Employability and Disability

Research Findings and Issues Arising

It is problematic to make generalisations about students with disabilities as a distinctive cohort. Definitions of disability in Higher Education are broad, and individual learners who are identified as disabled may have little in common, other than their student status. Research into issues relating to student disability is often focused on a single institution and it is difficult to gather enough data to attempt any analysis of characteristics or trends.

However, the issues raised from our research into the employability skills of students in HE were very consistent between students, lecturers and employers. One of the key findings from our research was that students with disabilities and students without disabilities have far more in common than they have differences between them: overall, both groups of students reported the same areas of difficulty in relation to the development and application of key skills and found common support strategies to be helpful.

It is important to note that there were some issues that were specific to students with disabilities, in particular, relating to socialisation, distribution of the Disabled Students’ Allowance, and disclosure of disability, which are outlined, below. There is a real and established need for specialist support services for students with disabilities – teaching staff made frequent reference to their importance. However, there is no sense in which students with disabilities are a particularly distinct or cohesive group, or that their support needs are at odds with those of non-disabled students:

*I get my lecture notes emailed to me by the lecturer – of course, everyone wants a copy… [2nd Year Student with Dyslexia]*

Some students with disabilities also reported that they felt more integrated into University life than they had within secondary education, due to the increased diversity of learners in Higher Education:

*Although I did feel sometimes that I stuck out at school, new kids particularly saw me as the disabled lad, I do find here that there are people who stand out way more than me. I think they get to University and want to show off their artistic side… [2nd Year Student, Wheelchair User]*

Students with disabilities demonstrated an increased awareness of the importance of employability skills, and were more likely to have given consideration to the challenges that they faced in their development. This is demonstrated by the fact that many had given consideration to, and developed, strategies for their support, which are presented below.

It is also a fact that all students can, at any time in their educational careers, have specialist support needs arising from a whole range of conditions and situations which are part of the general and unpredictable human condition.

These findings suggest that the development of a curriculum which embeds the teaching and learning strategies that students with disabilities have identified as supporting their key skills development will be of benefit to all students.

It is the embedding of these strategies for support which is really the key issue here. As well as improving overall student performance, Universities are required, by the Disability Discrimination Act to focus on institutional change, rather than make adjustments for individuals. Although responses from students with disabilities were generally positive, and the picture that emerges is one of departments keen to accommodate all students wherever, and however possible, it is not enough to be able to respond to student needs on an *ad hoc* basis. Responsible institutions are required by law to demonstrate that they have considered their standing in regard to accessibility and inclusion in advance.
of any specific student need. This legislation has the potential to improve teaching and learning support for all students. Some examples of practice in embedding support strategies are presented, below.

**Disclosing Disability**

All of the students whom we spoke to during the course of our research had declared themselves as having a disability to the University and to their Local Education Authority. However, a number of respondents with Dyslexia, a so-called ‘hidden’ disability, questioned their disabled status and reported a degree of uncertainty about disclosing their Dyslexia within education or to future employers:

*I didn’t like Dyslexia support at primary school. I was in a separate group, I found it frustrating when people were constantly having things explained to them in class, so at secondary school I didn’t declare it…* [1st Year Student]

*I’m not sure about declaring my Dyslexia to employers; they might think that I won’t be able to do the job, or that I’ll be too much trouble…* [3rd Year Student]

The issue of disclosing disability is a personal decision which must be made by individual students. There is no duty for a student to declare their disability. Further information about this issue is available from:

- **The University of Leicester Careers Service**: [http://www.le.ac.uk/careers/applicationsdisabilities.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/careers/applicationsdisabilities.html)
- **The Disability Rights Commission**: [http://www.drc-gb.org](http://www.drc-gb.org)

Not surprisingly, a high proportion of students pointed to the link between declaring a disability and accessing extra funding and support:

*The only time I describe myself as disabled is when I apply for the disabled student’s allowance and to get extra time in exams…* [2nd Year Student with Dyslexia]

A number of respondents in the qualitative research highlighted the importance of ensuring that support is in place early on:

*In my first year I didn’t really get any help because I just didn’t know that any support was available for Dyslexic students. Last year a guy in the house next to me had lots of support for exams and stuff and I found out about it. I didn’t realise. I have got a laptop and a scanner and a printer now, but it really came too late. I could have done with more help…* [3rd Year Student]

The comment above raises the issue of how students with disabilities are made aware of the support services available to them. Some respondents in the qualitative research commented on how useful they had found it to be contacted by the central disability support service when first applying to University:

