Critical disability studies and socially just change in higher education

Anastasia Liasidou

Social justice is an ambiguous and contested term that is evoked in order to address issues of enhancing participation and eliminating discrimination across various markers of difference linked to race, social class, and so on. Historically, disability has been excluded from these analyses because it has been cast in the sphere of abnormality and individual pathology. Notwithstanding considerable progress in the widening participation of disabled individuals in higher education, there are still many issues that need to be addressed in order to remove barriers to inclusion and to eradicate discriminatory regimes. The article, by Anastasia Liasidou of the European University Cyprus, uses some insights from Critical Disability Studies in order to highlight the ways in which certain dimensions of a social justice discourse need to be incorporated into debates about widening participation in higher education on the grounds of disability. Considerable emphasis is placed on the importance of adopting the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a means to mobilising socially just changes in higher education.

Key words: social justice, disability, inclusion, higher education, Universal Design for Learning

Introduction
Anti-discrimination legislation and other legal mandates promoting the inclusion of disabled individuals in all aspects of social, political and economic life have precipitated an enhanced interest in exploring the ways in which social justice
discourse can be understood and acted upon in different domains (Artiles, Harris-Murri & Rostenberg, 2006; Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006). Traditionally marginalised and vulnerable groups of people have been systematically denied access to higher education. This resulted in the creation and perpetuation of a vicious circle of social disadvantage whereby these individuals have systematically experienced discriminatory and paternalistic forms of provision. This has been particularly true for disabled individuals whose subjugation and marginalisation has been justified on the basis of their alleged biological deficiencies. As a direct result of the predominance of this individual pathology perspective, disability, unlike other sources of social disadvantage, has not been taken into consideration when discussing issues of unequal and discriminatory treatment (Baynton, 2001).

Examining issues of social inclusion on the grounds of disability in isolation from accessibility opportunities in higher education is a futile endeavour that leaves gaping holes in a host of dynamics that perpetuate the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled individuals from varied aspects of social, political and economic life. During the 1990s, higher education institutions were largely inaccessible for disabled students and were also reluctant to provide any kind of support to these students (Barnes, 1991). Following international developments and mandates promoting the rights of disabled individuals, the participation of disabled students in higher education has markedly improved. While in 1994/1995 the number of disabled individuals accessing higher education in the UK was 2%, it reached 8.63% in 2011/2012 (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013).

Nevertheless, despite these developments, disabled people are still under-represented in higher education (Barnes, 2007; Gibson, 2012; Gale & Tranter, 2011). This is especially apparent if we bear in mind that the working population of disabled individuals in the UK is estimated to be over 46% of those with disabilities of working age (ODI, 2012). The discrepancy between the percentage of disabled individuals accessing higher education and that of disabled individuals who are employed is a testament to the fact that disabled individuals are usually employed in low wage jobs that do not require higher education qualifications.

At the same time, despite notable progress in the introduction of innovative programmes and assistive technology equipment to better meet the needs of disabled students in higher education (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011), there are a number of other issues that need to be attended to in order to implement a fully-fledged social justice discourse in terms of enhancing participation in higher education. The following sections use insights from Critical Disability Studies in
order to explain the ways in which certain dimensions of a social justice discourse need to be incorporated into debates about widening participation in higher education on the grounds of disability.

Socially just change in higher education
Inclusion is an internationally mandated policy imperative that envisages creating more accessible social and educational environments for disabled individuals. The concept of inclusion epitomises an ideological ‘turnaround’, aimed at mobilising transformative changes so as to enhance the fair participation of disabled individuals in all social and educational domains. Emanating from the social model of disability, inclusion is the antidote to the long-standing marginalisation and disparagement of disabled individuals whose rights have been systematically denied and violated. International legislative and policy developments recognise the highly political and complex nature of the experience of disability, which cannot be reduced to an individual pathology phenomenon, while also advancing a human rights and social justice perspective concerned with challenging a host of systemic inequities and discriminatory regimes that adversely affect disabled people’s lives and educational trajectories (Armstrong & Barton, 2007; Rioux, 2002; Roaf & Bines, 2004).

