Developing and Implementing an Accreditation Scheme for Disability Services Staff in Post-compulsory Education in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

In the United Kingdom (UK), policy and provision for students with disabilities in post-compulsory education has made considerable progress in a relatively short time. This growth has been aided by several factors, arguably the most significant being the introduction of legal requirements in 1995. Many institutions and organisations have tried to ensure that what this neglected group of students receives goes beyond legally required equality of access to include best current practices of the highest quality. Other developments include the publication of codes of practice by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a national body responsible for monitoring and enhancing all aspects of institutions' provision including that offered to students with disabilities. This paper examines one dimension of high quality provision by describing the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP), whose mission is to provide qualified, experienced staff who specialize in disability services. This innovative practice encourages professionalism, promotes the interests of specialist staff and addresses the interests of students with disabilities. The NADP has devised and implemented a scheme that accredits the practices and procedures of staff in disability services. This paper explores basic principles underpinning the scheme, how the scheme operates, what is required of applicants, the progress made and problems encountered during the first years of its implementation. The paper concludes with descriptions of how the scheme might develop in the future, particularly given challenges faced by disability services staff.

Keywords: Staff training, professional skills, quality assurance

Creating policies and provision for students with disabilities in post-compulsory education and training has become a routine dimension of institutional life in many countries[1]. It has taken more than four decades for specialist disability advice and support services to become firmly established in most institutions providing third level/tertiary/higher education in the United Kingdom (UK). The creation of a new post - an adviser for students with disabilities - was seen as a major first step towards ensuring that the needs of this important minority group were not overlooked and neglected[2]. As the role became better known in the institutions and featured in their student recruitment information, responsibilities expanded and the number of students willing to disclose their impairments grew. Higher Education Statistics Agency ([HESA], 2013) Annual Reports demonstrate this clearly.

An unfortunate spin-off became evident, in that any aspect of policies, procedures, practices, and

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1 It should be noted that in the UK the current preferred terms are "disabled student/disabled person." These originate from those people with impairments following the example of other minority groups such as gays and lesbians who have chosen to show pride in their situation. People with impairments claim that they would not be the individuals they are without some up-front acknowledgement of their impairment. From the point of view of someone trying to encourage faculty and staff to move away from focussing on impairment and to see the student first, this approach seems counter-productive. In line with JPED practice, this paper will use the terms recommended by the American Psychological Association.

2 The actual title of the posts relating to supporting students with disabilities varies considerably in the United Kingdom. These range from the now old-fashioned and outmoded "Adviser for Students with Special Needs" to "Inclusive Learning Officer." There is a debate to be had regarding the job title that best suits the role and responsibilities of staff working in services for students with disabilities. It is interesting to reflect on the ways in which the many different job titles imply an underlying model of disability. The two examples listed suggest that one operates from an individual/deficit model and one is rooted in the social/educational model.

provision in which the word "disabled" appeared was directed immediately to the specialist without considering whether such action was appropriate. Many staff took the opportunity to try to relieve some of the work pressures they were experiencing by off-loading what was really their own responsibility. To counter this and in accord with national trends in many countries, there was a redirection of focus to universal design of the campus environment and curriculum to enhance inclusion. The goal of wider inclusion focused not only on students with disabilities but on a more diverse range of learners. Happily, in many places, this development has made some progress although there remains much to do. In looking at how further changes can be accomplished, perhaps there is now a greater need to reflect on the quality of what students with disabilities experience (Adams & Brown, 2006; Fuller et al., 2009; Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2005).

The aim of this paper is to outline the development of an accreditation scheme established recently in the UK so that colleagues in other countries can consider whether the scheme is applicable to their own situation. The author was invited to devise and pioneer the scheme, working alongside the professional development sub-group of the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP)[3]. It should be noted that the views expressed towards the end of the paper are the author's and not those of the sub-group. The paper should be of particular interest to JPED readers who are familiar with AHEAD's efforts in the 1990's and early 2000's to move towards accreditation/certification of disability services professionals.

3 The National Association of Disability Practitioners was originally called the National Association of Disability Officers until 2006. It was set up in 1999 using some initial funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England as one of HEFCE's special initiative projects. Its aim was to achieve for staff working in disability services what Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities was achieving for disabled students. Membership has grown to just over 1,000 in 2014. They work in approximately 90% of providers of post-secondary education and training undertaking a range of roles. Funding comes from membership fees plus use of income from conferences (NADP is organising its first international conference to be held in July 2015). There is a small national office in Northampton that supports the activities of the NADP Board, all of whom are involved with the organisation on a voluntary basis.

