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Subject Centre

Access and Widening Participation:
A Good Practice Guide
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A Good Practice Guide

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Foreword

The English Subject Centre Report Series aims to provide contextual information about the condition of the subject, its relation to national HE policies, and the practical and academic concerns shared by English Departments at the present time. Thereby, the series intends to assist departments in their planning, and in their understanding of their own positions.

This fourth report is in the form of a good practice guide, and takes as its subject Access and Widening Participation (AWP), one of the largest shifts in government policy for Higher Education in recent times. At the time of this report's completion, the Higher Educational Funding Council for England has announced its intention to make AWP one of the four core institutional activities through which funding will be channelled (alongside teaching, research, and business and community). All the funding councils in the UK have made AWP a top priority, and developments to date have indicated that this policy has a deep saturation within institutions, and accordingly, substantial impact on teaching and the curriculum. Subject specific work on this is therefore appropriate since many of the responsibilities for the admission, retention and support of under-represented groups are being devolved to department level.

The English Subject Centre began work in this area in 2001-2 with preliminary and informal surveys about the impact of this policy in English Departments, and Dr Siobhán Holland took on responsibility for the production and authorship of this guide. She has also investigated the implications, at departmental level, of recent legislation on disability and education. Subsequently she has been working with the three partner institutions represented here to demonstrate the ways in which different departments are responding to the new requirements, while simultaneously gathering materials which exemplify good practice. The institutions selected cannot be fully representative of the diversity of the sector or the subject, but they are sufficiently different in terms of their regional contexts and institutional characters to indicate the different ways in which English Departments are addressing the recruitment of under-represented groups. We are very grateful for the ready co-operation of the English Departments at King Alfred's College, Winchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the University of Teesside.

As Dr Holland notes in the report, the discipline of English has a historic and continuous concern with social inclusiveness. In recent years particularly, this predisposition has led to pedagogic and curricular innovations addressing deficits in the kinds of voices heard in the classroom across the whole range of English and Creative Writing. Without a doubt, the culture of English is receptive to policies that are in complementary relation to its intellectual developments. Yet the challenges of Access and Widening Participation will require much to be built upon this strong sympathetic foundation in the way of sound strategies. This report should contribute to this process through providing models of how departments are currently responding. It is also clear to all involved that success in this area will depend on the establishing of long-term strategies and partnerships with schools, further education colleges, and other constituencies, and careful application of resources. This latter is particularly important in the context of retention and support.

Copies of the report will be distributed to Departments, and an electronic version can be downloaded from the English Subject Centre website at **www.english.ltsn.ac.uk**

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Aims & Introduction

Aims

The move to promote access and widening participation in Higher Education (HE) represents a major policy change which impacts on all institutions and has its effects, in turn, on academic departments and practice at the disciplinary level. Departments which teach English Literature, Language and Creative Writing are being challenged by faculties and institutions to develop policies and strategies to support under-represented students. English is traditionally an inclusive discipline, sensitive to the ways in which exclusions on the grounds of gender, race, age and physical ability operate. Nevertheless, all departments will need to review some aspects of their practice in terms of their recruitment procedures, induction strategies and curricula.

This report offers colleagues in our disciplines examples of current good practice in relation to widening participation. It presents case studies of departments with experience of teaching under-represented students. It places them in the context of broader national debates within HE and suggests strategies for consideration by departments which are reviewing their practice.

It is focused primarily on subject-specific and departmental practice on the basis that students are recruited and supported by departments, to subject areas, in the first instance and their experience of HE is shaped largely by departmental culture as well as subject-specific discourses and challenges.

Introduction

The report uses the term 'under-represented students' to refer to those with no family history of HE experiences, economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities and disabled students. It concentrates primarily on widening access and participation at undergraduate level, though participation is also an issue in terms of postgraduate study.

It includes a number of case studies which relate to practice at Manchester Metropolitan University, King Alfred's College, Winchester, and the University of Teesside respectively. The case studies are based on interviews with Heads of Department, Heads of Level One and Admissions Tutors, among others. The case studies draw attention to examples of good practice. They also ask staff in participating departments to give their views on the charges of 'dumbing down' which are sometimes levelled at departments which have adapted curricula and procedures to support under-represented students. The case studies discuss subject-specific concerns about diversity in the cultural capital of incoming students and examine the relevance of benchmark standards to widening participation issues.

In addition to providing case studies, the report draws attention to departmental, institutional and national initiatives which have been established in advance of, or to contribute to, the government's policy of access and widening participation in Higher Education.[1] It also introduces a discussion of the impact on students and departments of the new legal requirements associated with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA), effective from September 2002, modifies the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and deals specifically with education.[2]

The report aims to contribute to a debate about access and widening participation in English Literature, Language and Creative Writing. It does not provide an exclusive or comprehensive account of good practice in these disciplines. The activities of the lecturers involved in this study do, nevertheless, provide positive examples of possible approaches to widening access and participation.

Contexts

National initiatives

The government, the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly together with the Higher Education Funding Councils are working to encourage wider participation in HE. If current government targets are met, 50% of people under 30 will have had some experience of HE by 2010.[3]

Funding has been used as the primary driver to encourage change at institutional level, and much of this funding has been distributed in relation to a 'postcode premium' whereby a student's location at the point of application has been used as an indicator of his or her social class and likelihood of applying to HE. Although funding will continue to be used to encourage widening participation, it seems likely that the Funding Councils will move away from use of the 'postcode premium'. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) suggests that the use of this strategy to encourage recruitment of students from under-represented areas is now skewing applications and admissions procedures in some institutions. It is likely that HEFCE will now 'change the basis for allocating the premium to [a system] which uses a profile of entry qualifications and age.' [4]

The Funding Councils have also used other funding streams to encourage widening participation. For example, the Scottish Funding Council (SHEFC) has set up a website which is directed towards Scottish school-leavers who are considering their post-school options.[5] The Welsh Funding Council (HEFCW) has established a Widening Access Fund which provides money to institutions in addition to that allotted through its premium funding scheme. Meanwhile, the Higher Education Funding Council for England runs the *Action on Access* project.[6] Funding Council resources have also been used to develop 'summer school' and 'master class' schemes which offer school students an opportunity to sample HE before they begin the application process.

Currently the profile of recruitment is variable and can depend on regional economic factors among other issues. For example, HEFCW notes that, according to figures for 1998-99, 'the Welsh higher education sector [is] achieving higher percentages of recruitment than the UK average of young full-time undergraduates from state schools, part-time mature students from low participation neighbourhoods, and young full-time undergraduates whose parents have occupations classed as skilled manual, semi-skilled or unskilled.'[7]

External pressure to increase levels of participation is directed at institutions and therefore institutional policies and profiles affect any decisions made at departmental and subject level about strategies for widening access. Some institutions, for example, are giving departments numerical targets for the recruitment of under-represented students. Some have for many years pursued recruitment strategies which aim to widen participation in the long term. Others make use of recruiting policies which are based largely on selection on the basis of their research profile and their institution's historic success in recruiting students.

Departments which are in a position to select undergraduates from a large pool of applicants, especially those located in universities which have traditionally recruited selectively, may have difficulty in establishing workable policies for recruiting and making decisions about prospective under-represented students. Meanwhile departments which need to recruit more intensively may already be engaged in collaborative activities with local schools or access courses in order to attract applicants from under-represented backgrounds. Institutional profiles often impact directly on these initiatives. It would be a mistake however to assume that institutional profile correlates absolutely with recruitment trends at departmental level. For example, several English departments in institutions with established reputations for widening access are in a position to recruit selectively and choose to continue to select a large number of students from under-represented constituencies.

Widening participation at subject level

The widening participation agenda has not impacted in the same way on all academic subjects. Its emphasis on skills and employability has lent itself to adoption by, and association with, subjects with a strong vocational focus.[8] Nonetheless, it has had an impact on the ways in which academics in English Studies account for their practices. The widespread adoption of the English Benchmarking Statement as a useful guide to graduate skills in English demonstrates a move towards explaining programmes in terms of the skills with which they will equip students.[9]

The English Subject Centre has also noted the ways in which English Studies programmes are developing strategies to promote the employability of their graduates as well as different kinds of work-based

modules.[10] Creative Writing programmes are also engaged in developing students' vocational skills in a number of ways. Clearly, any assumption that humanities subjects are not vocational is problematic.

Whether or not departments are developing subject-specific strategies to improve students' skills for the workplace, and however their institution is responding to national agendas about widening participation, there is a need for lecturers to devise strategies, at departmental and subject level, to support under-represented students. Students' primary point of contact with HE is established through the department and the subject area. (This contact can, of course be more complex for students on joint or combined honours courses.)

