Mission impossible? Satisfying disabled students' needs:

review of conference held at Birmingham City University

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Mission impossible? Satisfying disabled students' needs was the first of a series of conferences to be organised by Library and Learning Resources staff at Birmingham City University. Each team has been tasked with arranging a conference relevant to their area, the intention being that staff have the opportunity to share good practice with others in the sector and learn from the experts.

The choice of 'Mission impossible?' for our first conference was driven by a desire to serve our own disabled students better. The 2009 National Student Survey showed poor results compared with other areas, although the 2010 survey showed an improvement despite nothing extra being put in place. We were working in the dark and wanted to glean good practice. We also wanted to engage staff more in supporting disabled students and we felt that a conference might inspire some of them to be more actively involved in developing support.

The programme itself was very full, with two parallel sessions when delegates were able to choose sessions and two keynote speakers, Alistair McNaught from JISC's TechDis and Sue Jackson from the University of the Arts, London. Alistair's presentation focused on the many ways in which students can use readily available software in

alternative formats. He referred us to the Tech-Dis website, http://www.techdis.ac.uk/ which has recently been revamped and is an excellent source of information. Sue Jackson's presentation required us to work in groups to consider a range of scenarios in which mental health issues may present themselves in the library setting. These were very real scenarios and we were all able to relate to at least one of them. The parallel sessions featured:

- Laura Byrne and Tania Burt from Roehampton University who talked about their digitisation service aimed at students with visual impairment. They are able to sustain a 3-4 week turnaround on items.
- Julie Trimble, University College Dublin. Julie made the case for an access librarian. She argued that having a librarian who is designated as responsible for support for disabled students ensures that there is always someone who will champion the needs of such students and can influence policy and strategy.
- Alison McNab and Mary Pillai from De Montfort University discussed inclusive approaches and disabled student experiences. Alison and Mary explained how the library and the learner development teams worked together to support students with disabilities.
- Angela Brady from Aston University showed us how working towards Customer Service Excellence encompasses a focus on support for disabled students.
- Elaine Dean and Lois Burt from Sheffield University tackled the concept of flexibility for students with disabilities whilst still maintaining policies and procedures that provide a fair framework for all. They provided the quote of the day from *To kill a mockingbird*: 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'
- The final presentation was by Marian Cook and Chris Beevers from the University of Huddersfield. They presented a study of the development of the approach taken at the university where they have made use of disability buddies to provide a familiar point of contact for disabled students. They stressed the importance of keeping records of students' needs and demonstrated their record system which enables them to have a comprehensive approach to their support.

A suggestion was made at the event that a group should be set up in the Midlands to enable effective local networking for librarians involved in this support area. If anyone is interested please contact Enid Pryce-Jones (enid.pryce-jones@bcu.ac.uk) to discuss how this might be put in place.

Feedback was overwhelmingly good and we hope that delegates will have taken away ideas and inspiration to follow through at their own institutions. We have made the presentations available at http://library.bcu.ac.uk/conferencepapers.htm and are delighted to say that we now have an enthusiastic group working to support disabled students at Birmingham City University.