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Inclusive University Experience in Australia: Perspectives of students with intellectual disability and their mentors

Running head: Inclusive University Experience

Abstract

Background: Inclusive post-secondary education (PSE) delivers positive personal, social, and academic outcomes. However, there is limited support for students with intellectual disability (ID) to participate in higher education, particularly in Australia. This study investigated expectations and experiences of students with ID in an inclusive individual support PSE program (Hart et al., 2006).

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students (n=4) and peer mentors (n=6) at the beginning and end of one academic semester. Participants were asked about inclusive practices, goal attainment, mentoring experiences, and skill development. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data.

Results: Four major themes and several subthemes were identified: Self Determination (e.g. self-confidence), Social Development (e.g. social networks), Intellectual Development (e.g. subject knowledge), and Inclusive Practices.

Conclusions: The results emphasised the value of inclusive PSE for students with ID. Recommendations regarding future practices of inclusive PSE for people with ID are provided.

Keywords: auditing, community inclusion, inclusive post-secondary education, mentoring, university

Background

Philosophy of Inclusive Post-Secondary Education (PSE)

Participation in higher education has positive personal, social, and economic outcomes (Hout, 2012; Swain and Hammond, 2011). Several colleges (universities) in the US, Canada and Europe have supported the inclusion of people with intellectual disability

(ID) in post-secondary education (PSE) since the 1980s (O'Connor et al., 2012; Think College, 2013; Uditsky and Hughson, 2012). Uditsky and Hughson (2012) argued that the philosophy of inclusive PSE is based on the failure of segregated education to deliver positive outcomes for people with ID, and changing notions of what constitutes a 'good life' for people with disabilities. Inclusive education aims to overcome marginalisation and create educational opportunities that are the norm for other young people (Uditsky and Hughson, 2012).

Despite a philosophy of inclusion, many inclusive PSE programs are based on models that segregate, or partially segregate students with ID from their peers (Uditsky and Hughson, 2012). Three main models of inclusion have been identified: mixed or hybrid models, substantially separate models, and inclusive individual support models (Hart et al., 2004, 2006). *Mixed or hybrid* models are where students with ID have the option to participate in academic classes (for audit or credit), and/or social activities on campus with students without disabilities, while also participating in life skills or transition classes with others with disabilities (Hart et al., 2004, 2006). *Substantially separate* models involve students with ID participating only in classes with other students with disabilities (i.e. life skills or transition program), and may include opportunities for employment experience by rotation through a limited number of employment slots (Hart et al., 2004, 2006). Programs operating on the *inclusive individual support* model provide individualised services in college courses, certificate programs, and/or degree programs, for audit or credit (Hart et al., 2006) and may include employment related support (Hart et al., 2004). These services are based on the student's choices, vision and career goals (Grigal et al., 2012; Hart et al., 2004, 2006). Furthermore, the inclusive individual support model promotes self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1996) skills because students make their own choices and decisions and identify their own goals (Hart, et al. 2006). Support to realise these goals is often facilitated by peer

mentors (students without ID) (Jones and Goble, 2012; O’Conner et al., 2012). Mentors are typically preservice teachers who work to support positive on campus experiences (Conway, 2011). Mentors focus on enhancing academic, social and employability skills of students with ID (Giust and Valle-Riestra, 2016), and contribute to students’ success. Mentoring relationships have been found to be mutually beneficial (Giust and Valle-Riestra, 2016).

Reported Outcomes of Inclusive PSE

Despite program variations, inclusive PSE has been shown to deliver positive academic and social outcomes. Positive benefits for students include: meeting new people, developing communication skills, building capacity to self-advocate, building self-esteem and confidence, and growing independence (Folk et al., 2012; Hughson et al., 2006; O’Connor et al., 2012). Overall, inclusive PSE promotes the perception that students with ID are more similar to peers without ID than different, and increases students’ expectations of themselves and what they can achieve (Hart et al., 2006). Moreover, students with ID have reported similar academic experiences to students without disabilities, such as keeping up with readings, interacting with faculty, and ability to perform academically (Plotner and May, 2017). Inclusive PSE also encourages positive attitudes towards students with ID in university communities (Griffin et al., 2012; May, 2012), including supportive faculty (Plotner and Marshall, 2015). Moreover, positive contact and interaction with marginalised groups (e.g. people with ID) can reduce stereotyping and discriminatory behaviours (Allport, 1954; Devine and O’Brien, 2007; Roper, 1990).

