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Report on an International Conference on Disability in Higher Education

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An international conference of disability service providers in higher education was held July 10-13, 1992 at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. The organizer of the conference was the University of New Orleans - Metropolitan College, the Division of Public Service Training/ Assistive Technology and the Division of International Education. Other conference sponsors were *AHEAD*, Project EASI (Equal Access to Software for Instruction), and the European projects, TEMPUS and COMETT-11 (to be described later in this article).

Fifty delegates from 15 countries attended the conference, including a number of professionals who have disabilities. Twenty-three of the delegates presented information about their programs and about specific topics related to disability and higher education. The conference represented a first step in establishing an international network of service providers and laid the groundwork for a similar future gathering. This article summarizes the sessions of the conference, presents common issues that emerged, and discusses possible future results of the event.

Description of Sessions

Oliver St. Pe, University of New Orleans, served as the moderator for the conference. The presentations were divided into three sessions: (a) an international overview of disability services; (b) identifying needs and resources of students with disabilities; and (c) transition into and out of the university. On the final day, participants evaluated the conference and discussed the format and content of a possible future gathering.

Session 1: International Overview of Disability Services

The first session was devoted to providing an overview of disability services in several countries - New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States, Australia, Belgium, and

Canada. The presenters focused on the services provided at their particular institutions, so one cannot necessarily generalize to all institutions in that country.

New Zealand. Bruce Fraser, Lincoln University, reported that universities in New Zealand have adopted an equal opportunity policy and have appointed an equal employment officer on each campus. Students can receive accommodations for examinations, such as extended time, oral exams, and the use of a scribe. Networks have been established for students with disabilities and staff. All services and accommodations are funded by the individual universities. Fraser reported that 1975 legislation called for physically accessible buildings. The next area to be addressed is faculty awareness of learning disabilities. At Lincoln, training in disabilities will now be a regular part of staff development.

United Kingdom. Alan Hurst briefly described the higher education system in the United Kingdom and then presented an overview of disability services at the University of Central Lancashire. All postsecondary institutions are competitive and use the same application form. Next year, for the first time, there will be a place on the application form for prospective students to disclose their disability. It is hoped that this measure will make it possible to determine if students are being denied access to the university because of their disability.

Currently, of 13,000 students at the University of Central Lancashire, 200 have identified themselves as having a disability. Lancashire offers a wide array of services to students with disabilities, including accommodations for examinations, part-time personal care, accessible housing, loan of adaptive equipment, and an adaptive technology unit in the library. Tuition allowances are made for students with disabilities.

Hurst reported that British institutions are dealing with a number of issues such as: (a) less concern on campuses for people with disabilities than for women and ethnic minorities; (b) students experiencing difficulty qualifying for financial allowances; (c) a discriminatory medical examination required for entrance into the teacher training program; and (d) lack of government support to universities for special needs services.

Hurst also provided information on SKILL: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities. This volunteer organization, which is based in London, provides information, training, consultation and materials on disability and higher education, training, and employment. SKILL sponsors conferences, conducts research, and establishes regional networks to address issues related to physical and sensory disabilities, learning difficulties, and emotional problems.

United States. Warren King briefly explained Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and its impact on American universities. He then presented a report on services available at The Ohio State University, which has one of the largest disability programs in the United States. The office, which was established in 1974, serves about 930 students per year, including those with learning disabilities; mobility, vision, speech, and hearing impairments; and chronic illnesses. King described a wide array of services including

pre-admission interviews, priority scheduling, academic accommodations, adapted transportation, assessment, tutoring, an adaptive technology center, career-related services, and support groups. The program uses volunteers extensively to record textbooks on tape. The office also provides consultation and training for faculty and staff.

King also provided information on two national organizations devoted to higher education and disability-AHEAD, an organization of postsecondary disability service providers, and HEATH Resource Center, a national clearinghouse on higher education and disability based in Washington, D.C.

