

Title of presentation

The impact of COVID-19 on disabled and neurodivergent students; implications for inclusive education

Presenters

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Abstract

COVID-19 changed education like never before. Lecturers and HEI's had to adapt methods of delivery almost overnight, changing to the 'new normal' of teaching. This led to unprecedented changes for students learning as they had to adapt to learning online from home, usually in poorer environments with little access to resources. There was little known about the impact of moving to online learning for students who were disabled or neurodivergent. This research explores the impact of the pandemic on disabled or neurodivergent students in HE via qualitative in-depth interviews with 22 students. It found that students throughout the UK reported a mixed impact from the pandemic, although the majority of this impact was reported as difficult for most students, positives included the option for flexibility or accessibility of online content. Overall, most reported receiving little support for their disability or neurodivergence from university services, with most support coming only from individual tutors. Furthermore, processes for support were hard to negotiate and signposting to support was inadequate. This led to a greater need for students to become independent, resilient and to self-advocate more, as well as engage in much more metacognitive learning. Students who had better quality experiences of being independent previously were at an advantage to others with no previous relevant experience. Most reported needing the combination of face to face and online learning- specifically asynchronous learning, and direct that changing to blended / flexible learning would be most equitable for students in HE. There were also struggles for students to access resources. Students with ADHD reported finding the experiences harder, but those with a mobility-based impairment without a neurodiversity found it

more accessible with a wider access to content. These experiences seemed harder for students who had multiple difficulties or diagnoses, especially if they were not receiving the majority of their needed support e.g. transcripts, subtitles, note takers, recordings etc. Students also felt they were lacking community and had worsening mental health, and a sense of feeling forgotten by the institutions. Takeaway messages from these findings include the necessity for processes to become more accessible, signposting support to be improved, training for staff in best inclusive practice in an online/ blended environment, more funding to support services, and even free implementable options for assisting inclusive support for learning e.g. volunteer transcribers, fostering community, including captions etc.