



Promoting higher quality

*The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education*

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality
and standards in higher education

Section 3: Students with disabilities - October 1999

Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	3
Precepts and guidance	6
General principles	6
The physical environment	7
Information for applicants, students and staff	9
The selection and admission of students	10
Enrolment, registration and induction of students	11
Learning and teaching, including provision for research and other postgraduate students	12
Examination, assessment and progression	15
Staff development	17
Access to general facilities and support	18
Additional specialist support	18
Complaints	20
Monitoring and evaluation	21
Appendix 1: the precepts	22
Appendix 2: the working group	27
Appendix 3: related publications	28

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Students with disabilities

Foreword

1 This document is a code of practice for the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities for students with disabilities* in UK higher education institutions. The object of the code is to assist institutions in ensuring that students with disabilities have access to a learning experience comparable to that of their peers. It is one of a suite of inter-related documents which, taken together, will form an overall ***Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*** for the guidance of higher education institutions subscribing to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the QAA).

2 The overall ***Code*** and its constituent sections are being prepared by the QAA in response both to the Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and its Scottish Committee (the 'Dearing and Garrick Reports') and the consequent remodelling of the national arrangements for quality assurance in higher education. The completed ***Code*** will identify a comprehensive series of system-wide expectations covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education. In so doing, it will provide an authoritative reference point for institutions as they assure, consciously, actively and systematically, the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications. The ***Code*** will assume that, taking into account nationally agreed principles and practices, each institution has its own systems for independent verification both of its quality and standards and of the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems. In developing the ***Code***, extensive guidance is being sought from a range of knowledgeable practitioners.

* Within this code the phrases 'students with disabilities' and 'disabled students' are used interchangeably. See also introductory discussion under 'Who is disabled?'

3 Each section of the **Code** is being structured into a series of precepts and accompanying outline guidance. The precepts identify those key matters which the QAA expects an institution to be able to demonstrate it is addressing effectively through its own quality assurance mechanisms. The accompanying outline guidance is provided to assist institutions in maintaining and enhancing the quality of provision for students and other stakeholders. The guidance is not intended to be either prescriptive or exhaustive: its purpose is to offer a framework for quality assurance and control which institutions may wish to use directly and adapt according to their own needs, traditions, cultures and decision-making processes. Nonetheless, in many institutions the guidance will constitute appropriate good practice.

4 To assist users, the precepts are listed, without the associated guidance, in appendix 1 to the code.

5 During the course of its quality assurance reviews, the QAA will consider the extent to which individual institutions are meeting the expectations of the precepts in the available sections of the **Code of Practice**. The Agency will report on how effectively higher education institutions individually are meeting these expectations and are discharging their responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of their programmes and awards. In doing so it will focus on the precepts themselves, and not on the associated guidance: the latter may, however, provide a helpful starting point for discussion. So far as this particular section of the **Code** is concerned, institutions will also be expected to demonstrate that, as they review their existing arrangements for students with disabilities, they are identifying any aspects which do not offer the safeguards that the precepts seek to provide and are taking appropriate action to meet any consequent shortcomings. The Agency expects that by Autumn 2000 all institutions will be able to demonstrate that they are adhering to the precepts of this section of the **Code**.

Introduction

6 This code of practice recognises that disabled students are an integral part of the academic community. It takes as its starting point the premiss that accessible and appropriate provision is not 'additional', but a core element of the overall service which an institution makes available. As such, the quality of the learning opportunities on offer to disabled students in higher education institutions needs to be assured in the same way as any other provision.

7 The development of this section of the QAA's ***Code of Practice*** was undertaken by a group including representatives of higher education institutions, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP), and specialist bodies promoting access for students with disabilities. Members of the working group are listed in appendix 2. The group benefited from being able to draw on a range of existing publications, including several that provide more detailed operational guidance that may be of interest to institutions in developing their own arrangements.

8 All institutions face many competing demands on their resources. It may appear that the needs of disabled students are not central to institutional survival and should therefore give way to issues of 'higher' priority. When setting their priorities, however, institutions will want to take into account that the quality of their overall provision will be measured, in part, on how well they meet the expectations of this code.

