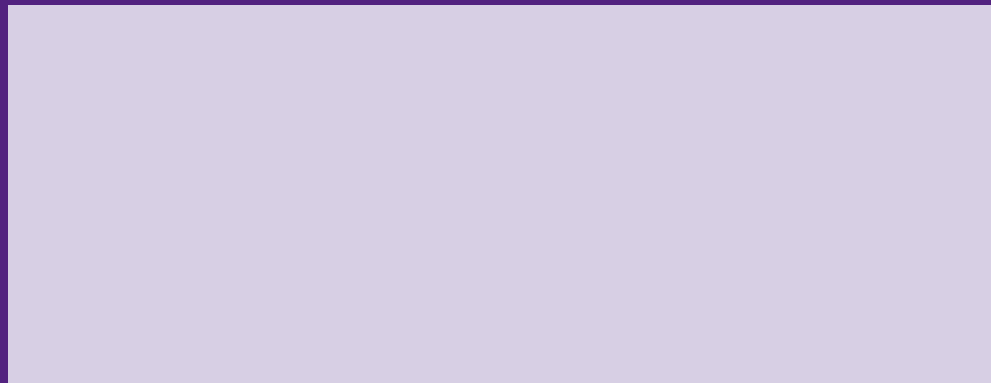


Evidencing equality: approaches to increasing disclosure and take-up of disabled students' allowance



Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Barbara Waters, Tony Stevens and Robert Holland, Skill and Dr Manuel Madriaga, Sheffield Hallam University

ECU and the research team would like to thank all the students and staff from each of the higher education institutions that participated in the research. We would also like to thank the following people from the advisory group for their time, advice and expertise in guiding the research.

- = **Christine Child**, Association of University Administrators
- = **Nicola Martin**, National Association of Disability Practitioners
- = **Martin Murphy**, Action on Access
- = **Sally Olohan**, Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education
- = **Karen Robson**, Cardiff Metropolitan University
- = **Phil Scarffe**, University Mental Health Advisers Network
- = **Dan Shaffer**, Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

This project was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Scottish Funding Council.

Contact

disability@ecu.ac.uk

Evidencing equality: approaches to increasing disclosure and take-up of disabled students' allowance

Contents

1 Introduction		1
	Methodology	1
	Terminology	2
2 What disability information is available and what does it show?		4
3 Understanding why students choose to disclose		6
4 Opportunities for encouraging disclosure and take-up of DSA		9
	Admissions and fitness-to-practise considerations	12
	Induction and orientation	13
	Peer-to-peer support	14
	Work placements and transition to employment	14
	Determining other ongoing opportunities	16
	Groups with low levels of disclosure and DSA take-up	18
5 Analysing and using evidence		23
	Communicating the analysis widely	24
	Upgrading systems	25
6 Conclusions		26
References and resources		27

1 Introduction

This guidance aims to raise awareness of the many approaches higher education institutions (HEIs) can take to increase the level of disability disclosure and take-up of disabled students' allowance.

A review of higher education policy as it related to disabled students raised concerns about the limited extent to which data was being used to improve support for disabled students in higher education (HEFCE 2009).

That review reported an overall increase in the number of students disclosing themselves as disabled, but noted that disclosure rates varied across institutions and between part-time and full-time students. It also highlighted that not all students who disclose a disability receive a disabled students' allowance (DSA). Given that disabled students who receive DSA are more likely to be awarded a first-class degree than those who do not receive the allowance, this is something that institutions should address.

This guidance provides recommendations for HEIs to encourage more disabled students to disclose their impairment and take up DSA entitlements. It suggests methods to optimise opportunities for disclosure and to make sure students are aware of the benefits of disclosing an impairment and of accessing DSA.

Methodology

This research sought examples of HEIs with good practice in increasing disclosure rates and DSA take-up to be disseminated across the sector. To do this, ECU conducted an analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student data from 2008/09 to identify trends in relation to disabled students' disclosure and DSA take-up. The analysis considered variables such as study level, mode of study, location of study, subject of study and domicile.

HEIs with high levels of disability disclosure and/or DSA take-up were invited to participate in an online questionnaire on how their disabled student data was collated and managed. Twenty-two HEIs from across England and Wales completed the questionnaire. Further field work was conducted in six HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales. The HEIs were selected to cover a range of size, location and student offer. The field work included semi-structured interviews and focus groups with staff and students, and a web-based student questionnaire (191 students and 92 staff). This included part-time, full-time and postgraduate students.

Terminology

Competence standards

A competence standard is an academic, medical or other standard applied for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability.

HEIs must have genuine competence standards in place to ensure all candidates are able to demonstrate their ability in a particular area. HEIs may need to review entry, course and examination criteria to ensure they are not discriminatory and that appropriate anticipatory reasonable adjustments (see below) are in place.

