

WORKING AS A DISABILITY LIAISON OFFICER IN ENGLAND, 1997- 1999

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This paper is about my own experiences and observations while I worked as a Disability Officer at Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, England from September 1997 to March 1999.

In June 1997, a colleague who knew I was searching for something different to do emailed me a job advertisement for a DLO at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in Nottingham, England. I read it with mounting excitement and immediately thought 'I can do this'. After a very 21st century application and interview process – no letters crossed the oceans: the whole process was conducted by emails, faxes (the horror at arriving at the office one morning to find NTU's Disability Statement of about 50 pages spewed up all over the floor overnight!) and video conference – I did do it. In 4 weeks I managed to pack up my worldly belongings, sell car and a motorbike, rent the house, book the ticket, talk my way out of jury duty and arrive.

A one week orientation to the country and I was in the post.

Now the fun and games started.

First, the **language barrier** – they speak English I hear you say. Well, yes, but there is English, the Queen's English and then there is Nottinghamese.

Try these out and you will see what I mean:

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| • Ey up mi doock! | G'day! |
| • Init cowd? | Isn't it cold? |
| • Giover yer mardy ode thing, it's loovleh | Get out you moody thing, it's lovely |
| • Arkattit! | Listen to the rain! |
| • Gerroff! | Go away , please |
| • Wigorn ev us dinnaz | We are about to take lunch |
| • Aya gorra weeya? | Is your wife with you? |

AND also, these were some common educational terms:

- Strands of projects
- LD = ID
- 'Disabled student' not 'student with a disability'
- Dyslexia = LD
- Gap year
- Sandwich course

All will be revealed throughout my discussion!

Following is an overview of the issues I intend to cover:

- Working in a country whose DDA did not include Education
- Funding issues – Disabled Student's Allowances(DSA's) and Local Education Authorities (LEA's)
- Access Centres - equipment assessments
- The 'types' of disability and terminology
- Models for Student Support Workers
- Staff associated with a DLO

1. A DDA THAT DOES NOT INCLUDE EDUCATION.

It seemed strange to be working under a system whose DDA did not include education. It meant that the approach to support for students was not consistent across the sector. Some institutions were very positive about supporting 'disabled students', some put most of their effort into specialising in supporting a particular disability, some services were not very good at all and students had to apply for - and monitor - their own funding with the Local Education Authorities.

Disability Statements

All universities are required to produce a disability statement that gives details of the type of provision that they have for people with disabilities. Many universities' disability statements are on the CANDO website at <http://cando.lancs.ac.uk>.

Disability Statements generally outline the services available to students. Disability Action Plans as we know them, were not required at that time – and are not now, as far as I know.

Coordinators for students with disabilities

Every university should have a named member of staff, whose job it is to advise students with disabilities. Their title is normally 'Disability Coordinator' or 'Disabled Students' Adviser' and their contact details should be given in the university's disability statement.

The co-ordinator should be able to help with an assessment of a student's study support needs. They may also be able to negotiate with a student's local education authority and social services about getting funding and helping to find and manage assistants.

NTU responded very positively to providing access to students with a disability. (Disability Support was part of Student Services. This included dyslexia support tutors, Counselling, the Access and Hardship Fund and Chaplaincy.) As a matter of fact, the reason I was there was because the previous incumbent, who was also the coordinator of Disability Support, was seconded onto a project with a number of 'strands' including setting up a **Student Support Register** on which professionally-trained support workers, such as notetakers and interpreters were recruited and matched to students with a disability who required this support. I was responsible for developing and implementing this aspect of the project.

NTU had set up a very comprehensive system of **Information Visits** for prospective students. In the UK, a student applies to university via a system, UCAS, where a code is filled in (if the student chooses to disclose) alerting admissions officers to the fact that the student has a disability. This form was sent to us to explore further. If we felt the student may have extensive support requirements, we would contact them to discuss, then decide whether to set up an Information Visit. This meeting usually comprised a Departmental staff member, student, parent and myself. A standard format was followed where all areas that the student may need support in were discussed – lectures / tutes / exam arrangements / library / equipment / support workers / accommodation / emergency evacuation procedures etc. I was then responsible for writing a report which went to the Dean first. If the Dean was uncertain whether his / her Faculty could support the student s/he would discuss this with me before approving that an offer be made to the student. As you can imagine, this was a very labour-intensive, time-consuming process but it meant all stakeholders were involved from the beginning and the Departments were responsible for ensuring the recommendations were put in place. The DLO really did become a *liaison* office where students and staff could go if things went 'pearshaped'. Certainly we were responsible for organising support workers but most of the responsibility for the student's support lay with the Department.