9 Disabled people have been under-represented within higher education. Poor physical access to buildings has created a barrier for some students, while others have been excluded by teaching methods that do not take full account of their needs. Facilities beyond the classroom have been inaccessible in some institutions; in others the attitudes of staff may have been less than welcoming.

10 The code is not a charter for disabled students, and does not attempt to offer a blueprint for best practice in provision; but it does provide some pointers towards good practice. It will be for institutions to

determine which approaches to meeting the standards set by the precepts best suit their own culture and ethos. It is expected that the code will help to raise standards of provision for disabled students.

11 Nevertheless, there are likely to be some common features amongst those institutions that measure up well to the code's expectations. For example, institutions which are already active in this area tend to have an ethos that attentively embraces equal opportunities, and be working to widen them. They have senior managers with an active interest in how access is progressing, and who take seriously the budgetary and other implications of their commitment. In these institutions consideration of the needs of disabled students is a dimension in all decisions and activities, and the intervention of a disability co-ordinator is viewed as a welcome injection of specialist expertise, rather than an obstruction to the smooth pursuit of 'more important' priorities.

12 The code focuses on the quality assurance aspects of the level of provision for disabled students, and does not try to offer extensive practical advice. Institutions wanting further practical guidance will find a wealth of expertise within the sector, in printed publications, on the world wide web and from voluntary organisations. Some further reading and web site addresses are suggested in appendix 3 and institutions are encouraged to make full use of the resources available to them. Disabled students already enrolled on programmes are often a useful source of advice. Their participation at every stage of provision, from design to evaluation, is likely to ensure that developments are both effective and efficient in increasing access and improving the quality of disabled students' experience of higher education.

13 Higher education institutions will also have gained an understanding of the needs of disabled people as a result of meeting their legal responsibilities towards disabled employees and users of goods, facilities and services. These responsibilities, acquired through the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, do not as yet extend to institutions' role as providers of education. Nevertheless, the experience gained in this way will no doubt be helpful in considering what action to take to improve participation by disabled students.

14 The Disability Discrimination Act also introduced a requirement on institutions to publish disability statements. Disability statements are useful ways of communicating to students the approach and level of provision within an institution. Students use them to make informed choices about their future. Institutions may wish to use disability statements to publicise the way in which they are meeting the expectations set out in the code.

Who is disabled?

15 There are many different ways of defining who is disabled. This code follows no particular model. Institutions should be aware that disability covers a wide range of impairments including physical and mobility difficulties, hearing impairments, visual impairments, specific learning difficulties including dyslexia, medical conditions and mental health problems. Some of these impairments may have few, if any, implications for a student's life or study. Others may have little impact on day to day life but may have a major impact on a student's study, or vice versa. Some students may already be disabled when they apply to an institution, others may become disabled or become aware of an existing disability only after their programme has started. Others may have fluctuating conditions. Some students may be disabled temporarily by accident or illness.

16 Institutions will want to ensure that their provision and structures take into account, so far as possible, the full range of needs which disabled students may have, and that their provision is sufficiently flexible to cater to individuals' changing needs throughout their periods of study.

Precepts and guidance

(The precepts are contained in the grey boxes: see paragraphs 3 and 4 of the Foreword.)

General principles

1

stitutions should ensure that in all their policies, procedures and activities, including strategic planning and resource allocation, consideration is given to the means of enabling disabled students' participation in all aspects of the academic and social life of the institution.

Institutions should consider:

- implementing procedures which ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are addressed at all stages and levels of academic and resource planning;
- embedding the fair and equal treatment of disabled students in all operational practices;
- identifying clearly the locus of senior management responsibilities in relation to arrangements for students with disabilities;
- ensuring that senior managers and other key staff have an adequate understanding of the legal framework concerning disabled people;
- ensuring that management systems include the gathering of information to enable well-informed decisions to be made regarding participation and progression of students with disabilities;
- including the needs of disabled students within the remits of all resource allocation, academic management, estates and services committees;

- incorporating the views of disabled students in the development and review of the physical environment, academic programmes and services;
- identifying designated contact(s) for disabled students with specialist expertise and effective channels of communication with senior managers;
- providing staff development in disability awareness/equality for all staff;
- monitoring and reviewing the impact of all institutional policies, procedures and practices on students with disabilities with a view to continuous improvement;
- the implications for disabled students of collaborative provision and articulation of arrangements involving study in more than one institution and/or other partner organisation.