*The AccessAbility centre is brilliant. When I first applied to university, they wrote to me saying that they’d seen that I’d indicated that I was Dyslexic and told me about the support available, and they sorted out the local authority grant for me, filled in the forms, checked the cheque I wrote. If you need any help, it’s no problem at all, you can get one on one help…* [Postgraduate Student]

Indeed, the majority of students interviewed made use of the central support facility for students with disabilities and were extremely positive about the level of service that they received. The failure to access this support appeared to be an issue where students did not identify themselves as having a disability when they first came to University.
A number of students were keen to point out that they were not advantaged by the support that they received, but stated that it put them on equal terms with non-disabled students:

*I get an extra 25% in exams, which I think evens the level with other students… [2\textsuperscript{nd} Year Student]*

However, some learners were concerned that they would not be able to expect the level of support which they receive at University in their future employment:

*The AccessAbility Centre have given me a sheet to say “Jane has problems with written work”, but when you get into the real world in a job, I don’t think that you get a little sheet… [Postgraduate Student]*

This comment also raises issues about the nature of graduateness, and how students who require specialist skills support can achieve the standards which comply with perceptions of graduateness. This extract from Mike Wray’s *An introduction to students with Dyslexia in Higher Education* [http://www.skill.org.uk/info/demos/dyslexia.asp](http://www.skill.org.uk/info/demos/dyslexia.asp) discusses this issue further and demonstrates that support for disability is not incompatible with the concepts of graduateness and employability:

Many strategies that dyslexic students use in university are available in the workplace and most employers are legally required to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to working practices. For example, an employee with dyslexia writing a report in the workplace might use various methods to ensure quality of the final product – proofreading by colleagues, typing by administrative staff, use of dictation software on their computer.

Many people question the ability of students with dyslexia and say that they cannot achieve the skills required of graduates. There is a move in higher education at the moment to bring in the idea of graduateness. Dyslexic students are able to acquire such skills as taking responsibility for their own learning and development and using analytical and conceptual thinking. However, they may not be able to achieve some of the ancillary skills that are inherent in the implementation of ‘graduateness’, (e.g. acquisition of literacy skills, including spelling and grammar) without support mechanisms.

A recent report (NWP 1999)* concluded that in universities where there was an established system of support for dyslexic students, degree classifications achieved by dyslexic students were not significantly different from other students. The vast majority of dyslexic students pass their degree courses and go on to find graduate employment.


**Peer Group Learning**

Peer group Learning has been seen to be an important strategy for the development and application of employability skills. However, in some cases a minority of students reported that their disability could isolate them from group activities. The problem did not appear to be directly related to teaching and learning strategy, but arose from barriers of communication and perception within a new student group:

*I have a number of health problems which mean that I can’t always get to my course. I found that this stopped me gelling with the rest of the group who had all got to know each other… [2\textsuperscript{nd} Year Student, visually impaired]*

*I went to a college which had a lot of disabled students and I had friends there who also used BSL and we could just chat and have a laugh …about anything…not just work, lads, who we didn’t like, you know…but here I don’t have that yet on my course. I have a signer and I tend to be with her, rather*
than with the group...It’s not they’re unfriendly, but they get flustered if I can’t understand them... [1st Year Student, Hearing Impaired]

**Strategies towards an Accessible Curriculum**

The following section is extracted from *Doing all right? Employment skills, disability and ethnicity among archaeology students* (2003) by Michael Reynier & Annie Grant as part of the ESAC project. The report outlines the findings of a quantitative survey into Archaeology students’ attitudes to Employability Skills and is available from the ESAC website.

There are number of steps that departments can take relatively easily that may go a long way towards a more accessible and inclusive curriculum - by which is meant a curriculum that allows students to perform to the best of their ability without the need for additional accommodations and adjustments.:  
  
- Offer appropriate and repeated opportunities at which a student can disclose that they have a disability, and ensure that a policy exists for processing this information sensitively, and that all staff know about it and adhere to it.
- Look at how information is disseminated from the department to its students, and try to ensure that all such information can be made available in alternative formats, such as email or Braille.
- Continue to work with individual students towards resolving their specific concerns, but formalise the process so that students know they can approach the department to make accommodations.
- Require that all lecture material (PowerPoint presentations, notes, handouts and images) are made available to all students electronically at least twenty-four hours prior to the lecture.
- At the point of course development consideration should be given to the difficulties students with disabilities might have in accessing the course and its demands, and adequate allowance should be made for their needs without compromising the standards or content of the course.

