The Pendulum of Control:

 Normative - Bureaucratic Fluctuations in Disability Inclusion

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Abstract

Those working in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the post-pandemic period are caught up in between conflicting pulls of oscillating control modalities: whilst *normative* controls push for stronger student diversity and inclusion practices, *bureaucratic* controls seek to restore academic and administrative authority over students. Although hybrid combinations of control are commonplace in complex organizations, the specific challenges of oscillating modalities in post-pandemic HEIs exert contradictory demands on faculty, staff, and students that lead to unexpected and even unintended outcomes. In this case study of a European Business school, we examine a policy change whose intention to increase overall student academic engagement inadvertently resulted in sharply increasing the number of student disability disclosures. We argue that management of disability inclusion in post-crisis HEIs is emblematic of how the neoliberal university now operates in the interstices of ‘pendulum swings’ between normative-inductive and bureaucratic-conducive modalities of organizational control.

Keywords:

Disability inclusion, normative control, bureaucratic control, organizational pendulum

Introduction

The disruptions unleashed by the 2020 pandemic laid bare the vulnerabilities of administrative control in higher education and led to a broader ‘control turn’ in management, politics, and society at large. Those working in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) today are experiencing the conflicting pulls of oscillating control pressures: while *normative* pressures push for stronger student diversity and inclusion practices, *bureaucratic* control pressures seek to restore academic and administrative authority over students.  Normative pressures induce organizational actors to shift the internal cursor towards desirable social outcomes (e.g. greater inclusion), yet bureaucratic pressures made a swift comeback in the return to the classroom to target diminished student engagement and attendance.

In this qualitative case study of a European Business school, we examine an organizational directive – a change in rules -- whose intention to increase overall student academic engagement inadvertently resulted in a sharp increase in student disability disclosures. Findings demonstrate that longstanding normative initiatives to increase student disability inclusion were surpassed by top-down bureaucratic control measures in the aftermath of the pandemic, and conceptualize control as dynamically responding to crises through ‘pendulum swings’. Disability inclusion in HEIs is paradoxically emblematic of the current swing from normative to bureaucratic controls. We argue here that the specific challenges of managing disability inclusion in such a context of oscillating control pressures exerts divergent, competing demands on HEI stakeholders and ultimately leads to the growth of stronger bureaucratic control.

**Crises, Disruptions, and Control.** The ‘home classroom’ distance learning approach implemented in early 2020 at the outbreak of Covid-19 revealed vast inequalities among students and led educators worldwide to acknowledge the value of the physical classroom as a ‘great equalizer’ (Agostinelli et al., 2022). Among the most vulnerable in education are students with disabilities (SWDs); yet they seldom seek to disclose their disability officially due to fear of stigma and in turn do not receive the appropriate accommodations. During the pandemic, HE institutions responded by shifting towards greater proximity with their remote-learner SWD constituents.

Yet the return to the classroom in the ensuing period was anything but smooth, and rules were reformulated in an attempt to regain pre-pandemic levels of student engagement. Ultimately, our data revealed that, despite contradictory tensions, institutional shifts during crises can lead to greater numbers of SWDs disclosing and receiving the relevant accommodations.

**Theories of Organizational Control**

Bureaucratic work organizations, according to Amitai Etzioni (1961) typically rely on what he called utilitarian forms of control. Such traditional organizations bring about compliance with rules by wielding economic power over workers’ lives and by centering their focus on extrinsic motivations to maximize financial gains.  Bureaucracies rely on the presence of imperfect humans in order to justify their consistency, as David Graeber noted,

Bureaucracies public and private appear…to be organized in such a way as to guarantee that a significant proportion of actors will not be able to perform their tasks as expected. It also exemplifies what I have come to think of as the defining feature of certain utopian forms of practice: that is, ones where those maintaining the system, on discovering that it will regularly produce such failures, conclude that the problem is not with the system itself but with the inadequacy of the human beings involved—or, indeed, of human beings in general. (Graeber, 2012, p. 108-109).