The physical environment

2

Institutions should ensure that disabled students can have access to the physical environment in which they will study, learn, live and take part in the social life of their institution.

Institutions should consider:

- undertaking a physical access audit of all buildings, including halls of residence, teaching and learning accommodation and resources, leisure and recreational facilities (covering general access and health and safety);
- establishing plans to improve physical accessibility that are effectively linked to resource allocation procedures and enable progress to be monitored and evaluated;

- having in place policies and procedures which ensure that the needs of disabled students are taken into account when any new building work or refurbishment of existing buildings is to take place;
- making arrangements to ensure that landscaping, car parking, and on-site and inter-site transport take account of access by disabled students;
- flexible and imaginative approaches to enabling alternative means of participation where physical access is impossible or unreasonably difficult;
- flexibility regarding where classes are held, including moving teaching from inaccessible lecture theatres/classrooms to more accessible ones;
- informed timetabling arrangements which ensure that there is enough time between classes to enable students with mobility impairments to travel between them.

3

Institutions should ensure that facilities and equipment are as accessible as possible to disabled students.

Institutions should consider the requirements of disabled students in such matters as:

- the height and layout of classroom tables and laboratory benches;
- supporting access around the campus with appropriate signage and information, such as large print and Braille notices, tactile maps and maps showing wheelchair-accessible routes;
- the publication and dissemination of information, in accessible formats, on physical access;
- the use of tone and colour contrasting in both the interior and exterior of buildings for visually-impaired students;

- the provision of appropriately adapted and well-sited accessible toilet facilities;
- the design and layout of seating especially in raked lecture theatres and computer laboratories;
- lighting design;
- systems of amplification and availability of induction loop or infra-red systems for hearing aid users;
- acoustics, including the minimising of background noise from fans in projection equipment, computers, heating or ventilation systems;
- ease of use of equipment in laboratories, computer and teaching rooms;
- alternative safety systems such as flashing fire alarms or vibrating pagers.

Information for applicants, students and staff

4

The institution's publicity, programme details and general information should be accessible to people with disabilities and describe the opportunities for disabled students to participate.

Institutions should consider implementing arrangements which ensure that:

- the disability statement provides clear and accurate information in accessible media on the physical environment, the human and technical support available and any costs that students will be expected to bear;
- electronic information, including web sites, is accessible to students with disabilities;

- information on placement opportunities, where relevant, is available at an early stage;
- details of the designated contact(s) for disabled students are widely publicised;
- responses to enquiries from people with disabilities are prompt and candid and include advice from experienced, specialist staff.

The selection and admission of students

5

In selecting students institutions should ensure equitable consideration of all applicants.

Institutions should consider:

- ensuring that criteria and procedures used for selecting students are relevant to the requirements of the programme, including any professional requirements, and do not unjustifiably disadvantage or debar applicants with disabilities;
- ensuring that appropriate support is offered and available for applicants attending interviews and other selection activities;
- providing disability awareness/equality guidance and training for all tutors and administrative staff involved in selection and admissions;
- where appropriate, offering disabled applicants the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to use alternative ways for meeting programme requirements.

6

Disabled applicants' support needs should be identified and assessed in an effective and timely way, taking into account the applicant's views.

Institutions should consider:

- developing an environment within which individuals feel able to disclose their disability;
- providing specialist advice which draws on recognised sources of expertise to assess applicants' support needs, in order to ensure that decisions by admissions tutors and disabled students are as well-informed as possible;
- developing systems which ensure that applicants with disabilities are not subject to undue disadvantage in terms of support if they apply later through the 'clearing' procedure;
- drawing up agreements with individual disabled students and all concerned parties which specify details of support and other arrangements, including those for course examinations and assessments (precept 18 below).

Enrolment, registration and induction of students

7

The arrangements for enrolment, registration and induction of new entrants should accommodate the needs of disabled students.

