

Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

United Kingdom case study report 2 Teachability: A curriculum for disabled pupils

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October 2007

The EPASI project is a programme of analysis of educational programmes in fourteen European countries, designed to address various forms of social inequality. The project analysis was conducted in the period 2007 – 2009. This report is part of the overall project, details of which are at <http://www.epasi.eu>.

The analysis is intended to be used within the overall framework of the EPASI programme.

The project has been funded with support from the European Commission. Each report within the overall project is the responsibility of the named authors.

The EPASI project was conducted by the following institutions:

- The Institute for Policy Studies in Education, London Metropolitan University (UK) (Coordinator)
- Katholieke Hogeschool Zuid-West-Vlaanderen (Belgium)
- Univerzita Hradec Králové (Czech Republic)
- Montpellier III - Université Paul Valéry (France)
- Panepistimio Patron ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΠΑΤΡΩΝ (Greece)
- Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona (Spain)
- Malmö högskola (Sweden)



Teachability: A curriculum for disabled pupils

Summary

This case study reviews the Teachability project based at Strathclyde University. Teachability assessed curriculum provision for disabled students in Scotland and designed a set of workshops and publications to enable staff in Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) to improve access to the curriculum. This case study sets the project in its historical and political context, describes its aims and objectives, the stages of its implementation, and the project outcomes.

Background on disabled students' progress

- The number of students declaring a disability entering higher education has increased by over two-thirds between 2000-01 and 2005-06, from 82,000 to 138,000.
- The proportion of full-time first degree students who receive the Disabled Students Allowance has risen for the third year running, from 2.6 percent in 2002-03 to 3.6 percent in 2004-05.
- Disabled students that receive allowances are more likely to continue their courses. But the proportion of students who get allowances varies widely between institutions and is particularly low among part-time students (NAO 2007).

Legislative Background

The Teachability project was developed in response to changes in UK disability laws. The most important change was the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) which outlaws discrimination against disabled people in employment, health and the provision of goods and services. In the United Kingdom, the Disability Discrimination Act defines disability using the medical model - disabled people are defined as people with particular conditions, or limitations on their ability to carry out certain activities. The Act's emphasis on employers and service providers to make 'reasonable adjustments' to their policies or practices, or to their premises, follows a social model of disability which constructs barriers to participation as disabling rather than physical or mental conditions or limitations. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) also requires public bodies to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 amended the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) and extended its reach to education providers. Both Part 4 of the DDA (1995) and the 2001 Act placed the emphasis on providers to anticipate the needs of disabled staff and students and in the case of the DDA explicitly placed HE institutions under a duty to 'anticipate reasonable adjustments'. In addition to this the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education introduced a code of practice for meeting the needs of disabled students. This consisted of a set of 24 standards and HEIs were expected to have regard for them by 2000-01.

In response to the new disabilities legislation the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC though now the Scottish Funding Council) funded the provision of disability services staff in each Scottish Higher Education Institution (HEI). In 1998 the funding council decided that these advisors were well placed to audit Scottish HEI provision for disabled students and devised three projects aimed at improving provision for disabled students. The need for providers to be proactive rather than reactive in their provision for disabled learners formed the basis for the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council's call for research and projects to enhance access to HE for disabled learners.

In 2000 SHEFC launched a wide-ranging programme to assess access to Scottish HEIs. The programme worth £300,000 was allocated to Scotland's 18 HEIs to evaluate their provision in order to ensure that they are compliant with disability legislation. Of this £108,000 went to Strathclyde University for the Teachability – Access to the Curriculum project to conduct a curriculum audit. The other projects funded under this programme were an audit of policies and procedures carried out by Skill (the national bureau for Students with Disabilities) and an audit of the institutions' estates carried out by the Joint Mobility Unit of the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

These projects in line with recent legislation are grounded in the social model of disability which argues that it is external barriers to accessing education rather than physical impairment which disadvantage disabled learners. They also recognised the importance of actively engaging with disabled learners and each project was asked to work in consultation with disabled student groups in devising and implementing their programme. The Teachability project provides materials and support to enable academic staff to assess their curriculum, course design and materials for accessibility.

The Projects Aims and Objectives

In the spring of 2000, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council decided to conduct an audit of the provision for disabled students as part of its duties under the disability legislation. The overall aims of the Disability Needs Analyses were to obtain information for institutions and for SHEFC on current provision for disabled students, to feed into the funding decisions made and to make recommendations for enhancing the provision available in Scottish HEIs. The Teachability - Access to the Curriculum strand moved beyond auditing provision and SHEFC recognised that the project's approach (providing academic colleagues with the resources and support with which to conduct their own self audit of provision for disabled students) would fulfil an important, additional staff development objective. SHEFC's key goal for Teachability shifted towards broader improvement in access to the curriculum, informing those institutions not already engaged in the developmental work.

