

Coming Ready Or Not: Are New Zealand Tertiary Institutions Ready For Those With Significant Impairments?

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Abstract

New Zealand has adopted the inclusive education pathway as the preferred option in the education of students with impairments. Despite the enactment of legislation and promulgation of wide reaching policy documents and codes of practice, many of the provisions and best practice standards presented, remain to be implemented by post-compulsory education institutions. As a result, significant barriers are being encountered by those with major intellectual and developmental impairments in being able to access and successfully complete post compulsory education courses and programmes. We propose the development of an action plan as a first step in the pathway towards a fully inclusive post compulsory (tertiary) learning environment.

Keywords

Inclusive education; disability; post-compulsory education; tertiary education; autism; developmental disabilities

“Disability is in society, not me, I have the right to dignity, to develop my potential, to use my qualities and skills.” Quote from *New Zealand Disability Strategy 2001* (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001).

Introduction

In 1994, at a UNESCO world conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality (UNESCO 1994), the term ‘Inclusive Education’ was adopted. This phenomenon, which has rapidly gained world-wide focus and attention, is a social movement against exclusion in education (Slee & Alan, 2005). Inclusive education is based on the restructuring of educational facilities and means of delivery. It is not focussed on remediating perceived deficits or impairments within students, nor is it focused on assimilating diverse students into education institutions or programmes (Ballard 1999; Slee 2001). The overwhelming thrust of inclusive education is to overcome the barriers to participation by students and in particular those students who have historically been excluded or marginalised from centres of learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Of all the groups that have faced such discrimination, disabled people are by far the largest of groups excluded and marginalised from equality and quality education today (UNESCO, 2005). The term ‘disabled’ is used in accordance with the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* where it is defined as “the process which happens when one group of people create barriers by designing a world only for their way of living, taking no account of the impairments other people have” (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001).

New Zealand government policy proposed a preferred pathway, based on the inclusive education model when it released the Special Education 2000 policy. This established a goal to create an inclusive education system by the year 2000. However, more recent research (Higgins et al, 2008), has been somewhat critical of the government for not embarking on this path even though it has led to an increased number of students with disabilities studying alongside their peers in regular schools and classrooms. While not yet supported by formal studies, we believe that this is likely lead to increased expectations of students who are disabled, that they will be able to study at tertiary level alongside their peers and that they will receive support to meet their potential. In discussions between the authors, and parents of disabled children, it appears a dream of some parents their adult children will have the opportunity to study at tertiary level, obtain employment and maximise their levels of independence.

This will present some major challenges for tertiary education institutions, particularly in relation to students with very high needs. Traditional models of tertiary education will not be appropriate in creating inclusive learning environments where barriers to participation and learning need to be identified and broken down. Similarly, inclusive tertiary education will require a ‘shift in thinking’ particularly in relation to the role of those who teach there, and their attitudes and beliefs in relation to the rights of disabled students.

Sadly it has been informally reported that many disabled candidates have encountered barriers right at the enrolment stage at some tertiary institutions, where teaching staff do not expect to have individuals with serious disability in their classes and appear to have had little or no training in the teaching and management of students they will teach. Typical barriers that have been reported by discussions with parents and the students (Armstrong, personal communication, 15 March 2008) include:

- Entry is competitive to this course and it is unlikely s/he will ever meet the entry criteria

- S/he has to work at the same level as other students and no special help can be given
- This course is full time and there is no provision for part time study
- We do not provide the level of personal care you would need to study here and so you will have to organise extra support and meet those costs yourself.

The level and extent of typical barriers being encountered needs to be thoroughly researched in the New Zealand tertiary education sector.

Legislation, standards, policy and inclusive education

Prior to 1989, there was no legislation in New Zealand protecting the rights of disabled students to attend the local neighbourhood schools. The enactment of the *Education Act 1989* was the first statute to guarantee that right with Section 8 of the Act stating that those with special education needs were to have the same right to enrol and receive the same level of education as other students. This wide-reaching requirement makes it illegal to exclude any student from all or part of any educational activities enjoyed by other students on the grounds of their disability. The New Zealand *Human Rights Act 1993* and the *Bill of Rights Act 1990* protect the rights of disabled people in all aspects of society. New Zealand is also signatory to a number of UN conventions on the rights of the child and more recently, the rights of disabled people, which promote a better quality of life than previously enjoyed for disabled people in terms of accessing appropriate education, living and support in society.

