Chapter 16
Reigniting the Voice of Disabled People in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This concluding chapter brings together the key threads woven throughout the book. It provides an overall summary of the progress made by higher education across the UK in making inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practice a reality.

The analysis reinforces the complexity of the situation. It identifies clear momentum factors which have supported progressive approaches to inclusive practice, but also identifies key issues which have slowed down, and even limited the extent of expected achievements. This complex situation is overlaid with an exploration of the wider public policy changes which have taken place at the same time.

The second part of this chapter sets out the challenges for reigniting the voice of disabled people in higher education. Drawing on models of practice from other sectors, it sets out the key principles for putting choice and control back into the hands of individual disabled people.

INTRODUCTION

In the concluding chapter of our last key text we focused on disability issues in higher education (Adams & Brown, 2006), and we outlined a ‘manifesto for change’. This manifesto acknowledged the tremendous developments which had already taken place: particularly the transformation of the higher education context to improve accessibility but equally important has been the development of organisational infrastructure. This is manifested most vividly through the creation of disability offices, now commonplace throughout the UK higher
education sector, which take overall responsibility in many universities to promote inclusive practice for disabled students. The biggest challenge facing the sector at the time was in taking the next steps to change and embedding both the appropriate processes and required outcomes relating to inclusive assessment, learning, and teaching and their interface with disabled students.

Our manifesto was wide ranging in its scope and the following points reflect and develop selected key issues which we argued:

• It is essential to build credibility by further developing rigorous and evidence-based pedagogy which convinces both disability practitioners and those within the academic community that inclusive practice is not only appropriate but also highly effective. Inclusive pedagogic practice for disabled students usually represents highly effective pedagogy for all students since it focuses on what students can do rather than what they cannot, thus enabling students to maximise their potential.
• Those involved in learning and teaching need to continue to engage fully with research and scholarship and make best use of the range of international literature available. This will facilitate the adoption of action learning approaches, enabling the monitoring of the success of innovative initiatives, and prompting us to fine tune our practices, leading to wide disseminating of what we find works well.
• Practitioners need to think inclusively when designing assessment instruments, so alternative and reasonable adjustments to assignments for disabled students are built in from the outset enabling them to have equivalent if not identical learning experiences.
• It is essential to engage disabled students in all stages of curriculum design and review, so that inclusive practices are informed by ‘lived experience’.
• An awareness of disability matters needs to be embedded into the curriculum for all students, so that disability awareness is mainstreamed and fellow students engage in inclusive practices themselves, since it is acknowledged that fellow students can commonly be a source of discrimination.
• It is essential to draw on and adapt good practice that already exists in other institutions, learning from other sectors and other nations as appropriate.
• We need to promote pragmatic approaches and engage in academic/staff development to further raise awareness of inclusive practice.
• Staff in the sector need to continue regularly and thoroughly to reflect on our own practice to ensure continuous improvement and learning from the experience of others.
• We also need to avoid being risk averse, trying out different and innovative approaches while basing our practice on sound pedagogic research and maximising the involvement of others, especially disabled students and practitioners.

CONTEXT

Progress

The analysis of the extent to which universities and colleges have made demonstrable progress is mixed. In many ways the content of the chapters in this book crystallises the current position and provides a good barometer. On the one hand we recognise pockets of excellence both in terms of engaging with new technologies (see Ball’s chapter as a good example) and advances in more specific subject areas (Moore’s chapter on computer-based learning systems for people with autism excellently illustrates the subject focus).