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Students with Disability: Data Collection for Reporting in New Zealand Universities

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education in New Zealand has dedicated funding to increase the participation of people with disability in tertiary education. However there has been no standardised system in place for defining disability, categorising impairment, or collecting, maintaining and reporting data about tertiary students with disability, in order to determine the eventual impact of this initiative. The present study utilised a cross-sectional survey in a single stage sampling procedure, to gather information from the eight New Zealand universities regarding definitions of disability and categories of impairment used to collect data, as well as the source of data collection and numerical characteristics of the population. Data collected showed a steady increase in the population of university students with disability from 3,039 in 1998 to 4,358 in 2000. However the findings were consistent with the evidence in the literature review that it is currently not possible to know the real number of these students because of the differences in data collection and reporting across institutions. These findings indicated that data was not sourced in the same way across institutions. Furthermore, information was kept in segregated databases in some institutions, which did not all have a means of exchanging data with their general student record system. The Ministry of Education's reporting template introduced in 2001 was found to provide only a partially standardised framework for reporting on data. There must also be a systematic method of collecting and maintaining data across tertiary institutions, including clarification of the sets of students to be counted, so that all institutions are counting students in the same way. The present study identified confusion in language and definitions, with the terms impairment, disability, illness and injury being used interchangeably. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health was suggested as providing a practical functional model for data collection, which could be used as a platform for establishing definitions and clarifying the language around disability and impairment, as well as providing an international standard for establishing consistency.

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Introduction

In New Zealand and around the world, it is recognised that tertiary education is the key to securing better career paths, better quality of life and standards of living, and ensuring a more equitable, culturally dynamic and informed society (Ministry of Education, 1998). Participation in the tertiary sector in New Zealand has increased substantially over recent years and is above the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average. In 1998, 68% of New Zealand school leavers entered a tertiary programme leading to the equivalent of a bachelor's degree or higher. This was the highest rate of all the OECD countries, 28% over the mean rate of 40% (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation [CERI], 2000).

There are 4 kinds of public tertiary institutions (TEIs) in New Zealand: a) universities ($n=8$), b) polytechnics ($n=20$), c) colleges of education ($n=4$), and d) wananga ($n=3$), which among them enrol over 300,000 students each year. Universities are generally the largest institutions, with an average of over 15,000 students formally enrolled at each (Ministry of Education, 1998).

In 1999 there were seven universities in New Zealand: Lincoln University, Massey University, The University of Auckland, The University of Waikato, University of Canterbury, University of Otago and Victoria University of Wellington. On the first of January 2000, the Auckland Institute of Technology became the Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand's eighth university (Ministry of Education, 1998).

As the tertiary population has continued to grow, so has the diversity of the population of students enrolled. Prior to the late 1970s, little emphasis had been placed on access to tertiary education for people with disability in New Zealand. Initially the focus was on transition to work courses or 'special', non-integrated education, rather than on the participation of students in mainstream tertiary

institutions (Lang, 1993). In 1981, the International Year of the Disabled raised awareness of the needs of people with disability and prompted the formation of groups such as the Assembly of People with Disabilities; this increased awareness of disability issues spread to university campuses as well (Dell & Sandbrook, 1996).

Alexander and Bridgman (1982) undertook a survey of New Zealand tertiary institutions, which enquired about the numbers of students identifying with disability and whether universities had a systematic method of identifying these students. Only the University of Auckland and Canterbury University had a systematic means of identifying students with disability, the others had to provide estimates (Alexander & Bridgman, 1982). At the time of this study (1982), the collection of data about students with disability was not a requirement for reporting in tertiary institutions.

The University of Auckland reported 56 students enrolled with disability, the University of Canterbury 8; Lincoln University estimated it had 3 students with disability, the University of Waikato estimated 2, Victoria University estimated 25; neither Massey University nor the University of Otago offered an estimate of the number of students with disability enrolled. The numbers reported were incomplete, both the authors and the institutions believed there were more.

These figures, if only estimated and incomplete, still indicated a low participation rate among students with disability at universities. This was partly due to an absence of formal structures to ensure student support. Other reasons included: lack of access and information; misconceptions or negative expectations of parents, teachers or students; low levels of confidence or encouragement of potential students and financial need (Andrews, 1992; Lang, 1993).

The participation rate of tertiary students with disability (TSDs) has increased from 1982, but records are not available to indicate exactly by how much. For example,

data collection began at Massey University in 1992 when there were 261 students; this number increased to 348 in 1996 (Dell & Sandbrook, 1996). Data collection related to students with disability over this period was not required by either the Ministry of Education or Massey University, rather, data was collected to make a case to the University for providing services and support to this group of students.

Mandatory reporting did not begin until 1997, when the Ministry of Education introduced a Special Supplementary Grant for Tertiary Students with Disabilities to come into effect in 1998. The purpose of the grant was to increase the participation of people with disability in tertiary education by improving access to educational opportunities at tertiary institutions and increasing the level of enrolment and academic achievements of these students (Ministry of Education, 1997a). The grant was based on a sum of \$29.95 (including GST) per equivalent full-time student (EFT). The grant was based on the total number of EFTs enrolled in a given tertiary institution, not just students with disability, so was a significant sum of money for larger institutions. For example the University of Auckland reported 22,113 EFTs in 1999 (The University of Auckland, 2000), which equates to a supplementary grant of \$662,284.35.