Australia. Gillian McConnell, Monash University, discussed the development of disability support services in Australia. These services were predominately informal until 1989-90, when federal policy was implemented to increase access to higher education for people with disabilities. Initially, the policy proposed that each university develop expertise in a specific disability area. McConnell spoke against this proposition, as it would not allow for equal access and, as Australia is such a large country with relatively few universities, it would require students to travel long distances to reach a university with the services needed.

Monash University is the largest of Australia's 36 universities, with more than 35,000 students on five campuses. At Monash, the first disability support staff person was appointed in 1991 and, in 18 months, there has been a significant increase in the diversity of services, and the number of students asserting their right to support services, as well as a marked improvement in physical access on all campuses.

Belgium. Myriam Van Acker presented the interactive approach to disability services used at the Katholieke Universiteit, a university of 25,000 students, which is spread throughout the city of Leuven. Their philosophy is that integration does not mean 'fitting into' an existing system. Rather, adjustments must be made by persons with and without disabilities alike. A campus interdisciplinary working group, which has been in existence for 19 years, consists of a psychologist, three staff from housing, a social worker, an engineer, and a sports specialist. This group arranges for support groups for students with mobility impairments. Groups of 12 to 15 students live with the student with a disability in accessible housing, providing personal care service on a rotating basis. Similar groups are formed when necessary for students who are blind. Adaptive equipment is procured for students with visual impairments and a meeting is held with their professors before the course starts.

Fewer services are available for students with hearing impairments. They have not found sign language to be an adequate communication technique for lectures, although a modified version of sign language is sometimes used. Financial assistance is available through the Flemish Fund for Social Rehabilitation of People with a Handicap.

Canada. Marion Vosahlo reported on the services available at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. The University of Alberta specializes in working with students with

deafness, but it also serves other disability areas. Six years ago the University developed a research-based program to address the needs of students with learning disabilities.

Vosahlo presented the following factors needed for a successful program: (a) a positive attitude about the capabilities of all students; (b) commitment to supporting educational access for people with disabilities; (c) services based on the expressed needs of students; (d) diplomacy to develop rapport and support from all who might play a role; (p) political awareness; and (f) accountability for student success.

During the question and answer period, a conference participant asked if Vosahlo would use volunteers if she had unlimited funds. She replied, "absolutely." Vosahlo explained that the student volunteers help to change attitudes on campus. When these future leaders leave school, they leave with a new appreciation for and understanding of people with disabilities and will perhaps have an impact on their communities.

Germany. A student, Stefan Pankoke, described his experiences at the University of Karlsruhe. In a later session, Joachim Klaus described a special project in which Pankoke participates. Pankoke is one of 26 students with visual impairments or blindness studying industrial engineering and computer science at the University of Karlsruhe. Students in these programs have developed both hardware and software to improve learning opportunities for students with visual impairments.

Pankoke described a system whereby nondisabled students in the same program serve as tutors for students with visual impairments. They transfer requested reading materials to computer disk and meet with the students regularly to discuss diagrams and other information that was visually presented in class. These tutors provide a bridge between the faculty and the student. Students with visual impairments also have available specialized counseling and assistance with developing nonverbal communication skills. Pankoke reported that he feels totally integrated into university life.

Session II: Identifying Needs and Resources for Students with Disabilities

Session II addressed physical accessibility, services for students with learning disabilities, volunteer programs, and technology.

Accommodating students with physical disabilities. Three presenters addressed issues of physical accessibility. Naomi Moore, University of New Orleans, U.S., presented a brief history of disability rights legislation and provided an overview of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As this information is well documented in other sources, it will not be summarized here.

Susan Wheeler described her experiences in Canada, first at York University as a student with a disability, and then at Brock University as disability services coordinator. For example, she fought for replacing steps with a ramp to the stage for graduation ceremonies. Lack of money and dealing with the bureaucracy seem to be the major

barriers in making the campus more accessible. A Canadian participant commented during this session that while Canada does not have legislation like the ADA, it does have a charter that provides for certain codes. Canada also has the Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons which is addressing the issues of disability rights and access.