However, common challenges to inclusive PSE have been reported, such as inadequate support for students with ID (Jones and Goble, 2012; Mock and Love, 2012). Students’ academic and social experiences can be hampered by low academic expectations and non-inclusive practices of others in the university community (Grigal et al., 2011; Hart et al., 2006; Neubert et al., 2002). Therefore, inclusive PSE programs need to be regularly

reviewed and evaluated in order to optimise students' experiences and outcomes. Given the variations in program models (Grigal et al., 2012; Hart et al., 2004, 2006; Plotner and May, 2017; Uditsky and Hughson, 2012), it would be advantageous to have further evidence identifying benefits and challenges associated with inclusive individual support models.

Inclusive PSE in Australia

Though inclusive PSE for people with ID has existed for almost 30 years in the US, Canada and parts of Europe, it is relatively new in Australia (Centre for Disability Studies, 2013; Grantley, 2000; O'Rourke, 2011). The Australian Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) "provide a framework to ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students" (p. iii). In addition, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) states that people with disability have the right to "access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others". However, people from 'disadvantaged' groups are still under-represented, or continue to face barriers to participation in Australian higher education (Australian Government, 2016). In Australia, people with an ID are less likely to move into post-secondary education than their same-age peers without disability (6% versus 12%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2008). As a result of the policy statement, "A Fair Chance for All" (Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET), 1990), access and equity for students with various disabilities in Australian universities was improved. However, people with ID were not included in the range of people with disabilities accessing university (Andrews, 1991, cited in Grantley, 2000). This lack of access to university may in part be because post-school options for people with ID typically focused on vocational outcomes, though young people with ID indicated that they also

needed support with community and social skills, such as making friends (Parmenter and Knox, 1991).

A pilot study at Flinders University attempted to address these identified support needs by providing inclusive PSE opportunities for people with ID as auditing students (Gibson, 1997). Auditing students attend lectures in a chosen topic (also known as subject/ unit/ course/ component/ module) for interest and do not undertake assessments or examinations for the purpose of completing the degree award. The pilot was based on PSE university programs in Canada (Hughson, et al., 2006) and Finland (Saloviita, 2000). It aimed to ensure an 'authentic student experience' (Uditsky and Hughson, 2012) having students with ID in the same classes as peers without ID. The pilot study found that people with ID who audited a topic over one academic semester (4-5 months) formed relationships with peers, and developed an understanding of norms of the class (Gibson, 1997). Following the pilot, it was recommended that the inclusive program be implemented (Grantley, 2000). This program is known as the Up the Hill Project (UTHP).

The Up the Hill Project (UTHP)

The Up the Hill Project (UTHP), established in 1999 (Flinders University, 2016), aligns somewhat with the inclusive individual support model (Hart et al., 2006); however, student goals are not necessarily career focussed. The UTHP currently receives state government funding. However, in future, participants in Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) (NDIA, 2016) may choose to use their individualised funds to be supported to attend university through a program such as the UTHP.

The UTHP promotes self-determination skills, by enabling students to choose a university topic of interest to audit each semester, and set and review individual semester goals. Individual goals, based on personal preference may be based around making friends, using the library, writing an assignment, or using the university bus. Auditing students attend

lectures and may choose other social and academic activities as well (e.g. participate in class discussions or assessments, and presentation days). A certificate of recognition is awarded on completion of six academic semesters (3 years). The certificate is presented at the university graduation ceremony.

The mean age of students who have participated in the project since it commenced is 32 years (range: 19 - 66 years) (Rillotta et al., 2014). Topic areas that students have chosen to audit include Disability, Visual Arts, History, Sociology, Politics, Australian Studies, Drama, Criminal Justice, Screen and Media, Health and Physical Education, and Computer Science. Topic choices are up to individual preferences and interests, as well as subject to availability and Lecturer approval.

Students in the UTHP are supported by peer mentors. Peer mentors are students without ID undertaking work experience placements as part of their studies to become disability professionals, teachers, or other human service professionals. Peer mentors are supervised by the UTHP Coordinator and provide individual support based on the goals and choices of the student with ID. Mentors attend university classes with auditing students to facilitate learning. Peer mentors support social inclusion by encouraging students with ID to interact with peers inside and outside the classroom and to participate in group discussion and activities. Peer mentors also introduce people in their network to the students with ID to initiate connections and relationships. Peer mentors may choose to engage in social activities such as attending parties, shopping, or cinema with students with ID, even though it is not a requirement of their placement. Peer mentors build rapport with the student they mentor to ascertain interests, and then facilitate access to relevant university activities and facilities such as student clubs and societies. They will also go to the university eateries, study spaces and library together, and support the student with ID to learn how to get to these locations and use the facilities.

Positive outcomes such as learning about different topics, increased self-esteem, self-confidence, independence, social skills, and social networks (e.g. enjoyed meeting new people) were reported shortly after the UTHP was established (Lobban, 2002). The UTHP is the longest standing project of its kind in Australia, but it has no recent evaluation, or robust evidence of its value from the perspectives of auditing students and mentors.

