

The New Duty to Promote Disability Equality

Final report from: Corri van de Stege

Name of project: Impact Assessment

Organisation: The College of West Anglia

March 2006

The main criterion for including projects on this website is that they are all developmental or action research projects undertaken as part of DDA: taking the work forward. The overall aim of this project was to support organisations within the post school education sector to respond to the DDA 2005 new duty to promote disability equality in a way which does not merely seek compliance but actively promotes opportunities for disabled people. They do not necessarily reflect good or best practice.

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Major Focus

Prior to engaging with the LSDA project the College underwent an effectiveness audit for disability equality. The College has extensive policies and good practices, however, disabled students and staff have not, on the whole, been consulted on policies and practices, apart from contributing to student and staff questionnaires on provision. The College has an Equality and Diversity Forum, which is chaired by the Assistant Principal and which has membership from across the business support areas and the faculties. The terms of reference of this forum are to review Equality and Diversity policies and procedures, review new legislation and identify and monitor information and areas of positive action.

The College also has a DDA Action Group which is chaired by the Principal and which used to focus on the implementation of SENDA. The group consists of cross college managers who are able to 'make things happen'. With the emerging DED legislation the DDA Action Group has now been tasked with monitoring and reviewing the implementation of Disability Equality Schemes.

A previous action plan of the DDA group was based on an effectiveness audit that was carried out. Actions included for example the drawing up of a Disability Disclosure Policy and Procedures, amendment of the enrolment form to encourage disclosure, etc. The LSDA project took forward some of the actions identified.

The LSDA project plan focused on:

- a. Impact assessment of admission procedures and marketing activities
- b. Impact assessment of employment recruitment policy and practice

Progress:

- i. The aim was to have two strands, both focusing on initial entry into the college, one for students, the other for staff. Due to the impending merger of the College with Isle College and the reluctance of staff to engage with focus groups or questionnaires, the HR department were unable to take the second strand forward after initial attempts.
- ii. The initial the focus of the project was on awareness raising and dissemination of information on the DDA (2005) requirements and the reasons for carrying out impact assessments under the LSDA project:
 - a. Individual meetings took place with Heads of Areas (Head of Marketing and Student Services and the Head of HR) to discuss their roles in the two different strands identified under 2. These meetings also identified the roles to be taken on by other members of staff across the college. A detailed action plan was drawn up, which was submitted to LSDA.
 - b. The action plan was taken to the College's Equality and Diversity Review Group on 26 September 2005. The group agreed it would act as a sounding board and support activities where it could. The group also agreed to act as a focus group which became practically impossible as the next meeting was

not due until January 2006. It was decided to also take the project to the DDA group

- c. As a management group, the DDA group has the ability to instigate and follow up on actions. The DDA group agreed that it would take on the monitoring role for the implementation of a disability equality scheme. Parts of the LSDA project action plan were therefore incorporated in the DDA group Action plan
- d. Information on the LSDA project and the DED (2005) was provided to the Senior Managers Team meeting and subsequently managers across the college (Heads and Deputy Heads of Faculties, Heads of Departments) were informed of the LSDA action plan at one of their meetings on 4 October 2005. Furthermore, the Policy briefing on the disability equality duty was distributed and elucidated during a meeting on 15 November. Managers were asked to disseminate this information at their team meetings, so creating an awareness of DED and the duty to draw up a Disability Equality Scheme for the whole of the college.
- e. On 21 November the DDA revised action plan, including the action points deriving from the LSDA project, were taken to the management team meeting, again to ensure awareness and action.

Focus groups, questionnaire and case study

To carry out impact assessments of application and enrolment procedures the project made use of student focus groups. To carry out an impact assessment of recruitment and selection procedures for staff the project proposed to use a staff focus group.

