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Promoting Inclusive Learning in Higher Education for Students with Disabilities in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities or learning difficulties in the United Kingdom (U.K.) has been added to the national agenda only within the last eight years. The university sector has moved from being largely unaware of these students through initiatives centered on promoting access to higher education to a current concern with promoting high quality education and "inclusive learning." This article offers an introduction to the factors influencing these developments nationally; the recent initiatives of the councils which fund higher education in the U.K. to finance special projects across the sector to promote access, the Tomlinson report and the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. The national situation is illustrated by reference to the experience of the University of East London at which the author coordinates services for students with disabilities.

Inclusive learning is a key concept in discussions of postsecondary education and disability in the United Kingdom (U.K.) at present. It arises from the work of a national committee (Tomlinson, 1996) set up to examine post-school provision for those with learning difficulties and disabilities and the requirements of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. One of the main recommendations made is that in providing for "inclusive education" the aim must be to move away from "offering courses of education and training and then giving students who have learning difficulties some additional human or physical aids to gain access to these courses" and move toward "redesigning the very processes of learning, assessment and organization so as to fit the objectives and learning styles of the students ... only the second philosophy can claim to be inclusive, to have as its central purpose the opening of opportunity to those whose disability means they learn differently from others" (p. 4). This inclusive philosophy extends beyond individual classes or institutions to cover the whole system of further education such that colleges across the sector must share in the legal duty of the funding council to have regard to the needs of these students and collaborate in "building a system that is sufficient and adequate for all who come forward" (p. 5).

Postsecondary education in the U.K. is in two broad sections. One is the post-school provision of employment, training, and general and vocational qualifications which is delivered largely in local further education colleges and funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The other is higher education, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFC) and delivered largely in universities providing degree and post degree level qualifications. The distinction is not absolute as an increasing amount of higher education is being delivered through FEFC funded institutions. The inquiry on which the Tomlinson report was based applied to further education but its analysis and recommendations have significant implications for the higher education (HE) sector.

The need to create an HE system that is "inclusive" has become increasingly apparent over the last half decade and will be intensified as students with disabilities and learning difficulties progress through the further education system and expect to complete their studies in HE. Higher education in the U.K. is far behind further education in policy and provision for students with disabilities and learning difficulties in giving a general right of access to the system and also in the quality of education provided to those students who do enter. HE has been an exclusive and excluding system for many years and has only quite recently begun widening access to various under-represented groups of which people with disabilities are one of the last. Several recent initiatives have prompted the system to move from being mainly characterized by the absence of students with disabilities, absence of support systems, and ignorance of their needs to one where at least information about disability access is becoming accepted as a sector level responsibility.

Disability and Access to Higher Education

A report of the HEFCE 1993-94 special initiative indicates that "statistics for disability in higher education are not readily available" (HEFCE, 1995, p. 17). The Department for Education has recently undertaken a review of Further and Higher Education and noted that, although 97% of institutions have a written equal opportunities policy and often refer to access and participation, "specific references to students with learning difficulties and disabilities is extremely rare" (Department for Education, 1995, p. E7). More recent figures indicate that 4 percent of all U.K. domiciled undergraduate students are known to have a disability (Fender, 1995, p. 4).

The University of East London (UEL) and its progress in developing provision for students with disabilities in many ways reflected what was typical across the sector at the time. Before 1990, there was no official knowledge of how many students with disabilities or special needs applied to, were accepted by, or were undertaking studies at, the University. At that time, the University had no formal policy or procedures for identifying or meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This situation was reflected across the sector with the exception of a few institutions with a particular commitment to disability access.

As some institutions began to consider students and applicants with disabilities these local initiatives were reflected in a national initiative which was to provide the first significant improvement to access to the HE sector for disabled applicants. This was the HEFC's offer, in 1993-94, of funding to the HE sector for projects aimed at improving access to students with special needs. To provide some context for understanding this initiative it is necessary to briefly outline the general approach to the funding of HE and students with special needs in the U.K.

Funding of Higher Education and Students with Special Needs

In the U.K., the main source of funding for university education is from the Department for Education (DFE) which funds the institutions of higher education (HEIs) through separate HEFCs for England (includes Northern Ireland), Wales, and Scotland. These councils allocate a block grant to each university each year based on overall student numbers and certain historical features of each institution. The strong tradition of academic autonomy in HE inhibits the funding councils from designating any of the block funding for any specified purpose. Once the block is allocated to the institution it has the autonomy to spend it as it wishes. No money is specifically given to institutions by funding councils for access or provision for students with special needs as part of the annual allocation. Institutional provision for students with special needs across the U.K. is very variable. There are a few institutions with a national reputation for excellence for their disability provision such as the University of Central Lancashire which first appointed advisory staff to support students with disabilities in 1987. Such institutions typically "top slice" their budgets to fund provision for students with special needs. More typically, up to the last 4 or 5 years, most HE institutions had no such provision or policy.

