Opening the doors of higher education to students with learning disabilities: Lessons from Lancaster University Ghana

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Abstract

There is a universal recognition of the right to education without conditions, regardless of the state of the beneficiary. Higher education institutions recently have embraced the idea of inclusive learning. Yet few have committed to restructuring educational systems to truly accommodate persons with learning disabilities. In this paper we attempt to share our experience in handling students with learning disabilities studying alongside mainstream students. The method is phenomenological, with authors sharing their experiences dealing with students who have cognitive diversity and learning disabilities. The findings show that given the opportunity, students with learning disabilities could achieve academic success alongside mainstream students. However, such success could only be attained through deliberate planning where the needs of disabled students are factored into curriculum designing with special facilities and offices dedicated to supporting the students. It is recommended that educational institutions and national accreditation authorities collaborate to create special dispensation for students with cognitive differences during curriculum design and accreditation.

Introduction

Education is a right. Universities over the world have underscored the need for and committed to opening the doors of education to persons with different abilities, yet implementation remains challenging (Scott 2020). Commitment to inclusion is particularly difficult because often we deal with social structures and structural hurdles that are hard to change (Rocha et al 2024). Lancaster University Ghana, a branch campus of Lancaster University UK opened its doors to students with declared disability, marking a bold step aimed at contributing to the commitment to inclusivity. In doing this, we have seen our students do well, pass modules and progress to the next level. At the same time, we have faced daunting challenges such as incompatibility between students' abilities and modes of assessment. Our mission is to share our experiences in managing these students, to inspire others, especially those seeking inclusivity. As lecturer and registrar, we are sharing not just experiences in the classroom but also administrative. This makes our contribution somehow unique as it elucidates the experiences of people who deal directly with students with cognitive challenges from both academic and administrative front.

This is a phenomenological study where the authors share their lived experiences teaching and providing administrative guidance to students with cognitive disabilities. As a qualitative method and as a philosophical standpoint, phenomenology is used by researchers to reflectively analyse their experiences or experiences of others to understand otherwise unquantifiable social phenomena (Padilla-Díaz 2015, Embree 2010). Effectively, the method allows us to use ourselves as the study subjects without fear of breaking any methodological rules – exactly the reason we have chosen it. Our task in this short piece is to discuss our experience in dealing with students with learning disabilities who study together with mainstream students. Our role in relation to the students, as lecturer who teaches them in the classroom and as a registrar who manages their administrative needs, gives us firsthand experiences worth sharing with other practitioners and academic units.

Cognitive and learning disability

This work is inspired by Erin Shinn and Nicole Ofiesh (2012) who discussed the influences of cognitive traits on academic success. Shinn and Ofiesh (2012) are particularly relevant to our study because of their focus on cognitive diversity and success in academic tests. As we will see later, the main challenge the students we deal with face in terms of academic performance is their inability to align classroom instruction with examinations, therefore, unable to be successful in written assignments. Shinn and Ofiesh (2012) used the term 'cognitive diversity' to describe diverse and sometimes overlapping mental conditions such as learning disabilities,

attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), language disorders, anxiety, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as traits that ultimately affect students' abilities in comprehension, writing, reading and calculation. A major challenge these students face, and which affects their academic progress is their limitations in accessing and completing tests due to challenged mental processing speed and working memory (Shinn and Ofiesh 2012). However, Shinn and Ofiesh (2012) take on rather a broad approach to this topic, addressing the issues and challenges in broad and generic terms – without necessarily sharing experiences of their involvement with specific students with learning disabilities. In this paper, we share our experience managing students with learning disabilities due to cognitive challenges. It is our hope to highlight what we have done, what we have achieved, our challenges and make recommendations.

Handling the needs

We had three students who entered the university in the 2023/24 academic year with declared cognitive challenges – autism and schizophrenia. The students were all admitted to our foundation programme which prepares students for undergraduate studies. About 90% of our undergraduate students start from the foundation level – mainly due to admission requirements. They were admitted just like any other student. However, the application form had a section where applicants needed to state whether they had any special needs. The information on the application form would inform the Admission Officer on how to welcome a special need applicant. So, right from the outset, our institution had a mechanism to identify or at least help students declare their needs status.

