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Leeds Beckett University Library: Our Response to the DSA Changes and Support for Students with Disabilities

Vicky Dobson – Senior Information Services Librarian

Leeds Beckett University

Abstract: Leeds Beckett University has over three thousand students with disabilities. This amounts to around 15% of our student population and the number who have a disability is increasing. Many have a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) such as dyslexia, and there has been a recent increase in students with mental health conditions and those on the Autistic spectrum. This article discusses the support mechanisms in place within the library.

Changes to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs)

Disabled Students' Allowance is a government fund to pay for extra costs students incur due to their disability, to help ensure they get the support they need to access the same learning opportunities as their peers.

From September 2016, DSA funding arrangements are changing and Higher Education Institutions will have increased responsibility for supporting students with disabilities (Student Finance England, 2016a). There is also an increasing focus on helping students to become independent learners:

"Disabled students should expect to be able to study effectively and leave higher education as more autonomous, independent learners, ready to follow their chosen career. The provision of support, both institution and DSAs, should focus on achieving those outcomes" (Student Finance England 2016b, p.5).

Under the Equality Act 2010, education providers have a legal duty to anticipate the barriers that students with disabilities may face and make reasonable adjustments to remove these. This is known as an anticipatory duty (Disability Rights UK, 2015; Gov.uk, 2015).

Leeds Beckett University provides a wealth of services to remove barriers to learning and achievement for our students with disabilities and we are working to embed accessibility across all our systems and services. A new post of Senior Information Services Librarian post was created to support this, responsible for working with teams to identify and implement accessibility improvements. The role also involves increasing disability awareness amongst Library staff, supporting them to become disability confident and helping them to provide excellent service to our customers with disabilities.

Learning Support Officer

We have a dedicated Learning Support Officer to help students with a range of disability related queries in the Library. These include assistive software, using Library services and equipment and information searching as well as other Library queries. Students can book one-to-one appointments with the Learning Support Officer or attend regular drop-in sessions. During the 2015/2016 academic year, 143 student appointments and drop-in meetings were held and the Learning Support Officer supported 146 different students.

We were very proud when in 2014 our Learning Support Officer won the Hidden Hero category in Leeds Beckett University Students' Union's Golden Robes awards, which give students the chance to nominate staff who have made an impact on their student experience.

Alternative formats

The Learning Support Officer works with the Copyright Clearance Officer and the Library's Collections team to obtain alternative formats of Library resources to meet the needs of print impaired students, acquiring 278 titles during the 2015/2016 academic year. Giving students access to resources in their required format helps to increase their independence. In September 2015 our Learning Support Officer attended a meeting with the RNIB Bookshare Alternative Formats Service (Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2016) and other colleagues to work with them on how RNIB Bookshare can best meet the needs of the higher education sector, enhancing the service we provide to students.

Disability Resource Areas

We offer a variety of study environments to suit different preferences. There is a Disability Resource Area (DRA) at each campus, open 24/7, offering a quiet and comfortable study space. Inside are PCs with assistive software, low level printers, adjustable height desks and ergonomic chairs, which are also available throughout the Library. The DRAs also have equipment and books relating to study skills and disability in higher education, focussing on a positive approach to disability.

Software

Computers in the DRAs have specialist software installed, including Supernova (Dolphin Computer Access Ltd., 2016) which offers screen magnification, reading and navigation for people who are unable to see screen content and Audio Notetaker (Sonocent, 2016) for combining audio lecture recordings with PowerPoint slides. Dragon NaturallySpeaking (Nuance Communications, 2016) speech recognition software is available on a staff laptop so the Learning Support Officer can demonstrate it to students to help them decide whether it would be useful for them.

We also have site licences for a range of assistive software which means the software is available on every student PC in the Library. These include MindView (MatchWare, 2016) and Inspiration (Inspiration Software, Inc., 2016) for mind mapping, Texthelp Read & Write (Texthelp Ltd.,

2015) and ClaroRead (Claro Software, 2016), which supports student study skills through a toolbar that works alongside other applications such as Microsoft Word, email and the internet. These provide support as students are working by reading text aloud, spell checking, supporting use of homophones (such as their and there) and scanning printed text. These software packages are designed to provide support for people with writing, reading and spelling difficulties. We also have site licences for JAWS (Freedom Scientific, 2016), Supernova (Dolphin Computer Access Ltd., 2016) and ZoomText (Ai Squared, 2016), for screen reading and magnification. We also subscribe to the QuickScan dyslexia screening tool (Pico Educational Systems Limited, 2016), supporting students who are not yet aware that they have a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD).