Despite other programs of inclusive PSE now established nationally (e.g. uni 2 beyond, Centre for Disability Studies, 2013, 2016) there has been little research evidence within Australia about the benefits of inclusive PSE for people with ID. The UTHP is currently one of two inclusive PSE programs in Australian Universities. The other program in Australia (uni 2 beyond, Centre for Disability Studies, 2016), established in 2012, is similar to the UTHP in that students with ID attend lectures and tutorials of their choice as audit students, supported by peer mentors. Evaluation of the UTHP, and other similar Australian programs, is particularly important because the inclusive individual support model of PSE that they represent, is one of the least common PSE models internationally (Grigal et al., 2012; Hart et al., 2004, 2006). Yet, inclusive individual support models are likely to represent ‘full inclusion’ informed by the social model of disability, and a moral imperative as argued by Uditsky and Hughson, (2012). Moreover, given that Australia’s National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will help people with disability to achieve their education goals (NDIA, 2016), evidence is needed to promote best practice in supporting people with ID to attend Australian Universities. The current research explored the following research question: what are the experiences of participating in an inclusive university program for students with an ID? The aims of the research were to: 1) investigate the expectations and experiences of auditing students with ID, and 2) explore mentors’ perceptions and opinions of the university experience for auditing students.

Methods

Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from the university's Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 6154). Participants provided written consent to their participation. Eligibility criteria for the UTHP requires students to independently express a desire to attend university; thus demonstrating capacity to provide independent informed consent.

One of the authors is the Program Advisor of the UTHP. All other authors are not involved in the UTHP in any capacity. The Program Advisor of the UTHP did not recruit participants nor collect data, but supported data analysis with the Research Assistant (RA), who was independent of the UTHP. This ensured that the Program Advisor's position did not unduly influence research outcomes.

Design

This qualitative research collected data using semi-structured interviews at two time points, four to five months apart, to capture expectations (start of academic semester), and experiences (end of academic semester). Semi-structured interviews have been successfully used to capture perspectives of people with ID (Kroll, 2011; Ruddick and Oliver, 2005). The flexible format of semi-structured interviews ensures that interesting avenues of information presented during the interview can be fully explored (Rapley, 2004).

Participants

All participants in the UTHP at the time were invited to participate in the research, and all possible participants agreed to participate. There were two groups of participants:

Auditing students ($n=4$). All five current auditing students were invited to participate and four agreed (the fifth experienced personal issues and withdrew from the UTHP).

Auditing students (2 females; 2 males) had ID, and were aged from 19 to 41 (mean = 28

years). One student was new to the program; two were part-way through; and one was in their second to last semester of the three-year program. Students were participating in various topics including drama, Australian studies, computing (graphic design), and disability. One participant was not available to attend a second interview towards the end of the semester due to personal time constraints; however, data from the first interview was included in the analysis.

Student mentors (n=6). All three current student mentors at the time of the research agreed to participate. Three previous mentors – who had mentored existing UTHP students – also participated. The mentors were undergraduate university students without ID, in their second year of a disability degree or a related degree with a disability major (e.g. Psychology, Education, Health Sciences). Since mentors worked one on one with auditing students at least once a week, mentors were considered to have significant insight into students' experiences.

Procedure

The UTHP Coordinator (not on the research team) provided information sheets and consent forms to all students and mentors who then posted their consent form to the RA. A mutually convenient time and location (quiet, private room at the university campus) was arranged for the RA to meet with the participants to explain the study further, conduct the interview, and arrange the second interview.

Interviews were conducted once at the beginning and once towards the end of the academic semester (4-5 months). Each interview lasted no longer than one hour. Participants consented to audio recording of interviews to enable verbatim transcription. **Interview questions were slightly different for students and mentors because, as emphasised in the literature it is important to consider cognitive ability and communication skills of people with ID when interviewing (Corby et al., 2015). Therefore, the interview schedules were targeted towards the participants and used simple, accessible language with a combination of open and**

closed questions. Student interview questions were designed to capture the students' perspectives on their own experience. Mentor interview questions were aimed at gathering their perspective on inclusive practices for the person they mentored. Student and mentor interview questions were designed to answer the research question and aims about the overall experience for students with ID, and therefore were analysed together.

Auditing students' interviews. The interviewer (experienced in working with and communicating with people with ID), guided participants to discuss expectations and experiences; maintained flexibility of discussion to accommodate each individual's perspectives; and paraphrased to check understanding and accurate interpretation of the information provided. One auditing student, who was new to university, decided to have their mentor at their first interview to help them to feel more comfortable, but completed the second interview independently.

