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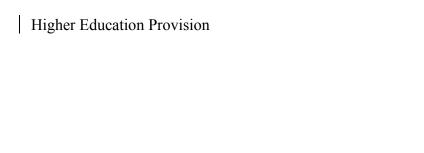Dr Dimitra Hartas

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Higher Education Provision for Students with Disabilities in Cyprus

Abstract

Internationally, the number of students with disabilities entering higher education institutions is on the rise. Research estimates that 8% to 10% of students attending higher education are registered with disability, with learning difficulties being the most commonly reported disability. Widening participation in higher education has been supported by legislative changes, inclusive education practices, the use of ICT and accessible facilities and programs and, ultimately, an increasing belief among students with disabilities that higher education maximizes their opportunities for employment and independent living. Within the Cypriot context, research on disability, access and provision in higher education is limited. This study was a part of a large-scale study (PERSEAS) funded by the EU. From the original sample, fifteen students attending private higher education institutions in Cyprus reported disability (i.e., sensory impairment, dyslexia, physical disabilities) and were selected for focus group discussions. Also, interviews and focus groups were conducted with the Headmasters and teachers respectively in ten private higher education institutions. This study yielded interesting results regarding the current state of provision (e.g., concessions for exams and assignments, infrastructure, teaching modification, counseling services) as well as issues of social inclusion, equality of opportunity and entitlement to education.

Keywords: Higher Education Provision, Cypriot Higher Education, Disability and Provision, Disability in Cyprus, Student Services in Cyprus

Higher Education Provision for Students with Disabilities in Cyprus

Responding to Diversity in Higher Education

Numerous governmental initiatives in many western countries have implemented non-discriminatory practices through changes in educational policy and practice by making adjustments and widening access to higher education. In the UK in particular, throughout the 1990s, there have been attempts to improve access and opportunities for students with disabilities entering further and higher education. Both the Dearing and Garrick reports, together with governmental initiatives on lifelong learning, have stressed the importance of widening participation for students with disabilities and those who experience social disadvantage (Tinklin, Riddell and Wilson, 2004).

A number of initiatives and policy developments over the last decade (e.g., Tomlinson, 1996; HEFCE/HEFCW, 1999) aimed at supporting students with disabilities at an institution level. To this end, higher education institutions are expected to have a disability statement and become anticipatory of students' needs; modify application/registration and administration procedures; re-conceptualize teaching and learning in the context of differentiation; have a disability officer; and provide financial support via the Disabled Student Allowance Fund.

The Tomlinson report (1996) stressed the importance of inclusive learning for further education. Other developments within the further education sector have been accomplished through legislation such as the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which encourages the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) to take regard of the

requirements of students with disabilities by providing additional funding to individual colleges. These initiatives require individual institutions to competitively bid for money to fund provision for students with disabilities.

Lancaster and his colleagues (2001) investigated provision in students with disabilities in higher education institutions in the USA. The main premise underlying their research was that "the goal of providing course accommodations for students with disabilities is to modify materials or testing procedures in order to help students become as successful as they can be. This should be done in such a way that the rigor of the academic program is not compromised or without giving the students an unfair advantage" (2001:8). They found that students with disabilities and their tutors generally negotiate teaching modifications and concessions with assignments and exams including extra time for tests/assignments, extended due dates, scribes and readers for tests, oral tests/reports instead of written, and separate testing rooms. Across colleges, the use of adaptive equipment and technology in particular (e.g., spell-checkers, voice-input software, electronic reading machines, talking calculators, computer-screen readers, specialized keyboards, tape recorders) has become an important aspect of provision.

Catering for Students with Disabilities: Pro-active vs. Reactive Provision

Provision for students with disabilities is multi-faceted, involving issues of availability of and access to resources, training for academic tutors and staff, awareness about diversity and areas of need, effective referral services, as well as emotional and pastoral support

for students with SEN to disclose disability and minimize the sense of stigma (Allard 1987; Pacifici and McKinney, 1997; Tinklin and Hall, 1999; Lancaster et al., 2001). With regard to stigma, Allard (1987) found that some students with learning disabilities tend to "hide-out" during their first months at college in that they feel that disclosure of disability is likely to bring disadvantage.

Singleton and Aisbitt (2001) conducted a survey on the support services available within higher education available for students with dyslexia. They identified a number of factors that were likely to hider effective provision, including variability in the provision across institutions; lack of trained tutors; limited awareness of issues related to assessment and identification of dyslexia and its implications for learning among staff and the existence of centralized services rather than support at a departmental level.

