

Staying the Course

The Experiences of Disabled Students
of English and Creative Writing

Kevin Brunton and
Jonathan Gibson



English
Subject
Centre

Report Series

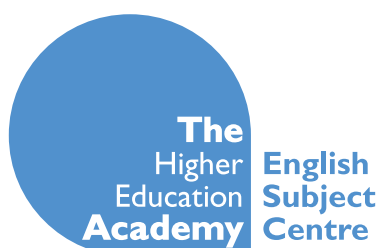
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Note

In this report, 'English' refers to the academic disciplines of English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing. Where quotations are made from student responses to the survey, the disability of the student making each comment appears in parentheses following that comment. Very occasionally, a student comment written as an answer to one question in the questionnaire has been quoted in a section of the report dealing with a different question to which that comment seems more apposite. The grammar, spelling and punctuation of student comments has been corrected throughout.

The titles of sections and subsections in the report are related to sections in the original survey, available online at <http://tinyurl.com/klqclb>. The order of the sections has, however, been changed, as has some of the wording.

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Foreword

Professor Robert Eaglestone
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English, since its birth in its modern disciplinary form, has always had an integral and special relationship to teaching. The late Harold Rosen wrote that English is 'nothing less than a different model of education' where knowledge 'comprises more than can be discursively stated', is 'made, not given' and learning is 'a diverse range of processes, including affective ones'. In this, Rosen argued, 'students' perceptions, experiences, imaginings and unsystematically acquired knowledge' are 'admitted as legitimate curricular content'. This makes English, all the way from the experiences of new students in the first-year seminar room to the professoriate and beyond to where English is thrown around in the contentious world of public opinion, the media and the government, one of the most, if not the most, exciting, uncertain and volatile subject in Higher Education. It also makes it the discipline the most open to change.

This openness to change isn't capriciousness. Instead, it reflects something true about the literary and other texts we study. Our understandings of them constantly change: new works and criticism come as if out of the blue to revise artistic trajectories, to reshape what we know of art, ourselves, others and the world. But this openness also reflects something true about our teaching, too: that it is properly, should be, open to change and to challenge, something at best co-operatively 'made' with our students, not simply 'given' to them. English has been open to philosophical and ideological changes, but sometimes has been resistant to more practical and pedagogic ones: while the curriculum and content of the discipline has shifted, the mechanics of teaching – assessment, writing, marking, lecturing, e-learning – have often remained unexamined. This lack of reflection extends even more to the seemingly mundane practicalities of things like the use of space, seating and audio-visual equipment.

And it is, most of all, to these often overlooked practical matters that this very full and insightful report is addressed. If English as a subject is to be true to this openness – which is paradoxically at its core – in response to the pedagogical challenges rightly raised by questions of disability, it needs to go further, now, and practically, than perhaps it has done before. As Lennard Davis, a major figure in disability studies, writes, in 'its broadest application, disability studies aims to challenge the received in its most simple form--the body--and in its most complex form--the construction of the body'. This report, then, is about the body in English, about its construction and the nuts and bolts of pedagogy. In the admirable range and grain of student voices which make up the bulk of the report – some terribly critical, some deeply appreciative -- physical pain and incapacity (exhaustion, illness, strain, a bad shoulder, an aching head, not hearing) and its sources (writing notes, typing, keyboards, screens, chairs, a careless speaker) stand out over and over again. These bring the reader of the report back to the body, in the case of clearly physical disabilities, and the mind, in the case of dyslexia and other mental health issues.

Some of the issues raised are common to all students – there have never been enough books in any university library; exams

are always stressful; a seminar group moves at different speeds, responding to its own particular dynamic – but are exacerbated by disability. There is, as the report makes clear, 'a continuum of learner differences'. Some of the issues are very particular and need careful thought and responses, although it's cheering to note that many recommendations are already in process (see chapter 12 for a short, concrete list of recommendations for departments). But there are moments of discomforting exposure: one student writes that most staff seem 'to have had no experience of disability in any form and are unwilling to adjust their teaching style – or say they will then don't remember or understand the importance of what I have requested'. I can easily imagine this being said about my teaching and it's pretty damning for a discipline which, as Rosen argues, takes students' 'perceptions, experiences, imaginings' – here utterly ignored – as 'legitimate curricular content'.