The initial interview addressed expectations for the upcoming semester. The four guide questions asked participants to describe why they decided to come to university; hopes and goals for the semester; information about the topic they were to study; and information about their mentor.

The second interview asked individuals to reflect on their lived experience of the semester. The six guide questions asked whether expectations were met over the semester; likes and dislikes about attending university; if they believed life had changed since attending university; future goals; and any additional comments about their experience of attending university.

Mentors' interviews. The initial interview asked mentors to describe what they thought the outcomes of participating in university might be for the person they mentored; adaptations they thought might be necessary for Lecturers to make to accommodate students

with ID; and how peers in the class might demonstrate inclusive practices and accepting attitudes.

The second interview questions were similar; however, they asked the mentors to reflect on and describe what they had experienced, rather than what their predictions or expectations might have been. Questions related to strategies/adaptations/modifications they witnessed; ideas/opinions/observations about what else could be done by staff and peers to include the student with ID; and any suggestions to improve the overall experience for auditing students.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim by the RA to develop strong familiarity with the data. Interview data of both groups were coded into themes and subthemes using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). **Student and mentor data were analysed together in order to best address the research question about overall experience of inclusive university.** This method was considered most appropriate because the data were participant driven and shaped according to individual interview responses. In order to strengthen analytical rigour, two of the authors analysed and coded the data separately to develop themes and subthemes; and then a second and third round of coding was undertaken where both researchers collaborated to check accuracy and finalise themes.

Results

Thematic analysis identified four major themes: Self-determination, Social Development, Inclusive Practices, and Intellectual Development - and several subthemes (Figure 1). These themes are now presented with illustrative quotes.

[Insert Figure 1]

