Reasonable Adjustments in Academic Departments

Background:

In May 2001 the Government passed the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, which amended the existing DDA (1995) in several ways. There are two main requirements of law, which affect institutions:

- "responsible bodies must not treat a disabled person 'less favourably' than a non-disabled person for reasons related to his/her disability, without 'justification'."

- "responsible bodies are required by law to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that a disabled student is not placed at a 'substantial disadvantage'."

The new legislation requirements, which affect the institution's core business, came into force from 1st September 2002. It is now incumbent on every university to make reasonable adjustments for existing students with disabilities. Moreover, universities must make provision for future students and therefore they often cannot rely on existing infrastructures, but must put systems into place to address the needs of students with a range of disabilities.

Definition

A 'reasonable adjustment' may be defined as an accommodation or alteration to existing academic programmes, which is necessary for students to have the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. The implementation of a reasonable adjustment aims to allow students to achieve their maximum potential within a framework of academic standards.

The inclusion of reasonable adjustments to teaching, learning and assessment requires the promotion of changes in attitude and processes within Higher Education. Reasonable adjustments reflect legal and ethical obligations to ensure disabled students are offered a level playing field

Reasonable adjustments in relation to lectures:

The following suggestions might be considered reasonable adjustments for academic departments to make in relation to lectures. It should be noted that, in many cases, these recommendations reflect good teaching practice for *all* students. However, if the provision is not in place, students with Specific

Learning Difficulties would be most apt to be disadvantaged, and therefore have a basis for a complaint, which would most likely be supported in law.

Preparation
- Provide a course overview or 'road-map' for the whole course
- State learning outcomes at the outset of each lecture

Handouts
- Handouts should be available in advance and on line; consider use of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) e.g WebCT, Blackboard. Students have easy access to this in most institutions and can print out the handouts in any format they find suitable
- Use a clear font (e.g. Arial) of at least 12 point
- Use non-glare cream/ivory paper (or a different colour which might be recommended for a particular student) for handouts
- Provide a clear structure which offers a simplifies version of the lecture
- Handouts with reading lists should give library class/shelf number

Access to lecture topics
- Lectures to be recorded on tapes and/or videos, which should be stored in and made available from the library
- Students should be allowed to make personal recordings of lectures
- Arrange for a single note taker for each lecture on a rota basis from among the students
- Student helpers or support workers may be required to act as scribes; payment is available in some universities or as part of the DSA
- Multi-sensory presentation to appeal to all learning styles
- Named contact in each academic department
- Named contact in library
- Extended loans for library material

Note Lecturers need to be given guidelines for good practice such as giving an overview at the beginning of each lecture and recognising different learning styles. If academics suggest that students do not attend lectures if given notes in advance, they could be referred to a survey carried out at the University of Durham. This showed that only 3% of students indicated that they did not attend lectures if given notes in advance. The main reasons given by students for non-attendance were early starting times and boring lecture style.

Reasonable adjustments in relation to tutorials:
- Students should be able to make a sound recording of the tutorial if they find note taking difficult
- A summary of the tutorial should be made available
- References to literature should be written down rather than given verbally and names of authors spelt out
- Confidentiality should be respected
- Students should not be asked to read aloud (without prior preparation)

Reasonable adjustments in relation to coursework:

Feedback:

- Tutors could be asked to give written essay feedback in a word processed format especially if their handwriting is difficult to read
- Tutors could also tape comments on a micro disk or other recording device
- Flexible access to tutors for follow up questions

Time Limits on Coursework:

- There should be a rigorous whole institution policy so that (all) students know what to expect
- Communication between departments to establish agreed time-limits is essential
- Departments should ensure that deadlines for assignments are staggered
- If departments offer joint courses, deadlines should be checked with the co-operating department
- Extensions should not be automatic but granted if applied for and supported by a good case as with all extenuating circumstances
- Specific Learning Difficulties are not generally considered as a sole justification for extension
- Multiple extensions could lead to additional problems
- Advanced time scales in course outlines should assist planning
- Long lead time should be given for all assessments on fieldwork and placements
- Students should be expected to hand in a plan or mind map on the due date even if granted additional time based on extenuating circumstances
- Draft work should be accepted for checking well ahead of the deadline

