

Exploring Out-of-Classroom Activities for Students with Disabilities: Implications for Employability Skills Development

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of students with disabilities in tertiary education is rising globally, however research on their participation in out-of-classroom activities remains limited. This paper investigates the significance of out-of-classroom engagement for students with disabilities, particularly its impact on their development of employability skills. While existing literature predominantly addresses accommodations within academic settings, this study emphasises the broader university experience. Through a scoping review, it examines the benefits and challenges associated with out-of-classroom activities and their relevance to employability post-graduation.

The study reveals that while universities primarily focus on subject-specific skills, the demand for complementary competencies is increasing. Out-of-classroom activities, including curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular pursuits, are crucial for fostering practical skills and social integration. Such activities are instrumental in developing employability traits like leadership, teamwork, communication, and resilience. Moreover, participation in these activities facilitates networking opportunities essential for career advancement. University graduates with known disabilities are less likely to find themselves in employment in the first year after graduation, and for some disciplines even less likely to find a relevant role within the area related to their degree. In the United Kingdom alone, adults with disabilities are amongst the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

Despite the acknowledged benefits and the drivers for inclusion, students with disabilities encounter barriers hindering their participation in out-of-classroom activities. Institutional, attitudinal, and disability-specific challenges hinder their access to these opportunities. Lack of appropriate accommodations, fear of stigmatization, and limited resources pose significant obstacles for their inclusion. Addressing these barriers is essential to ensure equal opportunities for skills development and employment prospects.

Keywords

Extra-curricular activities, Employability skills, Disabled students, Inclusion, Graduate employability

1 INTRODUCTION

The number of students with disabilities in tertiary education continues to rise globally, with approximately 15 percent of the undergraduate student population having at least one impairment or disability (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Moriña, 2017; Chipchase et al., 2023). As the population of university students with disabilities continues to increase, there is a growing interest in researching their inclusion in campus life. Research to date primarily focuses on implementing appropriate accommodations in academic environments and managing curriculum to support their needs (Toutain, 2019; Zorec et al., 2022). While there are significantly fewer studies exploring inclusion for out-of-classroom activities compared to those addressing in-class provisions, research emphasising the overall university experience for students with disabilities acknowledges the significance and advantages of engaging in extracurricular activities. This recognition underscores the importance of such involvement, particularly in fostering employability skills (Tinklin & Hall, 1999; Moriña, 2016; Chipchase et al., 2023).

In the United Kingdom, students spend only a small proportion of their time in lectures and tutorials, whilst substantially more time is spent out of the classroom, which includes engagement in recreational and social activities (Johnson, 2000; Lau et al., 2014; Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022). The choices students make regarding their leisure time is greatly influenced by the range of activities accessible to them, as well as their individual and social backgrounds. These factors significantly shape not only their university experience but also their career prospects after graduation. Despite the Government's attempts to increase inclusion in higher education, to ensure that all people have the chance to acquire the professional skills essential for employment and to smoothly transition into a professional environment, individuals with disabilities remain amongst the most socially and economically disadvantaged (Gibson, 2015). The data from the most recently available Graduate Outcomes survey reveals that across all subject groupings, graduates with disabilities are less likely to be in full-time employment 15 months after graduation (54 per cent), compared to individuals with no known disabilities (63 per cent) (HESA, 2023).

Universities are primarily focused on the development and fostering of subject-specific skills, yet the demand for a wider range of complementary skills is also increasing. Participation in out-of-classroom activities is considered important for the development of practical skills that may not be fostered in classroom (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2023). There is a proven link between participation in out-of-classroom activities and the development of transferrable skills sought by employers, which is also acknowledged by the British Government (Department for Education, 2018; Buckley & Lee, 2021). Engagement in out-of-classroom activities impacts the development of knowledge and cognition more than academic engagement and helps students to become industry-ready and employable (Riberio et al., 2023).

This paper aims to review literature exploring the benefits and challenges associated with participation in out-of-classroom activities for students with disabilities, and the subsequent development of employability skills for success post-graduation.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study presents a scoping review of literature exploring the importance and benefits of out-of-classroom activities for the development of employability skills, and the inclusion of students with disabilities in these activities in universities. The goal of a scoping review is to explore and synthesize a range of evidence, offering broad insights and relationships to illustrate the extent, depth, and novelty within the specified field of research (Aguilar & Pifarre Turmo, 2019). Specifically, this research aims to answer three questions:

- RQ1: What are the different types of out-of-classroom activities available to students at universities?
- RQ2: What are the benefits of partaking in the out-of-classroom activities?
- RQ3: What are the challenges for students with disabilities who wish to participate in out-of-classroom activities?

