
The provision made by higher education library services for people with disabilities

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Abstract

This article examines the results of a Masters research project which examined the provision provided by Higher Education (HE) library services for students with disabilities within the context of the new disability legislation, The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA), which came into force on 1st September 2002.

Five HE libraries were selected as case studies and this included interviews with staff, an accessibility audit of services and facilities and a questionnaire targeted at students with disabilities. Library provision was assessed in light of library policies, procedures and practices. On the positive side, all libraries had a disability representative and many staff attended disability awareness training. However, accessibility of the built environment was often inadequate for the needs of people with disabilities. Lighting was poor, shelving was of inappropriate width and height and signage was far from ideal. Recommendations to improve provision included: compilation of formal written disability policies; compulsory disability awareness training and proactive promotion of available facilities.

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Introduction

The passing of the Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA) has focused attention on the participation of young people with disabilities in higher education. From September 1 2002, all higher education services must be provided indiscriminately for all students, encompassing leisure facilities, training, accommodation and education and, importantly, including library services. Library and information services lie at the heart of learning at every higher education institution and have both moral and legal obligations to ensure equitable access to both the building and its resources for all users. Adjustments to the physical premises alone are not enough, but with advancements in information and communication technology (ICT), equitable access must include Web-based materials, electronic journals, books and databases. Access for all, whatever ability or disability, is fundamental, enabling all students to be empowered by the educational opportunities provided by higher education. Inclusion, not exclusion, is the goal.

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was fundamental to gain a thorough understanding of the research topic and help define the subject more clearly. Advice from experts in the field was sought through email discussion lists such as the mailbase list DIS-Forum, (a list for students with disabilities and their support staff) and subscription to online disability-related bulletins and newsletters such as E-Access Bulletin. Two courses in HE library provision for students with disabilities were also attended.

A case study approach was adopted and five case studies were completed at five different HE libraries. Due to financial constraints the sample was geographically biased towards the Midlands area. The sampling strategy embraced both attempts to ensure representativeness of the HE sector whilst simultaneously adopting the critical case approach. The sample included pre- and post-1992 universities - those based in large cities and small towns and those which

exist within varying social climates. The research project also involved adopting the critical case approach by selecting one carefully chosen case with certain special characteristics. One of the case studies had a good reputation for provision for hearing impaired and deaf students.

Each of the case studies examined the institution's principal library service. For more accurate results the project would ideally have included all library services within the institution's remit, but this was impossible due to time constraints. In addition, three of the case studies were undergoing building work and this restricted some of the researchers' movements.

The multi-method approach, methodological triangulation, was adopted for data collection. A diversity of complementary methods was used including interviews, observation and fieldwork, questionnaires and documentary research. Interviews with 'key informants' took place and these included:

- a senior member of library staff with responsibilities for students with disabilities, or failing this, the Library Manager;
- a front-line member of library staff. In all cases this was a library assistant; and
- a member of student support services with responsibilities for students with disabilities. In all but one case study, this was the services' manager.

Two library staff at different levels of seniority were interviewed as they generated different perspectives on the research project. Interviewing student support services was vital to ascertain their views of library services and gain an overall vision of university-wide provision for students with disabilities. The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on services and facilities for students whilst also reflecting on SENDA 2001 and its implications.

Observation took the form of an access audit which was completed using an ethnographic approach. This enables researchers to, as

Wellington states, "share the same experiences as the subjects, to understand better why they acted in the way they did and to see things as those involved see things." (Wellington, 2000). However, as the author does not have disabilities, a complete understanding of the needs of students with disabilities was impossible and this may have generated errors in data collection. It is hoped that the methodological triangulation, which includes the voices of students, minimised any possible adverse effects. Filed notes were also compiled from a combination of listening and observing as opportunities arose for the author to have direct interaction with students.

The access audit awarded points on a scale of 0-5, based on the availability and accessibility of established criteria. Careful examination of the British Standard, 'Design of Buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people', combined with research from the literature search enabled the compilation of a list of accessibility criteria for HE library services. The audit included issues such as access to the front of the building, lighting and signage, movement around the library, alternative information formats, provision of auxiliary aids, accessibility of the library OPAC and web pages.