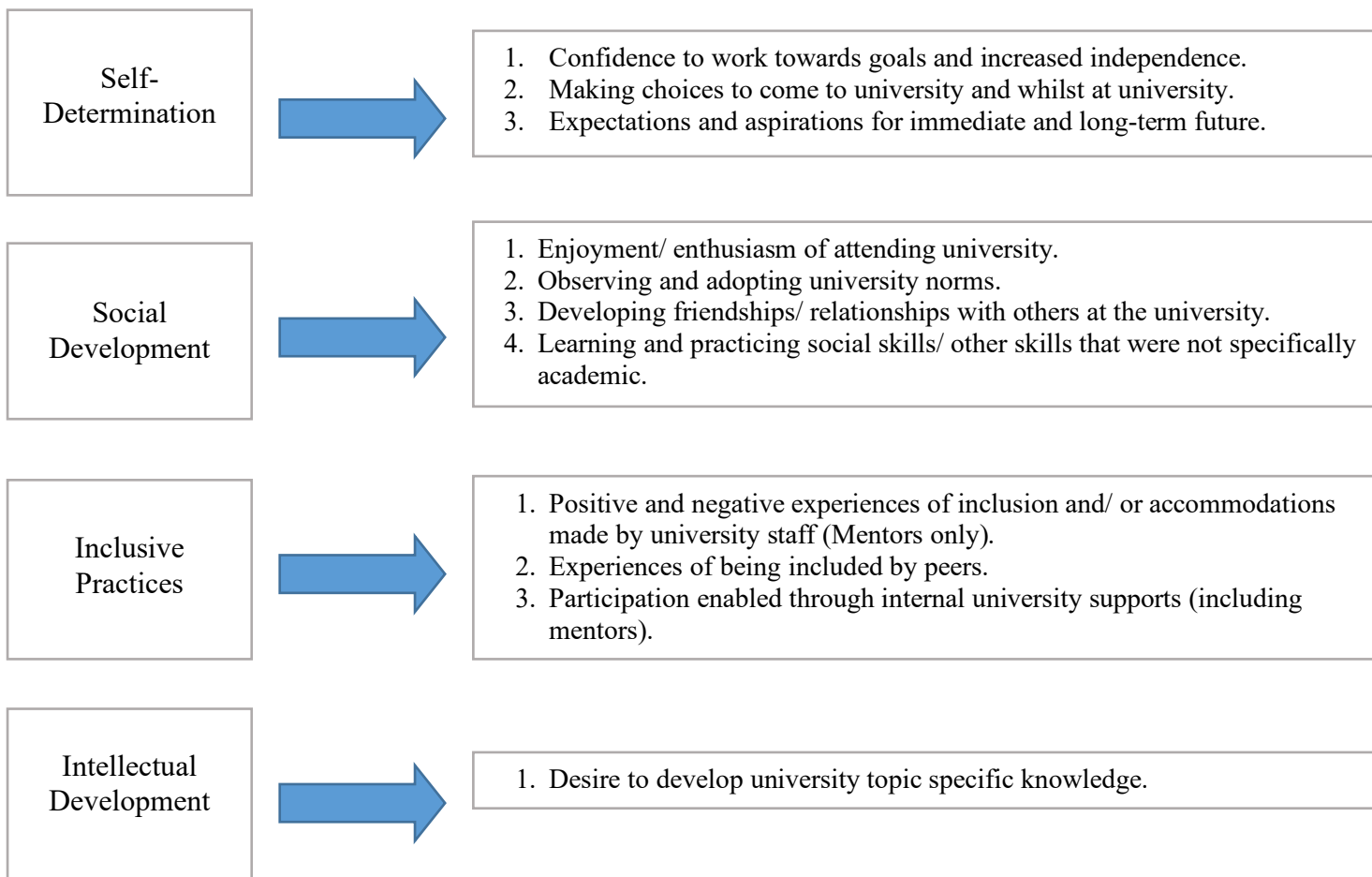


Figure 1. Themes and Subthemes: Perceptions of auditing students and mentors.

Self-Determination

Confidence to work towards goals and increased independence. Auditing students reflected upon their growing confidence to work towards goals, despite feeling overwhelmed or nervous at first. One student described: “...going towards it [goal]” was “like stepping stones...” (Student 4), whilst a mentor explained: “...she improved more in her confidence...” (Mentor 5). Further evidence of growth and development included one student describing how she cried (feeling afraid/nervous) and required her mentor’s support the first time she delivered a presentation. However, she independently delivered her next presentation with minimal mentor support and felt more confident about her abilities.

Another student described her increased independence in finding her way around campus and accessing resources: *“I know where the [library name] library is without my mentor with me...”* (Student 4).

Making choices to come to university and whilst at university. Students also referred to their decision to attend university; for example, *“Yeah I decided to come to Flinders University to get some more skills and... a bit more knowledge and a bit of experience”* (Student 3). In terms of choices and decisions whilst at university, one mentor described how an auditing student chose to take a period of leave from university for personal reasons. Another mentor reported that, despite an auditing student expressing initial hesitation/dislike towards her, she decided not to request a new mentor. This decision demonstrated persistence and paid off because, as their relationship developed, the student realised that she did get along with the mentor, *“...and we were able to work together”* (Mentor 4).

Expectations and aspirations for immediate and long-term future (including employment ambitions). Whilst not all auditing students spoke about their expectations and aspirations for the immediate and long-term future (e.g. planned careers), a couple of students identified the areas they would like to work in once they completed university. These interests influenced the topic choices they made. For example, *“I want to work as an Occupational Therapist Assistant which includes like different types of children with different types of disabilities”* (Student 4). Students also expressed their employment preferences to their mentors: *“...he has been looking for jobs... and he told me that this is a way for him to be motivated and do things throughout his day and that he’s also interested in learning about topics he is interested in like computing...”* (Mentor 3).

Social Development

Enjoyment/enthusiasm of attending university. Students spoke with pride about their positive experience of university, as summarised by one participant: “[*I’m feeling*] oh terrific! Oh terrific! I love it [*being at university*]” (Student 4). Equally, mentors described auditing students as enthusiastic, committed, and willing to learn a variety of things and have new social experiences. For example, “[*they were always really excited and like eager to learn and be here and um yeah a really positive experience*]” (Mentor 6).

Observing and adopting university norms. During their studies students developed an understanding of the requirements of being at university, such as note taking: “[*initially [student] didn’t even like take notes... but come week 3 they took their book out and started taking notes*]” (Mentor 2). Other university norms adopted by students included borrowing library books, participating in class discussions, taking breaks, not interrupting others, and being on time. Students also experienced navigating the university campus; for example, “[*how long it’s going to take to catch the bus to get to the top of the hill to then walk to class...*]” (Mentor 5). Students also adopted strategies to aid learning such as, “[*you can actually bring your laptop with you (laughs) you can type it up while they are talking I think it’s great.*]” (Student 4).

Developing friendships/ relationships with others at the university. New friendships formed between mentors and students, as described from the perspective of a student: “[*...it’s different [my life]... because when I started coming here I had no friends and then when I have a mentor we were friends.*]” (Student 1), and the perspective of a mentor: “[*me and [student’s name] built a strong friendship so like I kind of just see her as a friend, a really close friend... we will still catch up...*]” (Mentor 1). However, development of relationships with other students was limited. For example, only one student described knowing and talking with a peer in their class. However, a mentor noted that her university

friends also interacted with and included the auditing student, which was seen as a positive social experience; “... *we hung out with my friends and [student’s name] in particular loved that. She would take photos of us and put it on Facebook, she loved it you know, just that social, socialisation was so awesome.*” (Mentor 5).