Disabled students

This term is used within this guidance, rather than 'students with disabilities', as it is often the terminology preferred by disabled people. This is based on the social model of disability, which views environmental, physical, structural and attitudinal barriers as disadvantaging – or disabling – for people with impairments.

Disabled students' allowance (DSA)

The DSA is a supplementary allowance available to UK-domiciled students who incur additional expenditure because of a disability. The allowance can cover costs for:

- = specialist equipment required for studying
- = non-medical helpers, eg note-takers
- = extra travel costs paid by a student because of a disability
- = other costs

DSAs do not have to be paid back. The allowances are funded by different bodies across the four nations. For further information:

- = for English students, see Student Finance England:
<http://practitioners.studentfinanceengland.co.uk>
- = for Welsh students, see Student Finance Wales:
www.studentfinancewales.co.uk

- = for Scottish students, see Students Award Agency for Scotland:
www.saas.gov.uk
- = for Northern Irish students, see Student Finance NI:
www.studentfinancenl.co.uk

Fitness to practise

Professional bodies may set 'fitness-to-practise' professional standards that students must demonstrate to enter the profession. Disabled students are entitled to reasonable adjustments to the process of demonstrating that they meet the standard, but not to the standard itself.

Reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments are legally required where disabled staff, students or visitors personally experience substantial disadvantage in comparison with non-disabled people. HEIs have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for staff, students and service users in relation to:

- = a provision, criteria or practice
- = physical features
- = auxiliary aids

There is an anticipatory duty to provide reasonable adjustments for students, which means service providers must plan ahead and take a strategic approach to addressing the barriers that potentially impede disabled students. This will involve institutions putting in place systems that can be activated as appropriate for disabled students, staff and/or visitors. Alongside this, disabled students and staff are entitled to individual reasonable adjustments for specific requirements.

For further information on reasonable adjustments in higher education, please see the ECU publication *Managing reasonable adjustments in higher education* (ECU 2010).

2 What disability information is available and what does it show?

The research investigated the information HEIs were collecting, and any other information that may support HEIs in achieving positive outcomes for disabled students.

The revised Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (QAA 2010) recommends that HEIs monitor the progression and achievement of disabled students to support improvements to courses.

Effective monitoring of this information will allow for detailed analysis of the disabled student's experience, including measures of disabled students':

- = participation at the HEI
- = progression
- = attainment
- = access and take-up of services (eg student support)
- = complaints and disciplinaries
- = reported incidents of disability hate crime
- = participation on work placements and targeted programmes
- = destinations in relation to Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services data
- = satisfaction rates (eg through satisfaction surveys)
- = changes in disclosure levels over time
- = changes in DSA take-up over time
- = reasonable adjustment requests
- = withdrawals (ideally capturing whether a student is disabled and, importantly, whether their reason for withdrawal is related to an impairment)
- = use of inclusive procedures (and how this may improve progression and attainment)
- = mitigating (or extenuating) circumstances linked to an impairment

Cross-referencing different measures will help provide more detailed evidence about the disabled student experience. For example, analysing information on mitigating circumstances and the use of inclusive processes and exit information would enable a better understanding of how disabled students are responding

to changes in the inclusive learning environment, and how changes may be improving progression and achievement.

Where appropriate, the analysis may be broken down by specific impairment, programme area or profession, class of study (eg foundation degree, postgraduate degree), and full-time and part-time status. This will also allow for detailed insight into the impact of changes in institutional initiatives, policies and practices, such as changes in information, advice and guidance (IAG) and in induction.

There are a number of information sources from which data can be drawn, including HESA returns, UCAS, student satisfaction surveys, complaints procedures and service feedback.

Monitoring and analysing such evidence can be used by HEIs to set equality objectives and meet their legal duties under the Equality Act 2010. In particular, this information will support HEIs in showing due regard to the public sector equality duty (PSED) of the Equality Act 2010, which encompasses the need to:

- = eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation of disabled people
- = advance equality of opportunity between disabled and non-disabled people
- = foster good relations between disabled and non-disabled people

For further information on the Equality Act 2010, please visit www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/equality-act-2010

Recommendations

- = HEI equality and diversity committees should review the range of data they collect on disabled students and consider if there is additional information that would be useful to gather and analyse.
- = Equality and diversity committees and student services could work together in reviewing the monitoring, collecting and analysis of data.
- = It may also be helpful to engage the support of planning offices with expertise in dealing with all HEI data management in any analysis.

3 Understanding why students choose to disclose

Good quality information can support HEIs in achieving positive outcomes for disabled students. Low disclosure rates of disability status may indicate that information is not accurate and may lead to inefficient allocation of resources.