Yet bureaucratic organizations require human discipline, as Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips indicate in their discussion of Max Weber’s emphasis on

Increasing self-discipline, meshing with intensified bureaucratization, rationalization and individualization... External constraint(sovereign power, traditional power) increasingly is replaced by *internalization**of constraint* (disciplinary power, rational domination), assisted by the new technologies of power that figures such as [Frederick] Taylor were developing [emphasis added] (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips, 2006, p 109).

This *internalization of constraint*, key to producing proper organizational citizens, marks the conceptual move towards normative mechanisms in contemporary organizations. Normative control emerges as a *cultural* manifestation that signals a change in managerial dispositions (Etzioni, 1961) normally conceived as top-down, rational hierarchical control. Working under normative culture “…is not merely an economic transaction; rather, it is imbued with a deeper personal significance that causes people to behave in ways that the company finds rewarding and that require less use of traditional control” (Kunda, 1992, P 355).

Normative theories evolved to emphasize how organizations influence the internal motivations of workers, and the processes through which worker subjectivity becomes increasingly bound up in organizational culture (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). The rise of corporate culturalism (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Sturdy, 1998; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011) in large bureaucratic organizations was accompanied by a growth in critical management analyses of emergent group processes and behaviors (Barker, 1993; Willmott, 1993, 2003). This scholarship increasingly identified organizational culture as control through conformity to social norms (Alvesson, 1991; Kunda, 1992) and the organization’s growing capacity to manufacture control (Collinson, 2002) specifically through concertive team processes (Barker, 1993).  Although recent work has focused on ‘neo-normative’ control, or forms of normativity centered on workplace happiness, freedom, and individual expression that capture control (Fleming, 2009, Fleming & Sturdy 2009; 2011; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Endrissat et al., 2015; Mielly et al., 2022) other work has recognized the many evolutions of organizational normativity and the interdependency with bureaucratic controls (Gill, 2019).

Both normative and bureaucratic controls should also be understood ontologically, to distinguish between a fixed (or ‘distal’) approach focused on outcomes versus a more fluid (or ‘proximal’) one focused on relations and unfinished, ongoing processes (McCabe, Ciuk, & Gilbert, 2022).  “Through focusing on the processes of control, we can avoid ‘distal’ conceptualizations and perceive control as far more fluid, porous and fragile” (McCabe et al., 2022).  Conceptualizing both bureaucratic and normative modes of control as processual and proximal, we keep in mind their interplay and continuous interdependency in complex organizations.  They are more often than not simultaneously active and fluid, context-dependent, and proximal in their shifting modes.  The great economist Pareto noted that people are driven by two types of rulers – those who rule by guile (i.e. ‘normative’) and those who rule by force (‘bureaucratic’).  “Societies tended to oscillate between rule by the two types, Pareto argues.  There would be a tendency to equilibrium when the two types …were balanced in the governing elites” (Clegg, Courpasson, Nelson, 2006: p. 113). Bureaucracies always possess normative characteristics, since they implicitly involve not only workers’ rationality (the mind) but also their hearts (Ouchi, 1979). The objectivity, neutrality, and consistency offered by bureaucracies have maintained their appeal across the centuries (Du Gay, 2000) which may provide explanatory value for why they often operate in tandem alongside normative controls focused on shared identity and values in organizational culture (Gill, 2019).

**Disability Inclusion**

Disability inclusion abounds with multiple paradoxes. With a growing number of students with disabilities (SWDs) entering into HEIs (Pumfrey, 2008), inclusion is increasingly gaining visibility as a scholarly topic in the higher education literature (Morina, 2017; Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019; Isenmann et al., 2019; Herzner & Stucken, 2019; Wigmoire et al., 2020). In the paradigm shift from a traditional elite values model to one focused on *economic* *growth*, HEIs must attract a broader array of students by increasingly promoting academic prestige (Blackmore, 2016).

HEIs’ responsibility to ensure equal access to “…equivalent resources does not necessarily lead to equal outcomes...” (Mahlangu, 2020; p.451). David (2011) identifies key issues key to the 21st century HEI ‘crisis’ centered on equality, educational opportunity, social justice and equity, diversity, and inclusion. Studies on inequalities suggest that rather than providing more opportunities for disadvantaged students, HEIs are still creating more opportunities for the privileged, thereby widening the gap (Halsey et al., 2000; Lauder et al., 2006; Shavit et al., 2007).  As Altbach underscores,

… the reality of *greater access* to higher education in an era of fiscal constraint, combined with *ever-increasing costs*, is that inequality within higher education systems is here to stay... these issues constitute a deep contradiction for 21st century higher education. As access expands, inequalities within the higher education system also grow... (Altbach, 2010; p. 50; our emphasis).

