'The times they are a changing': Developing Disability Provision in UK Higher Education.

Mike Adams (Principal Co-ordinator, National Disability Team, England)

Paul Brown (National Co-ordinator for Students with Disabilities, Scotland)

Introduction

This paper will provide an overview of the approaches undertaken by the English and Scottish Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCE and SHEFC) for developing high quality provision for disabled students.

The Funding Councils were established as part of the Further and Higher Education Acts 1992. Such legislation was explicit in stating that part of their remit was to 'consider how access to higher education for students with special educational needs can be facilitated' (June 1992, p.2). It is, therefore, the Councils' responses to this statement that is the primary concern of this paper. The paper will outline the strategies adopted by each Council and examine these in the context of wider developments within the higher education sector. Furthermore, it will outline future strategies and operational issues that have been identified to further ensure the 'mainstreaming' of disability issues within the Councils' overall policy framework.

UK Government education policies in the mid 1980s, were driven by the need to significantly increase the number of people entering higher education. This led to institutions proactively recruiting students from 'non-traditional backgrounds'. Previously, the number of disabled students entering higher education had been limited as access was characterised by minimal financial assistance and, in most cases, without the existence of formal support mechanisms within their chosen institution.

However, as part of the Student Loans Bill 1990 the government modified the existing Disabled Students Award (Hurst 1996). This enabled full-time students in receipt of a maintenance award to access an additional allowance i.e. 'Disabled Students Allowance', to cover 'disability-related costs' e.g. adaptive technology, personal assistance etc. This legislation was to prove significant as, for the first time, individual disabled students were provided with the financial support required to access higher education.

The English Model

In July 1992, the HEFCE established an Advisory Group on Access and Participation (AGAP) to develop the Council's strategy on disability issues. As a result, two one year pump-priming 'special initiatives' to widen participation for students with 'special needs' (HEFCE 1993, 1994) were founded. In total, £3m was allocated for each year with funding determined on a competitive basis. Such funding decisions were underpinned by the Council's policy to support those institutions which had 'already shown a commitment to meeting the needs of disabled students' and which 'had a successful record of providing for such students' (HEFCE 1995 p.2).

In evaluating these initiatives, the Council identified a limited impact in developing good practice within individual institutions and, indeed, across the sector as a whole. The creation of a designated disability post was identified as the single most important factor in providing lasting change within an institution. However, the greatest concern was that single year funding had made it extremely difficult to fully develop a disability service. Within this short time-period, it was apparent that difficulties had also been experienced in 'embedding' project outcomes across broader institutional frameworks. The consequence of this was that, for many institutions, service provision continued to be the domain of one or two committed individuals located primarily in student welfare departments.

In the years that followed, a third special initiative (1996-97 to 1998-99) to encourage high quality provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (HEFCE 1996) was developed. This initiative incorporated many of the recommendations identified in the initial evaluation, including that projects should be funded for a period of three years. As part of this programme the Council established a national Co-ordination Team whose role was to provide direct support to projects, to ensure institutions met identified aims and objectives and to enhance the transfer of good practice across the sector as a whole. A combination of activities and tools were used by the team to facilitate this process, including on-site visits, workshops on particular areas of project support, newsletters and use of an electronic project mailbase which provided a forum for staff to exchange ideas and practice on project management issues.

In addition to providing direct support to projects, the Co-ordination Team also had a wider remit to provide information and advice on disability issues to all staff in higher education institutions. Such support recognised the diverse needs of individual institutions within the sector and their position with regard to the development of provision for disabled students. A 'resource directory' of disability-related materials and expertise available, drawing together those outputs developed within the previous initiatives, was developed both in paper and electronic formats. The directory was then extended to include a much wider range of resources available within the sector and, indeed, it continues to expand. It was felt that dissemination of resources and expertise in this way, would avoid projects constantly having to 're-invent the wheel' by

enabling them to transfer and adapt existing good practice to suit their own particular institutional requirements.

Therefore, whilst the primary concern of the Council was to develop and embed provision within individual institutions, it was recognised that to create and sustain real change in practice, key sector-wide organisations involved in cross-sector strategic development would also have to become engaged in addressing disability issues. This was viewed as critical in enabling issues of disability to be raised within the broader educational arena and in providing an efficient and effective means of disseminating project outcomes to the wider sector.