Some Comments on the Quality of the Experience of Higher Education for Students with Disabilities

It is important to note that positive developments regarding students' experiences have been aided by the spread of anti-discrimination legislation in many countries. The most relevant UK laws are the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act ([SENDA], Her Majesty's Stationery Office [HMSO], 2001) and the Disability Discrimination Acts of 1995 and 2005 (subsequently subsumed in a single Equality Act, 2010) (HMSO 1995, 2005, 2010). The two key dimensions of the laws were to ensure that "reasonable adjustments" should be made to facilitate access to all goods and services for people with disabilities and that their needs should be anticipated when planning for the future. Without doubt, these had a significant impact on wider access. It is also probably true that many companies/organizations/institutions adopted a position of basic compliance with the law and were unwilling to go beyond this. Johnson's (2003) assertion that "a law cannot guarantee what a culture will not give" (p. viii) is pertinent here. Also, it is possible to discuss the differences between the concepts of "equality" (i.e., equal access) and "equity" (i.e., fair access). That aside, the focus must return to a consideration of how post-compulsory education attempted to stimulate change towards more meaningful, embedded, inclusive policies and practices; to equity rather than equality.

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established to review all aspects of institutional policies and provision. Since its creation in 1997, its role has shifted from quality audit through quality monitoring to quality enhancement. A key part of this work was the development and publication of a Code of Practice (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education[QAA], 1999 & 2010) that could be used to guide those involved when QAA panels visited higher education providers to investigate quality. This publication anticipated changes that were to become legal requirements following the implementation of the 2001 anti-discrimination law. An updated version of the Code appeared in 2010 and was based around a different approach to institutional visits, commonly viewed as a "lighter touch" (QAA, 2010). The full Code covered all aspects of university policy and provision in different sections.

Section 3 is about students with disabilities. The Code was used for guidance by those responsible for periodic visits to institutions to consider the quality of the experience it provides for students. Each section comprised a number of general precepts followed by some illustrative examples of good practice. For example, Precept 10 focuses on students with disabilities

and the aspect of inclusive curriculum design and delivery. It states that the design of new programmes and the review and/or revalidation of existing programmes should include an assessment of the extent to which the programme is inclusive of students with disabilities. Precept 11 states that both the design and implementation of learning and teaching strategies and related activities such as the learning environment should recognise the entitlement of students with disabilities to participate in all activities provided as part of their programme of study. It is interesting to note that what were seen as optional extras in the first edition had become legal requirements by the time the second edition was published, as a result of changes to the law. The second edition's approach was much more centered on inclusion. So, when discussing the quality of the experiences of students with disabilities, the aim is go beyond basic levels of provision (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 1999) towards excellence. The original QAA Codes were replaced by an overarching "Quality Code" in 2012/13, so it is too early to assess its impact.

One dimension relating to quality is the recruitment of suitable and experienced staff. However, this has yet to be addressed comprehensively and successfully in the UK (and, perhaps, in other countries). Some years ago, the Universities of Central Lancashire and Plymouth devised a portfolio of courses to meet the needs of both new and inexperienced staff and also those of the more experienced practitioners. At one stage, the two programmes were brought together and validated successfully by quality assurance procedures recognised by both institutions. Sadly, for reasons such as the retirement of the programme leaders, the opportunity for disability services staff to make use of this curriculum has disappeared. Another major influence on the disappearance of the programmes was the growing costs to participants in terms of time and expense. The two individual programmes and the subsequent combined version demonstrated the commitment to a particular philosophy of learning that depended on face-to-face contact. More recently, many forms of electronic information about meeting the needs of students with a range of impairments have emerged. These instructional tools might be more suited to an educational context that has changed significantly in recent years with increased work pressures coinciding with funding cuts. Nevertheless, it remains important to consider the quality of what students with disabilities experience and how this quality can be verified, sustained and enhanced.

Given the realities of limited funding for training and professional development through taught courses like those mentioned above, the NADP proposed a different approach. This involved a shift towards already-existing practices and their accreditation. What follows describes what has been put in place and what has happened during the first two years of implementation.

The NADP Accreditation Scheme: Underlying Principles and Basic Characteristics

What has been put in place is a structure and a procedure within which accreditation can take place. This offers individual practitioners a route to formal, external recognition that they have reached a certain level of professional practice. It is not a course or programme of study leading to a qualification. It recognises the work being undertaken currently by a range of staff working in disability services. The two major principles underlying the NADP approach were (1) to keep it within a small scale and (2) the simpler the scheme, the better for all involved. The scheme has several basic characteristics:

- it is easy to manage in terms of how it is structured and organised;
- it is efficient and effective in terms of use of time by all involved;
- it is cost-effective and provides excellent value-for-money;
- it is credible both within the NADP and also within the world outside the association;
- it is comprehensive in trying to bring together practitioners from a variety of backgrounds – such as psychologists, academics, social workers, occupational therapists;
- it is rigorous and is not a "rubber stamping" or "tick box" approach; rather it seeks to balance being appropriately demanding and challenging with being realistic in terms of what can be expected of working applicants;
- it supports the exchange of knowledge and the dissemination of information and innovation, thereby helping practitioners develop their knowledge and skills and by promoting collaboration;
- it contributes to the development of professionalism and to wider and greater recognition for the status, roles, and responsibilities of staff working with students with disabilities in post-compulsory education and training; and
- it encourages critical reflection by practitioners in both their own attitudes and actions and also those of others.

Who Accredits, Who Can Be Accredited, and When?