It is important that departments consider the ways in which their practical procedures, as well as their presentation of the subject and curricular developments, impact on students from under-represented groups. This does not mean that departments should adopt special measures for these students. Rather they can ensure best practice by communicating with all students clearly and effectively. Some general recommendations, drawn from the case studies, are presented for consideration below.

Reflecting on current practice

Recruitment & outreach

The English departments at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), King Alfred's College, Winchester and the University of Teesside collaborated in this study. Staff in all three departments stressed the importance of setting up positive connections with prospective students as early as possible in the application process. At MMU, a policy has been introduced which ensures that all applicants are interviewed prior to being offered a place (not a universal practice in English departments). At Teesside, members of staff are available to answer any queries that students may have at any stage of the application process and the institution's 'Passport' scheme encourages prospective students to develop a sense that they belong to the university's community even before they apply (see individual case studies for further details). This kind of initiative encourages people to make enquiries, offers face-to-face contact and provides ongoing opportunities for prospective students to pose questions of departmental staff. Lecturers at both of these universities stress the importance of establishing clear lines of communication for students who may be inclined to think of universities as places where they do not belong or are not wanted.

The departments involved in the case studies use outreach strategies to make contact with students who may not have planned to go on to HE. All are involved in nationally-funded initiatives which are designed to encourage applications from under-represented groups of school-leaving students. At King Alfred's, the department is involved in running summer schools and 'master classes', for instance. Lecturers at MMU and Teesside visit local schools or meet students who visit the university on school trips. The English department at King Alfred's College is involved in a project whereby local schools have a named contact from one of the college's academic departments who is available to respond to any queries that teachers and students may have about HE. Sadie Williams, the author of the English Subject Centre's report on *Admission Trends in Undergraduate English: Statistics and Attitudes,* found that school teachers recommended 'positive marketing' as one of the ways in which English could improve its general recruitment and clearly this kind of marketing, sensitively handled, can also help to advance the recruitment of under-represented students.[11]

Departmental links to local Access courses and the institution's and department's visibility in the local community are important factors in encouraging applications from mature students. All of the departments involved emphasised the value of recruiting and retaining mature students whose wide range of experience often makes them a real asset to programmes in English Literature, Language and Creative Writing.

Information

During the recruitment process, clear information about programmes, facilities and flexibility can encourage applications from students who come from under-represented constituencies. This information can easily be directed to applicants, where appropriate, in leaflet form or through the involvement of under-represented students in open days and other recruitment events. Mature students with caring responsibilities or disabled students are encouraged to apply if this information is provided before they make choices about the suitability of a degree programme.

The SENDA legislation which came into force in September 2002 makes it a legal requirement for prospective disabled students to be provided with advance information about provision for them at institutional but also at programme level.[12] Departments must explain in advance and accurately the ways in which they will cater for a student's needs. In Appendix A to this report, which focusses on disability, some suggestions are made about how to flag practical support mechanisms at departmental level in prospectus materials. It is important for departments to recognise that the duty to provide information about this provision is not restricted to the institution's requirement to explain its generic support mechanisms.

Institutions are, of course, likely to be involved in providing some of the information, support and guidelines necessary. In Wales, institutions have already produced 'disability provision development plans' for HEFCW and these may already be impacting on practice at institutional and faculty level.[13] However, this does not relieve departments of the responsibility to explain their own systems for, among other things, helping all students to benefit from lecture material, film screenings, theatre visits, the use of virtual learning environments on-line and assessment feedback.

Many students from under-represented groups have substantial caring responsibilities and the students interviewed for this study stressed the importance of being given clear practical information about their programme as early as possible in the recruitment process. This information would ideally cover issues such as timetabling, procedures for claiming extenuating circumstances and details of any procedures relating to moves between full- and part-time programmes. One of the students interviewed commented that if she had known before she arrived in HE how well her department catered for mature students with children she would have applied for a place much more readily. The students interviewed stressed that clear information provided well in advance of the programme's commencement and each semester allows them to plan effectively and to avoid problems cropping up during term-time (when, for example, reading weeks may not coincide with local half-term breaks).

Clear timetabling systems can also make it easier for students with financial difficulties to plan their part-time employment more efficiently. Departments are often constrained in their use of timetable slots by faculty-level or institutional systems but it is nevertheless usually possible to ensure that 'core' lectures do not take place at 9am, when many students will be taking their children to school. At MMU, where the curriculum is delivered in timetabled blocks, the students can make clear plans about the times they set aside to pursue their studies and their other responsibilities. When students receive information about this kind of practical support in advance of their studies, it can encourage recruitment and retention.

Induction

The departments involved in this project explained that they do not employ any special strategies for under-represented students during the induction process. However, this does not mean that the attention they direct towards these students before they register for a programme wanes when they arrive. Instead, the departments involved in the case studies stressed the need for the provision of clear and relevant information for all students at this potentially stressful time. They also make sure that lecturers are available to answer questions about all aspects of the course. Several departments, not included in this report, involve student mentors in the induction process to provide non-intimidating opportunities for students to establish a clear understanding of HE practices. Many departments run social events to encourage students to get to know one another. These kinds of events can be especially important for students who are not resident in student accommodation and are therefore unlikely to meet other students on their programme before teaching commences. Alerting students about the time and location of this kind of event before they arrive in HE will enable those with caring responsibilities to plan for attendance.

Induction procedures can help students to settle into HE where they help them to understand its procedures and terminologies. The students interviewed for this report suggested that at the outset of their programme they had been acutely conscious of what they did not know about HE. The careful introduction of terms such as lecture, seminar, tutorial, module, course and unit will be of benefit to all students. Many students from well-represented groups will be as mystified by terminology as are their less well-represented counterparts, but they are less likely to assume that other students really know what is being talked about and that they are being deliberately excluded. Careful glossing and the provision of opportunities for students to ask questions and clarify their understanding of procedures are crucial. The need for this kind of glossing is especially acute at assessment time and is certainly not the preserve of the induction period.

Departments need to provide clear opportunities for students to ask for help at the outset of their programmes. Some of these opportunities will involve investing staff time in 'fresher's week' events and subject level induction meetings. Additional forms of support might include the development of mentoring schemes. At the University of Manchester, a well-organised, department-based student mentoring scheme provides support for students throughout their programmes and provides support during the induction period. While some departments use level handbooks and/or module handbooks only to explain regulations, others—including the University of Birmingham, for example—use these documents to perform additional less formal roles, so that handbooks provide positive and informative sources of information for students, clearly flagging departmental, institutional and additional forms of support.

The curriculum

All of the departments involved in the case studies rejected charges that adapting the curriculum for under-represented students involves 'dumbing down' the subject. The lecturers interviewed were clear that they were asking students to read complex texts and engage with key critical debates. At Teesside students are expected to study literary theory throughout the programme and, for example, take modules which require them to write critically about non-canonical Renaissance texts which are not supported by large amounts of secondary criticism.

While lecturers in the departments discussed here ensure that the contents of the curricula they deliver are comparable to those elsewhere, they have made careful plans to ensure that students are well integrated into academic study and subject-specific discourses. Some departments have developed modules which specifically address students' skills. In the English department at MMU, for example, first year students complete a module in 'Writing Skills and Research Methods' which is taught to relatively small groups of 15 students. The department at Teesside also delivers this kind of specific skills support. Similar modules can be found in a wide variety of English departments and the materials developed by the Speak-Write project are perhaps the best-known resources available to English departments which want students to reflect on skills in a subject-specific context.[14]

Whether or not departments take up this direct approach, the departments visited in the course of this project stress the importance of flagging, explicitly, opportunities for skills development within the structure of modules, especially in the first year. The case studies suggest that the careful pacing of subject material and the direct discussion of skills in 'subject-specific' seminars can help all students to develop the ability to operate more independently as their studies progress. (This approach has been trialled in the English Department at Staffordshire University where a virtual learning environment supports students as they develop the assessment skills they need to complete a literary studies module.)[15]

At MMU, the delivery of the curriculum has been subject to radical practical changes to ensure that lecturers provide students with the best opportunities to learn subject-specific approaches to literature. Modules which were delivered in a '1+1' lecture and seminar format are now delivered in a '1+2' format in which tutors run two-hour workshops for students.

Changes in the curriculum might arouse fears of dumbing down, and indeed some academics in our subject community have expressed concerns that changes in the delivery of the curriculum will encourage students to become increasingly dependent on 'spoon-feeding'. None of the departments involved in this study accept that they are spoon-feeding students. Instead, the lecturers interviewed emphasised that when—at the outset of a programme—a department addresses students clearly, sets out its expectations transparently and provides support for students as they learn to work within the subject area they have chosen to study, it is actively helping students to develop the skills they need to work confidently and independently in and beyond their undergraduate careers.