Results

Adopting the triangulation approach created a large quantity of rich qualitative data. This paper examines the most interesting and revealing findings, focusing on:

- Policies for students with disabilities within the context of SENDA;
- Procedures, including the identification of students with disabilities, the monitoring of services, disability awareness training and the promotion of services; and
- Practices, including the accessibility of the built environment, access to printed and electronic information and the provision of assistive technology and additional services.

Policies for students with disabilities

None of the case studies had a formal disability policy relating specifically to library and information service provision, however all institutions had university wide policies which included attention to disability issues. Some institutional policies were available in other formats including large print, audiotape and Braille and included information regarding the library alongside university-wide provision for people with disabilities. These policies emphasised key areas of library provision such as telephone points for library disability support contacts, the accessibility of library buildings, a brief introduction to specialist software and the availability of library publications in alternative formats. All libraries had written guides on service provision, with two libraries providing this in alternative formats including standard and large print, audiotape, Braille and electronic copy.

Many of the libraries were planning to address their absence of library policy covering their services. This often included producing a disability statement which would be regularly updated with the help of the institutions' disability office to ensure it was disability-friendly, for example, ensuring that the typeface and layout is appropriate for students with dyslexia and visual impairments.

Interviewees discussed the importance of raising disability awareness amongst academic and library staff, recognising that teaching and learning practices will need to change in relation to SENDA. SENDA recommends conducting an accessibility audit to help improve access to the built environment. Whilst accessibility audits had been conducted university-wide at all case studies, only one case study had completed an audit on a library basis. Two of the libraries had been built recently and accessibility had been fully considered, with one library enlisting the help of a wheelchair user to highlight potential accessibility problems whilst the building was still in its planning stage.

Procedures

The student questionnaire asked whether it is important to have a member of library staff to support students with disabilities. 92 per cent replied in the affirmative and the qualitative comments suggested that students have three main requirements:

- A support network involving more front-line staff;
- Better promotion and publicity of library contacts; and
- Library contacts with personal experiences of disability and the institution, enabling them to empathise with the challenges facing students with disabilities.

All libraries had at least one staff member with responsibility for supporting students with disabilities, and multi-site libraries had a disability representative at each site. In some cases, these contacts reported to an institution-wide working group or committee concerned with disability issues. At other libraries disability issues were a small part of contacts' responsibilities, usually alongside other issues such as service provision for part-time and distance learners or health and safety. However, one library had a group of disability contacts at different levels in the staff hierarchy and at different physical locations.

When considering the issue of disability awareness training, in all but one case, interviewees working on the front-line had received disability awareness training in the last month. Training included the impact of SENDA, using specialist software and general disability awareness training. Whilst disability awareness training was offered by student support services at all institutions, in only one case were there plans to make disability awareness training compulsory for all new and existing staff, which would go some way to addressing the problem that training often fails to attract those most in need. Staff were generally unenthusiastic about acquiring additional communicative skills such as British Sign Language, as they were sceptical that they would be able to make best use of it.

Many front-line staff were concerned about how they could identify students with disabilities so that their needs could be served. There are often no formal procedures for registering students with disabilities on a University-wide or departmental basis and interviewees recognised that there are often several reasons why students do not declare their disability:

- Some students declare their disability during the Admissions process but do not have day-to-day support needs, e.g. students with asthma or diabetes;
- Students with mental health problems are often unwilling to declare they may need additional help; and
- Students with hidden disabilities, e.g. dyslexia, may fear discrimination and stigmatisation.

Only one library recorded students' disabilities on their patron record and card. Here, students register their disability with student support services and receive an introductory letter from the library. Their ID card is marked with red waterproof ink and their patron record altered to include a series of hash marks, enabling staff to identify students who may need additional help without individuals having to disclose their personal circumstances.

Practices

This section discusses selected results of the access audits undertaken in all five case study libraries, covering the built environment and printed and electronic information resources.