While the report is full of suggestions about how to address many of the issues raised, it's also the case that some problems may be intractable: to speak the legalese, the potential 'adjustment' might not be 'reasonable', though this concept, being advanced through case law, is both unspecific and often expensive to test or define. Accessibility and inclusion are costly and often difficult, but this should not prevent our recognition of both our statutory duties and our – greater, perhaps – shared responsibilities.

Earlier I suggested that while the intellectual structures of English have profoundly changed, these changes have not, in some cases, trickled down to the 'nuts and bolts'. I wonder if, in reverse, as it were, building on the 'nuts and bolts' suggestions and challenges highlighted by this report, there is a chance – with the growing area of disability studies – to change the intellectual structures, too. Dr Lucy Burke, Disability Coordinator in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University rightly asks

an engagement with forms of cognitive, physical or sensory difference contribute to the ways in which we conceptualize and teach our discipline?... we also need to address disability as more than a set of problems for us as teachers and learners. Inclusive practices also encompass a positive recognition of difference: why isn't disability mentioned in our benchmarking statements alongside an engagement with race, ethnicity and gender? Why aren't we discussing the significance of dis/ability in the production of culture and as an ideologically complex and resonant category in the texts we teach?

The openness of English as a teaching practice ('made, not given') means that there is a chance here to develop an array of new view points about our subject, and new ways of thinking. In this, all the voices in this report, even the most critical, should be heard by all of us, because not listening, not being open and sensitive to them, is somehow failing both the students and what lies at the heart of the subject. And we should thank the Subject Centre, and the authors of the report, for providing this opportunity to hear what is being said.

Davis, L. J. (2006), 'Introduction', *The Disability Studies Reader*. Second edition. New York: Routledge, xv-xviii.

Rosen, Harold (1981), *Neither Bleak House nor Liberty Hall: English in the Curriculum*. London: Institute of Education, 1-2.

Introduction and key findings

This report summarises the findings of the first ever survey of disabled students registered on English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing courses in the UK Higher Education system. It also offers advice to lecturers (sections 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.6 and 9.3).

Recent studies (Tinklin et al. 2004; Pollak 2005) have emphasized the need for university departments to consider the impact of their teaching and assessment on disabled students, and recent disability rights legislation (summarised in 1.2 below) has made the need for such awareness particularly pressing. Even so, there have to date been surprisingly few subject-specific studies.¹ Before this survey, for example, no systematic information about the requirements and expectations of disabled English students was available.

The survey on which this report is based was commissioned by the English Subject Centre in 2007. Its aim was to gather information from disabled students both about their experience of studying English and about pedagogical, social, structural and technological factors that may have helped or hindered them.²

Respondents to an online questionnaire were given the opportunity to describe in detail how their disability had affected their studies, to explain what they believed could be done to help them best fulfil their potential and to identify strategies they found useful.³ This report summarises the survey findings, quotes extensively from the comments made by respondents, and offers advice to lecturers keen to improve the experience of their disabled students.⁴

One of the most striking findings of the survey was the frequency with which respondents across all impairments highlighted the same set of issues: in many cases what was a problem for students with specific learning difficulties also proved to be a problem for students with mobility problems and for students with visual impairments – and so on. Equally significant were variations in response, highlighting the obvious fact that each student's experience of HE is different. For this reason, those sections in the report offering practical advice to lecturers are divided into two parts: a section on measures which English departments can take which we think would be helpful not simply for disabled students but also for students across the board; and a section on adjustments which lecturers might consider making to accommodate the requirements of particular students.⁵ Many of the suggestions we make can be found elsewhere,

not least in an earlier report in this series by Siobhan Holland.⁶ We feel, however, that presenting this material in a new way, under two categories ('inclusive teaching' and 'student-specific teaching'), shows how much can be done comparatively painlessly to accommodate the requirements of disabled students. We also feel that linking such recommendations to statements in the voices of disabled students about their experiences of English and Creative Writing at university gives the advice added force. At the end of the report, we provide a list of ten areas in which we believe action at a departmental level would be worthwhile (chapter 12).