Harold Morandell, a graduate student at the University of Innsbruck and a native of Italy, presented a summary of his doctoral study, which outlines a European perspective on disability. He reported that European universities are generally spread throughout a city which therefore causes difficulties for physical accessibility. Also, students have to find lodging on their own, making it difficult to find suitable living space for students who use wheelchairs. Morandell, a power wheelchair user himself, has found accessibility challenging but possible at the University of Innsbruck. The Austrian government does not fund disability services, so each university has to develop its own program. Morandell described legislation in Italy mandating accessibility, but it has not been enforced.

Accommodating students with learning disabilities. After presenting a brief history of the development of the learning disabilities field, Harold Minden described a model program for students with learning disabilities (LD) at York University in Canada. They received a grant from a private research foundation for \$2.1 million over six years to develop their program. It is a comprehensive program which includes career services; coordination with secondary schools and the business community; participation on campus committees; and education of faculty. Follow-up services are provided, including a self-help group for graduates. York's program emphasizes the development of a positive self-concept and stresses interdependence rather than independence.

The learning disabilities program has a 90% retention rate of students after the first year compared to a 75% retention rate of the student population as a whole. Hard data have been collected to prove that the LD program works, which has resulted in government funding for similar LD programs at other Canadian universities.

Volunteer programs. Ann Kelly, University of Alberta in Edmonton, and Karen Swartz, York University, described the extensive use of volunteers in their programs. The University of Alberta uses over 300 volunteers per year, most of them students. Kelly and Swartz described the volunteer programs in terms of pre-recruitment; recruitment; interview and selection; training and orientation; evaluation and supervision; and recognition.

Pre-recruitment involves defining the mission of the volunteer partnership, conducting a needs assessment to match volunteer and student, and securing resources for recruitment. Recruitment includes sending letters to the previous years volunteers, exhibiting at registration, and going into classes to recruit notetakers. York University has a smaller program and is therefore able to interview prospective student volunteers individually. The interview is used to give the volunteers information about the program and to determine their attitudes toward people with disabilities. During training, volunteers receive information about their job descriptions and on disabilities in general. Formal and

informal supervision is provided so that volunteers receive feedback on their work. At the end of the term, volunteers meet as a group to provide feedback to the staff.

Recognition is an important component in the volunteer program. Kelly reported that social forms of recognition (e.g., luncheon, barbecue) are not as effective as written forms (e.g., volunteer names in school newspaper, certificate of thanks). The most effective forms of recognition are the intangible ones - developing a friendly, fun and caring atmosphere and making volunteers feel welcome and appreciated.

Ulrich Zeun described the work of self-help groups in German universities. He is a member of a self-help group and also works in the Disabled Student Services office at the University of Dortmund. Very few German universities even have a disabled student services office, but there are over 20 self-help groups at various universities. These groups are open to students with all types of disabilities and to students without disabilities who are interested in working to improve the situation on campus for students with disabilities. The self-help groups provide peer counseling and orientation for new students. They are also involved in political action to improve services on campus.

Zeun remarked that Germany has no legislation like Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA. The university system does have a written policy stating that the needs of students with disabilities should be met, but there is no enforcement of the policy. An ombudsman is assigned at each university, but he or she is not given time to do this work and therefore little is actually accomplished.

Students who request additional services at the University of Dortmund are often asked how many students with disabilities are on campus. When officials learn what a small number of students are involved, they say it is not worth it to have services for such a small number. However, more students do not attend the University precisely because there are so few services available. One of Zeun's goals is to end this cycle by obtaining commitment from University officials to increase student services so that additional students will be able to attend the University.

Adaptive technology. Four presenters discussed technology as a resource for students with disabilities. Lamar Kap reported that Weber State University, Utah has been very successful in obtaining funds from private foundations for adaptive technology. He provided these tips on getting private grants: (a) keep current on funding sources; (b) request exactly what equipment is wanted and the amount of money required; and (c) stay in touch with the funding agency after receiving a grant. He explained that private foundations assure the recipient more freedom than government grants. Further, the university does not assess indirect costs to private grants as is done for government grants.