Despite the overlapping nature of ‘special educational needs’ and ‘disabilities’, the two notions are not synonymous; individuals with special educational needs are not necessarily disabled, while some others are disabled but do not have special educational needs (Lewis, Mooney, Brady, Gill, Henshall, Willmott, Owen, Evans & Statham, 2010). Hence, the notion of ‘special educational needs’ should not be regarded as an endemic and immutable aspect of a disabled person’s make-up. Rather, it should be seen as the result of the accumulative and intersecting effects of institutional and ideological pathologies that create barriers to learning and participation (Dyson & Kozleski, 2008; Van Kampen, Van Zijverden & Emmett, 2008). This perspective necessitates the removal of disabling barriers by means of problematising and modifying existing organisational attitudes, processes and practices that exclude certain individuals from mainstream cultures and communities.

The introduction of anti-discrimination legislation with regard to disability has brought to the fore the multitude of social barriers encountered by disabled individuals in their daily lives (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008). Anti-discriminatory legislative caveats stipulate that social and educational institutions are expected to promote inclusion and respond to individuals’ diverse needs in effective and non-discriminatory ways (for example, the Equality Act 2010). An important
legislative development pertaining to a human rights approach to disability was the enforcement of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 3 May 2008. The Convention subscribes to a social relational approach to disability to foreground the interaction of an individual’s impairment with contextual dynamics that undermine ‘their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (UN, 2008).

Notwithstanding the propagation of legal mandates that promote a framework of social justice and human rights for addressing the needs of disabled individuals, disability is not regarded as a social justice issue on a par with other sources of social disadvantage linked to ethnicity/race and social class. Rather, it is monodimensionally regarded in terms of responding to students’ ‘special educational needs’ (Claiborne, Cornforth, Gibson & Smith, 2011; Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009). This perspective is also reflected in anti-discrimination legislation that stipulates the necessity of making ‘reasonable accommodations’ in order to meet disabled individuals’ needs. This kind of phraseology portrays disability as an individual problem in need of ‘reasonable accommodations’, rather than a systemic problem that results from power inequities and discriminatory regimes (Guillaume, 2011).

At the same time, the notion of social justice is a contested and ambiguous term (Johnson, 2008), for it can occasionally be understood from a meritocratic and neo-liberal perspective (Masschelein & Simon, 2005). As a result, certain groups of students are excluded from higher education institutions on the basis of their alleged inability to contribute to performance indicators and to cope with the competitive ‘human capital’ marketplace of higher education institutions. Such an elitist approach leaves little room to mobilise and achieve socially just changes in higher education (Singh, 2011) in order to reduce and eradicate structural and ideological obstacles that undermine attempts to implement an inclusive education reform agenda in higher education (for example, Barnes, 2007).

That said, even in cases whereby higher education institutions provide some kind of disability support services, these forms of support reflect an individual pathology approach that is focused on ‘caring for and compensating disabled students’ (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013). Disability support services are thus largely seen as being distinct from the role of the academic tutor in embedding exclusionary regimes into the learning process and the student–tutor relationship. As a result, it is occasionally the case that disabled students are segregated from their non-disabled peers so as to have additional time during exams. In certain instances, segregation does not only result from the necessity of giving extra time during...
exams; rather the allocation of a ‘separate room’ is presented as an autonomous ‘exam access arrangement’ for disabled students. In so doing, disabled students are singled out as being ‘different’ and in need of compensatory measures of support (Madriaga, Hanson, Kay & Walker, 2011). These practices are antithetical to the principles of an inclusive discourse that is geared towards the necessity of responding to learner diversity without having recourse to segregating and stigmatising forms of provision.