More recently, on the heels of declining enrollment numbers attributed to the global financial crisis, HEIs in the Global North experienced further threats to their viability due to the Covid crisis (HESA, 2022).

**Research Context**

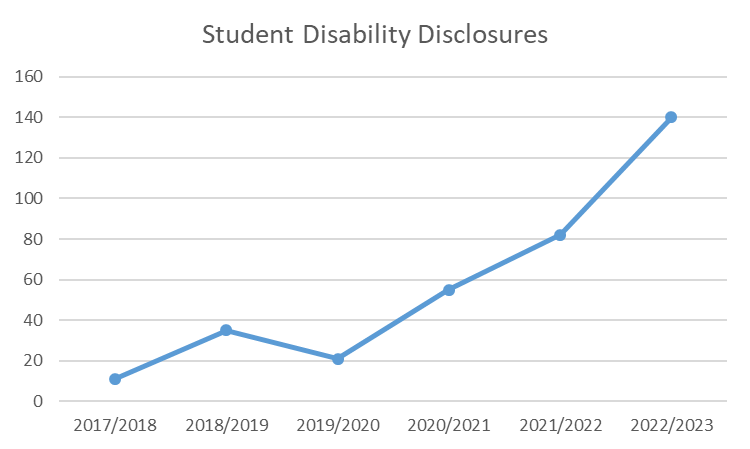
**Empirical setting: The case of ‘Grande Ecole’**

We selected for our case study an institution of higher education in France having developed an inclusion policy to align with current regulatory and legal frameworks. The institution has a highly international student body and is known for its strong CSR and sustainability orientations.

With the exception of a few classrooms, the campuses were constructed with disability access in mind. The school’s professional development team provides staff and professors with training on a variety of disability-related topics like how to create inclusive pedagogical content. All employees have access to an online autonomous learning platform where they can learn about disability inclusion via activities, films, and real-world examples. They can also access a list of resources for further in-depth information on the topic. Emails, the school's internal social network, and TV displays in the hallways all make communication within the institution quite evident.  An additional certificate course on disability inclusion is available to students, and since its launch in 2014, 351 students have successfully completed it. A specialized team dealing with disabilities ensures that affected students are informed about the services and accommodations that are available to them.

Grande Ecole currently has 21 partnerships with local and national companies and associations allowing for students to access funding to cover costs related to their disability. The school participates in and hosts a wide range of events and activities to help spread awareness on disability inclusion and to assist students in finding internship and job opportunities.

The disability inclusion officer at this institution is a key collaborator and facilitator for our study and has a direct interest in obtaining fresh insights through the feedback obtained from the pilot survey and the interviews with members from the first round of data collection. After discussion, she decided to change the vocabulary she uses in her communication with students at the beginning of the school year. Emails sent out to students in the 2021-2022 school year advised students to contact the 'Disability and Diversity Office’ if a student presents a ‘disability’. The 2022-2023 campaign shifted its language and mentioned contacting the office if a student has ‘specific needs’. Information was displayed on the screens in the halls all throughout the month of September 2022, highlighting examples of students presenting specific learning needs which could be signaled to the office (dyslexia, ADHD, etc.).



**Post-Covid Student engagement & Attendance Policy**

In the 2021 – 2022 school year, 82 students presented themselves to the disability officer to make sure that the school had the documents necessary to put in place accommodation they may need during the school year. In September 2022, that number went up to 140 students.

