

The Seed-time and the Harvest: Towards the Development of a Community of Scholars

Alan Hurst - University of Central Lancashire, September 1995

John Bright, the nineteenth century radical orator, commented thus:

"If there be no seed-time there will certainly be no harvest, and youth of life is the seed-time of life".

Following the above the paper argues for the potentially important role of disabled students in higher education in contributing to the development of a community of scholars.

Since the late 1980's there has been a concern with widening participation rates from under-represented groups. Most of the focus has been on women and on minority ethnic groups. Disabled people have been rather overlooked. Making progress has not been helped by the lack of information both quantitative (about the number of disabled students - see O'Hanlon & Manning 1995) and qualitative (about the experiences of disabled students - see Hurst 1993). In the future information is to be collected centrally by the newly-created Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

Currently perhaps the best figures originate with the UCAS applications. Those for 1994 are:

	Applications		Acceptances	
	Number	%	Number	%
Dyslexia	2,991	0.7	2,003	0.7
Blind/partially sighted	510	0.1	308	0.1
Deaf/hearing impaired	962	0.2	644	0.2
Wheelchair user/mobility	406	0.1	265	0.1
Personal care support	69	0.1	32	0.1
Mental health difficulties	216	0.1	107	0.1
Unseen disabilities	11,521	2.8	7,724	2.9
Multiple disabilities	415	0.1	273	0.1
Other disabilities	1,331	0.3	854	0.3
Total with disability	18,421	4.5	12,210	4.5
No disability/no reply	386,696	95.5	258,688	95.5
Overall totals	405,117		270,898	

(Source: CVCP Briefing Paper 17.5.95)

Whilst an indication of the success of any efforts to widen participation might

be an increase in numbers this does ignore the quality of the experience. In recent years there has been an increasing concern with 'quality' and thus the quality of what disabled students encounter should be included. The F & HE Act 1992 introduced quality monitoring methods.

DEVELOPMENTS AND CHANGES AFFECTING STUDENTS

The major development affecting most disabled students is the relatively better financial situation following changes made in 1990. When top-up loans were introduced the government also introduced modifications in the form of additional allowances, each of which has increased in line with inflation. These allowances are:

Disabled Students Additional General Allowance (to cover costs incurred directly as a result of participating in higher education and having a disability, for example more frequent use of telephones, photocopiers, etc.) - up to £1215 each year (for 1995-96)

Equipment Allowance (to purchase any items of equipment necessary to participate in the course, for example a lap-top computer, a cassette recorder, etc.) - up to £3650 on a once only basis (for 1995-96)

Non-Medical Personal Allowance (to purchase services needed to participate in the course, for example communicators for deaf students) - up to £4850 each year (for 1995-96)

Despite the success of the DSA there are still many problems which are being raised frequently with the government:

1. DSA is not available to part-time students. Many disabled people might have to study on a part-time basis as a consequence of their disability. The attraction of part-time study for disabled people is demonstrated by the success of the Open University. Changing the system would involve the approval of parliament and recent governments have been unwilling to allow time for this. Perhaps too they fear the huge increase in demand which could follow.

2. DSA is not available for post-graduate students and thus suitably-qualified researchers with disabilities could be discouraged from taking up further study.

3. Whilst the funds for DSA originate with the government the system is administered by the LEA. There are around 100 of these and they operate in different ways.

Some of them are helpful to disabled students, others create additional

difficulties (e.g. by demanding some estimates prior to agreeing to pay costs, by insisting on students incurring the expense and then reclaiming later, by the slow processing of applications so that students do not have the money to purchase equipment/services at the start of their courses, etc.)

A particular feature to emerge is the large number of students claiming DSA on the grounds of their having a specific learning difficulty (usually dyslexia). This has been a major surprise to the institutions and to the LEA. Also and to be fair to the LEA there have been instances where both individual students and some institutions have been trying to abuse the system. Note that in Scotland the process is centralised and the applications, using a simple form, are processed by the Scottish Education Department.

In March 1995 the Department for Education announced its intention to review DSA. A letter was sent to a small number of organisations (but not to individual institutions, students or LEA) seeking responses to nine questions which concerned:

1. National and local publicity about the availability of DSA
2. Defining 'disability'
3. Applying for DSA and the procedures of LEA
4. Assessment of needs
5. Nature of acceptable evidence submitted to support applications
6. Impact of differing disabilities and DSA
7. Role of the institutions e.g. in publicising DSA
8. Payment of DSA
9. Use of equipment purchased by DSA after the students complete their studies

Some of these give cause for concern and suggest that the Department is worried about the growing costs of DSA payments. (Perhaps the large numbers claiming to have dyslexia are a significant contributing factor.) The letter from the DFE made it clear that there was no intention to consider extending DSA to part-time students.

