



IFLA
2005
OSLO

World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme:

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

June 10, 2005

Code Number:

095-E

Meeting:

110 SI - Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons

Towards an accessible academic library: using the IFLA checklist

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Abstract

This paper describes and analyses the experience of applying the IFLA checklist, "Access to libraries for persons with disabilities" to an academic library, Fife Campus Library at the School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Dundee, Scotland. An introduction to disability legislation in the United Kingdom provides the legal framework for this paper and is recognised as an important incentive for libraries to improve their services to disabled people. A number of physical and attitudinal barriers to good practice are considered and the value of using the IFLA Checklist in overcoming some of these barriers and working towards an accessible academic library is promoted.

Legislative context

In the United Kingdom the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (known as the DDA), places statutory duties on organisations, including libraries, to make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of disabled people (Great Britain 1995). The DDA was

extended to education following amendments introduced by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 (Great Britain 2001). The legislation has been introduced in three stages:

- **From 1st September 2002**
It is unlawful to treat disabled students less favourably and there is a requirement to make reasonable adjustments.
- **From 1st September 2003**
Institutions are required to provide access to auxiliary aids and services (e.g. sign language interpreters for deaf students).
- **From 1st September 2005**
Institutions are required to make reasonable adjustments to physical features of their buildings and environment (e.g. provide a ramp for wheelchair users).

Under the DDA a “disabled person” is defined as a person with a physical or mental impairment who has a substantial, adverse and long term effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities. Long term is taken to be a year or more, but allowance is made for remissions in conditions such as multiple sclerosis. It can include people with:

- physical or mobility impairments
- visual impairments
- hearing impairments
- dyslexia
- medical conditions
- mental health difficulties

In the UK there are 8.5 million disabled people (Disability Rights Commission n.d.). This is approximately one in seven of the population. The aim of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act is to ensure that disabled people have equal opportunities to benefit from, and contribute to, the learning and services available in higher education institutions.

The Act applies to all the activities and facilities institutions provide for students. This includes elearning and distance learning; learning resources, including libraries and computer facilities; aspects of the physical environment such as buildings, landscaping and equipment; and many other services.

Discrimination against disabled students can take place in either of two ways:

- treating them “less favourably” 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.

Under the Act, there is a responsibility to make “anticipatory adjustments”. This means that institutions should consider what adjustments future disabled students may need and make them in advance. It is unlikely that every need can be anticipated. However, this is

where an access checklist can be especially valuable in preparing libraries to make adjustments in advance of them being required.

Overcoming barriers to accessibility

In working through the IFLA Checklist, it soon became apparent that a number of physical as well as some attitudinal barriers to accessibility existed at Fife Campus. The Library is situated on the first floor of a former College of Nursing and Midwifery. Prior to the College's merger with the University of Dundee in 1996, the Library provided a service in the education of a profession where it was generally considered unacceptable for members to have a disability. Although there are now many successful disabled health professionals, there is still a perception that disabled people are usually patients and therefore should be on the receiving end of the healthcare professions, rather than being involved in delivering and promoting health care. A recent publication by Skill: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities indicates that this perception is still prevalent in the UK (Skill 2005). A study undertaken in the United States and published in the *Journal of Nursing Education* suggests that these perceptions are still held by some nurse educators in America, 24 years after the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and that educators need training regarding nursing students with disabilities (Sowers 2004).

Although attitudinal barriers to disabled people training to become nurses today are less evident, the legacy still exists in the building design and facilities for nursing and midwifery education at the University of Dundee. In spite of the fact that the accommodation at Fife Campus was built as recently as the mid-1980s, there was no legal requirement at that time to install a lift and no incentive to provide one from teaching staff whose vision of their profession did not encompass nurses or midwives with disabilities.

Learning and teaching at the Campus has continued to focus on the subjects nursing and midwifery. The Campus Library, however, is part of the University-wide library service and is open to all staff and students and the general public. Other disciplines taught at the University do not have the same history of attitudinal barriers as the health professions and have generally welcomed the recruitment of students and staff with a diversity of access requirements. Situated approximately 40 miles (64 km) from the City Campus, the Library at Fife is used by a significant number of staff and students who live locally and are able to make use of the full University Library stock through a van delivery service between site libraries of the University.

Although a number of barriers to access still exist there are now increasing drivers for change from both the legal and the institutional context and a pressing need for the Library service at the Fife Campus to be more inclusive and enable better access to users with disabilities. The remainder of this paper focuses on the experience of the library staff at Fife Campus in working towards a more accessible service.

Working towards accessibility

Institutional support

In August 2003, the appointment of a new member of staff with a disability and experience of developing an accessible library service may have contributed to an increase in interest and awareness among other library staff and the need to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate users with disabilities. Soon after this appointment, the Senior Library Assistant, Dawn Adams, volunteered to become the Library's Disability Services Officer, an important liaison position between the Library at Fife and Disability Services of the University, based at Dundee. This contact has enabled the Library to keep up to date with developments in disability access at the University and staff training in this area. Regular visits to Fife Campus by one of the Disability Advisers have included visits to the Library and support in making the resources more accessible to readers.

Interest in disability access at the Fife Campus soon became focussed on the Library and when accessible equipment was purchased for use at the Campus, it was promptly "acquired" by Library staff to enable students with disabilities to access electronic resources. In addition to support from Disability Services, help and advice was obtained from IT Services at the University in the development of an eAccess Area.