*Figure 1: Number of students with disabilities from 2017 to 2023*

Methods

**Case Design**

We selected a single case-study design (Yin, 2009) to capture the richness of this unique empirical setting which offered us access to, among other, archival documentation (websites, internal memoranda, reports, presentations, internal announcements, and emails), a number of key organizational actors for interviews, and organizational sites of direct ethnographic participant-observations (e.g., classrooms; meetings). Through 60-minute semi-directive interviews we obtained a holistic representation of inclusion perceptions in Grande Ecole. By engaging in a multi-perspective, multi-voicing practice for data collection we opened a space for listening and hearing the stories of those at risk of exclusion or marginalization; e.g. those presenting a disability. In addition, we sought out the voices and perspectives of the administrators and managers involved in the efforts to create, implement, and enforce institutional policies and practices of disability inclusion.

The sample selection criteria targeted disability policy designers and implementers (administrative staff and teachers) and recipients of inclusive policy practices (students with disabilities). The sample selection criteria strove for diverse levels of hierarchy and occupations, and a representative cross-section of students across programs and years of study.

**Phase I Data Collection 2021 - 2022**

**Internal Survey.** An online qualitative survey was distributed in the spring of 2022 through Grande Ecole’s internal communications network with a twofold purpose; first to collect anonymous responses from a cross-section of stakeholders on a range of issues related to disability inclusion at the institution, and second to identify voluntary participants for a semi-directive interview to be organized in the future. The survey included questions on individual demographics, practice-related issues, knowledge of disability policies in place, disability inclusion statistics, and open-ended qualitative questions to elicit additional personal insights [cf. Appendix].  The online form was available in both English and French. A total of 188 individuals responded to the survey, including 51 administrative staff, 3 managers, 18 professors and 116 students. 119 of the total respondents were female and 69 were male. 17 respondents claimed to have a disability, all of which were specifically invisible disabilities, and 16 out of 17 were said to require some form of accommodations.  Based on the responses from all 188 Phase 1 participants, 26 individuals volunteered to participate in the subsequent 1-hour interview.

**60-minute Semi-Directive Interviews.** The interview participants were invited to individual interviews over the summer of 2022. A 10-question interview guide with semi-directive, open-ended questions derived from our research question was developed and refined [cf Appendix]. All participants were informed of the study's objectives and ethical guidelines and were required to sign a consent form guaranteeing their confidentiality and anonymity.

**Phase II Data Collection 2022 - 2023**

In the Spring of 2023, Phase 2 of the data collection was carried out to enable a longitudinal approach to understanding organizational phenomena, enabling us to capture rich follow-up data on how organizational discourse and stakeholder impressions of disability were evolving and affecting DEI perceptions and actual outcomes in the institution.  Accordingly, Phase 2 also deployed a survey similar to that in Phase I for which a total of 340 responses were obtained, including 47 administrative staff, 11 managers, 28 professors and 245 students. There were 222 female respondents and 118 male, 23 respondents declared having a “specific need” for the classroom. 22 people were then selected for interviews.

Based on the results from Phase I we were able to identify the key informants who were not only performing the strategic shift in policy and communications, but who were also managing and implementing the messaging and communications on disability inclusion inside the institution. This helped us gain the requisite trust of the stakeholders involved to gain subsequent access to internal documents and communications that exemplify the shift in policy. Following the shift, there was a significantly higher number of students officially disclosing their disability who asked to establish an accommodations plan.

Phase 2 also included ethnographic participant observations in classrooms and other organizational settings (e.g., meetings and training sessions) using an observational template. The data gathered from the interviews as well as the archival documentation (websites, internal memoranda, reports, presentations, internal announcements, and emails) was analyzed using an Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software package to identify the level of groundedness of our codes, to engage in code splitting and merging, and reduction overall in order to have a robust coding structure in place for the next stages of the research.

***Table 1: Data Sources***

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| **Phase I - 2022** | |
| **Type** | **Number/description** |
| **Internal Survey** | 188 |
| **Faculty & Staff Interviews** | 20 (3 with disability) |
| **Student Interviews** | 6 (3 with disability) |
| **Participant Observations** | 2 teacher training sessions on disability. 3 Sustainability committee meetings. European disability inclusion study meetings. Handicap and inclusion module for students. |
| **Digital ethnography** | Online training platform intended for faculty for inclusive pedagogy |
| **Phase II - 2023** | |
| **Type** | **Number/description** |
| **Survey** | 340 |
| **Faculty & Staff Interviews** | 15 (1 with specific needs) |
| **Student Interviews** | 7 (1 with specific needs) |
| **Focus group interview** | Administrative staff discussion on new attendance rules & procedures |
| **Internal archival documents** | Documents used to inform students and faculty, found on MS Teams and other sources. |
| **Official internal communication** | Internal social media platform, emails, digital signage screens in the halls, conferences, assemblies, posters. |
| **Collective construction of D&I timeline** | Key informants (current & past employees) participated in reconstructing the organization’s diversity & inclusion management development timeline. |
| **Additional data on the attendance policy** | |
| **Type** | **Number/description** |
| **Survey** | Faculty and staff |
| **Survey** | SWD |

