

## **The Sixth *QHE* Seminar**

### **The End of Quality?**

**Birmingham, 25–26 May, 2001**

## **Disabled students in higher education and quality: Current public policy issues**

**Ozcan Konur**

**City University, London**

### **Abstract**

Public policy initiatives in the United Kingdom have encouraged the widening participation in higher education. In line with these initiatives, disabled students have increasingly participated in higher education, currently comprising 4% of the total student population. In parallel with these developments there have been increasing concerns expressed about the academic standards and the related quality issues. This presentation aims to deal with the current policy and legal issues with regard to the quality issues, such as faculty development, academic achievement of disabled students, and the new ‘duties not to discriminate against disabled students’ and duties ‘to make adjustments for disabled students’ proposed by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Education Bill (2000).

### **Outline**

Public policy initiatives in the united Kingdom have encouraged widening participation in higher education, targeting students from the lower socio-economic backgrounds. For example, a sector-based widening access management project has just started to co-ordinate the activities of the higher education institutions in England. These initiatives have been matched with the sector-based equal opportunity initiatives targeting the historically marginalised groups of people on grounds of such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, and race and ethnicity.

In line with these initiatives, disabled students have increasingly participated in higher education, currently comprising 4% of the total student population. The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) as amended by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) has brought a legal duty for the higher education funding councils ‘to have a regard’ for the needs of disabled students in higher education. As a consequence, a wide range of disability projects across the sector have been funded to promote the accessibility of higher education institutions for disabled students. For example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has spent £18 million during the last decade for such purposes.

However, there has been substantial anecdotal and research evidence that disabled students have been discriminated against at every stage of the university services, from admission to examinations and to career services. This has been because there has been no regulation of such services in the UK unlike in other countries such as the US, where the services for disabled students have been regulated since the mid-1970s. The UK government has started a new rule-making process in this area to rectify this deficit. The Special Educational Needs and Disability in Education Bill (2000), which is currently passing through parliament has been informed by the consultative processes such as the final report of the Disability Rights Task Force, and the final report of the House of Commons Select Committee on education and Employment, among others. This proposed legislation aims to regulate the academic and non-academic service provision in higher education.

In parallel with these developments, there have been increasing concerns expressed in the sector about the academic standards and the related quality issues as a result of the widening participation initiatives. For example, recently Sharp and Earle (2000) and Earle and Sharp (2000) strongly advocate the removal of adjustments made in examinations, such as provision of the assistive technology and non-medical helpers during the examinations for disabled people. This also suggests that disabled students should not be provided with such adjustments during their study as well, such as the provision of such assistive technology and medical helpers during lectures, workshops and work experience.

Evidence suggests that there has been little work done in the area of faculty development in enabling them to play an informed and proactive role in the institutional service provision for disabled students. There is also little participation of disabled staff in UK higher education.

Hence, this paper first aims to outline the major public policy and legal issues from the perspectives of academic staff. The main concerns of staff are discussed, such as, academic standards, quality assurance and faculty/staff development, using an institutional theoretical framework developed by Douglas C. North. The extensive research carried out in the US suggest that academic staff have a crucial role to play in the provision of services for disabled students in higher education and the removal of their historical discrimination against them as a member of our society. Therefore, the paper argues for a major role for the academic staff in the policy development and practice for the service provision for disabled students in higher education and increased role for the faculty development for such a purpose.

The paper will draw on the research project on the disabled students in higher education carried out at the Rehabilitation Centre of City University. A work in progress paper (Konur, 2000) lays out the conceptual framework for such analysis.

## References

- Earle, S. & Sharp, K. 2000, "Disability and assessment in the UK: should be compensate disabled students?" *Teaching in Higher Education* 5(4), pp. 541–545.
- Konur, O., 2000, 'Creating enforceable civil rights for disabled students in higher education: an institutional theory perspective', *Disability and Society*, 15(7) pp. 1041–1063.
- Sharp, K. & Earle, S. 2000, "Assessment disability and problem of compensation", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 25(2), pp. 191–99.

Ozcan Konur  
Rehabilitation Research Centre City University,  
Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB  
okonur@hotmail.com