Academic Accommodations for Special Education Students: A Systematic Review

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Abstract Identifying students’ perception of accessibility to academic accommodations within post-secondary education is vital for disability service providers in the United States and Canada. This systematic review is an in-depth synthesis of 25 literature published since 2010, utilizing the EPPI reviewer 4 in incorporating data to highlight the context of academic accommodation provisions in these two countries. The author found that with increasing inclusive education advocacy, the surge in the enrollment of students with disabilities in post-secondary institutions calls for a holistic approach to identifying the achievement gaps between these students and their non-disabled peers. Students’ experiences are influenced by several factors, most of which are not directly evolving from the student themselves. Stakeholders such as their instructors, legislators, their academic communities, and the office of disability services contribute to these experiences. Therefore, a pragmatic approach with students’ expert contributions based on their needs will benefit the process.

Keywords: academic accommodations, post-secondary education, special education, students with disabilities, EPPI Reviewer 4.0, systematic review

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1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

Increasing enrollment in post-secondary education by disabled people in Canada and the United States aligns with existing federal mandates upholding their inclusive rights. The ballooning admission rates of these groups of students are likewise associated with an augmented dependence on the universities’ provision of academic accommodations to facilitate equitable access to learning [1,2,3,4]. In these inclusive universities, however, the academic expectations of special education students remain comparable alongside those of their non-disabled peers. Diverse studies continuously substantiate findings revealing increasing gaps in achievement amongst these two populations, predominantly in academics, retention, and graduation rates [2,5]. How do post-secondary institutions in North America identify individualized needs, narrow achievement gaps, and ensure equitable access to education for this populace? A strong correlation exists linking academic accommodation accessibility, and these achievement gaps [6].

1.2. Objectives

This systematic review explores existing peer-reviewed literature regarding the concept of academic accommodations and disabled students’ experiences in post-secondary education. An in-depth analysis lends itself to amplifying students’ access to services vis-a-vis the available offerings at their institutions, to identify the elements crucial to narrowing the gaps amongst students.

The study utilized the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Center’s EPPI Reviewer 4.0 software from the EPPI Centre, at the university college of London [7], for the systematic review research synthesis. The screening included 1,008 literature across multiple databases, with data extraction on the concept of academic accommodations within the contexts of Canadian and U.S. Universities. By piloting the experiences of stakeholders (students, their lecturers, and university disability support office), the study analyses existing data to identify gaps in the selection and implementation process of academic accommodations in higher education.

1.3. Review Questions

The overarching questions addressed in the review are as follows:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of Special Education Students with Disabilities in accessing Academic Accommodations offerings in their respective Canadian and U.S. Universities?

RQ2: What are the Academic Accommodations offerings for Special Education students in Canadian and U.S. Universities?
2. Methodology

2.1. Methods

The systematic review protocol involved using the EPPI Reviewer 4.0 software from the Evidence for Policy & Practice Information (EPPI) from the EPPI Centre-Institute of Education University College of London [7].

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Eligibility Criteria for the Systematic Review

| Inclusion Criteria | Exclusion Criteria | Rationale |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| Publication Type   | Journal, Reports, Articles | Grey Literature | To establish study validity |
| Time Frame         | 2010-2020          | Before 2010 | To identify relevant and current published study |
| Population         | Special Education Students | Other students | To level the review and emphasize the review question |
| Country of Origin  | United States, Canada | Other Countries | |
| Education Level    | University          | Elementary, Secondary, Colleges, Pre-School | To emphasize the review and highlight the review question |
| Peer-Reviewed      | Yes                | Not peer-reviewed | |
| Setting            | Higher education institutions | Other parameters, such as residential homes or clinics | To emphasize relevant setting towards answering the review questions |
| Intervention       | Use of Academic Accommodations | None use of Academic accommodation | To identify appropriate research towards the review questions |

Table 2. Search Terms

| Special Education | Academic Accommodations | University |
|-------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Special Needs Education | Modifications | Higher Education |
| Specialist Support | Intervention | Post Secondary |
|                   | Academic | Academy |
|                   | College | |
|                   | Further Education | School |

2.2. Identification and Categorization

The databases subsequently furnished a total of 44 works of literature, which hypothetically met the inclusion criteria from the initial pool of 1,008. Only thirty-eight full texts were, however, available from these pools. An additional thirteen studies failed the inclusion test due to not strictly meeting the required criteria for the following reasons:

- concerned with only one academic field
- addressed only one type of academic accommodation
- dealt with only one kind of disability
- dealt with excluded education level.