Institutions should consider implementing arrangements which ensure that:

- enrolment procedures and induction events take into account the access requirements of disabled students;
- enrolment forms and other relevant forms are modified to enable students with disabilities to complete them with the same levels of independence and confidentiality as other students;
- when information about disability is collected, the purpose of collection is made clear and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality are outlined;

- staff who are responsible for organising induction programmes take into account the requirements of students with disabilities including orientation training for, for example, visually impaired students;
- during enrolment and induction, there are opportunities to identify or reconsider the support needs of disabled entrants and to confirm that they are in place.

Learning and teaching, including provision for research and other postgraduate students

8

Programme specifications should include no unnecessary barriers to access by disabled people.

Institutions should consider establishing procedures which ensure that:

- the setting and/or amendment of academic and other programme requirements during approval or validation processes includes well-informed consideration of the requirements of disabled students;
- programme specifications and descriptions give sufficient information to enable students with disabilities and staff to make informed decisions about the ability to complete the programme.

9

Academic support services and guidance should be accessible and appropriate to the needs of disabled students.

In developing academic support and guidance structures and procedures institutions should consider implementing arrangements which ensure that:

- information about course choice and content is fully accessible to disabled students;

- all staff who advise students are aware of any aspects of courses that may raise barriers or be inaccessible to students with particular disabilities;
- the academic facilities and support available to non-disabled students including library, IT and careers services, are fully accessible and appropriate to disabled students.

10

The delivery of programmes should take into account the needs of disabled people or, where appropriate, be adapted to accommodate their individual requirements.

Institutions should consider making arrangements which ensure that all academic and technical staff:

- plan and employ teaching and learning strategies which make the delivery of the programme as inclusive as is reasonably possible;
- know and understand the learning implications of any disabilities of the students whom they teach, and are responsive to student feedback;
- make individual adaptations to delivery that are appropriate for particular students, which might include providing handouts in advance and/or in different formats (Braille, disk), short breaks for interpreters to rest, or using radio microphone systems, or flexible/interrupted study for students with mental health difficulties.

Institutions should consider implementing IT and computer arrangements which maximise disabled students' access to learning, including:

- IT strategies and procedures that pay due attention to the needs of

disabled students;

- ensuring that any courseware and electronic learning materials are fully accessible to disabled students using, if necessary, alternative hardware or software;
- installing appropriate specialist hardware and software on computer facilities;
- ensuring that computer services staff have appropriate training and time to meet the needs of disabled students.

11

Institutions should ensure that, wherever possible, disabled students have access to academic and vocational placements including field trips and study abroad.

Where placements, including international placements, are a formal requirement or standard component of the programme, institutions should consider ways of ensuring that the specified learning opportunities are available to disabled students by:

- seeking placements in accessible contexts;
- providing specialist guidance on international placements;
- re-locating field trips to alternative sites or providing alternative experiences where comparable opportunities are available which satisfy the learning outcomes;
- working with placement providers to ensure accessibility;
- providing support before, during and after placements that takes account of the needs of any disabled students, including transport needs.

Where a placement is an optional but desirable element of the programme, institutions should consider making similar arrangements

to support access for disabled students.

12

Disabled research students should receive the support and guidance necessary to secure equal access to research programmes.

Institutions should consider ways of ensuring that supervisors:

- know the learning implications of any disabilities of students whom they supervise;
- agree with the students, where appropriate, mutually acceptable alternative methods of carrying out research.

(See also the QAA's code of practice on postgraduate research programmes.)

Examination, assessment and progression

13

Assessment and examination policies, practices and procedures should provide disabled students with the same opportunity as their peers to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes.

Institutions should consider implementing procedures for agreeing alternative assessment and examination arrangements when necessary that:

- are widely publicised and easy for students to follow;
- operate with minimum delay;
- allow flexibility in the conduct of the assessment;
- protect the rigour and comparability of the assessment;

- are applied consistently across the institution;
- are not dependent on students' individual funding arrangements.

