

A global blueprint for enhancing opportunities for people with disabilities to access and succeed in higher education

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Abstract

This presentation will share the intercultural learning from the SWING project (Sustainable Ways to Increase Higher Education Students' Equal Access to Learning Environments). This was a two-year project funded by EU Tempus, involving partnership between four European (EU), one Egyptian and two Moroccan higher education (HE) institutions. The overarching aim of the project was to bring together partner expertise to share best practice to support students with disabilities in accessing and optimizing their chance of succeeding in HE through the use of assistive technologies (AT). Research illustrates that there is still much work to be done in levelling higher education experiences for disabled students (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

The project team investigated the current state of accessibility for disabled people in the EU and the partner countries in terms of national and international legislation, HE policy and practice. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (WHO, 2001) was adopted which is the WHO's framework for health and disability that emphasises health and functioning, rather than disability. This conception of disability when applied in an HE context suggests the need to focus holistically on the education experience in its widest sense, thus enabling students to enjoy the full benefits of involvement in student life.

An appreciative inquiry approach was adopted in line with a collaborative action research style ethos. The project aimed to capture the perspectives and alter attitudes and practice at all levels including students, academic and administrative staff, technical experts and senior managers. Having provoked change there is commitment in the partner countries to sustaining and building on what has been achieved. Partners are keen to disseminate the project outcomes nationally and internationally, and to become flagship institutions within their own countries. Mutual benefit for the EU universities has been felt through challenging taken-for-granted practice that might have lulled universities into thinking they had levelled the field for students with disabilities. For instance, the use of IT and AT had not been optimised in our own institution prior to this project, throwing local challenges into sharp relief.

Keywords

Disability; Assistive technology; Accessibility Centres; Appreciative inquiry;

Background & Research Context

Information technology (IT) and assistive technology (AT) potentially open up opportunities for people with a wide range of disabilities to access and succeed at university. However, a one-size fits all approach to disability does not work where AT is concerned as students' needs are infinitely diverse and unique. Research shows that the various technologies are not always used in the ways in which they might be expected to be used (Forrest, 2003). Whilst general and adaptive technology are both used for what they are intended (e.g., computers for word processing), general-use technology is also used as an adaptive aid (e.g. scanning a document to enlarge diagrams or text for easier reading). These findings suggest that students will optimise the use of any technology available to suit their needs; staff should be flexible and ready to help students by maximising access to IT, providing training and in helping them to find appropriate solutions.

Visits to each partner were conducted to research practice and see what was working and what was needed, requiring input from students, academics and professional services. Aspects of good practice in the EU institutions were identified that would be transferrable to the partner countries, for example, use of a variety of AT, (concentrating largely on open source solutions, due to lack of availability and expense of AT for the Moroccan and Egyptian students), peer mentoring schemes, volunteer schemes, disabled student networks, staff training, transport services and employment advisory services. All partner institutions acknowledged scope for improvement, expressed commitment to, and were optimistic that the SWING project would help to achieve necessary progress in promoting inclusive education.

An important output from the SWING project was the development of an Accessibility Model, a conceptual framework capturing best practices of the partner institutions to produce a blueprint for enhancing opportunities for people with disabilities to gain access to and succeed in higher education (HE). The objective of the model was to analyse and describe how the provision of services to students with disability, such as guidance, training and access to specialized AT, could be organized in an effective way that would have a real impact upon students' everyday life. Another output was the development of ten modules with indicative core content that needed to be customized to the particular local context of the Egyptian and Moroccan universities.

Participant priorities going into the implementation phase included: seeking, purchasing and practicing using AT (including open source technology), sharing good practice with colleagues, gaining further insight into experiences of disabled students at their institutions (by speaking with their students, seeking out disability policies at their institution, and gathering relevant data), and preparing for the creation of their own Accessibility Centres.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of the project was to bring together partner expertise to share best practice to support students with disabilities in accessing and optimizing their chance of succeeding in HE through AT. Specifically the project focused on:

- Enhancing disabled students' equal access to university facilities by using AT and accessible IT.
- Utilizing EU e-accessibility best practices.
- Designing and establishing a model for Accessibility Centres in Partner Countries.
- Training academic, careers, support staff and technical experts from the Partner Country Universities in Student Accessibility.
- Promoting the adaptation of specialized "design-for-all" policies (universal design approaches) by the Universities through the development of sustainable Accessibility Centres.

Design

An appreciative inquiry (AI) approach was chosen to align with the collaborative project approach and the focused project aims. Epistemologically, practically and ethically, collaboration is essential to AI (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and tight project timeframes meant rehearsing ubiquitous problems was not feasible; we needed an approach that aimed to un-stick difficult policy areas previously unchallenged, to disrupt the status quo and bring about change. Unlike traditional research approaches that tend to focus on problems, AI focuses on often overlooked, positive aspects of experience with the aim of generating new theory and/or anticipating a new reality. Facilitators must be attentive to maintaining a focus on positive aspects of what is working so that this can be understood fully and built upon. While there is no single accepted model for AI, the 4D cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), is commonly used. Within the SWING project AI appeared to offer opportunities to identify good practice or 'what worked' for students (Discovery), to imagine their situation at its best (Dream) and to give them opportunity to voice their suggestions for ways forward (Design). The Design phase 'bridges the best of what is with collective aspiration of what might be' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 29). AI has a reputation for fostering an egalitarian dialogue which could lead to the final step in the process, the Destiny of achieving cultural change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 34). AI can incorporate a wide range of data collection methods. The SWING project included institutional needs analyses, SWOT analyses, student and staff pre and post training questionnaires,

focus groups with staff, students and parents and participant observation during training events. These data collection methods were used across the three partner sites. Parametric and non-parametric methods were used for analysis of the quantitative data. Documentary and thematic analysis were used for the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ethical approval for the research and evaluation aspects of the project was gained through University ethical approval processes.