In the initial meetings with the NADP's representatives, attention was given to how a scheme might secure wider status and recognition. One possibility was to create something and then seek to have it validated by a university or college. Firstly, this would mean that the validating body would have significant control over the structure and organisation of a scheme that might not fit NADP's aims. Secondly, it would require NADP to pay the validating body and thus increase costs especially for those seeking accreditation. Thirdly, it would offer less flexibility to implement modifications quickly in the light of experience of operating the scheme. It was decided that, if NADP is to be recognised as a genuinely professional body that can sit alongside similar bodies created to serve the best interests of other occupational groups, it should take full responsibility for the scheme. It is interesting to note that this seems to have been one of the major concerns for AHEAD when it considered an accreditation scheme for its own members (C.Funckes, personal communication, March 3 2014).

The NADP established an Accreditation Panel to review applications and make decisions on whether they reach the required standards. The number of members is not proscribed. Currently it is five, comprising two NADP members, two non-members plus a non-member Chair, although membership can be increased if the flow of applications grows. The two non-members are experienced professionals whose work is well regarded in the sector. One was responsible for leading a national project promoting inclusive curricula and pedagogy. The second had completed a number of projects relating to inclusive academic assessment and provision for students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. (At the time of writing this paper, one of the two non-members had resigned and the search was on for a replacement.) The non-member Chair also has considerable experience of working in a university and also at national and international levels especially with regard to organising and delivering professional development. All three have successful publishing experience.

It was agreed that membership of the Accreditation Panel had to include representatives external to the NADP since this contributes to the scheme's more widespread credibility. The elected Chairperson of the association is not formally involved in order to allow her/him to act as final arbiter in any situation where there is serious disagreement about the status of an application. The panel has face-to-face meetings on at least two occasions during every academic year although, in keeping with the desire for efficiency and effectiveness, most of the work is completed using electronic means. However, the face-to-face meetings are useful for considering consistency of approach on the part of the Accreditation Panel members and also the mentors whose role is discussed later. To monitor the quality of the procedures and practices, the Accreditation Chair submits an annual written report to the NADP Board of Directors. This incorporates feedback from mentors. Feedback is elicited from those seeking accreditation about their experiences of the application process. Again, one strategy to accomplish this efficiently and effectively is to hold an open session at the NADP conferences.

Turning to eligibility for application, the scheme embraces anyone who fulfils the criteria for membership of NADP and is up-to-date with subscriptions. However, applicants could encounter difficulties if they have not had a significant amount of experience of working in a context that involves supporting learners with disabilities. On the other hand, there are staff who have spent many years and have considerable experience of working with students with disabilities, some of whom have higher degrees.

The issue of "grandparent rights" was explored but, in keeping with the desire to ensure that the system was simple to implement, it was decided that no exceptions should be made for any members. AHEAD also explored –and ultimately rejected - "grandfathering" people into a scheme should it have been developed (R. Allegra, personal communication, February 24, 2014). It is necessary to levy a fee to cover expenses, since the scheme involves additional work for the NADP administrative staff and also since there is involvement of people from outside the association. No attempt has been made to create a system that would be income generating, a matter that AHEAD considered in its deliberations some years ago (C.Funckes, personal communication, March 3, 2014). In Spring 2014, the fee for registering as an applicant was £52/$80. This amount will need to keep pace with the rate of inflation but, again, the scheme is not viewed as a profit-making opportunity.

In keeping with the desire to retain a simple structure, applications can be submitted at two points each year. The current deadlines are September 1st and February 1st. These are likely to change to October 1st and March 1st as a result of feedback from those who have registered for accreditation in the past. Applicants are informed of the decision of the Accreditation Panel within a maximum of 12 working weeks after the application deadline. Whilst this might seem a long period to wait for a decision, those involved in the decision-making process are volunteers and have other major responsibilities.

Why Should Members Apply and What Does Applying for Accreditation Involve?

The main incentive for applying for accreditation is the contribution it might make to further professional recognition. It will also contribute to professional development through the exchange of good practice that results when some of the applicants' accounts are published in the NADP journal and elsewhere. What accreditation cannot do is to secure promotions or salary increases although, as the scheme grows and becomes recognised more widely, these benefits might start to occur.

The NADP recognises that members/applicants are at different points in their career paths, so the Accreditation Scheme has two levels: Accredited Member and Senior Accredited Member. Everyone has to secure Accredited Member status in the first instance. Application for accreditation involves submitting work under three themes plus one of the applicant's own choosing from a list of three broad relevant areas (i.e., a total of four including the reflective diary):

A. Working with students with disabilities with special reference to the NADP Code of Practice, which could take the form of case studies of individual students or the impact of a particular kind of impairment on learning;
B. Continuing professional development, which could be an analysis of the applicant's own needs and how they might be met or a consideration of a staff development programme for non-specialist faculty colleagues; and
C. A critical, reflective journal containing a selection of activities for a week's work.

Further, applicants must submit one additional item chosen from three themes: disability, society and education, institutional policies and procedures, and quality assurance. For those progressing subsequently to Senior Accredited Member status, all of the above items must be submitted plus one more on a topic of the applicant's choosing and which does not repeat any of the other five topics. A second reflective journal is also required.