We have quoted extensively from the detailed comments made by respondents to the survey (though, unfortunately, space does not permit us to include all of them), as we believe they will give lecturers an unprecedented level of insight into the day-to-day experiences of their disabled students. Indeed, since many of the comments express disabled students' reluctance to ask teaching staff for help and to talk about their disability, part of the value of the report is as a supplementary channel of communication between students and lecturers. The length at which many respondents wrote implies a strong commitment to improving the teaching of the subject and also a wish for their voices to be heard.

Patterns and trends that have emerged from the study include the following:

- 84% of students felt that their disability had had some impact on their studies with just over half of these stating that the impact had been a major one.
- 47% of students had considered withdrawing from their course as a result of their disability. However, only 13% of these had actually done so and all those who did had returned to study at a later time.
- 94% of students faced difficulties with independent study activities.
- 86% of students faced difficulties with class-based activities.
- 86% of students taking exam-based assessment experienced difficulties with it. For 73% of these students remaining calm was a key problem.
- 64% of students reported that their lecturers responded 'well' or 'adequately' to their requirements. However numerous comments criticised wide variations in the level of understanding shown by staff within the same course teams.

1 An important exception is geography (available at <http://resources.glos.ac.uk/ceal/gdn/publications/icp/index.cfm#report>), summarised in Healey et al. (2006). See also Fuller et al. (2009). On the importance of such work, see Riddell et al. (2005): 'Until institutions consult their disabled students directly they will remain ignorant of the difficulties and barriers faced by disabled students as they go about their daily business' (55).

2 For a more comprehensive look at the experience of disabled students in HE, including topics such as transition to HE, choice of institution and social inclusion, see Jacklin et al. (2007). See also Fuller et al. (2009).

3 For more about the questionnaire, see chapter 2.

4 The Subject Centre is also publishing a briefer 'seed guide' to inclusive teaching concisely summarising many of the recommendations in the full report. Short guides have been produced by the Subject Centres for Social Work and Social Policy (www.swap.ac.uk/docs/swapguide_1.pdf) and Bioscience (<http://tinyurl.com/yds313r>).

5 The positive effects for all students of changes in departmental practice to accommodate the needs of disabled students are mentioned in many studies: cf. Healey et al. (2006): 'Arguably, in the long run, the main beneficiaries of disability legislation and the need to make suitable adjustments in advance are the non-disabled students, because many of the adjustments...are simply good teaching and learning practices' (41).

6 Holland (2003), in particular Appendix A, 'Access and widening participation for students with disabilities'.

- Refusal or failure to make adjustments was the most commonly mentioned barrier to learning. When asked about what advice they would give to prospective disabled students, respondents emphasized the importance of requesting help and ensuring that it was put into place.
- Students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia appear to be under-represented in the subject area by as much as 25% when compared to students with specific learning difficulties studying other subjects.

Whilst many of these figures imply a gloomy situation, isolated in this way they fail to reflect the love of the subject expressed by nearly every respondent at some point in their answers.⁷ Such a potent combination of elements – enthusiasm for English studies tempered by an acute awareness of the potential for improved access – makes the findings of the survey a rich source of information for English lecturers about how to maximise the contributions and achievements of a significant number of their students.⁸

Report structure

We begin with an introduction to the major intellectual models of disability (1.1), the legal context (1.2) and the idea of inclusive teaching (1.3). Following this contextual material is an outline of how the survey on which the report is based was run (2.1-3), together with information about the profile of respondents (2.4).