The Special Supplementary Grant had certain conditions attached, which were mandatory for institutions receiving the funding. The first condition was that universities had to identify TSDs as a target Equal Educational Opportunities group in their Charters by 31 December 1999. The second condition was that universities were required to complete separate annual reporting on the provision of support services for TSDs, including identification of the variety of services provided and their costs. The third condition was the gathering of baseline data on the enrolment numbers, course participation, course completion rates and graduation or certification rates of TSDs (Ministry of Education, 1997b).

TSDs were defined by the Ministry of Education for the purposes of the Special Supplementary Grant as: 'those who self-declare as such on the enrolment form,

together with those who do not but who approach, or are referred to, the Disability Coordinator during the year' (Ministry of Education, 1997a). The 'Notice of Purpose for the Special Supplementary Grant' and the 'Conditions of the Grant', were sent to tertiary institutions by the Ministry of Education. Individual universities then set their own objectives for the funding and the Vice-Chancellors and the Senior Manager at the Ministry of Education signed them off.

From this point, each university was required to specifically include statements about the provision of support to students with disability in public documents, including the Charter and the institution's annual objectives. All public tertiary education institutions in New Zealand rely heavily on funds raised through taxes by government with over 80% of all gross revenue coming from this source (Dixon, Coy & Tower, 1994). It is now widely accepted that information about the objectives of an organisation using public money is important and should be disclosed in an annual report. Objectives are largely discretionary, even though they have to be put to the Ministry of Education in some detail as part of the funding process. Annual reports are generally regarded as a primary vehicle by which universities communicate information about their activities and achievements to their many stakeholders, and so are fundamental to discharging accountability to these stakeholders (Dixon, Coy & Tower, 1994).

Reporting requirements became more stringent with the introduction of the Special Supplementary Grant. In the 1990s tertiary institutions provided individual student record data to the Ministry of Education electronically, and in earlier years summary data was provided on paper returns for each institution (Ministry of Education, 1998). As a result of the Special Supplementary Grant, universities were required to report data on students with disability in three different ways: a) in the Single Data Return (SDR) sent to the Ministry of Education electronically three times a year, b) in the annual report on the Special Supplementary Grant for the Ministry of Education and c) in a university's annual report.

In order to provide services to students with disability and meet the Ministry of Education requirements, each university asks students to voluntarily self-identify by a positive response on student enrolment forms or by contacting the disability services at their institution during the year. This information is kept confidential and is used to facilitate service provision, as well as to collect data for reporting to the institution and the Ministry of Education.

As instructed by the Ministry of Education, the Single Data Return provides data taken from the enrolment form on the number of students who voluntarily identify as having a disability at the time of enrolment (Ministry of Education, 2002). The annual report on the Special Supplementary Grant provides data on the number of students who self-declare as such on the enrolment form, together with those who do not, but who approach or are referred to the Disability Coordinator during the year (Ministry of Education, 1997a). It is not clear where universities source the disability data for their annual reports. This means there are two different instructions from the Ministry of Education for collecting data for two of the reports and no clear instructions for the annual report. This would suggest a possible disparity between the sets of data collected.

Policymaking has been hindered by the lack of reliable information about the number of students involved in higher education. The Ministry of Education has no real idea of the numbers of students with disability studying in tertiary education because of the lack of consistent data (McKay, Rowlands, Ballard & Smith, 1998). Charlton (1997), recommended that as an outcome of her research into the key factors that attract and retain students with disability at tertiary institutions, support be given to the collection of accurate data on TSDs by creating standardised questions on the enrolment forms of all institutions and standardising data collection.

Prior to 2001 there was no standardised framework for collecting data about students with disability. In 2001, the Ministry of Education decided to address this

by developing a standardised reporting template for tertiary institutions to use when reporting on the Special Supplementary Grant, the implication being that tertiary institutions would begin to collect the same data about students with disability and report on it in the same way. Mandatory reporting using the template will be from 2003.

As part of the 1999 Budget, the Government also announced the development of a Data Warehouse for the tertiary education sector by January 2002. This project involves the provision of computer hardware and software to enable the Ministry of Education to collect, store and analyse information on the tertiary education sector, reflecting the Ministry's need for consistent and uniform data across tertiary institutions. The establishment of the data warehouse is fundamental to the implementation of the new demand-driven tertiary funding system, provision of high quality advice to Government about tertiary education, and the ability of Government to plan, forecast, monitor and report on developments in tertiary education in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1998).

In order for the data collected for the Data Warehouse to be meaningful, it must be valid and reliable. Validity refers to the ability of data to measure what it purports to measure. Without adequate validity, it is not clear what something is measuring. Reliability is the consistency of measurement from time to time when results are similar on different occasions. The essence of reliability is that the results can be relied upon to be an accurate representation of that which is being measured (Creswell, 1994). If data is not reliable, then no clear statement can be made about what has been measured.

The importance of consistency in the collection and reporting of disability data is paramount if it is to be useful. Variation in information about people with disability in national data sources creates variation in estimates of prevalence, incidence, performance and contributions (Andrews, 1992). Estimates from data produced using different categories for classifying subgroups of individuals with disability

create confusion for users of this information, including policy analysts and decision makers. A low level of student identification at tertiary institutions impedes planning and support service development for people with disability (Andrews, 1992).

Timely access to reliable disability data and therefore the profile of students with disability is required to facilitate more effective reporting, planning, and design and delivery of support services, at both a national and regional level. This thesis will investigate how data has been collected for reporting purposes in the eight universities in New Zealand. The definitions and categories that are used will be compared as well as how and where data is collected, to see where there is variability or similarity between universities. This will provide an opportunity for universities to inform process, before reporting to the Ministry of Education using the template becomes mandatory in 2003.