Normally, all submissions are made electronically since this facilitates the circulation of materials and thus speeds up the processing. Whilst the implication might be that submissions take the form of written accounts, given the focus of the profession and its concern with social and educational inclusion, it would be embarrassing and inappropriate if alternative formats were not welcomed. Also, since applicants work in different situations and different institutions, the Accreditation Panel is not anticipating a significant need to identify plagiarism. However, it is concerned that applicants do not submit materials with excessive overlap/repetition. All applications are made anonymous by staff at the NADP national office before they are distributed to assessors.

In discussions during the creation of the accreditation scheme, much attention was given to what the length of items should be. Eventually, it was agreed that submissions should be between 500-750 words with a maximum excess of 10% (i.e., 825 words) for each section. This length was seen to be manageable while also exerting sufficient pressure on applicants to be analytical and succinct. The reflective journal is treated slightly differently in that, in addition to submitting a sample weekly diary/log, applicants have to provide a commentary that should be no longer than 750 words to ensure uniformity of length across all sections of the submission.

Regarding the content of applications, the Accreditation Panel looks for content that can be categorised under two major headings:

A. A range of knowledge, skills, and professional values with reference to the following:

- relevant recent legislation, policies, codes of practice
- disability theories and concepts, the impact of impairment on learning
- relevant research
- internal institutional systems
- funding mechanisms/sources
- course design/course structures
- learning approaches
- academic assessment strategies
- support systems, both human and technical
- information sources
- quality measures and quality enhancement

B. A range of attitudes and activities drawn from the following:

- aspects of working 1:1 with learners
- co-operation and team-working with others
- contribution to needs assessment
- liaison with external agencies
- devising and promoting inclusive policies and practices
- involvement in disability education for staff
- participating in and contributing to key

committees/groups both within and outside the institution
- recognition of roles, responsibilities, boundaries and personal competence

It would have been relatively straightforward during the initial stages of development to identify specific aspects of the two lists and to state that they should be included in specific sections of the application. For example, when considering students with disabilities, applicants should include comment on funding mechanisms and learning approaches from the first list and aspects of working 1:1 and contribution to needs assessment from the second list. Whilst there is some merit in this approach, particularly with regard to consistency, it was felt that it would be too constraining and would not allow for the flexibility and creativity that the scheme is trying to encourage. However, following experience working the scheme, Accreditation Panel members are creating a matrix identifying the characteristic features of accounts at referral/satisfactory/distinctive levels to aid feedback and to bring even more consistency to the process.

Regarding content and coverage, the debates that took place within AHEAD suggested that it might be difficult to identify content and skills common to all those working in disability services given the variety of roles and responsibilities in the field. However, frequent and regular contacts with staff working in countries other than the UK have indicated a large degree of agreement on what disability services staff have to do in these positions. The flexibility and variety of knowledge and skills identified above allow for the scheme to be applicable to a wide range of staff with many different specialisms.

To demonstrate what the Accreditation Panel was looking for, a number of sample submissions were devised to reflect what would be returned for further work, what would be deemed to be of an acceptable standard, and what would be deemed to be of high quality (see examples in Appendix B). However, some members of NADP's Professional Development Group are uncertain at present of the value of these exemplars. They are anxious that those applying might follow the exemplars too closely.

Turning to the presentation of the applicants' accounts, the Accreditation Panel is clear on what it is looking for, namely:

- accounts that are analytical and critically reflective;
- accounts that use a range of supporting evidence including national and institutional pol-

icy documents, research reports and findings;
- accounts that use relevant concepts and theories such as models of disability, principles of independent living, etc;.
- accounts that show insights and innovations;
- accounts that show evidence of thinking and working strategically – demonstrated using the analogy of preventing fires rather than fighting them once they have started; and
- accounts that are logically and coherently structured and presented appropriately and professionally (e.g., in relation to the citing and listing of supporting sources).

What the Accreditation Panel does not want to consider are anecdotal approaches, descriptive narratives, unsupported opinion and conjecture, and loosely organised rambles around a topic.

Processing Applicants' Accounts and Verifying Their Validity

Once submitted electronically to the NADP office, each account is reviewed and commented on independently by two members of the Accreditation Panel, one of whom is nominated as First Assessor. The First Assessor then becomes responsible for providing feedback to the applicant based on a synthesis of the views of herself/himself and the Second Assessor. Two decisions are possible: satisfactory, or return for further work as outlined in the feedback. In cases where the two assessors disagree, the application is passed to the Panel Chairperson for a third review and a final decision. At the discretion of the Accreditation Panel, and with the agreement of the applicant, some items might be forwarded to the Editorial Board of the NADP Journal with a recommendation to publish. Also, when items are returned for further work, the applicant is entitled to one further opportunity to resubmit. Full feedback is provided with guidance about how the submission might be improved. Should this also be deemed to require more attention, there cannot be an application for accreditation for a minimum period of one year. Finally, it is possible to appeal the decision of the Accreditation Panel. Appeals can be submitted only in exceptional circumstances, must be based on procedural matters, and not involve questioning the academic judgements of the Accreditation Panel.

