

Qualitative methods and sight-impairment: developing a toolkit for inclusive teaching.

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1. Context

- Approximately 15 in every 10 000 Higher Education (HE) students in the UK have a sight impairment (HESA, 2014).
- Recent cuts to funding of provision of support (e.g. Weale, 2015) mean inclusive approaches to teaching and learning in higher education is a key priority (e.g. Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014).
- Not always clear to tutors what inclusive teaching practice is, particularly with regards to research methods training (Godfrey & Loots, 2015).
- Although some literature to guide inclusive practice for teaching quantitative research methods exist, *no* best practice guidelines for *qualitative* research methods are available.

2. Students as Academic Partners (SAP) project aims

Staff and students to work collaboratively to explore:

- barriers to the learning and teaching of qualitative research methods in relation to sight-impairment
- strategies to manage them;
- development of a toolkit to guide inclusive teaching practice.

3. Methods

- Opportunistic and snowball sample of five participants ($n = 3$ tutors, $n = 2$ students) with experience of teaching or learning qualitative research methods in relation to sight-impairment.
- Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting between 15-60 minutes were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- Ethical approval granted by the Institute of Health and Society's research ethics committee (HCA17180041-R).

4. Preliminary findings

- Data analysis and toolkit development are ongoing, but four initial themes identified challenges across qualitative research methods (i.e. finding/reviewing literature, data collection, data analysis and presenting findings).

4a. The learning curve

- Participants spoke of the importance of **recognising diversity** at the outset; in particular, adopting one-size fits all approach to *adaptation* would not work. Sight impairments are diverse: people's needs are therefore different and can also change.
- Some tutors spoke of **lacking in confidence** – in relation to sight impairment and knowing what to do for the best and how this could impact on learners' experiences. However, both students and tutors recognised that a **trial and error** approach, was needed to empower learners to identify practices which best met their needs and learning preferences.

"If right now, their visual impairment on paper... they've both got the same visual impairment, their experience of being a visually impaired person is completely different" (Participant 05, tutor).

"[The screen-reader] doesn't necessarily recognise inflections, or commas and things very well, and either overcompensates for them... or it doesn't read any of them... so it's like, was that meant to be said in this way, or is it not?" (Participant 04, student).

4b. Understanding assistive technology

- **Independent learning** was a key feature of all participants' talk. However, the greatest challenges to accessibility were experienced by users of screen-readers (text-to-speech programmes). Many resources (particularly journal articles) are not accessible. Identifying accessible resources when studying is time consuming and disrupts learners' **flow**, making it frustrating, confusing and challenging to stay on task.
- There are pervasive **misunderstandings of how assistive technology works**. Organising materials for use with screen-readers may be very different to organising materials for learners who can use visual cues.
- Screen-readers do not read as humans do, and can make the interpretation of transcripts very difficult.

"I remember being really frustrated about it for a while, until I sort of just sat down with some of my lecturers, and we went through it all" (Participant 03, student).

4c. Communication and partnership

- All participants spoke of confusion over **what, who and how to ask questions** about sight impairment, adaptations and qualitative methods. This was particularly evident at the beginning of a degree, or when tutors and students first met. However, participants felt strongly that being able to meet with each other and have explicit conversations about learners' needs and how things were progressing reduced anxiety and helped learning experiences to be positive. These helped to build **shared understanding** between tutors and students. Seeing accessibility as a **dynamic**, and **open dialogue** was important.

"Part of [the] seminars is about the students getting together and having the opportunity to form friendships and the ability to work together, and you don't want 'Oh, that student is always working with the tutor' – you don't want to remove that opportunity" (Participant 01, tutor).

4d. Universal design

- Tutors spoke of the importance of keeping the **social and psychological aspects of learning** in mind when developing activities. In particular, there were concerns about ensuring opportunities for peer-learning and developing peer networks. Student participants highlighted this as an important means of consolidating understanding and pre-empting challenges. However, many of the concerns and barriers to learning qualitative methods were highlighted as being experienced by many learners – particularly those who are **new to a subject**.
- There were questions over whether qualitative data analysis *should* be taught using purely visual methods. Furthermore, participants highlighted that identifying a **repertoire of methods** informed by accessibility practices, for use in teaching qualitative research methods would **benefit all students**.

5. Next steps

- The toolkit is development and will contain information on: key types of assistive technology, and the potential challenges learners may experience in qualitative research methods when using them; where to access free version of assistive technology so tutors can become familiar with and experience them and; different approaches to adapting qualitative research methods and data analysis techniques, including considering universal design.

6. Reflections on the SAP project experience

- Conducting this research as part of a collaboration between students and staff has provided the opportunity to consider the issues from multiple perspectives, consolidate skills and help ensure the feeling of inclusivity is present throughout the process of pedagogical research. We would encourage others to adopt this approach.

¹ Would you like an accessible copy of this poster, or to learn more about the toolkit?
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