Institutions may wish to consider the following adjustments:

- flexibility in the balance between assessed course work and examinations;
- demonstration of achievement in alternative ways, such as through signed presentations or viva voce examinations;
- additional time allowances, rest breaks and re-scheduling of examinations;
- the use of computers, amanuenses, readers and other support in examinations;
- the availability of examinations or the presentation of assessed work in alternative formats (eg modifying carrier language);
- the provision of additional rooms and invigilators for those using alternative arrangements.

Institutions should have policies and procedures in place which enable disabled students to participate in ceremonial events.

14

Where studying is interrupted as a direct result of a disability-related cause, this should not unjustifiably impede a student's subsequent academic progress.

Institutions should consider ways of ensuring that where reliable evidence is provided that delayed completion of assessed work, non-attendance at examinations, deferral or withdrawal has been due to

a disability-related cause, this is recorded in non-prejudicial terms in all academic progress files.

Staff development

15

Induction and other relevant training programmes for all staff should include disability awareness/equality and training in specific services and support.

Institutions should consider providing disability training as part of induction and development programmes for all staff, including part-time and contract staff. This might cover:

- basic disability awareness/equality;
- the implications of disability for the learning and teaching process for all staff involved in admissions, learning/teaching and assessment, curriculum development and learning resource provision;
- the range and types of support available to disabled people relevant to the education context for staff involved in admissions, learning and teaching and curriculum development;
- accessible and alternative teaching strategies for teaching staff and those involved in curriculum development;
- the needs of disabled students for those designing or managing the physical environment.

In addition, institutions should consider:

- ensuring that training programmes are flexible enough to allow specific training on working with students with particular disabilities to be made available to individual staff when the need arises;
- making the necessary arrangements for staff to attend such training programmes, eg by providing designated time for staff development;

- bringing in specialist expertise to provide training on some aspects of disability provision and awareness;
- providing guidance notes for staff on disability awareness/equality and sources of support;
- ensuring access to appropriate continuing professional development for the designated contact(s) for disabled students.

Access to general facilities and support

16

Students with disabilities should have access to the full range of support services that are available to their non-disabled peers.

Institutions should consider ensuring that:

- support and welfare services (and information about these) are as accessible as possible;
- where existing services cannot be made available, alternative services and arrangements should be readily accessible.

Additional specialist support

17

Institutions should ensure that there are sufficient designated members of staff with appropriate skills and experience to provide specialist advice and support to disabled applicants and students, and to the staff who work with them.

Institutions should consider ensuring that the designated staff:

- have sufficient administrative support;

- provide timely and accurate advice about appropriate IT equipment, academic and administrative matters, daily living and financial support;
- develop effective liaison with staff and student contacts;
- support students in a way that facilitates their becoming independent members of the academic and student community.

18

Institutions should identify and seek to meet the particular needs of individual disabled students.

Institutions should consider:

- means for establishing early contact with disabled applicants, especially those with complex academic and/or daily living support needs, in order to identify appropriate sources or systems of support;
- how best to ensure that all students who can benefit from the services available to them are aware of those services;
- ensuring that they have effective means of delivering the particular specialist support needs identified for each student;
- establishing regular and effective links with external statutory and voluntary agencies to provide appropriate support;
- putting in place arrangements to ensure the quality of the specialist support provided.

Institutions should consider regularly reviewing the support

arrangements agreed with disabled applicants and students (precept 6 above) to ensure that these are being met and are responsive to their current needs.

19

Internal communications systems should ensure that appropriate staff receive information about the particular needs of disabled students in a clear and timely way.

Institutions should consider:

- the importance of ensuring that information about students' needs is communicated in good time to appropriate academic, support and residential staff;
- how to ensure effective communication, for example within or between academic departments, as students move from one year or one department to another.

20

Institutions should have a clearly defined policy on the confidentiality and disclosure of information relating to a person's disabilities that is communicated to applicants, students and staff.

Institutions should consider:

- informing all applicants, students and staff of institutional policies relating to the confidentiality and disclosure of personal information on disabilities, including information that is gathered for monitoring purposes;
- ensuring that procedures are in place which both protect an

individual's privacy and permit necessary disclosure for the provision of effective support for disabled students or to ensure health and safety.

Complaints

(See also the QAA's code of practice on student complaints and appeals.)

21

Institutions should ensure that information about all complaints and appeals policies and procedures is available in accessible formats and communicated to students.