Learning and practicing social skills/ other skills that were not specifically academic. Students were noted to have learnt and practiced social skills such as: “...*social norms of... you don’t talk while the people were talking*” (Mentor 5). One mentor reported that, at first, she had to initiate and maintain conversations with the auditing student. Part way through the semester, however, the student learnt to initiate conversation: “*I started the conversation, then half way through she started talking to me, I didn’t have to...*” (Mentor 4), demonstrating development of social skills. One student acknowledged that if she had a new mentor she would have to get to know him/her, indicating that she was practicing skills of building rapport. Some mentors identified that the auditing students developed public speaking skills and were more assertive in speaking up in class (e.g. telling the Lecturer in front of the whole class when the Lecturer’s slides were not working). Another mentor identified that the student learnt to ask for help through social networks if needed: “... *even if they were really good at it, they still had that little fear of asking for help but they didn’t seem to fear it when they were actually given help. By the end I noticed that everyone was asking for help*” (Mentor 4).

Inclusive Practices

Positive and negative experiences of inclusion and/ or accommodations made by university staff (only discussed by Mentors). Mentors referred to positive experiences of inclusive practices by university staff, such as being included in groups: “*we would quite often break up into groups and... even though [Student 1] didn’t end up doing that group assignment we were still assigned to a group and we still sat with them... so we still had...*”

time to collaborate on ideas..." (Mentor 5). Mentors noted that Tutors gave the student additional time to complete a practical task correctly; and a Lecturer positively acknowledged the auditing student's contribution to class discussion, even if it was off topic: *"that's a really good suggestion but how about ..."* (Mentor 2).

However, mentors also described instances where they felt as though the auditing student was excluded; for example, *"... they [other students] all went into the reading groups and we weren't allowed in one because they all presented... no one really wanted us there... we were kind of excluded"* (Mentor 4). Mentors reported that some teaching staff were not so accommodating; were not familiar with having people with ID in their class; and/or did not have awareness, knowledge or skills to implement inclusive practices. Mentors identified that Lecturers needed additional skills such as how to 'break it down' using simpler terminology, and needed to be more familiar with the role of the mentor (i.e. mentors are not tutors). One mentor described the negative impact when a Lecturer announced the student's disability and auditing status to the class, because: *"it's kind of segregation because you are pointing out that this person's here for a different reason"* (Mentor 5).

Two mentors believed that Lecturers focussed their attention on students in their class who were actually enrolled in the degree, and believed that students participating in the UTHP should have the same opportunity to enrol as degree students. For example, *"I honestly just believe that they [people with ID] should be able to just come to uni and shouldn't need the [UTHP]... could do the entire degree and would just need that little bit of help..."* (Mentor 4).

Experiences of being included by peers. Mentors found that peers would often talk directly to the mentor instead of the auditing student; for example, *"some people kind of spoke to me for her... but then I... just sort of direct it back to them"* (Mentor 5); and, *"...a big part of what I had to do was to role model how to use the communication board and..."*

demonstrating the fact that because she has a communication board doesn't mean that she doesn't understand you, you can still talk to her..." (Mentor 6). In another example, when an auditing student was trying to converse with a peer in the class, the peer *"literally just turned her back"* (Mentor 3). However, mentors also reported positive inclusive experiences such as *"... we came in a little bit late and they were doing... group discussions and they made the effort to come up and say oh we are talking about this and joining her in..."* (Mentor 2). Another mentor mentioned that peers *"just thought we were two people in the topic"* and *"were pretty good most of the time"* (Mentor 4). Some mentors saw it as part of their role to demonstrate that, though the auditing student has an ID, they are still a student just like any other student, and *"they deserve just as much respect just as much as everyone else"* (Mentor 1).

Participation enabled through internal university supports (including mentors).

Auditing students spoke highly of the support offered by their mentors, as they felt more at ease with university processes with the mentor by their side. For example, *"...some of the things goes straight over your head... so that's why... it is great to have a mentor so they would tell you exactly what the Lecturer is really [saying]"* (Student 4)

Mentors shared this perspective; for example, *"uni can be a little bit daunting sometimes, so I think just having that person for them to lean on was helpful"* (Mentor 6). One auditing student felt her developing relationship with the liaison librarian was an important part of her university experience and learning, because the librarian had expertise in the subject area. A mentor described how one auditing student always wanted to leave the class as soon as the other students broke into groups (e.g. by using the excuse that she needed to eat). However, the mentor encouraged the student to stay and interact with peers (suggesting that the student bring food to class). In this case, without a mentor, the student may have been discouraged from or apprehensive about attending small group work. Three

mentors described strategies for inclusion, and advice for peers and future mentors to enable auditing students' participation, such as, by allowing the student additional time to respond.