Previously, in a report on Dyslexia in Higher Education in the UK, Singleton (1999) produced a list of recommendations on supporting students with dyslexia by identifying as immediate priorities the need to establish a policy of dyslexia at a whole-institution level; raise awareness about dyslexia (through professional development activities) for key staff such as admission tutors, examination officers, counselors and career advisers; and implement special examination and assessment arrangements for students with dyslexia.

Although the emphasis in Singleton's report was on institutional procedures to respond to students' needs, five years later, Tinklin, Riddell and Wilson found that support was

provided mainly at an individual and not an institutional level (2004). Effective provision

for students with disabilities relies on a culture of acknowledging and responding to

difference by linking policy with practice at an institution level, rather than engaging in

negotiations with individual students about teaching modification and exam concession

arrangements. This can be achieved through the development of policies regarding

disability and legislative frameworks such as The UK Special Educational Needs and

Disabilities Act (2002), to ascertain students' rights by making discrimination on the

grounds of disability unlawful in both pre and post sectors.

The Act uses a wide definition of disabled persons, including people with physical or

mobility impairment, sensory impairment, dyslexia, medical conditions, and mental

health difficulties. Discrimination against students with disabilities can take place either

by treating them "less favorably" than other people, or failing to make a 'reasonable

adjustment' when they are placed at a "substantial disadvantage" compared to other

people for a reason relating to their disability (Disability Rights Commission, 2002).

Much of the research on disability and provision has been at an institutional and policy-

making level. Provision is complex and raises many issues with regard to equality of

access, understandings of disability, assessment and identification and availability of

resources and expertise. A study by Tinklin and Hall (1999) found that the quality of

provision for students with disabilities in higher education depends on attitudes,

experience and awareness about disability among staff and students, rather than the

institutional policies alone.

Farmer, Riddick and Sterling (2002) pointed out that participation of students with learning difficulties in higher education should be considered at three levels, namely personal, organizational / institutional and political / ideological. Personal in terms of providing counseling services, adapting the curriculum (electronic and other materials), modifying teaching and other services such as a sign language interpreter or materials in Braille. Organisational in terms of changing standard institutional procedures, training staff and modifying the physical environment. Finally, ideological in terms of debating models of disability and current policies, striving for equality of opportunity and supporting students' access and entitlement to education.

Internationally, the provision for students with disability is gaining ground. Although it is far from ideal, legislation is in place for institutions to do whatever is "reasonable" to respond to students' diverse needs. Studies on students with special educational needs in higher education are mainly quantitative in nature, accumulating statistical information on the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education and provision offered. A small but growing number of studies during the last few years have explored the experience of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education students with disabilities (Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela, 2004).

The Context of this Study

Recently, in Cyprus, the number of young people attending higher education institutions is on the rise. Tertiary education in Cyprus is currently provided at a university level from the University of Cyprus, the Technological University of Cyprus, and the Open University; and at a non-university level from the Public Educational Institutions of tertiary education (n=7) and Private Colleges (n=23) (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005; Statistical Service, 2006). Sixty-seven percent of the pupils who graduated from secondary education in Cyprus during the academic year 2003-2004 continued their studies in higher education. Out of these young people, 45% entered tertiary education institutions in Cyprus, and 55% higher education institutions abroad (Statistical Service, 2006). Fifty-nine percent of the students who studied in Cyprus attended private colleges, and 41% attended public higher education institutions. The number of students in private higher education institutions have been tripled during the last five years, from 5855 in 1999, to 14669 in 2003-2004 (the foreign students are also included in these numbers) (Meletiou-Mavrotheris, Maouri, Hatzichristou & Hartas, 2006).

Since January 2000, the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (KY.S.A.T.S) has been providing services by examining applications for degree recognition mainly for students attending private colleges (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005). Steps have been also made during the last two years to upgrade the private institutions of private education with the approval of the House of Representatives of the Law 109 (1) 2005 which regulates the establishment, control and operation of Private Universities (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005).

Regarding the provision for students with disabilities in Cyprus' higher education, the Cypriot Parliament voted to approve the [113(1)99] Special Education Law in 1999, which stresses among other things the responsibility of the state to provide the least restricted environment possible for individuals with special educational needs. In July 2001, the Regulations of the Law were also ratified by the Cyprus Parliament, addressing issues related to the attendance of the students with special needs in postsecondary institutions, placing provision in a legislative context. Specifically, the Law and its Regulations address issues regarding support services offered to students with disabilities including individual educational plans, resources available in the form of assistive technology, exam modifications, physical modifications of buildings and part-time enrollment.

In Cyprus, very little is known about the prevalence and the experiences of students with disability and special educational needs attending postsecondary institutions, as well as the support services provided to them. The aim of the present study was to fill this gap, and explore the experiences of students with disabilities and the views of their tutors and Heads of private tertiary education institutions in Cyprus. Issues regarding teaching and environmental / physical modifications, access to resources and support services, identification and assessment of special educational needs, funding, ICT support and distance learning were explored.