There is no systematic provision by funding formula or other mechanism to provide resources for the needs of students with disabilities in the HE sector.

The main means of funding support for students with disabilities in HE is via the Department of Education (DFE) Disabled Student Allowances (DSA) which are grants paid directly to these students by their Local Education Authorities (LEA) as part of the student maintenance awards. They have been increased annually and currently stand at L3650 per course for equipment, L4850 (\$5.392) annually for non-medical personal support and an annual allowance of L1215. The introduction of the DSAs, in 1990-91, has been quite a pivotal factor in enabling institutions of HE to develop policies and services for students with disabilities and most important in enabling students with special needs to enter HE and study successfully on a full-time basis. The total number of awards made in the first 3 years they were introduced almost tripled, from 1,497 in 1991-92 to 4,050 in 1993-94 (Department for Education and Employment, 1995, p. 11).

In a survey of the 118 LEAs in England and Wales (Parker, 1995a), the LEAs were asked how many students they were supporting with the disabled student allowances (DSA). The replies indicated considerable variation. Two LEAs had no students supported with the DSA, another has 177 such students, and a further 7 supported 30-39 students. It seems likely that this is a reflection of the level of information and procedures used by LEAs to give students access to the DSAs. The LEA which supported the largest number of students had a named officer, written guidelines for staff, information for all students about the DSA (not just those who identify themselves as disabled), and treats all applications as urgent. Given the importance of the DSA the chances of an individual with a disability entering HE will be substantially affected by the policy and practice of the LEA which serves the area in which s/he resides.

The other main means of funding provision for students with disabilities has been a series of three special initiatives from the funding councils. The two initiatives in 1993-94 and 1994-95 were for projects of 1 year and the latest, from 1996-99, for projects of 3 years duration. These have very significantly improved access across the HE sector.

Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFC) Projects for Students with Special Needs and Disabilities

During the periods 1993-94 and 1994-95 the HEFC (England) offered L3 million to the sector for universities to bid for funding for projects aimed at improving access to students with special needs.

The aim of these initiatives was to "encourage HE institutions to become more accessible to students with special needs. This could be in relation to: physical access; access to teaching and curriculum support; leisure and advisory services. It was intended to direct funding towards institutions where there was existing experience, thus developing exemplars of good practice, dissemination (was) to be an important feature of the initiative" (HEFCE circular 8/94, April 1994, p. 3).

All projects had to be action/outcome directed so solely research-directed projects were not supported. In 1993-94, 38 projects were funded and, of these, 12 projects addressed sensory impairment (visual, hearing, etc.), 10 projects addressed the problems of dyslexia, and 19 were concerned with access to information and learning. In 1994-95, 48 projects were funded covering a wider range of activity. Of these 27 aimed at facilitating access to the curriculum and learning support, 11 projects were to develop information technology and 10 were on various other themes (HEFCE, 1996b, p. 6).

Twenty-seven institutions were funded for both years. The total number of projects funded over the 2 years was 86 and these were located across 59 institutions. Between one-half and one-third of all institutions of HE were involved directly in some way and dissemination events and materials have ensured that many of the institutions not funded for projects have been given the opportunity to benefit from the projects. The main achievements of the projects were (a) raising the profile of support for disability within institutions, and increasing awareness among staff, especially central services staff, of the needs of students with disabilities; (b) improving access to the curriculum for particular groups of students with disabilities, by coordinating internal support services and making it easier for students to find support; (c) increasing and sharing information, resources and advice for students with disabilities and staff across the whole sector; and (d) developing new electronic sources of advice as projects set up news groups and bulletin boards on the Internet and their own World Wide Web pages.

Most institutions felt that the improvements in their provision would attract more students with disabilities into the system in future. Most of the funded institutions recorded great increases in the number of students with disabilities applying, entering, and making their needs known in HE. The University of East London is just one example of this (Table 1) and there has been continuing growth in the numbers choosing to study at UEL. The need for improving not just entry to the sector but the quality of provision was amply documented by the project outcomes and HEFCE recognized this.