Regarding the validity and veracity of what applicants submit, applications must be reviewed by a colleague (normally a line manager) prior to submission who must sign a pro forma to indicate that the piece has been reviewed and that there are no reasons to question what has been submitted. This also has the

additional advantage of drawing attention to and raising awareness of the work done by staff in disability services who often feel that what they do is unrecognised and undervalued.

Supporting Applications: The Role of Mentors and the Provision of Resources

All applicants are informed that they have been assigned to a mentor. Mentors are experienced colleagues working in a different educational setting or recently retired from long and successful careers working with disabled students; their achievements being demonstrated by their being awarded honorary degrees or national awards. Once the system is fully operational, the group from which mentors can be drawn will grow and comprise many of those who have gained accredited status, although this cannot be viewed as an automatic procedure. The role and responsibilities of mentors are fivefold:

A. To offer advice and support to applicants seeking NADP accreditation; it was envisaged that most of this will take place using telephone or email contacts;
B. To comment on ONE draft only of the applicant's accreditation submission for each part of the process if invited to do so by the applicant; mentors' feedback should have as its major focus the content rather than the presentation of the submission;
C. To be familiar with the submission guidance provided to applicants by the NADP and to ensure that the applicant has followed it;
D. To be familiar with the criteria used by the Accreditation Panel whenevaluating accounts and to ensure that the applicant refers to them; and
E. To offer advice and to be involved in situations where an applicant's submission is returned for further work.

The Accreditation Scheme has been operative since 2012 and mentors are helping others involved in the scheme pioneer the way. At this important formative stage, they work as a very close team and keep each other fully informed of their activities and actions (paying due regard to conventions of confidentiality). The system seems to have had some success. See the short message from an accreditation applicant in Appendix D.

In addition, the NADP has made available on its website a list of resources that applicants can use to collect evidence to support their assertions. The resources comprise research and theory-based books, journal articles, and a range of policy statements and government/national documents. Many of the latter are now available on-line. The intention is that this list grows as the accreditation scheme develops since those going through the process can add sources they have discovered and that others might find useful. This is an important dimension to the sharing of knowledge and the dissemination of examples of good practice.

Dissemination of Information about the Accreditation Scheme

The Accreditation Scheme was developed following support for a proposal at an NADP Annual General Meeting. The NADP Professional Development Sub-Group invited the author of this paper to act as guide and consultant. What has been described above is the outcome of this work and the close and committed involvement of members of the NADP at all levels. Prior to a public launch of the Accreditation Scheme, two small pilot projects were undertaken involving volunteers from the NADP Board of Directors and from the wider membership. These proved extremely useful and indicated where further work was needed. Once this had been done, the scheme was presented at the NADP Annual Conference, other NADP events, and at those organised by other groups. Information about the scheme is also an important section of the website and much of it takes the form of user-friendly Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). There is also the list of useful resources mentioned above that will grow as the scheme develops since applicants will make others aware of their own preferences for information sources. Also, if any applicants' accounts are of a sufficiently high standard to merit publication either in the NADP journal or elsewhere, this will enhance publicity for the scheme.

Progress (2012 – 2014)

The Accreditation Scheme was launched on June 1, 2012. Statistics regarding the number of members seeking accreditation are included in Appendix A. Based on the experience of implementing the scheme so far, a number of issues have emerged:

• balancing content about daily practice with the need to adopt an academic approach vis-a-vis supporting evidence, etc.;
• reading more widely including materials that are specific to impairment and disability as well as more general materials such as national policy statements with a view to recognising and anticipating possible implications for

students with disabilities and those who work with them;

- avoiding excessive description/narrative and including more informed, reflective, analytical comments (e.g., less on how things are done and more on why they are done in a particular way, what alternatives there might be and why these have not been pursued);
- engaging more regularly and more closely with mentors;
- organising workloads by both applicants and mentors/panel members to ensure that deadlines are met;
- paying appropriate attention to aspects of presentation such as referencing in a professional and conventional fashion and using grammatically correct language and acceptable terminology;
- devising a system that overcomes the problem of ensuring that there are viable cohorts passing through the process, a problem created by the large numbers enrolling and the small numbers actually submitting. Putting a limit on the maximum number who can be enrolled in any one academic year has not been as useful as was envisaged;
- creating a procedure for the recruitment of additional mentors and also members of the Accreditation Panel to ensure that quality standards are maintained; and
- publicising and promoting the scheme.

Four particular matters continue to be the focus of debate. Firstly, the reflective diary seems to be taken by some applicants to be the opportunity to write a story akin to "my day at the office." Such accounts lack the critical approach that the scheme envisaged. NADP members have discussed whether the reflective accounts require support from published sources. It has been suggested that searching for such evidence requires more time and effort from colleagues who are already bearing considerable workloads. This might be true and it might be inappropriate to require this additional level of scholarship. On the other hand, certain sources such as the Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice/Quality Code should be in use to guide policies, provision, and practices, so additional effort would seem limited to a manageable amount of time. An example of the guidance given to the creation of a reflective account may be found in Appendix C.

