclusive and empowering practice (Meacham, Tandy, Giddings, Vodde, Curington, Morris, & Holliman, 2004). It provides an overview of disability accommodation within the Australian university sector with a particular focus on the experience of students with depression and anxiety, amongst the most prevalent disabilities on campus, which are also often unaccommodated by disability support systems due to low disclosure rates and structural barriers to support (Markoulakis, 2014; Martin, 2010). The review concludes by examining social work's literature on professional suitability and critiques of its practices regarding mental health.

BACKGROUND

The Australian Tertiary Education Sector

The preceding three decades have been a time of significant structural change in Australian higher education (Watts, 2016). Reforms have caused an expansion in student enrolments and the number of public universities (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016). Public providers now face direct competition from private colleges and within a globalised marketplace, for fee paying international student enrolments necessary to maintain institutional budgets in the face of reductions in government funding (Marginson, 2006). A key reform has been to link tertiary education to labour market outcomes and universities have refocused teaching away from disciplines such as liberal arts into vocational and professionally focused programs (Watts, 2016). This can add another level of regulatory complexity as programs also have to teach towards accreditation standards set by professional qualifying bodies (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016; McNaught, 2013).

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