The Scottish Model

In contrast to the English model, from the outset, SHEFC undertook a 'whole sector approach' to issues of disability. In many ways this all-inclusive approach was determined by the nature of the sector, having only 18 higher education institutions. An audit of provision for disabled students was commissioned in 1993/1994 and overseen by the Scottish Wider Access Panel (SWAP). This report informed the Council's strategy for development and further provided the basis for the publication 'Access to Success' (SHEFC 1994b), a guide for disabled students which provided details of the services and provision available in all Scottish higher education institutions.

Subsequently, following a sector-wide consultation process, a programme of targeted funding was initiated to address the needs identified within the report. Funding was made available, on a regional basis, to all institutions rather than through a competitive approach, as adopted in the English model. The Support for Students with Disabilities Equipment Initiative' (SHEFC 1994b) was a one year funding programme to support institutions wishing to undertake minor capital adaptations or the purchase of specialist equipment for disabled students.

Consistent with the English experience, the need for a dedicated disability post was a major factor, which emerged from the consultation process. In response, the 'Support for Students with Disabilities Staff Initiative' (SHEFC 1994) provided an opportunity for institutions to create a designated post for supporting disabled students. Each institution was invited to submit plans detailing the nature of the role and importantly, how the post would become embedded within institutional structures once special initiative funding had ceased. All institutions eligible to bid were participating by the end of the second year, which ensured that all higher education institutions funded by SHEFC had a designated member of staff with responsibility for supporting disabled students. Clearly, as a result of this initiative, disability issues were given a higher profile within Scottish institutions. Moreover, this also proved to be a major catalyst for a significant increase in the numbers of students disclosing an impairment/disability.

As part of the 1994 initiative, the programme also established the post of SHEFC National Co-ordinator for Students with Disabilities to provide advice and guidance to these designated staff in developing policy and practice within their institutions. This model of support was the precursor to that of the Co-ordination Team in England whose role has been described earlier in the paper. In addition to providing one-to-one support, the National Co-ordinator developed regional and national networks, which were used as a forum for discussing particular areas of concern, for both designated disability support staff and those within institutions more generally. Such networks were also important as a mechanism for the transfer and dissemination of good practice throughout the sector. Furthermore, to further facilitate and enhance this process, a programme of meetings was organised that provided designated staff with guidance on 'managing institutional change'.

The 'Developing Provision for Students with Disabilities Initiative' (SHEFC 1997) provided further opportunities for institutions in Scotland to fund disability posts. It extended the previous initiative by enabling institutions to part fund other disability-related posts identified as a need within their tender documents. For example, many institutions utilised the money to part fund a Dyslexia Support Tutor alongside the Disability Adviser in response to a growing support need within this area. For other institutions, which had been unable to secure funding to meet the costs of a permanent Disability Adviser, it provided an opportunity to continue this post for another year, with the intention of securing long term funding.

Key Factors Influencing Change

In recent years, a significant number of factors have led to the changing nature of higher education in the UK. However, within the scope of this paper, only those major factors, which have had a direct influence on disabled students, are considered.

In a comprehensive review of UK higher education, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education delivered a series of recommendations, within a twenty year strategy, on the future purpose, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education (NICHE 1997). This report recognised the need to meet an increasingly diverse student population and included a strong focus on widening participation for students from groups currently under-represented within higher education. Recent statistics would suggest disabled students comprise approximately 3% of the overall student population (HESA 1998), compared with 14% of the population as a whole.

Recommendation two states:

> 'We recommend to . . . . . the funding bodies that, when allocating funds . . . they give priority to those institutions that can demonstrate a commitment to widening participation and have in place a participation strategy . . . . .'

Recommendation six is explicit in making the link with disabled students:

> 'We recommend to the funding bodies that they provide funding for institutions to provide learning support for students with disabilities'.

The report clearly stated that institutional policies and practice should not solely address issues of recruitment, ensuring that students also received a learning experience equivalent to their non-disabled peers.

In 1995, the UK Government passed the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The main aim of this legislation was to end discrimination against disabled people. However, educational provision was not included within the main provisions of the DDA and, therefore, the Act currently only pertains to higher education institutions with regard to services they provide to the public and not to education or services primarily provided for students. Within this legislation all higher education institutions had a duty to provide the funding councils with a Disability Statement. These Statements were intended to provide information on education and facilities offered by higher education institutions to disabled students.

