# What do university teachers think about including students with intellectual disability?

## *Research Summary*

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## Introduction/ Background

Post-secondary education programs for people with intellectual disability (ID) have been around in countries like the United States of America for many years. However, programs specifically at university have only been around 20 years within Australia (O'Rourke, 2011; Flinders University, 2018). Inclusive university programs provide students with ID opportunity to attend university alongside peers (other university students) without ID. Programs help with development of self-determination and advocacy skills (Rillotta, Arthur, Hutchinson & Raghavendra, 2018). They also help to challenge stereotypes that the wider university community may have about people with ID (Rillotta et al., 2018; May, 2012; Griffin, Summer, McMillan, Day & Hodapp, 2012).

Currently, the Up the Hill Project at Flinders University in South Australia is one of two inclusive university programs available in Australia for students with ID (O'Rourke, 2011; Flinders University, 2018; Rillotta et al., 2018; Centre for Disability Studies, 2018). The second program, uni 2 beyond, is at the University of Sydney in New South Wales (Centre for Disability Studies, 2018).

Past research has explored the experiences of lots of different people involved in the university experience for students with ID (Griffin et al., 2012; O'Connor, Kubiak, Espiner & O'Brien, 2012), including the experiences of the students with intellectual disability themselves (Casale-Giannola & Kamens, 2006; Rillotta et al., 2018; Plotner & May, 2017; Kubiak, 2015). Exploring these experiences is important for investigating successes or areas for improvement of inclusive university programs. However, investigating teaching staff attitudes towards students with ID is also very important, because teaching staff contribute to both the student experience and success. Yet, teaching staff attitudes and perspectives is one of the least researched areas in inclusive higher education (Rao, 2004; O'Connor et al., 2012).

## Methods

The current research explored the following question: **what are the attitudes and experiences of teaching staff towards the inclusion of students with ID?** This was done by interviewing teaching staff at the university to see what they think about including people with ID (qualitative research approach involving semi-structured interviews). Five participants were recruited from a South Australian university because it has an inclusive university program (purposive sampling). Three participants had been involved with the inclusive university program at the university, and two participants were not involved with the inclusive university program at the same university.

## Findings

The three themes that came out through the analysis of interviews will now be discussed:

1. Limited knowledge and understanding of intellectual disability
2. Interpretation of inclusion
3. University systems

*Limited Knowledge and Understanding of Intellectual Disability*

Most participants had limited understanding of ID. One participant suggested that Autism Spectrum Disorder was an ID. Another participant admitted that they had a very vague idea of what would be considered an ID. However, participants also identified characteristics they felt were associated with ID, including the potential for needing more/ clearer explanation about tasks, and extra time to complete tasks. Importantly, one participant noted that an individual with ID is "… someone who can still function and make a difference …" (Participant #4).

*Interpretation of Inclusion*

Interview questions also explored participants understanding of inclusive higher education (university) and inclusive practices used within the university. One participant said that inclusive higher education was not a phrase they heard often. The participant said they had never seen it in emails or heard about it in conversations. Another participant suggested that it

directly related to equal gender representation in the sciences. Participants had different ideas and understandings about inclusive practices. One participant who had been involved with the university's inclusive university program described their approach to inclusion as promoting choice, whereas another participant who was also involved in the inclusive university program explained that they did not feel as though they needed to change the way they teach (their teaching practice).

*University Systems*

Discussion about university systems appeared in many interviews. All participants were aware of the disability support plans (access plans) provided by the university. One participant noted that they would like to know more about the student with ID before they attended class. They wanted to know more about the nature of the disability, the student's interests, and what the student has done previously. Participants suggested that inclusive practices should be built into university policies. They also thought that policies should be developed for formally understanding inclusive higher education. Participants suggested these policies might make all staff within the university more aware.

*Up the Hill Project*

Participants said it was important to encourage Flinders University programs like the Up the Hill Project. They also said it was important to challenge the idea that a university should only be for certain people (i.e. exclusive). Participants also said the Up the Hill Project was easier to work with than having students with disabilities attend university through other means. One participant said that having an Up the Hill Project student was no problem at all. Overall the program received positive comments from participants who had been involved in the Up the Hill Project. One participant said how great the program is and that more lecturers should be involved. Another participant explained that they could not think of a single negative associated with the program and that it's a " … bloody good idea…" (Participant #2).

**What does all of this mean? (Implications)**

This research highlighted that there is a need to educate university teaching staff who may only know ID by its stereotypical characteristics such as what people with ID can't do. The education needs to be careful not to further reinforce the stereotypes and the prejudice that comes with the stereotypes. Education about what ID is and about inclusive practices for students with ID is very important. But, we also need to be careful that we do not categorise all different kinds of ID and different abilities into one group.

Even though this study only had a small number of participants (small sample size) we hope the results will encourage more research about the attitudes of the entire university teaching staff towards the participation of students with various disabilities at university. As suggested by one participant, education is a significant achievement for all students; however the value of education is even stronger when it involves people that had never had the opportunity to participate at university in the past: "…going to university was something that they [student with ID] probably valued more than a lot of other people who just assumed it was a normal extension of their school life…" (Participant #1).

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