The second continuing challenge is to modify the application system to allow for the fact that only a certain number of applications can be processed prior to each of the two deadline dates. Once the NADP office reaches the agreed quota, no additional applications are accepted for consideration until the next deadline. Given the number of applicants who defer submitting after having registered, there is a block placed in the way of others. So far, a strategy to overcome this has not been found.

Thirdly, looking at the statistics in Appendix A, the large number of NADP members who register for accreditation and then either defer submission of their application or withdraw from the scheme completely needs to be explored. The basic underlying cause seems to be lack of time. One strategy to address this might be through greater involvement of line managers. Currently, their only responsibility and involvement is to confirm in writing the content of the member of staff's application submission. They might wish to consider implementing a more strategic and selective approach to supporting their staff. For example, some line managers currently register all staff working in disability services, reflecting how understandably keen they are to seek endorsement for the work of their staff. However, they could instead identify no more than two members of staff each academic year who would then be given priority in registering for and completing successfully accreditation.

This approach ought to have been negotiated, discussed, and agreed to during an annual appraisal interview. The line manager could then provide an allocation of sufficient time away from daily duties to these individuals to facilitate their achieving accreditation. Progress should be the focus of regular meetings, perhaps twice or three times during the year. This should help staff with their work on securing accreditation. Incidentally, involving line managers more closely might benefit the scheme in other ways (e.g., in allowing them to have a sense of ownership). Having more time would be good for all applicants. A further incentive might be for the line managers to cover the modest accreditation fees and/or subsequently the member might be allowed to continue their membership of NADP at a reduced rate. Whatever strategy might be applied, it should not compromise the quality of the content of the applications or the standards expected.

Finally, and connected to the previous point, all staff appear to be under increasing pressures in their workplaces. The compilation of an accreditation submission has to make way for other priorities. This heavy workload applies also to those involved with policy development within the NADP, all of whom are volunteers. The consequence of this is the rather long time period that seems to intervene between taking decisions at meetings and implementing them in policy and prac-

tice. Appointing additional staff to the main office would not overcome this issue because, when questions arise, almost all of them require discussion by and answers from experienced, education-based people.

Future Developments

Looking at the current Accreditation Scheme and considering what might happen within NADP itself, a number of future developments should be considered. Firstly, there are some likely amendments to the accreditation requirements based on experience acquired and feedback from applicants. For example, following discussion involving mentors, accreditation panel members and the NADP Professional Development Group, future applicants will be asked to select two events from those they include in their journal and then expand and debate these. This allows for more reflection and in-depth discussion than the original approach, which asked for a critical commentary on the full week's activities. Also, the Accreditation Panel members are creating a matrix identifying the characteristic features of accounts at referral/satisfactory/distinctive levels to aid feedback and to bring even more consistency to the process.

Secondly, it might be possible to build upon the implementation of the Senior Accredited Member status to create a Fellowship level, perhaps by invitation or perhaps by application. Linked to this is the possible introduction of post-nominal letters such as Accredited Member of the National Association of Disability Practitioners (AMNADP) and Senior Accredited Member of the National Association of Disability Practitioner (SAMNADP). This matter was discussed during the development stage. The decision was taken to set the matter aside for further consideration at an appropriate point in time.

Despite its brief existence so far, the scheme has been welcomed by the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE) and the Association of University Administrators (AUA). Both groups are in an important position with regard to encouraging and facilitating participation by colleagues working in disability services. Already, a small number of posts have been advertised where the position's specification has mentioned successful applicants having NADP accredited status. Also, once the accreditation of individuals has gained momentum, the NADP is considering devising and implementing a scheme that will accredit an institution's entire disability service. This might be based around models used currently in other dimensions of universities' provision such as those for the counselling services.

Finally, colleagues working in disability services outside the United Kingdom have shown a strong interest in this development. So far this has been at the level of enquiring whether they might submit personal applications. However, what ought to be possible is the development of a national system for their own country based on what the NADP has done already. Frequent contacts with staff working in countries in many different parts of the world indicate that the challenges faced when working to support students with disabilities are universal, so the flexibility already built into the NADP scheme should prove helpful. Should accreditation develop in other countries, possibilities for improved international mobility could increase. At the very least, there should be improved knowledge of policies, practices, procedures, and provision in other countries and it might be possible, too, to make use of a wider range of sources and resources. For example, the author often uses cartoons created by the late John Callahan (1998) to convey issues related to individuals who use wheelchairs. Colleagues in Belgium and the Netherlands have shared other cartoons, usually where an issue is conveyed simply and graphically without any need to use language (Hurst, 2006).

Conclusion

Whilst it might appear to have had an excessively lengthy development phase, the fact that NADP's Accreditation Scheme has been implemented and is currently working well is a major achievement. Perhaps the long hours of discussion and argument about structure/content/operation was time well spent, given the lack of major issues that have become evident. However, it is important to remember that the procedures, practices, and processes are relatively untried and tested, so there are likely to be more points to be addressed. Setting this aside, it is heartening to see that staff working in disability services in post-compulsory education in the UK have a structure for ensuring that their work can be recognised formally and an opportunity to engage in valuable professional development.