All buildings scored highly for affording protection from the weather via a canopy or recessed entrance, for those 'having to pause before entering a building.' Obstructions such as flower tubs and litter bins, can be dangerous for all, particularly people with visual impairments and mobility difficulties. While in one case, obstacles such as litter bins were appropriately painted in contrasting colours, at another library benches, litter bins and bicycle racks were dull and lacked colour contrast. Overhanging foliage was a problem at another library, with shrubbery obscuring the entrance.

In terms of car parking facilities, all car parks had dropped kerbs and grouped disabled parking bays together, maximising visibility. However, no libraries had monitoring procedures to prevent misuse, and in one of the cases none of the vehicles parked in the disabled bays displayed a disabled badge.

Provision of automated doors at library entrances was often inadequate. BS8300 states that the principal door entrance must be 'usable by disabled people', recommending a power-operated door operated either by a push pad or card swipe or a door controlled by a motion sensor or hands-free proximity reader. Only one library had an automatic door and whilst library staff recognised the necessity for automatic doors, funding remained the biggest issue.

Internally, all libraries had well-lit corridors, although a couple had patches of light and dark, which can be disorientating for people with visual impairments. The provision of adjustable blinds was inconsistent throughout all buildings and they were often in poor working order. Notably, task lighting was absent from all libraries. Three student questionnaire respondents noted that poor lighting discourages them from using the library and at one of the libraries, students had requested the maximisation of natural light, now being addressed through planar glazing. This library was also investigating the possibility of lamps that produce light in variable colours to aid users with dyslexia.

All disabled toilets were clean and functional, however, with one exception, they did not take into account the extra room for manoeuvre for wheelchair users. All the libraries had lifts though in some cases these were for use of staff and people with disabilities only. In one case, this meant that a RADAR key was necessary, students having to request a key from the issue counter each time they use the library, particularly awkward at peak times.

BS8300 recommends the provision of adjustable desks and workspaces with appropriate room for manoeuvre for people with restricted mobility. Only one library had adjustable desks and also

had plans to invest in more. Accessibility of study spaces for wheelchair users varied greatly. Whilst group study desks were often accessible they offered an inferior study environment and many desks in silent study areas were individual carrels which were too narrow and too high for wheelchair users. However, one library did have desk provision for documents to be held vertically. The majority of shelving was too high, and one student questionnaire with Larsens syndrome (limited mobility and stature) said that she was discouraged from using the library as she is 'too short to browse properly.' Whilst she said that most staff will fetch books immediately, some weekend staff are unsure of their professional responsibilities with regard to this. Three libraries made arrangements for book retrieval services, with students either emailing the library with a book list or notifying staff when they would be in the library.

Library signage was often found to be inadequate. No libraries used Braille, tactile information or universally accepted pictograms. Shelf labelling was often criticised by student questionnaire respondents as too high and not very legible, particularly for those with visual impairments or dyslexia. Students would have preferred guides to topics, rather than the standard classification system. Signs and navigational signage were often inappropriate. Safety signage was often at a height disabling for those with visual impairments or wheelchair users and floor maps were often too small and difficult to read because of the colour of the background or text or inappropriate use of typefaces such as italic.

Moving on to the provision of printed information sources, no libraries provided large-print copies or alternative formats for short loan materials. However, alternative formats were available on demand, such as: alternative background colours for printed documentation to aid people with visual impairments or dyslexia and alternative orientation tours, e.g. printed, audio or online. A range of assistive technologies was also available in many of the libraries. Three libraries provided access to dyslexic software products and all libraries provided access to a Kutzweil machine. With

the exception of one library, all provided access to Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) to aid people with visual impairments and some libraries also provided low tech solutions such as colour overlays, key guards and full sheet magnifiers and hand held magnifying glasses. None of the libraries provided hearing loops, and one student questionnaire respondent talked about the 'exhausting difficulties' in communication resulting from a 'bad sound system' and absence of T boxes.

