

Curriculum design and approval at the University of Strathclyde

The University of Strathclyde is currently engaged in a complete 'Review of Procedure and Guidelines for Course and Class Approval' and the PiP Curriculum project team¹ have been heavily involved with activities surrounding this. The PiP project is a JISC funded project that is supporting the University in the development of a new, technology-supported approach to curriculum design, approval and enhancement that reduces blockages and inefficiencies, offers help and guidance to academic staff designing learning tasks, classes and courses and reflects the principals and strategic objectives embodied in university policy. This paper examines some of the issues faced by disabled students as a result of current approaches to curriculum and the impact changes to the approval and design process could have on their university experience. The PiP project provides a possible platform for raising awareness about disability issues and through analysis of current project and institutional activities in this area, it is hoped a strategy for enhancing accessibility within the institution in this area will emerge. A review of the wider literature available and a consultation with a range of staff across the institution including the Disability Service, members of the Governance Management & Policy Team (GMAP) and staff responsible for Equality Impact Assessments and College Liaison and Admissions, has been undertaken by PiP in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of institutional culture and decision-making in this area.

Since curriculum policy, approval and delivery underpins many key activities and processes across the institution it is imperative that significant consideration is given to the needs of disabled students - and indeed students with other special needs or accessibility requirements - when course and classes are being designed. Taking account of accessibility issues and complying with disability and equality legislation "sooner rather than later" could have significant benefits to the institution not just for disabled students but for all students. Empowering staff to make informed decisions around accessibility is also an important aspect that should be addressed throughout this review of current practice. Delivering accessible courses and classes requires consideration of a number of factors at the design and approval stage and the institutional review and PiP project will explore mechanisms that could be put in place to ensure academics and professional services staff have the opportunity, support and appropriate information available to provide for such considerations, while minimising disruption to usual practice. Adaptation to design and approval processes and procedures that bring accessibility considerations to the fore earlier could help minimise the requirement for reasonable adjustments and help change perceptions of some staff that planning for disabled students is something that happens "afterwards".

¹ <http://www.principlesinpatterns.ac.uk/>

University policy and legal obligations

University Policy states that course descriptions must be written in such a way to welcome and encourage disabled people to apply. They should link closely to wider programme/course specifications “where the potential needs of future disabled students ought to be considered with a view to determining whether any aspects of the course design or delivery might needlessly create barriers for disabled students” It also stipulates that curriculum designers must be clear about core and non negotiable course requirements and competence standards when specifying and describing courses and agree where adjustments can and cannot be reasonably made. This information is essential when considering marketing courses to potential students, some of whom will be disabled

Competence Standards as detailed within the Code of Practice for Part IV of the DDA are defined as being any standard that fulfils the following three conditions:

1. It must be an academic, medical or other standard applied by or on behalf of an education provider for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability. (5.71)
2. It must be relevant to the course, i.e. a genuine standard. (5.73)
3. It must not lead to direct discrimination against a disabled person or persons when it is applied. (If it does, then it cannot be a ‘genuine’ competence standard. (6.30 / 9.19).²

As current course and class approval forms within the institution do not formally capture these standards or normally require course designers to stipulate them when courses are first put forward for approval there is a real risk of these standards not being appropriately discussed or incorporated into curriculum design. Without this step being included in the formal approval process it is extremely difficult to ensure compliance, or minimise the need for adjustments later in the process. Discussions with Disability Service staff suggest that they would welcome a formal approach to establishing and embedding Competence Standards in documentation. Such documentation would obviate their need to seek this information through relatively informal and unstructured mechanisms.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) clearly states the legal obligations upon the institution to “consider the anticipatory nature of the reasonable adjustments duty and design their courses and any assessments to be as accessible as possible”³ Approaches to curriculum design that do not anticipate possible adjustments required or take reasonable steps to ensure compliance with the

² Notes on Competence Standards – Lecture Materials PgCert

³ Disability Discrimination Act Part 4, revised 2007, para 8.13

DDA, or suggest alternative methods of assessment or course activities for example, are therefore contravening the DDA and could leave the institution open to legal challenge. Some staff may see anticipating issues for a relatively small section of the student population as an unreasonable and unrealistic burden on their time and resources; however, if flexibility is built in from the beginning it will actually mean a reduction in time spent on reasonable adjustments at the delivery stage.⁴ Institutions cannot afford to ignore the risk of litigation from non-compliance and a truly accessible course will in fact benefit all students not just those with disabilities.

