

Briefing

for senior and
executive managers
in FE

This is one of eleven briefings which is part of a range of resources from the project, *The Disability Discrimination Act: taking the work forward 2003–5*, managed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in partnership with NIACE and Skill, supported by the Disability Rights Commission and funded by the Learning and Skills Council. More than 100 organisations have been involved in a total of 20 projects on topics related to DDA implementation, and this briefing highlights key messages from project findings that are particularly relevant for senior and executive managers in further education. Information is provided on a strategic response, getting the message across, support, quality and a whole-college approach.

A strategic response

An inclusive culture

DDA covers everything that is offered to, or provided for, learners and potential learners. This includes: enquiries, admissions, programme delivery, examinations and assessment, work experience placements, canteen and leisure facilities, and the physical environment. Senior and executive managers play a crucial role in influencing culture and ethos, and in driving forward change. Creating a culture and ethos that are welcoming to disabled learners and sensitive to their needs will do much to meet the requirements of DDA.

Working in partnership

Many projects have demonstrated that effective learner recruitment, support and progression require collaboration with organisations such as employers, local LSCs, Connexions, Learning Disability Partnership Boards, social services and community groups. Senior management involvement in partnership working can ensure a clear vision for current and future provision.

- **How effective are partnership arrangements at a strategic level?**
- **Do they inform planning?**
- **How do you actively support staff in partnership working?**
- **Do you allocate time for interagency collaboration?**

Carrying out audits: policies, procedures and practice

DDA audits help you prioritise action, and could provide invaluable evidence to refute a claim of discrimination, should a case be brought against the college. Learners can provide a valuable and unique insight:

The learner member of the audit team made valuable contributions ... His 'I can't read this' was much more vivid than a manager trying to explain why Comic Sans was not a suitable typeface for some learners with dyslexia.

An audit of one site's complaints policy showed that not all learners knew how to make a complaint or get support in completing a complaints form.

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An audit encouraged another site to involve learning support staff early in the disciplinary process, to act as advocates for disabled learners.

- **How do you ensure all relevant policies, procedures and practice are rigorously assessed in the light of DDA?**
- **Are priority areas identified by the audit included within the development plan?**

Carrying out audits: provision

Many colleges focus on meeting the needs of learners with learning difficulties, physical and sensory disabilities, and dyslexia. However, fewer focus on learners with disabilities such as mental health difficulties, profound and complex learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, medical conditions that affect learning, and challenging behaviour.

There needs to be an awareness of people with mental health difficulties and how difficult it can be for them in a classroom environment ... There was a couple of exercises in my first class where we had to go to the front and use the blackboard, and I couldn't do any of those things and I'd be dreading it more and more ... The tutor who I got one-to-one support with, she gave me a lot of encouragement ... she taught me to believe in my own abilities.

- **What short and long-term plans are there for inclusive provision for all learners with disabilities and learning difficulties? For example, do you have a mental health policy?**
- **Can you, for example, provide effectively for learners with profound and complex learning difficulties?**

Carrying out audits: premises

Accessibility is much more than ramps and lifts; it includes signage, lighting, and many other aspects of the physical environment. You need to ensure that premises that are open to the public are fully accessible. See the LSC website (www.lsc.gov.uk) for details of capital funding and auditing of premises.

- **Have you carried out a robust access audit including outreach and satellite provision?**
- **Have priority actions for improving accessibility been identified, costed and scheduled?**
- **Are interim plans in place for areas that are currently inaccessible?**

Getting the message across to everyone

Research indicates that the message is not getting through to some staff:

I went to the college to do word processing but kept losing the pointer. The tutor knew I was visually impaired. She became exasperated because I was slow, and I felt a bit stupid so I stopped going.

High-quality and sustained staff development ensures that all staff understand and embed the requirements of DDA.

As the senior member of staff with responsibilities for raising awareness of, and implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act Part 4, I am all too conscious of the amount of training and work that needs to be done with staff, both teaching and support. Training sessions taken place, but some key personnel have not attended, and this needs to be addressed in a formal structured way.

