# **Disabled Students in Higher Education**

by Teresa Tinklin, Sheila Riddell, Alastair Wilson

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Higher education has been through a period of major change since the mid-1980s. A massive expansion in student numbers has been coupled with a reduction in funding and greater accountability. Within this demanding context, pressure has also been applied to institutions to improve accessibility for disabled people. most recently through changes legislation with amendment to **Disability** in the the Discrimination Act. This Briefing draws on the findings of an ESRCfunded research project, which aimed to investigate the impact of multiple policy innovations on the participation and experiences of disabled students in higher education in Scotland and England between 2001 and 2003.

- Most institutions had staffing and structures in places to develop policy and provision for disabled students.
- Disabled students had been written into policies in a number of areas including admissions, estates and building, and into some strategic plans.
- ▶ Student case studies revealed gaps between policy and practice, with students encountering barriers to choice of institution and subject, access to the physical environment and to the curriculum.
- Addressing barriers to accessing the curriculum will require a culture change within higher education, but would improve teaching and learning for all students.
- Some disabled students lacked social networks and were uninvolved in extra-curricular activities, thus reducing opportunities for informal learning.
- ▶ Delays in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance left students at a disadvantage at the start of their courses.
- ▶ The proportion of disabled students declaring dyslexia almost doubled between 1995/6 and 1999/00. It is likely that this reflects increased incentives to disclose dyslexia over this time period.
- The label 'disabled', which students must adopt to qualify for the Disabled Students Allowance and the protection of the law, did not sit easily with many students' self concept.
- Support for disabled students remains largely the province of student support services, with the emphasis on providing individual support to get round institutional barriers rather than on more fundamental institutional change.

#### Introduction

Disabled students pose particular challenges to higher education (HE) not only in terms of gaining physical access to buildings, but also in relation to much wider access issues concerning the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. For these reasons, they may be seen as a litmus test of the ability of higher education to include a diverse range of learners, particularly relevant in light of recent emphasis on initiatives aimed at widening access to higher education to underrepresented groups.

Senior managers in HE institutions acknowledged that higher education has been through a period of great change, with reductions in funding, increased workloads brought about through the huge expansion in student numbers and greater accountability through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency. In further education (FE), changes have focused on governance and funding with the creation of the Further Education Funding Councils and latterly the Learning and Skills Council. In this changing context, institutions have been under pressure through the publication of performance indicators, the introduction of premium funding (allocated on the basis of the number of students from under-represented groups, including disabled people) and the amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Part IV, to widen access to under-represented groups and to develop policy and provision for disabled students.

## Signs of progress: policy for disabled students

Despite the demands faced by institutions, there were definite signs of progress in provision for disabled students. Most institutions had at least one designated disability officer and a senior manager responsibility for disability issues. Where institutions did not fully meet the criteria established as 'base-level provision' for disabled students, as specified by the Higher Education Funding Councils for England and Wales (HEFCE/W, 1999), significant numbers reported partially meeting them. These criteria constitute a minimum level of provision and include, for example, having adequate staffing, ensuring the needs of disabled people are considered in the design and refurbishment of the physical environment and having an institution-wide policy and procedure covering examinations and assessments, which addresses the needs of disabled students.

Few institutions could claim to be 'prepared in advance' for disabled students (as required by DDA Part IV), but there were signs of movement away from a completely *ad hoc* reactive approach to the needs of individual students. Disabled students had been written into policies on admissions, estates and buildings and some strategic plans and most institutions had definite written plans for further development.

# Gaps between policy and practice

While all of these signs of progress were encouraging, the student case studies revealed gaps between policy and practice and showed that significant barriers remain to the participation of disabled students in higher education. Areas needing particular attention were teaching and learning, monitoring and evaluation and staff development.