The responses to the DFE have been interesting. Skill highlighted four key issues in its overall approach: the support needs which DSA should and

should not cover, the responsibilities of the higher education institutions, inconsistencies among LEA especially on assessments and evidence required, and problems of delayed payment. The body representing the LEA felt more direction was needed from the DFE and also that more liaison between the various interested groups would be helpful but the response is adamant that there is no cause for concern about inconsistencies between LEA. The problems relating to dyslexia are mentioned specifically. The response from the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals appears to indicate that most issues can be resolved by others rather than anything that they might themselves do. The CVCP response focuses heavily what LEA might do whilst matters which the institutions could address seem to be ignored.

In late July the DEE (formerly known as the DFE) included information about DSA in its Interim Report relating to its review of further and higher education (see below)(DEE 1995). The statistics on costs of DSA are reproduced from this:

Academic Year	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94
General Allowance			
Number of awards	551	840	1,416
Gross value	£0.55m	£0.83m	£1.42m
Non-medical help			
Number of awards	233	478	752
Gross value	£0.45m	£0.92m	£1.32m
Equipment			
Number of awards	713	1,170	1,882
Gross value	£1.10m	£2.00m	£3.28m
Totals			
Numbers of awards	1,497	2,488	4,050
Gross value	£2.10m	£3.75m	£6.02m
Total number of LEA award holders			
	546,460	649,706	721,611
Percentage in receipt of DSA			
	0.27%	0.38%	0.56%

Note that the figures relate to the number of awards, not the number of students; students can receive more than one type of DSA.

DEVELOPMENTS AND CHANGES AFFECTING THE INSTITUTIONS

For many years some institutions had been trying to develop high quality provision for disabled students. Most progress was made in those institutions which were the former polytechnics (thus at an international conference on disabled students in higher education held at the University of Innsbruck in July 1995 there were representatives from twelve different institutions, ten of which were from the former polytechnic sector. One of the two others was the Open University which has an exceptional record for its work with disabled students). Much has been accomplished although there was no financial incentive to do so. Funds had to be taken from current operating budgets. Many institutions did little or nothing, preferring to use their resources for more prestigious activities. Also why should they bother when others were doing something?

Following Act 1992 indicated students.

the creation of the Funding Councils by the F & HE the government minister responsible for education that they must give attention to disabled Each country approached this differently.

England

The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) established a small Advisory Group on Access and Widening Participation.

Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities was invited to represent disability interests. In early 1993 it was announced that £3M was available to support developing policies and provision for disabled students. Institutions were invited to bid for funds, their applications being judged against pre-determined, publicised criteria. Institutions could submit two bids if they wished. (For details see HEFC Circular 9/93)

103 bids were received which would cost a total of £8.2M. The Advisory Group tried to balance supporting those new to this work with recognising and enabling those with considerable experience to make further progress. It was decided to support 38 projects. (See Circular 22/93 for a full list of projects supported and contact names.)

Skill was invited to play a key role in monitoring and disseminating information deriving from the projects. Since there were a significant number of projects linked to deaf students, and also to dyslexia, meetings were arranged for representatives from these projects. In addition a termly booklet was produced and circulated.

One key dimension of the special initiative was dissemination. Thus projects had to submit final reports to HEFC and on the basis of this an overall

report was published by the Council ('Access to Higher Education: Students with Special Needs') and there was a national dissemination conference in October 1994.

Despite criticisms of both the funding methodology and the timing the exercise was repeated for the academic year 1994-95. Again £3M was made available and the procedures were the same although it was made clear that institutions could not make bids simply to continue the previous projects since these ought to have become embedded within the institutions' structures and practices. 91 bids were made with a total cost in excess of £10M and this time it was decided to support 49 projects. Also Skill again took the key role in organising meetings and disseminating information. A possible outcome after the end of these projects and when their final reports have been submitted to HEFC is that rather than producing an overall written evaluation, HEFC might devise a manual of good practice (see the guide produced by Professor Des Power for the Australian government - NBEET 1994).

