

# **The New Duty to Promote Disability Equality**

**Final report from: Mary Russell**

**Name of project: Support for students with mental health difficulties**

**Organisation: Morley College**

**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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## **Section 2 – Major Focus**

- To provide more effective support for students in distress, particularly in relation to mental health difficulties.
- To provide support for such students in dealing with the College (e.g. disciplinary procedures.)
- To provide support for staff in relation to working with students with mental health difficulties.
- To advise on appropriate changes to the College Disciplinary Policy and Course Information forms.
- To involve students with mental health difficulties in implementing the College's duty to promote disability equality.

### **Background to the project**

- Morley College (Adult Education) has a higher than average number of students with mental health difficulties. This is connected to the fact that Lambeth has a high number of adults with mental health difficulties. We also offer a large number of "leisure" courses which are often attractive to these students.
- This year about 70 students have declared a disability of this nature, and there are also those who do not declare. (Total number of students 12,000; FTEs 1,500; number declaring a disability 600). Most students attend for specific classes during the week, and the tutorial system applies only to a relatively small number of access students.
- New Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) legislation widens the number of students with mental health difficulties who may be considered disabled. It will therefore increase the number of students requiring reasonable adjustments in the College under the Act.

### ***Academic implications***

The additional learning support (als) department and academic departments work together to meet the needs of all students with disabilities, including those with mental health difficulties. We had previously made progress in this area, including some specific training on mental health issues for teaching and support staff. However, we felt it was important to strengthen our response in various ways, both in the support of students and in the support of staff working with them. In particular we wanted to support lecturing staff in making "reasonable adjustments" for the students in their classes.

### ***Behavioural issues***

We have had cases where learners who appeared to have mental health problems, but had not disclosed them, were asked to attend disciplinary panels because of their behaviour. One of our aims during this project was to strengthen our support to these students during this process.

### ***Students experiencing a crisis***

We also wished to strengthen our support for students experiencing psychotic episodes in common areas of the College, such as the canteen or library. When such students are too vulnerable to leave the college on their own they need encouragement to remain, pending the arrival of an ambulance, and individual support during this period.

### ***Reviewing policies***

We wanted to begin to review our existing policies in relation to students with disabilities. For example, the current student disciplinary policy has an impact on students with disabilities, particularly with mental health issues, and needs revision. We also wished to begin reviewing Course Information Forms (which provide details of courses and entrance requirements) to assess their impact, and make changes if necessary.

## **Section 3 – Progress made so far**

- Spring 2005. The project was discussed with the Executive (the College senior management team, which includes the Principal and Vice-Principals). Issues causing concern were clarified. The initial proposal for advocacy for students during the disciplinary process was replaced by the use of a supportive “friend”, which was more appropriate for this organisation.
- Academic and Support Staff Managers informed.
- Autumn 2005: We invited expressions of interest from all staff trained as first aiders, offering a small additional remuneration (£10 a month) As a result three support staff champions were appointed (see position description). Two tutor champions also were advertised for within the College and appointed (see job descriptions).
- A mental health service user was successfully involved. Her contribution has been particularly valuable.
- Autumn 2005: Training was delivered by Christine Rose to staff involved in the project. The purpose of the training was to clarify and discuss issues connected with supporting students with mental health difficulties.
- Following discussions with the head of department (Humanities) there was a proposal for less experienced tutors to observe tutors who are experienced in working with students with behavioural issues. The Humanities Department agreed to pilot this. There are already some useful conclusions. (See draft observation template and notes from sessions observed.)
- The LSDA project has enabled us to initiate and develop work with several agencies serving people with mental health difficulties. These include: South London & Maudsley, (SLAM) our local mental health service trust, “Leo” early onset services, Gateways, a local project to find work for people with mental health difficulties, and Pathways to Learning, based in Westminster.
- We have worked with these projects to support specific students, and also to be supported in our work with students.
- SLAM currently run a trauma clinic to support their staff after difficult incidents. Our contact in SLAM is currently seeking permission for College staff to use this if necessary after incidents in the College.