In 2001, the Minister for Disability Issues promulgated the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (Minster for Disability Issues, 2001). While this is not part of any formal legislation, it is expected that government departments and institutions which receive funds from the government will progressively implement this strategy. Objective three of the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* is pertinent to the tertiary institutions:

Provide the best education for disabled people

Action 3.8 proposes:

Improve post compulsory education options for disabled including:

- *Promoting best practice*
- *Providing career guidance*
- *Increasing lifelong opportunities for learning*
- *Better aligning financial support with educational opportunities*

Following the above strategy, the Tertiary Education Commission (of New Zealand) published *New Zealand Code of Practice for an Inclusive Tertiary Education Environment for Students with Impairments* (TEC., 2004). This comprehensive document established visions and best practice standards under the following academic and general educational processes:

- *Recruitment, selection, admission and enrolment*
- *Access to general and specialist services*
- *Funding and withdrawal*
- *Services for Maori (New Zealand indigenous population)*
- *Access to buildings facilities and equipment (physical environment)*
- *Teaching and learning*
- *Examinations and assessment*
- *Staff development*
- *Complaint and appeal procedures*
- *Monitoring and evaluation*

Staff attitudes, delivery of teaching, and the ability to learn feature prominently in the above code of practice. This policy document proposes a vision that all academic programmes are

accessible to students with impairments and staff design and implement appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Under the proposed best practice standards, there are to be no unnecessary barriers to access participation and achievement for students with impairments. Teaching staff are to receive necessary support and training. They are to employ strategies and reasonable accommodations to make delivery of courses and programmes as inclusive as possible without compromising essential quality standards. Students with impairments are to have, where possible, the same access as regular students to vocational placements, including field trips work placements and study aboard. Support and guidance are required to access and complete research programmes. Specific transition strategies and procedures are required to assist students with impairment to progress to higher studies or employment.

Staff development is identified as an important aspect in the creation of inclusive tertiary education environments. The *New Zealand Code of Practice for an Inclusive Tertiary Education Environment for Students with Impairments* (TEC, 2004) also proposes a vision that staff development initiatives include disability, and that staff members have the knowledge and skills to work effectively to create a fully inclusive environment. The underlying best practice standards require resourcing and encouragement of staff to attend disability training as part of their development and induction programmes. Expertise including that of people with impairments and their carers families are to be actively incorporated in training and be adequately reimbursed. Staff are to have access on an ongoing basis to resource information about creating an inclusive environment and be supported both internally and externally. Applicants for appointments, promotion, advancement and so forth, are required to demonstrate evidence of appropriate responsiveness and attitudes to students with impairments. Finally, strategies are to be developed and implemented which evaluate the knowledge or skills of staff to effectively work with people with impairments.

Another important initiative of direct relevance to inclusive tertiary education is the *New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline* (Ministry of Health & Ministry of Education, 2008). This initiative was developed as a result of extensive consultation and in response to the very special needs of this significant group, experiencing varying levels of impairment within the autistic spectrum of disorders (ASD). Recommendation 5.1.3 of the guideline states that further post secondary/compulsory education should be an option for all people regardless of ability or level of impairment. People with ASD have the potential to have satisfying and rewarding experiences in further education regardless of their intellectual level.

The *New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline* proposes a wide range of strategies for students with ASD when transitioning them into further education and for ongoing support. This guideline suggests that some of the support needed may be available through existing disability coordination or student services, but admits that where necessary services are deficient, the support needed may have to be organised from other sources. However, the guideline proposes a wide range of support strategies which include vocational counselling, buddies/guides or peer support for the first year, access to practical resources (rest, study rooms and computer access) mentoring, counselling (to deal with the social demands of tertiary life), one-on-one peer tutoring or assistance, the reformatting of course materials, note takers or videotaping of lectures and support with examinations (Ministry of Health & Ministry of Education, 2008). In addition, the guideline quotes a National Autistic Society (UK) guideline for Asperger's syndrome (Powell 2002) which includes the establishment and dissemination of clear learning outcomes, class rules and behavioural expectations at the beginning of each course. This UK guideline proposes the use of a clearly defined and standardised framework for each session and to state clearly the objectives and specific learning outcomes in order to enable students to clearly establish their learning routines. Specific advice is recommended in assisting a student to stay on task by reminding them that

the task at hand is an important step in developing their knowledge together with the provision of short breaks in long sessions or when the student experiences difficulty or anxiety.