In December 1996, the HEFCE agreed to allocate L4.92 million in support of 31 development plans under its special initiative to encourage high quality provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (HEFCE, 1996c). This emphasis indicates that the issue of entry is now well established on the sector agenda and the next most pressing item is the need is to ensure that students are provided with high quality service. Of the currently funded projects, 14 are focused on learning support or curriculum access; 13 on staff development or dissemination; 8 on establishing a resource or assessment center and 22 mention provision for students with specific impairments, and 7 refer to transition into, or out of, HE. Some projects cover more than one category. An examination of the criteria for funding projects, and the project outlines suggests that the current projects reflect an increased awareness across the sector and within the funding council of a social model of disability in their emphasis on creating effective learning environments within and across institutions. This contrasts slightly with the emphasis of the earlier projects which tended to focus on supporting individuals in their learning or on groups of learners with different impairments.

A Case Study: The University of East London

UEL initiatives to promote access for disabled students began in 1991 and were based on several assumptions. These were that (a) the main need was to encourage and enable entry to the University and everything else would follow naturally from this, (b) that the cost to the University of encouraging them to enter would be minimal as students would bring their own funding (the disabled student allowances), and (c) that the basic policies needed would focus around improved information services and procedures rather than provision of substantive equipment and resources as it was quite clear that the University would not provide any designated resource or budget.

During 1991-92 "pump priming," funding was provided by the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) project to review and improve accessibility at UEL. The (EHE) initiative was launched by the Employment Department in 1987 to encourage institutions of HE to enable students to contribute more effectively to society and the world of work. The funding was used at UEL to put the University prospectus into audio tape format, to make a staff development video about eight students with disabilities, and to undertake a survey of the experiences of all the students with disabilities known to the University.

At this time several key policies were also developed. The first was to offer all students indicating a disability an informal interview and opportunity to visit the campus. The second was that students were given the right to an appropriately amended assessment procedure to enable them to display their competence without being penalized by their disability. The third was the opportunity to meet the special needs coordinator to identify the support required during their studies. No budget was allocated to support the policies and the coordinators role was a voluntary task taken on by a tutor with no allowance of time, it seemed at that time that the number of students with disabilities likely to come to the University would always be very small.

One main difficulty UEL had, in common with many other institutions, was how to identify and make contact with potential and actual students with special needs. Applicants were asked to indicate if they have a disability by ticking one of 10 categories (e.g., partial sight; hearing impairment) on the application form. Newly enrolling students were asked to indicate in the same way. Publicity on support services and facilities inside the University also elicited direct contact with many students. Each system produced contact with different individuals as Table I indicates. Feedback from students indicated the need for more information to be made available to staff, applicants, and students. The financial support (i.e., DSA) that should have been available to many of the students was not being claimed because too few staff and students knew about it. The procedures agreed within the University for assessments and admissions were not being widely accessed for the same reasons.

HEFCE funding in 1993-94 for a project entitled "developing a whole institution approach to students with disabilities" enabled the service to develop. One main aim was to improve information and awareness for staff, applicants, and students. A detailed information booklet was produced and distributed to all applicants with special needs and

to all University staff. Extensive staff development was undertaken. Two staff development videos on dyslexia were made and a dissemination conference about the project was attended by about 100 delegates. All site signage was reviewed and improved to clearly indicate the location of reserved parking, lifts, ramps and access to keys.

A learning support tutor for dyslexic students was employed to offer support, assessment and guidance to students. This resulted in a great increase in the numbers of students with dyslexia and special needs self identifying and seeking support. A equipment resource center was set up to enable students to see and use equipment prior to deciding to purchase it with the DSA, and to enable students to access library-based materials. Some items of software (e.g., screen readers and screen enlargers) have also been networked and installed on the University computer laboratory networks to enable students to use them during laboratory based work.

A data base was developed to improve information and monitoring of students with special needs. The data in Table 1 indicates continuing growth in the numbers choosing to study at UEL. Developments in UEL policy and provision have encouraged applications and created a supportive atmosphere in which students feel able to identify themselves as having special needs. At this stage it was becoming quite apparent that there was quite a large number of students with disabilities wanting to come to university and that there was a considerable cost associated with providing access to them. This then featured in the bid made to HEFCE for a funding for a second project.

A second round of HEFCE funding, was secured in 1994-95 for a second project. The main focus was to explore ways of funding the infrastructure costs of the service for students with disabilities as there was a growing staff cost attached to enabling students to secure, manage, and spend their disabled student allowances. As more students with disabilities came to those universities which developed and publicized their services those services became more stretched. In the absence of extra funding, for the successful institutions the effect was experience across the sector as a penalty on those institutions providing these services. Many HEFC projects noted this effect but there has been no recognition yet "of the higher costs of working with disabled students in the HE funding methodologies used across the U.K." (Cooper & Corlett, 1996, p. 30). The funding council is currently consulting on a proposal which would introduce a weighting for student-related funding to recognize the costs of "nonstandard" students such as those with disabilities but it is proving a difficult task.

