Chapter 74

Reflections on Personal Experiences of Staff Training and Continuing Professional Development for Academic Staff in the Development of High Quality Support for Disabled Students in Higher Education

Alan Hurst
National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, UK

ABSTRACT

Despite the progress made in the development of policy and provision for disabled students in Higher Education since the issue first received attention in the UK in 1974, there is still some way to go before a state of genuine inclusion is reached. The key to further improvement and enhancement of quality is seen to lie in training for staff. After presenting evidence showing the need for more and better training, a number of issues relating to initial training and continuing professional development are discussed. A number of sample tasks for inclusion in staff development sessions are described.

INTRODUCTION

Considerable progress has been made in developing high quality policy and provision for disabled students in higher education in the years since 1974 when the first study of the situation in the UK was published (National Innovations Centre, 1974). Evidence for this assertion about progress can be found in number of sources such as Department for Industry, Universities and Skills (2009) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (2009a). At the start, much of the positive change was due to the activities of the newly created National Bureau for Handicapped Students which, as Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, continued to work effectively to support disabled students until its demise in 2011. Further progress came as a result of the actions of the national funding councils created following legislation in 1992 and also following the Dearing Report in 1996 (Hurst 1999). A third push for progress has been the introduction and spread of anti discrimination law since the first Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. However, whilst celebrating the progress, one must not become complacent.

Informal contacts with disability advisers suggest that most of the challenges they and the disabled students encounter are curriculum-related and classroom-based. Many issues stem from an unsatisfactory and/or an inadequate approach to staff training and continuing professional development (CPD) in higher education institutions. However, to build a case for change there is a need to collect and consider valid evidence about disabled students' experiences in higher education. This paper starts by outlining evidence indicating the need for more and better staff training and CPD. The following section discusses a range of issues associated with policy and provision of staff training and CPD. The final section provides some examples of activities which can be used in training sessions.

STAFF TRAINING AND CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: DOES MORE NEED TO BE DONE?

In recent years more evidence has accumulated indicating the need for improved staff training and CPD in relation to working with disabled students in higher education. The following section will focus on the most recent sources described in terms of three major themes: students' issues, staff concerns, and aspects of institutional policies.

Students' Issues

The example used here is the report on the outcome of the debates and discussions which resulted from meetings of the National Student Forum in 2009.

Within the National Student Forum's Annual Report (DBIS 2009) there is a specific chapter concerned with disabled students. Chapter Five is called "Improving the Experience of Disabled Students". It identifies five matters which warrant attention: a need for more tailored information prior to entry, a lack of adequate knowledge about sources of funding available, the existence of misconceptions and stigma in the higher education institutions which unwittingly contribute to the perpetuation of discrimination, academic disadvantages, and the non-academic challenges arising from insufficiently accessible features of the institutions. The report makes five recommendations in relation to each of the above: improve advice and guidance for prospective disabled students, review and revise induction and enrolment procedures to ensure that they are inclusive, raise awareness of disability issues amongst the wider student community in higher education, improve awareness of disability amongst all staff, and ensure that institutional feedback methods secure data from disabled students and are used to improve policy and provision.

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