

Viewpoint

It's buff. Get over it!

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On the 7th April 2014 David Willetts, the then Minister of State for Universities and Science, issued a statement concerning proposed future changes to the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs). In short the statement put universities on notice that from September 1st 2015 the Government will expect HEIs to shoulder much more responsibility for supporting disabled students: "The proposals look to rebalance responsibilities between Government funding and institutional support" (Willetts, 2014). The statement made clear the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' (BIS) view that these were anticipatory duties which universities should be undertaking anyway and which would therefore reduce the current dependence upon the DSAs.

Not surprisingly the statement caused considerable concern amongst disability practitioners, advocates and some academic staff in universities. There has been much debate amongst those involved in the day-to-day delivery of disabled student support about where the proposed changes will leave the provision for specialist staff such as note takers and other forms of personal assistance and one-to-one tutoring in addition to the obvious impact on demand for university IT equipment and the potential impact upon student expectations, satisfaction and attainment.

However, although the consequences for universities if no preparatory action is taken could indeed be severe, not least in terms of student satisfaction, there is also an opportunity here for any institution nimble enough to take it. For years disability practitioners have grappled with entrenched practices and restrictive attitudes. Some, though by no means all, staff in Higher Education seem to take the view that the language of inclusivity is somehow Orwellian in nature and that 'reasonable adjustment' is in fact rather unreasonable. Concepts such as inclusive practice or universal design are often regarded with suspicion both in principle and in practice. It is sometimes argued for example that it will be too time-

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consuming and impractical for staff to undertake such measures. Others have protested that it is also unfair on the very students it aims to support because it results in ‘molly coddling’, a failure to ‘prepare them for the *real world*’, and a slackening of ‘academic standards’, (standards that are frequently conflated with mastery of English grammar, spelling, essay structure and particular styles of referencing as opposed to critical thinking and reflection).

With the announcement from BIS, the current protocols and practices for making individual reasonable adjustments are likely to be found wanting if not downright unsustainable. Willetts’ announcement, unwelcome though it may have been in terms of its tone and timescale, could actually serve as a spur to change, a wake-up call for those with the wits to hear it: although it has to be pointed out that time is fast running out. There is a prize to be had here and it’s a lot bigger than just improved satisfaction scores from the 10% or so of disabled students nationwide, influential though those could be for any institution capable of mobilising them. The fact is that more inclusive practices very often improve the experiences and opportunities for all students as well as being much more manageable for staff.

For anyone not moved by either the ethical case or the pedagogical arguments for developing more inclusive approaches to learning, teaching and the wider student experience in HE then, there is now therefore a much more hard-nosed imperative. We have been handed a business case. If, as seems likely, the new Government makes good on the previous Administration’s stated intentions towards the DSA following the recent general election then this just became a matter of retention and completion, of NSS scores and league table rankings, of institutional competition and recruitment. Time, perhaps colleagues, to scrap that white paper in the photocopier and move instead to buff as standard?

Willetts D. (7th April, 2014): <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/higher-education-student-support-changes-to-disabled-students-allowances-dsa>

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