Our Learning Support Officer delivers group QuickScan (Pico Educational Systems Limited, 2016) sessions to students on specific courses, so that all students in their first year of study complete QuickScan. This enables the early identification of students with SpLDs, helping to ensure they receive the support they need. This academic year we also introduced Library Assistive Technology sessions, which are delivered to groups of students by our Learning Support Officer in collaboration with the Disability Assessment Centre (Leeds Beckett University, 2016a). They are designed to increase student assistive software skills, supporting them to become independent learners, in keeping with the expectations of Student Finance England (2016b). Another aim of the sessions is to promote the assistive software available in the Library and increase its usage so that more students benefit. Sessions are open to all students, as the assistive software can be useful for supporting anyone with their study skills - not just students with disabilities. Library staff volunteers assist with some of the sessions which we hope will raise staff confidence at using assistive software, enabling them to more effectively answer queries from students.

Leeds Beckett University Library has recently subscribed to SensusAccess (Leeds Beckett University Library, 2016a), a self-service tool which allows Leeds Beckett University students and staff to automatically convert documents into a range of more accessible formats such as audio

(Sensus ApS, 2016), supporting student independence. We anticipate that this will be very useful for our users with disabilities and dyslexia, many of whom have difficulties reading inaccessible documents, for example PDF documents which have been scanned as images meaning the text cannot be recognised by text-to-speech software. It is especially relevant considering the changes to DSAs described above which are due to take effect from September 2016 and place an increased expectation on higher education institutions to embed support for students with disabilities. This particularly applies to support for students with "mild difficulties" (Willets, 2014) which would include dyslexia and therefore potentially affect a large number of our students. SensusAccess also has the potential to be significantly time saving for staff involved in our Alternative Formats service, which obtains resources in accessible formats for print impaired students.

Borrowing resources

Various systems are in place to ensure students with disabilities are not disadvantaged when borrowing Library resources. They receive an extended loan period of four weeks for example, compared to the standard period of two weeks. In response to student feedback an extended loan period for students with disabilities who are registered with Offsite, our Library distance learner support service, was also recently introduced. These students can now borrow books for six weeks, allowing an extra two weeks in addition to the standard Offsite loan period. This system helps to ensure that distance learners with disabilities are not unfairly disadvantaged, and we have already received positive feedback from one student who is finding the extended loan period beneficial.

Students with disabilities can also place an increased number of holds on resources. Those who have difficulty moving around the Library building or accessing items on the shelves, can use the holds system to request that Library staff retrieve the resources they require and place them in the holds collection area near the entrance on the ground floor. This is especially beneficial considering the forthcoming DSA changes, meaning that Practical Support Assistants for carrying books, opening doors and general

orientation will no longer be funded (Student Finance England, 2016).

There is also a trolley, known as the Orange Trolley, located behind the Help and Information Point where students with mobility issues can leave their issued resources to avoid carrying them. This was introduced to make it easier for students with disabilities to use the Library, and to fulfil our anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments. Again it is anticipated that this scheme will prove particularly helpful when funding for practical support assistants ceases.

Leeds Beckett University Library is currently reviewing our system for shelving self-service holds awaiting collection. The Library Disability Support team has made recommendations to the Holds Working Group overseeing this project to help make the new system as accessible as possible for students with disabilities. We anticipate that this will make it easier for students to collect their holds without having to ask for help, supporting them to become independent learners.

There is flexibility around Library fines if they are due to a student's disability. The Learning Support Officer can liaise with the student and the Disability Advice team on the reason for the fines and they can be waived if they are due to disability related reasons.

The Library Disability Support Team have also requested a review of the wording of notices sent to alert students to overdue items on their account. This was in response to anecdotal feedback from students who found the wording intimidating. A group of staff will be formed to investigate this.

Contact channels

Email enquiries are handled by a team of staff from across the Library who work on a scheduled basis on our Remote Enquiry Service. We have introduced an additional queue to our email system with a corresponding contact form on the Disabled and Dyslexic Users page of the Library website. This means enquiries from students with disabilities are handled by a central team of staff, who refer complex ones to the Learning Support Officer as necessary. This system is designed to make our service more robust by embedding support for students with disabilities and helping

to ensure they receive a quick response by avoiding reliance on one individual for answering their queries. We have produced a range of template email answers to common queries to support Remote Enquiry Staff in answering emails from students with disabilities.

We are also organising staff training on handling Library disability support emails. We then plan to work on increasing the proportion of emails from students with disabilities that go through the Remote Enquiry Service rather than to the Learning Support Officer directly. It is hoped that this will give our Learning Support Officer more time to support students with complex needs and to answer queries which require specialist advice.

The Library Disability Support team have recently launched an online chat service, making it easier for students to communicate without having to use the phone whilst getting a more immediate reply than by email.

Self-service advice and support

In line with our priority to increase the availability of self-service advice and support for students, we are adding more FAQs to the Library's FAQ system and embedding these on the Library website (Leeds Beckett University Library, 2016b). 60 new disability FAQs have been added this academic year. We also plan to add to our Library Shorts collection of video tutorials (Leeds Beckett University Library, 2016c), with topics such as the Disability Resource Areas and using the QuickScan dyslexia screening tool (Pico Educational Systems Limited, 2016).