Disabled students discussed with the research team their reasons for disclosure/non-disclosure. The most commonly cited reasons to disclose given by students were to have reasonable adjustments put in place, the influence of supportive, inspirational and understanding tutors, and advice from friends and family.

Those students who had disclosed explained some of the benefits:

‘Not struggle on alone’

‘Getting support in planning my work’

‘Helping tutors to understand my position’

‘Get the help you deserve in order to be successful’

‘Extra time in exams is really important to me’

‘The support and equipment provided, which can help academically’

‘More support and understanding = happier and less worried = better grades’

In addition, students mentioned the importance of disclosure as a route to understanding more about their impairment.

‘I wanted to understand dyslexia and to find out how it affects me’

‘Mine is a minor physical disability that led to unsatisfactory teaching of how to form written letters properly at school. By disclosing this, I was able to understand that this handwriting disability was not my fault, and there was someone there to offer support and understanding.’

There were a number of concerns raised around disclosure, particularly the potentially negative effect it may have on professional aspirations (see section on Admissions and fitness to practise). This is of particular importance as students consider the value of a degree, career destinations and work in the current job market. Other reasons for non-disclosure given by students who participated in the research included:

- = a fear of being discriminated against in admissions processes, especially for vocational courses
- = fear of stigma and prejudice, and of being seen as not suitable for higher education
- = students not regarding themselves as disabled, or 'not disabled enough'

Reasonable adjustments and the inclusive environment

In developing and maintaining an inclusive culture, the number of students disclosing and requiring DSA may be reduced. This may be a positive step, where diversity is naturally accommodated. However, messages around disclosure, and DSA, need to continue to be given so that any additional arrangements, including reasonable adjustments, can be made.

HEIs in the survey were at different stages in the process of providing anticipatory reasonable adjustments for students. Those who had changed practices and procedures found benefits for disabled students, along with other students, in approaching their academic work. Instituting this cultural shift may also enhance the experiences of disabled international students who are not entitled to DSA. Drawing from respondents' feedback, practical examples of inclusive practice included:

- = using e-learning platforms to support teaching and learning, eg archiving lecture notes and other papers
- = having academic disability champions whose training was kept up to date by disability services, allowing for knowledge transfer to other staff in departments

- = flexible study and changes in regulations on attendance on campus step-on/step-off programmes, with the opportunity to have time away from study
- = longer assessment deadlines for all
- = alternative assessment options available to all
- = accessible software features enabled across campus facilities

Further examples can be found in *Managing reasonable adjustments in higher education* (ECU 2010).

The Higher Education Academy has produced guidance on developing and embedding inclusive policies and practice to improve the learning experience of students from under-represented groups and has identified strategic approaches to implementing change (May and Bridger 2008).

Recommendations

- = Engage the student body when determining how to improve/develop mechanisms to encourage disclosure and DSA take-up. This will help ensure the measures they take are appropriate and effective.
- = Consider how to structure, and disseminate to all staff and students, positive messages on disability that increase knowledge and understanding of disability equality (including the negative effect of stigma and prejudice on all staff and students) and promote a culture that welcomes diversity. Again, involving disabled people within the HEI will support the production of effective and useful communications and training.
- = Ensure information on disability is easily available to all, not just targeted at those who are more familiar with disability issues.
- = Have more opportunities for students to talk about their impairment and/or access more information about impairments.

4 Opportunities for encouraging disclosure and take-up of DSA

The field work gathered examples of initiatives to improve disclosure rates and DSA take-up with new and prospective students.

The HEIs that participated in the research had developed various approaches to providing messages for prospective students to encourage early disclosure. These included:

- = websites
- = prospectuses
- = brochures/publications
- = social media
- = open days
- = using case studies of former or current students (with their express consent)
- = outreach work with sixth form and further education colleges

Case study: A mature disabled undergraduate student

For many years, I believed that because of the pain I was in that further education was not going to be an option for me, so I began to do very short courses of a couple of hours a week, I felt comfortable that I could cope with that and the teachers were really supportive. Because of this, I thought I would try a part-time, one-year course, which I did at further education college, thinking that if I tried and failed, I would not have lost a lot.

I became aware of support for disabled students on my access course at further education college. I was surprised at the care and support for disabled people. It led me to believe that I may also be supported in university. I began to ask questions at college about university support. The lecturer there assured me that I would be supported at university too, and that it would be a good idea for me to go to one of the open days and speak to a disability adviser, which I did.

Although I didn't take in everything she said, I left that conversation believing that I would be supported physically if I wanted to take the course on. She also told me of counselling that would be available if I needed it. Because I was confident that I could learn, and now felt I would be supported with my disability, I felt happier to apply and 'go for it'.