The main body of the report consists of a series of chapters devoted to the different areas addressed by the survey, illustrated by many quotations in the students' own words.

In the opening findings section (3) we look at students' thoughts on how their disability has affected their general studies experience. We then take a more detailed look at their day-to-day student experience, using the following headings:

Independent study (4)

Seminars, lectures and tutorials (5)

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) (6)

Exams (7)

In the following two chapters, students give their views on course documentation, course pace, assessment timing, feedback and timetabling (8) and staff awareness of disability issues (9).

Each of these six chapters (4-9) concludes with examples of possible support strategies, the first five of which are divided into strategies that we think would be of benefit to all students ('Inclusive teaching': 4.4.1, 5.4.1, 6.4.1, 7.4.1 and 8.6.1) and adjustments whose helpfulness may be limited to students with particular disabilities ('Student-specific teaching': 4.4.2, 5.4.2, 6.4.2, 7.4.2 and 8.6.2).

After a chapter on the advice respondents would give to future students (10), and a chapter of comments describing the respondents' best experiences of studying English and Creative Writing (11), the main body of the report ends with a chapter containing a checklist of ten relatively straightforward measures that might be implemented as part of a departmental policy on inclusion. (In many departments some of these measures will already be common, if not necessarily universal, practice.)

The report concludes with a list of references (books, reports and articles on disability and Higher Education), and two appendices. Appendix 1 is a list of websites offering more extensive advice on teaching and disability than we have room for in this report. Appendix 2 briefly describes the conditions categorised under UCAS disability codes, providing links to websites with further information.

⁷ See in particular chapter 11, on 'best experiences'.

⁸ We are aware that there are many issues related to disability on which this report does not touch – for example, undergraduate recruitment, admissions procedures, financial support, employment prospects, the recruitment and support of disabled staff and postgraduates, appeals procedures and marking practices. Pointers on some of these topics will be found in the English Subject Centre area on diversity and inclusion (www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/access/index.php).

1 Contexts: models of disability, the legislative framework and inclusive teaching

The history of disabled rights in the UK has commonalities with the history of other marginalized areas of society more commonly studied in the academic discipline of English, such as gender, race and social class. This opening chapter sketches out some of this historical context as a means of situating and introducing some of the key issues in our report.⁹

1.1 The medical and social models

Work on disability and the rights of disabled people in this country has since the 1980s been heavily influenced by the 'social model of disability' (sometimes known as 'the human rights model of disability').¹⁰ The social model was constructed in opposition to what was taken to be a damaging 'medical model' (sometimes known as the 'individualist model'). The medical model was said to conceive of disability as primarily a medical problem – something physically 'wrong' with an individual, entailing personal tragedy and requiring treatment. By contrast, proponents of the social model argued that while disabled people's 'impairments' were physical, their 'disability' was a social phenomenon – the product of environmental, economic and cultural barriers erected by an oppressive society. 'Impairment', in this view, only becomes 'disability' by virtue of inadequate and discriminatory social arrangements.

The opposition at the heart of the social model is very similar to the distinction between sex and gender which has been so central to feminist thought. In both radical feminism and the radical disabled rights movement, the relabelling as 'social' of phenomena previously perceived (or perceived to have been perceived) as 'biological' was an important and empowering step forwards.

1.2 Legislation

Campaigns for disabled people's rights bore fruit in the **Disability Discrimination Act** of 1995 (the **DDA**). Although it made discrimination against disabled people unlawful in a wide range of situations, in its original form the DDA did not specifically apply to the provision of educational services. This lacuna was filled in 2001 by the **Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA)**. SENDA became part 4 of the DDA, outlawing discrimination against disabled people in education. This part of the DDA has been implemented in stages, incorporating a series of later amendments. A revised

DDA became law in 2005. The key elements in the legislation as it now applies to HE institutions are as follows:¹¹

