Higher education can strengthen job opportunities for people with disabilities. Mandy Mou, a PhD candidate within the Cumming School of Medicine at the University of Calgary, Canada, observed a gap in the literature surrounding equality relating to federal and provincial disability grants for post-secondary education. She undertook a critical discourse analysis, highlighting that in Canada, a neoliberalist culture has led to students with disabilities having more responsibility in applying for financial aid – but ultimately, less control over their finances.

Living with a disability in a world built for abled bodies may impact people’s lives in a variety of ways. It can limit their independence or make everyday tasks harder to complete. It can also have a significant impact on their personal finances. In Canada, people of working age who report having at least one disability are twice as likely to be on a low income compared to adults without disabilities. This equates to half a million Canadians with a disability, aged 15 to 64, who live below the poverty line. Undertaking post-secondary education, also referred to as PSE, could help people with disabilities to improve their financial outlook. Previous research has shown that people with disabilities who do engage in PSE find it easier to obtain employment, have more job security, and are much more likely to be satisfied with their employer.

Mandy Mou, a PhD candidate within the Cumming School of Medicine at the University of Calgary, Canada, agrees that easier access to PSE for people with disabilities could help to break the cycle of poverty. She has investigated whether there are equity issues for people with disabilities to gain access to funding, which would enable them to enrol and stay in higher education. Mou believes it is important to acknowledge the role that neoliberalism may play in the process of gaining financial aid.

NEOLIBERALISM WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

Neoliberalism refers to policy changes that aim to reduce government spending and increase the role of the private sector within our economy. It incorporates reforms that eliminate price controls and increase free trade, which often leads to greater privatization and a reduction of state influence. The general ideology is that if capitalism is allowed to generate wealth, then this will filter down to everyone. However, these kinds of policy reforms have led to harmful socioeconomic consequences such as increased poverty and unemployment. Within the education sector, it has meant that PSE has become a quasi-commercial market. Policymakers are positioning universities and higher-education institutions as tools to create a labour force and to further business innovation. As a result, some feel that these institutes may have lost their humanist values. In Canada, this has led to a rise in PSE costs, making enrolment inaccessible for those at the lower end of the wealth divide.

Many people with disabilities live below the poverty line, meaning the neoliberalist rise in costs has made it difficult for them to gain access to further education. To combat these issues around high cost, the Canadian Social Transfer – a programme that supports the costs of PSE and earlier childhood development – allocated additional $800 million in funding. This should have helped to provide more upfront funding of education for disadvantaged groups, including people who have disabilities. However, Mou questions whether neoliberalism has reshaped Canada’s values around financial aid, making access to this funding inequitable for people with disabilities.

CANADIAN STUDENT GRANT SYSTEM

Literature has rarely acknowledged whether the financial grants provided by the Canadian government can provide students with disabilities with an equal opportunity to engage in higher education. According to the Canadian Student Grant (CSG) programme, people with permanent disabilities can receive up to $4,000 annually. In addition, they may be eligible for a grant of up to $20,000 towards disability-related expenses. Eligibility is determined by the Canadian Student Loan Programme, which considers parental or spousal wealth when making their assessments.

Mou’s research used critical discourse analysis to assess the government’s online materials relating to disability grants for post-secondary in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Ontario. Her analysis highlighted areas of interdiscursivity, which occur when discourse types are mentioned within the same communication. The two main themes identified within the online grant process were neoliberalism and control.

JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROL

Despite much lobbying for people with disabilities to have equitable rights, there is still a strong element of professional control that is exerted over this group. There is a rhetoric of disabled people being ‘more deserving’ of support which can be a way of the state exerting control over their lives. For example, when needing support, students who have disabilities are encouraged to speak with their disability advisor who can only advocate on their behalf based on an already approved list of recommendations that are ‘green lighted’ by a medical doctor. This places the student under greater professional supervision and encourages the narrative that they are ‘needy’. This labelling can be degrading but also puts disabled people in a position where control is exerted
Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

PHD candidate Mou investigates whether Canadian financial grants meaningfully provide students with disabilities an equitable opportunity to engage in post-secondary education.

Detail

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Mandy Mou has an Honours Bachelor's degree in psychology from University of Manitoba, followed by an interdisciplinary master's degree in disability studies at the University of Manitoba. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies programme at Community Health Sciences at the Cumming School of Medicine from University of Calgary.

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References


Personal Response

How can your research findings help governments to improve their financial aid for students with disabilities?

Given that the experiences of living with a disability are often dynamic and unique to the individual, the research findings suggest that students with disabilities in PSE should have more control to flexibly address their nuanced needs throughout their educational programme. Students should be able to work with their disability advisors to apply for services and equipment that their medical doctors may not directly list. To further amend policy directions to empower students with disabilities, decisionmakers need to include the voices of the disability community to propose policies that can help an already marginalised population full participate in PSE. It rings an age-old ethos: ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’.