For a comprehensive evaluation of the concept of academic accommodations and the experiences of students with disabilities in U.S. and Canadian Universities, and to further analyze the impact on student achievement and retention; the review generated evidence in response to the vital questions of what academic accommodations are to university students with disabilities. This scoping of the literature offers a systematic map of presently available literature, contributing validation in response to the research questions.

The data was generated from three databases (ERIC N=311, PUBMED N=419 & Education Sources N=378) and uploaded into the EPPI Reviewer 4 web interface for the data extraction process.

Further exclusions of literature were necessary upon application of the inclusion criteria to the original pool. From the original (n=1008), after exclusions (Date N=49; Country=158; Target group N=628; Intervention N=73, Evidence N=1; Duplicates N=106) were applied, only (N=44) met the inclusion criteria in its entirety during screening. However, additional exclusions became necessary during the data extraction phase.

Before the final exclusions were applied, the review had identified that most of the studies available originated from the U.S. (N=36), with Canada contributing only (N=8) to the legal and background information on the concept and methodology of academic accommodations in the universities. However, both countries elicit similar contributions to the eligibility criteria for academic accommodations in their universities.

Of the final twenty-five studies included in the in-depth analysis, the majority unveiled gaps as existing in disabled students’ access to provisions in academic accommodations at the university level.

A final pool of twenty-five (N=25) of the literature strictly aligned with the inclusion criteria set for the study.

Figure 1. Flow Diagram

Academic Accommodations for Special Education Students in Universities: A systematic Review

By Kathy Ogundohun, University-Level (May, 2020)
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3. Result

3.1. Evidence

Twelve of the included studies presented evidence in response to RQ1, on what is known about the experiences of students with disabilities, using academic accommodations in U.S. and Canadian universities.

The evidence pointed to the following findings: [2,8] identified students’ perception of bias and complexities surrounding their access and use of academic accommodations in universities.

[6,9,10,11,12,13] found in multiple studies that although most of the target students had positive experiences with the disability office in accessing needed academic accommodations, there were indications for the need for increased involvement in identifying and selecting their individualized academic accommodations.

On the other hand, according to [6,8], there is a need for greater self-awareness by students with disabilities about their conditions to effectively self-advocate on needed academic accommodations from their institutions of learning.

14] forwarded that having identified that many students with disabilities lack the knowledge and skills needed to access post-secondary accommodations and services, formal self-advocacy training can maximize limited time and provide social learning benefits to students.

[15] also found that students’ awareness of institutional goals correlates with their use of academic accommodations. In these cases, academic success associates with student’s self-advocacy skills.

Furthermore, thirteen of the included studies highlight the evidence in response to RQ2, in the context of academic accommodation offerings in universities in both Canada and the U.S.

Through an analytical lens, the scrutiny of disability laws mandating the provision of academic accommodations and stakeholders’ responsibilities, the data for enhancing student accessibility is feasible. Most of the special education studies studied, revealed a satisfactory experience with the use of academic accommodations. However, recognizing barriers to the current identification and implementation process in most post-secondary institutions inconsistently riled in areas such as the willingness of some faculties to allow the use of academic accommodations during instruction. Further studies called for a review of the process, with a massive need for increased involvement of target students in the process and equipping lecturers’ knowledge base on governing laws relating to academic accommodations:

Federal and provincial laws mandate the provision of academic accommodations for university students with disabilities in the U.S. and Canada to ensure equitable access to education [1,16].

However, instructors with prior training on disability laws were perceived to be more confident in their administering role to target students, in comparison to their colleagues without the training [17].