A new Accessibility page has been added to the eBooks guide on the Library website (Leeds Beckett University Library, 2016d). The page features FAQs explaining how to make eBooks more accessible, including instructions for different platforms on changing the text size, changing the font and background colours, and having eBooks read aloud. We are also collaborating with colleagues across the sector to conduct an accessibility audit of eBook platforms. The aim of the project is to support students in using different platforms and help them take advantage of the variety of content available, to work closely with publishers to improve accessibility, and to inform purchasing decisions. This project is helping us to fulfil our anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities under the Equality Act 2010. In light of the changes to DSA, the government expects that the eBook platforms institutions subscribe to should be as accessible as possible (Student Finance England, 2016c).

We are working with a colleague in the Library's Academic Support team to produce a new Library website page containing employability information and resources specifically for students with disabilities. This is intended to encourage student independence and support graduate employability.

Publicity

The Library Disability Support team has worked with colleagues in the Library Publicity and Marketing team to promote the services and software available for students with disabilities via the Library's Twitter account (@BeckettLibrary) (Leeds Beckett University Library, 2016e). We made the decision not to target our tweets at students with disabilities, since many of the topics are of potential relevance to all students; for example assistive software which supports different learning styles for all students.

In October 2015 we worked with colleagues as part of the University's Disability Action Group to promote UK Disability History Month. The Library's contribution included webpages showcasing relevant Library resources and research by Leeds Beckett University researchers.

We also posted on the Library blog about the Disability Support Team to tie in with Deaf Awareness Week (Leeds Beckett University Library, 2016f). Our intention is to raise awareness of the support and resources available to students with disabilities so that more students benefit from them.

Staff training

We are working on training to raise Library staff disability awareness and help staff to feel confident in supporting our students with disabilities.

In summer of 2015 and 2016, groups of Library staff attended accredited trainer assistive software workshops. We are also piloting an online assistive software training package called Learning Labs (2016); licences have been assigned to four members of Library staff. The training is

intended to develop staff assistive software skills and increase their confidence in answering assistive software queries from students.

The majority of Library staff have completed an online Disability Awareness module designed by Disability Advice (Leeds Beckett University, 2016b). Following the launch of the online module we arranged for Disability Advice to deliver disability awareness question and answer sessions to Library staff. We plan to repeat this model this year by asking staff to complete the University's online mental health awareness module, followed up by arranging for staff from the Student Wellbeing team to hold 'Tea and Talk' mental health and disability awareness sessions in the Library. These will be informal sessions with refreshments where Library staff can come along, have a chat with Student Wellbeing colleagues and ask any questions they may have. Our aim is to raise staff disability confidence and awareness, enabling them to more effectively support and answer enquiries from students with disabilities.

In addition to the staff training on handling Library disability support emails, we are producing a video tutorial for staff about the Disability Resource Areas. We have also arranged two practical visual impairment training sessions for staff in August 2016, which will be delivered by a colleague from the University's Disability Assessment Centre. Furthermore, we are arranging Library Disability Support refresher training for the start of the 2016 academic year to update staff on the support available for students with disabilities. We are developing training for Library staff on producing accessible documents which will cover how to design Word, PDF and PowerPoint documents for maximum accessibility. Additionally we are part of a group looking at proactive customer engagement and have attended training on this topic. Along with colleagues we plan to cascade this knowledge to frontline staff across the Library to help them notice students, possibly with disabilities or dyslexia, who may benefit from assistance but are hesitant to ask for help.

Sharing best practice

We collaborate with colleagues across the University, working closely with Disability Advice, the Disability Assessment Centre and IT services.

We also share best practice through regional groups such as the Open Rose (JISCMail, 2016a) and Northern Collaboration Enabling groups (Northern Collaboration, n.d.). We hosted the most recent meeting of the Northern Collaboration Enabling Group in July 2016. Our Learning Support Officer along with colleagues from Leeds Beckett University, Kent and York St. John Universities has set up a JISCMail list – LIS-ACCESSIBILITY (JISCMail, 2016b), to share best practice on the provision of alternative formats to print impaired students across the sector. At the time of writing the list has over 200 subscribers.

These are good opportunities for us to influence positive change across the higher education library sector and enhance collaboration with other institutions for the benefit of all HE students with disabilities.

Conclusion

In our experience there are simple changes which can be made that have a big impact on the experience of students with disabilities, such as extended loan periods, increased holds limits, and the Orange Trolley. There are also more complex measures which can be taken, such as providing resources in alternative formats. However, the key is to work towards embedding support for students with disabilities by considering them in the design and provision of all projects, services and resources. Improving accessibility for students with disabilities usually makes things more accessible for everyone.

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