- **Student focus groups:**

Marketing developed posters, which were displayed around the college, asking students to participate in focus groups in November 2005. The Head of Marketing and Student Services took responsibility for this aspect of the work. Two focus group meetings were held in November 2005 and were attended by 13 Students. 18 students had initially signed up, but 5 did not turn up. The Focus Group facilitator (a student support adviser) noted that this might have been due to shyness, rather than an unwillingness to participate. She followed up with these students by sending them a questionnaire. Students who participated had disabilities ranging from deafness, dyslexia and sight impairment to osteoarthritis, cerebral palsy and paralysis. A course director Performing Arts participated in one of the groups

- **Outcomes of the student focus groups:**

The workshop facilitator provided a detailed report and the outcomes send some very clear messages to the College. Whereas the college has policies and procedures for application and enrolment procedures, including disability disclosure policy and procedures, it appears that students felt they are being sent from pillar to post when it comes to

accessing additional support. The report also notes a certain defensiveness and vulnerability that these students portray. A real message to the college in particular as the college does have a caring and inclusive approach to all its learners: individual cases appear to contradict some of this.

- On the whole students found the enrolment processes confusing.
- Some students felt that once they contacted the college and had initially informed staff of their disability/learning difficulty they were then passed around to too many people. They were not sure who the correct person was to talk to about issues relating to their disability/learning difficulty.
- Students would have liked one particular person to talk to and also to have that person help them with any particular problems they experience when making their application i.e. completing forms – particularly with HE as there seem to be so many.
- One student said that when she intended to do an FE course it was not explained to her what the available support would be. However, when she intended to start an HE course the following year available support was discussed with her at the Assessment Centre in Cambridge. Subsequently she had been unsure about how to access this support.
- One P/T FE student was offered an assessment and accepted this offer but never had one done.
- Another student who had received information on support and funding for an HE course at University did not realise that when he subsequently attended an Access Course, that FE and HE funding support were quite different.
- One student had not been offered support for her interview but coped as she could lip read. She had felt that because she had a disability she had to prove herself capable of completing the course
- In one case information provided by a student on her application form was not taken forward during the interview, nor was she subsequently offered a screening test. It was only when she started a second course that these omissions were rectified, but meanwhile she had been made to feel uncomfortable.

Suggestions made by students included:

- Enrolment/application forms should be made available on-line so that students could alter the format if they needed to, to make them easier to read and fill in. This is now being taken forward by Marketing and Student Services
- Students would like to be able to talk to a dedicated member of staff, with sole responsibility for disability information and support. In particular, they would like there to be one person to help them through the enrolment process.
- Students should be given more information about what will be expected of them once they have started the course so that the students can talk about what they will need when they have an assessment.

- More focused questions should be asked during their interview
- Raise staff awareness of students' entitlement to support

Finally, the forum participants felt that it would be a good idea to have more meetings along the lines of focus groups so they would have more of a voice within college.

- **Questionnaire responses**

One student provided feedback via a questionnaire, as she had been unable to attend the focus group. She was positive about all the help and information she had received prior and during the enrolment process, including the assessment. However, as it turned out she was not happy with the outcome of the assessment: she feels that the health and safety guidelines in her particular case make her feel stifled as she is not allowed to go anywhere on her own – even though she feels old and wise enough to know where she can and cannot go safely. Moreover, one of the reasons she is not allowed to move around freely on her own is that the disabled toilet doors are too heavy and she cannot open them on her own.

- **Case Study**

A case study of one of the students emphasises that at times there is a gap between application and interview process, where the interviewer is not picking up the details from the application form: the main reason appears to be that there is not a designated member of staff with responsibilities for students with disabilities. Referrals should be made via the application form and in this case this had not happened. The case study was drawn up by the Student Support Adviser who also led on the workshops:

This is about a 16 year old student who is on a Level 1 Childcare Course

The student looked through prospectus at school and then came into reception at college to fill in an application form. When she came in she asked the receptionist for an application form and was given a prospectus, which had one in. She sat in reception with a family member and filled in the application form, on which she stated she had dyslexia. She felt able to complete the application form with the help of her family member. She says she was made to feel welcome by the receptionist. She handed in the completed application form before she left.

A couple of weeks later the student received a letter inviting her to attend an interview for her chosen course. When she attended the interview her dyslexia was not mentioned and so support requirements were not discussed. She was just asked how she felt she would cope at college.

Shortly after her interview she was offered a place at college and then started on 5 September 2005. She is unaware of having had any dyslexia screening and says she is not receiving any support to help with it.