**Intersectionality as an impetus for a social justice action agenda**

As already discussed, disabled students are under-represented in higher education while they also have high drop-out rates (Barnes, 2007; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013; Gibson, 2012; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). These are important issues that need to be addressed through the lens of an intersectional perspective with a view to targeting the overlapping and intersecting effects of multiple sources of social disadvantage on the lives and educational trajectories of disabled individuals. A social justice reform agenda in higher education necessitates transcending individual pathology perspectives that call for assimilationist practices and discriminatory forms of intervention (Lloyd, 2008). That said, disability should be seen as a social justice and equity issue with a view to addressing the accumulative effects of multiple sources of social disadvantage experienced by disabled students.

The accumulative result of multiple forms of social disadvantage has a direct impact on the access of disabled students to higher education as well as their ability to complete their course of studies. As far as the first point is concerned, accessibility rates in higher education on the grounds of disability depend to a great extent on where a disabled individual lives and goes to school (Lewis et al., 2010), while the high drop-out rates from higher education can be attributed to financial constraints, lack of support, and social marginalisation and negative social attitudes (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). These considerations raise significant issues regarding the ways in which wider societal factors are responsible for the under-representation and the high drop-out rates of disabled individuals in higher education. As Gale and Tranter (2011, p. 38) write:

> ‘The current inequalities of representation and outcomes in higher education are the result of multiple social, educational and economic factors and are not due to different overall levels of ability or potential’.

Given the above considerations, the notion of ‘intersectionality’ (Davis, 2008; Denis, 2008; Knudsen, 2006), which denotes the multiple, overlapping and reciprocally reinforcing forms of social disadvantage experienced by disabled
individuals, gives impetus to initiate a social justice action agenda challenging simultaneous forms of discrimination experienced by disabled students in higher education on the grounds of their class, racial, cultural, sexual, etc. characteristics. Intersectional understandings of disability necessitate a systemic policy framework in order to simultaneously address the overlapping sources of social disadvantage experienced by disabled individuals (Liasidou, 2013). For instance, a discussion on the accessibility of higher education to disabled individuals should take into consideration the pernicious effect of introducing tuition fees in higher education institutions and their impact on prospective disabled students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, in terms of the wider societal conditions that influence disabled people’s lives and educational trajectories, particular consideration should be given to issues such as disability and housing, and the formulation of social protection policies relevant to disabled people.

This line of thought takes us to another aspect of a social justice discourse that is concerned with the ways in which dominant forms of ‘knowing’ valorise certain human identities while devaluing others. Gale and Tranter (2011) refer to the notion of ‘epistemological equity’ to denote the legitimisation of certain kinds of knowledge at the expense of others. For instance ‘eurocentric knowledge’ advances particular ways of viewing and understanding human identities; ‘whiteness’ has been portrayed as a ‘property’ to convey its infinite value and to legitimise the supremacy of those people who embody this ontological ‘property’ (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Drawing parallels, Madriaga et al. (2011) refer to the ways in which the sanctified status attributed to the notion of ‘normalcy’ in higher education are responsible for the systemic exclusion of disabled individuals. In analogous ways, albeit not specifically referring to higher education, Campbell (2008, 2009) exemplifies the ways in which the prevalence of the ‘able-bodied order’ pervades social understandings in relation to the notion of disability. The ‘able-bodied order’ valorises normalcy, while also attributing any kind of alleged deviation from it to the sphere of individual pathology. When adopting an intersectional perspective, the analytical edge extends to include the ways in which the able-bodied order, racialised order, and so on, advance particular ways of knowing and being that devalue some individuals on the basis of the combined effects of certain markers of difference (Guillaume, 2011).

The pervasive influence of ‘normalcy’ in higher education creates an ‘academic elitism’ that engenders negative attitudes toward disabled students. For instance, the following quotation from one Dean of an Ivy League university in the USA

Negative attitudes are also prevalent among non-disabled students – something that is responsible for the social isolation of disabled students in higher education institutions. This parameter is occasionally omitted when discussing issues of enhancing one’s participation in higher education and raises significant concerns about the necessity of placing a more pronounced emphasis on understanding the overall educational experiences of this group of students. As Sachs and Schreuer (2011, p. 52) write:

‘most research and discussions on the inclusion of students with disabilities focus on their academic achievements, and neglect the implications of their social participation. This finding calls academic institutions, student organizations, and policymakers to promote social participation programmes as part of the services provided in higher education institutions . . .’

