Coming Ready or Not – Supporting Disabled Students in Changing Times in England

As I began to prepare this article, my two granddaughters were playing a game of hide-and-seek. True to the rules, one went to hide whilst the other counted to one hundred before shouting, 'Coming ready or not!'. It struck me then that this phrase would be an appropriate title for my paper given what I want to say – so thank you, Eva and Bo! Let me explain.

It is clear that in many countries, different approaches to supporting disabled students in third level/higher education are beginning to gather momentum. The strategy underpinning most of them involves a shift from being reactive to being proactive, the latter focusing on strategy and on anticipation and moving away from post-hoc actions for individual students. For instance, some years ago, in one university a lecture to a year group of about 300 students involved making adjustments for some 30 individual students. After persuading the tutor to create notes in advance and make them available electronically so that students could change font, type size, colour contrast etc. the number of students requiring changes fell to just 10. The first major concern with universal curriculum design can be demonstrated by the number of conferences, keynote speakers and workshop sessions on the topic - for example, the AHEAD conference in Dublin in March. (The proceedings can be accessed via AHEAD's website at www.ahead.ie) The second major concern is with inclusive pedagogy where the approaches to learning, teaching and assessment are intended to embrace the needs of a variety of students including those with a range of impairments. I shall return to this second concern when discussing professional development for disability services and teaching staff later.

Implications for the role and responsibilities of specialist disability services staff

The spread of these two features has significant implications for the role and responsibilities of specialist disability services staff (although being strictly accurate, at the time of writing, there remains a lack of clear research evidence that universal curriculum design and inclusive pedagogy have a positive impact on the experiences of disabled students and their levels of attainment). I think too that there are implications for others, especially teaching staff. There will be a need for universal curriculum design and inclusive pedagogy to be included in both basic and in on-going staff training and professional development – in which disability specialists ought to have a role. This is just the first of a number of implications which will be explored in what follows.

To begin with, disability services staff will need to work more strategically to ensure that they can influence important decisions on policies and practices. For example, they could be useful participants in groups and committees responsible for validation of new courses, periodic reviews of existing courses, and quality assurance. As a simple example, questions should be asked about the impact of the proposed learning approaches used in the course on students with a range of impairments. It might be that the programme includes a work placement as a core non-negotiable element, so this should be explored in relation to disabled students. **Next**, disability services staff will need to adapt many of their current practices to act in a more advisory and consultative capacity since in a genuinely inclusive institution disability is everybody's responsibility. Taking academic assessment as an example, disability specialists should be there to offer advice on a range of possible adjustments (based on knowledge and experience) and not to make the actual practical arrangements such as invigilation or venue. Even if universal

course design and inclusive pedagogy have been introduced, there will still be a small number of disabled students who will continue to need changes to the assessment programme. However, to return to the point, whoever is responsible for exam arrangements must take on responsibility for actually making any modifications which are needed by disabled students.

A crucial aspect of the changed role is involvement in training and professional development. However, depending on their own backgrounds and experiences, some disability services staff might have to acquire more knowledge about curriculum design and pedagogy in order to establish their credibility in this field. Once they have this and are recognised as such, they can participate fully in training and development for other staff. They will need to consider ways of delivering these. Using my own sessions as an example, in more recent times I have moved the focus away from using case studies of individuals with physical, sensory, and nonvisible impairments towards exploring issues relevant to inclusive course design, learning, teaching, and academic assessment.

Often, I use the strategy advocated in the Teachability programme which involves asking teaching staff to first identify the core, non-negotiable elements of a course they are familiar with, then to consider the barriers these might present for students with a range of impairments, and finally to suggest ways in which these barriers might be overcome (SHEFC 2000). Looking back, I think that it is fair to claim that what the Teachability programme was attempting to do from the year 2000 onwards was well ahead of its time. It is necessary to recognise that all staff are under great pressure in terms of having time to attend sessions; also, there could be limits to the funding available to support attendance at events. One way is to make greater use of IT-based training, although this does not address some important issues such as whether participation is compulsory or by free choice. (See Hurst 2006 for a more detailed discussion of issues linked to training and development.)

So what might the future look like?

One valuable example comes from the Open University in the UK which has an excellent record of making high quality provision for its disabled students and has been a leader in the field. I can do no better than use the descriptive summary which opens a recent article which outlines the new development:

> The Open University has an established infrastructure for supporting disabled students. Historically the thrust of this support has focused on accessibility of materials once they have been produced. In 2012 the OU implemented Securing Greater Accessibility (SeGA) to raise awareness and bring about an institutional change to curriculum design so that the needs of all students, including disabled students, are taken into account from the outset of module design and production. A core component of SeGA was the introduction of faculty accessibility specialists (AS). (Slater et al 2015 opening abstract).

This development put the OU in a good position vis-a-vis the changes that are being made between 2015 and 2017 to the funding of disabled students in England. (Control of education in Scotland and Wales has been devolved to their respective national governments.) The process began in April 2015 when the then Secretary of State announced that the system of providing Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs) was to be modified. This was met with considerable criticism from the sector, much of which was about the timescale for the implementation of the changes. Since that first announcement, agreement has been reached with a new Secretary of State about a

revised longer schedule for their implementation to allow everyone in the sector to get prepared for the new context. What has not altered, however, is the government's intention to monitor the spending on DSA to ensure that funds are directed towards the most needy, such as those who need considerable levels of support, and also to ensure that the institutions take on their proper responsibilities in an inclusive setting. For example, many of the services currently financed by the individual student's DSA are to be provided at no cost to the disabled students by the institutions themselves (SLC 2015).This will free up funds for the more targeted approach. Incidentally, there has been no mention by the government that the total amount spent on the DSA will be cut, but many have chosen to interpret it in that way.

Are we ready?

So, in England at least, change is underway. The question now is whether disability services staff are ready to respond. My personal view is somewhat negative; I feel that many still have work to do. I base my position on my experiences of working with the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) on its accreditation scheme. (For a full account of the scheme and how it developed and is organised see Hurst 2015.) Since the scheme was implemented in 2013, many members of the NADP have had their applications returned to them for further work and thus could not be accredited. Advice about how to amend their submissions so that they reach the standard required for accreditation has been provided both by mentors and by members of the accreditation panel. It appears that those applications returned for revision demonstrate the need for staff to engage in more critical reflection on their actions and activities in their daily work and on more sector-wide issues too. This process needs to be informed by sound knowledge of some relevant key sources such as codes of practice and legislation as the very minimum. In addition, there should be some awareness of more general policy matters and their possible implications for disabled students – for example the annual reports from the Office for Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE) on the complaints raised by students (which does include a separate section on disabled students who have raised issues which their institutions could not resolve to their satisfaction). In addition it would be helpful if disability services staff had some awareness of recent relevant research such as that of Fuller et al (2009) whose book is actually called 'Improving Disabled Students' Learning'. They should also be familiar with discussions around various models of disability or about the nature of specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

After all, practice informed by up-to-date knowledge is a fundamental characteristic of working as a professional.

I hope that these comments prompt further debate and discussion. Let us not forget where we started and that game of hide-and-seek.

Change is coming – ready or not!

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