For example, "*stepping back and allowing them to progress in their communication development*" (Mentor 1), and "*ask... a lot of open questions, not just yes no questions... and then you just sit back and wait... you've given them the time to process it...*" (Mentor 4).

Intellectual Development

Desire to develop university topic specific knowledge. Auditing students were given the opportunity to choose to participate in a topic that was of interest to them.

Attending lectures and tutorials on a topic of interest led to students developing topic specific knowledge: "*there was lots of [things I learnt]... in Australian studies and there were heaps [of things I learnt]*" (Student 2), that met their interests and aspirations: "*so I'm just hoping to learn some new computer skills and build on my knowledge of computers...*" (Student 3).

Auditing students shared their delight about their expanding knowledge base. One student stated "*I like...learning about more things*" (Student 1). Mentors reiterated this, reporting "*...she wanted the academic side of it so she wanted to do all of the assignments and quizzes*" (Mentor 2). This demonstrates that not only did auditing students enjoy the experience of learning, but also some were striving to achieve beyond what was expected of them, i.e. to complete assessments.

Discussion

This study found that auditing students with ID experienced a range of benefits in line with the principles of inclusive post-secondary education (PSE) (Folk et al., 2012; O'Connor et al., 2012; Uditsky and Hughson, 2012), and the founding principles of the UTHP (Gibson, 1997; Grantley, 2000; Lobban, 2002). Consistent with previous literature, positive experiences of the UTHP, based on the inclusive individual support model (Hart et al., 2006), included developing confidence and independence, and developing socially by meeting

people and making friends. Positive experiences also included understanding and adopting university norms, experiencing positive inclusive practices, and gaining knowledge in their chosen subject area (Folk et al., 2012, Hart et al., 2006; Hughson et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2012). Participants also identified barriers to successful inclusion, which have implications for practice, such as not being included by peers, and some practices by teaching staff that were not accommodating or inclusive of students with ID. Recommendations for future research and for inclusive PSE are discussed.

Social Development- Challenging the Perceptions of Peers

Auditing students described having had opportunities to socialise and expand their social networks. This is consistent with previous literature reporting that inclusion of students with ID resulted in meaningful interactions with peers (Jones and Goble, 2012; O'Connor, et al., 2012); however, social interaction was found to be predominantly with peer mentors at the university. This finding echoes Plotner and May's (2017) finding that students with ID were less likely than students without disabilities to spend time with friends outside the institution.

As Jones and Goble (2012) found in their research into mentors in inclusive education programs, the UTHP mentors most likely already had positive attitudes towards students with ID and were supportive of inclusive educational practices. These attitudes are likely due to the mentors studying to be disability professionals. However, contrary to previous literature which suggested that inclusive PSE encourages positive attitudes in university communities (Griffin et al., 2012; May, 2012), there is less evidence of such positive attitudes in the current findings. Furthermore, increased awareness that learning difference does not mean incompetence (Jones and Goble, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2012) was not necessarily evident. Even though previous research found that contact with 'marginalised' people (e.g. students with ID) reduced stereotyping and discriminatory behaviour (Allport, 1954; Devine and

O'Brien, 2007; Roper, 1990), there was evidence that many peers discriminated against auditing students based on disability. Mentors reported that they needed to challenge the perceptions of peers and identified that part of their role was to redirect conversation to include auditing students because peers spoke to mentors instead of directly to the students. Unfortunately, this aligns with Lobban's (2002: p.157) findings from 14 years ago that "non-disabled students would look to the mentor for interaction", implying there has been little development in awareness and attitudes of others. These findings provide further evidence that more disability education and awareness is required for mainstream university students, particularly in terms of communicating with people with ID.

Inclusive Practices- Need for Lecturer Education

Mentors commonly reported mixed experiences of inclusive practices by university staff. As noted previously, the perspectives of mentors may have been influenced by their existing expectations of social inclusion based on their studies (Jones and Goble, 2012). Mentors were more informed, aware of, and educated about - and hence critical of - inclusive practices. Mentors noted that Lecturers had varying skills in inclusive practices. Some practices, such as not including the auditing student with ID in groups, were noted to present a barrier to successful inclusion. **Since the main focus of the current study was to explore the experiences of the students and their mentors, Lecturer perspectives were not investigated.** **Therefore,** it remains unknown whether these practices are associated with negative attitudes of Lecturers, or a lack of understanding and awareness (or both). Consistent with Jones and Goble (2012: p.276), Lecturers may need training "related to the provision of accommodations" to include people with ID in their classes. In order to identify specific training needs, future research should develop upon research by O'Connor et al. (2012) investigating existing awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge and perspectives of university teaching staff (e.g. **Lecturers and Tutors**).