Both prospective students and participating HEIs noted that there were benefits from early information, advice and guidance on the support offered by HEIs.

'The student support pages on the website and prospectus assured me that the university would be supportive of my condition and needs.'

'It was the explanation of availability of different types of student support within the prospectus [that determined my decision to disclose] before I was even accepted into the university.'

Evidence drawn from the study suggests that it is crucial that available information offers clear and specific details about DSA, the benefits of disclosing, and the experiences of disabled students, rather than generic statements about the HEI's attitude to disability. Disabled students interviewed thought that this would enhance student understanding and lead to a higher number of disclosures during the application and admissions processes.

There is evidence that students are starting their first year with no DSA provision in place. Two-thirds of HEIs who participated in the survey encouraged all students disclosing a disability and holding offers to apply for DSA six to eleven months before beginning their studies. HEIs taking this approach were of the view that most of the students would progress to begin their studies at an institution, even though they might not get their first choice, and that institutions would receive other incoming students in the same way. Encouraging early DSA will also reduce late DSA applications, which can lead to delays in students receiving their support.

Some specific actions taken to encourage DSA take-up were:

- = following up letters and emails sent out to students who disclosed a disability on UCAS
- = targeting mail-outs at those who disclosed a disability
- = offering assistance to students completing DSA application forms and guidance throughout the process

Recommendations

- = Review the provision of early information and advice on disclosure and DSA to consider if a more effective message on the benefits of disclosure could be delivered. This could involve consultation with current disabled students.
- = In the early advice and guidance, consider including specific information on:
 - the positive impact of DSA on progression and achievement
 - how to claim DSA and arrange assessments, pre-freshers' week induction days, peer guides/student ambassador arrangements
 - names (and faces) of staff at the HEI who are available to discuss disclosure and DSA, which can be posted on institutional websites and put up in student services reception
 - case studies of students with different impairments, including unseen impairments, and a range of reasonable adjustments
- = In some parts of England, HEIs highly valued the Aimhigher programme (now closed; see www.aimhigher.ac.uk) and worked collaboratively with local and regional partnerships to provide IAG. HEIs may wish to collect any outcomes available from local and regional Aimhigher partnerships, and review IAG and outreach strategies following the closure of Aimhigher-funded programmes.
- = Ensure recruitment and outreach marketing materials (across different media) include clear, accessible information on disability equality, disclosure and DSA. Such provision will enable potential students, friends and family to access the relevant information and support students to make an informed choice.

Admissions and fitness-to-practise considerations

The application stage is a key point at which disclosure should be encouraged to ensure any necessary entitlements are received before an offer is made. Such processes should be clarified in information, advice and guidance to ensure students understand the reasons for disclosure and to mitigate misconceptions of how disclosure may be used by admissions staff.

The experience of admissions practices differs for students depending on the type of institution and the nature and type of the course they wish to study.

The research found that the majority of students who did not disclose on admission had hesitated to disclose for fear of such information affecting them, for example due to fears of not meeting competence standards or fitness-to-practise considerations (see HEI case study).

Case study: A higher education institution

The disability adviser for medicine acknowledged that students might not say if they have access issues because of fears about fitness to practise. Although the occupational health (OH) questionnaire effectively promotes disclosure of health conditions, the disability adviser emphasised that admissions staff/OH involved her in making a decision about fitness to practise. This ensures that reasonable adjustments are taken into account and that the disability adviser would receive notification if ever a candidate was judged 'unfit'.

Overall, the disability adviser is well placed to ensure that OH operates in accordance with the institution's obligations under the Equality Act 2010, which includes taking an enabling approach and focusing on reasonable adjustments rather than medical diagnosis. There is an understanding within OH that professions include a variety of roles, and that a student may be able to undertake some but not others.

Disabled students who had applied for these courses welcomed guidance on disclosure from course tutors.

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions has produced guidance on the timing of offers in relation to support assessment of applicants declaring a disability, and the implications of different approaches on admissions and disabled students relating to the Equality Act 2010 (SPA 2011). SPA also offers a briefing on competency standards (SPA 2007).

Recommendations

- = Review IAG on admissions so that it includes the positive reasons for disability disclosure.
- = Ensure appropriate disclosure opportunities for all prospective students at various stages of the admissions process, including students who come through clearing, and postgraduate students who do not use UCAS.
- = Where necessary, provide guidance for admissions and other staff to assist them in encouraging early disclosure, and in mitigating misconceptions of how this data will be used.
- = To assist admissions staff with fitness-to-practise issues, develop case studies of disabled graduates for tutors to use at induction and at key points in their professional training, explaining how reasonable adjustments can provide alternative methods of meeting fitness-to-practise standards. Involve occupational health staff in drawing up the case studies.
- = Ensure there is a regular communication strategy between admissions staff, school tutors and occupational health.