Extra support may be necessary for individuals with high levels of need on the autistic spectrum where serious impairments in speech, verbal and non verbal communication are major issues along with obsessive compulsive behaviours as they can take a high level of skill to effectively manage and disseminate information to them. Those that are adversely affected by the noise generated in a busy interactive learning space may prefer the solitude of a quiet non-stimulating learning space. It is clear that autism specific training will be needed to all those involved in the teaching and support and inclusion of these students if they don't have the requisite knowledge. As reported by Paul (2003), a programme involving a group of students undertaking to provide support to the child with a disability found the programme to be inadequate on its own without ASD-specific education and support for peers.

The highlighting of deficiencies in post compulsory educational support by the *New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline* (Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, 2008) has to be considered a serious issue. It is our view that this could constitute a discriminatory practice under Human Rights Act 1993 and a breach of any equal opportunities provisions if necessary student support has to be obtained from outside sources due to deficiencies in support services provided by the educational institution. It will then depend on the ability of the student and their families to provide a high level of support and resources themselves or meet substantial additional costs of providing the support necessary.

While not yet supported by formal investigation or research, anecdotally, it appears that many of the best practice standards and recommendations proposed in the above platforms are yet to be implemented in the New Zealand tertiary education sector. Based on the authors' personal experiences and through their discussions with fellow academics from other tertiary institutions, concerted efforts in academic staff development appear minimal except for occasional seminars with little incentive for staff to attend. There appears only minimal recognition in performance appraisals of staff who willingly undertake such development. Because this is anecdotal evidence, there is urgent need for research into this important area. While there appears to be little evidence that many tertiary institutions and staff have fully embraced the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* and the *New Zealand Code of Practice for an Inclusive Tertiary Education Environment for Students with Impairments* (TEC., 2004), tertiary institutions, however, have engaged disability support co-ordinators and these dedicated personnel, generally do the best they can with scarce resources. Universities, in particular, have clung to inflexible and inefficient procedures and appear reluctant to investigate, trial and implement more flexible and innovative alternatives.

One example which consumes a major part of the disability co-ordination resource is the arrangement of reader/writer persons for students unable to write examination scripts without assistance. We maintain the view that this is an inflexible, cumbersome, inefficient and time-consuming approach. Personnel who are employed as reader/writers have informally reported to us that sometimes they do not have knowledge in many of the disciplines in which the students are being examined. Examples outlined are mathematical or chemical equations in scientific disciplines, which can present a considerable level of difficulty in writing the examination script. An alternative, worthy of development, is the direct assessment of such students by the examiner at the same time the written examinations are being held, if this is possible. Tertiary institutions often require course coordinators and those responsible for setting and marking examinations to be readily able to be contacted during the duration of

examinations, to respond to queries and unforeseen problems which cannot be resolved by the examination room supervisors. It therefore seems appropriate that they could be involved in the direct examination of students with impairments at that time. Examiners would need a set of assessment tools, guidance and initial support from education experts to ensure that they were assessing these students fairly and equitably in relation to others completing examination scripts. Problems of lack of necessary knowledge of a third party (reader/writer) would be completely dispelled with such a direct approach. Indeed an examiner could argue that each student directly assessed is one less written script s/he has to mark later on. From this point alone it could lend itself favourably to a buy-in by academic staff. Most of all, it would greatly free up disability coordination services to attend to other pressing issues. While we have no direct evidence of this assessment approach being adopted overseas, there are many initiatives are being developed as platforms and policies in the provision of inclusive learning environments. A number of initiatives can be found in the report by Hughson et al (2004-5).