Method

Participants

In this study, the views of students, administrative and teaching staff were sought. Specifically, data were collected from tertiary students with disabilities (n= 10), their tutors (n=4) and the Heads of ten Private Tertiary Education Institutions in Cyprus (n= 10). The students were selected from a large pool of final-year students participating in an EU-funded research program (PERSEAS; n = 1390) based on their responses to a question about disability. Initially, fifteen students stated that they have a form of disability; however, five students could not participate in the study due to a variety of circumstances. Finally, ten students (eight female and two male) with a wide range of disabilities, including two students with hearing problems, one with physical disabilities, two with dyslexia, one with epilepsy, one with multiple disabilities, two with visual impairment and one with long-term health problems participated in this study. All students were attending private tertiary educational institutions in Cyprus. It is worth noting that the sample in this study was rather small, characterized by a gender imbalance. Accurate figures about students with disability in higher education in Cyprus were non existent at the time this study was conducted, making sample selection very difficult. Nevertheless, this sample is representative of the students with special educational need in Cyprus.

Research Design and Data Analysis

In order to capture the complexity of the issues regarding access, entitlement and provision for students with disabilities in higher education in Cyprus, we employed two qualitative methods, i.e., semi-structured interviews and focus groups, for data collection. Qualitative methods were deemed appropriate for taking an in-depth approach of data collection (Cohen & Manion, 1994) to allow the voices of students with disabilities and their tutors to be heard. Qualitative studies on students with disabilities in higher education conducted in other countries have also enrolled small numbers of participants (eg, Hall & Tinklin, 1998; Holloway, 2001; Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela, 2004; Goode, 2007); in some of those studies a gender imbalance was also present (Goode, 2007).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Heads of private higher education institutions. An interview guide was developed, based on the research questions of this study, focusing on the following fifteen groups of questions: demographics, resources' choice, modifications, support services, residence, disability disclosure, attitudes, personnel, priorities, assessment, costs, technological support, environmental modifications, distance learning, and exams.

Focus groups were used to examine a wide range of topics related to issues of disability and provision in Higher Education through discussions with the individuals who are primarily affected by these issues. Two separate focus groups were formed, one comprised of students, and another comprised of their tutors. Focus groups were chosen for the advantages they offer in terms of allowing respondents to react and build upon the responses of other member groups; providing the opportunity to obtain large and rich

amounts of data in the respondents' own words; and allowing the researcher to interact directly with the respondents (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Focus groups provide the opportunities for probing and clarifying of responses and following up questions. Focus groups' participants were seated in a manner that provided maximum opportunity for eye contact with both the moderator and other group members.

Almost all of the discussions were open-ended to explore issues the respondents considered to be important. Two sets of guidelines were produced to accommodate the different backgrounds of the people attending the meetings. Regarding the students' focus groups, demographics, resources/support services, academic inclusion, social inclusion and future employment were explored. In the tutors' focus group, demographics, resources' choice, modifications, support services, disability disclosure, attitudes, personnel, technological support, environmental modifications, distance learning, and exams were discussed.

The discussions from the focus groups and interviews were audio taped, transcribed, coded and analyzed through thematic analyses. Ethical issues regarding anonymity, confidentiality and access to the data and research findings were discussed with the participants who gave an informed consent prior to data collection. The emerging themes from the discussions with the Heads, students and their tutors included policy, staff training, resources, terms and conditions for obtaining a higher education degree, building adaptations, assistive technology, support services, the special education law,

awareness of the students' diverse needs, attitudes among staff with regard to disability issues, incentives for enrollment and identification.

Results

Identification and recognition of Students with Disabilities

All private tertiary colleges that participated in this study have a written policy with regard to the identification and provision for students with disabilities as a part of the college attendance regulations. Also, the college prospectus in almost all colleges stressed the non-discriminating policy of the college for the admittance of all students, as long as they meet the requirements of the academic programs offered. Specifically, a Head stated that the "legislation of tertiary education in Cyprus does not exclude students with special needs, as long as the learning of the other students is not compromised."

Although there is a written policy regarding disability in all colleges that participated in this study, the assessment and identification of students' learning needs did not take place within the colleges. Specifically, none of the colleges carried out screening tests for specific learning difficulties, a frequently cited area of need. The Heads of two colleges said that students' learning needs are typically identified by either counselors at the college or outside specialists, with the students mainly taking the initiative to raise awareness about their needs. Also, in seven of the ten higher education institutions, there was not any information about the Special Education Law provided officially, despite

that the Cypriot Special Education Law sets the legislative framework for special

education provision. The other three colleges were informed about the law in an informal

manner (e.g. from the students themselves or during seminars).