The whole two-year episode is being evaluated again with the involvement of Skill and a final report for the HEFC will be produced in early 1996. Some of the key features which are likely to be included are the extent to which projects have become embedded in the institutions structures and practices, the impact of the two special initiatives and the projects on the whole sector (i.e. on the non-funded institutions, on those involved in educational guidance, etc.), the effectiveness of dissemination, and the strengths and weaknesses of the funding mechanism

The University of East London has undertaken an overall analysis of the projects over the entire period. indicates that:

10 were funded for 1993-94 but not 1994-95

21 were funded for 1994-95 but not 1993-94

27 were funded for both years

In total 57 institutions received funding (out of an overall possible 80 institutions for which HEFC has responsibility)

At this stage it is possible to identify a number of outcomes of the two special initiatives:

1. Whilst many of those involved with the projects are members of Skill and thus involved in the existing network of regional groups, there has been an increase in the number of events at which people can meet to exchange information, ideas and experiences.
2. All the formal events have been evaluated by the participants and yet what is often missed in this process is the value of the informal contacts whilst having lunch etc.
3. There has been an upsurge in the production of materials concerned with disability in higher education - pamphlets, guidebooks, project reports, videos, posters, etc.
4. The projects and the associated activities involving both Skill and the Funding Council have contributed to raising awareness about disability.
5. Many institutions have made considerable progress in developing provision which in turn means improved choice and facilities for disabled students.
6. Those which have made progress have taken steps to ensure that what has been achieved continues beyond the life of the project (and the availability of external funds).
7. In each of the two years it was possible to identify some shared concerns in terms of the numbers of projects relating to particular aspects: in 1993-94 two aspects emerged - deaf students and dyslexic students; in 1994-95 these two were also prominent but were augmented by several projects about information technology and about careers guidance for disabled students
8. As the end of the projects draws near it is becoming evident that some institutions do not intend to continue with the work despite the exhortations of the Funding Council to have had regard to this when applying for funds
9. Dissemination has been only partially successful especially in terms of the sharing of information and the avoidance of duplication of activities. Thus not all projects have sent contributions to the 'Projects Update' newsletter, not all institutions sent representatives to the October 1994 national dissemination conference.
10. Issues relating to the need for staff training have emerged and in early 1995, in both England and Scotland Skill organised events directed towards the induction of staff new to working with disabled students (see also the comments about professional recognition/professional qualifications below in relation to

the project at the University of Central Lancashire).

11. In producing regular reports projects, perhaps understandably, have seemed less willing to record their difficulties and failings - and yet this is crucial if others are to benefit from their experiences and avoid the same snags.

12. With only a few exceptions, what has occurred has done so with no acknowledgement of underpinning theories or principles (an interesting exception is the project at the Sheffield Hallam University which centred upon the concept of independence).

Scotland

The Scottish Higher Funding Council (SHEFC) decided that for 1993-4 it would provide financial support for three Development Officers each of whom would have responsibility for promoting the interests of disabled students in a particular geographical area. In late 1994 SHEFC published "Access to Success for Students with Disabilities in Scotland" which provides guidance and support for disabled students seeking entry to higher education. More recently money has been set aside for the purchase of special equipment with institutions being encouraged to make bids as partners in a local area. For 1994-95 (and also for 1995-96) a single post of a Development Officer was created.

Wales

In 1993-94 the Welsh Funding Council agreed to make available money to allow institutions to improve their infrastructure. The guidance to institutions indicated that they might wish to improve access and facilities for disabled students. This laissez-faire approach was unsuccessful with little spent to improve the situation for disabled students and so for 1994-95 £120,000 was set aside. Institutions were invited to bid in a similar way to the English approach. 7 projects were supported and a Welsh dissemination conference took place in May 1995. This in itself was very successful and participants requested that it should become a regular, annual event. The Welsh Funding Council is publishing a report of the conference proceedings.

Northern Ireland

The situation in Northern Ireland is really about two institutions. In 1994-95 they were encouraged to make bids for funds to support projects using the criteria of the English Funding Council's Advisory Group. Both projects have

been supported by the Northern Ireland Higher Education Funding Council.

THE CHANGING NATIONAL CONTEXT

Currently there is a major concern in the United Kingdom with Anti-discrimination. At one time there were two bills being considered by parliament. One was much more radical and emphasised civil **rights**. In fact this bill was 'talked out' during a debate in the House of Commons on July 13th since there was insufficient time to discuss all the amendments proposed by the government (168 amendments). The other, the one sponsored by and supported by the government, is less radical and is directed towards ending discrimination on grounds of disability. The main concern is with access to goods and services, access to public transport, and access to employment. Education was not mentioned, the intention being to exclude it from any legislation. However, there has been much pressure on the government to force it to include education.

Related to this and perhaps as a result of the pressures put upon it the government has asked the DFE to undertake a review of further and higher education. The latter is to consider the following: the role and responsibilities of the HEFC, funding, the quality of teaching and learning, DSA (see the earlier section of 41is paper), the Student Charter, and the work undertaken by Skill.

A second outcome associated with the anti-discrimination legislation was that the government proposed two amendments to the 1992 F & HE Act. The first would place a statutory duty on HEFC to:

“have regard for the needs of disabled students in its allocation of funding”.

The second amendment proposed was:

“...the conditions subject to which a council makes grants, loans, or other paymentsto the governing body of an institution shall require the governing body to publish disability statements at such intervals as may be specified”.