With the election of New Labour in 1997 the Government signalled its intention to create enforceable comprehensive civil rights for disabled people. The Government established a Disability Rights Taskforce to draw up recommendations and in its final report (DfEE 1999) it recommended that anti-discrimination legislation should cover education. Accordingly, the Government announced its intention to enact such legislation, and recently published a consultation document setting out the main principles that such legislation would adopt (DfEE 2000).

Further legislative change in the field of disability and higher education will be brought about with the passing, by the UK, of the Human Rights Act (2000) (HRA). The HRA will enshrine into British law the European convention of Human Rights. While this legislation has not yet produced a body of case law in Britain, it is widely expected to have a huge impact on the policies and procedures of many public bodies including higher education institutions.

Key-sector wide organisations have also begun to directly address issues of disability within their remit. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency, responsible for ensuring academic quality and standards in higher education (QAA 1999 p.2), has recently introduced a 'code of practice' on students with disabilities. As one of a suite of inter-related documents, the code aims to ensure the quality of learning opportunities for disabled students, covering issues ranging from admissions though to learning, teaching and research provision to examinations and assessment and staff development. For each of these areas the code provides associated guidance, which is intended to assist institutions to meet those key features the QAA expects institutions to demonstrate through their quality assurance mechanisms. Indeed, QAA assessors at both individual subject and broader institutional reviews will make use of this code of practice.

The final factor is recognition by the Funding Councils of the additional costs to institutions in supporting disabled students. From academic year 2000/01, a mainstream funding formula has been introduced that will directly provide additional funding to institutions, funded by the HEFCE, in relation to their number of disabled students. Such monies will provide core funding to individual institutions, thereby encouraging a more strategic approach to provision.

Current Approaches

In addition to mainstream funding, the English Funding Council has introduced a fourth funding initiative 'Improving Provision for Disabled Students' (HEFCE 1999). A new co-ordination team, the National Disability Team, has been established to oversee the development of this programme, in response to identified policy objectives. One major objective identified was to raise the minimum level of provision that each institution should be providing for disabled students. Therefore, a primary focus has been placed on institutions that currently have little provision for, or experience in, supporting students with disabilities, to establish a base level of provision and, 'where appropriate, to develop a more strategic approach to improving all aspects of disability provision in the institution' (p.2). Such a strategy is characteristic of the Scottish model although it is set within a competitive tendering process.

Secondly, the Council was keen to ensure that knowledge and expertise gained through previous special initiatives was effectively transferred and disseminated across the sector. Institutions are encouraged to establish or utilise existing networks and events to share experience and expertise on disability issues. For example, currently the sector is developing resources on how best to meet the needs of students with particular impairments, such as dyslexia or mental health difficulties. Specific issues such as careers related activities are beginning to be researched and shared as models of good practice and broader networks of professional groups, e.g. librarians are also tackling disability issues and making their outcomes available for the benefit of the wider sector.

A third objective continued to support the thrust towards the transfer of expertise but highlighted a focus on collaborative working. The sharing of existing expertise and resources is paramount in providing a wider range of support services more cost effectively than would be possible for any single institution. Indeed, the remit of the National Disability Team is to ensure that not only do individual projects succeed but that outcomes are disseminated across the sector leading to real change in institutional practice.

In contrast, the Scottish Funding Council is adopting a more targeted approach (SHEFC 1997). The three projects funded are collaborative partnerships and focus on creating accessible curricula, student work placements and staff development. The National Co-ordinator also has primary responsibility for commissioning small to medium term activities to

meet identified gaps in provision. Again, emphasis is placed on collaboration and a whole sector approach as demonstrated by the funding of a cross-sector conference addressing the needs of students with mental health difficulties in post-sixteen education and the production of a handbook for dyslexic students. Staff have also been provided with funding to undertake the Certificate in Professional Development in higher education and disability provision.

Recently, SHEFC has also funded a Disability Needs Analysis (SHEFC 2000). Institutional 'audits' were undertaken and will be utilised to inform the Council on how best to develop its strategy pertaining to disabled students and provide institutions with "pointers" to meet the coming challenges posed by the changing policy and legislative context. This analysis will focus on access to the curriculum, access to the physical environment and central institutional policies, procedures and practice.