Teaching and learning remains an area of particular concern, with respondents stating that the kind of culture change required to really make a difference in this area will take a long time. The Teachability project (Teachability, 2002) provides a resource to facilitate a review of teaching and learning by academics, with a view to improving accessibility for disabled students. Significantly, the first step in the process is the establishment of the core requirements of a subject or discipline. Once these have been identified, alternative means of assessment can be identified which do not compromise standards. For example. language specialists need to decide whether a core requirement of their discipline is that students be able to *speak* the language, which might exclude some students with a speech impediment. However, if indeed the core requirement is that students be able to communicate in the language then alternative means of expression can be found. Disciplines that rely on essay-writing as a means of assessment need to establish whether essay-writing in itself is a core requirement, or whether the ability to marshal information, to discuss ideas and to present a coherent argument are the core requirements, in which case this could equally well be done verbally.

#### Students' experiences

Depending on their particular impairment, most of the students experienced barriers to accessing their education relating to the physical environment or teaching and learning (or both) at some point during their studies. In addition, the institution and course choice of some students was affected by physical access issues. Some students found that adjustments to teaching practices were difficult to obtain. Even where students had received formal agreements to provide 'reasonable adjustments' (as required by law), such as handouts in advance of lectures, they often found themselves in the difficult position of repeatedly having to ask for these, to avail. Some lecturers, particularly in older universities, felt that adjustments to teaching practices would lower standards and give unfair advantage to disabled students. In all institutions, academic staff felt they were under pressure and were unable to devote as much time as they would like to individual students.

Some students were entitled to the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), subject to a formal assessment of needs, which enabled them to purchase equipment or employ assistants (eg readers, note-takers). However, assessments could be somewhat *ad hoc*, and there could be significant delays in receiving the money. This meant that students started their courses at a disadvantage. For some students with dyslexia or mental health difficulties assessments did not take place until they had experienced overwhelming difficulties.

Some disabled students lacked social networks and were uninvolved with extra-curricular activities, thus reducing opportunities for informal learning, which is an important aspect of the HE experience. This was particularly the case for those who lived at a distance from the institution, those with mental health difficulties and those with high support needs.

#### Profile of disabled students

Table 1 shows that students with dyslexia make up onethird of disabled students. Almost another third have unseen disabilities such as epilepsy and asthma. Those with physical or sensory impairments or mental health difficulties account for much smaller groups. The proportion of disabled students declaring dyslexia almost doubled between 1995/6 (18%) and 1999/00 (33%). It is likely that this reflects, to some extent, increased incentives to disclose dyslexia over this time period.

Overall disabled students were more likely to be male than non-disabled students (% male: disabled students 49%, non-disabled 44%, all 44.5% <sup>1</sup>). This was largely explained by the fact that males are more likely to have dyslexia and those with dyslexia made up the largest group of disabled students.

**Table I** First year UK domiciled undergraduates known to have a disability by type of impairment (source HESA 1999/2000)

Dyslexia	33%
Unseen disability	30%
Multiple disabilities	7%
Deaf/hard of hearing	6%
Wheelchair user/mobility impaired	4%
Blind/partially sighted	4%
Mental health difficulties	3%
Personal care support	0.3%
Other disability	13%
Total known to have a disability	22290
Total first year undergraduates	525140
Not known/sought	31860 (6%)

Disabled students were less likely to have come from minority ethnic groups than other students and there were more non-white students in English than in Scottish HE institutions overall (% non-white England: disabled students 12%, non-disabled 18%; Scotland: disabled students 3.3%, non-disabled 4.4%<sup>2</sup>).

Data on socio-economic status was limited (only available for 33.6% of the student population). However, it suggested that in new universities and non-university HE Institutions, disabled students were more lkely to have come from the advantaged end of the social class spectrum, but that in old universities their social class profile was similar to that of other students, although these institutions have the worst record on access to under-represented groups in general anyway.