Given the scope of the topic and the research's aim to provide an overview of available academic literature, a scoping literature review was considered a suitable approach. The primary aim of the review was to explore the benefits and challenges associated with participation in non-curricular activities across higher education institutions in the United Kingdom for students with all types of disabilities.

2.1 Literature search and the criteria for paper inclusion

The databases identified for the research were selected through the university's electronic databases search, under the *education* and *social sciences* sections. This returned the total of 17 eligible databases for research. These were further narrowed down to include only those that publish full text journal articles and conference papers, excluding databases publishing abstracts, book chapters, and/or dissertations. Additionally, only databases that provided up-to-date access were included in the further selection criteria. This process narrowed down the final eligible databases to six, namely, Taylor and Francis, ERIC, Elsevier, SpringerLink, Sage and Wiley.

Then, the titles, abstracts and keywords of papers considered relevant were evaluated. In this stage of research, the keywords 'extra-curricular activities', 'out-of-classroom activities', 'disability' and 'inclusion' were of primary interest. Furthermore, keywords like 'challenges', and 'barriers' were added. Finally, the following search strings were created to identify suitable resources:

- "extra-curricul*" AND "disab*" OR "includi*"
- "out-of-classroom" AND "disab*" OR "includi*"
- "extra-curricul*" AND "disab*" OR "includi*" AND "barrier*" OR "challenge*"
- "out-of-classroom" AND "disab*" OR "includi*" AND "barrier*" OR "challenge*"

The primary focus was on academic publications in English language published between January 2011 and December 2023, taking into consideration the introduction of *The Equality Act 2010*, which has a significant influence on the inclusion of individuals, and the time at which the research was conducted. However, two British studies published pre-2011 were included – Tinklin & Hall, 1999 and Johnson, 2000 – due to their significant importance for the study, focusing specifically on the experiences of students with disabilities and the provision of support in and out of the classroom. Studies that were not directly linked to university students or higher education were automatically excluded from the review. This approach revealed a lack of pertinent academic resources in the British context; only thirteen, eleven out of which were published within the specified timeframe. For that reason, relevant and recent studies from primarily European countries published in the last decade in the English language were included as well. This approach identified 21 suitable resources.

3 REVIEW FINDINGS

3.1 RQ1: Employability and out-of-classroom activities

Employability can be defined as a set of accomplishments, including the skills, opinions, and individual characteristics, that increase the likelihood of graduates securing employment and success in their chosen occupations (Griffiths et al., 2021).

There are three primary types of out-of-classroom activities available to students in the United Kingdom: *curricular*, *co-curricular* and *extra-curricular* (Swingler et al., 2022). Curricular activities are embedded into the programme of studies, and although they can happen outside of a normal classroom setting, they are normally regarded as credit-bearing tasks. They can include work-integrated learning, study tours, student exchanges, and degree-related competitions (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022). Co-curricular activities are delivered by the higher education institution but are not regarded as credit-bearing, nor are they formally part of a degree programme. They encompass employability events and activities that help to develop professional and industry-related skills, such as networking events, career-related workshops, or volunteering (Swingler et al., 2022). Extra-curricular activities are the non-academic activities conducted within the context of higher education institutions, that happen outside of the class and are not part of a normal academic curriculum. These do not only include sports and recreational activities such as sports and arts, but also award programmes community work, clubs and societies, and paid work (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2021; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

3.2 RQ2: The role and importance of out-of-classroom activities

Out-of-classroom activities play an important role in the overall university life of all its students. They are one of the primary factors in student integration in the institution, fostering and developing social connections and a sense of belonging, thus directly influencing student retention (Pedler et al., 2022). Additionally, participation in recreational activities is proven to have a positive impact on students' wellbeing by decreasing perceptions of loneliness that leads to poor mental health in students with and without disabilities, and physical health which is primarily associated with participation in sports and physical activities (Johnson, 2000, Kotera et al., 2021). There are numerous studies claiming additional benefits of out-of-classroom activities, especially with the connection to employability post-graduation, for both, students with disabilities, and their counterparts, as students have an opportunity to develop transferrable skills necessary for securing employment in today's competitive environment (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Furthermore, social networks built while participating in out-of-class activities are linked to aiding fresh graduates with job search, and in many cases are linked to their current career paths by establishing industry-specific social connections (Ribeiro et al., 2023).