Key Findings

Assistive Technology

In both Egypt and Morocco many students were already IT literate and using smart phones and other IT to support their learning, recording lecture notes, using visual and audio software to modify words. Visually impaired students had learned to cope with reading and typing Braille and helping one another and had access to technology such as JAWs through the Association for the Blind (funded through an NGO in Morocco) where they lived. Students' mutual support mechanisms were very strong and students with, as well as others without disabilities, readily helped one another, were keen to share ideas for peer mentoring schemes, and disabled student networks and societies using social media, as well as using physical spaces on campus for sport activities, socialising and networking. Their lives were enabled through both physical and online networks, which enhanced students' sense of autonomy. Inability to access technology did cause frustration due to its cost and other constraints such as satellite navigation and geographical tracking devices not always being available in Arabic. More advanced AT will help and the students will no doubt be instrumental at teaching the staff how to use it. Nevertheless, the SWING project has identified an increase in the availability of IT and provision of up to date IT equipment on campus, and for use on loan, including Open Source software which will provide opportunity to improve equal access for students.

The Ten modules

The modules were to form the basis of staff and student training although it did not all occur as planned. In some cases students received the training before the staff. Further, procurement processes were slow delaying access to the AT therefore the practical workshops were delayed. Disabled students must be able to access the course material and the information presented in class at the same time as all other students. Therefore, academic staff play a vital role in ensuring that educational materials are available, and if necessary, in an alternative format and in a timely manner. In addition, the conversion of module content and printed materials into alternative formats and languages, whether they are Braille, audio, CD-ROM or enlargements, can be complex and takes time. The students spoke about their undergraduate studies being too theoretical and lacking adequate practical / experiential learning to help them in their transition from study to work.

'We are not hopeless cases'

Students were keen to secure employment therefore there was clearly concerns about needing to find ways to demonstrate to employers their skills and their contribution in the workplace, and how, with reasonable adjustment, including, optimising IT and AT, they can make a valuable contribution. As there is currently no career advice provision on some campuses in both Egypt and Morocco this is a key area for development. The future delivery of the SWING modules related to employability, strategies to foster closer working between employers and academic staff and the promotion of work-based learning are all issues that require ongoing attention. The development of careers and employability advice on campus would be of benefit for all students; the key here is to promote an integrated system.

Disrupting cultural expectations

The SWING project challenged cultural expectations on many levels. A Moroccan student showed us her undergraduate project that had focused on how Islam views people with a disability, explaining that disabled people, like the very young and the elderly should be cared for. This seems to us to reinforce a rather paternalistic culture that imposes low expectations of anyone with a disability trying to succeed in society and illustrates the challenge that students face. Yet it is at odds with the apparent ambitions of students who were frustrated and impatient at the systems in place; they have similar aspirations to other students, for example, to study at post-graduate level, to study abroad, and to gain good employment at the conclusion of their studies. Cross cultural awareness developed as a product of the project is invaluable in changing attitudes. Staff and

students were interested that students with disabilities are integrated to a greater extent in the EU countries rather than being placed in special schools that involve boarding away from home.

More specifically with respect to the use of AT, Egyptian and Moroccan students showed themselves to be no different to EU students. Increased availability of AT in both contexts, and the reduction in the Disabled Student's Allowance in the UK, is forcing a reduction in the use of note-takers and a need to utilise AT which is seen as a compromise. The parallels are very interesting. It is human nature to take the line of least resistance and this makes the aims of SWING feel very ambitious because the project is arguably less about finances and resources (which provide a tangible focus) and more about changing values and attitudes.

Similar to the experience of disabled students at university in the EU countries, there is a need for policy which supports the philosophy of an accessible learning environment for all students; co-ordination to implement the policy with practical guidelines to departments; ongoing monitoring and evaluation procedures which involve disabled students; staff training and awareness and student advocacy. However, there are important links to be made between accessibility, wider issues about infrastructure and cultural restrictions. SWING is not only about ways in which students' learning could be supported through the use of additional forms of technology, but also the wider implications of professional development and employability being promoted through the SWING training modules and project intentions. The online networks in the partner institutions in Morocco have extended to allow students to communicate across institutions, a sign of the sense of empowerment that SWING has engendered that promises that its full impact has yet to be realised.

Conclusion

HE institutions worldwide espouse varied levels of commitment to supporting students with disabilities. The reality is that the experiences of disabled students can still be far from satisfactory across a range of physical and attitudinal aspects of services. The SWING project has initiated change in behaviour, change in practice, and change in influencing others but these changes must be nurtured and supported until they become embedded and part of normal practice in mainstream institutional processes. SWING has focused specifically at the part that AT driven by ICT can play. ICT included those tools and services used by students with disabilities in order to perform learning activities and participate in university life; that are used by academic staff for their teaching activities and that can be useful for students with disabilities; and technology used by administrative staff in order to provide university facilities that can be useful for students with disabilities. It became evident that the AT introduced needed to be customizable, adaptable and where possible open tools that might be disability-specific or not. Opportunity for interaction, collaboration and fusion between cultural communities through both physical and online networks has proved itself to be of great benefit for the SWING project. It has made us all appreciate the value of diversity, making us realise that things might not always work out in the same ways, often for very good reasons. However, it has also made us realise that in lots of ways we share the same concerns, aspirations and hopes and that co-creation provides a powerful vehicle for change.

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