Within UEL there currently coexist two models of provision to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The main Special Needs Support service is still resource limited and has no budget other than some allowance of staff time to fulfill the coordinator's role. It provides a baseline service to all students which consists primarily of access to information about the service and systems which exists for them, for example, how they may request changes to the assessment process and ask for particular support from tutors and library staff. This is reflected in the quality standards against which the service monitors its performance the following are examples. For students, the service will do the following:

1. Ensure all students are informed about UEL policy, in particular examination arrangements, support on-course, the operation of the Disabled Student Allowances, Access Funds and the role of the Coordinators and Administrator.
2. Ensure all applicants to UEL are advised and informed about services and facilities at UEL and assist with admissions of students with special needs and disabilities.

These standards are monitored annually through a student feedback questionnaire distributed to all students who have indicated a disability or have been in contact with the service; through records maintained on the service provided and selected interviews with students. The University service does not ensure for students the right to be given that which is requested as there is no resource to back the request. The emphasis is on the right to make a request and, if it cannot be met, to be given reasons for this.

The other model operating within the University is a fully resourced and equipped service for students with visual impairments studying physiotherapy. This is funded from an external source, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), and provides a dedicated resource including a center with state of the art equipment, technician support to produce teaching and learning aids as required and a support tutor to work with students inside and outside classroom settings. Visually impaired students taking physiotherapy degrees have a right to whatever support they require to study in the most effective learning environment for them. This system offers and provides a level of entitlement to an inclusive learning environment that the general University system can only aspire toward at present. There has been ongoing debate within the University about the value and acceptability of a system based primarily on rights to information rather than rights to substantive services and resources. One argument is that a right to information only amounts effectively to no rights. The predominant view to date at UEL has been that information enables a choice to be made and those who choose to enter the system as it is, will by their presence and the lobbying of others around their needs, eventually compel further provision to be made. The potential of a system or legal requirement based on the provision of information alone has been indicated to some extent recently by a small survey of the effects on HE of the new U.K. Disability Discrimination Act.

The Disability Discrimination Act

The Disability Discrimination Act received Royal Assent in November 1995. The Act's coverage is more limited than many disability rights campaigners had hoped for and education is excluded from its main provisions. The Act does however place a new statutory duty on the HE funding councils in exercising their functions to "have regard to the requirements of disabled persons" and to require the governing bodies of institutions of HE funded by them "to publish disability statements" (Disability Discrimination Act 1995, p. 26). This will enable the funding councils to take a strategic role in influencing what institutions do for students with disabilities.

This requirement that HEIs publish disability statements seemed initially unlikely to have any significant impact on improving access to HE. The main purpose of the statements is that they should "describe the facilities for education and research that an HEI offers people with disabilities." A secondary purpose is to inform the funding council of such provision and "highlight good practice which the Council may draw upon in the future" (HEFCE, 1996a). The fact that the requirement concerns the supply only of information and there is no requirement on any HEI that it should make any provision as such leaves open the possibility that the legislation could leave the level and quality of provision in the sector largely untouched.

A questionnaire survey of HEIs undertaken between February and June 1996 (Parker, 1996) indicates that the requirement to produce information across the sector may have some positive outcomes for access to the sector. The survey was carried out just after the HEFCE consultative exercise when universities were asked (HEFCE, 1996a) to comment on the format and content of statements. The questions were therefore directed at eliciting the anticipated effects on the sector of the requirement to produce the statements. A total of 90 institutions were asked to complete the questionnaire. Thirty-seven questionnaires were returned and the return rate is 41.1 %. A full report is published in *The Skill Journal* (Parker, 1997). The results of the survey indicate outcomes operating at two levels; those at student or applicant level, and those at institutional level or sector level.

Student Level Outcomes

Most responses indicated a wide range of ways in which disability statements might enhance the information offered to students. Only one indicated that there would be "not much" effect as it was an agricultural college this suggests assumptions about the nature of disability that might exclude any hidden or invisible impairments such as hearing impairment or dyslexia (approximately 14% of undergraduates with disabilities in HE are dyslexic and 6 % have a hearing impairment) (Fender, 1995).

Positive factors identified included the provision of information where there had previously been none and increasing the amount and detail of information where some has previously been provided. Nine responses mentioned that in various ways institutions will review and revise documentation to make it more comprehensive, consistent, coherent and easily accessible to students. Some referred to this effect as within their institution "it may lead us to take a more holistic approach," and where a diversity of documents currently exists these would be "concentrated into a coherent form." Others emphasized the effect across the sector in that, for example, "it may make all institutions more uniform in their information so students can make informed choices sooner."