3.3 The development of specific skills

A document by the European Commission (2017) regarding higher education states that there is an increase in the demand for individuals who not only possess high-level qualification, but also transferrable skills. While the benefits of participating in out-of-classroom activities encompass a broad array of competencies, multiple authors agree on several specific personal and professional benefits for students. The most common are *leadership*, *teamwork*, *communication*, *self-confidence*, and *self-management*. These are also amongst the most desired transferrable skills by employers. Other benefits include *networking*, *decision-making*, *problem-solving*, and *entrepreneurship*. Additional identified skills were *innovation*, *self-advocacy*, *self-perception*, *adaptation*, and *resilience* (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2021; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023).

It is important to note that not all activities help to develop all the necessary skills equally. Literature differentiates between the types of activities an individual gets involved in and the types of skills they develop. For example, participation in recreational activities such as sports is linked

with the development of social relationships, leadership, teamwork, and the improvement of physical and mental health. Activities directly linked to the institution, such as representation in student union, help with the development of communication, networking, decision-making, problem-solving and resilience, are more likely to guarantee a fast transition from academia to employment (Johnson, 2000; Buckley & Lee, 2021; Riberio et al., 2023).

3.4 RQ3: The challenges faced by students with disabilities

Even with all the benefits that involvement in extra-curricular activities entails, there is a prevalent lack of participation from the side of the disabled student population (Chipchase et al., 2023). Empirical research indicates many reasons for this. Some authors argue that students with disabilities face many challenges in their everyday lives and there is a reported consensus among them that they must exert greater effort than their non-disabled counterparts, as they must navigate their disabilities alongside their academic pursuits (Moriña, 2017). Others claim that the reasonable accommodations agreed with disability offices only extend to the curriculum and academic performance, not covering extra-curricular activities (Garcia-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Some students with invisible disabilities simply choose not to participate in activities outside of the curriculum, from the fear of stigmatisation, or because they feel uncomfortable requesting adjustments (Riddell & Weedon, 2012; Nolan et al., 2015; Chipchase et al., 2023).

Strnadova et al. (2015) identified 3 types of barriers that students with disabilities encounter at university: *institutional* – such as the process of disability disclosure and requesting accommodations or architectural setting, *attitudinal* – arguably the biggest barrier for individuals with disabilities and the most decisive factor for participation in sports and recreational activities, including the perceptions of students by their peers; and *disability-specific* – individual to each student and each disability. Although Strnadova's study explored the barriers to inclusion in education settings, their findings apply to extra-curricular activities as well. Institutional barriers include disability disclosure, accommodations, and architectural setting (Garcia-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Attitudinal barriers include the perceptions of disabled students by their peers. Many individuals choose not to disclose their disability to their peer group for fear of being stigmatised, and participating in extra-curricular activities might require disclosure (Nolan et al., 2015). Disability-specific barriers are primarily the outcome of lacking resources to support appropriate individual accommodations (Strnadova et al., 2015).

Despite the different barriers students with disabilities encounter, it is imperative to recognise that providing equal opportunities for skills development is key to securing employment, and thus achieving independence and participate in community (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

3.5 Discussion

The review identified three types of out-of-classroom opportunities available to students at universities in the United Kingdom. It is noteworthy that each of these types of activities help to develop specific types of skills, some of which are not fostered in a normal academic setting. Additionally, participation in the non-academic part of university life is associated with an improved wellbeing, in addition to the development of transferrable employability skills. However, despite attempts by the Government and institutional inclusion frameworks, students with disabilities still face significant barriers that exclude them from a full participation in every aspect of university experience. These findings suggest that it is imperative for students with disabilities to be included in all parts of campus life, including out-of-classroom activities, and the

provision of reasonable accommodations should extend outside of the normal syllabus into curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper presented a scoping review of literature exploring the advantages and challenges related to the involvement in out-of-classroom activities of students with disabilities, and the resulting development of employability skills. Out-of-classroom activities are proven to help develop a wide range of personal and professional competencies and transferable skills desired by potential employers, for students with disabilities and their able-bodied peers. There is also a notable difference between the types of activities students undertake and the skills these activities help to foster. Despite the increased focus on inclusion in the academic side of university life and the introduction of reasonable accommodations to ensure the development of industry-focused skills, there are still known limitations for students with disabilities to be able to participate in out-of-class activities in the United Kingdom. Students with disabilities face institutional, attitudinal, and disability-specific barriers that hinder them from participating in out-of-class activities, and thus directly impact their development of transferrable skills. In conclusion, this paper highlights the importance of out-of-classroom activities for students with disabilities in enhancing their employability skills. It calls for further research to explore strategies for overcoming existing barriers and promoting inclusive practices in higher education institutions. By fostering an environment conducive to participation, universities can empower students with disabilities to achieve independence and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

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