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About the Author

Alan Hurst received his B.A. degree in history and sociology from the University of Hull, a Ph.D. from the University of Lancaster and an Honorary Doctorate from the Open University. His experience includes working as a teacher educator at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and serving in various national and international roles relating to the inclusion of students with disabilities in post-secondary education. He retired from his full-time post as Professor in the Department of Education at UCLan in 2007. His research interests include inclusive learning and pedagogy and staff training and continuing professional development for those working with students with disabilities. He can be reached by email at: hahurst@yahoo.co.uk

Author's Note

Appendix A

Data regarding status of applications submitted to the NADP office as of February 2014. The February 2012 submission acted as a pilot and, although many DS professionals expressed enthusiasm for participating, they chose ultimately not to submit.

Status	Feb 2012	Sept 2012	Feb 2013	Sept 2013	Feb 2014
Registered	40	16	6	30	39
Submissions	8	3	3	4	13
Referrals	2	0	0	2	?
Deferrals	0	8	0	20*	14
Withdrawals	?	5	3	6	5
Accredited	6	3	3	2	?

Note. Seven disability service providers did not submit to meet the second deadline after having deferred and so are considered to have withdrawn.

Appendix B

Sample Accounts for the Theme of "Working with Students with Disabilities"

An account that would be returned for further work:

I work in a team of advisers which constitutes the University Disability Advisory Service (DAS). Because we have significant numbers of students with disabilities enrolled on our courses, we have structured our provision on each adviser supporting specific impairments. I work with blind and visually-impaired students. This submission looks at the arrangements made for a particular blind student when she first entered the university.

Totally blind since birth, Anna has had experience of both segregated and mainstream schools. On leaving secondary education with qualifications in Literature, French, and History, all at high grades, she chose to spend a year out of education before trying to enter university. She failed to find a satisfying steady job. However, she did acquire a guide dog to aid her mobility. She decided to come to university to study French.

Note that firstly, Anna was born blind and so she has had time to devise effective coping strategies. Secondly, her experience of mainstream school will have given her the chance to decide on which teaching and which exam methods suit her best. Her success in school-leaving exams suggests that she has the potential to become a good student. Her employment will have tested her ability to live independently.

After being offered a place on the basis of her existing qualifications, I arranged for Anna to spend a day visiting the university. An important part of this was the opportunity to identify and discuss her needs. She uses modern software to give her access to print materials although she was aware of the possibilities offered by developing ICT. To give her the chance to find out more and to recommend any specialist equipment she could use, time was spent in the Access Centre talking with specialist staff. The outcome was that she was advised to obtain a lap-top PC along with specialist software. I explained that the costs of this would be covered if she applied and obtained a Disabled Students Allowance. Looking at other points of concern, Anna commented on the problems she would have with lecture notes. I suggested that she ask tutors to ensure their materials are available electronically on the intranet. In relation to exams, information provided by the Department suggested that the main method of assessing students was end-of-module, unseen, three-hour papers. Anna said she needs to work with her specialist software and so I noted that changes would need to be made at exam time. The only other issue was the requirement that students spend a significant period studying or working overseas in the third year of the course. Since Anna was the first blind foreign languages student I had worked with I would need to explore this.

If Anna was to adjust quickly to a new routine and new environment, it was important for her to feel happy with her living accommodation. After some discussion she decided to live in a university hall of residence and asked for a ground-floor, larger room if available since this would allow space to store her equipment and also for her guide dog.

Visits like this have proved extremely helpful both for students and staff in the DAS. Prior to Anna's arrival there was time to ensure that everything was in place ready to give her a flying start. The final piece in the jigsaw was arranging for Anna to arrive a few days in advance of all other new students so that she could be given mobility training along routes between locations she would have to use in the course of her daily life.
(584 words approx)

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An account that would be deemed to be of a "satisfactory" standard:

Statistics demonstrate increased numbers of students with disabilities entering higher education in the last few years. The number of those with visual impairments has remained steady overall (HESA 2008) but my university has acquired a reputation for the quality of its provision for blind students (QAA 2008) and our numbers have increased. This account concentrates on one blind student, Anna, who is now in her final year. Rather than try to cover all the challenges faced I shall discuss four which are the most important.

Totally blind since birth, Anna has had experience of both segregated and mainstream schools. On leaving secondary education with qualifications in Literature, French, and History, all at high grades, she chose to spend a year out of education before trying to enter university. She failed to find a satisfying steady job. However, she did acquire a guide dog to aid her mobility. She decided to come to university to study French.

The first challenge is disclosure. My university has put in place a range of measures designed to promote inclusion, based on a number of published sources (DfES 2002, Rose 2006). In Anna's case, working with a guide dog made evident her impairment. However, some teaching staff who had already worked with blind students appeared to consider that they had nothing to learn. In accordance with the law, every student must be treated as an individual. It was essential to discuss Anna's needs with her and how best to meet them. (In fact, what in the past might have been viewed as "needs" are now entitlements following recent legislation – see QAA 2010).

