

Network launch to increase opportunity for students with specific learning differences

A new national network of universities, colleges, schools and voluntary organisations is aiming to break down barriers to higher education for students with specific learning differences such as dyslexia.

Launched by Barry Sheerman MP, chair of the Select Committee for Children, Schools and Families, the network will share and disseminate best practice across educational sectors. Known as AchieveAbility, the network has developed over the last three years after being established by Aimhigher, the Government-funded initiative to widen participation in higher education.

AchieveAbility, which is based at the University of Westminster, has successfully developed new teaching materials in 60 East Anglian schools and worked in collaboration with universities to make use of these materials in higher education.

The network has also made use of trained student ambassadors, who themselves have specific learning differences, to work in schools. Student ambassadors have been involved in projects in schools in London, Yorkshire, Humberside and the South West, focussing on widening participation to higher education.

Projects include one at London's Quintin Kynaston School to develop a resources hub, learning skills and parent-student workshops and staff development sessions.

Network director Katherine Hewlett said: "AchieveAbility is working to ensure there are appropriate learning opportunities to support and enhance the chances of students with specific learning differences (SpLD) making progress across the different educational sectors.

"We are initiating and participating in discussion and research, as well as developing projects to make sure the issues affecting access and involvement for SpLD learners across the sector are put under the spotlight.

Barry Sheerman, who is the network's first President, said at the launch that AchieveAbility had shown over the last three years that it could be successful in bringing a range of organisations together "to make a difference".

"Aimhigher has moved forward over the past three years and AchieveAbility has shown itself to be a sustainable and successful project. We have seen some big advances but there are still barriers for children with special educational needs, especially in post-16 education. We want to clear these barriers away. This network is working to make sure every child can push through these barriers to realise their full potential."

Shirley Cramer, chief executive of Dyslexia Action, said that the AchieveAbility project was “contributing to a sense of momentum” surrounding increasing recognition of the barriers facing students with specific learning differences.

Ends

Notes to editors

1. David Maguire, AchieveAbility Ambassador and project outreach worker is available as a case study. He was undiagnosed as having SpLD at school. He later learnt to read in prison after receiving specialist support and completed a first class degree at the University of Westminster.
2. For more information on AchieveAbility, contact Katherine Hewlett on 020 7911 5764
3. For more information on the Quintin Kynaston School project, contact Eugene Moriarty, deputy head, on 0207 722 8141