However.... the complex question of funding support was still to be tackled!

2. FUNDING ISSUES : DSA's and LEA's

It took me MANY months to understand how the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) worked! DSA's are intended to pay for extra costs which students in higher education have due to a disability. Students did not have to be 'registered disabled' to be eligible – that term posed another new concept to me as it does not exist as such in Australia.

Elements of the DSA were means-tested and the DSA was only available to full-time undergraduate students. There were so many exemptions at that time – I believe things have improved since then. It was a complex, bureaucratic system to administer.

The first thing to do when a student wanted support of any kind that cost money: student support workers, equipment etc was to discover if they were eligible. How many students with a disability do you know who are part-time because of their disability? These students were unable to receive funding at that time.

The next thing to learn was that the DSA was administered via the student's Local Education Authority (LEA). The staff generally were administrators and not qualified in any disability-related field. Once we had assessed the student at the stage of the Information Visit and at a follow-up session once the student had accepted a place, and costed the support of accommodating them at university for the year, we had to apply for funding from the LEA.

No doubt, a few things immediately spring to your minds here. If the student was totally reliant on funding to purchase equipment, there was quite a lengthy time delay between enrolment, assessment, application and approval. This severely disadvantaged the already disadvantaged student. Fortunately, NTU did pay for the cost of student support workers up-front and were reimbursed by the LEA on the provision of an invoice by us each semester.

The other very interesting thing that I learnt about LEA's was that there was not a consistent approach to which they responded to applications for funding. Some did not even believe in some of the disabilities they were presented with. Dyslexia was very contentious. Some LEA's did not believe this existed and refused requests for funding. So if you were unfortunate enough to come from these counties, you were on your own or the DLO would attempt to seek funding from other sources such as charities!

Funding was divided into 3 components and in 1997/98/99 comprised :

- Non-medical personal helpers support - \$12500 pa (2000/2001 : \$25000)
- Specialist equipment allowance - \$7500 for duration of course (2000/2001 : \$10000)
- Other eg photocopying, tapes, braille, heating, travel - \$3000 pa (2000/2001 : \$3500)

ISSUES

Under this funding system, students were able to purchase appropriate equipment for their own use which remained theirs. However, if a student purchased equipment and then dropped out, the equipment still remained theirs.

The LEA's generally do not know the student and at times acted with suspicion to requests for funding. No doubt this was with justification sometimes because the system can be open to abuse.

There was no one method in which to apply for funding. Each DLO invented their own. If an institution did not have a DLO, the student had to apply themselves which could be quite stressful.

Each element had to be assessed and applied for individually. When the money ran out, as it did especially for Deaf students who used interpreters, we had to go to Charities with varied degrees of success.

Receipts had to be kept for everything including photocopying and sent to LEA's when students sought reimbursement.

As there was a limit to the funding for each student, the students were careful about giving notice when they were not able to a session.

Many of the appointments students made with me were for the purpose of discussing funding, discrepancies in invoices and so on.

3. ACCESS CENTRES

These were scattered throughout the country and were generally where a student went in order to be assessed for appropriate equipment. Access Centres had all the latest technology, the staff were aware of funding issues and how much was available to students under the DSA. In my experience, Access Centres were a wonderful resource and did an excellent job of ensuring students were appropriately set up with suitable technology.

In the absence of an Access Centre, the responsibility of assessing the students could be the DLO's. This could be quite problematic as the DLO was often not familiar with the latest technology available. We were fortunate at NTU as a staff member in IT took an active interest in this area and it became part of her role. As a matter of fact, as I was departing, NTU was in the process of applying to have an Access Centre where students in the area could go for assessments, regardless of the institution they attended.

4. THE 'TYPES' OF DISABILITY AND TERMINOLOGY

It was interesting to note that the range of disability types differed markedly from those I had been presented with in Australia.