The second series of challenges relate to learning, teaching and assessment. In devising an approach to meet her entitlements, the university pursued a policy based on a social model of disability recognising Anna's skills and making changes to the environment to allow her to demonstrate them (Oliver 1990) and the creation of a genuinely inclusive curricular environment. Following the structure offered by the Teachability project, we looked at curriculum design, delivery and assessment (SHEFC 2004) and in particular, prompted staff to identify core non-negotiable dimensions of their courses. It became clear that we would need to plan for a period of overseas residence since all students have to undertake this. We were aided in this by the work of Orsini-Jones (Orsini-Jones 2005 and 2009) and by the checklists of provision produced some years ago (Van Acker et al 1996). Also helpful would be the availability of teaching materials electronically, a relatively straightforward "reasonable adjustment" which some tutors are reluctant to undertake, not an uncommon scenario (see Fuller et al 2009).

The third challenge is funding. Anna receives the maxima available according to DSA regulations including costs of time spent abroad. However, what was interesting was that as my university has developed some of the services which in the past Anna might have had to purchase using her DSA are now provided as part of standard services and for which no charge is made. (The HEFCE provides an additional per capita allocation recognising costs of provision.) This was not the case in the University overseas where Ann chose to study.

Creating high quality services for students with disabilities as part of routine provision might be regarded as a step from initial integration to full inclusion. However, there is still much to be accomplished. For example, when the arranging of special facilities for end-of-course examinations was raised, academic staff were quick to try to transfer responsibility from themselves to the disability advisory service.

Practices like is indicate that the university has a long way to go before it can claim to be genuinely inclusive. One step in the right direction might be to improve continuing professional development although as others have shown (Hurst 2006) this really is about changing pedagogic cultures and is difficult to achieve.

(638 words)

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Brief Commentary on the Two Accounts

A deliberate choice was made to focus on the same student – the second paragraph providing information about the student is the same in both accounts. It should be evident that the first account is a simple narrative. At many points it is possible to draw attention to questions needing discussion. For example, what might be the implications of building a service where specialisms are impairment-based? What can be done to check whether the coping strategies used successfully in schools are appropriate to the post-school context? What assistive technology might be useful or has been rejected as inappropriate?   Whilst the content might be informed by knowledge of some recent and relevant sources, these have not been acknowledged as contributing to the approach adopted. In fact, it is incorrect to label them as "References"; it would be more appropriate to use the heading "Bibliography." The second account is much more thoroughly researched and supported and contains more critical reflections and insights. It is based on the identification of three important issues, each of which is explored. Incidentally, as a result of feedback from members, it has been agreed to extend the word limit to 750 words to ensure parity with other sections of the application.

Appendix C

Sample Guidance Available on the NADP Website (http://nadp-uk.org/) and of Particular Relevance to the Reflective Diary

Critical Reflection in Relation to Disability in Further and Higher Education

(written by David Pollak, formerly a member of the Accreditation Panel)

This refers to the cognitive processes which underpin and inform the practical activities of a professional in education and training. One way of summing this up simply: What I do (how and, importantly, why), what I don't do (and why), what I might also be doing (how and why), and the literature which relates to all of these. Below are examples of the sort of questions you may choose to address. Your own professional context and areas of interest will enable you to vary the themes and focus you choose to take. Whatever the question, critical reflection which moves beyond description to questioning, will inform your approach.

Values and perspectives
Ability to move beyond understanding. One way of summing this up simply: What I do (how and, importantly, why), what I don't do (and why), what I might also be doing (how and why), and the literature which relates to all of these. Below are examples of the sort of events in concrete terms into the conceptualisation of underlying values
Example: Critical reflection on the relevance of labelling in assisting disabled students. Reflect on the potential significance of labelling some students in a way which could be interpreted by the student, or others as ''defective''?

Analysis
Ability to analyse professional situations, particularly in terms of underlying issues; theoretical problem solving.
Example: Critical reflection on assessment and intervention to assist students identified with dyslexia .Who should determine which students are dyslexic? What model of dyslexia, and which tests, should be used? Why?

Implementation
Ability to relate reflection to a practical context; taking decisions; practical problem solving
Example: Critical reflection on provision for disabled students in an inclusive institution in 2012. What does 'inclusivity' actually mean in my institution? What sort of provision should be made for individual disabled students and what should be embedded in an inclusive context? Who should be responsible for what? How does legislation influence this? Why?

Communication
Ability to retain positive working relationships with others, to discuss complex ideas, and to have developed an awareness of audience
Examples: Critical reflecting on the role of 'diagnostic assessment' in 2014 from the perspective of the student and the institution. How should assessment reports be written, so that they are helpful both to the student and to the institution? How should the information be presented to students and colleagues? Why?

Reflection/Critical self-awareness
Ability to empathise with others, to work beyond what is given and to devise innovative solutions to problems
Examples: Critical Reflection on my professional approach with neuro-diverse students, and possible alternatives. Why do I use certain approaches with neuro-diverse students? Are there other models of support which might help?

Appendix D

Unsolicited Feedback Message to the NADP Office from an Accreditation Applicant (February 2014)

Hello,

I just wanted to say how helpful I have found it completing the accreditation. I appreciated the opportunity to re-evaluate my job role and learn more about disability studies.

X was an inspiring mentor and I was very grateful for her support.

Kind regards,