The more expensive pieces of equipment (the height-adjustable table and chair and multimedia computer and scanner) were purchased by Disability Services with support from IT Services. Less expensive "accessible accessories" were funded from the Library budget. These items include: an adjustable keyboard, an expert pro trackball and gel mouse, wrist rests and a neck loop (for hearing impaired users). Accessible software was installed onto the computer to enlarge and enhance text and images on screen (Zoom Text), help with reading (with a synthetic voice reading text on screen) (Text Help) and help with concept mapping (Mind Genius). Additional equipment includes a CCTV magnifier and coloured overlays for students with dyslexia.

With support from other departments within the University (especially Disability Services and IT Services), the Library staff were able to make a significant improvement in providing a more accessible library service.

Using the IFLA Checklist

With some of the ground work completed, the next step was to conduct an access audit of the library services. "Access audits" are generally used to describe a process by which a building or organisation is evaluated for its accessibility to disabled people (Delin 2003). An access audit report would enable the library staff to gauge the level of service currently provided and enable future planning to be focussed on areas of improvement. Unfortunately, the estimate for an external company to carry out an access audit at Fife Campus Library in 2004 had proved to be too expensive. However, there are a number of

published resources which make it possible to carry out a self audit of library services and one of these is the IFLA Checklist (Irvall and Nielsen 2005).

Using the IFLA Checklist, Library staff at Fife Campus carried out a self audit following the three main sections which focus on: physical access, media formats and service and communication.

Physical access

The area outside the main building of Fife Campus was found to be accessible with sufficient parking spaces marked for disabled users. Two spaces are close to the entrance, with clear signposting. Unobstructed and well lit access paths lead to the entrance. Within the reception area of the building there is adequate space for wheelchair manoeuvrability and a disabled toilet on the ground floor. However, access to the Library is more problematic. Situated on the first floor of a building with no lift or chair elevator on the stairs clearly prevents the Campus Library from checking any of the points concerned with “getting into the library”. Although the University plans to install a lift at the Fife Campus, this will not be in place in time to meet the legal requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act in September of this year.

Within the Library, however, access to materials and services was found to be good and most of the checklist points were satisfied. The new eAccess Area provides access to a reading and computer table of adjustable height and a chair with sturdy armrests. Aisles are unobstructed between the bookcases and staff are available to retrieve materials from the shelves when users request this support. There is a visible and audible fire alarm in the Library which is regularly tested and staff are trained to assist users in case of an emergency. The circulation/enquiry desk is well-positioned close to the entrance of the Library and near a seating area. However, it was noted that no loop induction system was available at the desk and that one would need to be fitted.

Media formats

The IFLA Checklist recommends that “all library materials should ideally be accessible for all customers”. Although the University has limited materials in Braille or large print, it does subscribe to several thousand ejournals and ebooks which are accessible to staff and students both on and off campus via the Library website. Where textbooks are published in both audio and printed format, both formats are purchased by Fife Campus Library to enable access for print-disabled users. Videos and DVDs with subtitles are purchased where possible and a closed caption decoder is available for use in the Library to enable deaf patrons to read “hidden captions” which are available on many videos.

In the section of the IFLA Checklist which covers computer equipment, Fife Campus Library scored highly, mainly due to the innovative eAccess Area.

Service and communication

Under the final section on Service and communication, the authors of the Checklist stress the importance of good staff training in disability awareness. Dundee University Library is especially fortunate to have a member of staff who has been involved in disability awareness training for many years and has co-authored a guide for supporting students with disabilities - Sandra Charles (Charles and Foster 2004). This guide has been used extensively at the University Library and is one of the recommended resources in the Disability Rights Commission's good practice guide for libraries and learning centres (Disability Rights Commission 2005).

The IFLA Checklist suggests a number of special services which could be made available to patrons with disabilities. The appropriateness of these services will vary depending on the type of library using the checklist. Additional services available from the Fife Campus Library include the following:

- help finding and using library materials
- extended borrowing time with short loan materials
- different format and coloured paper for all library publications on request
- confidential advice and help from the Library Disability Services Officer

Evaluation

An important recommendation made by the Checklist authors is that "representatives from disability groups should be included in the evaluation process". Earlier this year Fife Campus Library staff began work on an impact study of its services to users with disabilities. A pre-study questionnaire was distributed by email to all Fife students registered with Disability Services. Paper copies of the questionnaire were also made available to walk-in users of the Library. The main purpose of the survey was to gauge users' awareness of the new eAccess Area facilities and request support from users to help library staff develop these services further.

Although the response rate to the questionnaire was very low, library staff gained useful information from the exercise. The responses stressed the need to improve the Library's marketing and promotion of facilities for users with disabilities and to run training sessions on the new equipment. The most valuable outcome of the survey has been the support obtained from three dyslexic nursing students who joined the Library's Access Focus Group. Using the checklist findings from the self audit in addition to support from disabled students, Fife Campus Library is now in a much stronger position to plan and provide the necessary "reasonable adjustments" required by the Disability Discrimination Act and SENDA.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide an introduction to the legal context of disability equality in the UK and the response of one academic library to the requirement to make its services more accessible for users with disabilities. The value of using the IFLA

Checklist in establishing the parameters of the service has been emphasised. However, it is important that the checklist points are not seen as providing a maximum level of service, but as a framework for continual development and improvement (SAIF 2004). The authors of the IFLA Checklist suggest that “it is often a question of changing attitudes and thinking in new ways”. The experience of the staff at Fife Campus Library reflect this. They have demonstrated that through innovative ways of thinking and support from Dundee University colleagues and students, providing an academic library service to users with disabilities is possible.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to all my colleagues at the University of Dundee Library who supported me in the preparation of this paper. In particular, I would like to thank Dawn Adams and Sandra Charles for their creativity and inspiration in developing the service at Fife Campus Library.

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