Induction and orientation

Students' survey responses showed that they valued the openness and visibility of disabled staff and students at induction. Disabled students and staff in HEIs also said they would welcome opportunities to act as role models in providing information, advice and guidance, and to contribute to making the institution more inclusive.

For one HEI, using a personal learning plan at induction for all students led to a doubling of pre-entry disclosure rates.

Recommendation

- = Consider how to involve disabled student ambassadors and disabled staff in induction and orientation activities.

Peer-to-peer support

Most of the students surveyed commented on how they had not knowingly met other disabled students within the institution, or did not know anyone who also was in receipt of DSA. Through involvement in the research, students had the opportunity to discuss the types of support that really worked for them, which they found helpful.

‘Hearing other students talking about their experiences in the focus groups has been really interesting, and not something I have had a chance to do before. It has allowed me to see the benefits of other support I’m entitled to under my DSA but have not yet taken up because I didn’t see the benefit – now I do.’

While many students will not want to discuss their individual situation with other students, others may be interested in doing so. The students involved in the research found it helpful to discuss the positive nature of the DSA assessment, compared with the negative assessments they may have received at school or through health services.

Recommendations

- = HEIs should meet with disabled students groups to consider the opportunities for peer-to-peer support, provided the impetus comes from the students themselves.
- = This could be taken forward through a student focus group or by working within existing structures such as students’ unions and other student-led groups.

Work placements and transition to employment

While staff found that DSA was clearly helpful to students’ progression and achievement, they believed it was necessary to also discuss independent study and life strategies, particularly in relation to employment. Considering the needs of disabled students when designing careers and work placement activities will help this.

In preparing disabled students for work placements, it may be useful to offer them an opportunity to meet with tutors and employers to identify reasonable adjustments.

In one HEI, advisers within the disability services' wellbeing centre were working with first-year undergraduates who receive DSA, using the opportunity to develop skills and strategies and to identify those that can be carried through to employment. For example, students using the non-medical helper element of DSA were encouraged to consider different modes of note-taking and to experiment with using recording equipment and ways of using recorded material (eg full transcription, playback review, back-up to notes).

Other students were working with relevant advisers on self-management of their condition.

Some students interviewed were on courses where they would have to disclose in order to work professionally or for health and safety reasons. They said they expected to feel a lot more comfortable and confident about doing this in employment following their experience in university. Students on other courses were still uncertain about disclosing for a job.

It was clear that although students had a basic understanding of their rights with regard to education, the legal duties of employers not to discriminate and to make reasonable adjustments were unknown. Knowledge of this legal protection might encourage students to disclose, particularly with regard to work placements.

ECU has produced the following toolkits on work placements:

- = Work placements in the creative industries: good placements for all students: www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/diversity-equality-and-access-toolkits
- = Work placements in the arts and cultural sector: diversity, equality and access: www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/work-placements-report

Recommendations

- = Consider reviewing the data held on disabled student destinations and how this is reported to academic departments and admissions staff. This information will complement the earlier tracking of student retention, progression and achievement.
- = Consider how discussions on disclosure and DSA support can be coordinated across academic departments and student services, including careers. This should include providing students with information on entitlement such as Access to Work, and employment guidance in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 (www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/Employmentsupport/WorkSchemesAndProgrammes/DG_4000347)

Determining other ongoing opportunities

The research found that 42 per cent of students disclosed on application, and 37 per cent disclosed at induction or during their first year, encouraged by the actions the HEIs had taken.

The research also found that, by establishing ongoing mechanisms throughout the student cycle, students who acquire an impairment during their course can receive the support they require. Ongoing mechanisms that promote disability equality and encourage disclosure and DSA take-up also create opportunities to capture information on disabled students who did not disclose during the applications and admissions process. Opportunities for disclosure need to be repeated in a variety of materials, such as course handbooks (including those for postgraduate students), and at key points in the course.

Case study: Second-year undergraduate student

I did not complete the disability section of the UCAS form. I was worried that filling in this section might mean that I would not get in. I also felt ashamed of my dyslexia and didn't want others to know. It would have been good if staff at my sixth form had talked to people at the university to tell them I needed support.

I realised that I would not be able to get my first essay in on time and that I was struggling with reading and writing. I realised that I would need help, and my foster father said I should go and talk to staff at the university.

I'm now more comfortable with myself and do not feel ashamed. I do not see myself as 'disabled', but realise that I learn in different ways. I now have a laptop and one-to-one support, although it was frustrating that it took almost a year before this was put in place.