- 1. Direct discrimination.** Education providers must not treat somebody less favourably purely because they are disabled – for example, refusing entry to a course solely on the grounds of disability.
- 2. Disability-related discrimination.** Education providers must not discriminate against disabled people for a reason connected to their disability.
- 3. Reasonable adjustments.** When their current practice puts a disabled student at a considerable disadvantage, education providers must rectify the situation by making a 'reasonable adjustment', such as, for example, providing an alternative form of assessment. The issue of what makes an adjustment 'reasonable' is in the process of being established by case law. When considering whether or not to put an adjustment in place, universities will be expected to take into account a range of factors, including the standard of evidence provided by the student, the maintenance of academic standards, the interests of other students, cost, practicality, the size and nature of the institution, health and safety and the particular effects of the disability in question.

An important feature of these adjustments is that as much as possible they should be anticipatory. To an extent, then, it is necessary to change course procedures before any disabled students apply for a course.

- 4. Victimisation.** Education providers must not discriminate against anyone (disabled or not) for a reason connected solely to proceedings under the DDA.

- 5. At an institutional level, it is now expected that education providers are proactive in their approach to the rights of disabled people. The **Disability Equality Duty (DED)**, or **General Duty** obliges public bodies to do the following:**

- Promote equality of opportunity between disabled people and other people.
- Eliminate discrimination unlawful under the Act.
- Eliminate disability-related harassment.
- Promote positive attitudes towards disabled people.
- Encourage participation by disabled people in public life.
- Take steps to take account of disabled people's requirements, even where that involves treating disabled people more favourably than other people.

⁹ A shortened version of some of the material in this chapter has appeared as Gibson (2009).

¹⁰ The origins of the social model can be traced back to the publication in 1976 of a statement of Fundamental Principles of Disability by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS): a narrative is provided by Shakespeare (2006). Oliver (1990) and (1995) are key texts in the social model tradition.

¹¹ For the Act, see <http://tinyurl.com/2vzd5j>. For more detailed guidance on how recent legislation applies to academic practice, see Cavanagh and Dickinson (2006); Disability Rights Commission (2007b). In undertaking future curriculum evaluation and design staff should consider the DDA Code of Practice (Disability Rights Commission (2007a)) which gives practical guidance on how to prevent discrimination against disabled students and disabled people wanting to access education or other related provision. The code describes the duties of education providers. Whilst it does not impose legal obligations, it is nevertheless a 'statutory' Code. This means that it has been approved by Parliament and is admissible as evidence in legal proceedings under the Act. Section 3 ('Disabled students') of the QAA Code of practice for HE, at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp, was published in 1999 and is at the time of writing being revised.

The general duty must be applied with regard to all disabled students, staff and customers of a HE institution and also covers all visitors and prospective staff and students. To guide their work in this area over the period 2006-2009, each HE institution has produced a **Disability Equality Scheme (DES)** giving details of the ways in which it planned to respond to the new legislation.¹² Producing each DES involved carrying out impact assessments to consider whether existing policies and procedures were discriminatory as well as anticipating what changes might reasonably be made to a university's procedures should students with particular disabilities apply. Institutions are also required to carry out equality impact assessments whenever instituting a significant change in policy or practice. The aim of such an exercise is to assess whether or not the change might adversely affect a particular group of people so that modifications can be made. (If the results of such an assessment were unclear then the institution would need to ensure that some form of monitoring was built in to check that discrimination did not occur as a result of the change.) Meanwhile, if a disabled student has told any individual staff member of an institution about their condition, that institution is deemed to know and about it and is legally obliged to make accommodations.

The DDA's definition of 'disability' is couched in medical terms, and overall the Act focuses on the rights of 'disabled people' – taken to be people with 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. However, the main thrust of the legislation – the requirement that institutions are proactive in making 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate the requirements of disabled people – reflects the priorities of the 'social model' position. The Act mandates the removal of those 'barriers' that proponents of the social model argued to be constitutive of disability: pressure is put on society (the university) to accommodate disabled people rather than on disabled people themselves to prove discrimination.