As they review the accessibility of the curriculum, departments can use a number of strategies to identify students' points of need. Departments can work within existing structures and make use of the views of student representatives, or they can engage in more detailed surveys of student views, such as the one MMU uses annually to investigate its recruitment and induction procedures. A review of the curriculum's accessibility will also need to take into consideration the needs of disabled students and the appendix to this report makes suggestions about where these kinds of curricular change might be required in English Language, Literature and Creative Writing programmes.

The new 'Personal Development Planning' (PDP) schemes, compulsory in HE from 2005, will ensure that each student has an opportunity to discuss her or his 'progress file' with a tutor at regular intervals throughout a programme. Some of the case studies related to the PADSHE project on project files, developed in the English department at the University of Nottingham, discuss experiences of using progress files with under-represented students in English departments.[16] Because these PDP schemes are compulsory and represent a substantial commitment in terms of time and planning, departments will be looking to establish how best they can help to embed other departmental projects, on literacy or employability, for example. They can obviously be used to identify the success with which individual students have established themselves confidently in HE. They can provide opportunities for departments to identify areas in which clarity or support is lacking in their own practice, and to track the progress of new policies which are designed to offer clarity and support to all students, particularly those from under-represented groups.

Referral mechanisms

As the lecturers at Teesside explain, students from under-represented groups are often more likely than their counterparts to have non-academic difficulties which affect their learning. Equally, these students may not have the support networks available to students whose families and friends 'expected' them to go into HE, and who are themselves familiar with some of the challenges that HE poses.

It will often be important to refer students to other services within an institution. These might include study skills centres, disability support services and counselling services. Nevertheless, research into students' psychological health shows that, after friends and family, teaching staff are the people that students are most likely to approach for help in the first instance when they are experiencing difficulties.[17] It is important that lecturers are fully aware of the support mechanisms available within their institution, and the department itself, and feel comfortable with listening to students carefully before referring them on to other services.

Robust personal tutor schemes can provide one means for departments to ensure that students are aware of the support mechanisms available to them. They can also help to ensure that students' rights under data protection legislation are protected. A clear and consistent system through which students can meet tutors for individual consultations is also likely to be helpful.

In many departments, part-time tutors teach a substantial amount of the undergraduate programme. While some departments assign most of the first-year teaching to full-time staff and use part-time tutors elsewhere, many visiting lecturers have substantial responsibility for teaching students at the outset of their studies. If a department is to establish successful mechanisms for supporting under-represented students, it is vital that part-time tutors are properly informed about them, and that any extra work generated in terms of training and workload is properly remunerated. Extra work for visiting lecturers might figure in terms of office hours and the provision of e-mail support, for example, or part-time tutor representation at departmental meetings in which policy is revised.

Conclusions

Departments and curricula which are supportive of access and widening participation benefit from clarity about their aims and practices, can foster for all students a sense of ownership of their educational experience and minimise students' sense of alienation or marginalisation within the HE system. Changes made at departmental level to admission procedures and the curriculum can contribute to the recruitment and retention of under-represented students.

Procedures and curricula which are not adapted to changes in the student body are, this Guide concludes, more likely to constitute unfair practice than provide 'a level playing field'. In some departments which teach English Literature, Language and Creative Writing changes are already advanced, and this Guide makes discussion of these adaptations available to our subject communities as a whole.

Choices that departments make about which changes to adopt in the face of widening participation are likely to be different for different departments and a wide range of practical factors (e.g. institutional, geographical and financial) will need to be taken into account when departmental strategies for widening participation are being developed. Nevertheless, there are clear implications for access and widening participation policy at departmental and subject level.

The Subject Centre is developing materials which explore issues related to skills and employability in English and related disciplines through our project funding programme and through collaboration with the LTSN Generic Centre.[18] The English Subject Centre would like to develop more case studies in this area and welcomes contributions or enquiries. It will highlight examples of good practice through its Directory of Experience and Expertise as well as through its events programme. It will also provide a gateway to useful external resources through the 'Access Issues' section of its website.[19]

Case Study 1: Manchester Metropolitan University

The English department at Manchester Metropolitan University is able to recruit selectively, and draws around 70% of its students from the local area. It has a tradition of recruiting mature students and its urban location also affects its recruitment profile.

The admissions process in the English department at MMU is designed to establish clear lines of communication with the prospective student from the outset. The department seeks out feedback from students who take up places on the course and around 90% of students surveyed in September 2001 said that they had found the interview process 'both useful and friendly.' The admissions tutor notes that although the process of interviewing is time-consuming and 'initially everyone was very nervous' of introducing the procedure across the board, 'this year colleagues have volunteered to do interviews and take on more and more because they find this a beneficial experience.'

The interview allows lecturers to make informed judgements about the potential of students who may not have traditional or straightforwardly excellent qualifications. The department already places a great deal of importance on the personal statement students make on their application forms and the interview provides another opportunity to gauge commitment to future study and to the subject. The admissions tutor explains that 'I take a lot from the interview. A standard interview question is about their reading, and you can tell fairly quickly by their use of vocabulary whether or not they are engaged in the subject.'

The interview also gives students an opportunity to ask questions about the admissions process and about the programme available to them. Students who are not applying through UCAS can also contact the admissions tutor directly about the possibility of taking up a place, and these applicants are often looking for detailed practical information about the application procedure and the structure of the course: 'Basically they ask about the procedures and then the content.' The student questionnaire responses show that the initial contact at interview and the 'flexible structure of study' are important to applicants who go on to take up a place.

The department is involved in a number of schemes which are designed to generate the prospective student's first contact with the department. Some of these contacts are funded by money made available to schools which work to raise educational aspirations in the inner city, or deprived areas. Others are organised by the institution or the department. The admissions tutor explains that

We offer sessions to colleges and they contact us and say what they want to do. We also run formal seminars and workshops. We don't have a school visit programme as such, although we do visit various sixth form colleges and keep up friendly relations with them. They may send us parties of students for informal induction sessions [or for the university open days]. We have an A-Level day once a year in which we invite school children for tasters of HE and we talk to local colleges and schools. We say to them that we will interview anyone over twenty-one. If they show interest we will bring them in and interview them. We leave them to make the contact and the minute they do we spend a lot of time with them as an individual. I am always available to discuss the degree and application procedures, basically with anyone who calls me—school and college teachers or individual students—at any stage in their education. And I think it does come across in our enrolment questionnaires that individual candidates appreciate it when we are generous with our time.

The personal contact that students have with the department during the application process is productive in terms of generating student numbers—'The amount of individual support we give our students works to sell the university and the department to potential students'—but it also represents a concerted attempt to integrate under-represented students into HE. The admissions tutor concludes that 'We have to connect with them and make sure they know they are important to us. It is a cultural thing where everyone recognises the significance of his or her place in the student body.'

The Head of the English Department at Manchester Metropolitan University explains that the department has an ongoing commitment to recruiting and supporting mature students: 'We love mature students because they work hard and are great to teach. They are focussed and know where they are going [and] they can have very powerful aspirations.' In order to support these students, many of whom have substantial caring responsibilities, significant changes have been made to the department's timetable. For the last three years,

each module has been taught through a three-hour session which includes lecture and workshop time. In addition, students can make use of consultation time with their tutors. This structure, which has replaced a traditional 'lecture-seminar' format, gives tutors 'more scope to work and to get to know the students individually.' It also gives students the opportunity to organise their timetable in half-day blocks. The programme leader explains that 'This is very important and the students appreciate it. Our timetable runs so that they can cope with childcare commitments. We give them the timetable information well in advance so that they can plan childcare arrangements and this works very well.'

In the first year, class sizes are limited to 15, and there is a focus on skills development. The Head of Department argues that:

If these non-standard entrants don't have the skills we expect, such as essay-writing, and we don't provide them, we will be wasting the time of the student. We have got round this kind of problem by having a companion course called 'Writing Skills and Research Methods' which has a higher level of individual contact [and encourages] thinking about writing for different audiences, formal writing skills and communication.

There are some skills issues that the department feels are associated with mature students. For example, they are likely to perform, initially, more confidently in seminars than in essays and exams. But as one tutor notes 'we have realised that we cannot guarantee certain skills, such as research and presentation, in any of our students as these do not show up in previous qualifications.' The 'Writing Skills and Research Methods' module is part of a broader curricular project which works to 'turn our intake into people we can make assumptions about in year two, even though we cannot make those assumptions at entry level. Not making a big deal of those who are non-standard yet giving everyone the opportunity of support if they want it.'

The department is increasingly recruiting students from ethnic minorities. It is also making provision for students with disabilities and has its own disability officer. A departmental Braille machine is used to produce notices and other documents for existing students. Lecturers have also arranged for lockers to be provided so that physically disabled students do not have to carry books around with them throughout the day.