The DDA amendment regulations (2006) extended the concept of Competence Standards to all courses and programmes of study. Including these standards in a more formal way within curriculum design and approval could also help protect the institution and minimise the requirement for unnecessary adjustments to curriculum over time. As Competence Standards are very precisely defined (i.e. they must be “genuinely” relevant to the course and must not lead to direct discrimination against a disabled student when applied) there is no further duty on the institution to “reasonably adjust” that which has been identified as a competent standard. This allows the institution to set out concrete standards for each course and class that give clear messages to students about the “non-negotiable” elements being taught. These “non-negotiables” could then provide a defence mechanism for institutions who may receive requests for adjustment to core activities or learning outcomes that are in fact unreasonable and contrary to the intended outcomes of the teaching in question. Building these non-negotiables in to a course at the beginning would ensure both staff and students are better informed about expectations contained within a given course of study. Although institutions may not have to compromise so readily on their core competent standards per se; what they must do, however, is suggest different methods of delivery or alternative assessments that allow students with disabilities to still achieve the competence standards outlined within a course. It is clear that a better understanding about Competence Standards among staff and students would result in less confusion over possible adaptations to curriculum designs and give all involved clearer guidance as to what is - and indeed what is not possible - under the “reasonable adjustment” umbrella.

External reviews from the Quality Assurance Association for Scotland (QAA) also provide a measure for institutional alignment with disability legislation and compliance with equality laws. As an institution the University of Strathclyde has an obligation to respond to individual students' entitlements and as an organisation in the public sector, they are covered by the Disability Equality Duty (DED). The DED requires institutions to pay 'due regard' to the need to eliminate unlawful disability discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people when carrying out all of its functions.⁵ The University of Strathclyde is obliged therefore to ensure all policies and procedures are in line with disability legislation. Further institutions must ensure any review of policy on course and class approval complies with relevant legislation. With this in mind the institution is now carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment as part of its review of course and

⁴ Teachability Resources (see references)

⁵ QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 3: Disabled students -February 2010

class approval policy, which will examine all expected changes in line with legislation and anticipated risks (the scheduling of this activity came as a direct result of PiP team meetings with staff in this area).

The institution's most recent Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR) carried out in Feb/March 2010 by external agency the QAA on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council, also pointed towards greater consistency in approach and the production of a single source of information that could help to ensure accessibility by multiple users for multiple purposes⁶. Furthermore, the ELIR report stated that "in carrying out its planned review of the course and class approval arrangements, the University is asked to reflect on the balance between cross-institutional consistency and flexibility in its approach, with particular regard to the impact on students of variations in regulations" (ELIR Report 2010 para. 77). Consistency of experience fits well with planning for disability and ensuring widespread accessibility as it requires the institution to be more prescriptive and regulatory in their approach.

Institutional review of course and class approval

As a result of ELIR findings and wider attempts to streamline practice and process in light of institutional re-structuring, the current paper based approach to course and class design and approval has now been deemed unsatisfactory by the institution and a wholesale review is being undertaken. A key strategy for enhancing accessibility across the institution is building accessibility principles into course and class design and approval. Ensuring that the content of course specifications is not exclusionary is no small task and will require input from a number of different sources and stakeholders. Contained within course specifications are benchmark statements, intended learning outcomes and assessment activities and these could prove exclusionary if not documented and described properly.