Apart from the above considerations, those disabled individuals who are singled out as being ‘deviants’ from what is projected to them as the ‘able-bodied order’ experience, according to Campbell (2008, 2009), ‘internalized oppression’, for they are well aware of the marginal and subordinated subject positions imputed to them. ‘Internalized oppression’ consists of two acts, namely emulation and dispersal. The former refers to attempts to emulate/approximate hegemonic and conventional norms, while the latter refers to a conscious reluctance to accept one’s own disability. The latter can explain the occasional reluctance of some disabled individuals to disclose their disability and claim their entitlements. This is a phenomenon well documented in higher education, especially for students with invisible disabilities, who are occasionally reluctant to reveal their disability and to have access to disability support services (Barnes, 2007; Gibson, 2012; Madriaga et al., 2011).

This is an important issue because there is considerable evidence suggesting that when disabled individuals have access to disability-related support services, they can reach the same achievement levels as their non-disabled peers. Madriaga et al. (2011, p. 917) write about the reasons why some disabled students fail in higher education:

‘their lack of achievement reflects the pervasiveness of normalcy within the institution, where disabled students who are considering take-up of support are placed in vulnerable positions to disclose their impairments’.
Interestingly, the pervasiveness of the normalcy discourse has wider implications for higher education institutions. Campbell (2008), for instance, cites the example of some of her disabled fellow academics who also refuse to reveal their disabilities and subsequently to claim their work-related entitlements.

**Fostering inclusive pedagogies in higher education**

The considerations raised in the previous section point to the necessity of challenging the deficit-oriented perspectives that inform a number of accessibility initiatives in higher education institutions to meet the needs of disabled students. Fostering inclusion in higher education entails moving beyond assimilationist and compensatory measures of support with a view to advancing inclusive forms of pedagogy to meet learner diversity in non-discriminatory and socially just ways. To that end, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has gained momentum in a number of disciplines, ranging from engineering to education, that deliver a considerable number of Universal Design (UD) courses intended to acquaint students with the principles and practices of UDL. The ideas of UDL originated from architecture and subsequently were developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the USA in order to create accessible environments and minimise the need for specialised interventions and compensatory measures of support (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Burgstahler & Cory, 2008).

The application of UD in education has been concerned with the introduction of curricula (Doyle & Robson, 2002; Watts, Stickels, Fraser, Carroll, Stewart & Radloff, 2000) and teaching methods (for example, Burgstahler, 2012; Thousand, Villa & Nevin, 2007) that improve teaching and learning and enhance educational accessibility on the grounds of ability, race/ethnicity and other markers of difference, without the need to adopt specialist interventions and adaptations (such as special education practices) (Thousand et al., 2007). UD pedagogies presuppose an informed understanding of the ways in which students differ (Rose, 2001), so as to strategically design courses that enable students to interact with and respond to curricula and materials in accordance with their preferred modalities of learning. This process involves adopting a diverse repertoire of teaching methods, including the use of technology to present new information, while incorporating approaches and theoretical perspectives commensurate with the principles of an inclusive discourse, such as the need to promote instructional differentiation and multi-sensory teaching (for example, Burgstahler & Cory, 2008; Thousand et al., 2007).
Given the discipline-specific character of these courses, it is imperative to devise a unified pedagogical approach to teaching UD, which can be cross-disciplinary and hence truly universal. This broader approach can be the harbinger to improve and expand existing UD courses so as to be applicable across different disciplines. A widely applicable UD curriculum can enable all higher education students and faculty staff to become acquainted with the theoretical, technical, legal and philosophical underpinnings of UD, with a view to fostering accessible and effective environments for all. One important goal of this generic curriculum is to advance the idea that inclusive design efforts can benefit disabled and non-disabled students alike. This is an important goal, for it highlights the real universality of this effort which is not limited to a specific group of individuals. A generic UD curriculum can provide the springboard for the adoption of a reflective and critical process of providing a proactive rather than a reactive and specialised approach to meeting all students’ needs across disciplines and different working environments (Mole, 2012).