The Head of Department notes that the current attempt to involve more under-represented students in Higher Education brings with it major practical implications: 'If you want the kind of concentration of staff-student help that will prevent students from dropping out then this will cost a lot, in terms of mentoring [and] support.' If departments are to deliver a high level of support to under-represented students, this work needs to be properly resourced.

Case Study 2: University of Teesside

The English department at the University of Teesside is a recruiting department which draws all of its current first year students from its own region. In addition to its full-time students, the department also supports a small number of part-time students who take modules from the full-time day programme.

Its recruitment of all of these students is affected by the university's regional profile as 'the opportunity university'. The Head of Department explains that:

The institution is very conscious of its position in a post-industrial area. It is in a location where there is a very high level of deprivation and a very low level of educational attainment. The institution has quite deliberately stretched back, getting students involved at a young age and we have a lot of mentor schemes where we get involved with schools. This is our official position and quite genuinely it is very pro-active. We are making contact with groups that are very under-represented in Higher Education.

The university's location does create real issues for recruitment to arts subjects, however, for reasons that the Head of Department relates to 'the rise of English as a subject. […] What the region is short of is the kind of class fraction that would take a high interest in literacy as part of its lifestyle.'

The Teesside department is involved in national, institutional and regional recruiting strategies. The admissions tutor explains that:

We have just introduced the Master Class [which is] an initiative introduced by the university in conjunction with the Oxford Excellence Challenge Initiative in the region. The idea is to target students defined as 'gifted and talented' who are also at school so that we can give them special attention. The Master Class is an evening class including a number of students from different schools.

While this kind of scheme works to raise aspirations about Higher Education in general, the institution runs a 'Passport' scheme which encourages students to build up a connection with the University of Teesside in particular. People involved in the scheme receive certificates for attending campus tours and other events and are guaranteed a place if they fulfil the English programme's entry requirements. The scheme provides potential applicants with 'a transition phase where they get to know the campus and meet the staff.' Teesside also has a franchise arrangement with Darlington College whereby students can do the first year of either the single or joint honours English programme at Darlington. The department is introducing a mentoring scheme this year through which these students will be mentored by students who left Darlington a year before them.

In another recruitment initiative, the English department is working to target its open days more effectively to different age groups so that students receive information which is tailored to their needs. School open days involve a school bringing pupils to the university for a general introduction to HE. Students are given a tour of the campus and have the option of attending a range of subject talks. The university runs separate open days for access students and subject-specific open days or 'discovery days.' These targeted events aim to develop an applicant's sense of involvement with the student body, the department and the institution: 'the principal motivation behind this is to get students on campus and make them feel at home—plant the university on their horizon, and make them feel that they can achieve it. Also, we give them a taste of what English study would be like.'

The problems involved in resourcing student interviews are an issue here as they are in many departments, and interviewing is not common practice at Teesside. Nevertheless, the admissions tutor does see benefits to the process of meeting students informally because it offers to increase the student's sense that their ability is being recognised by the department which accepts his or her application. She suggests that:

It is important that the prospective student knows that we have made a judgement about them. We have had some students who have come in without the formal qualifications and they almost feel as though they got in 'by mistake' or 'through the back door'. This undermines their own confidence in their abilities—they need to feel that they have been seen, evaluated and then let in. It is better than an impersonal offer. Quite often the students who convey this feeling, that they got in by mistake, are not students who are struggling. They just needed that stamp of approval initially to give them that initial firm foundation.

The department has a clear strategy for use in the induction process which is designed to encourage students to feel comfortable in their programme: 'It is important for [students] to meet a number of key staff in induction week, but not too many. They need some faces that they can relate to and talk to early on. We do try not to give them too much at this stage as they cannot take it in.'

When teaching starts, lecturers help students to navigate the first year course using a specific module called 'Learning Skills for English'. In this module and others, students are given guidance which ideally leads them towards more independent study as the programme develops: 'For example, in the first year there will be worksheets each week; in the second year, a mix, and in the third, there will be very few handouts. There must be scope for students to find their own way'. The programme leader stresses that within this framework there is a deliberate effort to avoid spoon-feeding students: 'In the first year it's teaching and offering support, working towards the third year with the independent student learner. That is why the dissertation remains and why I would argue that it continues.' Another tutor comments that 'we have worked very hard at planning, within a modular system, a very carefully staged programme which at each level addresses a whole variety of issues [including] writing and confidence skills.'

The lack of confidence that often characterises students from under-represented groups can mean that there is a greater need for staff to spend time reassuring students as they become more independent scholars: 'Currently some of my students have to set up their own essay topic, in consultation with me […] we have had two essay workshops where we have talked through each and every one of their proposals […] but still I have spent some time on the phone to students who are anxious about their topics.'

An emphasis on literary theory in the curriculum is seen as one way of mobilising and complicating the range of experience that under-represented students bring to the programme. The programme leader comments that 'Theory can make students reflect on their experience in a different way. Often it can be difficult to lift the level of discussion outside personal experience. Theory can make people think about their experience in a more productive way, […] they are encouraged to be outward-looking and not insular.' At the same time, the programme invites students to engage with texts, genres and historical periods with which they are not familiar. The programme leader, who teaches non-canonical Renaissance literature, emphasises that the composition of the student cohort:

hasn't shaken the topics that we choose to teach […] Coming across people who are so distant [from the material studied] and who think that this has got nothing to do with them, and that they are useless is a challenge. I love teaching the subject, but what is so special about teaching it here is to see students engage with material that is so alien to them. In the

first year you can see them thinking 'this is awful', but somewhere a connection is made and you see that person change beyond recognition.

Lecturers identify confidence as a key issue for students, and one that creates the need for increased support. Talking about the different experiences involved in teaching well-represented, and under-represented students in programmes with different kinds of student cohort, one tutor commented that:

most of the [well-represented] students have the experience of being the top of the class or being good at school. Sometimes for them it is difficult to find themselves among other students who also have that experience. But the students at Teesside have a more uneven experience and require far more encouragement and support to contribute and have confidence in their own abilities. It makes it a very rewarding job but it is more demanding in that sense.

The department refers students to the university's support systems where appropriate but tutors stress that personal difficulties often produce the confidence issues that impact directly on students' academic work. These effects do need to be acknowledged in tutorial support. This does not mean that tutors in the department are involved in counselling but that they take time to support students who are experiencing difficulties. One tutor explained that:

Quite a lot of students take a while to find their feet. [But] it is important to have a boundary and to say to students that [we] can [only] go so far. We have a particular role to fulfil […] I would urge students to go to the counsellors and ring to find out what sessions are available. This sort of linkage is necessary.

The Head of Department notes that students may have widely variable support networks. Even if students do not need to seek help from support services, a lack of other kinds of support can affect their experience of HE substantially.

You often find that some of those [students] who are intellectually stronger come from some kind of emotional support group. Women particularly will go through courses with a friend sharing books, videos and activities. A lot of 18 year-olds do not have this support network, especially those from local areas who are not feeling the 'all-inclusive' experience that many younger students expect.

The support and academic development of all of its students is the department's focus and this reflects what the Head of Department describes as 'a passionate commitment on behalf of the teachers who feel strongly about widening participation.'

Case Study 3: King Alfred's College, Winchester

The geographical location of the College in Winchester affects its recruitment base, and the student body of the English subject area has been made up primarily of 'white middle-class students from the South of England,' although this is changing slowly as a result of recent College efforts at widening participation. The Head of Subject notes that Winchester's image 'tends not to attract many from the inner city' and has adversely affected attempts to widen participation. The subject area's ongoing efforts to recruit students with different profiles has been partly prompted by the conviction that 'non-standard students have much to offer' and that an overly homogenous student body leads to 'a poverty of cultural breadth'. The team's interest in widening participation is based on a belief that it will enrich the student experience: 'Lowering standards is not a fear we have. We would like to see more working-class students [because] a diverse body of students with different backgrounds and cultures is better for the learning process of all concerned. We welcome the government's 50% participation target (but not its contradictory affiliation to differential fees).'

Colleagues at King Alfred's, like those in the other departments discussed here, feel that confidence is a crucial issue for under-represented students at the outset of their studies. When students have not achieved as well as they had hoped to do at 'A'-level, or if they are coming into HE as mature students, it is important to take confidence-building seriously in the first-year programme. The co-ordinator of first year, who was himself a mature student, comments that for some students who applied elsewhere first and came through clearing: 'They think it is second-best and wish they were at a "proper" university. They are fine by the second year. Up until then [there is] a lack of self-confidence.' He notes that 'there has always been this sense [of lost confidence] with the mature entrants, possibly because entry to university late in life indicates a hiatus in work, and […] you have to build them up. Conversely [students] can almost be over-confident and you have to draw them back.' Rising confidence levels help to account for the assessment profile of the programme:

Looking across mark ranges from the second year to third year, the good 2:1/borderline firsts generally have a rising profile. Many of them don't start hitting the top grades until the end of the second year. The lower end of the 2:1 to 2:2 ranges are more random and fluctuating.