22

Institutions should have in place policies and procedures to deal with complaints arising directly or indirectly from a student's disability.

Institutions should consider ensuring that the policies established in relation to appeals, complaints, equal opportunities, harassment, disciplinary and grievance procedures cover disability issues.

Monitoring and evaluation

23

Institutional information systems should monitor the applications, admissions, academic progress and nature of impairment of disabled students.

24

Institutions should operate systems to monitor the effectiveness of provision for students with disabilities, evaluate progress and identify opportunities for enhancement.

Institutions should consider:

- creating a development plan, consistent with and informed by the disability statement, which can be used as a reference tool to evaluate

progress;

- incorporating the views of disabled students in development planning;
- evaluating the outcomes of specific projects.

Appendix 1

The precepts

(Note: The precepts are printed here without the guidance notes for ease of reference.)

General principles

1

Institutions should ensure that in all their policies, procedures and activities, including strategic planning and resource allocation, consideration is given to the means of enabling disabled students' participation in all aspects of the academic and social life of the institution.

The physical environment

2

Institutions should ensure that disabled students can have access to the physical environment in which they will study, learn, live and take part in the social life of their institution.

3

Institutions should ensure that facilities and equipment are as accessible as possible to disabled students.

Information for applicants, students and staff

4

The institution's publicity, programme details and general information should be accessible to people with disabilities and describe the opportunities for disabled students to participate.

The selection and admission of students

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In selecting students institutions should ensure equitable consideration of all applicants.

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Disabled applicants' support needs should be identified and assessed in an effective and timely way, taking into account the applicant's views.

Enrolment, registration and induction of students

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Learning and teaching, including provision for research and other postgraduate students

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Institutions should ensure that, wherever possible, disabled students have access to academic and vocational placements including field trips and study abroad.

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Disabled research students should receive the support and guidance necessary to secure equal access to research programmes.

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Staff development

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services and support.

Access to general facilities and support

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Students with disabilities should have access to the full range of support services that are available to their non-disabled peers.

Additional specialist support

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Institutions should ensure that there are sufficient designated members of staff with appropriate skills and experience to provide specialist advice and support to disabled applicants and students, and to the staff who work with them.

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Institutions should identify and seek to meet the particular needs of individual disabled students.

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Internal communications systems should ensure that appropriate staff receive information about the particular needs of disabled students in a clear and timely way.

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Institutional information systems should monitor the applications, admissions, academic progress and nature of impairment of disabled students.

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Institutions should operate systems to monitor the effectiveness of provision for students with disabilities, evaluate progress and identify opportunities for enhancement.

Appendix 2

The working group

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eEquip/Lancaster University

Mr Greg Wade
SCOP

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QAA

Appendix 3

Related publications

Access to success for students with disabilities in higher education in Scotland (SHEFC, 1996).

Base-level provision for disabled students (HEFCE 99/04).

Disability statements. A guide to good practice (HEFCE 98/66).

Alan Hurst (ed), ***Higher education and disabled students: international approaches*** (Ashgate Publishing, 1998).

Resource directory of disability-related products and services (HEFCE/Skill/eQuip).

Students with disabilities: code of practice for Australian tertiary institutions (February 1998).

John Hall and Teresa Tinklin, 'Students first : disabled students in higher education', ***Spotlights***, The Scottish Council for Research in Education, Research Report 85 (1998).

The co-ordinator's handbook (Skill, September 1997).

Specific publications

Bridging the gap: a guide to the disabled students' allowances in higher education 1998-99 (DfEE, 1998).

Guidelines for accessible courseware (HEFCE 99/05).

Dyslexia in higher education: policy, provision and practice (National

Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education, University of Hull, 1999).

Alan Hurst, 'Students with disabilities and opportunities to study abroad', *Journal of studies in international education*, 2: 2, Fall 1998.

Report to the European Commission DG XXII on...the participation of students with disabilities in Socrates 1996-98, Association for Higher Education, Access and Disability (May 1998).

Web sites

www.daras.co.uk

www.disinhe.ac.uk

www.equipservices.hefce.ac.uk

www.skill.org.uk