Using this large composite data, we began to abductively alternate between extant theories on disability and inclusion and our data.  Closer observation revealed the importance of shifting modes of control, as evidenced by the pervasive contradictions and tensions in the data.

**Participant Observations & Digital Ethnography**

A number of events and activities inside Grande Ecole enabled direct participant observation.  These included:

* Training Workshops
* Examination & use of Digital platform on Disability Inclusion
* Attendance of Sustainability Committee Meeting

**Internal Archival Documents**

A variety of internal archival documents were accessed and are part of the overall data used to better understand the organizational shift.  These include, for example:

* Documents
* Digital Records of Microsoft Teams Pages
* Communications Procedures and Templates
* International Partner Document

**Internal Communications**

The communication present in digital signage and on the internal social network with links to videos and other information provided a means of following the disability officer’s internal communication with students, staff and faculty. A recent student-led school project produced disability awareness posters for internal display.  A total of 9 were created in all, ranging in subjects from cancer to autism and physical disability. Figure 1 shows excerpts of three posters (modified for confidentiality).

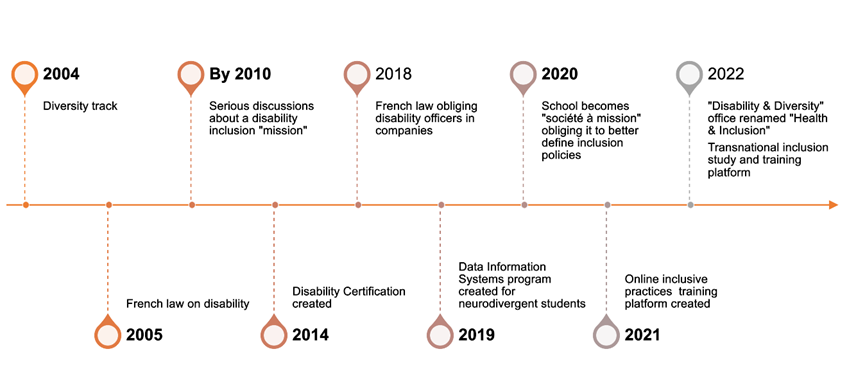
*Figure 2: Sample of 3 Posters Created by Students to raise DI Awareness*

**Timeline of Diversity and Inclusion Policy Evolutions**

Disability and inclusion efforts have a longstanding history in Grande Ecole. Prior to the 2005 law, the institution had anticipated change and had initiated a special track for students with disabilities. By 2010, a number of individuals served SWDs requiring accommodations. In 2018 the French government put into effect a new law obliging companies with over 250 employees to appoint a designated disability officer; at Grande Ecole such a role had already been put in place since 2014. An optional certification course on disability inclusion was created in 2014, and since its debut, 351 students have successfully completed the course. In more recent years several new initiatives have been implemented. Please see Figure 2 below for a timeline reconstructed with the assistance of key informants.

*Figure 2: Timeline of Grande Ecole’s Diversity and Inclusion Developments*



**Data Analysis**

Using an abductive approach, we analyzed the shift described by a number of key stakeholders in the institution. We considered the change in communication as the chief motive for the increased number of student disability disclosures however the first-order codes primarily focused on feelings of pressure to disclose due to policy changes. While coding the second phase interviews, we noticed a heightened presence of ambivalent emotional discourses from students and teachers exposing their reassurance and/or uncertainty regarding the organizational shift. By considering the idea that organizational actions are what led to the ambivalent discourses of teachers and students, we recombined the codes.