If a special need is declared by a student or guardian, the Admission Officer would inform Registry and share a copy of the completed form which had the declaration. At this stage, the guardian of the student would be invited to discuss with the Registry staff and the school Counsellor the nature of the condition and how they had been handled in their previous schools. This engagement helps to map out a plan that is suitable for the needs of the student. It also helps to assign roles to various departments and stakeholders who will be involved in the academic life of the student. In supporting the student, four key steps are worth mentioning.

Key workable lessons

- The first thing we usually do and keep doing onward is communication with the guardians/parents to understand the nature of the condition. This helps to plan academic activities for the student. There is constant updates by administrative staff to parents about the academic progress of their ward. However, the student is involved in arriving at the decision to involve their guardian. The student must sign a consent form to involve their guardian in managing their academic journey. Most of the time, this is not a difficulty as the guardian would have been involved in getting the student to school and the student would have had no objection to their involvement.

- The second cornerstone of our exercise is to receive periodic update from the student's therapist particularly about coping mechanisms. As guardians are aware of the learning developmental stages of their wards, student and guardian inform psychologist when student is reacting to anything in school. All along, the student must give express permission to the involvement of a guardian or any professional in their affairs. This is done by signing a consent form.

- Third is a constant communication among academic services, departmental heads and module leaders is crucial. All our students are assigned academic tutors who engage their students regularly to understand and document their successes and challenges. Often this window is used to assess the performance of the student in the academic year. Any risks are picked up early, and the student is given any necessary support needed. The teaching staff report the classroom progress of the student to Registry and if necessary, the head of department is involved to discuss any necessary adjustments.

- Finally, Registry and the lecturers take time to observe the likes and dislikes of the students. The observation is then coordinated among all the teachers to ensure alignment. Often, we look out for their response to the classroom setting, whether they are comfortable with the crowd or not. While some students want to be in the crown and enjoy being with and around mainstream students, others are uncomfortable. This information helps with planning academic activities in a helpful way. If necessary, students are allowed to take assessment (coursework and exam) alone. They are also allowed extra time during exam and sit-in coursework assessments.

Challenges

The first challenge we encountered and perhaps the most important is the realisation that the curriculum and particularly assessment structure were not meant for students with cognitive impairment. In short, the curriculum is not inclusive enough to accommodate the differences of these students. A curriculum that is inclusive, according to Morgan and Houghton (2011) "is one that takes into account students' educational, cultural and social background and experience as well as the presence of any physical or sensory impairment and their mental well-being" (p. 3). Yet often, and as our experiences has shown, curricula and assessments are designed without flexibility to accommodate students who cannot do things like everyone else. It is to address this problem that Morgan and Houghton advocate for inclusion to start from the curriculum design stage as it will allows for easy planning and helps teaching staff to be proactive in their delivery to students who need extra attention. The authors warn that lack of advanced planning and preparation eventually lead to "individualised, reactive responses to students' circumstances and apparent 'need'. This approach has the potential to stigmatise and further marginalise students whose profile, experience or expectations deviated from perceived norms" (Morgan and Houghton 2011, p. 7). So far, our experience appears to embody this description by Morgan and Houghton. We were more reactionary in approach. In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, these students were not considered in the planning.

The most conspicuous area of challenge was on examinations and passing tests. Students with learning difficulties would not pass their test and will have to sometimes take resit tests severally without success. But we are unable to use other methods because the curriculum does not support that. In effect, students with learning disability are made to take assessments just like ordinary students without the option of changing method of assessment. Yet, when taken through viva, you could often sense that the students in questions could do better when orally engaged, but they must sit and write exams to pass. As will be discussed in detail below, we propose an amendment to assessment regimes to enable students to take oral exams when necessary. This is currently not available in our institution but it is worth advocating.

