Chapter 11

Disabled Students in Higher Education: Lessons from Establishing a Staff Disability Forum

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contains a case study, set in a major UK University, concerning the evolution, progress and actions resulting from establishing a staff disability forum. The discussion of the case study enables us to offer a series of recommendations for other organisations wishing to establish such a forum. The forum was initially established as a means of consulting with disabled staff but it rapidly evolved into an action group with a remit of initiating and monitoring key actions such as reviewing disability education, running major consultation events and organising a Quality Enhancement Audit, which includes the important issue of seeking to avoid unwitting discrimination in policies or procedures.

INTRODUCTION

Leeds Metropolitan University has a stated commitment to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment and to promote equality of opportunity and positive attitudes towards disabled people. The University is also committed to consult with both disabled students and staff. One practical means of doing this was to establish a ‘Disability Action Group’ (DAG). This was first convened in 2007 with the following agreed terms of reference: (i) To provide a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss issues relating to disability. (ii) To provide support and networking. (iii) To share best
practice. (iv) To contribute to policy development across the University. (v) To contribute to staff development and awareness raising in relation to equality and diversity. (vi) To ensure the group has a credible presence for the disabled community through the membership and participation of disabled people.

The mode of operation was to meet four to six times a year and to report to the University’s ‘Disability Strategy Group’. This latter group provided a strategic steer for the University, with DAG undertaking projects or acting as a ‘sounding board’ on behalf of the Strategy Group. DAG is made open to all staff and students of the University who are willing to make a commitment to the group and the role and responsibilities of membership and encourages both disabled participants and others with a personal or research interest in disability to participate.

DAG has evolved since its inception in 2007, responding to changes in the University structure, to governance changes and to changes in equality and diversity legalisation, for example in the UK the 2010 Equality Act (ECU, 2010). This chapter will chart the progress of DAG, serving as a case study which it is believed will be of interest to other higher education institutions (HEI), and will offer a series of recommendations, based upon our experience, as to how to establish and maintain such a group. The following sections outline the key actions of the group.

The Work of the Disability Action Group: Consultation

In 2007, DAG supervised and supported a ‘Garden Party’, primarily to facilitate consultation with a range of disabled people in the local community, enabling feedback concerning what the University was doing well and what could be improved upon. Here we present the publicity used for the event, in the expectation that this might serve as a useful starting point for other HEIs who may be considering a similar approach:

On Friday the 31st of August 2007 the beautiful grounds of our Headingley Campus will play host to the Leeds Metropolitan University Community Garden Party. The event is being organised by our Equality & Diversity Unit and its purpose is to forge partnerships with people from the university and the wider community that are affected by disability issues. We hope that the spirit of the event will encourage informal discussions about the obstacles faced by potential students and employees due to a disability. As a dedicated equal opportunities employer and firm promoter of widening participation in education, we hope to use what we learn to feed into a review of how we recruit and support disabled staff and students.

A number of useful recommendations arose from the consultation exercise. These recommendations may provide a useful ‘checklist’ for other HEIs, so it is worth articulating them in full here:

1. All University departments should complete ‘Equality Impact Assessments’, in order to ensure that accessibility to all buildings and services is not discriminatory against people with mobility impairments.
2. Halls of residence that have suitable scope for development into accommodation that includes adequate facilities for 24 hour carers should be identified.
3. A sustainable model of accessibility for disabled university students is required. The model should use technology and innovative adaptation programmes to create an economically sound business model for inclusion of disabled students.
4. Navigation issues for disabled student access to buildings and services should be addressed.
5. Equality groups should evaluate proposals to make new buildings accessible ‘beyond compliance’ in terms of suitable signage in various alternative formats, induction loops and accessibility systems.