Joachim Klaus, Germany, provided information on two projects of the European Community- COMET II (Community Action Program for Education and Training in Technology), and TEMPUS (Trans-European Mobility Program for University Studies). The purpose of COMET II is to integrate people with visual impairments into the

workplace by developing opportunities for them to complete practical training within Europe. The project is a joint effort between European businesses and universities, with a pilot project at the University of Karlsruhe in Germany. The purpose of TEMPUS is the educational and vocational integration of persons with visual impairments in Czechoslovakia. This project will develop support centers at two technical universities in Czechoslovakia, and will influence the environment (faculty and workplace) to work more effectively with students with visual impairments.

Klaus described the program at the University of Karlsruhe for students with visual impairments in the computer science and industrial engineering programs (the program in which Stefan Pankoke is a student). Through this project, all necessary literature for classes is transferred to computer by student tutors. Regular meetings are held with the students, the staff, and the tutors. Staff meet with professors before students with visual impairments are placed in their classes. They also work with employers who provide work experience opportunities for the students. Students with visual impairments are provided with all the equipment they need so that they can work at home, in the lab, and in the classroom. The computer science and industrial engineering programs work closely with the Counseling, Guidance, and Information Center, which provides orientation and counseling to the students.

Gayle Gagliano, University of New Orleans, provided information on Project EASI (Equal Access to Software for Instruction), a project of EDUCOM's Educational Uses of Informational Technology (EUIT) program. EDUCOM is a consortium of over 600 colleges and universities and 100 corporate associates which facilitates computing and communication technology in education. The mission of EASI, which has members throughout the U.S., Canada, and other countries, is to serve as a resource to higher education in the area of computing resources for students with disabilities (Project EASI, 1991). The project provides information on adaptive technology for information access, instruction, research, and employment. Project EASI has a number of working groups including a speaker's bureau, outreach and referral, online resources, legislative and policy concerns, and fund raising.

The final speaker on technology was Antonio Parreno, Hospital Ramon y Cajal, Madrid, Spain. He demonstrated new equipment he and his colleagues have developed. The device can be attached to a laptop computer and is more economical, smaller, and faster than similar devices because it uses only one cell, instead of the 80 cells used by traditional equipment. The Braille line can be used with application programs such as WordPerfect.

Session III: Transition Into and Out of the University

The speakers in this session discussed issues and programs related to the transition from high school to college and from the university to the workplace.

Transition from high school to college. This session featured four speakers who addressed transition issues for students with learning disabilities and visual impairments,

new approaches for vocational evaluation of students with sensory disabilities, and funding sources for students with disabilities. This author gave the first presentation, which outlined eight key elements for the successful transition of students with learning disabilities to postsecondary education: understanding one's strengths and weaknesses, using study strategies, planning accommodations in school, using self-advocacy skills, exploring careers, learning about different types of postsecondary schools, selecting and applying to a college, and developing interpersonal skills. Aune outlined a technique for assisting students in trying out accommodations while still in high school.

Kenneth Zangla, University of New Orleans, discussed career and vocational evaluation for students with sensory disabilities. First, he led a discussion on the kind of assessment information that should follow a student from high school to college. Then he explained the assessment process generally used by rehabilitation agencies in the United States. Zangla pointed out some of the problems with traditional instruments when dealing with persons with visual and hearing impairments. He emphasized the importance of greater cooperation between high schools and colleges in developing appropriate career evaluation for students with visual and hearing impairments. Zangla stated that career exploration and work experience are especially important for college students with disabilities, because they often have not been exposed to various career options.