Across colleges, there was a consensus that the Regional Committees of Special

Education and the Higher Education Department in the Cypriot Ministry of Education

and Culture are responsible for disseminating information to higher education institutions

with regard to identification and provision for students with disabilities. However, there

were concerns expressed by the majority of Heads in that the information provided via

this central mechanism was not always consistent and thorough. Instead, Heads relied on

information communicated to the colleges by the students and their parents during

registration or at a later stage. One Head in particular stated

> "The students come to us and tell us about their needs. They take the initiative to
>
> inform us, so as to know how to help them when they need us".

However, some students who took the initiative to inform the college about their

disability did not have positive experiences. One student in particular said that

> "now, having graduated from the college after so many adversities, I think that I
>
> would have faced fewer difficulties if I had never mentioned to the Head of the
>
> College that I am dyslexic. I am saying this because the director did not
>
> accurately inform the teachers on the kind of difficulties that I faced, resulting in
>
> my being treated as a student with mental retardation rather than a student with
>
> dyslexia."

Almost all Heads stated that issues of SEN were typically raised through confidential talks with tutors, during registration and at a later stage during the academic year, especially after students having failed exams. Some Heads and teachers were skeptical about students who disclosed dyslexia after failing exams. A small number of colleges were more pro-active in gathering information about students' disability status albeit in an informal way. A Head specifically stated

"During students' registration, we try to find out in a discreet way whether there is a problem. There is no such part in the registration form asking the students to state their special needs; however, there is always time for discussion during the registration process. Also, during the academic year, we're trying to investigate whether they face some difficulties with the lessons; that's how we detected some problems."

There has been a consensus across colleges that Heads and staff did not actively recruit students with disabilities. Some Heads discussed the need to widen participation to students with disabilities as long as their needs and, thus, their requirements were not "challenging". Others raised concerns about whether students with disabilities are in a position to pursue demanding academic degrees. For example, regarding engineering courses where machine handling is a requirement, a Head said that "because of the nature of these academic programs, students with disabilities may put themselves and other people into risk".

One student in particular commented that students with disabilities are not welcomed at the institution he attended, stating

> "The School is not 'altruistic'. They don't care for students with special needs (…). The teachers (…) insult the people with special needs; for instance, they tell us 'Change your glasses', or 'Are you deaf?'. Their behavior is unacceptable".

Provision

To capture the complexity with regard to provision, issues of availability of trained staff, financial aid and teaching modification including concessions for exams and assignments, were discussed during the interviews and focus groups.

Human resources and financial support.

Across colleges, very few trained staff (e.g. special needs teachers, speech and language therapists, doctors, physiotherapists) were employed despite the Cypriot Special Education Law stressing the need for staff training and qualification. In many of the colleges, students with disabilities were supported by counselors/ psychologists or tutors, receiving the same type and level of support as their peers. One of the tutors interviewed took the initiative to give postgraduate seminars on teaching methods for students with disabilities and, through a cascading model, trained other colleagues. Also, in three colleges, staff were trained to provide first aid to all students. Overall, counselors and personal tutors were seen as being responsible for supporting students with disabilities and special educational needs, albeit in a non-differentiated manner.

All the higher education colleges in Cyprus undertake the financial cost for providing resources and support to students with disabilities. Some of the Heads stressed that they would have made provisions to respond to the students' needs by putting in place sign language interpreters, special teachers for students with visual and hearing impairment and in-service training on dyslexia, had they had some financial help from the government. In many colleges, the Heads stated that building adaptations and ICT had been provided, in that these were seen as investment for the benefit of all students.

Although there were not any disability-related scholarships available in the colleges interviewed, some Heads stated that they were willing to consider such scholarships, especially for students who experience social and economic disadvantage. Specifically, a Head stated

> "we co-operate with the Cyprus Association for People with Heart Problems for the provision of scholarships for our students suffering from heart problems. We ask them whether they know any students with heart problems attending our college, in order to offer them a scholarship."

Teaching modification.

Across colleges, with regard to teaching and learning, the learning objectives and goals of the course of study were said to be the same for all students. Heads stressed that the students with disabilities compete with their fellow students on the same terms. In almost

all colleges, changes in the curriculum and the overall degree requirements were not allowed for students with disabilities. The rationale was that academic programs in colleges had been evaluated and certified by the Ministry of Education and Culture and, thus, all students were required to pass the prescribed modules without any modifications in order to get a certified degree.

