Disability services:
supporting international students
World rankings aside, word of mouth is one of the most effective marketing tools for encouraging international students to consider a particular higher education institution (HEI).

Providing an inclusive environment for disabled international students can result in increased attraction, retention and achievement, and contribute to improving the institution’s ability to recruit future international applicants.

“We can’t just be going full-steam ahead and say this is our strategy for attracting international students without recognising the amount of support that these students need or are entitled to.”

Staff member
This leaflet presents key messages, recommendations and practical actions that can be taken to enhance equity in support for disabled students based on research findings from six Scottish HEIs.

Providing equitable support for disabled students does not mean providing the same for every student, but recognising the different needs within a diverse group and making necessary steps to ensure that services meet these needs as far as possible.

Disabled international students unfamiliar with their rights for support under UK legislation often require additional or specific information that UK students would know already or have access to through other sources and networks.

Further information and resources can be found in Equality Challenge Unit’s full report.

ECU (2012) Attracting international students: equitable services and support, campus cohesion and community engagement
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/attracting-international-students
Raise awareness and understanding of support for international disabled students

The majority of international students involved in our focus groups were unaware of the support their HEI’s disability service offered.

Some students highlighted that information from the disability service was not as accessible as it could be and there was a lack of information on disability matters available through other student services.

“I think there’s a culture in the UK of getting support at school and getting support at a college and things like that … and I’m not sure if that’s the same in other countries, so … more of the international students I think may present when difficulties start to arise on the course.”

Staff member
Staff within disability services indicated that international students from the EU were more likely to seek advice and support than non-EU students. This raised concerns that their requirements were not being met. Staff thought that more could be done to inform international disabled students about their rights in relation to UK equality legislation during their studies.

International students were less likely than UK students to disclose impairments as part of the institution’s admissions process. Staff suspected there are students with an impairment that they did not declare on entry, either because they did not wish to be seen to be ‘making excuses for themselves’, or were concerned that they may be treated differently if they disclosed.

Staff were also aware of complexities such as different cultural views and understandings of disability across and within different countries, but they were not sure they had the knowledge, capacity or time to address these.
Recommendation
Review how the disability service is publicised to ensure all students, including international students, are aware of the support available.

Actions
= Work with the international office to publicise disability services. This could include pre-arrival information, webpages, induction or freshers’ week, social events and any ongoing provision of information, advice and guidance. Publicity could include:

- contact details (including names and faces) of staff within disability services
- information on disabled international students’ rights under the Equality Act 2010, for example protection from unlawful discrimination and provision of reasonable adjustments
- details of the legal definition of disability under the Equality Act (in clear language), so that international students can find out whether they are entitled to support and gain an understanding of what support they are entitled to
- case studies of students with different impairments, including unseen impairments, and a range of reasonable adjustments
Recommendations

Work with other services so they can provide information on disability matters.

Provide training and support for service staff on how different cultural views may have an impact on international students’ decisions to access disability services.

Actions

- Provide training for staff in student-facing services to enable them to consider disabled students in their service development and delivery.

- Cultivate a culture of respect and understanding for different perceptions of disability, including those that staff may not be familiar with, so that staff understand how different students may manage or approach different impairments.
Ensure the disability service is resourced to support all disabled students

Staff providing disability support services highlighted the need for more resources to support international disabled students.

“We would like to take the service to international students maybe more than we’re able to do at the moment…”

Staff member
International students do not have statutory funding equivalent to the UK government’s disabled students’ allowance (DSA). At present, individual HEIs fund any support that an international student requires to uphold the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

To receive DSA, UK students are given a rigorous assessment process. Without undergoing this assessment, the support needs of international students may be missed.

“While of course we do something, it’s much more informal. But it’s not perhaps as stringent as it might be and if we are talking about equity in service provision, then maybe it should be. And I’ve been thinking to myself of late, well, that’s not really how we should be approaching this.

Staff member
A staff member stated they had not proactively targeted their services at international students due to the high demand on staff time and resources from UK students. They were concerned about whether the needs of disabled non-EU international students were being adequately met because of this.

Difference in provision did not go unnoticed among disabled students.

“It’s made a big difference but I don’t know how... foreign students have found it. Because like they managed to get funding to get me stuff from the DSA. But I know there’s a girl in my class from Taiwan. And she wasn’t able to get so much because they couldn’t get funding to get stuff for her.”

UK postgraduate
**Recommendations**
Review funding for disability services so that they can better meet the demands of the Equality Act 2010 for international students.

Consider introducing a more rigorous needs assessment process for international students, comparable to that for UK students.

**Actions**

- Emphasise the value of disability services by highlighting the progress and achievement of international students who have used the service.

- Ensure senior management are aware of legal responsibilities towards international disabled students under the Equality Act 2010 and the funding implications this has for disability services.

- Approach other agencies for funding, for example resources available in other countries or through international businesses or donors known to the institution.

- Review your needs assessment system to determine whether international students are being disadvantaged.
Develop a cross-institution approach to supporting international students experiencing mental health difficulties

Medical and counselling staff report increasing numbers of international students requiring support with mental health difficulties year on year, particularly for stress. This echoes the findings of the National Union of Students Scotland survey of students in Scottish HEIs and colleges in 2010 and 2011.

“About a fifth to a third of those coming for medical consultations would be overseas students... and inevitably many of these are stress related, financial stress, or isolation or integration or perceptions. Staff member”
Disability and health staff reported that international students are less likely to discuss mental health difficulties in particular. It was felt that the experience and empathy shown by staff are critical in such cases.

Beliefs, customs and practices in different countries can affect student behaviour and understanding of mental health issues. Staff need to be aware of the different ways disability and mental health matters are considered, discussed and handled in different parts of the world.

Some international students felt that mental health services were limited in terms of provision. Although support for depression was well regarded, students suggested there was a need for additional specialist support as the general practitioners in the health centre or local practice were not necessarily qualified to assist.

“ For some students, the crowded campus can be the loneliest place. Staff member”
Staff indicated that a close relationship between academics and support services, including mental health services, is important to detect early signs that international students may require support.

Staff identified that while there are resources and good examples to draw from, the challenge remains to provide an environment in which students feel able to seek advice and support for stress and other mental health-related matters.

“If an academic staff raises a problem, saying ‘X is having falling grades and I think there is a psychological issue. He is withdrawing. He is not turning up to classes.’ Then we make the approach and contact the student.”

Staff member
**Recommendation**
Support integrated working with key partners and other departments to provide proactive support for international students with mental health difficulties.

**Actions**
- Develop training for all staff to increase understanding of the different ways disability and mental health difficulties are considered, discussed and supported in different parts of the world.
- Review provision and publicity of specialist mental health support to international students.
- Work proactively with health services and student associations and key partners including the NHS to support all disabled students, particularly in the area of mental health where perceived stigma may be highest.
- Provide an environment in which international students feel able to seek advice and support for stress and other mental health-related matters.
- Work with academics with tutoring and pastoral care responsibilities to develop their understanding of mental health difficulties and the support available.
Equality Challenge Unit works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in colleges in Scotland.

www.ecu.ac.uk
Twitter: @EqualityinHE

For further information see:
ECU (2012) Attracting international students: equitable services and support, campus cohesion and community engagement
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/attracting-international-students

© Equality Challenge Unit 2013
Alternative formats are available: E pubs@ecu.ac.uk