Joachim Klaus described transition activities held at the University of Karlsruhe, Germany. Every year in May, a four-day program is held for students with visual impairments during their last year of high school. Faculty and students provide information about the demands of university study and about its special university programs. An orientation program is held in October for students with visual impairments who have entered the University. In addition, tutors who work with the students receive training on the integration of students with visual impairments into university life. Finally, a specialist is available to provide counseling to students with visual impairments.

Susan Wheeler of Ontario discussed the concept of a 'fair race', stipulating that accommodations simply make the educational experience fair for students with disabilities, not easier. At the same time, students need to "respect their disability", to acknowledge the limits it places on them and to plan a course schedule with those limitations in mind.

Wheeler reported that most funding sources unintentionally discriminate against students with disabilities because they require full-time status. She has written to 25 funding sources and asked them to waive this requirement for students with disabilities. All have agreed. She argued that the best way to increase the number of scholarships for students with disabilities is to influence existing sources to make their scholarships accessible to all students.

Transition from the university to the workplace. Ingegerd Haglund provided data on the numbers of students with disabilities in various universities in Sweden and described the government-supported program at the University of Stockholm. Haglund presented

follow-up data on graduates with visual, hearing and mobility impairments. Sweden has a national databased population register, so Haglund was able to track nearly all University of Stockholm graduates with disabilities from 1970 to 1986. The greatest number of majors among graduates were in social work, public administration, and law, with very few majors in the natural sciences. Results of the study showed that only a few of those surveyed were unemployed and looking for work. The employment rate was 89.7% and adaptive technology was used by 75% of the graduates (the government provides the equipment). A number of graduates were employed by the University. About one-fourth of the graduates had supported employment; however 95% were living independently. A strong correlation was found between the government's supportive policies and the success of graduates.

Susan Aase and this author presented a model career development program entitled Career Connections at the University of Minnesota. This program, which is operated by Disability Services and funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education, offers career-oriented counseling and activities, including a career development course sequence, a mentorship experience, an internship, employer forums and a career assessment. The program also offers consultation and training to University staff and community employers. Project staff work closely with college placement offices, student employment, university personnel, student leadership organizations, the alumni association, and business groups in the community.

Ute Lehnerer described the practical training experience offered to students participating in the Comet II Project at the University of Kadsruhe, Germany. The purpose of the work experience is twofold: (a) to provide an opportunity for students to become familiar with working life and to find out which specialty is of greatest interest to them; and (b) to reduce the insecurity of the company on how to deal with visually impaired persons and to understand that students with visual impairments do work independently. Students who participate in an internship bring their own adaptive equipment with them (paid for by the employment office), and employers are promised that students will provide their own equipment if offered a permanent job. Comet II staff plan to develop a videotape to train staff at the worksite before students with visual impairments start their practical training. They also plan, in cooperation with the counseling office, to train students on job seeking skills. One problem they have faced is that the practical training experience is not required for the degree and students must be persuaded of its value.

Summary

After discussions about disability services in many countries, it became evident that service providers are dealing with a number of common issues. There is a growing recognition of the importance of educating faculty and of developing networks among national organizations world-wide. Adaptive technology is being used extensively in all of the countries represented and there continues to be great interest in learning more about new equipment now available. Transition into and out of college is recognized as an important issue for students with disabilities. Some institutions are directly involved in

developing model transition programs, but transition does not seem to be an ongoing service routinely provided to students with disabilities at most institutions.

While much common ground was found, differences also surfaced. Perhaps the most important difference was that the United States has by far the most comprehensive legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities (e.g., Section 504, ADA). Another important difference was the level of funding provided by the government for disability services in postsecondary education - from generous funding in Sweden to limited direct funding for many other European countries.

Some European countries have found creative ways to deal with the lack of funding, for example, they have tapped the resource of students without disabilities, using them as a support to students with disabilities. In a number of cases, the initiative for European disability programs has come from academic departments, rather than from student services.

While European countries tend to use their limited resources to fund special programs for specific disability areas, the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have comprehensive services for people with all types of disabilities. The U.S. and Canada are working with large numbers of students with learning disabilities. The United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand are beginning to address the needs of this population. Most European institutions represented are not serving students with learning disabilities. Some conference participants reported that students with learning disabilities generally do not meet entrance requirements of their institutions.