# Issues of identity

The label 'disabled', which students must adopt to qualify for the Disabled Students Allowance, and the protection of the law, did not sit easily with many students' self concept. This may prove a barrier to the effectiveness of equality legislation in this area. Many disabled students regarded other aspects of their identity as more salient (eg being a single parent, gay, Christian). Many students wanted to pass as non-disabled and therefore did not tell students or lecturers about their impairment. Students with a diagnosis of dyslexia or a mental health difficulty, in particular, rejected the term 'disabled', associating it with being a wheelchair user or having a sensory impairment. Some were prepared to use the term pragmatically to obtain the Disabled Students Allowance, but did not incorporate it into their sense of self. Most students were unaware of the DDA and said they were unlikely to seek legal redress.

## Model of provision

The majority of institutions had plans to 'mainstream' disability. This means embedding policy and provision for disabled students into all institutional procedures, for example, considering disabled students' needs in all discussions of physical estates, teaching, learning and assessment and admissions, as well as raising awareness among all institutional staff of the needs of disabled students. However, there is clearly a long way to go before mainstreaming is achieved. At the time of the research, although disabled students had been written into institutional policies in a significant number of areas, in practice, support for disabled students remained largely the province of student support services, with the emphasis, as yet, remaining largely on providing individual support through the Disabled Students Allowance and support staff, rather than on more fundamental institutional change.

<sup>2</sup> Source: as table 1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Source: HESA 1999-2000, first year, full time, UK domiciled undergraduates, Scottish and English HE institutions only.

## **Conclusions**

There were definite signs of progress in provision for disabled students, taking place within a demanding context. However, much further development is needed. In particular, barriers to accessing the curriculum need to be addressed. This will require a culture change within higher education, particularly older universities, with a shift towards more accessible teaching practices and the wider availability of learning support for all students. It needs to be recognised that mounting pressures on staff, through, for example, the RAE and the increase in student numbers have reduced time available for staff to devote to individual students. This is having an impact on the learning experience of all students. We would argue that improvements in teaching practices for disabled students would improve teaching and learning for all students. Relatively simple adjustments, such as routinely providing course notes and handouts on-line, for example, would effectively remove some students' 'special needs' and be a useful resource for all students.

Monitoring and evaluation of statistics and services for disabled students also needs further development. Better evaluation would highlight difficulties and barriers encountered by disabled students, make staff more accountable for their practice and, potentially, show up areas where staff were under particularly high levels of pressure.

Disabled students were more likely to be white, male and to have come from the more advantaged end of the social class spectrum. The gender difference is largely accounted for by differences in prevalence of dyslexia. However, policy-makers and institutions, particularly in relation to widening access policies, need to be alert to the interaction of different sources of inequality which combine to make higher education more and more inaccessible to some people.

Current provision for disabled students places too much emphasis on providing them with individual support to get round institutional barriers, rather than on more fundamental institutional change. The intention to 'mainstream' disability remains a rather vague notion at the moment, with no time limits set on achieving any of its component parts. The recent introduction of premium funding for disabled students heralds a shift in Funding Council policy towards mainstreaming disability. As yet, however, disability remains a fairly distinct policy area,

mainly addressed by student support services and its relocation, particularly in teaching and learning will demand a significant commitment on the part of all institutions.

## **Further reading**

Riddell, S, Tinklin, T and Wilson, A (2004) **Disabled students and multiple policy innovations in higher education**, Final report to ESRC, Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh. (www.ed.ac.uk/ces/Disability/publications.htm)

# References

HEFCE/HEFCW (1999) Guidance on base-level provision for disabled students in higher education institutions. Bristol, HEFCE.

Teachability (2002) **Teachability project: Creating an accessible curriculum for students with disabilities.** Glasgow, University of Strathclyde.

## **Further information**

For further information, contact Professor Sheila Riddell, email sheilar@education.ed.ac.uk, tel 0131 651 6597. The views expressed are those of the authors.

## About this study

The research was carried out between March 2001 and September 2003. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It involved reviews of relevant literature, policy documents and legislation; interviews with 15 key informants; analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency data for England and Scotland; a questionnaire survey of FE and HE institutions; and case studies of 48 students and eight institutions (four in England, four in Scotland).

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