Alternative forms of assessment:

- There should be a rigorous Whole Institution Policy
- Oral presentation of work should be allowed in the form of *vivas*, but both staff and students need training in the use of *vivas* to meet the learning outcomes of courses
- When allowed, *vivas* should be recorded for external examiners
- When recommended, students should have the option of presenting coursework instead of doing examinations
- Examinations with an open book provision should be allowed
- Audio or video presentations should be allowed for students who find direct presentation difficult (e.g. due to expressive language difficulties)
- Mind mapped presentations may be acceptable for some assessment components
- Practice items should be readily available and marked if requested
- Projects and work of a more practical kind, may be acceptable alternatives to dissertations
- Portfolios or presentations may be acceptable alternatives to essays

- Short answer responses may be an acceptable alternative to essays in some contexts
- The use of voice activated software should be allowed if needed
- The use of text reading software, for example, Texthelp Gold should be allowed if needed
- Double marking of work in terms of looking at its content and then its form should be considered
- In examinations, students should have additional time, and if necessary the use of information technology with the facility to change the background colour and font, access to large print versions of the questions and the services of a reader or amanuensis
- Alternative forms of assessment need to be reviewed at Academic Progress Review Boards
- Alternative forms of assessment should be included in the validation of new courses

What might be considered an *unreasonable* adjustment?

- The provision of unlimited time in examinations would generally be considered an unreasonable adjustment. The amount of additional time allowed must be justifiable based on the nature and degree of the individual's difficulties
- Reduced workloads are unreasonable in that they could be seen as lowering standards
- Extreme demands on lecturers' time would be viewed as unreasonable

Note: Issues of parity need to be further investigated in relation to both alternative assessment and allocation of time by lecturers. Fairness does not mean treating everyone in the same way; rather it suggests the need to treat each individual according to his or her need.

Examples of good practice:

The following two examples of good practice illustrate how 'reasonable adjustments' can assist students with Specific Learning Difficulties:

➢ The following provisions were adapted by the Open Language Programme at London Metropolitan University to help students with Specific Learning Difficulties compensate for problems with poor working memory:

- Additional time in aural examinations and provision of language laboratory so that dyslexic students can replay tapes as often as they wish during their extra time
- Additional time and repetition of instructions in oral examinations

> ➢ The following adjustment at the School of Nursing at Thames Valley University ensured that a severely dyspraxic student with a writing speed of 10 wpm was not disadvantaged:
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> - Provision of Log Book, normally completed by hand on hospital placement, provided on CD-Rom

Who is responsible for the implementation of reasonable adjustments?

University wide policies need to be developed to ensure consistency and transparency of provision. In the event of conflict, provision should be made for mediation and a system of appeals should be in place.

Possible problems concerning professional bodies:

Professional bodies are sometimes reluctant to offer reasonable adjustments in relation to professional examinations. However, they are included under the legislation and appropriate adjustments should be put in place.

The above document was prepared from information contributed initially in two workshops at the First Annual ADSHE conference (September 2004) and subsequently agreed upon by the members of the Association.

Overall a wide variety of suggestions were made that will help dyslexic students, and those with other specific learning difficulties, access the learning and teaching programmes offered in universities. Many of these suggestions could be incorporated into guidelines of good practice that would help all students. However, it was observed that some of the suggestions would mean extra work for some teaching staff, for example word processing feedback on essays, and this should be kept in mind when liaising with staff from academic departments.

There is also some tension between making lectures and tutorials accessible to students and the expectations of what students should be asked to do for themselves, for instance should all students be expected to make their own recordings and notes (in any format) and not expect tutors to provide notes and summaries. Academic tutors might argue that this is an essential learning process and a necessary 'academic literacy' that all students have to learn, albeit with necessary and adequate support that can be provided by specialist dyslexia tutors.