The term "learning disability" was not a common term used by all countries. In fact, varying terminology and groupings of disabilities caused some confusion about the groups under discussion at the conference.

Evaluation of the Conference and Future Planning

On the final morning, conference participants worked in small groups to evaluate the conference and to discuss a possible future gathering. Everyone agreed that another conference should be planned. Participants felt that, in spite of different terminology, legislation, and resources, the conference was valuable in learning about creative solutions to similar problems. Suggestions for a future conference that met with general agreement included the following:

1. Select a focus for the conference and go into depth, rather than covering many topics.
2. Have a plenary session first, before discussing particular programs. At this session, representatives of each country would explain their political, health, and education systems, so that participants will better understand the setting for each program subsequently described.
3. Allow ample time for discussion.

4. Request that speakers provide papers and/or visual aids. Publish proceedings from the conference.
5. Schedule the next conference in one or two years in Europe, to encourage participation of additional European countries. Later conferences could be held in other areas, such as the United States.
6. Publicize the conference well in advance, so that people have time to submit papers and to make arrangements to attend.

There was considerable discussion about whether to limit the size of the conference. Participants agreed that the small size of the group enhanced discussion. However, they also agreed that it should not be an exclusive group and that it was important to involve more countries. A suggested compromise solution was that small groups could be formed around interest areas, allowing the overall size of the conference to increase.

The group discussed whether a future conference should focus on a specific disability area. Participants observed that hearing impairments and deafness received little attention at this conference and could perhaps be the focus of a future conference. However, others pointed out that many issues touch all disability areas, for example, faculty development, volunteerism, and legal issues.

A number of topics were identified for a future conference including (a) faculty/staff development, (b) funding resources, (c) volunteerism, (d) empowerment, (e) counseling, (f) specific disability areas, (g) adaptive technology, and (h) student exchange programs.

Student exchange programs were discussed at some length. Conference participants need information from other countries about exchange opportunities for students with disabilities. The possibility was discussed of developing a guide for students of various study abroad opportunities with disability-specific information included. It was suggested that conference participants submit proposals to present at mainstream conferences, such as the Council on International Education, to heighten awareness among those who provide exchange opportunities. Participants also agreed that they should provide education to their campus international exchange organizations in order to open up new exchange possibilities for students with disabilities.

Conference participants discussed a number of related projects. A conference for European countries will be held in Belgium in the near future, sponsored by FEDORA (Forum European D'Orientation Academique). Also planned is the development of a European directory of disability services for service providers and prospective students. The directory will identify services available and describe the accessibility of European universities. Several conference participants agreed to build on that work and develop an international directory. This directory would aid students with disabilities who are looking for international exchange opportunities.

Conference delegates viewed this event as more than a learning experience. It was also the first step in organizing a group to address common issues and to advocate for change. They discussed the formation of a new international organization that would have the

potential to influence government and higher education policy in member countries. This organization could perhaps become a branch or division of an already-established organization. This conference was also an important first step in increasing international cooperation and collaboration among disability student service providers. Future conferences will need to more clearly define the specific populations being discussed and the educational systems of countries represented. Hopefully future gatherings will include an even wider representation of countries interested in improving opportunities in higher education for people with disabilities.

Resources

COMET III and TEMPUS, Computer Science for the Blind, University of Karlsruhe, Engesserstrasse 4, Karlsruhe, Germany D-7500. Email: MVBLIND@IRA.UKA.DE

Division of Public Service Training, Metropolitan College, Lakefront Campus, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA 70148. (504-286-7096). (For information on future conferences)

EASI (Equal Access to Software for Instruction), c/o EDUCOM, 1112 16th St. NW, Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20036. (310-640-3193).

FEDORA (Forum European D'Orientation Academique). Contact Myriam Van Acker listed under Presenters.

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