A degree of differentiation took place in the form of teaching modification in terms of exam and assignment concessions. Specifically, a few concessions were allowed by the special education law, including extra time for lesson understanding, regular breaks, clear and slow speech, oral examinations instead of written ones, and exemption from shorthand for students with hearing impairment. Nearly half of all the teachers and Heads stated that they often use visual materials / projector, allow oral examinations for students with dyslexia, encourage students to sit in the front row and lip read (for students with hearing impairment), put notes on the web and speak clearly and slowly.

Other tutors stated that teaching modification was impossible due to the rapid pace of lessons and the financial cost of such accommodation (e.g. the employment of an interpreter). One tutor in particular said that

> "in the classroom there are a lot of students and it would be impossible for me to provide more time to the students with special needs to understand better."

In some colleges, students were encouraged to visit their tutors for support, considering that

> "the classroom normal delivery cannot be easily modified. We also have to look after the rest of the students. It would have been easier to provide such help on an individual basis, after the end of the lesson."

There was variability in students' responses with regard to teaching modifications provided, with students mainly feeling that their needs were not met in the classroom. One student specifically stated that

> "there are no good conditions at the music class. The teacher teaches constantly; I get tired, dizzy and I leave the class. She doesn't even have a break. She only allows us to stay in the classroom for five minutes without talking during break time. She just lets us move from our seats to stretch our legs. I have a lot of health problems and I need breaks".

A coupler of students felt that their learning needs were taken into consideration, stating that "the teachers at the college provided us with quite a lot of support in the classroom whenever asked for".

Assignments / exams.

Concessions with regard to assignments and exams (e.g. extra time for assignments, essay substitutions, and essays in an alternative form) for students with disabilities were also discussed. The decision about concessions depended upon students' learning needs as they are delineated by an Educational Psychologist from the Ministry of Education and Culture, in conjunction with the relevant guidelines that the Special Education Law

provides. Typically, the exam modifications offered include extra time and a choice to take both oral and written examinations.

Six students stated that they were not allowed any extra time for assignments, two students said that occasionally extra time was given to them, with one student being allowed extra time frequently. All participants responded that Brailled tests or tests with enlarged font were not available for students with visual impairment; furthermore, students with severe hearing impairment were not provided with sign interpretation or lip-reading of the questions nor were they allowed to use loop systems. Likewise, students with visual impairments were not allowed to use magnifiers during the exams.

Regarding students with dyslexia, the Heads in seven higher education institutions stated that extra time for assignment was provided on a regular basis, and alternative ways of presentation, e.g., oral rather than written, were allowed in accordance with the Pancyprian Association of Dyslexia. Moreover, a teacher specifically stated that

> "these concessions are based on each student's needs. There was a case in our college of a student with physical disabilities who writes slowly. This person was given extra time for assignments, or, alternatively, is allowed to finish an assignment at home."

Interesting views were expressed by some Heads with regard to the needs of students with disabilities and the provision offered to them, stressing the need for sameness. One Head in particular stated

"we treat them in the same way as the rest of the students. These students are

eager to work. Their special needs don't prevent them from doing their

assignments. It's not as if they all had physical disabilities and we would have to

give them extra time to compensate for this loss."

Part-time enrollment for undergraduate courses was not an option at any of the higher

education institutions participated in our study. Students must be enrolled full-time in

order for their degrees to be recognized, with attendance being obligatory. The Heads in

some colleges said that they tend to be flexible with students who are absent due to

chronic medical problems.

Infrastructure: physical and virtual environments.

In nine colleges, building adaptations for students with disability (e.g. special car park

places, lifts, toilets for the disabled, and ramps) were made. In Cyprus, building

adaptations for people on wheelchairs (e.g. special car park places, lifts, toilets for the

disabled, and ramps, staff member to help with mobility) is a prerequisite for any newly

established higher education institution to obtain an official license for operation.

In almost all the higher educational institutions, according to the Heads and the students,

ICT was fully used (e.g., word processors, e-mail access, and internet access). One Head

in particular stated

"All students have their own e-mail account, use computers to write their essays

and have access to printers. There are special computer labs for students to use to

write their essays and to attend the graphic design course."

The use of assistive technology (e.g., magnifiers, FM systems, electronic reading

machines, specialized keyboards, spell checkers, and tape recorders) for students with

disability was also discussed. Only in one college was assistive technology available for

students with special needs, mainly due to the need to constantly update technology and

its financial implications. The Head specifically stated

"I remember that we had a case of a blind student. We borrowed a touch screen

and a Braille machine from the School for the Blind. Of course if a type of

technology equipment is needed we can borrow such equipment or rent it. We

only had one blind student. If we had bought the equipment, by the time we

would have needed it again, it could have been considered 'old hat' "

Counseling services.

