

Disability Equality Duty

As part of its commitment to the equality agenda MMU held 4 student disability focus groups attended by 20 in June 2006 to get the views of students about the university. Whilst the number of students who participated are small and the views and experiences that follow can not be seen as representative of all disabled students, they are clearly important and will help inform actions within the University's first Disability Equality Scheme.

1. Disclosure p.54: 3.10

Overall there was a feeling that more effort needed to be made in order to develop a climate of confidence for disclosure as not all students are ready to disclose before or at the beginning of a course. The reasons for this lay in fear of prejudice (of not being offered a place), that there was no opportunity to give detail of a condition on the UCAS form and the use of the word 'disabled' which is a problem as some do not see themselves as disabled.

There was an expectation that if one had disclosed on the UCAS form this would mean that their tutors would have been informed, however tutors often didn't know. It was generally felt that students with a 'visible' disability found it easier to disclose compared to those with a 'hidden' disability and that it can be difficult to get across to staff how serious an invisible disability is. Some staff feel unable to ask students what support they need for fear of thinking they should know without needing to ask. All the students were happy to be asked, and understood that this was how staff learnt. Staff reactions to disclosure were mixed and with some there was a general lack of awareness about the ramifications of disability. It was felt that some staff handled disclosure insensitively and tactlessly and some gave no credit to students for their own judgement of their condition. However it was felt that these attitudes were not discriminatory but were the result of tutors being overworked with no time to deal with disability issues.

The group felt that some students were unaware of the benefits of disclosure and suggested that there be more information about

Learning Support both pre- entry and once in university for both students and staff as this would facilitate more timely referrals. They noted that many students only come to Learning Support when they have reached crisis point.

2. Personal Learning Plans (PLP) p.47: 2.3

This process was felt to be slow with information not filtering through to staff; that some staff did not read the PLP resulting in students having to repeat information, or to rudeness by staff ignorant of the need for special arrangements. Some students did not always get a copy of their PLPS and were unaware of its recommendations. For students on sandwich courses there was the difficulty that the support ended after 3 years meaning they had to wait in their final year for support to continue. It seemed to be a departmental/ faculty lottery as to the level of service received and that a lot of 'pushing' and 'shouting' was required to get what was needed. This links into the importance of disability awareness training for all staff. Students recommended that guidelines on the PLP process and what students and tutors have to do should be produced.

Exams

Exam errors occurred due to a lack of information i.e. changes to exams not being sufficiently explained, Invigilators for students in separate rooms being ignorant of the subject and so unable to answer exam-related questions (whereas main venue is invigilated by subject specialist).

Learning Support (LS)

In the main this got good feedback though a number felt that LS suffered from institutionalised problems; bureaucracy was a key element to this feeling and the time lag between disclosure and getting the support put into place was felt to be too long; support arriving too late to impact on study (very problematic for short courses). One student reported that after disclosing at registration, no one told her to go to LS and it felt as if her disclosure had gone into a void. Others felt that the management of the process by themselves is very hard especially if feeling ill, as there are too many different organisations to deal with e.g. LEA, manufacturers of special equipment etc. Students commented that there was no

follow up from LS to see if equipment had arrived or to check if the PLP had been put into place.

Discontent was felt not with individual advisers but at the system within which they are working which is old fashioned and seemingly only there due to a legal requirement rather than to help people. Some felt they had to fight for their rights to get what they were entitled to. It was suggested LS should be decentralised to combat access problems for students not based at All Saints.

Access Summit

Generally this was given a good review but the level of service was felt to be dependent upon the quality of the assessor and there was no consistent approach; some students getting a superior outcome to others. It was also felt that there needed to be better co-ordination between Access Summit, department tutors and LS.

Training

Criticism of the effectiveness of computer support to accompany supportive software; some had received no training, others had found the training inadequate. Some were supplementing equipment with their own to make it work properly.

Tutors

General lack of understanding from some tutors about needs disabled students have; one teacher training student noted that no disability training was given to students and that her tutor could not answer disability related questions.

Library

Generally given good feedback but it was felt that more staff training was needed regarding invisible disabilities. It was suggested that library staff should be informed of a student's need as part of disclosure process.

The main issues lay around the age/ quality of some of the equipment and the lack of knowledge of some of the technical staff. The catalogue computers don't permit text to be enlarged, but they felt that plans to put JAWS on the network would improve things for visually impaired students.

Student Union (SU)

SU had no impact and it had not crossed anyone's mind that it could do anything about disability issues. There was praise for the advice centre.

Access (physical/ signage/ lecture notes etc)

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All felt it was important to build in access at the design stage for all new buildings. A number of buildings were deemed to be non disability friendly including the SU, Ormond, Sugden Sports Centre and John Dalton. Other buildings - Didsbury, Geoffrey Manton, All Saints Library, Hollings and Gaskell were seen to be improving though not perfect. More disabled parking is also needed.

- **Accessible toilets**

There is misuse of accessible toilets by non disabled people which causes distress and makes students late for lectures etc. The ones at Didsbury have been out of action for more than 6 months due to repairs and on other sites you need to get keys to use them. Some toilets appear not to be checked regularly and often lack toilet rolls/ pull cords etc.

- **Lifts**

Problems were caused by regular break downs, being too small for wheelchair users and being non-speaking. The All Saints Library and new part of John Dalton were good and accessible.

- **Accessible Formats**

Students noted difficulties in getting lecture notes in enough time and in suitable formats. Interactive whiteboards need to be utilized more and it was suggested that summary notes of lectures should be provided and that all handouts / lecture materials be posted on to web CT.

- **Fire Alarms**

Some tutors do not know how to act/deal with disabled students when fire alarms go.

- **Signage**

More large print signs and campus maps are needed

- **Work experience/Placements**

There is a lack of information about student's legal rights on placement. Some tutors automatically discriminate without the full knowledge of the needs of the disabled student i.e. travel.

The good things at MMU

Generally, MMU is perceived as a good, 'inclusive' university

- **Student Services** p.48: 2.4

This was seen as very good. Learning Support was praised for being helpful and easy to talk to and for opening up access to the range of support available. The Careers Service for targeted e-mails and for promoting support available to disabled students. It was also noted that having a disabled person in post was good as it helped with empathy. Both Counselling and CoMMUni were seen to be very helpful.

- **Academics**

Some academic staff have gone out of their way to support students, and asked “how can we help you?” They made it possible to go on field trips

- **Sport** p.65:3

¹Facilities not so good and can be daunting

Is MMU getting better?

Consensus was that MMU is improving and that it is better than the other universities in the city. There was also an overwhelming view that the support available and the attitudes of staff towards disabled students was much better than that in the school/ FE sector.

In an ideal world, what would you like to see put in place?

- More disability awareness training for staff and students
- Deputy VC for disability issues
- Departmental disability officers
- Separate induction event for disabled students
- More focus groups for disabled students
- More staff in Learning Support
- Access Summit – more training for mentors
- The mentoring of disabled students by disabled students (study mentor not always appropriate for some disabilities i.e. Mental Health Difficulties)
- Centralised funding for student support needs (not LEA)
- Training for exam invigilators
- More jobs for disabled graduates p.66

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