Training for staff will contribute to an environment where students can disclose, and will provide further ongoing opportunities. The research highlighted a range of methods to raise staff awareness of disability issues throughout the student life cycle. These include:

- = profiling case studies of both disabled students and disabled staff
- = enhancing the disability awareness content of new staff induction
- = increasing the visible involvement of disabled people in the life of the university, and in outreach work
- = arranging opportunities to hear from disabled graduates about their employment and experiences since graduating
- = offering training to academic staff on DSA and its impact on student retention, progression and achievement

Recommendations

- = Collate and review the range of actions taken to encourage disability disclosure and DSA take-up, and involve disabled staff and students in this process. HEIs may want to use student surveys to understand the impact of their actions in encouraging disclosure.
- = Consider working with academic departments on how the data they hold on student retention, progression and achievement correlates with uptake of DSA. This would contribute to tracking trends and provide a focus for future activity.
- = Review whether the messages in course handbooks are clear and welcoming, including contact information for the disability champion within faculty, department or school.
- = Consider reviewing the content and frequency of training in the area of disability awareness and reasonable adjustments related to course programmes, to ensure all staff have enough knowledge to support disclosure and inclusive practice. The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (QAA 2010) may support this.

Groups with low levels of disclosure and DSA take-up

There were low levels of disclosure and DSA take-up by particular groups identified by participating HEIs, including students with less-visible impairments, international students and postgraduate students.

Students with less-visible impairments

Engaging with students with less-visible impairments to encourage disclosure and take-up of DSA worked well where good communication existed between disability services and other student services, such as the counselling or wellbeing centre. Staff in wellbeing services suggested that it was important to be sensitive, and to understand that disability is not the only defining feature of a person, and that self-image is shaped by previous experience.

Case study: Students with mental health difficulties, ADHD or Asperger's syndrome

This HEI found that students with mental health difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or Asperger's syndrome were now more likely to be referred, or to refer themselves, to the wellbeing centre. This may reflect the greater sensitivity this university is showing through its inclusive practice. Previously, the institution was aware that students with Asperger's syndrome were withdrawing, not because of academic difficulties but as a result of challenges in managing life at university. Since a growth in the range of support offered by disability services and the wellbeing centre, no student known to have Asperger's syndrome withdrew in the previous year. Participating HEIs reported more students with Asperger's syndrome applying to higher education. The HEI recommended working with disability organisations such as the National Autistic Society.

Disclosing a mental health difficulty

Staff in one wellbeing centre noted that the support a student with a mental health difficulty receives through the DSA needs to consider how the individual student interacts with the learning, teaching and other structures of the institution. Supporting this, during the field-work interviews, the Chair of the University Mental Health Advisers Network suggested:

'The provision of human support or technological aids needs to be skilfully introduced to students, as they may not even view themselves as having mental health difficulties, let alone being a disabled student. Furthermore, using the DSA mechanism for students with mental health difficulties must be based on careful assessment of their situation. For example, equipment and other resources that make it easier for students to withdraw from activities should be provided only if, without them, the student is not going to be able to get their work done; if it merely allows them to avoid something they find difficult, this can reinforce the avoidance and therefore disable the student further.'

The University Mental Health Advisers Network also emphasises the importance of understanding that many students with mental health difficulties expect that a disclosure of a mental health condition will be greeted by prejudice (which, given societal attitudes, is not a surprising assumption), and that providing information on the advantages of disclosure is particularly important to this group of students.

www.umhan.com/institutional-support.html

International students

Staff in several participating HEIs had found that many international students did not identify themselves as disabled, given alternative understandings of disability in their own culture or country. Some staff reported that some international students had come from a background where disclosure would lead to discrimination. Culture and disability need to be considered in relation to the manner of encouragement to disclose.

Respondents to the research highlighted how international students had mixed experiences on campus. One HEI had an international students with disabilities fund (ISDF) to fund disability-related study costs. The process was aligned with the DSA categories and any equipment was provided on loan, with students returning it at the end of their studies. The ISDF was publicised widely on noticeboards and on the main disability and dyslexia service website. Another HEI provided study skills support for international students who had disclosed a disability at summer language courses. In other HEIs, international students reported little encouragement to seek support.

Although international students are not eligible for DSA, an inclusive approach by an HEI could be of great benefit to these students. It is important to note, however, that the inclusive approach may not meet all the access requirements of international disabled students. International disabled students are entitled to reasonable adjustments, so a wider understanding and a more strategic approach to student entitlement will also assist the university to meet its responsibilities under the public sector equality duty.

Recommendations

- = Support international students so that they are aware of their entitlements in terms of reasonable adjustments and other services offered by HEIs.
- = Consider how to monitor progression and achievement of international students who do disclose a disability, and work with international student advisers encouraging disability disclosure, while recognising cultural barriers.
- = Consider how academic staff and international student services are equipped with equality and diversity knowledge so they are better prepared to support international students, who may have different needs.