Implementation of the project

Phase 1- The Disability Needs Analysis

Teachability was funded as a 3 year project, with a pilot impact assessment of curriculum materials and courses in 15 pilot departments. The impact assessment material was informed by focus groups with disabled students conducted by the disability services department across the pilot HEIs. The project operated with a team of seven people and in the first phase one day workshops were held with institutional staff chosen to conduct the self audit of curriculum accessibility. Each participating pilot department then carried out an evaluation of current provision and made the following recommendations:

- Communication systems within departments and across institutions should support the necessary flow of information about the needs of individual disabled students to relevant staff.
- HEIs should provide increased staff development:
 - (i) in inclusive teaching practices which will anticipate the likely needs of future disabled students and
 - (ii) in adaptations to delivery appropriate for individual disabled students.

- Departments should make use of enabling technology to improve provision and associated support, and audit the disabling and enabling effects of technology used to support teaching and learning.
- HEIs need to assess the nature and level of staffing, and supporting management structures required for the development of curricula accessible to disabled students.
- HEI's must ensure agreement over and subsequent publication of standards of provision for disabled students in course design and delivery. This relates to the necessity to ensure that disabled applicants, as well as course selectors, are aware of the ability of academic departments to meet the needs of disabled students.
- Course planning must anticipate disabled students' needs in all elements of the curriculum, including placements, field trips and study abroad, where needs may be more complex.
- Departments should evaluate the progress and experience of disabled students, to ensure that note is taken of the nature and extent of difficulties encountered, as well as solutions found.
- HEIs must evaluate and implement improvements to physical access, including furnishing of teaching accommodation.
- Departments must consider the accessibility of all courses, in all subject areas and at all levels. They must also remember that the duties of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act are not confined to undergraduate programmes of study.

These were mainly at the level of individual teaching practices, departmental arrangements, institutional systems, IT facilities, physical access and furnishings, the nature of subjects or disciplines and external factors, such as the requirements of professional bodies.

An important early finding was the wide variation in the accessibility of curricula for disabled students within the same or relevantly similar subject areas within the same and across different institutions. This variation suggested that it was not possible to generalise about the accessible curriculum according to broad areas, such as laboratory or arts based subjects. The variations in accessibility seemed to be linked to (i) variations in practices, attitudes and knowledge of academic staff, and (ii) equipment, staff and technological resources available to the departments.

The Disability Needs Analysis recommended that the Funding Council should:

- Seek to assist institutions to have in place by September 2002, communication systems which allow relevant staff to be informed of the needs of disabled students in the academic environment.
- Require institutions to reflect in their strategic plans, particularly in sections which articulate staff information and development strategy, arrangements to ensure compliance with statutory standards in relation to disabled students
- Exhort institutions to publicise accessible course and programme information which will convey relevant course information enabling informed subject, course or programme choice, and reflecting the institution's commitment to making reasonable adjustments to course design and delivery.

Phase 2 - Helping higher education staff create and deliver an accessible curriculum.

The second phase of the project involved the publication of *Teachability: Creating an Accessible Curriculum for Students with Disabilities* (2000), a booklet which helps academic staff to evaluate the accessibility of their course provision for disabled students.

<http://www.teachability.strath.ac.uk/original/downloads/teachability.doc>

The original booklet led onto the publication of further booklets addressing the following topics:

- Creating accessible lectures, seminars and information on courses
- Accessible course design
- Creating accessible placements and practical classes.
- Creating accessible e-learning resources for disabled students
- Creating accessible examinations and assessments

The programme's publications were complemented by a series of workshops for Higher Education professionals which provided support and training in using Teachability for both evaluative and course design purposes. This phase of the programme was initially planned to run from November 2003 to March 2005 but was eventually extended for a further four months until July 2005.

Project Outcomes

An estimated 1,100 academic staff have taken part in Teachability workshops or assessments and 18 institutions have been involved. An average of 25 half or whole day workshops per year have been carried out, either in individual institutions or as regional workshops since 1999. An estimated 1,100 academic staff played an active part in using Teachability towards a departmental evaluation of curriculum accessibility and preparation of a strategy for change. The Teachability project was originally developed by the University of Strathclyde for five institutions in the West of Scotland but due to its success, the original booklets have now been distributed to a further 13 institutions.

Although the project was not externally evaluated (the project produced a final report but this was not made available to the public) it is possible to assess the impact of the project on HEI activity in Scotland. A search of Scottish HEIs demonstrates widespread use of Teachability as an audit tool and it has established itself as a way to demonstrate compliance with current disability legislation.

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