For example, a course that stipulates oral presentations as assessed elements (e.g. to help foster transferrable presentational skills in students that are very desirable for employers) may result in problems for a disabled student that prevents them from fulfilling this criteria. If the description of such oral assessments are written and marketed as what appears to be a "non-negotiable" element then students who feel this element may prevent them from successfully completing the course may not even apply. If course designers stipulated alternative forms of assessment for those who may be unable to complete those tasks at the design stage then they would prevent the possible exclusion of some students further on. There is a strong argument for considering flexible alternatives in the core areas of course and classes at the design and approval stage, where course descriptions can then be written to "minimise the likelihood of unintended rigidity of interpretation, to the needless disadvantage of disabled future students". The general areas that should be considered for flexibility

⁶ Review of the University's Procedures and Guidelines for Course and Class approval – paper written for Educational Strategy Committee June 2010 (pending approval)

with course and class design are: resources and materials used in seminars and tutorials, tutor practices, group working and group assignments.⁷

It is expected that the institutional review and the PiP project will aim to provide opportunities for more flexibility within most of these areas, e.g. capturing reading list information at the course approval stage will aid flexibility for resources and materials - and providing access to support materials during design and approval through an on-line interactive tool will hopefully lead to a change in tutor practices.

Enhancing accessibility in curriculum design and approval

The PiP Project has been engaged in a number of activities that have provided an opportunity to enhance accessibility and tackle possible disability related issues across the institution. PiP has been invited to be part of the wider institutional 'Course and Class Review Working Group' tasked with reviewing all University procedures and guidelines for course and class approval. This has provided an excellent platform from which to canvass opinion, foster support and raise awareness about accessibility within the institution. There is also an obligation upon PiP project team members through JISC, to ensure accessibility is considered within the general practice of the project and that materials developed as outputs for the JISC website etc. be accessible and mindful of disability and equality.

As part of the project and the wider institutional review the piloting of new curriculum "forms" (i.e. adapted course/programme specifications) across departments and faculties is planned. The forms could be modified to ask more enquiring questions about learning outcomes and assessment approaches and will encourage academics to be more prescriptive about the skills and attributes they wish their students to develop throughout the course. It is hoped the forms will also be made available as part of an on-line system that will contain associated useful resources, good practice materials and examples. This will hopefully provide opportunities for designers to develop courses and classes that are inclusionary rather than exclusionary, and courses that are driven by quality while not being at the expense of equality.

Building in flexibility: technology and accessibility

"Accessibility is not hard to achieve, nor is it expensive, but it does require a change of thinking. Instead of a one size fits all approach, IT departments need to think about helping users to customise their systems" (Lamb, 2007).

The PiP project prototype of an interactive web-based approval system to support decision-making and workflow management with dynamic guidance for users is currently under development. This will take the more traditional "forms" detailed in the last section and develop them for an on-line,

⁷ Teachability: Creating Accessible seminars and tutorials for disabled students

interactive system. This new system will enable regular updating, central storage and data analysis of approval information. The plan is to support a range of enhancement processes (e.g. collecting examples of good practice, mapping provision against strategy, linking delivery and review) and to provide efficiency benefits to other areas of the university (e.g. Library, Registry, Marketing, Disability Service and Room Bookings).

Integrating links to materials that provide better support and guidance for all staff will be an excellent starting point and a “quick win” for accessibility. An example of such an activity is the provision of a new “field” on the on-line form that would enable designers or indeed other staff such as Department Disability Contacts, to list possible alternative assessments if the original assessment proves to be a problem for some students. These alternative assessments, selected at the new approval “form- filling” stage, would give staff and students the opportunity to suggest and document reasonable adjustments earlier in the process than they are currently captured (e.g. a course designer may favour group working assessments simply as a preference and not because they are necessarily linked to the establishment of core competencies within the course). They could therefore select an alternative assessment such as an independent reflective report for a student who found difficulties working in groups.

The benefits of a technical solution are extensive. It is hoped that information and advice on Competence Standards and “non-negotiable” elements of courses and classes could be built in to the repository of information being developed by the PiP project that will back course and class approval. Links to guidance materials such as Strathclyde’s Teachability Guidance or materials on Critical Thinking approaches will also help provide course designers with appropriate information to make more informed choices at the design stage. Teachability is about the emphasis on objectives of teaching instead of disability per se. This is very relevant to any new approaches being taken by the institution as it will help ensure buy-in across the institution by encouraging an accessible curriculum that is to the benefit of the entire student body. It would also be possible to build in elements of the Evaluation Practice Framework from the Teachability Guidance, to encourage staff to formally evaluate their approaches and establish genuine “non-negotiables” at the design stage. Advice on designing accessible lectures and other teaching tasks could also be made available at the time of design, thus ensuring accessibility is always at the forefront of any design activity.

