

Inclusive Higher Education at an Australian University: Perspectives of Students With Intellectual Disability and Their Mentors

By Fiona Rillotta

BACKGROUND

Despite Australian policies and legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), and the Disability Standards for Education (2005), there are only two inclusive higher education programs for people with intellectual disability at Australian universities. The Up the Hill Project (UTHP) is one of these two programs. It was established in 1999 in South Australia, and aligns with the inclusive individual support model of post-secondary education (Hart et al., 2004; Hart et al., 2006).

The UTHP students audit one topic per university semester. Auditing involves attending classes in a chosen topic for general interest but not undertaking assessments/ examinations. UTHP students are supported one on one by a peer mentor. Peer mentors are other university students studying towards human service degrees (e.g. disability, education, psychology), and they undertake the peer mentoring for one of their practicum placements (work experience).

At the completion of three years at university, the UTHP students participate in the formal university graduation ceremonies. They do not obtain a formal qualification, but they do develop many skills and social networks.

Pilot research about the UTHP found that people with intellectual disability who audited topics (also known as subject/unit/course/component/module) reported feeling more independent, feeling better about themselves, forming relationships with peers, and learning about different topics (Gibson, 1997; Lobban, 2002).

Previous literature also tells us that mentoring is seen as a mutually beneficial partnership (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016). Other research has found that for peer mentors, early exposure to intellectual disability, meaningful interactions, and collaborative relationships can positively influence awareness and attitudes toward inclusive practices (Jones & Goble, 2012).

Even though there was some previous research in Australia, it was very limited and not recent, so we conducted another study to get more information about the experiences of the UTHP students and their peer mentors.

METHODS

We conducted interviews with four students with intellectual disability and six peer mentors who were all participating in the Up the Hill Project at the time. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences and perspectives of:

- inclusive practices
- working towards and achieving goals
- mentoring experience
- development of skills

All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. We then analysed the data using thematic analysis, which involved looking for and creating key themes and sub-themes.

KEY FINDINGS – BRIEF OVERVIEW

Four main themes were found, and the sub themes are also shown in the boxes below.

SELF DETERMINATION

1. Work towards goals; independence
2. Choices
3. Future expectations and aspirations

UTHP students explained that their confidence to work towards goals had grown, even though they may have felt overwhelmed or nervous at first. Students also referred to why they decided to attend university, as well as their choices (such as topic choice) while at university. Not all UTHP students spoke about their expectations and aspirations for the future; however, a couple of students identified career plans/ employment preferences for once they completed university. UTHP students shared these expectations and aspirations with their peer mentors.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Enjoyment/ enthusiasm
2. University norms
3. Developing friendships/ relationships
4. Social skills

UTHP students and their mentors spoke about positive experiences at university, including evidence of enthusiasm, commitment, willingness to learn, and have new social experiences. UTHP students also developed an understanding of university requirements and norms, such as note taking, using the library and participating in class discussions. Participants also reported further developing social skills and that friendships formed between mentors and students, but relationships were not necessarily developed with others in the university.

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

1. Positive/ negative experiences of inclusion/ accommodations
2. Being included by peers
3. Internal university supports

Mentors talked about some positive experiences of inclusive practices by university staff. They explained how the UTHP students were included in groups, and described appropriate accommodations such as more time to complete a task. However, mentors also explained that there were some experiences where they felt that the auditing student was excluded and/ or the teaching staff did not have the appropriate understanding/ knowledge about intellectual disability (e.g. breaking things down). Mentors also said that peers in the classroom would talk to the mentor instead of the UTHP student. Mentors and UTHP students acknowledged that having a peer mentor helped the UTHP student to feel more comfortable.

INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

1. University topic specific knowledge

Attending lectures and tutorials on a topic of interest led to students developing topic-specific knowledge, and in some instances they also did their best to complete the assessments as well, even though it was not expected.

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CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

- Higher education is valued because it enables development of academic knowledge and skills, as well as enhanced social skills and personal growth.
- With appropriate support, people with intellectual disability develop personally, socially, and academically through meaningful involvement in inclusive university.
- Australian policies legislate that people with (intellectual) disability have a right to study at any educational institution in the same way as any other student.
- Students with ID should be supported to undertake formal university qualifications/ degrees, not just auditing of topics.
- Further knowledge and understanding of the capabilities of people with ID, and about inclusive practices is required for the broader university community (peers and teachers). For example, training is required for university Lecturers about inclusive practices (to support inclusion of students with ID). Future research also needs to seek the perspectives of more peer mentors, specifically about what they gained out of the experiences and/ or any personal challenges they faced as a peer mentor.

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