[18] furthered that post-secondary institutions should review their decisions, policies, practices, and procedures for compliance and reflective analysis of target students’ preconceived notions on disability and higher education.

With disabling conditions being subject to change, offices of disabilities or special education stakeholders will benefit from being mindful of academic accommodations needing fluidity and, hence, needing not to be disability-specific [19].

[3] postulated that study findings indicate a majority of stakeholders’ satisfaction with current students’ review process about the academic accommodations offered by the office of special education services at their institutions of learning.

[20] opined that a three-phased approach is vital to determining academic accommodation selection in universities, explicitly:

1. The use of all available data (including documents that reflect education and accommodation history.

2. If those data are not comprehensive, conclusive, or sufficient, successive review levels of documentation until the student’s functional limitations and need for accommodation are precise; and,

3. Work collaboratively with secondary education personnel, State Departments of Education, parent groups, and secondary education transition agencies to improve the quality of special education documentation and teacher report data.

In keeping with [5], barriers exist across disability types and throughout the processes with which students engage in the access and use of academic accommodations. The review found associations between awareness, documentation, functionality, and utilization of accommodations.

[21,22] found evidence to support discrepancies as existing amongst university lecturers’ willingness to permit the use of academic accommodations for students with disabilities. A disparity shows female instructors and others from the faculty of education being more willing to accommodate students with disabilities than their counterparts.

[23] further revealed that the more a student self-discloses about a needed accommodation, the more self-efficacy an instructor has in supporting the student. The willingness and flexibility of university instructors to comply with and provide accommodations for students with disabilities is critical to academic success.

[24,25] were able to identify that the provisions of academic accommodations were a significant concern for faculty, in that many were unfamiliar with the concept and the reasons that necessitate them. Overcoming attitudinal barriers and improving awareness through training for faculty was found to be vital.

[4] found that trying to balance fairness to students with disabilities alongside their peers can be challenging, primarily due to the different perspectives. Also, legal obligations (such as the duty to accommodate), must be balanced with the students’ potential to adapt and its long-term benefits. Further to these issues, the question of who has the expertise to determine what is appropriate within a professor’s classroom, especially when the professor lacks training on teaching students with disabilities, or cases where tight budgets make it a challenge for institutions needing to provide these training, leaves these topics undecided.

4. Discussion

To further extend the findings towards the implications on stakeholders, an analysis of results respective to target parties is subsequently conducted and is as follows:
Studies show that federal and provincial legal mandates in both the U.S. and Canada support the provision of academic accommodations for students with disabilities in universities; therefore, post-secondary institutions and instructors have a responsibility to provide such supports to students [1,16].

In response to the review questions, a further in-depth scope analysis into the direct perception of target students is pertinent to comprehending gaps and the most effective techniques to narrowing them. An understanding of candid opinions and applicable concepts are ultimately instrumental for systematic change.

4.1. University Students with Disabilities Using Academic Accommodations

Students with disabilities can be described as those with functional limitations, preventing them from accessing the curriculum at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. [14] cited federal laws supporting students with disabilities in their access to post-secondary education through academic accommodations.

According to [25], the successful selection of academic accommodations was an individualized situation, which is unique to the user. Besides, the determination of best practices suitable for a specific educational environment and student group largely depends upon learner aspirations, needs, and preferences. These have the potential to vary significantly from course to course as well as from student to student.

In the bid to ensure a learner-centered and individualized approach to learning, most findings indicate the need to involve the target students in the service or equipment selection process.

As stated in [26], the perception of students with disabilities in universities is rife with continuous discriminatory experiences, when on campus. [1,16] further championed the perception of target students experiencing some challenges in accessing equitable educational opportunities. These students encountered several barriers in accessing their education, in comparison to their non-disabled peers.

[27] forwarded that it may be preferable to let the student decide what features they wish to access during a test session rather than to provide accommodations that may not be needed, and that may interfere with test validity. A need for comparison of options available to students based on outcomes is vital to these processes.

[10] posited that adequate accommodations use hinges on many factors, including availability, quality, and the appropriate fit with the context’s accessibility.

[14] forwarded that most of these students lack the appropriate knowledge of their legal rights, thereby impacting their self-advocacy to access needed academic accommodations.