In nine higher education institutions generic counseling services (i.e., academic,

psychological support, career advice and campus orientation during the first days) were

provided for all students. Counseling services mainly focused on career support and

orientation by assisting students with writing their CVs, undertaking job-based training

and contacting prospective employers. In some colleges, psychologists were also

employed to provide mental health advice and support. In addition to general

information and guidelines given to all students, some counseling centers published

handouts on teaching practices with regard to dyslexia. Thus, in this context, students with disabilities were offered the same support as their non-disabled peers.

In some colleges, counselors were also responsible for providing campus orientation services intended for all students. However, the orientation services were not tailored to the needs of students with disabilities in particular; instead, they focused on introductory lectures, student social life and general issues regarding students' health and wellbeing. Across colleges, tutors and Heads stressed that students with disability receive help during the registration process in terms of filling registration forms and explaining regulations. For this support to be available however, students with disabilities need to be pro-active and inform the college about their needs before they register for the course.

Students with disabilities provided diverse accounts and views about provision. Five students described the support they received as being adequate, with a couple of students wishing they had more support and positive experiences. The least satisfied students raised serious concerns about the support provided, particularly with regard to teachers' limited SEN training and attitudes towards disability, stating that "teachers are not trained on how to support students with special needs."

In summary, in almost all colleges, provision took place in the form of teaching modifications, exam/assignments concessions, counseling and ICT, mainly relying on recommendations suggested by external professionals and agencies, i.e., educational psychologists working for the Ministry of Education and Culture or the Regional

Committees with a remit on special education. A small number of heads and teachers were aware of their responsibility to engage in responsive pedagogy by meeting students' diverse learning needs without offering an unfair advantage. They agreed that although widening participation of students with disabilities in Higher Education was a "testing ground" for them, it had raised their awareness about students' diverse needs and had broadened their understanding about disability. A Head specifically referred to the complexity and challenges of "adapting to student's needs, without lowering the academic level or giving an unfair advantage to some students with special needs." It was also said that certain groups of students with disabilities (e.g., students who are blind and those with health problems) presented serious challenges in that their requirements were not as easily met as "making building adaptations".

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate issues related to the identification and provision of students with disabilities in private higher education institutions in Cyprus. To this end, we sought the views of students with disabilities, their tutors and the Heads of ten higher education institutions, exploring the support mechanisms available for students with disabilities, as well as their views regarding access and entitlement to education.

Provision has multiple facets, including activities, services, facilities and resources aiming at removing obstacles to learning, and access and entitlement to education. Differentiation and not sameness or 'treating everybody the same' lies at the heart of

effective provision, applying to all aspects of teaching and learning (e.g., distance learning, examinations and assessments), learning resources (e.g., libraries, computer, building adaptations and equipment), counseling and other support services (e.g., campus orientation, careers services).

The main findings from this study suggested variability in the provision, mainly due to the lack of common and consistent procedures with regard to identifying disability and responding to students' needs effectively. Specifically, there was variability in registering, recording and evaluating students' learning needs, with colleges relying on individual students' accounts and assessment results obtained from outside agencies and professionals. Furthermore, there were not any criteria for assessment/identification agreed upon, with the majority of staff having limited training and expertise on disability issues. Across colleges, outside agencies (e.g. the Cyprus Association of Dyslexia or the Educational Psychology Service of the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture) were contacted for SEN information and guidance on assessment, identification and provision.

This study draws upon the framework suggested by Farmer and his colleagues (2002) to discuss provision for students with disabilities in higher education at an individual, organizational and ideological level.

Individual Level

The results from this study suggested that provision for students with disabilities was restricted into exam/assignment concessions and building adaptations with other forms of differentiation (e.g., teaching modification and removing obstacles to learning) being neglected. Teaching modification in terms of re-thinking and adapting the learning goals and the curriculum did not take place in any of the colleges interviewed (Fuller, Bradley, Healey, 2004; Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela, 2004). According to the Heads in these colleges, any form of differentiation or departure from the official requirements of the academic programs would have jeopardized students' chances of getting a certified degree.

At an individual level, the identification and provision for students with disabilities were hindered by students' lack of confidence in disclosing/discussing disability issues (Goode, 2007). There were several reasons to explain this. Students may not know that they were entitled to additional support; they may not perceive themselves as having 'special needs' or disabilities; or they may choose not to disclose disabilities because they believed they will be disadvantaged and stigmatized. Regarding the last reason, some students with disability felt a sense of stigma and shame, resorting in 'hiding' their needs to alleviate social pressure and the implications of being different. This view was illustrated by a Head saying that

> "during the registration process we provide all students with handouts asking them what to do if they have special needs. Some dyslexic students hide their problem, probably due to the prejudices of Cyprus society."