When looking at these issues, it is important to bear in mind the distinction between ‘can be’ and ‘is’. Compliance with legislation does not mean, for example, that all department documentation must be available in Braille (even if your department has no visually impaired students); it means that the department should be able to make all its documentation available in Braille, should a student request it in the future. Effective and meaningful support for students with disabilities is, therefore, all about creating opportunities. If a department knows if has a disabled student, and that student knows he or she can talk to someone about their concerns, then most potential problems can be avoided. However, if either one of these parties is ignorant of the other, then problems are inevitable.

**Student Strategies for Success:**

The availability of specialist tutorial support from staff was frequently referred to by students. In particular, students made reference to the value of support provided by specialist tutors with experience of supporting students with their particular disability.

*I take Maths lessons at the AccessAbility Centre one on one which helps a lot. I get to focus on the things that I find difficult and I can go through it in a lot more detail than I would do in a group...* [1st Year Student]

*My advice to students is just to attend, go to lectures, go to seminars, consider it a job. Speak up in class. Sometimes I would go to see lecturers, not necessarily because I was having problems, but to show them how keen I was - look at my nice shiny work, aren’t I great..?* [Postgraduate Student]

*I would advise Dyslexic people coming to Uni. to make the most of all the opportunities they are offered, if they are offered extra Maths lessons you might think they interfere with your social life, but take them up because they will really help you...* [1st Year Student]
I would advise students to find out about everything that they can use and experiment to see if it is suitable for them. And do not be afraid to speak out... [1st Year Student]

I would advise disabled students to get their claims into the LEA’s for specialist equipment and software early. Also learn the special programmes before you get to Uni. Keep up to date with your work and do it straight away or you will get behind. Look after your health because everyone seems to get ill in their first term at Uni with communal living…

I cope by being incredibly tidy and organised. I know where everything is, and always get everything ready the night before… [1st Year Student]

ICT can make a major contribution to improving accessibility to learning and the curriculum. Most universities have a range of media which can be used for communication and delivery: virtual learning environments (VLEs), online message boards and discussion forums allow students with disabilities equal access to information and can be customised to meet individual requirements. Specialist software to support students with specific disabilities is widely available and technologically robust. Where students are prevented from physically attending classes due to ill health, the University VLE can ensure that they are not excluded from their studies:

Specialist software is a life saver. Check out what is available and keep up to date with new developments… [2nd year Student]

Students are generally perceptive and articulate when talking about their own learning. It is extremely effective to employ students with disabilities and disability support staff as consultants when designing courses

In addition, it is advisable to collect feedback from students regularly, not just during the annual student satisfaction survey. Online message boards and text messaging can be more effective means of gathering students’ views than just using standard questionnaires, particularly where students have a specific learning disability, such as Dyslexia.

Examples of Practice

University of Leicester Student Psychological Health Project: http://www.le.ac.uk/edsc/sphp/careers.html
One of the original aims of the project was to work with the University’s Careers Service to explore the further development of strategies to support the transition to work or further study for graduates with mental health difficulties…

University of Cambridge: Supporting Disabled Students and Colleagues http://www.cam.ac.uk/cambuniv/disability/support/ This guide is for academic and non-academic staff in the University who are working with, admitting and recruiting disabled people. It is mainly about supporting disabled students, but the issues and concerns that are tackled will apply equally to supporting disabled staff…

Geography Discipline Network (GDN) Inclusive Curriculum Project http://www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/icp/caseintro.htm The project is designed to develop, disseminate and embed resources for supporting disabled students studying geography, earth and environmental sciences in higher education and to transfer the generic lessons widely to subject-based academics, educational developers, learning support staff and disability advisors…

The Learning Experiences of University of Nottingham Students who have a Disability http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/education/centres/irlthe/disability-project-short-report.pdf This study aims to increase awareness and understanding of the needs of Nottingham students who
have a disability. The project is a qualitative investigation using in-depth interviews, work ‘shadowing’, and video recordings of a ‘day in the life of’ a number of selected students…

Sheffield Hallam University: Embedding ‘Inclusive Assessment’ practices-a strategic approach
Project leader(s): Madeleine Freewood and Dr. Hilary Cunliffe-Charlesworth
Accessible Assessments: [www.shu.ac.uk/accessibleassessments](http://www.shu.ac.uk/accessibleassessments/)
Building on established good practice the aim of this project is to share and enhance existing assessment and feedback practices for disabled students in the School of Cultural Studies and the wider academic community. The outcome of the project was the development of a website to provide practical support to academic staff in the design and delivery of inclusive academic assessments. It was intended that the website would be a repository for resources and best practice guidelines that staff could quickly and easily access…