

Mental Health and Student Welfare: A Student Reflection

Written by Siân Hampson

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SIÂN HAMPSON, JUL 31 2014

Education has become more accessible than ever. The idea that we can all achieve an education is engrained into British society, and rightly so. However, in my view there is a gap between the idea of everyone being able to enter higher education and the support given to those who do so, and may then struggle.

I'm writing this as a woman, from a low income background, who has had ongoing issues with mental health problems. I cannot recall a time when I thought any of these factors would hold me back from achieving an education. As I started university and my mental health deteriorated I sought support from my doctor and eventually from counselling services. This helped to an extent, but didn't stop my depression and I still experienced crippling breakdowns which almost cost me my degree.

Emotional support is becoming more accessible in universities now, as the media – and society in a larger sense – are starting to address mental health issues more openly. This support is vital to the well-being of students and for some may suffice. Yet, there is still more work needed in targetting academic support for students that suffer with mental health issues – such as providing reasonable adjustments for coursework and exams etc.

In a NUS survey conducted in May 2013, it was shown that only 17% of UK students who had reported symptoms of mental distress went on to receive formal support from their institution, whilst 64% do not receive any formal support whatsoever. This support could be delivered in the form of counselling sessions, mentoring or via disability services.

Universities are by law required to support disabled students, this usually comes in the form of the university's disability service and via the disabled students allowance (DSA), which can pay for non-medical helpers, computer software, printing and books, amongst other things. The idea of the DSA is to level out the playing field for disabled students.

Mental health issues are seen as a disability under the Equality Act 2010, meaning that universities are legally obligated to provide support for their disabled students. It is difficult to argue that students with mental health problems should not be given extra support but it seems that there are many students that don't access that support for whatever reason.

I personally didn't seek support at first because I wasn't aware of the support that I could have had, and I didn't feel deserving of it. To me, disabled student support was for those with learning difficulties or physical difficulties. I unknowingly added to the stigma that surrounds disabled students. In order to reach this group of people who may make the same mistake as I did, we need to raise awareness of the issue in order to break down the stigma around being a disabled student, and actively target the misunderstandings that commonly arise about what disability may entail.

Getting the support that you are entitled to, and that you deserve, shouldn't be shameful or difficult. If I didn't get it, my degree would have finished prematurely.

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