In order to support students achieve their potential the issue of compatibility between provision and students' needs was raised. The findings from this study pointed to the lack of mechanisms, other than generic feedback provided by the students mainly through unofficial channels, to evaluate the effectiveness of provision. Some Heads said that talking informally with students was a good way to "investigate whether they feel that they get the provision needed."

Monitoring and feedback have also been important aspects of good practice. Setting up committees with representatives from different sectors of higher education institutions, e.g., senior management, academic departments, accommodation, welfare, library or computing facilities, to look at disability issues and provision was suggested by some students. They also stated that students should sit on committees to voice their views and make suggestions with regard to provision for students with disability.

Organizational Level

Across institutions, the Heads referred to centralized mechanisms, e.g., Regional Committees of Special Education, as being responsible for identifying and assessing students and providing advice, financial assistance and other forms of support, as well as the legislative / policy and practice framework within which colleges and staff were expected to operate. One Head in particular stated

> "If we have a dyslexic student we respond to his needs centrally; the diagnosis
> and assessment reports get to the academic department, and people there give

relevant guidelines to the teachers. The teacher doesn't decide himself. The

teacher will take the information centrally based on an official report. We tell the

students with special needs that we are willing to provide modifications, as long

as they bring to us the official papers."

The Cypriot special education law states that the Regional Committees of Special

Education should identify and assess students with disabilities and decide about

provision, mainly, through exam/assignment concessions. However, the results revealed

that the Heads tended to make decisions about provision based on the psychological

reports obtained from outside agencies, individual students' suggestions and negotiations

with the students' parents. Thus, there seemed to be an inconsistency between what the

law stipulates and the provision offered at an organizational level.

Moreover, although all colleges had a written policy emphasizing non-discriminatory

practice, the knowledge about the legislative framework for SEN and awareness about

students' areas of need were limited. Support services such as counseling, campus

orientation and ICT facilities were available to all students including those with

disabilities, pointing to limited differentiation. In almost all colleges, teaching

modification and curriculum adjustment were viewed as being incompatible with the

academic programs regulated by the Ministry for Education and Culture.

Corlett (2001) pointed out that, for an organization, being non-discriminatory involves

changes in the policy and practice by engaging in differentiation and adjustments.

Specifically, she stated that "the concept of adjustment will also require educators to look at some fundamental issues regarding their academic and subject disciplines and the methods used to teach and access them" (p. 6). With this in mind, higher education institutions in Cyprus should re-examine the academic programs available and make their requirements non-discriminatory and compatible with the needs of students with disability.

Under the UK Disability and Discrimination Act, there is a responsibility for higher education institutions and other organisations to make anticipatory adjustments. This means that institutions should consider what adjustments future students or applicants with disability may need, and make them in advance. In this study, Heads and tutors stressed the need for an organizational culture and ethos that is pro-active and anticipatory of students' learning needs, rather than assuming a passive role by relying on outside agencies and governmental bodies to provide them with a blueprint for provision. To this end, a couple of Heads only were active in organizing in-service seminars, publishing materials on dyslexia and other areas of need and collaborating with other departments, e.g., Guidance Centre, Centre of Academic Issues, and outside agencies (e.g., Cypriot Dyslexia Association) to raise awareness about disability and train teachers and administration staff to respond effectively.

Ideological Level

Provision is effective when it has the potential to ascertain disabled students' rights. Undoubtedly, students with disabilities present numerous challenges to educators who try to reconcile their needs with the requirements of higher education degrees. There are tensions between notions of equity, opportunity, fairness and high standards to be resolved. For students with disabilities, opportunity, access and entitlement play a significant role in that academic achievement is shaped by support and encouragement, equal opportunity, resources and expertise, as well as staff's awareness of students' needs.

Widening participation and offering support for students with disabilities are the cornerstones of inclusive education. Lancaster and his colleagues (2001) listed diversity, quality of life, reaching out to the community and ideological and legal obligations as the main incentives for recruiting students with disabilities in higher education. In this study, a number of Heads stated that they did not actively recruit students with disabilities although they "don't turn them away when they are registered". In certain subjects, such as engineering, it was said that, for safety reasons, students with disabilities were being discouraged from registering, raising issues regarding equality of opportunity and participation of students with disability in education.

Also, almost all staff interviewed stressed the importance of raising awareness about students' needs. One Head in particular commented

> "we need specialists in dyslexia and deafness. The administrative personnel and
> the teachers need to get information about each problem and about what needs to

be done. Awareness is really important. If we are aware of the students' special

problems we can then find proper solutions."