- There have been a few occasions when this would have been useful. We provided SLAM with case studies to support our request.
- Meetings with champions and other interested parties have enabled us to define procedures for supporting students with mental health issues experiencing a crisis, so that staff can be clear about their roles.
- We are currently delivering training to approximately 150 teaching and support staff. This training includes a presentation on the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and information on the LSDA project.
- Tutor champions have begun to impact assess the course information forms, and changes have been proposed for the course guide.
- College managers have received training in impact assessment.

## **Section 4 – Successes and Challenges**

### **Successes**

- This project has enabled us to promote a discussion of disability issues within the College. It has raised their profile, increasing knowledge of the new DDA legislation as well as of the specific problems faced by students with mental health difficulties.

*DDA input, and information on the project was given to a large number of teaching and support staff (20 different training sessions to about 150 staff). The Student Executive Committee (SEC) (which represents students) was also involved. As a result of the information we received at project meetings, the College was alerted to the need for impact assessment training. This was to enable us to carry out impact assessments to meet the new DDA requirements. Twenty managers were given this training.*

- Improved our procedures in relation to students with mental health difficulties who may be excluded from the College, and provided support for these students.

*A student who was believed to have mental health difficulties but had not declared them was offered a “friend” to support him through a disciplinary process. The “friend” was also able to arrange referrals and ensure that he received appropriate refunds. Although the outcome was not significantly altered the student was pleased to accept this support.*

- Began a process of class observation which has the potential to improve the ability of lecturers to make “reasonable adjustments” to meet the needs of this group of students.

*In the previous year a student had been temporarily excluded because of very inappropriate behaviour in a class, which appeared to be connected to a mental health issue. The observer has recently attended a lesson in a different subject area where this student was contributing appropriately, and was accepted by the rest of the class. This was related to the strategies used by the tutor (see notes on class observation for details.)*

### **Main challenges**

- The target of impact assessing the disciplinary policy (students) and proposing a revised version was not achieved. It was necessary to

have impact assessment training, before collecting data and involving students, so the target proved to be over-ambitious. However, the need for change was highlighted, and interim adjustments made, so that the policy now takes better account of the needs of students with mental health difficulties.

- Work needs to be done with some tutors so that they become more confident in handling behavioural issues (including those related to mental health difficulties). Otherwise, there is a danger that students are being sent too quickly to the learning support department or the student champions, before the tutor has tried appropriate adjustments to meet the student's needs. Adjustments within and outside the classroom can work well.

*Earlier this term one student, who was experiencing a paranoid episode, was left by their lecturer outside the student support manager's office. The lecturer told the security guard, but did not leave their name. It was fairly easy to calm the student, who then decided to go home until he felt better. He subsequently returned to the class, and there have been no further problems of this nature.*

*He has discussed with learning support the fact that he occasionally feels stressed and paranoid, and that it is difficult for him to remain in class at those times. We have been able to provide effective support in the following ways: additional support in the subject area (English) as he can find it difficult to focus, referral to the local refugee network, additional time in examinations and occasional meetings with one of the mental health champions to check how things are going for him.*

- As work with students with disabilities had been viewed as a strength in the College inspection in February 05, attention had switched to other areas for development. Effort was required to persuade people of the need for further training and development. We are now more aware of the weaknesses and strengths in relation to this area and the new DDA legislation.

## **Section 5 – Outcomes and benefits**

- It has been very useful to have a focused project, which was part of the College Operating Plan, to take forward the disability agenda.
- Tutors, support staff and student champions have made an important contribution to this. The group of people who feel able to “own” the way forward has been significantly widened.
- Staff have received additional training in working with students with mental health issues. This focused on the variable nature of this group and on demystifying the behavioural issues which may be involved in working with people with this type of disability.
- Academic and support managers have discussed the project, and been informed on its progress. This project has also been discussed with approximately 150 members of staff, as part of DDA training.
- Students were involved on an individual and group basis. This included the S.E.C. and five individual students.