This generic UD curriculum will also address some of the shortcomings of existing UD programmes, which are primarily concerned with the technical aspects of UD methodologies while ignoring its critical dimensions. Enhancing accessibility for all is primarily a social justice issue, and therefore UD should be firmly embedded in a social justice framework that is informed by a serious interest in exploring and destabilising power inequities, which create and project subordinated educational and social roles for disabled and other disenfranchised groups of individuals (Knoll, 2009). Arguably, UD pedagogies alone cannot, according to Johnson (2004), ‘unpack the power inequities that define educational bodies, relationships and structures’. Consequently, a more pronounced emphasis should be placed on incorporating a critical approach to designing UD curricula. The latter, for instance, should focus on the role of language and its material effects on the creation of accessible and non-discriminatory social and educational spaces for all (Mole, 2012). As pointed out earlier, the lexicon of ‘reasonable accommodations’ frequently stipulated in anti-discrimination legislation, runs the danger of placing the focus on an individual’s presumed ‘pathology; rather than on a host of organization pathologies’ (Guillaume, 2011) that need to be eradicated through critical UD approaches.

As part of Bologna’s rhetoric on forging collaborative institutional and communicative higher education channels, a generic UD curriculum could be implemented cross-nationally in order to advance a reflective and critical approach to providing a proactive rather than a reactive and specialised approach to accessibility issues. To that end, the notion of collaboration stipulated in the Bologna
process should extend to include concerns about fostering social solidarity by means of building collaborative networks to facilitate a global approach to promoting socially just forms of UD curricula. Evidence from good practice in relation to these initiatives should be disseminated and rolled out across Europe as well as non-EU countries in order to materialise international policy rhetoric on respecting and accommodating diversity in effective and democratic ways (Nyborg, 2004).

The cross-cultural dimension of this endeavour, however, presents some other challenges that need to be addressed; namely the culturally mediated character of students’ perceptions, as well as those of staff with regard to the importance of adopting UD as a means of creating inclusive societies. If we are genuinely interested in promoting UD curricula, we should seek to scrutinise and establish the relations, processes and interactions which impinge upon the ways in which the nature and the purpose of these curricula are conceptualised and acted upon. The development and introduction of an international, interactive, universally designed educational system should provide the impetus to address the above challenges so as to mobilise a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural effort to ‘move towards a global responsibility for access and inclusion’ (Mole, 2012).

Moreover, particular attention should also be given to the need to include disabled individuals in terms of articulating their views on the scope and aims of these curricula, along with the ways in which they want to be presented, the role they should play and the kind of change they want to see in these curricula designs. Gale and Tranter (2011) refer to the notion of ‘recognitive justice’ as a means to promote the inclusion of disenfranchised groups of students in higher education. As they write:

‘In a context of higher education for the masses, “recognitive justice” requires a deeper understanding of the knowledges, values and understandings that all students bring to university. And this necessarily implies creating spaces for them, not simply creating more places’.

