

Adaptech Project

Preliminary research findings and news from the Adaptech Project

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Computer and information technologies have the potential both of enhancing the lives of students with disabilities in colleges and universities as well as of denying them equality of access to higher education. To explore issues related to computer use in the Canadian context we recently concluded a preliminary investigation evaluating the views and opinions of both students with disabilities and Disabled Student Services professionals concerning the use of computers in postsecondary education.

For the past year we have been working on a project in partnership with the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS). After conducting a series of focus groups, we carried out an interview study of postsecondary students with disabilities and service providers and resource persons across Canada.

Participants were 37 Canadian college and university students and 30 Disabled Student Services personnel. Students were enrolled in community and junior colleges, universities, and postsecondary distance education institutions in all 10 Canadian provinces and both territories. A minimum of 1 college and 1 university student per province was interviewed. Because neither the Yukon nor the Northwest Territories have universities, only college students from the territories were interviewed. Where available, both English and French institutions were sampled. Both computer users and non-users were interviewed. Although our sample had geographic representation from various areas and constituencies across Canada, the sample was by no means random and the findings need to be interpreted with caution.

Structured interviews were conducted in the spring of 1998. Interviews with students were conducted either by telephone or via TTY. Seventeen groups of questions were posed. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1-1/2 hours. Service providers were asked 18 groups of questions. Several of these were identical to questions asked of students. Interviews with service providers also lasted between 20 minutes and 1-1/2 hours.

Findings from our interview study indicate that students had a variety of disabilities: learning disabilities, visual and hearing impairments, mobility and neuromuscular impairments as well as medical and psychiatric conditions.

The findings also indicate that colleges in our sample had the largest proportion of students with disabilities who made themselves known to service providers: approximately 3-1/2 % of the

student body. Universities, including distance universities, had only approximately 1-1/2 %. Neither the size of the city nor the size of the postsecondary educational institution was related to the proportion of students with disabilities on campus.

The results indicate that about 1/2 of the student sample had 2 or more impairments, suggesting the need for adapted work stations which can accommodate the needs of students with various disabilities. This recommendation is supported by other aspects of the findings which indicate that over 80% of institutions had students who are hard of hearing and use the oral approach, have learning disabilities, are partially sighted, have mobility impairments or use a wheelchair, have medical or psychiatric impairments, or have problems using their arms or hands. Fewer institutions reported students who are deaf and use sign or students who are totally blind.

In spite of their smaller numbers, students who are blind had the largest array of technologies at their disposal. The results indicate that popular solutions, such as software that reads what is on the screen, are used not only by students who are blind but also by students who have low vision and, increasingly, by students who have a learning disability. Use of large screen monitors is another instance of this trend to "cross-use" technologies.

Voice input software, an increasingly popular option, and scanners are two technological solutions that are used not only by students with learning disabilities, but also by those who have a variety of impairments involving mobility and use of hands and arms. Multiple uses of adaptive technologies seems to be an emerging trend. Thus, it is becoming increasingly important to ensure that different types of adaptive equipment can work together. In particular, the heavy hardware and training demands of dictation software should be taken into consideration.

Architectural adjustments, such as adjustable work stations, are also simple solutions that go a long way in making computers accessible. Better awareness of what is available for students who are deaf or hard of hearing is an important issue.

The data indicate that service providers in increasing numbers are using the internet as a means of getting information about what equipment and adaptations are out there for students, and they are primarily teaching themselves how to use the equipment. Students, too, are primarily self-taught, but they generally learn about available hardware and software from their friends or families. Wish lists of both service providers and students include "more and better" of everything as well as easy to use voice control and dictation software.

There is an even split among institutions that keep their adaptive technology in one central location and those that decentralise their equipment. Similarly, about half of all institutions have a loan program, while the rest do not. In general, smaller institutions are less likely to have specialized computer technologies for their students.

A related issue concerns hours of availability, with over 80% of

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institutions indicating weekend and evening access to adapted equipment mainly through sign-in/sign-out procedures. All institutions studied had access to the internet, but only 1/2 had adapted computers with internet access. All institutions consulted staff and students about equipment purchases, but only about 20% of institutions had broad-based, formal consultative committees.

Internet access and access to the graphical environment of Windows are rapidly becoming a key concern in postsecondary educational institutions. The data also show a trend toward multidisciplinary and multisectorial decision making as well as toward integrated mainstream computer labs. Additionally, there was overall agreement that institutional administrations need to recognize the importance of these technologies for students with disabilities.

The implications of the findings are clear: students with disabilities can and do use computer and information technologies to help them succeed in postsecondary education. Organizations which support students in this effort need to make money available both to individual students as well as to colleges and universities. Moreover, because about 1/2 of the students surveyed did not know that funding programs existed to help them to obtain needed equipment, information concerning the availability of programs needs more broadly based dissemination.

If you are interested in receiving a more detailed presentation of the findings, contact Catherine Fichten at Dawson College, 3040 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3Z 1A4 tel: 514-931-8731 #1546, e-mail: <cficht@po-box.mcgill.ca>

CADSPPE MEMBERSHIP

The success of CADSPPE in providing a strong voice for Canadian service providers in post-secondary education depends on our ability to speak on behalf of a large membership base. As you already know, to be a member of CADSPPE, it is necessary to become a member of CACUSS and to list CADSPPE as your division.

If you know of other service providers in your institution or across Canada who are eligible for CADSPPE membership, please encourage them to join us as we build a strong voice for our new profession. Membership information is available on the CACUSS website at <http://www2.cacuss.ca/cacuss/>.

Please speak to colleagues within your institution who are CACUSS members. They may be willing to include CADSPPE as one of the divisions they are interested in joining, especially if their current role includes service to some of your students.

Don't forget to check into whether your institution has institutional membership in CACUSS. You may be able to have your application included in the group that is covered through the institutional membership fee.

Professional Development and You

Finding appropriate professional resources, and training opportunities available to the Canadian Disability Service Provider can definitely be a challenge. CADSPPE has established a Professional Development and Resource Committee to explore and eventually provide opportunities for training while listing resources (e.g., articles, books, journals, videos, etc.) that would be useful to you, the professional.

You can assist us by completing the PD questionnaire that will be distributed shortly to the CADSPPE membership. CADSPPE values your feedback and welcomes any comments or ideas that would assist in resource, workshop, or seminar developments.

If you have an interest in PD issues and would be willing to volunteer for this committee, please contact:

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Charles Drouin

It is with deep regret that we must inform you of the death of our colleague, Charles Drouin, Coordinator at the University of Ottawa. Charles died February 3, 1999. There was a service in memory of Charles in Ottawa on Wednesday, February 7, 1999.

Charles was one of us, working with us to improve education for students with disabilities, and in the four languages of Ottawa U, his job was perhaps more challenging than most. His vitality and energy will be sadly missed. A charitable foundation has been established in his honour to support students with disabilities at the University of Ottawa.

THE NEADS E-MAIL LISTSERV

The National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) is pleased to announce that we have established an e-mail based discussion forum. NEADS-L will allow those who have an active e-mail account to network with other students nationwide. It will be a place where we can discuss issues that are important to us as students with disabilities in post-secondary education here in Canada.

To join the listserv, send an e-mail message to <listserv@yorku.ca> and write subscribe neads-l in the message body, with no subject. For further information, e-mail <j_asunc@alcor.concordia.ca>