The legislative environment is not likely to stand still for long. At the time of writing, the government is in the process of consulting interested parties on an Equity Bill scheduled for Spring 2010. This Act will attempt to draw together the myriad of current Acts and Duties related to all areas of diversity – gender, age, race, ethnicity, religious belief, disability and sexual orientation.

In responding to the most recent legislation, universities have adjusted their approach to disability. Whereas before the focus was largely on specialist support services, more emphasis is now placed on the involvement of academic departments – a shift from individual, piecemeal adjustments to thoroughgoing organisational change. This report is clearly part of this shift, highlighting as it does the ways in which departmental practice can improve the experience of disabled students (cf. Tinklin et al. (2004)).

This focus on barriers and institution-wide practices contrasts with the other major element in the support system for disabled students in HE, the Disabled Student Allowance (**DSA**). All disabled students who can provide proof of their disability are eligible for this allowance, which is not means-tested and is paid in addition to other forms of student finance. The DSA is intended to pay for means of support such as items of assistive technology, non-medical helpers such as library assistants or specialist dyslexia tutors, and travel costs, and can be applied for by students at any point during their degree. As part of the application process, students will have a needs assessment meeting with a specialist assessor, at an independent centre, who will discuss with them the best methods of support.¹³

1.3 Inclusive teaching and student-specific teaching

Institutions can go a considerable way towards implementing the 'reasonable adjustments' required by the DDA by thinking from the first in 'inclusive' terms – that is, by attempting to make their programmes as accessible for as many people as possible, acknowledging the diversity (on many levels¹⁴) of the twenty-first century student population.¹⁵ Doing this will crucially involve being clear about the 'core' requirements and standards of degree programmes (admittedly a difficult task for a subject such as English). Once a set of core requirements is agreed, it will be possible to think clearly about all the different ways (different ways of teaching, different modes of assessment) in which those requirements can be met.¹⁶ If teaching is planned in this way, the end result should, the argument goes, benefit everybody.

Clearly, it is impossible to remove all imaginable barriers to study for all imaginable disabled students – both as a result of the need to protect core aspects of the degree programme, and because the requirements of some disabled students will potentially clash with the requirements of others. (E-learning is a case in point, causing problems for some at the same time as substantially helping others.) For this reason, in the recommendations attached to each chapter in this report, we have made a distinction between 'inclusive teaching' and 'student-specific teaching'.

12 Each DES must include an action plan and have been put together in consultation with disabled people. The Disability Equality Schemes have been monitored by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) and its successor the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

13 The government information page about the DSA (covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland) is at <http://tinyurl.com/2twex7>. Procedure is different in Scotland: see <http://tinyurl.com/3gqltt>.

14 In ethnicity, social class and learning style (to name but three) as well as in terms of disability.

15 The idea of 'inclusivity' is closely related to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the USA (cf. www.cast.org/). The idea of 'inclusive learning' in UK education took hold following the publication of a report of that name written by John Tomlinson and published in 1996 by the Further Education Funding Council. For more on inclusion in HE, see Grace and Gravestock (2008).

16 The DDA code of practice (Disability Rights Commission (2007a)) highlights the importance of developing 'competence standards' in HEIs, a competence standard being 'an academic, medical, or other standard applied by or on behalf of an education provider for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability' (98). In reviewing existing provision and designing new curricula, it is now important that English staff carefully consider the competence standards that students must meet. Whilst there is no duty to make reasonable adjustments in respect of the application of a competence standard, there is a duty to make reasonable adjustments to the process that is being used to measure whether a student has met the competence standard—and competence standards themselves must not be inherently discriminatory.

