

Biomedical sciences: A disabled student's experience of inclusion

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I am a mature student and recently started a part-time PhD on the parasites of small mammals. I am also disabled; I have secondary progressive multiple sclerosis which means that I can no longer walk unaided so I use a wheelchair. It is quite a challenge working in a laboratory whilst using a wheelchair.

Fortunately, having completed a Masters at Salford in 2010 I knew the layout of the laboratories and where possible problems could arise. I contacted the Disability Service team at the University and a support plan was drawn up recommending any adjustments that would need to be made in order for me to study.

Access to the research laboratories was through double doors which opened outwards onto a flight of stairs, very scary to negotiate. These doors were re-hung by Estates so that they opened inwards - problem solved!

Laboratory benches are too high to use with wheelchair, there are height adjustable benches in the teaching laboratories which I used on the Masters course but there are none in the research laboratories. A height adjustable bench was ordered for me by the School and installed in a corner of the research laboratory. My wheelchair fits under enabling me to work easily.

I usually come to the University by car. I can only get a manual wheelchair in and out the car by myself but I cannot work satisfactorily using the manual wheelchair. I don't have a lot of strength in my arms so cannot go very far in it and the terrain needs to be fairly flat. I have a standing electric wheelchair which is for indoor use, the School arranged for me to leave this wheelchair at the University with access to a plug socket so that it can be recharged. I then use this wheelchair around the University; the standing facility enables me to reach equipment in the lab etc.

I also had a needs assessment at Access Summit for funding from the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). I was awarded funding for a lightweight laptop, Dragon software (voice recognition software), personal assistance on field trips, laboratory assistance if required and an allowance for printing and photocopying support plus the hire charge for a four-wheel drive wheelchair when on field trips.

Being disabled presents me with logistical challenges on a daily basis, I can't pretend that studying in the biomedical sciences is easy using a wheelchair but with some adjustments, help and support it is possible. The University, staff and students have been very accommodating in helping me to do this.