- **Do all staff have a shared understanding of DDA?**
- **Have they received training that is appropriate for their current role?**

Providing support

Not all learners will disclose a disability during admissions, perhaps because they fear that their disability will jeopardise their place on a course:

They might ask me that you're dyslexic, you won't be able to do it because of the number of exams and the number of questions ... so therefore I skipped that question.

An enrolment form contained this statement:

I declare that I have answered the above questions honestly and fully and that I am not otherwise aware of any physical or mental disability which will, or may, affect my working capacity. I realise that any false or incomplete statement could result in my being asked to withdraw from the course.

Such statements breach learners' rights to confidentiality, damage their perception of the organisation and may deter them from enrolling.

- **Are all staff aware of their role and responsibility in:**
 - encouraging disclosure?
 - passing on information to appropriate staff, following learner consent?
 - acting on the information received?
 - respecting the rights of learners to confidentiality about their disability?
- **Have you developed effective policies and procedures for disability disclosure and confidentiality for all programmes?**

(See: *Disclosure, passing on of information and confidentiality*, LSC October 2003; *Do you have a disability, yes or no? (Or is there a better way of asking?)*, LSDA 2005.)

High-quality provision

The LSC has a statutory duty to fund provision for learners with learning difficulties and other disabilities. While managers may decide to reduce certain provision, for example to improve quality, they must ensure that disabled learners are not treated less favourably than other learners, nor more seriously disadvantaged than others by the changes.

- **Have you ensured that, at the very least, you are not reducing the amount of provision for disabled learners?**

Improve your provision by ensuring that learners are encouraged to disclose a disability. This might mean altering the language on application and enrolment forms. Observe lessons to check for differentiation, use accessible fonts in handouts, and so forth. Ensure that your data is robust: inform management information services (MIS) when learners disclose a disability after admission, and monitor recruitment and success of disabled learners.

Another barrier can be over-reliance on MIS data at the expense of other evidence. In one organisation, learners believed that some teachers were not implementing adjustments; however, because they lacked the confidence to complain, staff assumed that arrangements were working well. Another organisation realised that:

There was a significant gap in the support provision if students didn't have one-to-one support. We realised that students could be struggling, but with no mechanism in place to monitor students, nobody would know.

One college discovered gaps in the process of passing on information to relevant staff: *A student who has a medical problem gave the information that she has to make frequent visits to the hospital. She was extremely upset when she received a disciplinary letter because her attendance was below the expected norm.*

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- **How do you ensure you get comprehensive feedback from all disabled learners?**
- **Are disabled learners represented on committees and working parties?**

One college provided training to help all staff self assess DDA progress and performance. The outcomes were fed into a college equality action plan, and appropriate targets were identified. The action plan is monitored monthly by a disability equality team, once a term by the equalities committee, and annually by governors.

- **How is support self-assessed across the whole organisation, including all sites, and outreach and franchised provision?**

The DDA duties are anticipatory and it is important to respond, in advance, to learner requirements, such as producing marketing materials in alternative formats, and ensuring that teaching notes are available to learners in advance of the teaching session.

- **Is the requirement to anticipate built into self-assessment processes?**

A whole-college approach

The projects identified that it is relatively easy to review initial assessment processes, produce a new disclosure procedure or revise an enrolment form. It is much harder to create a consistent approach that ensures all staff embrace their responsibilities:

We focused too much on trying to get the paperwork right, and not fully appreciating the cultural change necessary ...

Leadership and commitment by senior managers are critical success factors in implementing DDA:

The formula for the success of this project ... [requires] the absolute support of the principal.

- **Have you identified strategies to ensure a whole-college approach to meeting the needs of disabled learners and potential learners?**
- **Are you continually and proactively seeking to improve the experience of disabled learners and drive forward cultural change?**

For further information including other briefings in this series contact LSDA (www.LSDA.org.uk) or these organisations:

Disability Rights Commission
(www.drc-gb.org)
Helpline 0845 762 2633)

Learning and Skills Council
(www.lsc.gov.uk)

NIACE (www.niace.org.uk)

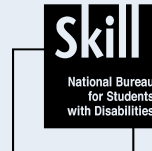
Skill (www.skill.org.uk)

 Disability Rights Commission

 **>lsc**
Leading learning and skills

 **niace**
promoting adult learning

 **learning and skills development agency**

 **Skill**
National Bureau for Students with Disabilities