(Gale & Tranter, 2011, p. 43)

This is an important, albeit under-recognised, dimension of a social justice discourse in higher education that needs to be seriously taken into consideration when discussing issues of accessibility on the basis of disability. Disabled students’ voices and perspectives should be central to any research endeavour intended to foster more inclusive policies and practices in higher education.
(Gibson, 2012). To that end, it is necessary to foster ‘emancipatory’ and ‘participatory’ forms of disability research so as to give voice to disabled individuals, so that they can participate and actively contribute to the aims and scope of the research agenda with a view to mobilising transformative change (Barton, 2005; Barnes, 2007). At the same time, particular consideration should also be given to the fact that disabled individuals do not form a homogeneous group of students. The differing nature of disabilities necessitates transcending the dualistic logic of the disabled/non-disabled distinction so as to understand the ways in which different kinds of disability evoke different sociocultural responses as well as different experiential embodiments of disability. This point also relates to the different degrees of privilege afforded to certain disabled students in accessing existing disability-related support services and procedures. Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson (2005) explain the ways in which the latter tend to benefit male, middle-class students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, for example.

Moreover, professional development for social justice and inclusion on the grounds of disability should constitute an integral aspect of attempts to enhance accessibility in higher education. That said, it is imperative to enhance staff members’ as well as non-disabled students’ understandings of the complex nature of disability experience and the needs of disabled individuals to create positive attitudes and to enhance disability awareness in terms of disabled people’s rights and entitlements as these are stipulated in international laws and conventions. This kind of education should be provided on a compulsory and systematic basis and should be gradually extended to all citizens through the implementation of disability awareness initiatives across the nation.

Article 26 (2) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2008) is explicit about the necessity of providing initial and continuous training on disability rights and accessibility issues. This includes disability awareness training, to enable the various professionals concerned to understand the environmental, social, cultural and political barriers faced by disabled individuals. This kind of understanding will rationalise and make imperative the need to provide alternative and augmentative means of communication as well as appropriate modes of support in order to enable disabled students to overcome these barriers in socially just and non-discriminatory ways. As already discussed, accessibility issues cannot be seen in isolation from the necessity to enhance ‘critical awareness’ with regard to human rights, the value of the individuality of disabled people, and the recognition of their rights as citizens. To this end, professional development initiatives in higher education should also be concerned with
enabling participants to develop, according to Corker (1999), reflexive knowledge on disability issues which ‘opens up political discourse to issues of language and difference and their relationship to the unequal distribution of social resources’.

Conclusions
Discussing issues of social justice and accessibility in higher education on the grounds of disability necessitates a nuanced analysis of the myriad of hidden dynamics that create power inequities and exclusionary regimes for disabled students. Such an attempt requires analytical openness as well as convergence in the unpacking of exclusionary matrices and discriminatory practices that have a cumulative and overlapping effect on the lives and educational trajectories of disabled students.

Technological innovations and disability support services are incomplete and even pernicious in terms of their potential stigmatising power unless underpinned by a critical understanding of the highly political and complex nature of disability. This involves transcending assimilationist and compensatory approaches to meeting disability-related needs through an informed understanding of the intersectional nature of disability experience and the ways in which accessibility in higher education is primarily a social justice and human rights issue that calls for transformative structural and ideological action. An intersectional framework of intervention can shift the focus from a reductionist perspective to a systemic approach to alleviating the social and educational inequalities that impact disabled students’ lives and identities. In so doing, it will be possible to target intersecting sources of social disadvantage that are accountable for the under-representation and high drop-out rates of disabled individuals in higher education.

Particular attention also needs to be given to the pervasive effect of the discourse of ‘normalcy’ in creating subordinate student identities and negative attitudes towards disability and difference. Challenging deeply rooted discourses of normality is a critical step toward dismantling negative attitudes and elitist approaches that assign inferior and marginal subject positions to disabled individuals. A paradigm shift from this reductionist epistemology necessitates introducing disability awareness initiatives across higher education and offering professional development opportunities for social justice and inclusion, while also taking into consideration the ‘lived’ experience of disability through emancipatory and participatory research agendas. The latter give ‘voice’ to disabled students to articulate their thoughts and perspectives in relation to the focus, direction and aims of a social justice reform agenda in higher education.
References


**Address for correspondence:**

Dr Anastasia Liasidou
European University Cyprus – Education
6 Diogenes St
2404 Engomi
Nicosia
Cyprus
Email: A.Liasidou@euc.ac.cy

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