Like the lecturers at Manchester Metropolitan University, the staff here make no assumptions about students' prior skills: 'We have, I suppose, a relatively large number of students who are the first person in their family to go to university. We therefore can make no assumptions about their knowledge of the degree or what it is for.' The subject team at King Alfred's has responded by adopting an approach to curriculum change which is focused on signposting skills to students within the structure of text-focussed modules.

We consciously don't try to do much of "this is what university is like" induction. [Instead] in the first semester we try to [structure] the assessments so that they have to go off and do a library search [or] an essay plan. They have to fill in little reports and then they have to write an essay and do an exam of some kind. […] We also have a resource week, which is not a reading week but includes workshops and more fun things. […] The students like being talked to in terms of the 'why' as well as the 'how' of their courses. This is why we encourage colleagues to explain their techniques.

A similar approach is adopted in relation to students on the part-time programme which runs in the evenings. The lecturer who runs the programme explains that 'We had a brief period when there was a study skills module in the degree, but it was generally hated and didn't really work. We have found that integrating stuff into the projects [students are asked to complete] is more successful.' Students on this programme are potentially less able to take advantage of support offered centrally by the institution: 'We potentially have difficulties with students accessing daytime things such as assessment classes or [classes] giving the criteria for presentations. This can make things daunting for them.' Integrating study skills training into modules 'during the acclimatisation period' has helped to improve support for part-time students for whom the need for skills 'isn't an ability issue, but rather a confidence issue.'

The full-time undergraduate programme is flexible, allowing day-time students to take modules in the evenings. All students have to choose eight modules from 13 in any given year. The evening programme involves modules which are offered during the daytime in the other semester of the year so that students have the opportunity to fit their study choices around their other responsibilities. Students are also able to move

easily between full-time and part-time programmes if their circumstances change: 'We have an "open door" policy on this.'

The team has made other practical moves to support under-represented students. In recent years there have been some fluctuations in recruitment of students: '20% to 27% are non-standard entrants; this dropped off a bit when fees came in but is gradually pulling its way back up again [….] We do what we can in terms of not charging them for stuff and even giving them a sense of "value for money."' More and more departments are passing photocopying costs on to students, especially where there is an increased reliance on computer-based materials, but King Alfred's does not charge for photocopying or booklets 'and quite an appreciable amount of material will be handed out free.' Attention is also paid to the costs involved for students in buying books for each module.

The co-ordinator of first year argues that problems with academic work and problems of a personal nature 'aren't unconnected factors' and the team offers support to students as they are adapting to HE and building up their levels of confidence. The team are careful to refer students to appropriate support services when personal problems impact more severely on their performance:

We have a very good student support service here [and] one thing we did as a school two years ago was to tighten up on the way students were granted extensions. It [used to work] at the discretion of the module tutors, but now we say they have to have some kind of documented support for this. They can get [a form] from student services which will grade their problems and give them concessions based on this. It is, of course, totally confidential [but] it allows us to push more people into the support system so we know that they are being tapped into the help network.

One of the other positive effects of this new system has been that 'casual' requests for extensions have fallen drastically.

The subject team are heavily involved in the College's broader initiative to encourage widening participation. Lecturers are involved in a scheme whereby local schools each have a named contact in one of the College's departments. They have also been involved in the delivery of college-led 'summer school' courses and speak positively about them:

We have run for a few years, summer schools for 13 year–olds from schools in Basingstoke. They come for two days and are selected by their schools. They may be first-generation university material. [The summer school works] to give them a sense of coming in here and getting a feel of it and a feel for doing research. They do a whole range of activities. […] We are tracking them and surveying them in the run-up before they choose what to do in HE. For the first time this year we [also] had about 100 post-GCSE student–16 year olds from various areas of the country but with no background in university life. They stay for a week, Monday to Friday. They get a taste of Cultural Studies and Media Studies […] to give them a sense of the degree. They get bombarded with everything from Sports Studies to History. We [have] found that the 16 year-old students could engage with the undergraduate students who were there to help and monitor them.

One of the lecturers explained that 'we have developed a commitment to widening participation' but as the Head of Subject explains, this commitment depends in the future of the proper resourcing of the national widening participation initiative. Referring to the target that 50% of people under 30 should have experience of HE by 2010, he commented: 'I think it is a good thing, but only if it is properly funded. If it is not funded, all that will happen is that students who need it most will be deprived of small class sizes, special attention and support. It will be much more like a "sink or swim" [situation].'

Case Study 4: Student views

Some second-year students from the English department at the University of Teesside were interviewed about their experiences of applying to, and studying on, the English programme there. The group did not reflect all categories of under-represented students, but did provide an insight into the educational experience of mature women students returning to education.

Contact with education

The students had had varied levels of contact with education since leaving school. One of the students had attended occasional informal courses before studying on an Access course: 'I gave up work when my son was born, then did a couple of creative writing courses just for myself really, and then someone recommended the New Opportunities for Women Course which is run by Leeds University one day a week. […] I had never done 'A' levels and this got me interested in and gave me a feeling for education.' Some students had no family history of HE and Access courses had provided the first point of contact. One student had learnt that it was possible to become a mature student only through a conversation with an acquaintance in a supermarket.

Others did have some HE role models in their families: 'My mother went to teacher training and was one of the first to qualify for the Open University. I have two nephews and a niece who went to university and I have discussed it with my daughter.' The youngest student felt that her own persistence in pursuing her studies had helped her to realise that other members of her family shared her ambitions:

My mother did 'A' levels and is now back at work having had children, and she really tries to gain knowledge of what I am studying. Even my grandmother says that she wishes she had been able to do this. I was completely unaware that they had these aspirations before I came here, that these two generations wanted to study and make more of themselves but simply did not have the opportunity to do so.

Choosing English

For the students who were returning to education in order to improve their family's prospects, vocational degrees had originally seemed more realistic options than courses in the humanities. One student commented that:

I came through an Access course and all I thought I could do was a vocational degree leading to a career. But I was told [at the English subject meeting on an access open day] to spend the time thinking about who I was and what I wanted. I had felt

that I had to do a vocational degree as I have children who need support and the whole point was to find better employment.

Later she reflected:

I sometimes wonder where I would be heading if I had been doing a business or IT degree. It would have been easier in a way as it would theoretically lead to a job [but] other types of degree don't make you feel something extra in every aspect of your life. English has that capacity and that is the great thrill of it.

Another student commented that 'I have never known a subject [….] that allows you to learn about yourself so deeply.'

Other students shared the view that one of the most attractive features of the English degree is the opportunity it offers students to reflect on their own experiences and views in critical ways. One explained that 'The course is not just about [reading "classic" literature], it also covers critical theory and gives you more confidence in what you are thinking, [making you] more open to other things.' Another agreed that 'academia opens up a whole other experience and way of thinking.' The extent to which these students had engaged with the subject became clear when one woman argued that 'Anything seems possible now. It's not just a false consciousness.' The students also felt that it was difficult to 'switch off' the critical approach they were learning to adopt for their studies: 'I was even pulling apart Harry Potter as my daughter read it, only for her to say "but I am just reading an adventure story!"'

The challenge of English

While the students confirmed the attraction of English as a subject that offered them the opportunity to think outside vocational issues, all of them noted that this also made English a demanding subject: one which had 'a huge emotional impact.' As one student commented, 'My expectations were to go to university and it not to open me up–I would just get on with the rest of my life.' The others agreed that English 'makes you engage with life in a totally different way.' One student reflected that 'I have learnt history [and] critical and cultural theory that, although it sounds dry, can change the way you view everyday life. It can impact on the way you see everything.' Another noted that she had thought of herself as someone who had always reflected on her own assumptions: 'I was political at 18, but coming in at 40 you enter into study with a lot of preconceptions and the shattering of these can be very unsettling. The fluidity of your thoughts, expanding as you study, is

very exciting but also unnerving.' One student even echoed the language of government health warnings to describe the extent of the challenge posed by her studies: 'This subject can seriously change the way you think about yourself and it can be very scary, especially for mature students.'

For students whose families and friends are unfamiliar with HE, and not fully supportive, these changes can be more unsettling than for more established students. One student sympathised with others who lack support: 'I have a partner who has been to university and I can talk to him, but my ex-husband was completely uninterested in what I was doing and I can fully appreciate how difficult [that] situation is.' Although another student was relishing the challenge of the programme itself, she admitted that she often asked herself '"Why am I wasting these years when I could be earning this money without having a degree?" It is almost selfish [to study] because I know that right now my family would be better off if I was not studying.'