Firstly, a point on terminology. When I first arrived, I used to speak of students as 'students with a disability'. We are taught here - they are students first, who happen to have a disability ie a secondary issue. However, I was asked instead to say 'disabled students'. You can imagine how this went against the grain! The reason though was interesting in that it was a political comment to give this group more power - as in 'black people'.

Students with **mental health** issues rarely presented. I had maybe 2 students who presented with other disabilities but clearly had an unacknowledged psychological overlay. Staff were most intrigued when I related how the number of students with mental health issues had rapidly increased in Australia and were the fastest growing disability group. There were many questions about why this could be - are there more students with these issues in Australia, do they present because there is less of a stigma, are the support programs assisting them to self-disclose because they know assistance is available etc etc. There were even questions around whether students with Mental Health issues had a disability and I notice that even now some LEA's do not recognise this and will not fund requests for support. Now at NTU, however, there is a part-time DLO investigating these issues.

An overwhelming number of students had **dyslexia** (which I was calling LD initially causing constant confusion as LD means ID in England!). I was absolutely staggered at the figures. NTU had a renowned Art and Design faculty and many were enrolled here which may explain this to some degree. There was a whole team of dyslexia specialists providing assessment and tuition to this group of students. But dyslexia was not the only 'dys....' - there was also **dyspraxia, dysphasia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia** in numbers clearly out of proportion to our experience here. **Scotopic sensitivity syndrome** was also a hot topic.

Another fascinating experience was to be challenged with students who had **SAD** ie Seasonal Adjustment Disorder. One student had it so severely she had to carry 2 huge light boxes around with her to each lecture and be able to sit somewhere so she could plug them in. If she didn't receive the correct quota of light per day she would become agitated, anxious and eventually depressed and manic. She was also on medication to control this. (And she had dyscalculia and was studying Surveying!).

5. MODELS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT WORKERS

In both of my positions in Australia, student support workers or non-medical helpers, are drawn from the student population. I think we are all familiar with this model eg for notetakers, students who had done the subject before and achieved good grades, are ideally employed.

Notetakers

In England, however, I perceived that far more people train to be professional notetakers. The course is reasonably extensive and these are the people employed to support students. They make a career out of free-lancing in this way.

Interpreters

Interpreters as we know of them, were rarely employed in an educational setting. The people employed at NTU to undertake interpreting were called Communication Support Workers (CSW's) – they supported Deaf and hard of hearing students by using British Sign Language (BSL –which unlike AUSLAN was not yet recognised as a language in England – hence another reason why some 'disabled students' found it necessary to be more political than perhaps they are here) and would also be able to notetake, lipspeak, assist with English literacy and be able to offer general administrative support. CSW's must be qualified. The course was 2 years as I recall.

Attendant carers

Students had to apply to Social Services in their county in order to receive this support.

There was also a volunteer scheme, *Community Services Volunteers*, who undertook this work. These people were often students in their 'gap' year looking for something different to do and being paid a meagre wage for their often mammoth efforts or international students. In my experience it was a difficult system to be involved in with a high dropout rate leaving the student without support at times.

6. STAFF ASSOCIATED WITH A DLO

Disability Officer

Of necessity, this is a more administrative role than those of DLO's in Australia because of the funding system.

Due to the system of Information Visits at pre-admission stage and the involvement of Departmental staff, it was also less hands-on.

On the whole, a more inclusive system as other staff took on responsibility for the students enrolled in their Faculty.

Dyslexia Support Specialists

A team of qualified staff who assessed and tutored dyslexic students.

IT Support person

Assessed students equipment needs if they could not attend Access Centres.

Attended the adaptive technology conferences on the DLO's behalf.

Assisted in initiating the development of NTU's own Access Centre.

Administrator

Organised Information visits.

Liaised with LEA's re requests for DSA's.

Assisted with timetabling and payment of non-medical helpers.

Links with specific departmental staff

These staff members attended the Information visits and ensured recommendations were implemented in the Department.

They co-ordinated exam arrangements also.

USEFUL ADDRESSES

- Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities
<http://www.skill.org.au>
- UK Sensitive Map - Universities
<http://scitsc.wlv.ac.uk/ukinfo/uk.map.html>
A map of all UK institutions, including links to all university homepages.
- Dis-Forum
E-mail forum mainly designed for people working with students with disabilities, such as disability coordinators. To join send a message to mailbase@mailbase.ac.uk. Leave the subject field blank and type: join disforum [first name] [last name].