Secondly, dealing with students who have learning disabilities can be demanding and time consuming. Students often have different dispositions to academics and the classroom. This requires that each student is adequately understood in terms of how they react to new information and people. Two of our students who exhibit similar traits have opposite response to crowds. One student resist special treatment such as offering them separate classroom and extended time to complete exams. He would consistently ask why he was being treated differently. On the opposite side, the other does not like staying among many people and prefers to be alone and given special treatment. This student consistently refused to attend

classes because he thought the room of about 30 students was crowded. We had to engage him and the school's counsellor and parents to eventually get him used to the classroom. What this meant is that we needed to spend more time and resources on these two students because they responded differently to their environment.

Recommendations – addressing the challenges

Our recommendations flow from the challenges described above. First, inclusion must be considered at curriculum design stage. Such a curriculum would have considered in advance different instructional and assessment approaches for students with different needs. Shinn, and Ofiesh (2012) describe this as levelling the playing field for all students. The type of learning method and style should not be random but one informed by detailed assessment of the students' history and cognitive state to determine what works for them and what does not. This helps because it reduces stress on the lecturer, administrative staff and the students themselves. In terms of assessment, we agree with Shinn, and Ofiesh (2012) in suggesting the practice of "flexibility in presentation". Learning outcomes must be tested in a flexible manner using different approaches blending visual and auditory mechanisms. This is essential as students may have strength in their audio and oral senses which may be appropriate to use viva-like means in assessment rather than requiring them to write on pen and paper like everyone else. Approached this way, a curriculum would then be considered properly inclusive as it allows students to use their strong senses in learning and assessment. This recommendation is particularly for heads of institutions and accredited institutions. Institutional and departmental heads need to consider this suggestion at the programme development level and accreditation institutions need to be more flexible when these changes are incorporated in accreditation documents.

Second, since it takes extra time and energy to attend to students with learning disabilities, universities and departments committed to diversity and inclusion should consider dedicated offices and staff for the implementation of inclusion. While this may not apply to teaching staff, there needs to be at least a desk at the registry department dedicated to inclusion. The duties of these staff may include following up to ensure attendance and punctuality, assisting with tracking assessment and due date and working with the teaching staff to design the appropriate assessment mechanisms for each student with learning disability. It is important to remember at this point that though students may show up with similar conditions, their needs for success are usually different and always require bespoke arrangements. Again, this recommendation is aimed at institutional heads. This proposal is important because incorporating students with cognitive diversity into mainstream education must not be accidental. Rather it must be a deliberate policy backed by tangible commitment and

resources. Incorporating diversity without deliberate planning and resources tend to frustrate the students, teachers and administrative staff.

Finally, the two recommendations above could be complemented by an effective and workable collaborative mechanism among parents, administration, counsellor or cognitive specialist and academic departments. This collaborative loop must involve all teaching staff concerned. This requires skilful data protection mechanisms to collaborate without getting sensitive details about the students leaked. The advantage of such a collaboration is that everyone involved in the student's academic journey is aligned at all levels and more importantly each can contribute meaningfully to the student's success. This collaborative work could sit at the inclusion desk as discussed above.

Conclusion

We have discussed our experience in dealing with students who have learning disability and among mainstream students. While the challenges are daunting, we can also attest to the sense of fulfilment we experience when these students achieve milestones in their academic journey. Our experience shows that inclusivity is possible and rewarding for both staff and institutions who choose to accept students with learning difficulties. However, this could be even more rewarding and easier if the necessary structures are built at the institutional level by way of integration into curriculum and erecting inclusivity desks at the registry.

We want to wrap up by encouraging tertiary institutions to accept students who have learning difficulties, understand their unique cases and prepare learning plan for them. For most of the time it works. Yet, there seems to be a correlation between institutional preparedness and success rates. The more prepared an institution is and the level of inclusivity of a curriculum determines the success of students who have cognitive challenges. It is our aim that moving forward we will advocate for curriculum changes, especially in the conduct of assessments where students with special needs could be examined differently – such as orally, instead requiring written tests for everyone.

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