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Abstract

Disabled students have increasingly participated in higher education in recent years. However, a disability hierarchy has emerged in this participation where 47% of students of the total disabled student population have medical disabilities with a medical origin such as asthma, chronic fatigue syndrome, and multiple sclerosis and 28% of them have learning disabilities (reading disabilities, mathematical learning disabilities, writing disabilities). Visually and hearing disabled students comprise only 8 % of the total disabled student population. Similarly, mobility disabled students (e.g. wheelchair users) and mentally disabled students (students with clinical depression, schizophrenia, clinical anxiety etc.) constitute only 6% of this population. The access to higher education has not been regulated and a laissez faire policy has been adapted. Particularly, it has been notable that higher education has been excluded from the coverage of the Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). However, non-teaching related services such as students' union services, residential services have been covered by the Part III. Instead, a good practice culture has dominated the higher education sector in this area and public funds have

been distributed on a competitive basis to universities and colleges. Disabled Students' Allowances have been made available only to full time undergraduate home students. However, the start of the new millennium saw a number of changes in this area. First this allowance has been extended to all home students including part-time students and postgraduate students. Next, additional capital funding has been made available to universities and colleges in the form of premium funding and physical capital funding. But more importantly, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act was enacted on 11 May 2001. This Act amended the Part IV of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and brought both rights and duties for the governing bodies of colleges and universities. For example, universities would have duties not to treat students less favourably than their peers in the admission, expulsion, and provision of services starting with September 2002. Furthermore they would have additional duties to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students in admission and services starting with September 2003. They would be required to make reasonable adjustments to the physical premises starting with September 2004. Disabled students have been provided with a number of reasonable adjustments to access the curriculum during their studies. The shift to e-learning from paper-based learning has brought both opportunities and threats for disabled students. Increasingly courses have been adapted to contain e-learning elements using the e-learning systems such as Blackboard or WebCT. However, to enable disabled students to participate in these e-learning systems, it is essential that they are able to access these systems. The research on the e-learning for disabled students has been evolving since the early 1990s. The research so far has mainly focused on the requirements for visually disabled students, such as putting the screen reading software, the speech synthesis software packages etc. Properly adapted e-learning systems would have particular importance in opening higher education, professional education and life-long learning to disabled students. Students can have access to the learning materials 24 hours a day, they can communicate with their fellow students and tutors in real time through the use of the chat room and discussion list facilities in these systems. They can produce and submit their course work online and invite comments from their fellow students. This paper aims to develop an analysis of the public policy development regarding access to higher education through the use of the

e-learning systems using a conceptual framework as applied by [Konur, O. Creating enforceable civil rights for disabled students in higher education: an institutional theory perspective, *Disability and Society* 15(7) pp. 1041-1063]. It is argued the rules of the game matter and therefore the proper incentive structures for the key players should be designed for a proper play of the game of access to higher education by disabled students using e-learning systems.