Postgraduate students

Postgraduate students interviewed stated that they were very reluctant to disclose a disability. One student described admissions as 'more like a job interview'.

A disabled student may continue postgraduate studies in the existing university where his/her requirements are known, or may apply for a course at another HEI, where they would have to disclose their disability again. Postgraduate research students may hold the status of disabled staff and student, and/or may be able to apply for additional funding from an appropriate funding provider. (For information on the experiences of disabled staff and recommendations addressing ten key areas influential in shaping these experiences, see *Enabling equality: furthering disability equality for staff in higher education* (ECU 2011).

Across the participating HEIs, there was no consistent approach to encourage disclosure in the recruitment and induction of postgraduate students, although postgraduate students on taught courses were more likely to fill in a registration form offering a disclosure option.

Recommendations

- = Consider the data on disclosure and funding take-up of postgraduate students.
- = In order to ensure continuing encouragement and opportunities for disability disclosure, communication between academic departments and student services is essential, particularly providing information on DSA, as well as information on disabled student progression and achievement. This will also assist HEIs in their implementation of both the QAA (2010) Code of practice and the public sector equality duty.

5 Analysing and using evidence

HEIs can use information to manage reasonable adjustments and to support students progressing into employment. If information is used successfully, it can have a positive effect on disclosure rates.

Staff interviews suggested that opportunities were being missed for the evaluation of the impact on disabled students of the university's systems and procedures because data reporting was fragmented within institutions. All participating HEIs confirmed that their equality and diversity committees received data on disabled students. However, they stated that there was often insufficient time within meetings to consider its implications fully.

Most HEI staff in student services relied on data from central services. However, it is also possible for disability representatives to access disability information, for example on the progression and achievement of disabled students within their academic department/school or faculty, for regular review (see below).

heidi equality

- = heidi equality, run by HESA, provides direct access to a range of quantitative data about the institution. The aim is to provide access to this data for planning, monitoring and evaluating aspects of an HEI's work. The data system also offers the opportunity to benchmark an institution against its peers in a range of activities. ECU (2009b) has produced guidance on use of the system.
- = heidi can be made accessible to staff with a range of roles and responsibilities. Participating HEIs reported variations in staff access to heidi data. Academic staff felt that they would need training in how to interpret the data if they were to have more access. Staff expressed the need for more guidance on accessing data and how it could be used to inform quality management, learning and teaching outcomes, and the monitoring of disclosure.
- = HESA and ECU run training sessions on using heidi. Please email HESA's Institutional Liaison Team at liaison@hesa.ac.uk to register interest in any forthcoming heidi equality training sessions.

<https://heidi.hesa.ac.uk>

Findings from this research suggest that it is important to select appropriate staff for training, particularly those who are most likely to prepare reports for committees and planning groups to ensure disability data is embedded in the reporting process. Only one HEI in the study reported robust use of heidi data in planning for its responsibilities to disabled students.

Recommendations

- = Committees should consider how they allocate resources to interpreting the data and preparing actions for decisions at meetings. If there are resource implications, equality and diversity committees may consider setting up alternative mechanisms to a full committee meeting to consider data reporting, for example a data sub-group.
- = Institutions should ensure that access to confidential data on disabled students meets their confidentiality policy.

Communicating the analysis widely

Staff across the institutions in the study perceived the flow of information to equality and diversity committees to be mostly one way. They suggested committees should consider how they disseminate data more widely and inform staff about the progression and achievement of disabled students, so that it can be used across the institution to support developing inclusive practice.

Consideration has to be given to who in academic departments has access to the data, and what they do with it. In one HEI the disability service was informed whenever there was a new disclosure within a department. This ensured newly disclosed students received prompt contact about reasonable adjustments and DSA.

Recommendations

- = Consider how information is shared within the institution, and how it might be shared with students. This may include mapping the internal dissemination of data through the various committees responsible for inclusive learning and teaching, implementing the QAA (2010) Code of practice, and for equality and diversity. This can support coherent planning of policies and procedures relating to disabled students.
- = Develop a cross-organisation approach to monitoring and communicating information on disclosure, DSA take-up, progression and achievement.

Upgrading systems

Over half of the HEIs participating in the research were implementing new data systems, based on customer relations systems, to collect and manage student data. Disability services staff reported that where these had been implemented, the management of disabled student data was more efficient and less bureaucratic, and reporting of data to central services and HESA was accurate.

Recommendation

- = Ensure that disability-related factors (disclosure, impairment type) are fully included in plans to upgrade or replace central data systems.

6 Conclusions

The research identified a range of policies and procedures that are contributing to the success of participating HEIs in achieving higher levels of disclosure and take-up of DSA by disabled students. It also highlighted areas where some students needed further steps to understand their entitlement and the benefits of disclosure and take-up of DSA.