Another major outcome mentioned was that applicants will be enabled to make informed choices about their preferred place of study and not be limited to only those institutions which currently do provide information on their services and access for students with disabilities. The value that some institutions place on equal opportunities in their missions was reflected in the responses which saw the disability statements as enhancing equality of access. Several comments emphasized a change in the status of the disabled

student's claim to entry to HE linked to the statements. One suggested that "it will turn hopeful student expectations into a student right," another that it would specify "choice, what is/not available, entitlement, rights, what is/not accessible (i.e., buildings/curriculum)" and a third that "if coordinated correctly it would give disabled students an equality of access to all institutions."

The HEFCE report on the 1993-94 and 1994-95 special initiatives (HEFCE, 1996b, p. 8) referred to the problem that "many non-participating institutions do not have a named member of staff with whom participating institutions can share their expertise." Virtually all responses to the survey indicated an expectation that senior management would be involved in responding to the HEFCE consultation. The involvement of senior management was identified as most important in developing and sustaining good provision for students with disabilities in the special initiatives report (HEFCE, 1996b, p. 10) "An important factor in determining the success of the projects was the commitment and active support of senior management." The requirement to produce a disability statement seems likely to be the first step in drawing matters of disability access to the attention of the senior managers of some institutions which may have never considered the matter before.

Production of the disability statement was seen as likely to result in some form of audit of current policy and provision in each institution and to raise the awareness of staff responsible for various key services in each institution as they identify and review current and anticipated provision. A majority of responses indicated that the production of the disability statements would be used to "review, audit, or appraise current provision for disabled students" and that institutions would use the resulting information to identify the need for, or undertake, staff development and to identify strategies or policy plans for future development. This must enhance the general level of knowledge and awareness about provision for students with disabilities and will in itself be valuable for staff, applicants, and students. It also offers a starting point for developing and extending such provision.

It is quite possible, in principle, that an institution may identify a complete absence of policy and provision for students with disabilities and be prepared to make this the core of its statement. It seems much more likely however that, once disability statements for every institution become readily available as public documents, institutions will aspire to match at least the basic level that characterizes most of these statements.

Sector or Institutional Level outcomes

One immediate improvement at sector level seems likely to be a raising of the threshold, or minimum level, of policy and provision across the sector. The existence of standardized information at sector level seems likely to offer applicants a far wider and better grounded choice of where to study. The choice will be based upon a whole sector offer rather than limited only to those institutions that have given disability access high priority and chosen to make this known. There is a cost to these institutions which has been, in part, accentuated by the success of the HEFCE widening access initiatives.

Those institutions which have been committed to widening access to students with disabilities have found the number of applicants with disabilities has risen steeply over recent years. This places quite a strain on their resources and has even threatened to undermine or limit the provision that these institutions have aimed to offer to students with disabilities. If the provision for students with disabilities were more evenly spread across the sector this might give applicants a wider choice and enable the whole sector to share the costs of this provision more evenly ultimately to the greater benefit of more students.

Conclusion

The last five years have brought considerable improvement to the opportunities for those with disabilities or learning difficulties to enter higher education in the U.K. The presence of more of these students in HE has highlighted across the sector many issues associated with access to the curriculum, to the extra curricular activities and experiences that are an important part of the HE experience and to the quality of the whole experience open to them. These issues are being addressed at several levels, within individual institutions, via networks of institutions involved in the HEFCE funded projects and at Funding Council level. It seems likely that the requirement of the Disability Discrimination legislation that every institution of HE must produce a disability statement will have some small but significant effects upon the quality and extent of provision for students with disabilities across the whole sector. Institutions which have had no provision or even awareness will begin to move towards at least some awareness of the needs of students with disabilities and those with some existing provision are likely to seek to clarify the basis on which this is offered to students and applicants. The sector-wide collection and publication of this information should enable institutions to share policies and practices more widely and to build on best practice. This will then enable movement towards some "... sector- wide and regional planning and collaboration... to build a system that is sufficient and adequate for all who come forward" i. e., a system that is inclusive (Tomlinson, 1996, p. 5).

Table 1 Students with Disabilities/Dyslexia at UEL 1991-1996

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96 (half year figure only)
Applications					
Indicating disability	11	30	4	100+	120+
Enrolled students who ticked box Dyslexia	122	185	325	289	253
Students in direct Contact	29	50	161	Others 82	Other disabilities 78

NB: The total number of students at the university is about 12,000.

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