Approximately three weeks prior to this discussion one of the student's tutors said that because the student was falling behind with her work she had enquired about additional support for her but said she had been told there was no time available within the additional support department for the student to receive any support from them.

The student explained she mainly asks her friends for help. She sometimes asks her tutors but they usually say they are helping someone else. She feels that there is no point asking for any help but she says she still keeps doing so anyway.

The Student Support Adviser has now agreed with her that she will help her prioritise her work and look at time planning with her to assist her to complete her work when she needs to.

▪ **Conclusion and actions:**

The report on the outcomes of the focus groups clearly demonstrates that too many people are involved in referral for initial assessment – there is a need for one point of contact. In fact the college procedures clearly state that all disclosures are referred to the Head of Foundation Studies, whose office will trigger additional support for disabled students and who will liaise with the Key Skills Support Officer on particular needs. This division of support provision will be removed under the new structure for the merged College when the two departments, Foundation Studies and Key Skills will come together as one support area. Moreover, the new structure will allow for a dedicated person in Student Services to take on the role of advice and guidance for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. This staff member will be liaising directly with the Faculty of Foundation Studies (and the office for additional support) as well as with students.

Meanwhile, the college has drawn up new guidelines for interview staff, including guidelines on disability assessment information and how to respond to disclosures.

Marketing Department is taking forward the suggestion that enrolment forms should be made available on line.

Marketing Department have agreed to continue with the focus groups for disabled learners at regular intervals and after the merger.

▪ **Staff focus groups:**

With respect to the focus group for staff, Human Resources Department reported a reluctance on behalf of staff to engage

positively in discussions on recruitment procedures. The October edition of the College's newspaper included a short article asking for volunteers to come forward and engage with the proposed staff focus group. However, only two members of staff volunteered and not much progress has been made.

One difficulty in taking this forward and finding the resources to put in extra time is the imminent merger the College faces: staff are focusing on the restructure that has been announced and the HR department have not got the time to chase and cajole.

Successes and challenges:

Successes:

- Workshops were an excellent vehicle for learning about disabled students' views on admission procedures.
- Disabled students were very keen to participate and volunteered in the assessment process.
- There is quite good awareness at management level of the Disability Equality Duty and the need for Disability Equality Schemes across all business support areas as well as faculties.
- Important changes have already been made and implemented: interview process and guidelines, staffing structures, referrals have improved.

Challenges:

- Engaging disabled staff
- Finding the time and resources to do this well.
- Keeping this at the forefront of attention when so many other things impinge.
- Embedding the culture and processes across all areas.
- Making and embedding the required changes for support structures for students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Outcomes and benefits

Student focus groups provided guidelines to the College with respect to application procedures and the provision of IAG to disabled students. The Head of Marketing worked with the Quality Manager on redrafting interview guidelines and ensuring that the link between application form and disclosure of disability with the support department, which is the Faculty of Foundation Studies in the College, is clear. The College is considering how information is best made available to disabled students, in particular with respect to accessing additional support and new information leaflets and access points are being developed.

Engaging disabled students directly in assessment of procedures in this instance proves to be very beneficial.

Emerging themes

- a. The need for a clear and consistent approach to tackling the disability equality duty across all college areas and to involve both staff and students will require consistent and persistent application at all levels.
- b. Students: clearer information, advice and guidance should be provided to students who have disclosed a disability.
- c. The College's application and admission procedures needed to be revised to meet the needs of disabled students.
- d. Disabled staff: are reluctant to engage in assessment processes.

Key Recommendations:

- Involve managers at all levels
- Communicate, communicate, communicate
- Make sure that staff have ownership and that they are backed by their senior managers
- Disabled students need one point of reference, not a confusing mass of processes and procedures.
- Lecturing staff / academic staff need to be aware of the different needs of disabled students

Useful resources of sources for advice

DRC website for information on web accessibility: www.userite.com

Future work

Establish (external) steering group (Head of Foundation Studies)

Analyse marketing materials for accessibility (Head of Marketing)

Try and get feedback from staff on staff recruitment procedures
Analyse this feedback (HR)

Provide training sessions for Support Managers and for Academic Staff on DED

Heads of Departments/Faculties to take ownership of impact assessments in their areas.

DDA group and Equality and Diversity Group to monitor progress