[26] asserted that the study outcome of exploring the university experiences of students with learning disabilities who self-reported their disabilities revealed experiences of increased bias on campus and less satisfaction with their overall encounters.

4.2. Academic Accommodation: The Context

[28] defined academic accommodation as changes to school practices that hold students to the same standard as others without disabilities.

The legal underpinnings of inclusion creates the mandate for education institutions in Canada and the U.S. in the provisions of academic accommodations, hence requiring the onus to fall on the schools to make these provisions for accessibility.

[16] postulated that the legal context for Canadian academic accommodations originates from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, which guarantees persons with disabilities the right to freedom from discrimination at the federal level. Regardless of the types or duration of disability, students are entitled to receive academic accommodations if their disability results in a functional impairment that impacts their ability to participate in academics, under this mandate. During testing conditions, access to scholarly content, and assessments in typical classroom settings are made possible through alterations to the testing procedures. The assessment content remains as initially designed with course-level rigor applicable to all students regardless of their abilities.

For example, a student with a visual impairment could be given an exam in a large-text format to enhance their poor vision while retaining the original test objectives.

Consonance with [29], factors such as past and current personal experiences, type of disability, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and immutable characteristics lend to student experience with disability-specific services in post-secondary institutions.

4.3. Documentation Requirement to Access Services

As reported by [18], although similarity exists between the process of servicing students with disabilities within the two target countries in this review, they, however, differ in the aspect that there is a requirement in Canadian Universities that students must provide documentation to prove their disability before accessing disability services. [1,13,16] added that most Canadian protocols include steps requiring that students who request academic accommodation: first self-identify, then registers with the Office of Disabilities on their campuses, and after that submit documentation from a qualified health professional (such as a physician, psychiatrist, or psychologist) evidencing their disability. The documentation includes a diagnostic statement, a description of the functional impairment(s) resulting from the disorder, and the extent of the functional impairment associated with the diagnosed disorder and how it impacts academic functioning. In the United States, universities procure documentation determining eligibility from students’ secondary education institutions as part of the transition process, during admission.

4.4. University Instructors for Students with Disabilities Using Academic Accommodations

In agreement with [23], university instructors’ willingness and flexibility to comply with and provide accommodations for students with disabilities is critical to academic success.
As stated by [22] on a study on Quebec universities and lecturers of students with disabilities, most instructors have positive perceptions about students with disabilities. They are willing to allow the use of academic accommodation in their classrooms, contrary to student’s opinions.

[1] did opine that a need for self-advocacy is necessary by the students, for the instructors to be able to meet their needs. At the same time, there is the anticipation that instructors will ensure that accessibility provisions are obtainable for learners with disabilities within universities. With self-awareness, identification, and subsequent registration with the disability office, that office can then advise or prepare the instructors before being presented with the students in their classroom.

However, indications reveal that some target students fail in the initial phase of the enrollment process by not self-advocating, self-identifying, or registering with the disability office. Studies show that these students are often unaware of support services offered by the institutions and concerns about stigma associated with the disclosure of a disability and or poor self-advocacy skills [26] pressure the students into not seeking needed support.

Students with disabilities who sought assistance from special education services, offices agreed that academic accommodations were the second most crucial facilitators to their academic success after having excellent teachers, as reported by [22]. The study also showed that teachers’ perceptions of accommodations recommended by adapted services office were likely to improve with a better understanding of the basis and impact of the concept.

[17] also reported a strong correlation between the instructors’ knowledge of specific disability laws and a sense of confidence in their responsibilities to students needing support during learning. This information supports the benefit of exposure to disability training to improve instructors’ willingness to provide these essential services to students.

According to [18], specific applications to post-secondary educational access has many faces, including physical, communications, and programmatic access. The goal of access is to facilitate the increased integration of students with disabilities in inclusive education. Physical, interactive, and program access remain critical to compliance with Americans with Disability Act (ADA) section 504 in post-secondary education in the United States. Institutions should orient faculty to their legal obligations and assist them in becoming more critical as the population of students with disabilities increases in post-secondary education, as these students may have difficulties articulating to faculty why they need the requested support.

