

"It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it".
Paper Session for Pathways 5 National Conference –
'Reviewing the Past – Adapting the Future'
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Background to the session

This session will explore the context and rationale behind the development of a portfolio of training opportunities which have been undertaken by the South West Regional Access Centre at the University of Plymouth and also by the University of Central Lancashire. Our objective in developing this portfolio was to encourage inclusiveness, promote access to learning and teaching, and improve the experience of H.E. and employment for people with disabilities. The work has its origins in experience gained over the past five years of service delivery. During this time a generic training programme has been offered to academic and support staff working in Higher Education (H.E.) institutions and Further Education (F.E.) colleges within both institutions and across the UK H.E. sector.

The programmes have focused on disability awareness for academic and support staff, the assessment and support needs of a range of people with disabilities and the management of services responsible for the entry, sustainment and progression of such students. From these beginnings we have developed, validated and delivered courses at Post-Graduate level. This work has been undertaken in the context of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Special Initiatives Programmes. These programmes have encouraged our own and other institutions in the support of "high quality provision for students with disabilities and in the development of expertise throughout the sector and beyond". They have also provided pertinent and relevant opportunities to both staff and mature students for life-long learning.

Before concentrating on the "what" aspect of the title I will outline the summary factors which influenced our thinking for the development of the courses and their style of course delivery - the "why" and "how" of the equation.

Rising numbers of students with disabilities in Higher Education in the UK

In the past six years there has been a significant rise in numbers of students with disabilities entering H.E. The Dearing Report, **Higher Education in the Learning Society** (1997) recorded the need for "reducing the disparities in participation" for underrepresented groups. Currently approximately 4% of first year students in the UK declared a disability, but knowledge of the sector indicates a significantly higher

percentage. Since 1993, HEFCE has pumped a wide range of support initiatives for students with disabilities through the Special Initiative Funding, with matched funding from the receiving institution. This joint funding has prompted initiatives to provide in-house support previously unavailable within the sector. However, the picture is not consistent. On the one hand is the isolated, part time member of staff, the "Disability Officer", who may be variously located in Student Services, Registry or Student Welfare. On the other hand is the designated Centre, with a breadth of staff resources, offering a specialist focus to meet the assessment, learning and support needs of students with disabilities. As the climate to recruit students with disabilities grows, staff are expected to act as arbiters, supporters, teachers and champions in a new field. Specialist knowledge is fundamental to the development of appropriate services; the use of assistive technologies is vital to students, as is a range of learning support services. Colleagues are placed at the interface between applicant expectation, often very high, and the structure and attitudes of host institutions and external agencies, often complex and judgmental.

Government legislation to support equality and inclusivity

Following the advent of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), institutions were tasked with recording their commitment and services to these students through the production of a Disability Statement open to the public domain. In addition to this there is an expected extension to the DDA in the form of a Special Educational Needs and Disability rights in Education Bill, which is currently in its draft stage. This Bill will impact on inclusivity for the first time across the whole educational sector, from primary to H.E. level. The Human Rights Act coming into force this Autumn will also mean for the first time people with disabilities will have recourse to UK law if they are the recipients of less than equal rights to education and quality of life.

New field of responsibility for staff in Higher Education

With such rapid change taking place there is growing evidence of a serious shortage of appropriately trained staff.

Dearing (1997) noted that in the H.E. sector, few academics had the opportunity to keep at the forefront of developments in how to teach, and there was little training in the use of information technology. The Report also identified a similar dearth of training opportunities for administrative and support staff. Recent analysis of this undertaken by the University of Plymouth, indicates that professionals of various experience and background are operating within this sphere. At present there is little appropriate, targeted, training provision at pre-graduate or postgraduate level. This leads to inconsistency for the student and anomalies across the sector. There is an urgent need to provide validated qualifications with (inter) nationally agreed standards,

to enhance the academic status of staff working in the field and to provide parity of support for students.