The majority of students (62 per cent) felt that the Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs) in the libraries were good and some libraries had obviously made moves to enhance the accessibility of their OPACs and libraries' web pages. Some of the interesting OPAC features included: a spell-check facility to allow for variant spellings; easy navigation using navigational buttons; search prompts; and the ability to remember a previous search trail. Similarly, the libraries' web pages often included links to departmental resources such as reading lists and module specifications.

In summary, the results of the interviews, questionnaires and access audits suggest the higher education library provision for students with disabilities is inconsistent across the sector. Despite the standards produced by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), there appears to be no consensus of opinion as to what constitutes appropriate provision. Library provision is often made on an ad-hoc basis, lacking formal policy implementation. Whilst there are many examples of good practice including access to enabling assistive technologies there are numerous areas for improvement including disability awareness training and access to the built environment.

Conclusions and recommendations

Provision for HE library services for students with disabilities is inconsistent. Whilst library services are appropriate and accessible with regard to some aspects of provision, they fail on other grounds. It is anticipated that this may

influence admissions with students to attend institutions which make good provision for their individual needs. Institutions may become renowned for their excellence in providing for a specific disability, creating 'ghettos' and with these new forms of discrimination. To some extent this already evident at one of the case studies. Here an undergraduate course in Deaf Studies attracts approximately 300 students and services provided by the library demonstrate the institutions' commitment to supporting people with hearing impairments.

With the abolition of grants and students paying their own tuition fees, financial restrictions may mean that some have little choice but to attend an institution close to the parental home. If this institution fails to make adequate provision for their disability, this creates significant barriers to accessing higher education. SENDA legislates against this 'ghetto mentality'. It is now mandatory for all institutions to provide for the needs of people with various disabilities.

Recommendations for improvement

Recommendations for improvement in library provision include:

- Improved dissemination of good practice amongst HE library practitioners: New and improved networks enabling the celebration and sharing of successful practice such as the CLAUD network or the DIS-Forum.
- Compilation of formal disability policies on an institution-wide and library basis: Policy explained via disability statement available in standard and large print, audiotape, Braille and via the Internet. Similarly, detailed guides to library services available in alternative formats.
- Accessibility audits: Conducted in collaboration with students, adopting an ethnographic approach and learning from students' experiences. Audits should also involve discussions with library staff to assess services and staff attitudes.
- Teams of disability representatives for each site library. This should increase the probability that staff should be available should students require assistance.
- Compulsory disability awareness training. This should be integrated into customer care training for all new and existing staff and should include: raising awareness of the needs of students with disabilities, the availability of facilities and services and re-thinking staff attitudes.
- On-going departmental feedback targeted at users and non-users with disabilities. Surveys should be conducted via feedback mechanisms preferred by students e.g. email feedback. Personal communications with non-users, including focus groups and informal interviews.
- Better identification of students with specific learning difficulties. Improved liaison with student support services ensuring information regarding registering students is forwarded to library services. Disabilities noted discreetly on patron records to increase staff awareness of users' additional needs.
- Improvements to the built environment. New buildings and renovations to existing buildings to fully consider accessibility. Phasing-in of smaller alterations, e.g. adaptations to signage, re-painting wall-finished and the provision of accessible study desks.
- Consideration of more low-tech solutions. Examples include: trolleys to carry books, tracker ball mouse, foam arm rests, book and copy holders, lap trays, focused lighting, pen grips and line trackers. Demand monitored via user consultation.
- Increase availability of study rooms/carrels for users with various disabilities including mobility impairments, visual impairments and specific learning difficulties.

References

BS8300: 2001. *Design of Buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people*. A licence copy can be obtained from the British Standards website at:
<http://bsonline.techindex.co.uk>

CLAUD: Librarians in HE networking to improve access for disabled students
URL:
<http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/AccessUnitPRD/CLAUD>

DIS-Forum: Discussion list for disabled students and their support staff at:
<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/dis-forum.html>

Wellington, Jerry (2000). *Educational Research: Contemporary Issues and Practical Approaches*. London: Continuum.