Challenges

The Funding Councils have made a significant impact on improving both the quality and quantity of provision available for disabled students. Their challenge now is in continuing moves towards 'mainstreaming' disability issues into all core activities. This will require 'joined up' thinking at both strategic and operational levels if it is to be achieved. The Councils have already included issues of disability in recent sector consultations concerning the learning needs of diverse student groups in key areas e.g. Learning and Teaching, Communications and Information Technology. It is expected that within these areas, proposals for funding will clearly need to demonstrate how issues of disability are to be addressed. In Scotland, the Funding Council requires those submitting bids under the 'Wider Access Scheme' to ensure that the needs of disabled students are considered in any activities they propose to undertake (SHEFC 1999b).

However, the main challenge will be to address the needs of disabled students in relation to teaching and learning. The anticipated catalyst for this change is expected both from forthcoming legislation and the broader policy shifts towards widening participation in higher education described earlier in this paper. If it is understood that widening participation seeks to address the diverse needs of a broad spectrum of learners, then it will be critical to identify and address issues that relate access to the curriculum alongside the more traditional forms of providing support.

To achieve this will involve a cultural shift in the way institutions respond to the requirements of disabled students. A move beyond the well-meaning but often ad hoc response made when faced with disabled students is clearly required. It will no longer be appropriate to view this issue as one of adaptation and add-on. In this way, issues of participation cannot remain closed within a student services arena but must become part of the mainstream learning and teaching debate. This is not to denigrate the value of support services and the important role they will continue to play in

enabling access to higher education for many disabled students. Rather, it is a recognition that increasingly this role will involve working in partnership with academic staff in considering the students' learning needs, including course design and delivery.

Currently within the UK, there is a paucity of research within this area. However, by raising the issues we can begin to address particular aspects of teaching and learning as they relate to disabled students. At the cornerstone of the debate are two overriding principles:

- A need for both variety and flexibility in all aspects of teaching and learning.

- A need to ensure quality and parity with students' non-disabled peers.

The above principles are mutually interdependent and will need to be underpinned by the reality of academic staff taking ownership of these issues, alongside experienced practitioners within the field.

In relation to the first principle, contemporary teaching and learning theory emphasises the benefits for all students of the use of a variety of teaching, learning and assessment methods. The importance of such variety to disabled students has also been underlined by the limited research that has been undertaken in this area. However, our approach must avoid falling into the trap of viewing disabled students as a homogenous group. The process of designing an accessible curriculum for one disabled student will be different to and, in some cases at total odds with that for other individuals.

This is most clearly illustrated when examining the media of web-based learning. Whilst adaptive technologies enable most disabled people to access the web, the information presented on web pages may or may not be accessible. A blind user may browse the web using a screen reader that can translate text into speech. This user will be able to access information presented textually, but any information presented in images is impossible for the screen reader to interpret. As a result, such information is lost unless it is also represented in textual form. Conversely, a dyslexic user may find a text-heavy web page extremely difficult and would therefore benefit from some of the information being presented graphically. Increasingly we are now seeing web pages designed which provide the user with an option of the graphic representation in a textual form. This, however, highlights the fact that even the 'best' teaching practice will require some duplication in alternative formats if it is to be accessible to all.

Ensuring academic standards and parity with non-disabled students is paramount. In relation to examinations, current practice is to provide disabled students with a compensation, e.g. extra time, use of an amanuensis as a method of 'levelling the playing field'. Where more extensive modifications are required these are usually decided on an ad-hoc basis. Such practices, however, raise real questions as to whether these decisions are defensible within individual institutions' quality assurance mechanisms.

In reality, providing variety and flexibility within the curriculum will have cost implications both in terms of finance and administration. However, there are many activities, which can be undertaken with little or no cost that will facilitate a positive effect on the students' learning experience.

Providing a diverse approach to learning and teaching with scope for flexibility to take account of the circumstances specific to individual disabled students and particular subject disciplines is an ideal target. In developing new courses, academic staff should be striving to ensure that no 'hidden barriers' are unnecessarily included in the course content and delivery and that the learning outcomes build for both variety and flexibility from the outset.
If widening participation is to become a reality for disabled students, academic staff will need to take ownership of disability issues and work in partnership with disability practitioners and disabled students to ensure an appropriate learning experience.