- An external trainer provided impact assessment training to managers. Without the project the need for this training might not have been appreciated at this stage.
- A student involved in a disciplinary hearing has received support, and a number of other students with mental health difficulties have received additional learning support.
- We have begun work with class observations, which has enabled us to give information on useful strategies and reasonable adjustments. Staff who are successful in this use a combination of personal qualities and management strategies (see notes from class observation).
- We have clarified the importance of including this work in the Self Assessment Report (SAR) for 2005-2006 and the Annual Operating Plan (AOP) for 2006-2007. The AOP sets out the College's targets for the coming year, which address weaknesses named in the SAR. In the SAR our work with students with disabilities will feature as a strength in terms of the progress made, but also as a weakness in the need to impact assess and review our policies and course information forms. This will be resolved over the next three years by following the action plan in the College Disability Scheme. Writing this scheme will be one of the targets in the AOP for the coming year.
- We have revised sections of the course guide and the student handbook following the involvement of students with disabilities, including mental health difficulties.
- We have strengthened our work with local organisations who support and refer students to us. We have also begun the process of working with these organisations to provide support for our students, and, when necessary, our staff.

## **Section 6 – Emerging Themes**

- The importance of having one person who is responsible for co-ordinating support for students with mental health difficulties. They need to inform and work with all departments and areas in the College.
- The importance of working with staff to reduce their anxiety and increase their confidence in working with learners with different needs, including those with mental health difficulties.
- The valuable contribution which can be made by all groups of staff in the College. For example: site premises staff, canteen staff and administrative staff are groups which are sometimes overlooked and have a vital role in this work.
- The essential contribution which students with mental health difficulties can make. They often have an expertise as to what students with mental health difficulties may need. For example, they pointed out that they needed specific references to mental health difficulties in college publicity, as students with this difficulty often do not identify as disabled. They also may need access to one named person to relate to and see them through the enrolment process
- The work of senior management in this project has been invaluable. Progress depended on their involvement.
- Ensure that tasks have an appropriate position in the SAR and the AOP.
- The need too be opportunistic, on occasion, in finding a way forward.

*As a project team we asked for the chance to add our contribution, on work with students with disabilities and the LSDA project, to equality and diversity training which had previously been arranged. We were then given space in about 20 training sessions.*

## **Section 7 – Key recommendations for others**

- Make sure that equality and diversity training, including training on disabilities, is delivered to all staff in the organisation from the governors to site premises staff.
- Provide one named person to be the initial contact point for students with mental health difficulties, particularly to support them through the enrolment process.
- Be pragmatic in involving students. Individual discussions as well as groups work well. Discussions about difficulties experienced in the College can yield useful information about appropriate ways forward.
- Approach students with disabilities as experts in their area. They may also be suitable for supporting other students with disabilities, on a voluntary or paid basis.
- Tutor, support and student champions can play an extremely important role in taking this work forward. In our project tutor champions worked effectively with curriculum delivery, and support and student champions worked with students outside the classroom.
- Ensure that this area is appropriately included in the SAR and strategic documentation.

## **Section 8 – Useful resources or sources of advice**

- The use of external training providers within the college was important in providing information, facilitating discussion, and raising the profile of this work.
- There were three training days for project managers, which were excellent for networking, discussion and information.
- Consider using the staff intranet to disseminate strategies for making reasonable adjustments. More case studies, perhaps from DRC, would also be useful.

## **Section 9 – Future work**

- Screen existing policies for their relevance to students with disabilities, and produce an action plan for their impact assessment.
- Extend the function of the current support champions to act as “friends” or supporters to students with mental health difficulties who may need to relate to one named person.
- Review the observation template for the observation project. Present proposals to academic managers and the staff development advisor to widen the project and disseminate information on ways of working with challenging behaviour in the classroom.
- Communicate regularly with local organisations connected with mental health issues and work as a team to support specific students, and occasionally staff, when appropriate.
- Increase the use of volunteers within the College. Students with disabilities, including mental health issues, should be offered this

opportunity. Consider offering volunteers a free course of their choice, to show our appreciation of their work.

- Work with the SEC and students with mental health difficulties to ensure that students are involved in developing this work.
- Incorporate this action plan into the Disability Scheme, which the college is required to produce by December 2006.

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