Support

The students argued that because English provokes them to reconsider their views and can affect them profoundly it is especially important that tutors are supportive and take time to help students build their confidence. The students interviewed felt that this support was provided in the English department at Teesside and were really appreciative of it. One commented that 'I have felt that you can talk to any tutor and they won't laugh at you, they will listen, and we need this support.' The students explained that the support they were looking for as they dealt with the challenges of English as a discipline was not to be found via counselling services:

You go into a seminar with a tutor and you share a bond. It makes a big difference when you feel emotional about a particular book and you can share the experience. With a counsellor I don't think you would get this. I need to talk to the tutor to say that a book or a piece of work has emotionally affected me and I cannot do this with an outsider.

The students also relied on their peers for support but pointed out that some patterns of study could disrupt these networks or prevent them forming. One student who had returned to full-time study after a period as a part-time student on the programme explained that 'I use my peers for support but I lost this as a part-time student and I was getting no continuity, finding different people in different classes.' The students interviewed were happy that they would be referred to counselling or

other services if they were having significant difficulties.

When the students talked about the practical support they received in the English department, they drew attention to factors which might usefully be highlighted in materials issued during the application process. The student who had taken the shortest break between school and university had been very surprised—even though she had 'A' level qualifications—that it was possible to proceed to university when she had childcare responsibilities:

I got the 'A' levels I needed and my son went into the university nursery in September. The university [department] was very supportive and said that nothing should stop me. It shattered many of my ideas of how they might react.

An especially important factor for students was the supportive manner in which they were helped to take advantage of the department's mechanisms for helping under-represented students:

[The lecturers] have been very accommodating with me going from full-time to part-time and back to full-time. Even the odd extension on an essay, explaining that childcare is an issue for me, is very helpful. They are accommodating to the maximum and they never judge me.

The students also identified areas where minor changes in procedure would encourage applications from students with caring responsibilities:

The problem is that you come in and the next week study starts, and then you have to arrange childcare. I found that worrying because I can only relax once the children have been sorted out. But you literally have just three or four days before you begin and you have to arrange childcare in that time. It doesn't need to be that way.

Another student agreed: 'This was one of my main worries and to know the timetable even just a little earlier would have taken a lot of anxiety away from me.'

Finance

For all of the students, the problems of funding a degree represented a real obstacle to study. As one student explained, 'My sister did not go to university and says she would like to come back. But it is hard to say in one breath, "Do it, it's fantastic, but you will need a student loan or £10,000 from the bank."' Another student who had lost benefits after marrying during her degree programme explained that 'You have difficulty justifying [the fact] that you want to study for study's sake, as it is so expensive.' One woman struck a more optimistic

note: 'I get independence allowance and yes I am going to have a debt at the end of it, but I think that one has to speculate to accumulate.'

Interestingly, a major source of anger about funding was the obstacle it posed for under-represented students who wanted to proceed to postgraduate study. One student spoke passionately about her desire to do an MA but said that the posters displayed in the department promoting postgraduate courses were effectively taunting her because the option of continuing her studies was illusory: 'I really want to do the MA but I have to justify it and I cannot financially. It is like we are being offered the opportunity and then it is snatched away.' There was some scepticism about the level of opportunity being offered to under-represented students by the national agenda on widening participation: 'The government seems not to value education. The concept of Teesside–the University of Opportunities–implies that [the government] values only the career result of study rather than the study itself.' The need to make postgraduate courses accessible and feasible for students from under-represented groups is a key challenge for departments, institutions and national funding bodies. A large number of the lecturers involved in this study came into English as students from 'under-represented' groups and care needs to be taken so that the students being recruited under new initiatives have the opportunity, not just to study English Language, Literature and Creative Writing, but to find careers in academia in the long-term.

Ending under-representation

For all of the students, their own studies represented an important example to their children and other people in their communities. They commented variously that:

I can now take myself forward, not only for me but for my children.

I now feel that I have more opportunities to help my children and project the ambition I had at that age but could not fulfil.

My children can see that they can get out there, get those qualifications, and not struggle.

My children have always believed they will go to university and now perhaps [they] see it with less apprehension.

When my daughter goes to university, I will be able to talk to her with more understanding.

I would like to think that my experience has shown that it is never too late and you are never too old to go to university.

[Now] I am frustrated with my mother who never even went to work. The experience has made me drive my children to exceed their own expectations.

Appendix A: Access and widening participation for students with disabilities

Introduction

The materials below draw on some of the staff development resources available nationally in order to suggest, briefly, some of the strategies that a department teaching programmes in English Literature, Language and Creative Writing might consider adopting to improve the provision of support for students with disabilities. The suggestions here are by no means exhaustive and it is recommended that staff consult the QAA's *Code of Practice on Students with Disabilities* and the other resources mentioned below if they are reviewing their practice in this area. *The Code of Practice,*

> *…recognises that disabled students are an integral part of the academic community. It takes as its starting point the premiss [sic] that acceptable and appropriate provision is not 'additional', but a core element of the overall service which an institution makes available.*[20]

It is likely that individual institutions will have made some provision for disabled students and for staff development in this area, particularly now that the SENDA legislation has come into effect. The introduction of the new SENDA legislation on education and disability in the autumn of 2002 has done more than anything else to focus the attention of institutions on disability issues. However, research suggests that provision for students with disabilities will largely be a matter for departmental scrutiny. The National Disability Team has investigated the effects of legislation similar to SENDA in Australia and Mike Adams, the Principal Co-ordinator of the NDT, concludes that:

> *Anecdotal evidence indicates that the majority of cases that reached court (and where the judgement went against the institution) were directly related to teaching, learning and assessment. Such cases involved either direct discrimination (for example, refusing entry to a course without reasonable grounds where the decision was based on the individual's disability rather than educational achievement) or [departments] not going far enough in making reasonable adjustments in teaching and learning practice to enable participation [and] access to materials in alternative formats in a timely manner.*[21]

Adams suggests that in Australia academic staff have developed ways of working with disability officers which go beyond the kinds of referral processes current in most institutions in UK HE and that these changes have produced positive results: 'Alongside day-to-day curriculum issues [disability officers] work with course designers so students' learning needs are considered from the outset and unnecessary barriers to learning can be minimised at an early stage.'[22] Collaboration between academics and disability officers, together with the provision of generic and subject-specific training and support materials for academic staff, will help lecturers to develop effective strategies for supporting disabled students.

One of the key factors in developing effective curricula for students with disabilities is the acceptance that 'fair' provision is not identical with 'equal' provision for all students. Adjustments do need to be made to the curriculum, its delivery and its assessment if all students are to have equal opportunities to excel. Conventional modes for delivering or assessing courses may well operate to exclude or disadvantage students with disabilities and changes do need to be made on the basis of informed judgement and individual student needs. Barbara Lloyd-Smith, the Director of the National Disability Team, notes that when education and disability have been subject to judicial scrutiny in the United States, 'Courts have been interested in individual "needs" and circumstances rather than broad (prejudiced) views about disabled people that were taken to be paternalistic and unacceptable … [and in general the] misperception of the impact of disability has been a factor in successful cases.'[23]

Provision for disabled students is key to the broader 'widening participation' agenda. HEFCE is keen to consider disability issues in the light of broader debates on widening participation and learning and teaching.[24] Both HEFCE and SHEFC have funded projects in this area and are continuing to develop support and incentives to encourage change. The research on supporting students with disabilities suggests that good practice for them is generally good practice for all students. The departments involved in this English Subject Centre report on access and widening participation have emphasised the need for good communication and procedural changes to encourage the recruitment, induction, teaching and retention of under-represented students. These principles provide a solid basis for any curriculum review which focuses on

disability. Any review, should of course, take account of the support and curricular needs of students with mental health difficulties.

The incorporation of guidance on these issues into training for new lecturers–both full- and part-time–and careful attention to the voices of disabled students and staff will help to ensure that provision for students with disabilities becomes an automatic consideration in course design rather than the subject of continual review processes.

Support materials for lecturers

There are some very useful materials, available nationally, that can be employed to raise awareness about disability issues in relation to departmental practice and the curriculum.

They support:

- **Curriculum Review:** One of the most useful resources is the *Teachability* resource pack which would help a department to review its curriculum in terms of the needs of disabled students.[25]

- **Lecturer Training:** A resource in this area which is continuing to expand is the DEMOS project website. The site provides staff development materials online. Its online tutorial on dyslexia, which takes about an hour to complete, is useful in helping staff to develop a clear sense of the difficulties that dyslexic students encounter in their studies, and is likely to be of real interest to colleagues in English Language, Literature and Creative Writing. It provides samples of text which allow lecturers to experience textual information in the same way as dyslexic students do, and encourages them to think about how to adapt provision.[26] The DEMOS website also contains staff development materials on assessment and disability which could be used alongside the Teachability resource pack in a curriculum review process.

