

The background of the cover is a photograph of sand dunes. The top half shows the dunes in a light, hazy atmosphere, while the bottom half shows them in a darker, more shadowed light. A starfish is visible on the right side of the dunes.

The STAR Project

(Student Transition and Retention)


Supporting Students with Specific Learning Difficulties and other Disabilities

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SUMMARY



The number of students with specific learning difficulties and other disabilities entering higher education in Northern Ireland has increased substantially in recent years (University of Ulster and Queen's University, Belfast Equal Opportunities Monitoring forms 1998-2005) and in order to provide effective support for such students a Register of Support Providers has been developed. It was felt that the Register would release some of the pressure on academic staff in carrying out their support role for student learning, by providing additional suitable support to disabled students so that they could reach their full potential. The Support Providers are individuals drawn from a wide cross-section of the community. They are subject to statutory security checks and are given general training in disability awareness and specific training in, for example, Asperger's Syndrome, dyslexia and mental health difficulties. Funding is provided largely through the Disabled Students' Allowance. The areas of support available are covered by educational psychologists, dyslexia support tutors, signers and interpreters, mathematics tutors, information technology tutors, note-takers, readers, proof readers, library helpers, general support tutors, personal assistants, and mental health support providers.

Evaluation suggests that this is a highly effective model for providing specific support to students with specific learning difficulties and other disabilities.

Key words: learning difficulties, disabilities, support providers.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2000 under the auspices of the HEFCE programme 'Improving Provision for Disabled Students', the psychologist in Student Support in the University of Ulster set up a Register of Support Providers for students with specific learning difficulties in higher education in Northern Ireland. Initially used and managed by the lead institution, the Queen's University of Belfast and the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education, it is currently available not just to students with dyslexia, but to any disabled student in

higher education in any institution across the province. This case study outlines the model and assesses its effectiveness.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are:

- 1.3** Support should be available prior to study particularly where problems of transition may be predictable.
- 3.2** The course and its delivery should assist students' transition from their previous educational experience to studying at tertiary level as well as addressing the different needs arising from the subject backgrounds of the student cohort.

(Cook *et al.*, 2005)

NATURE OF THE WORK

The Register consists of an internet database containing details of part time free lance professionals and postgraduate students who can offer sessional support as and when required by the disabled student, and whose services are paid for through funding such as the Disabled Students' Allowance. The areas of support available are covered by educational psychologists, dyslexia support tutors, signers and interpreters, mathematics tutors, information technology tutors, note-takers, readers, proof readers, library helpers, general support tutors, personal assistants, and mental health support providers. The wide range of support available ensures that the academic needs of the student are fully met. Full details of the scheme may be accessed through the University of Ulster website at: www.ulster.ac.uk/supportregister.

RATIONALE

The rationale for setting up the Register was that the numbers of disabled students in the University of Ulster had increased considerably over recent years (Table 1), the University lacked suitable onsite support and it was also a multi-campus institution – Derry and Belfast, the most widespread of its campuses, being 80 miles apart. The geographical spread of such students therefore meant that it was difficult to source appropriate support at short notice. It was felt that the Register would release some of the pressure on academic staff in carrying out their support role for student learning, by providing additional suitable support to disabled students so that they could reach their full potential. By implication this would be part of the widening participation policy of the University and in preparation for the implementation of the Special Educational Needs

and Disability Order in September 2005. A register would also be flexible in order to meet any unpredicted and unpredictable demand.

Table 1. **Number of University of Ulster registered students with disabilities from 1998-99 until 2004-05.**

1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
1209	1381	1358	1431	1652	1837	1923

(Source: Equal Opportunities Monitoring Online Enrolment 1998-2005)

DISSEMINATION

Information about the Register was disseminated to all secondary schools in the province in order to encourage disabled students to attend courses in higher education knowing that there would be appropriate support. University staff were provided with information on the Student Support and Register website, inductions and staff development sessions on disability. Leaflets were designed and distributed to both staff and students, and promotional information included in student handbooks and course outlines.

STANDARDS

To reassure staff that their disabled students had suitable support, that academic standards were being maintained and the service provided was of a high quality, careful job descriptions and personnel specifications were written, and rigorous selection and recruitment procedures followed to create the database of support providers. All those selected underwent Pre-employment Consultancy Service (PECS) checks and now Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adult (POC(NI) and POVA (NI)) checks because they would be working independently with vulnerable adults. These individuals are not employees of the university but act as freelance independent tutors on a recommended list offered to students with disabilities and employed by them through their Disabled Students Allowance. The university therefore has no legal responsibility for their work but nevertheless it tries to ensure good practice by operating a good quality selection, recruitment, training and monitoring system. Codes of practice, which students and support providers alike signed up to, and statements of agreement to do with the nature of the support established for each individual student were established. Full details of these may be viewed at www.ulster.ac.uk/supportregister/forms.html.

TRAINING

Recruitment is carried out annually and those persons selected are given training in disability awareness. Biannual sessions are also given on skills such as note taking and

by specialists on supporting students with specific disabilities such as Asperger's Syndrome, dyslexia and mental health difficulties. Evaluation by participants after each training session has produced positive feedback as to its value. Plans are also afoot to recruit and then train part time members of the existing university staff in areas of skills shortage such as dyslexia and signing/interpreting.