The ability to follow and monitor workflow, as well as providing an audit trail as a result of a new technical approach, could also help institutions and individuals in the advent of a legal challenge, whether the challenge is about disability, quality of teaching, value for money or equality of provision. Managing, storing and manipulating information better could help institutions to guard against risks in all areas of its business. The technical solution could also help to provide better, more timely information to the Disability Service and related support services (e.g. The Scanning Service that provides course and class materials in alternative formats could be better informed about intended course materials and requirements for alternative formats when courses are first approved, instead of relying upon student or Disability requests that do not come through until the course has often already started).

Providing a central storage point for all information could in turn allow better and more timely re-use of information for accessibility purposes, e.g. a tailored view within the system could be created for Departmental Disability Contacts (DDC's) who could perhaps access the system to analyse course descriptors in a more timely fashion – perhaps even when they are still under development and still in a position to inform or shape the eventual outcome. For example, the system could trigger an email to DDC when group working or field trips are selected as an assessment type (both of which can be problematic activities for disabled students). This could eventually become a new approval “stage” that ensures materials have been checked and verified by an appropriately trained member of staff before final approval, minimising the requirement for adjustment at delivery. This would also demonstrate a pro-active approach by the institution to ensure equality across the curriculum while minimising the extra workload previously associated with this task.

Many reasonable adjustments for disabled students already surround the provision of more timely and varied materials and information. For some disabled learners the traditional text format on which so much of the education system depends is inaccessible because they can't see it, can't physically handle it or can't make easy sense of it. It is possible to get materials in alternative formats but there may be significant cost or time implications⁸ – the benefits of a technical solution here cannot be underestimated. If reading lists were made available to other University departments at the time courses were approved (e.g. the library, scanning services and Disability Service) then the time taken to ensure alternative formats were available would be significantly reduced, thus minimising any negative impact upon students. Research carried out within the PiP project also identified a time and cost saving associated with this approach. Staff would spend less time trying to gather information as it would all be captured within one system and available to those who need it. Information would also be more accurate as staff would undoubtedly take more consideration over their reading lists and resources if they were aware of the direct link to library resourcing, scanning services and Disability Services activities.

A technical solution could also help to embed more flexibility into course / class design and approval resulting in more inclusive curricula. Flexibility about attendance at timetabled classes could be planned in advance by providing links to alternative sources of materials at the approval stage for those unable to attend in person. Learning outcomes within a course of study or “methods of delivery” could be incorporated through a “drop-down” box giving access to lists of possible “accessible” alternatives.

Building in flexibility for students who experience periods of ill health is also considered good practice and establishing alternative arrangements for attendance, course work or assessments will help ensure more students successfully complete their course or class. “Building this possibility into programmes from the start can minimise students' concern about having to argue a special case, thereby making the course or programme more attractive to students who know in advance that their attendance is likely to be interrupted”⁹.

⁸ JISC TechDis - <http://www.techdis.ac.uk/>

⁹ Teachability Resources – (see References)

The current Pegasus system at the University is the main vehicle for relaying recommendations about disabled students' classroom teaching, examination and assessment requirements. Any new system must therefore replace this provision or at the very least be interoperable with it. If the new PiP system made best use of existing data on accessibility it could empower course designers to consider the current student compliment when designing as well as delivering courses.

From a practical perspective consideration must also be given to workshops to engage staff in discussion about the review of course and class approval and the PiP technical solution itself. This may include ensuring staff have appropriate access to materials in different formats, or that staff have other options for engagement beyond face to face meetings. Full consideration must also be given to accessibility issues for staff that may arise from the new on-line system being developed, e.g. ensuring the look and feel is in line with disability regulations.

It is anticipated that support will be sought from the Disability Service within the University, both for practical advice on staff engagement and also to ask for input on the new approach being developed, e.g. at present the paper based curriculum approval forms do not include any references to competence standards, equality or accessibility options, an issue that could easily be addressed by adapting the forms to be contained within the new on-line approval system.