In the new climate of increased inclusivity staff at all levels have day-to-day contact with students with disabilities. Administrators in many settings, academics from all subject areas, and service providers such as student services, libraries and open access IT areas are expected to work effectively with this student cohort. However, most staff tasked with these responsibilities have no specialist qualifications whatsoever to prepare them for this highly specialised work. There is a pressing need for a pre-degree, "starter" qualification for those who wish to improve their skills or for those who wish to have recognised the important work they already undertake.

In addition to the need of generic H.E. staff to recognise the implications and their responsibilities towards inclusivity which are now integral to their professional roles, a strata of staff has emerged with prime responsibility for co-ordinating the supportive underpinning to successful learning. Disability Officers and Learning Support Co-ordinators are two examples of this relatively new career opportunity.

Many colleagues who find their way into this area are not at managerial level, but are tasked with developing new services without the benefit of training and with little relevant experience. There is a need to provide awareness of disability related issues, including a critical perception of the different theoretical models applied to the social and cultural study of disability. Grounding practice in theory also involves considering the post-war history of legislation in Britain and internationally, in the context of disability and education for the successful mobility of students and graduates with disabilities. In addition the development of designated centres in many H.E.I.s has led to staff gaining experience at the interface between students and institutions but with little opportunity through a formal qualification structure, many staff find there is minimal recognition of the importance and permanency of their roles.

Equally important is the requirement to meet the professional responsibility to understand the likely impact of a particular disability on a specific individual and the possible consequences for learning and support. Colleagues often experience great anxiety about their capacity to make the "right" responses in crucial encounters at key points in the student career.

The trend towards a climate of inclusion and the advent of the Disability Discrimination Act, has drawn attention to the role of the professional as "gate keeper" to equality of opportunities for students with specific learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Information technology has become a crucial component of post-16 education and its particular value in supporting access to the curriculum for this student cohort is

generally well recognised. This has focused attention on one highly specialised area, that is the role of the assessor in providing that "level playing field" for these students, through the assessment of assistive technologies and learning support strategies. At present many practitioners have acquired experience through practice without the chance to gain formal qualifications. Conducting successful assessment activities requires knowledge of the consequences of particular disabilities on learning support needs and specific curriculum requirements, as well as being aware of developments in specialist assessment methods. Training for this group of staff is of paramount importance if there is to be parity and credibility of provision across the H.E. sector.

Specialist centres contain a diversity of technical resources and a range of staff engaged in a panoply of duties requiring a multiplicity of skills. Managers have complex organisational responsibilities and are expected to have access to a wealth of information concerning student entitlement to external funds, internal resources and services, as well a firm grasp of institutional practices. They are often responsible for staff development initiatives across both academic and support services.

Managers must be able to locate their practice in a rigorous academic framework, understanding their role in the context of recent and current legislation in the field of disability and the changes brought about by government policy and trends in both sectors. Above all there is a need for the standardisation of the management of assessment and learning support activities, especially with regard to the establishment of service-specific quality auditing systems which allow for the embedding of monitoring and evaluation activities. Generally speaking managers recognise the need for a thorough professionalism in both quantitative and qualitative measurements of service deliverables, including the involvement of all "clients" in the evaluation process. Quality auditing of all aspects of provision is regarded as a key component in the forming of sustainable services, informed by strategic and financial planning.

Many managers have acquired their expertise outside of formal qualifications through their work experience. All recognise that management itself requires circumspection. The opportunity to review personal and shared experience, and to define models of good practice, is particularly important where it involves team building to interact with a complex "client" group, many of whom utilise services throughout their student careers or at times of acute stress and crisis.

Management involves a complex hybrid of background knowledge and personal drive. The successful manager has to understand the cultural dimensions of the "client" relationship when working with people with disabilities. It is necessary to recognise the implications of funding arrangements for a variety of transitional stages. The successful manager has to recognise the appropriateness of developments in

specialist assessment methods, for a range of disabilities. These have a crucial bearing upon course choice, mode of study and assessment, and not least of all, upon equality of opportunity. It is important to be able to maximise effective management skills from a financial, interpersonal and service-specific perspective. In order to do this focused and specific H.E. relevant qualifications are necessary.

Quality Assurance Measures

In the UK September 2000 marks the inception of the Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education -Students with Disabilities, initiated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. The Code objectives are designed to assist institutions in ensuring that students with disabilities have access to a comparable learning experience to that of their non-disabled peers. This Code is one of a suite of eleven that will set the quality standards for H.E. provision. It contains twenty-four precepts against which institutions will be assessed and it covers the student experience from pre-entry to exit. The Code does not set out to be "a Charter", nor to offer a blue print for best practice (Introduction, point 10), but there is an expectation that the Code will help to raise the standards of provision for this student group. In its precept 15 (staff development) the Code encourages institutions to consider providing disability training as part of an induction and personal development programme for all staff.

Developing a Programme of Staff Training

For the past six years the Universities of Plymouth and Central Lancashire have each been developing a training portfolio for all staff within their generic staff development programmes. Such training has focused upon specific disability awareness for academic and support staff and the implications for teaching and the learning experience for students with disabilities. Both institutions through their Disability Services have sought to improve student support by peer and staff training through the teaching of sign language, note taking courses, student specific staff training and the Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Certificate for new tutors. In addition to these, both Universities have been at the forefront of initiatives to design post-graduate level modules designated for target groups in the field of disability support, assessment, teaching and management of services. These modules are transferable to other Integrated Masters Programmes throughout the UK. The University of Central Lancashire focused their activities on a University Certificate of Professional Development, an Advanced Certificate and a Diploma (H.E. Disability Services) all focusing upon the many dimensions of disability and Higher Education to produce competent practitioners. The University of Plymouth designed post-graduate modules through its Disability Services, for general disability and H.E. awareness, for assessors of

assistive technology and study support strategies and for managers of disability services.

In 1999 the H.E.F.C.E. funding programme sought bids from English H.E.I.s to improve their base level provision for students with disabilities to encourage more experienced practitioners to work collaboratively to maximise previous gains from earlier disability support funding initiatives. The University of Plymouth co-ordinated a bid between its Disability Service (South West Regional ACCESS Centre) and the University of Central Lancashire. This successful proposal was mindful of the training needs of the new cohorts of staff and nascent services, which would evolve from successful institutional bids for financial support to reach base level provision. The proposal aimed to:

- adapt, unify and upgrade well received existing training
- develop an innovative post-graduate diploma with a range of module options
- attempt joint validation
- provide a portfolio of consistent training, nationally available through a north-south UK delivery.

This work is now in process and currently the management team from both institutions and the Project Officer are addressing the content of the new diploma and a combined generic portfolio of training. Fundamental to this development is the premise that for learning to be effective and meaningful for staff already under heavy workloads in H.E., teaching has to be dynamic and interactive. For its effect to be lasting, to make possible H.E. opportunities for people with disabilities, it has to break down barriers, myths, preconceptions and prejudice.

In the second part of this session I would like to share with you some of the small group exercises which we have developed during the organisation and delivery of disability-awareness training programmes. The exercises and tasks can be readily adapted to meet the needs of different audiences and a range of contexts. Most sessions involve very little straightforward presentational approaches. Instead, sessions are built around the implementation of many of the principles associated with learning effectively. Amongst these are that effective learning occurs when the learners are involved actively in the learning process, that effective learning is associated with the use of a variety of methods and resources, that effective learning takes place when learners are interested in the topic, that effective learning takes place when learners see the topic as relevant and that effective learning is based on moving forward from knowledge and skills which learners have already to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Finally and not to be overlooked, effective learning takes place when the process is enjoyable and fun!

Given that often learners assemble in groups with colleagues who are unfamiliar to them and also that they feel apprehensive about the session themselves, the first exercise/task acts as an 'icebreaker', the intention

being to encourage everyone to contribute, to have their contributions received positively and uncritically, and to feel confident about what might follow later. The actual exercise task involves the compilation of an inventory of ideas. The group is broken down into smaller units ideally of between four and six members, one of whom is invited to act as recorder and to compile a list of the contributions and another to act as group chair. Having organised the participants in this way, the next stage is to present them with the stimulus words/words intended to trigger ideas. Group members are asked to say the first thing that enters their minds on hearing the trigger words/words. The immediate reaction is important. The triggers are given to different groups and so given that there are two triggers, it is ideal if there is an even number of subgroups. The triggers used are "student" and "disabled student" those chairing the groups are encouraged to try to keep a speedy pace and to close the exercise after three or four rounds or when it is clear that participants are losing momentum.

The triggers have been chosen because they elicit two quite different lists - or at least that is the intention. Those concerned with "student" will provide quite a collection of items, perhaps related to study, perhaps to accommodation, perhaps to general attitudes and demeanour. The list most often submitted in connection with "disabled student" contains a significant number of items which suggest that participants have focused more on the disability rather than the students. It usually offers a graphic example of what has sometimes been called the "inundating potential" of a disability - the individual person is lost sight of and the concern is with the wheelchair, the white stick, or the hearing aid. The consequence of this for practices in the context of higher education are that colleagues adopt an overly sympathetic approach. What has to be stressed is that disabled students are first and foremost students with all the positive and negative qualities that might be attributed to everybody.

Building upon this, it is possible to move into a similar exercise based around stereotyping. The large group needs to be divided into smaller groups containing ideally just four people. Again, each group needs to have a chair and a recorder. Groups are provided with a sheet of information about an individual. It gives the individual's age and describes the family background, education, interests, and current qualifications. On the basis of this, each group is asked to say something about what they think the individual's life will be like in ten years time. The groups are asked to organise their projections around four themes: family life, occupation, social relationships, and status as a member of society.

What the groups are not aware of at this stage is that there are three different individuals, one is a male, one a female, and one who is a wheelchair user and does not have a gender ascribed.

Working around stereotypes, what emerges is that both males and females have moved into their own homes, they have jobs, they are in

stable relationships with spouses/partners, etc. and that they are independent members of society. Often the role of parent is mentioned. The group working with the wheelchair user with the disability often become involved in a preliminary discussion about assigning a gender. This raises issues about differences between males and females in terms of the impact of an impairment. Once this has been resolved, they claim to encounter few difficulties and they often supply information very similar to what other groups provide. At this point, their attention is drawn to the available evidence about life as a person with a disability in the United Kingdom - namely that many will still be living at home, that finding and retaining a job is difficult, that being in a relationship (whether heterosexual or homosexual) might not be easy, and that their status is one of dependency on state benefits or on others for assistance with the activities of daily living.

So far, the concern has been with general disability-related matters. It is appropriate now to turn to higher education. The task which can be used to introduce this is an exercise based around statements which have to be judged to be "true" or "false" relevant to higher education. The statements are accompanied by answers which also provide an explanation for the answer on separate sheets. To start the exercise a selection of between twenty or thirty can be compiled (plus answers but on separate sheets) For variety, the task can be completed individually and then answers compared in pairs /trios, etc. The distribution of the answer sheets can be a source to stimulate further discussion. Participants can then be asked to devise a set of their own true/false statements - and of course these then add to the growing store of items. This task has been used with staff working in different countries and so it is important to keep in mind different characteristics of national policy and provision for students with disabilities.

As the largest single cohort of students with disabilities in the UK are those with dyslexia, another task is to provide small groups with anonymous reports by educational psychologists which identify the areas of strengths and weaknesses of the individual. The groups are then asked to match these profiles with course demands and structures to inform admission and support decisions.

A further task is to furnish participants with a page of text which emulates the experience students with visual perception difficulties (Myers Irlen Syndrome) have when asked to read the print for information, group work, presentations or revision purposes. Again this breaks down the notion that most people see the printed word in the same way and puts the participants in touch with the panic that some student's feel when asked to read.

It will be evident that as the session proceeds attention is narrowing and the next task/exercise is very much concerned with policy and provision. A number of case histories of individual students have been written and these can be used according to the group size. Again,

ideally small groups of no more than six people are ideal. Each group is asked to focus on one individual case history and to identify any points which might need to be taken into consideration if the student is to enter higher education. The task/exercise started originally using four “cases” - a student who is deaf wishing to study Physics, a blind student keen to study French, a wheelchair user interested in social work, and a part-time mature student with a specific learning difficulty wanting a course with minimal requirements for written work. The task takes up around thirty minutes and then each group is asked to report their findings. It becomes clear that many challenges are common and are irrespective of the nature of the impairment (for example the need for additional financial support). As with previous tasks/exercises there is scope for development and amendment to make the exercise more relevant.

The case history exercise forms a logical link into the next set of tasks/exercise which shifts away from student-oriented concerns and explores the context from the perspective of the institution. One simple strategy to begin with is to organise a brainstorm using either the entire group or breaking it down into smaller sub-groups. The task is to list reasons why universities and colleges should recruit students with disabilities. Contributors should be encouraged to be honest and to supply the altruistic as well as the cynical! Clearly it is possible to build a discussion on what the groups have suggested. Similarly, a brainstorm approach could be used to elicit from the participants a list of which post-holders to be involved in developing policy and provision. Depending on how much time is devoted to discussion, these exercises/tasks can be completed quite quickly.

A more demanding exercise/task is to ask participants to identify factors associated with high quality policy and provision. This can be done with the group as whole or with sub-groups. As a stimulus, participants are given a list of factors taken from the evaluation report on the first two special initiatives directed towards widening the participation of students with disabilities. The report lists eight factors but for the exercise/task a further five are added. Participants are asked first to select eight which they consider would be in the evaluation report. Having reached this point, they are required to put their selection into an order of priority. Having had time to discuss and agree on this, the feedback can prompt further discussion. To complete the picture, a copy of the paragraph from the evaluation report is distributed.

A number of other exercises/tasks have been devised which also focus attention on aspects of policy and provision from the perspective of the institution. For example, many institutions are seeking to make progress towards being more inclusive. An essential element of this is that all staff and students are aware of their roles and responsibilities. For too long, it has become custom and practice for anything and everything to be directed towards specialist staff. who are expected to

make decisions and to take action based primarily around the impairment. For example staff in "Disability Services" are expected to make any examination arrangements which are different from those obtaining for non-disabled students. Yet, in truly inclusive institution, actions surrounding examinations would be taken by those responsible for this aspect of the work and it would be a standard expectation of their roles that they take into consideration the needs of different students. The exercise/task developed to promote this inclusive approach can be implemented using small groups again, ideally of between four and six members. Each participant is supplied with a sheet of paper which lists along one side the career path of a student from pre-entry through to graduation. Alongside these horizontal divisions, the sheet is divided vertically into four columns. These are headed "students", "Department/Faculty/Administrative Staff", "Disability Services" and "Other Remarks" The participants are asked to indicate who is responsible and for which actions at the career points listed. Once the sheet has been completed, it is possible to start discussions in small groups by comparing responses. This can be concluded with a full group plenary. The exercise/task is interesting no matter whether it is used with staff based in one institution or staff from different places. A useful supplement is to have available a completed pro forma based around systems operated in one institution. Again, this itself can be a focus for discussion.

An exercise/task related to this is the creation of a spider diagram. This can be used immediately before the exercise/task described in the previous paragraph. Participants are asked to begin by locating "Disability Services" in the middle of their diagram. Next they are asked to indicate links which this central service has with other groups, both within and outwith the institution.

To conclude, our work began from the premise that equal opportunities for students with disabilities are significantly improved if staff responsible for teaching and supporting students are appropriately trained and qualified. All available evidence from staff and student experience, and funding council reports, highlighted the need for consistency of approach and professional qualifications for those involved in guiding, teaching and supporting students. We see the training initiatives described here as a significant means of reducing educational, social and economic marginalisation for people with disabilities. Such a portfolio of training and qualifications also provides personal development for a new strata of professional staff in post-16 education and an opportunity for career recognition. It also offers these professionals an improved understanding of cultural and social factors as they affect education and employment opportunities and it is hoped that it will make a contribution towards the integration of students and graduates with disabilities in H.E.