There are several implications of this study for individuals who serve on school teams serving students with disabilities. As noted in prior research, school teams need to engage in careful analysis and monitoring to determine whether students need and might benefit from academic accommodations [30].

According to [14], the degree of special education services and the prescribed types of support varies widely across post-secondary institutions. For example, some institutions offer significantly less training and informational materials to faculty about the responsibilities and techniques for providing accommodations in their classrooms. However, a critical analysis among teachers regarding the conditions under which these accommodations might be helpful and appropriate is warranted, along with proper monitoring of its use and effectiveness for individual students, to ensure that it does indeed have the intended benefits.

4.5. University Special Education Offices for Administering Academic Accommodation

[4] opined that the increasing enrollment of post-secondary students with disabilities results in accessibility services offices reaching capacity levels. He further stated that “while collaboration between accessibility services staff and professors seems a logical solution to maximizing resource management and improving issues with access, additional tensions arise when problems of fairness, authority, and roles come into play.” He primarily identified gaps as existing in the provisions, notably, the lack of adequate tools for disability support services staff to use in providing appropriate training to students to enhance their ability to self-advocate for accommodations. He recommended a conceptual framework for a training curriculum that addresses these gaps.

Conforming to [11], the solution to adequate academic accommodations’ selection and use is no longer individual, but rather systemic. Recognizing the need for campuses to include disability in their conversations about diversity championed the notion of a decision-making process consisting of individuals with disabilities as students, faculty, and staff on campus, thereby leading to the augmentation of a more inclusive environment.

In his view [19], there are only a fraction of students with disabilities self-reporting on campus, with others often forgoing needed accommodations for which they are eligible. He further posited that in the U.S., Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act gives a framework to initialize the discussions on services for students with disabilities. Institutions can challenge themselves to push past legal compliance to a place of inclusion and integration of these students. With proper staffing in disability services offices, newly emergent populations can thrive, with campuses increasingly exploring ways to celebrate disability as part of a campus diversity initiative that ultimately fosters access for all students.

Based on [18], Post-secondary institutions should review their decisions, policies, practices, and procedures for compliance with regulations, with an open mind and a thoughtful analysis of the parties’ biases. A truly interactive process will bring about a proper balance between the rights and responsibilities of all relevant parties.

In concordance with [31], documentation is a crucial element within the process. For example, the “Summary of Performance” (SOP) document is useful at post-secondary institutions for determining the academic accommodation needs of students with disabilities, with a holistic approach to the assessment process.
5. Conclusion

[8] stressed that research remains limited in analyzing the overall experiences of accessibility support services in post-secondary settings, especially from the perspectives of students with disabilities. Given the increasing number of students attending inclusive higher education institutions, assessing current procedures is useful for aligning the process with student needs, thereby promoting their academic success, retention, and narrowing achievement gaps.

[13] stressed that although there is a clear gap between the need for services and its utilization, much of the literature discussing why these post-secondary students do not seek academic accommodations, assign responsibilities to the student. Despite the lack of a clear understanding of students’ actions, the assumption persists on the notion that their poor academic performances stem from the failure to seek assistance from their institutions. However, as this study as shown, an array of other arguments may contribute to the reluctance of some students to seek help. Notable among those identified in the survey are barriers by other stakeholders such as their instructors and the disability services office. In some cases, the fear of experiencing bias, the lack of awareness about the availability of services, and several other factors are also contributors.

Despite the increasing enrollment of students with disabilities into post-secondary education in the countries under review, the effort of their instructors and institutions to meet their target needs, studies still show an increasing gap in their success to accessing or using mandated and much needed academic accommodations, inadvertently impacting their retention and graduation rates. There is a need for further studies into these gaps involving the primary stakeholder. In this case, the emphasis should be on the special education students in universities, recognizing them as experts to their own needs.

Appreciating the proficiency of the student in their disabilities, provision of education on self-awareness, and training on steps to accessing services, providing opportunities to express experiences such as bias, should all be built into an effective system of special education provisions.

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