The whole thrust of the inclusive education model emphasises that candidates with impairments must not be expected to fit in or adapt to existing modes of education which are unsuitable for them. It means that they must have equal opportunities to be able to learn in a mode that they can manage and this could mean a level of support of them and around their learning. The implications for many tertiary institutions are immense. It will mean that academic staff will have to buy into this and not think that the placement of a disabled student in their class has little to do with them. A respondent in the public consultation to develop the *New Zealand Code of Practice for an Inclusive Tertiary Education Environment* suggested that some lecturers have a 'not in my class mentality' (TEC., 2004). This has also been well demonstrated in individual cases where it is reported that many academic staff do not expect to have to teach students with impairments. Many tertiary staff, unlike those from the education and allied disciplines such as psychology, speech language therapy, music therapy and others involved in general disability issues, appear to have had no training at all in the delivery of education to these individuals. They perhaps see their research as of greater priority, with teaching duties following. Many are chosen on their competence in the discipline they teach, not in the discipline of teaching. As the *New Zealand Code of Practice for an Inclusive Tertiary Education Environment* (TEC., 2004) and the *New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline* (Ministry of Health & Ministry of Education, 2008) strongly advocate, staff will need training (as happens now for school teachers) in the management and education of those with impairments.

Many of the strategies that are helpful for people with impairments have been found to support 'typical' learners. It can be strongly argued that strategies proposed by the *New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline* such as establishing clear learning outcomes and adopting a clear and standardised framework for each session will not only benefit students with ASD but other students with impairment and even the student cohort as a whole. The use of a variety of tools in the tertiary education system needs to be thoroughly explored in the New Zealand tertiary education settings. Staff who are to have such individuals placed in their classes or cohorts may need to undergo some training and dedicate time to the preparation of resources and learning new methods of delivery. Many staff will no doubt feel that this is yet another time consuming duty placed on their heads by the institution, which could be detrimental to their academic careers if it takes them away from other required duties such as research. Tertiary institutions will have to make this a priority in the performance and assessment of such staff in recognition that it will involve a considerable commitment of time and energy, particularly in the early stages when resources are being developed and teaching strategies are being implemented and perfected.

Government too has many more responsibilities besides the promulgation of law standards and guidelines which it is bound to do by virtue of being signatories to international conventions involving disabled people. It is unrealistic to expect that tertiary institutions can implement such a level of teaching programmes and management of disabled people and receive no additional funding, resources or support. A serious anomaly that must be addressed is the lack of the Ongoing Resourcing and Renewable Scheme (ORRS) funding initiatives that exists for educational support of the most needy students in all other levels of education. Based on individual assessment of high and very high needs school students, funds are provided by the Ministry of Education for educational support workers and expert teachers to support the inclusion of disabled students. This can be used to provide one-on-one assistance with personal care needs, and expert input / advice to the school or early childhood centre in the education, support and inclusion of the individual. An ORRS funded student can stay at school and receive ORRS funding until 21 years of age, yet this fund is not transferable to any tertiary institution even if the candidate is under 21. It seems ludicrous to keep a person at school, when those funds could be well used by a tertiary institution in the education and support of that individual. It will be essential for tertiary institutions to work with government agencies to ensure that additional funding or resources can be accessed for students studying at the tertiary level.

Research into the inclusion of disabled students in compulsory education settings shows that parents desire a quality life for their children and are not be pleased to be told when trying to enrol their son or daughter that the institution is unable to offer the support s/he needs (Kearney, 2009). It seems likely therefore, that the same will apply in relation to tertiary settings. Parents of disabled students will wish for equal access to tertiary education for their children, and for the focus of the enrolment process to concentrate on their abilities and not their impairments. If results of research into disabled students access (or lack thereof) to the compulsory education sector is anything to go by, parents will wish for meaningful discussion about how their children can be placed, the support that could be given and also what they as parents could do to assist in their education. While there is a lack of research evidence in the area of access to inclusive tertiary education in New Zealand, it seems likely that parents of disabled students who are seeking a tertiary education for their sons or daughters will take exception to barriers to inclusion. They are unlikely to willingly accept any practices to lift the bar in a deliberate attempt to keep him them out. Parents generally have few misconceptions of the difficulties their sons or daughters will face in tertiary education, or how hard it might be for the institution - but that is not a good reason to deny them the chance.

Nunan et al (2004) challenge the very fabric of university education which can either enhance exclusive power structures and promote non-representational forms or power and privilege to the already advantaged or strive for an education that brings about greater participation, democracy and equality for all. In quoting Habermas (1987), they argue that higher education should be concerned with critique of society and commitment to social justice (Nunan et al, 2004). The elite notion that universities should be reserved for the best and brightest as publicly promoted in the editorial of the Dominion Post, a New Zealand daily newspaper, on 21 December 2007 is still widely believed and espoused.

Ghandi's famous proclamation that the value and authenticity of any institution, whether it be a school, educational institution, church, service provider or enterprise, can be measured in how they treat and support their most vulnerable members. Like churches, which are expected to implement their teachings within their own congregations, tertiary institutions too

are expected to set the example, serve and be leaders in the community. The way students with disabilities are educated and supported is no different.

Many universities and polytechnics have good human resources and it is essential that these be fully explored and utilised. There are staff with expertise in disciplines such as inclusive education, speech language therapy, disability issues, psychology, music therapy and so forth with high level of academic teaching and clinical practice skills in the education, management and support of disabled people and their families. These experts are clearly able to disseminate information to other staff and be a valuable resource to the institution. There are many parents some of whom could be on the staff who have availed themselves of numerous opportunities to be educated through government sponsored programmes and conferences offered by the various support organisations (e.g. Autism New Zealand, Cloud 9 Foundation, Parent to Parent Association and Down Syndrome Association).

One of the better international models exists in the state of Alberta in Canada where a number of tertiary institutions offer post-compulsory (tertiary) inclusive education for students with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities. These students are fully integrated in the range of programmes and courses offered, and the state can boast that over 70% of these students who complete their programmes, go on to find employment and careers. Funding is provided for each initiative to allow a small complement of staff to facilitate inclusion on campus. Students are supported by their peers (peer tutoring) and taught by class lecturers and instructors. They complete as much of the programme as they are able to do and also participate in other non-academic campus activities (Hughson et al, 2004-5; Uditsky and Hughson, 2008). There are other good international models worthy of investigation.

Development of an Action Plan

It appears that New Zealand compulsory education institutions are behind some other developed countries in the level of inclusion and support offered to disabled students despite the provision of comprehensive policy provisions and supporting legislation. However, it must be recognised that there has been progress even if it has been introduced in a fragmented and ad hoc manner. As a first step in the development of an action plan, we are introducing a set of questions to provoke a change in thinking in tertiary education.

- What is presently being achieved (and there is no doubt that there many aspects that are carried out with scarce resources)? What types of students are presently benefiting?
- What needs improvement? What students cannot be catered for at the present time? *It is doubtful that the needs of persons requiring high levels of support with daily personal needs such as toileting, or students with classical autism can be met.*
- What barriers have been, and are currently being, encountered at institutional level and at a personal level by those with impairments who are trying to enrol and successfully complete any programme?
- How can we reduce those barriers, e.g. by staff training initiatives and involving parents or carers and their support networks.
- What incentives can be given to staff who undertake staff training and the development of resources relating to people who have different learning needs, and how do we recognise the time commitment required of academic staff?
- What successful programmes exist overseas (e.g. Alberta) and can these models be utilised in developing programmes for New Zealand?
- To what extent are the relevant statutes and policy platforms being implemented? These include legislation such as the Human Rights Act 1993, Bill of Rights Act 1990, and major policy documents such as the *New Zealand Disability Strategy*

and the *New Zealand Code of Practice for an Inclusive Tertiary Education Environment for Students with Impairment*.

- How can tertiary institutions access the additional funding that will be required to meet legal requirements and government policy?

Conclusion

New Zealand has promulgated comprehensive strategies, guidelines and codes of practice to improve the post compulsory educational opportunities of New Zealanders with impairments. While tertiary institutions have introduced disability support coordination services, and there has been some improvement, many of the recommendations made to achieve for a fully inclusive educational environment have yet to be implemented. Tertiary institutions in New Zealand must now urgently address their responsibilities under the legislation and policy platforms to progress towards a fully inclusive educational environment. Failure to do so opens the possibility of being challenged for failure to provide equal opportunities for all and breaches of the relevant legislation. We propose the development of an action plan as a first step in the pathway towards a fully inclusive tertiary learning environment.

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