When these amendments were made known there were many protests especially from the university Vice Chancellors. A CVCP briefing paper circulated on June 6th comments:

"The CVCP was not consulted by DFE about this (i.e. the two amendments) until AFTER the statement was made in the House Universities adopt a

very positive approach to meeting the needs of disabled students... Of course they could do a great deal more if their resources were not so tightly stretched. **HOWEVER WHAT THE DFE IS PROPOSING WILL NOT FURTHER THE ASPIRATIONS OF THOSE WISHING TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION FOR DISABLED STUDENTS. IT IS A DIVERSION WHICH WILL DO NOTHING FOR DISABLED STUDENTS BUT COULD UNDERMINE AND DAMAGE UNIVERSITIES ' AUTONOMY.'** (Emphasis as in original)

The debates in the House of Lords have revealed some interesting perceptions. Matters which have been of concern included definitions of 'reasonableness' in relation to adaptations and expenditure which universities might be expected to incur:

“Who decides what is 'reasonable'? We shall have to work out the answer to that. The noble Lord asked for an undertaking that nothing in the Bill would pressurise a university to change the content of a course. I should think that such a decision would be entirely for the university. However, it might be legitimate to ask a university to ask itself whether there was another way of arriving at the same course with the same content and of the same standard.” (Baroness Darcy de Knayth col.1999 Hansard June 15th 1995)

Allied to this is a concern with costs which has indicated again the notion of centres of excellence:

“It is obviously important that higher education, as education generally, should make adequate provision for all those who, by reason of disability, may not be able immediately to find a suitable place and to vary provisions in order to assist them. It is important that there should be some place: it need not necessarily be that every institution must provide a suitable place.” (Lord Beloff col.874 Hansard May 22nd 1995)

However in response to this another Lord noted:

“On access and the whole issue of higher and further education, I ask the Minister to consider, within presumably the coherent programme the Government seek, as opposed to what the Minister described as the piecemeal approach - I understood though perhaps I got it wrong, that he was talking about a coherent programme - perhaps developing different facilities at different universities to allow student choice. That is fine for students who are able to leave home and students of standard entry age. However an increasing percentage of students are mature students or students who have physical problems which do

not allow them to leave home. Therefore it is important that all higher education institutions are adapted as quickly as possible to take the widest range". (Baroness Farrington of Ribbleton col.1995 Hansard June 15th 1995)

A major concern of the universities is their academic freedom and this is also evident in the exchanges in the House of Lords:

"In other words, the genuine and important needs of disabled students are being used, on occasion, for the Government to go back on a decision reached by Parliament that the one thing the funding council may not do is to place conditions on the grants affecting academic matters. The difficulty is that once a provision of this kind is over-ridden on a worthy cause, what will stop the Government from coming forward and providing means of overriding it for some less worthy cause?" (Lord Beloff col.876 Hansard May 22nd 1995)

Finally it is interesting to note that some comments tried to consider the total context of anti-discrimination:

"It is very welcome that the Bill covers employment. But what is the use of discrimination legislation on employment if education is not covered too? It is education at all levels which is the key to a job¹". (Baroness Darcy de Knayth col.849 Hansard May 22nd 1995)

Without doubt, the United Kingdom will have anti-discrimination law by the end of 1995. Partly in anticipation of this, in July 1995 the HEFC set up a special sub-group whose brief is to focus specifically on disability and to make recommendations to the Advisory Group and to the full HEFC. What it will actually do depends largely on what the legislation requires of higher education. At the time of writing it seems likely that the Funding Councils will have a duty to consider the requirements of disabled students. They are also likely to be required to monitor the ways in which the institutions respond to their duty to provide statements about their disability policies. Hopefully what the institutions will be required to produce will be documents indicating the extent of their existing provision and their plans for further development. Certainly this would seem to be more meaningful than the rhetoric of the various students charters which have appeared in recent years.

CONCLUSION

The period 1990-1995 has been one of considerable progress in terms of developing policies and provision for disabled students. The extent to which this can be maintained and extended is uncertain and is linked closely to other matters (e.g. the possible introduction of tuition fees, the potential

impact of the anti-discrimination legislation). What is interesting to note is the increasing involvement of the Funding Councils although whether the stage will be reached which parallels what has been achieved in Australia is less certain (see NBEET 1994).

Perhaps the most important outcome of all developments is the growth in networking at local, regional, national, and international level and the possibilities these stronger links have to bring about change.

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see also articles in Educare (the journal of Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities)

for example:

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for information about specific projects and regular progress reports see the

termly issue of 'Projects Update' also published by Skill (and available at
336 Brixton Road, London 5W9 7AA)