The role of data collection and analysis in monitoring the success, progression and achievement of disabled students was clearly demonstrated in participating HEIs. Opportunities were also identified to extend data collection and utilise heidi equality to give a more detailed analysis and understanding of specific groups of disabled students.

Additionally, once a link is made across the HEI between moving to more inclusive practice in teaching and learning and quality improvement for disabled students, it is possible for HEIs to identify data pathways to support decision making and policy implementation.

HEIs will be in a position to harmonise these goals for disabled students by:

- = taking an evidence-based approach to equality and quality-assuring services
- = improving access to student services
- = understanding the concept of student entitlement rather than additional support
- = anticipating and embedding reasonable adjustments within an inclusive institution

References and resources

- = ECU has produced a number of briefings and publications relating to the Equality Act 2010
www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/equality-act-2010
- = ECU (2009a) *Developing staff disclosure: a guide to collecting and using equality data*. Equality Challenge Unit, London.
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/developing-staff-disclosure
- = ECU (2009b) *Introducing heidi equality: a new way to run reports about the equality performance of your HEI*. Equality Challenge Unit, London.
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/introducing-heidi-equality
- = ECU (2010) *Managing reasonable adjustments in higher education*. Equality Challenge Unit, London.
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/managing-reasonable-adjustments-in-higher-education
- = ECU (2011) *Enabling equality: furthering disability equality for staff in higher education*. Equality Challenge Unit, London.
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/enabling-equality-staff
- = EHRC (2011a) *The essential guide to the public sector equality duty*. Equality and Human Rights Commission, London.
www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/PSED/essential_guide_guidance.pdf
- = EHRC (2011b) *Equality analysis and the equality duty: a guide for public authorities*. Equality and Human Rights Commission, London.
www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/PSED/equality_analysis_guidance.pdf
- = EHRC (2011c) *Equality objectives and the equality duty: a guide for public authorities*. Equality and Human Rights Commission, London.
www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/PSED/objectives_guidance.pdf
- = EHRC (2011d) *Equality information and the equality duty: a guide for public authorities*. Equality and Human Rights Commission, London.
www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/PSED/information_guidance.pdf

- = HEFCE (1999) *Guidance on base-level provision for disabled students in higher education institutions*. Higher Education Funding Council for England, Bristol.
www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1999/99_04.htm
- = HEFCE (2009) *Outcomes of HEFCE review of its policy as it relates to disabled students*. Policy Development Report. Higher Education Funding Council for England, Bristol.
www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_49/
- = HESA (undated) *Higher education information database for institutions*. Higher Education Statistics Agency, Cheltenham.
www.heidi.ac.uk
- = May, H and Bridger, K (2008) *Developing and embedding inclusive policy and practice in higher education*. Higher Education Academy, York.
www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/DevelopingEmbeddingInclusivePolicyPracticeReportFinal.pdf
- = QAA (2010) *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education – Section 3: Disabled students (updated March 2010)*. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Gloucester.
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-Section-3.aspx
- = SPA (2007) *A briefing on competency standards and admissions to higher education*. Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme, Cheltenham.
www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/competence-standards.html
- = SPA (2011) *SPA recommendations on good practice in the consideration of support needs within the admissions process to higher education for applicants with disabilities*. Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme, Cheltenham.
www.spa.ac.uk/documents/Timing_of_disability_considerations_within_admissions_processes.pdf
- = UMHAN (2009) *Higher education institutions' support for students with mental health difficulties*. University Mental Health Advisers Network.
www.umhan.com/institutional-support.html

Equality Challenge Unit

ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in further education in Scotland.

ECU works closely with colleges and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.



Equality Challenge Unit

7th floor, Queen's House
55/56 Lincoln's Inn Fields
London, WC2A 3LJ
T 020 7438 1010
F 020 7438 1011
E info@ecu.ac.uk
www.ecu.ac.uk

© **Equality Challenge Unit 2012**

ECU's publications are produced free of charge to the HE sector and for the FE sector in Scotland. Information can be reproduced accurately as long as the source is identified. Alternative formats are available including an accessible Word version: E [**pubs@ecu.ac.uk**](mailto:pubs@ecu.ac.uk)

Company limited by guarantee. Registered in England and Wales, no. 05689975. Registered charity no. 1114417

Sheffield Hallam University

Evidencing equality: approaches to increasing disclosure and take-up of disabled students' allowance

WATERS, Barbara, STEVENS, Tony, HOLLAND, Robert and MADRIAGA, Manuel
<<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2725-1718>>

Available from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/26184/>

Copyright and re-use policy

Please visit <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/26184/> and <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html> for further details about copyright and re-use permissions.