COMMUNICATION

A website to allow support providers to communicate readily with each other has also been set up. This allows for not only mutual support, but also information on any developments on the Register, changes of personnel details, useful resource materials to help with the support work and general exchange of information between Register staff and the support providers as well as with each other.

MONITORING

Monitoring and evaluation of standards of support are achieved by sending out annual reviews to both the student users and their support providers, the results of which are then incorporated into improving the quality of service provision.

EVALUATION

In 2003, after three years in operation, an official evaluation requested by the Department of Employment and Learning was carried out by the Community Evaluation Services. This found that the Register provided a valuable service for students, although there were some operational difficulties, due primarily to a gap in the funding, a long term staff illness, and a lack of managerial support mechanisms for the remaining staff member. These operational difficulties concerned:

- The training and development needs of staff;
- The speed of payment to support providers;
- The provision of meeting places for the support; and
- The introduction of more robust internal monitoring systems.

Some of these were not the responsibility of Register staff but to do with:

- The speed at which the Education and Library Board Officers processed the applications for the Disabled Student Allowance; and
- The attitudes of some academic staff to disability that were issues for some students.

STAFFING

Actions were then taken to improve the situation and more robust business plans were prepared so that the staffing complement could be improved. Having been set up initially by the University of Ulster's Student Support psychologist seconded for two days a week from her normal job and a secretary working for ten hours a week, the Register is now run by a full time Project Coordinator and a Project Administrator. Their remit is to match students with appropriate support providers once a referral has been sent by a Disability Officer from an Institute of Higher Education, and manage the financial payroll for the support providers, paying them on a monthly basis through the Disabled Students' Allowance from the Education and Library Boards or Central Services Agency. They have also to maintain the database, organize and/or deliver training, run recruitment campaigns and disseminate knowledge about the Register to students and academic staff within the institutions.

FUNDING

An annual agreement with the Department of Employment and Learning and the Central Services Agency allows the Register to make a standard administrative charge against each student user's Disabled Students' Allowance, and this charge is reviewed and adjusted annually depending on the extent of the usage by the individual student. Currently this charge is £300 per student. Approximately 400 disabled students were referred to the 275 support providers from the Register in the academic year 2004-2005, almost twice the number in the previous year.

RECENT EVALUATION

In June 2005 a postgraduate student was employed to carry out a further evaluation of the views of the student users through structured telephone interviews. Some students did not use the support provided because, for example, they were:

- Coping by themselves;
- On a practical course;
- Using family or friends for support; or
- Unable to meet with their provider because of time constraints.

There were however no trends across a particular disability, subject area or particular institution.

Those that did use the service, however, rated the support as essential and useful.

"It made a big difference to me – I would have struggled without it"

"Absolutely invaluable – I learned brilliant organizational skills"

“The note-taker made detailed notes in depth and highlighted important points”

“My notes had that ‘little bit extra’ because the note-taker had studied the subject before”

Students with dyslexia, in particular, found they were helped with spelling, handwriting, time management, planning, redrafting and structuring written work, study techniques and strategies, proof-reading, researching and organizational skills.

“Got a good routine together so meeting is automatic and smooth”

“Also provided emotional support when I was stressed”

“Especially useful under pressure”

“Over time I became more aware of my own needs as well”

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The Project Co-ordinator is currently meeting in Dublin with Disability Officers from institutes of Higher Education in the south to discuss ways in which the Register model might be transported to the Republic of Ireland. Administrative costs are likely to be the biggest difficulty. In Northern Ireland a percentage of the Disabled Students' Allowance has been used to run the service but it is not clear that this model would be available elsewhere.

It is also hoped to be able to set up an accredited training course so that all support providers on the Register can work towards a certificate in providing support for disabled students in higher education. This course might consist of a core module on Disability Awareness with other modules on specific disabilities, and be accredited by an organization such as Oxford and Cambridge Royal Society of Arts accreditation body. Examples of validated courses already exist in the University of Central Lancashire and jointly with Plymouth University, and it is hoped to learn from these.

REFERENCE

Cook A., Rushton, B.S., McCormick, S.M. and Southall, D.W. (2005). *Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition*. University of Ulster, Coleraine. Also at http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/resources/star_guidelines.pdf accessed 01-10-05

CONTEXT

University of Ulster	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 5 campuses (including campus one, a virtual campus)• 24,389 students• Undergraduate: 19,796• Postgraduate 5593• Full time: 16,821(15,397 UG, 1424 PG)• Part time: 7,568 (4399 UG, 3169 PG)• Students with registered disability: 1923• >3500 staff
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FURTHER INFORMATION

STAR Case Study: Learning Styles and Study Skills Module for Students with Dyslexia

<http://www.studentsupport.ulster.ac.uk/disability/> - UU Student Support Website for Disability

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/slidd/> - HEFCE, Improving provision for disabled students

<http://www.skill.org.uk/> - National Bureau for Students With Disabilities