PiP's role: implications and conclusions

The PiP Project team have promoted the accessibility agenda within online JISC forums that have, in turn, informed the support provided by TechDis to other projects within the wider JISC programme. The PiP project team remains dedicated to exploring the possibility of including new elements within the technical solution that will improve accessibility and therefore the learning experience available for disabled students at Strathclyde. PiP has also been invited to join the University's "Course and Class approval Business Case sub-group", and representatives from the team will encourage full exploration of disability issues here and throughout the wider working group. PiP has requested that the Disability Service be informed of all of sub-group activities and that they are invited to comment and provide advice as required.

Engaging staff has helped develop a better understanding of the complexities of curriculum design and its implications for disabled students. Further involving disabled students in the process would be a significant step forward; but unfortunately plans for this have not yet been considered. However, it would be an interesting exercise to canvass students upon completion of the course and class approval review or the introduction of the technical solution (if this approach is adopted by the institution) with a view to measuring any perceived improvement to their overall experience at the University of Strathclyde.

Involving the University's Assistive Technology Advisers in discussions would also be a welcome addition, as would guidance materials for staff (e.g. guidance on the possibilities and pitfalls of using technology in the delivery of courses). The new system could also be set up to trigger needs assessments or training in assistive technologies as required, e.g. if a course designer selects field trips as a core element or extensive computer based activities then an alert could be sent to the Disability Service to provide advice to the tutor in advance.

Although the benefits of the described new approach are exciting, it must be noted that as with all change there can be drawbacks: amendments to core documents and artefacts may mean a lot of effort and research, at least initially. Changes to attitudes about disability and curriculum design and encouraging others to consider widening access for all will take time. Educating people about some of the issues raised in this paper is only the first step. Getting the new approach right and then maintaining it within the law and without harming efficiencies is extremely challenging. Planning and developing awareness and practices that are flexible and evolving as every student is different is a constant challenge and tackling the “approach” or “mind-set” initially is perhaps more important than making singular changes.

The impact of all of this is far reaching and could potentially impact upon the working practices of all staff involved with curriculum design and approval. As PiP is an externally funded JISC project, project outcomes could also help to inform the sector as to best practice in this area. Full consideration must therefore be given to risks and resources associated with these changes. It is clear, however, that the benefits to the University of incorporating improved opportunities for accessibility in course and class approval cannot be ignored and that the initial cost or resources are worth the long-term benefits. The key benefits surround the opportunity to mitigate the risks of litigation and to provide a generally more flexible curriculum that is appealing to all students with inclusionary policies and programmes that will in turn help to target a wider student catchment.

The Public Sector Duty to Promote Disability Equality (2005) stipulates that promoting equality of opportunity for disabled people and eliminating discrimination are central to the general duties of a University. As a public sector institution this legislation requires the undertaking of an assessment of the impact of existing and proposed activities, especially the University’s key activities on disabled people. Curriculum design and approval is indeed a key activity and if designing a course one way rather than another would improve its accessibility to disabled people, then wherever possible, that’s the course of action that should be taken.¹⁰ The opportunities are endless yet difficult to achieve within the scope of a JISC project. The PiP project hopes the University of Strathclyde recognises the opportunities that exist not just disabled students but for all students.

References

Disability Discrimination Act Part 4, revised 2007, para 8.13

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review.

Copyright The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (September 2006)

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 3: Disabled students.

¹⁰ Teachability Resources (see references)

PiP Project
Developing an accessible curriculum for disabled students
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Teachability: Developing accessible courses and programmes of study for disabled students.

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Teachability: Creating Accessible seminars and tutorials for disabled students.

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Teachability: Creating Accessible Examinations and assessments for disabled students

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The PiP Project Website

<http://www.principlesinpatterns.ac.uk/>

Background reading:

'Accessible Curricula, good practice for all', Carol Doyle and Karen Robson, (2002).

<http://www.techdis.ac.uk/pdf/curricula.pdf>

Scotland's Colleges: Supporting Student Mental Health and Well-Being

http://www.ssmh.ac.uk/effective_practice/curriculum_design_and_delivery

http://www.ssmh.ac.uk/curriculum_design_and_delivery/inclusive_practice_relevant_links

University of Surrey: Notes to Aid Programme Planning - Students with Special Needs

http://portal.surrey.ac.uk/portal/page?_pageid=734,392795&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL