



Education and Culture

Leonardo da Vinci

Organising Integration II: Supporting deaf students at the University of Bristol

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Abstract

The support of disabled students, including deaf students, in higher education in the UK is based around national policies and guidelines and their interpretation in University strategies and practice. The model of disability on which this support is based is predominantly an administrative one, rather than a social one. This means that disabled people are seen to have needs, rather than rights, and these needs, and the services to meet them, are largely defined by non-disabled others, through a process of assessment and allocation of resources. These definitions are based on the social construction of disability from a non-disabled 'norm', rather than being informed by the perspectives of disabled people. This has a significant effect on the kind of support that deaf and disabled students can expect, their experience of inclusion and participation, and their ability to manage their support and organise their educational experience in ways that empower them to be independent and equal.

The national context for supporting disabled students in the UK

Nationally, the participation and support of disabled people in higher education in the UK is underpinned by four main features:

- A new legislative framework, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, that makes it illegal to treat disabled people less favourably than non-disabled people in the provision of education services, and imposes a duty on education providers to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that this

does not happen. This comes into effect on 1 September 2001. It defines disability as " a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities".

- A national quality framework, based on the Quality Assurance Agency's 'Code of Practice: Students with Disabilities'.
- A system of allowances, called Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs), which are available to all full-time UK undergraduate students, and to some post-graduate and part-time students as well.
- A government widening participation policy that aims to enable 50% of 18-30 year olds to participate in higher education by 2010.

These features create a framework for the participation of deaf and disabled students in higher education, which is enacted at a university level.

The University context

The University enacts these laws and policies through:

- A Learning & Teaching Strategy that is inclusive and applies as equally to deaf and disabled students as it does to other students. The draft guidelines for the Strategy are underpinned by a model of disability, which "names disability as the structural and institutional disadvantages faced by people with sensory and physical impairments, dyslexia, and mental health difficulties. In this context, disability is created by the individual students experience of their impairment, and by any University structures, systems and buildings that exclude them from full participation."
- A Widening Participation Strategy that aims to recruit a diverse student population, in line with the government's intention to increase the numbers of students entering higher education, especially from under-represented groups.
- An Equal Opportunities policy that gives all staff and students the rights "to be treated with respect and dignity, to be treated fairly with regard to all procedures, assessments and choices, and to receive encouragement to reach their full potential".

The role of the Access Unit for Deaf & Disabled Students

The name of the Access Unit was chosen deliberately. Originally, the University had two separate departments responsible for the support of disabled and deaf students: the Disability Unit and ADSI - Access for Deaf Students. ADSI was set up in 1992 mainly to support Deaf students who were using British Sign Language as a first language. The Centre for Deaf Studies, which made the

proposal to the University, advocated the need for additional support for Deaf students due to their poor secondary educational experience, their use of a different language and their different cultural identity. Features of this additional support included

- A trained counsellor who was Deaf
- Awareness training for staff and students where possible to improve levels of understanding
- Technical adaptations to student residences and other facilities
- Opportunities for Deaf students to meet with each other and participate in the Deaf community in Bristol.

The Disability Unit had been in existence for a longer time, but was under-funded by the University, and its work not accorded recognition or value within the institution.

The two units were amalgamated in 1999 to create a single source of information and support for both deaf and disabled students, and to make sure that students had equal access to these services.

The Access Unit co-ordinates the University's support of deaf and disabled students. It acts with students, their academic departments and support services, such as Accommodation, Student Health, or the Careers Advisory Service, to ensure that students receive the support they need to enable them to study successfully, and to participate in all the activities of the University.

It works closely with different units and departments in the University, to try and ensure that this happens. These include; the Teaching Support Unit, which is responsible for helping departments and services to implement the University's Learning & Teaching Strategy; the Widening Participation Office, which enables academic departments to implement the University's Participation Strategy; with Personnel Services and Staff Development who are responsible for enabling the University to enact its equal opportunities policy.

The service is based on three broad principles:

- 1) That deaf and disabled students' participation is university-wide
- 2) That there is corporate responsibility for the participation of deaf and disabled students
- 3) That the Access Unit works in ways that respect people's different experience and empowers them to take control of their lives

In theory, this means that deaf and disabled students can enter **any** programme in the University for which they are qualified, and that they enjoy the same access to all the activities and facilities as any other student; it means that responsibility for making sure that this happens rests with **all** academic departments and support services in the University, and not with the student or

any one particular service; and it also means that students are treated fairly and with respect to enable them to achieve their full potential.

The student experience at Bristol

In practice, this does not always happen. There are significant structural and institutional barriers to deaf and disabled students' full and equal participation. Some of these relate to the way that the University, including the Access Unit, implements the national policies and strategies, some to the policies and strategies themselves, and others to the constructions of disability imposed on disabled people by a dominant non-disabled world. We can evaluate whether the system is working to the benefit of the student by asking three questions:

- To what extent does the student have control over access to his or her study and university experience?
- What barriers are there to this access?
- Which systems and ways of working used in the University and the Access Unit empower the student, which do not empower enough, and which are dis-empowering?

We can consider these by taking a snap shot of the student experience at a number of different stages in their progress through the university system:

Application and initial contact, where the student applies, has their details passed from the central admissions office to the Access Unit, from where they are sent information;

Getting funding, where the student applies for Disabled Students Allowances from their local education authority, or funding from their research council (this will change from September 2003);

Arranging support, where the student discusses with Communication Services what support they need and what support is available;

Starting the course, where the student has made their choice of units, the timetable has been finalised and support has been booked

Flexibility and negotiation, where the student brings any difficulties or additional requirements to his or her department, to Communication Services and the Access Unit, to see what other support may be possible

Additional strategies, where the student, their department and the Access Unit set up alternative ways of providing for the student's requirements

Review, where the student can evaluate how successful the support has been, and what adjustments or additions need to be made

These are largely administrative structures and stages, and although every effort is made to work in ways that support independence and empower students to make their own decisions about what support they require, there are constraints built into the structures. These include:

- Inconsistencies in funding, where some students have reduced or no access to funding, or where they are dependent on what the University feels is reasonable to provide

- Restrictions on the numbers of support workers, especially interpreters, who are available to work in higher education, and on their qualifications and knowledge about particular subject areas
- Some support services are designed for hearing and non-disabled students, and need to be adapted for use by deaf or disabled student, which may reduce their effectiveness
- There is great inconsistency across academic departments, in terms of the support they offer to deaf and disabled students, and the attitude they adopt

Conclusion

Overall, colleagues from institutions in Spain and Germany, whether teachers or students, may consider this to be heaven in contrast to their own experience. However, there are still considerable institutional and structural barriers that are embedded in the way that funding is arranged, the way that institutions organise themselves, their teaching and their support for students, and in the attitudes these institutions have towards diversity and difference. In many ways the system of support has made a huge difference to deaf and disabled people's ability to participate in higher education. The key issue that remains unresolved, is whether this is *equal* participation.

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