Conclusion

Although similarities exist, the nature of both the English and Scottish sectors has necessitated that different approaches for developing high quality provision for disabled students in higher education have been undertaken. It is evident that both Councils have progressed from a targeted approach for encouraging increased provision to a wider coherent sector approach which aims to embed provision within broader institutional frameworks. Current policy developments such as the introduction of 'mainstream' funding will further support this strategy.

As has been demonstrated, the impact within both sectors has been considerable. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of disabled students entering higher education (HESA 1998) supported by an increase in the range and quality of provision. Where models of good practice have been developed, these are now being disseminated across the sector. Moreover, current initiatives will provide opportunities for those institutions that have not previously engaged in addressing issues of disability, and, therefore, ultimately improve choice for all disabled students.

However, it is acknowledged that there is still much to be achieved within the sectors and, in particular, within the domain of learning and teaching. It is important that the Councils draw on the lessons to be learnt from those countries which have embraced full civil rights for disabled people (for an overview of the Australian model of higher education see Power in Hurst, 1998). The rapid pace of change within higher education has been matched by an increased understanding of disability in wider society. It is important that such momentum is maintained in order that real equality of opportunity is achieved.

References

DfEE (2000) "SEN and Disability Rights in Education Bill Consultation Document". DfEE London.

DfEE (1999) "From Exclusion to Inclusion. A Report of the Disability Rights Task Force". DfEE London.

DfEE (1992) Guidance letter to the SHEFC. DfEE, London.

HEFCE (1993) Circular 9/93 Special Initiative to Widen DFEE (Participation for Students with special needs. HEFCE, Bristol.

HEFCE (1994) Circular 8/94 Special Initiative to Widen Participation for Students with special needs. HEFCE, Bristol.

HEFCE (1996) Access to higher education: students with learning difficulties and disabilities - A Report on the 1993-94 and 1994-95 HEFCE Special Initiatives to Encourage Widening Participation for Students with Disabilities. HEFCE, Bristol.

HEFCE (1996) Special Initiative to encourage high quality provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. HEFCE, Bristol.

HEFCE (1999) Circular 99/08 Improving Provision for Disabled Students. HEFCE, Bristol.

HEFCE (1999) Invitation to FDTL phase one and two and TLTP phase three projects to bid for additional funding. HEFCE, Bristol.

HESA (1998) Students in Higher Education Institutions 1996/7

HURST (1996) 'Reflecting on researching disability and higher education'. In Barton (Ed) Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights. London: Longman.

NCIHE (1997) Higher Education in the Learning Society, London: HMSO.

POWER, D. (1998) 'Disability services in Australian universities' in Hurst, A. (Ed) Higher Education and Disabilities: International Approaches, Aldershot: Ashgate.

QAA (1999) "Code of Practice: Students with Disabilities". QAA Gloucester

SHEFC (1994a) Access to Success: A Guide for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Scotland. SHEFC, Edinburgh.

SHEFC (1994b) Circular 54/94 Support for Students with Disabilities Equipment Initiative. SHEFC, Edinburgh.

SHEFC (1994c) Circular 37/94 Support for Students with Disabilities Staff Initiative. SHEFC, Edinburgh.

SHEFC (1997) Circular 14/97 Developing Provision for Students with Disabilities. SHEFC, Edinburgh.

SHEFC (1999a) Circular 9/99 Learning Support for Students with Disabilities. SHEFC, Edinburgh.

SHEFC (1999b) Circular 21/99 Wider Access Development Funding. SHEFC, Edinburgh

SHEFC (2000) Circular 11/00 Disability Needs Analysis SHEFC, Edinburgh

SOED (1992) Guidance letter to the SHEFC. SOED Edinburgh.

Details of Authors

Mike Adams

Mike Adams is Principal Co-ordinator of the Higher Education National Disability Team which has a remit to improve provision for disabled students. He is based at Coventry University where he is also Co-Director of the Centre for Research and Policy in Disability.

Paul Brown

Paul Brown has held the post of National Co-ordinator for Students with Disabilities from January 1995. This post is funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC). Paul is based at the University of Dundee in Scotland.