Intellectual Development – Recognising Potential for Further Education

Higher education is valued because it enables development of academic knowledge and skills, as well as personal growth (Hout, 2012; Swain and Hammond, 2011). Based on the principle of self-determination (Wehemeyer, 1996), students were supported to make choices whilst at university, speak up, independently navigate the university campus, and ask for help. Students with ID participating in the UTHP developed academic knowledge and demonstrated intellectual growth because of their participation in university topics. Topic specific knowledge, and social skills gained from inclusion in higher education programs such as the UTHP, may provide individuals with ID a transition pathway to further education (e.g. enrol in a university degree of their choice and work towards a formal qualification) or desirable skills for future employment. The program therefore fills an educational gap for people with ID who may not have previously had opportunity to attend university because of additional support needs (AIHW, 2008), or may not have had their potential recognised within higher education contexts.

Even though participants identified several positive points, one major area for future development for the UTHP (and other similar programs) to consider is whether providing opportunities for students with ID to audit university topics is a completely inclusive practice. Arguably, the fact that auditing students do not receive a university qualification is limiting, and reiterates previous assumptions of low academic expectations (Grigal et al., 2011; Jones and Goble, 2012). Even though results demonstrated personal and intellectual development of the auditing students, the outcomes are not necessarily the same as mainstream students who receive a formal qualification, potentially providing greater employment opportunities. Future research should build upon that of Plotner and May (2017) to compare outcomes of university for students with ID to their peers without ID. Further research is also required to explore the transition of auditing students who have completed the UTHP to examine

whether personal benefits continue beyond their time at university. It should also build upon Moore and Schelling's (2015) research to investigate whether improved employment rates for people with ID who participated in postsecondary education programs are similar in an Australian context.

Summary of Recommendations

In summary, the current research recommends that university Lecturers have opportunities for training around inclusive practises. Such training could specifically relate to supporting inclusion of students with ID to reduce barriers to learning and inclusion. A recommended next step for future research is to gain the perspectives of Lecturers and university teaching staff. Similarly, it is recommended that further disability education is required within mainstream higher education in order to embed positive communication, awareness and inclusion of people with ID amongst peers. Future research should also explore the attitudes and opinions of peers in the university community. Importantly, inclusion in PSE programs in Australia such as the UTHP should be acknowledged as a viable stepping-stone for people with ID to further education or employment.

Limitations

While this study highlighted a number of benefits, and made recommendations for future development of inclusive PSE for people with ID, the following limitations are noted. Firstly, even though all students from the UTHP participated, there was a small sample size for both auditing students and mentors limiting the generalisability of results. **Secondly, even though mentors elaborated on the auditing students' often briefer accounts; mentors' perspectives were overrepresented relative to the perspectives of the auditing students themselves. Therefore, mentors' voices may be amplified in the current findings, particularly under the Inclusive Practices theme.** Thirdly, it was difficult to gauge individual growth and development over a single semester (4-5 months) because intellectual and social

development, and time to reflect on that development, may take longer. Future longitudinal research should collect data over a longer period using a pre/post design, interviewing participants before they first commence at university in order to measure outcomes throughout their three years with the program. **Finally, it was not possible within the scope of the current study to interview Lecturers. Since there is limited research in Australia about inclusive post-secondary education, the main aim of the current research was to capture the experiences of students with ID and their mentors in the first instance. The current findings highlight diverse experiences (positive and negative) of inclusive practices, and the current themes can be used to inform future research investigating Lecturer perspectives.**

Conclusion

This study gathered preliminary evidence to indicate that there were a number of benefits to the UTHP. Results demonstrated that students with ID involved with the UTHP were supported to make decisions about their future direction, gain independence, socialise with typically developing peers and expand their social networks. These results are particularly relevant as Australia's NDIS (NDIA, 2016) enables people with ID to access and choose from more service and support options to maximise their quality of life and achieve personal goals. Accordingly, people with ID may choose to engage in further study/higher education, and further develop social skills by participating in projects like the UTHP. However, the success of inclusive PSE programs for people with ID in Australia depends on a stronger evidence-base demonstrating best practices that maximise potential and positive outcomes for people with ID. A larger sample size and analysis over an extended period is needed to further demonstrate the success of an individualised program in supporting students with ID to engage in higher education.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

As noted in the method section, the authors declare that the first author is the Program Advisor of the Up the Hill Project (UTHP). The Program Advisor's position did not unduly influence research outcomes.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Themes and Subthemes: Perceptions of auditing students and mentors.