Interesting issues were raised with regard to differentiation. Some Heads expressed the

view that students should modify their needs to access the curriculum rather than the

institution adapting its practices to remove obstacles to learning.   Specifically, it was said

that "there is a general rule in our college that we accept all students, as long as their

problem does not block their academic attendance. We treat everybody in the same way."

In this context, sameness does not imply equality in the treatment of students with

disabilities. Across colleges, the dominant view was that "treating everybody the same"

alleviates potential concerns about students with disabilities having an unfair advantage.

These views on sameness suggest that removing obstacles to learning can be achieved

through assimilation and not through adaptation, going against the very notion of

inclusion. Also, the notion of an 'unfair advantage' was not justified in that the findings

suggested that the students did not perceive the support provided to their fellow students

with disabilities as being unfair, especially in a context where students with disabilities

earned their degree on the same terms and conditions as did students without disabilities.

Moreover, the findings from this study suggested that institutions responded to the needs

of students with disabilities at an individual basis, making provision reactive rather than

pro-active. All ten higher education institutions in this study had institutional policies

with regard to students with disabilities. However, it is imperative they move from a

reactive and ad- hoc response to the needs of students with disabilities, towards a more proactive and systematic approach backed up by policy where provision for students with disability is a part of a standard academic practice (Hall and Tinklin, 1998; Goode, 2007).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Institutions are expected to do what is 'reasonable', and what is 'reasonable' depends on the circumstances of the individual cases, the financial and other resources of the institution and the practicality and effectiveness of the adjustments required (Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela, 2004). Issues, such as academic standards, health and safety and the wellbeing of other students are also important. Making adjustments that are practical and compatible with the nature and requirements of academic disciplines, uncompromising of other students' needs, and capable of abiding by the principles of inclusion and social justice is a balancing act.

Within the Cypriot context, there is a need to rethink and refine policy and practice regarding disability at an institution level, by clarifying issues of entry and admissions; identifying barriers to access and remove them through an equal opportunities legislation; informing applicants about facilities, resources and services; engaging in teaching modification; raising awareness about disability among staff and students; and, last but not least, promoting staff training and professional development. Moreover, higher Education institutions should become pro-active with regard to the identification and assessment of students with disabilities by taking the initiative to conduct assessments

within the institution and draw links between assessment and provision that are relevant and practical. This may be achieved by raising issues of fairness in the assessment procedures and promoting equal opportunities for students with disability to demonstrate ability and achieve academically.

Finally, the provision of ICT, counseling and career services should be differentiated for students with disabilities, in that providing generic services is less likely to remove obstacles to learning. Higher Education institutions are well placed to identify and access appropriate technology to support students with a wide range of difficulties as well as provide training and technical support. Likewise, regarding counseling and career orientation, students with disabilities have different needs and requirements compared to those of their non-disabled peers. Careers services in particular should take into account the needs of students with disabilities by training careers advisors to gain knowledge about policies on disability, equal opportunities and employment.

Conclusion

Effective provision for students with disabilities depends to a large extent on an accurate identification of their needs, consistency in availability and access of services and expertise, equality in accessing resources and the existence of an inclusive ethos and culture in higher education institutions (e.g., Vogel, Leyser, Wyland and Brulle, 1999). It also depends upon institutions' capacity and readiness to anticipate students' needs and engage in responsive and inclusive pedagogy.

Although the sample in this study was rather small, the results raised important issues

with regard to provision, equal opportunities and participation in higher education for

students with disabilities. The present findings suggested variability in access to

resources and availability of services, as well as in staff's views of disability. Also, lack

of clarity in identifying areas of need in students, limited consistency in the procedures

and type of support available, staff's limited knowledge and expertise with regard to SEN

and lack of consensus across higher education institutions with regard to identification

and assessment were found to affect the effectiveness of provision.

There is a delicate balance to be achieved between individual responses to students'

diverse needs, which may be unsystematic and unstructured but nevertheless effective in

some cases, and generalized policy-led approaches based on the principles of access,

entitlement to education and inclusive learning, which may not always be relevant to the

individual needs and requirements. In this study, it was found that provision was not

embedded in institutional and legislative frameworks. At both an individual and

organizational level, provision was not systematic and pro-active but an ad-hoc response

to the needs raised by the students and their families. Overall, support for students with

disabilities was seen as an extra service that the institution provides, and not embedded in

the context of inclusive educational practices. The aim of the current study was to

highlight issues regarding the inclusion of and provision for students with disabilities in

higher education in Cyprus. Nevertheless, its findings may be of interest to higher

education staff (e.g. administrators, teachers) and policy makers not only in Cyprus but

elsewhere as well.

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