The coding allowed us to identify two categories of organizational actions; CSR-driven and policy-driven. This suggests control is occurring within the organization. Grande Ecole has a history of disability inclusion long before national laws obliging conformity, pointing at a strong normative control occurring within the organization. With the hopes of increasing engagement, Grand Ecole put into action a new post-Covid-19 attendance policy coercing students to justify absences. This organizational bureaucratic control led to a significantly higher number of students disclosing their disability. We hence identify normative control and bureaucratic control as the aggregate dimensions emerging from our data analysis.

**Findings**

The disability officer believes that the increase in the number of students disclosing their disabilities is due to the institutional shift as she states in 2023:

140 students declared [their disability] so that’s 60% more compared to September 2021. The difference is that I started to no longer communicate on ‘disability’ [‘handicap’ in French] but shifted to communicate with the word ‘health’... can put in place accommodations, key word ‘accommodations’. If your health situation impacts your education, so key word ‘health’, second key word ‘impact’... I listed many complex health situations... I banished the word ‘handicap’ and other named ‘pathologies’.

The institution has seen an increase in students with medical conditions like diabetes, Crohn’s disease and epilepsy as well as a large number of students with post Covid19 mental health issues, anxiety and psychiatric conditions.

The assumption appeared to be that this new method of communication became more ‘solution-centric’ and removed the stigma associated with the word ‘disability’. Alongside this, the institution introduced changes to their attendance policy obliging students to show justified proof of any absences, which motivated students to bring doctor’s notes and in many cases triggered official disclosure to the disability officer. Furthermore, the *‘Disability and Diversity Office’* at the time, was in the process of officially changing its name to the *‘Health and Inclusion Office’*.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Individuals with a visible disability carry the inevitable stigma of physical difference, which is either difficult or impossible to conceal and ‘outs’ the individual from the outset announcing deviation from the ‘norm’.  Those with an invisible disability bear heavy conformity pressure to conceal their difference and engage in what could be called a ‘passing’ strategy where one attempts to appear as a member of the ableist norm.

Once disabled individuals intersect with organizational realities, they either disclose or decide not to disclose their status. The act of officially disclosing a disability (what could be referred to as a disability ‘coming out’ strategy) engenders real costs and consequences, not only by generating bureaucratic paperwork, but also by placing the individual under more organizational control. This occurs alongside the risk of potential stigmatization by coworkers and managers. However, those opting for a non-disclosure (‘passing’ strategy) run the risk of remaining in a holding pattern of lower performance or lower self-esteem, reinforcing temptation to further conceal or downplay any difference or need for special accommodations.

Disabled individuals juggle the burdens of visible stigmatization or invisible conformity to ableist norms in the broader societal context. Organizational membership places those with invisible disabilities between two unattractive choices: either disclose and bear the costs of bureaucratic controls over your status, or do not disclose and bear the weight of self-imposed normative control to conform to the ableist norm.  It goes without saying that those with a visible disability are not faced with the same choices.

The institution’s history of normative pressures to adhere to disability inclusion-- whether students, staff or faculty-- yielded relatively elaborate internal policies and adherence amongst organizational stakeholders. Nevertheless, this carrot approach to inclusion did not yield the desired effects, i.e. an increase in student disability disclosures. It was only in the post-Covid aftermath and the complicated return to in-person classes that the administration devised a stringent attendance policy penalizing absences in response to an overall perception of lax student engagement. This is what we refer to as an emergent form of bureaucratic control that immediately motivated those students who had previously remained hesitant to disclose their disability and suddenly submitted to the ‘stick’ of bureaucratic pressures. Although the goodwill of normative pressures was taken on board by a good number of internal stakeholders, including the belief that greater inclusion would diminish the effects of social stigma or intolerance of students with disabilities, in fact, this internal disposition was simply insufficient to enact effective organizational change. It is only with the top-down bureaucratic old school decision to enforce student attendance policy after Covid that they came forth to disclose.

The implications for this suggest a general trend towards the return of old school bureaucratic control and its direct competition with the more egalitarian corporate cultural normative control already in place in the neo-liberal business school. This can provide explanatory value to the educators, administrators and scholars attempting to unpack the paradoxical tensions presented by these conflicting motivational approaches deployed in the contemporary business school.

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