- **Electronic Resource Development:** Lecturers developing online materials will find it helpful to consult *Access All Areas: Disability, Technology and Learning* which includes a range of articles introducing contexts and examples of practice in this area.[27]

- **Reviews of Teaching Practice:** A guide which will give staff invaluable practical help as they adapt

their materials for teaching and learning is *Accessible Curricula: Good Practice for All.*[28] Some of its recommendations–those most applicable to programmes in our subject areas–are summarised below, but it would be good practice for departments to have a copy of this guide available to full-time and part-time staff for immediate reference. Other disability-specific guides are now being written and provide useful guidance on learning and teaching for deaf students, for example.[29]

- **Referral Mechanisms:** Another valuable source of information is the Student Mental Health website.[30] This online manual provides a useful, practical guide to lecturers supporting students with mental health difficulties. For example, it suggests strategies for use 'When a Student wants to Talk' and gives advice on how lecturers should act when a student expresses concerns for another student.

We now consider some methods for improving the accessibility of programmes and course materials.

Promotional materials

Promotional materials in leaflet or prospectus form should be as clear as possible about the kinds of teaching and learning methods used on a programme and about the expectations a department has of prospective students. Specific information, available in a variety of formats, about provision for disabled students will allow people to make informed and timely choices about the suitability of a programme for their needs. Clarity in promotional materials for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes will also help departments to avoid putting students in the position of having to make continual requests for information or proper provision.

As a general principle, students should not need either to ask if help is available or make repeated requests for the provision of support that has been promised to them. Recruitment information should as far as possible explain the support mechanisms which are built into practical procedures and the curriculum itself. If students have to make continual requests of this kind, a department will be in breach of the SENDA legislation which requires departments to make study as unproblematic for people with disabilities as it is for all other students. It is important that all lecturers involved

in the recruitment process are in a position to talk confidently about the department's support of disabled students. Many departments are now developing their links with local schools and colleges and this can provide them with additional opportunities to promote the accessibility of courses.

Disclosure

It is important to establish a point at which students are asked to disclose information about their needs to members of the academic department in which they are studying. While this information may well be disclosed to the institution in the application process, it also needs to be available to members of staff who are planning courses, preparing teaching materials and—as is increasingly the case—organising work placements or other kinds of activities outside the institution.

A review of departmental practice might usefully include a review of the processes through which information about student needs is circulated within an institution and a department. Such a review should involve part-time tutors who are often involved in the delivery of modules to students and would benefit from training and support in relation to access and widening participation issues.

If a student chooses not to disclose a disability, this is within his or her rights. Students who choose not to disclose their disabilities are still entitled to expect that learning opportunities will be designed in broadly accessible ways. Now that lectures and seminar materials are often developed in the form of word-processed documents, it is relatively easy for staff to provide materials to students so that they can convert them into Braille or audio formats, or read them in document form outside the teaching environment. A number of English departments are making use of film or audio materials in their programmes and the provision of subtitled materials or transcripts can often be arranged in collaboration with library services.[31] Even in the most traditional teaching and learning environments, small adjustments can make it substantially easier for students with disabilities to learn and to participate fully. Some of these adjustments are discussed below.

Adapting teaching materials

There are some basic considerations which can help to make the familiar teaching and learning environments of our disciplines accessible. If tutors deliver lectures and seminars in traditional ways, they are likely to be disadvantaging students. Failures to make changes will leave students disadvantaged, while changes are likely to make a positive impact on the learning experience of all students. In order to develop consistent practices and to ensure consistent experiences for students, departments will need to review their use of teaching formats, take time to train lecturers, agree on department-wide changes and ensure that students are aware of policies where appropriate. The guidelines below are limited in scope, but used in conjunction with the other materials mentioned in this study offer some guidelines for discussion.

Some lecturers in English departments now act as departmental or faculty-level disability officers. These lecturers are in an ideal position to co-ordinate policy changes. However, implementation will require the co-operation of all full-time and part-time colleagues. It is important to recognise that, given the legal changes brought in by the SENDA legislation, this co-operation is not optional.

Departments and individual lecturers will need to ensure that they are developing disability-aware resources and practices. Some of the recommendations from *Accessible Curricula: Good Practice for All* [32] which are most applicable to departments which teach English Literature, Language and Creative Writing are adapted and summarised below. They remind lecturers to develop disability-aware:

Support materials

- Make sure that resources provide visual or auditory support for students who may find information inaccessible in other formats.

- If students are referred to specific passages in texts during a seminar, ensure that students with visual impairments have had opportunities to focus on these extracts in appropriate formats in advance.

- The *Accessible Curricula* guide provides detailed information about the development of accessible OHP slides, PowerPoint and web materials.[33] It also describes the kinds of 'assistive technology' which students may find helpful.

- The English Subject Centre's Learning Link database illustrates that many colleagues are now making use of the world-wide web or virtual learning environments to deliver course materials.[34] It is possible to design these resources in ways that support disabled students and

guidance on this is available through the 'Bobby' service which sets targets for staff designing accessible websites.[35] An example of an online teaching resource which is already 'Bobby-approved' can be found at the website of AMATAS, the Americanisation project.[36] The TechDis website and its published resources provide detailed advice on assistive technologies and web accessibility.[37]

Handouts

- Use sans serif fonts such as Arial and Comic Sans which are easier for many students to read than fonts which are more elaborate.

- For students with visual impairments, provide copies of handouts in large text (e.g. 18 point type), but avoid using unwieldy A3 versions of A4 materials.

- Use coloured paper rather than 'bright' white paper which can increase the distortion of print for dyslexic students.

Clear verbal communication

- Always face the group when speaking to assist lip-reading students.

- Repeat students' questions or comments if they are not audible to everyone.

- Allow taping of lectures or provide summaries or transcripts.

- Make provision for students who find it difficult to listen and make notes at the same time.

- Use a microphone where appropriate.

Good conditions for lip-reading

- Encourage students with hearing difficulties to sit at the front of the class.

- Avoid standing in front of windows or bright lights which make it difficult for students to lip-read.

- Avoid obstructing the student's view of your lip movements.

Assessment

- Encourage good practice in group work required of students outside normal class-time and provide support for all the students involved as appropriate.

- Make provision for alternative or adapted modes of assessment if oral assessment presents difficulties to the student.

- Liaise with examination officers about the location, conditions, format and timing of examinations.

- Make use of training materials (such as those provided at the DEMOS website) and institutional training to develop awareness of best practice in, for example, the assessment of dyslexic students.

Good communication with students and others

- Some students will want to maintain total confidentiality about their disability and conversation with them will help lecturers to establish methods of working which support their learning and their privacy. All students will appreciate the unobtrusive provision of support.

- Academics in our disciplines are likely to be sensitive to the politics of naming. Nevertheless it can be helpful to remember some basic guidelines. It is better use the term 'disabled' rather than 'handicapped' and to refer to people as 'wheelchair users' rather than as 'wheelchair bound'. Avoid identifying students entirely with their disability: it is a better idea to refer to 'a student with dyslexia' than to 'a dyslexic'.

- In seminars, workshops and lectures make key concepts and tasks available in written and/or electronic as well as oral form. This can be helpful to dyslexic students, for example.

- Strategies for providing students with assessment feedback may need to be adapted so that feedback is fully accessible and a coherent departmental strategy will be helpful here.

- Liaison with other departments in which students are working, and with appropriate support services in the institution will be helpful.

- Liasing with support assistants who accompany students to seminars and lecturers will help them to provide the best possible support for students on your programme.

- Keeping part-time tutors involved in developments and providing them with support will help to ensure that students have a coherent experience.

- When changes of location or seminar time are inevitable or when staff-student committees are being organised, notice-boards may not provide effective means of communicating with disabled students. Develop good communication strategies in advance, using large print or Braille notices, email, (mobile) phones or text messages as appropriate so that students are not disadvantaged.

- Seek out feedback about provision so that practice can be improved across the department, subject community and institution. The QAA Code of Practice notes that 'Disabled students already enrolled on programmes are often a useful source of advice. Their participation at every stage of provision, from design to evaluation, is likely to ensure that developments are both effective and efficient in increasing access and improving the quality of disabled students' experience of higher education.'38 It will, of course, also be valuable to attend to the views of lecturers with disabilities who teach in the disciplines of English Literature, Language and Creative Writing.

Placements and conferences

- As English departments start to introduce modules which involve work-based learning, they will need to develop procedures which will help them to identify the requirements of disabled students and ensure that they are being adequately met. It may be helpful for lecturers to look at the kinds of provision made in subject areas more accustomed to arranging field work, and the English Subject Centre's website will provide up-to-date links to materials—developed in association with other subject centres—that will support work in this area. Individual institutions may be able to advise lecturers on procedures for disclosure and ongoing support during any work-based placement.

- Research projects in English language programmes may involve students in substantial field work and proper support mechanisms need to be developed to ensure that students are supported and assessed fairly.

- Theatre trips and other curriculum-related outings need to be planned with the needs of disabled students in mind. Details about provision should be made available in promotional material.

- Provision for disabled students and staff should be made when lecturers are organising research conferences as well as conventional teaching. Enquire about the needs of delegates, ensure that venues are accessible and advertise provision in a variety of formats.

These guidelines are limited in scope. The suggestions made here are by no means exhaustive and it is recommended that staff consult the QAA's Code of Practice on Students with Disabilities, and the other resources mentioned here if they are reviewing their practice in this area. It is likely that resources in this area will proliferate and the English Subject Centre website at www.english.ltsn.ac.uk will continue to provide up-to-date information.

The English Subject Centre welcomes information about examples of good practice in provision for students with disabilities. If you would like to contribute to the development of subject-specific resources in this area, please contact us.

References

1. '41.5% of those aged 18-30 enter higher education at present. The Government target is to increase that proportion to 50% by 2010'. Christopher Barnham, *Higher Education Issues Document*, Department for Education and Skills, November 2002, p. 6.

2. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001, c. 10) **http://www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.htm**. A SENDA Code of Practice has been developed by the Disability Rights Commission and is available at **http://www.drc-gb.org/drc/Campaigns/Page431.asp#three**. Additional resources, developed by Skill, the Bureau for Students with Disabilities, are available via **http://www.skill.org.uk**

3. 'The Government has set a target that, by the year 2010, 50 per cent of those aged between 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to benefit from higher education.' HEFCE, *Partnerships for Progression: Call for Strategic Plans to Release funding*, HEFCE 02/49, p. 2. **http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2002/**

4. HEFCE, *Funding for Widening Participation in Higher Education*, HEFCE 02/22 **http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2002**

5. SHEFC has established a site at **http://www.goals.ac.uk**

6. The Action on Access website is at **http://www.brad.ac.uk/admin/conted/action/**

7. Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), *Widening Access to Higher Education: Strategies*, HEFCW W00/114HE. **http://www.wfc.ac.uk/education/hefcw/pub00/w00114he.html**

8. It is notable the HEFCE's recent set of case studies on access and widening participation – *Successful Student Diversity: Case Studies of Practice in Learning and Teaching and Widening Participation*, HEFCE 02/48, – contains no case studies based on humanities subjects. HEFCE 02/48 is available at **http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2002/02_48.htm**

9. English Benchmarking Statement **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/topic/benchmark/index.htm**

10. Brennan, John and Ruth Williams, *The English Degree and Graduate Careers*, English Subject Centre Report Series 2, February 2003, ISBN 0 902 19463 1 **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/projects/gradcareer.htm**. The English Subject Centre is funding a project on 'English in the Workplace' run jointly by De Montfort University and the University of Loughborough. For further details see **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/projects/deptprojects/workplace.htm**

11. Williams, Sadie, *Admission Trends in Undergraduate English: Statistics and Attitudes*, English Subject Centre Report Series 1, p. 47. **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/topic/admissions.htm**

12. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001, c. 10) **http://www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.htm**

13. See *Disability Provision Development Plans 2000-01*, HEFCW W01/03HE; see also *Disability Discrimination Act Planning: Funding Development Plans 2001/02*, W02/03HE. Reports available via **http://www.wfc.ac.uk/education/hefcw/pubs.html**

14. The Speak-Write website is at **http://www.apu.ac.uk/english/speakwrite/**

15. Holland, Siobhán and Aidan Arrowsmith, *Practising Theory Online*, (Newcastle: Assessment and the Expanded Text, 2001). Available at **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/topic/expandtxt/casestudy.htm**

16. The PADSHE project case studies are available at **http://www.http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/padshe/case-studies/case-studies.html**

17.   The Student Psychological Health Project website is at **http://www.le.ac.uk/edsc/sphp/studresults/html**

18.   For further details, see our website at **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk**

19.   For details of the English Subject Centre's events programme, see **http://english.ltsn.ac.uk/events/index/htm**. The Directory of Experience and Expertise can be accessed at **http://english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/expertise/Experience_search.asp**

20.   Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education, Section 3: Students with Disabilities*, (Gloucester: QAA, 1999).

21.   Adams, Mike, 'A Postcard from Australia', *National Disability Team Newsletter*, 2001:03, p. 4. **http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk**

22.   See reference 21.

23.   Lloyd-Smith, Barbara, 'What Can we Learn from America?', *National Disability Team Newsletter*, 2001:03, p. 6. **http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk**

24.   HEFCE, *Improving Provision for Disabled Students: HEFCE Strategy and Invitation to Bid for Funds for 2003-2005*, HEFCE 02/21. **http://www.hefce.ac.uk**

25.   *Teachability: Creating and Accessible Curriculum*. Available at **http://www.ispn.gcal.ac.uk/teachability/index.html**

26.   The DEMOS website at **http://www.demos.ac.uk** includes staff development materials on topics including dyslexia and assessment.

27.   Phipps, Lawrie, Allan Sutherland and Jane Seale, (eds.) *Access All Areas: Disability, Technology and Learning*, (London: JISC TechDis Service and ALT, 2002). Contact the English Subject Centre for a free copy. Also available at **http://www.techdis.aac.uk/accessallareas.AAA.pdf**

28.   Doyle, Carol and Karen Robson, *Accessible Curricula: Good Practice for All*. (Cardiff: UWIC Press, 2002). **http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ltsu/accessible.html**

29.   Mole, Judith and Diane Peacock, *Learning, Teaching and Assessment: A Good Practice Guide for Lecturers Teaching Art, Design and Communication to Deaf Students* (Wolverhampton: University of Wolverhampton, 2002). Available at **http://www.wlv.ac.uk/teachingdeafstudents/booklet.htm**. The guide is accompanied by an online glossary of British Sign Language signs for terms which may well be of use to students, lecturers and Sign Language interpreters working with students of English Literature, Language and Creative Writing. See **http://www.artsigns.ac.uk**.

30.   See the Student Mental Health Manual website at **http://www.studentmentalhealth.org.uk/**. The most useful sections for lecturers are likely to be sections 3 and 7. Further resources are suggested on the English Subject Centre website at **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/projects/access/disability.htm**

31.   We would be grateful if staff in English departments who are using film or audio sources would share information with the English Subject Centre about the strategies they are developing to support students with disabilities.

32.   See reference 28 for details. It would be good practice for departments to make copies of this guide available to full-time and part-time colleagues for easy reference.

33.   See reference 28.

34.   The English Subject Centre's *LearningLink* database is available at **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/learninglink/**

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35. The Bobby Service is available at **http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp**

36. The website for AMATAS, the project on Americanisation and the Teaching of American Studies is comprehensively tagged to make it easy for all users to benefit from it. **http://www.uclan.ac.uk/amatas**

37. The TechDis website is at **http://www.techdis.ac.uk/** and provides comprehensive resources for people designing electronic learning materials for teaching and learning. For details of the organisation's publications in this area, see reference 27.

38. See reference 20, p. 4.

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Williams, Sadie, *Admissions Trends in Undergraduate English: Statistics and Attitudes*, English Subject Centre Report Series, 1. **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/topic/admissions.htm**

Links

Action on Access
http://www.brad.ac.uk/admin/conted/action/

Artsigns: An Online British Sign Language/English Glossary for Art and Design Education
http://www.artsigns.ac.uk

Bobby: Web Accessibility Software
http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp

DEMOS: Online Materials for Staff Disability Awareness
http://www.demos.ac.uk

Disability Rights Commission: SENDA Code of Practice
http://www.drc-gb.org/drc/Campaigns/Page431.asp#three

English Benchmarking Statement
http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/topic/benchmark/index.htm

English Subject Centre
http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk

Higher Education Funding Council for England
http://www.hefce.ac.uk

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
http://www.wfc.ac.uk/hefcw/index.htm

Learning Link: C&IT Resources for English
http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/learninglink/

National Disability Team
http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk

Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
http://www.shefc.ac.uk

SENDA, Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001, c. 10)
http://www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.htm

Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities
http://www.skill.org.uk

Student Mental Health: Planning, Guidance and Training Manual
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February 2003, ISBN 090219478X

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