1.4. A better model?

The social model has recently come under attack from the sociologist Tom Shakespeare (Shakespeare and Watson (2002); Shakespeare (2006)). Shakespeare accepts the importance of social factors in disabled people's experience (and of the dramatic improvement in disabled people's lives that can be wrought by social change), but he also stresses the reality of physical impairment, stating categorically that 'The problems associated with disability cannot be entirely eliminated by any imaginable form of social arrangements'. He goes on to make the obvious, if not always sufficiently recognised, point that 'Impairment is a universal phenomenon, in the sense that every human being has limitations and vulnerabilities' (2006: 56, 64). A recent survey of the experience of disabled students of geography echoes Shakespeare's conclusions, arguing that

In terms of learning needs, it is invidious to treat disabled students as a separate category; rather, they fall along a continuum of learner differences and share similar

challenges and difficulties that all students face in higher education...sometimes the barriers are more severe for them, but sometimes not' (Healey et. al. (2006), 41).

The two-pronged approach of our report maps quite neatly onto Shakespeare's model, isolating as it does both individual, impairment-specific need and social practices (or 'barriers') that are problematic for a large number of 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' students. An advantage of this approach to disability is its ability to build bridges between the experiences of 'disabled' people and the experiences of the wider population. As Alastair Macintyre argues,

Interest in how the needs of the disabled are adequately voiced and met is not a special interest, the interest of one particular group rather than of others, but rather the interest of the whole political society, an interest that is integral to their conception of their common good (Macintyre (1999), 130.)



2 The survey

2.1 Design

In designing the questionnaire we considered how to gather a large amount of information without making the length of the survey too onerous. At the same time we were keen to give students the opportunity to provide detailed qualitative answers and therefore did not want the space provided to seem too limited. Our solution was to produce an online questionnaire. This enabled us to break the questions up into short, discrete sections each covering a single topic. We ended up with an initial list of about 35-40 questions which we estimated would take 15-20 minutes to complete. In the introduction to the questionnaire, we emphasized the need for answers to be directly related to disability. Before launching the survey we tested the questionnaire on a small sample group and made some revisions based on the feedback received.¹⁷

2.2 Publicity

The survey was publicised via a number of mailing lists used by both students and staff, including Subject Centre mailing lists, several JISCmail disability fora and sites belonging to disability-related campaign organizations.

The first page of the survey explained that students who were unable to complete the survey online could request it in an alternative format or undertake a phone interview instead. Two students took up the latter option.

We emphasized in the publicity that respondents needed to relate their answers directly to their disability.

2.3 Data collection

Of the 75 returns via the website 26 were rejected due to the students coming from the wrong subject background or failing to complete sufficient information. Forty-nine responses were therefore deemed usable.

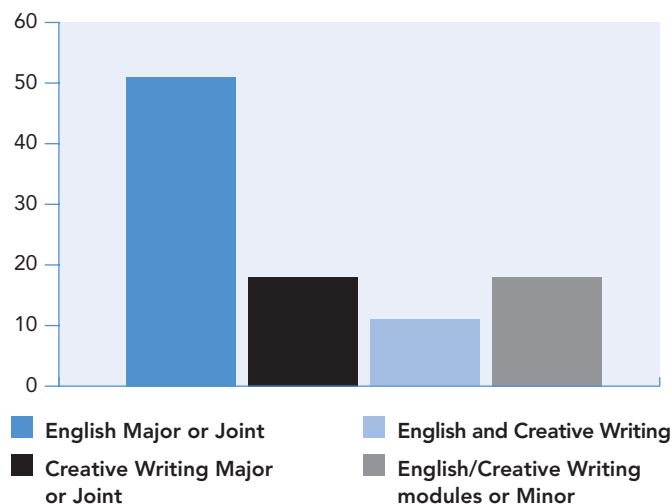
2.4 Respondent profile

In order to judge whether our sample was a fair reflection of the student population we compared our figures with statistics for students accepting HE places in 2004 bought from UCAS by the Higher Education Academy in 2005 and analysed by the Widening Participation Policy Unit of Sheffield Hallam University.

2.4.1 Course of study

Respondents reported a wide range of disabilities and as the numbers per disability were fairly low (specific learning difficulties was by far the largest group at 20) it would be difficult to draw any firm conclusions that students with certain disabilities were drawn to certain subjects.

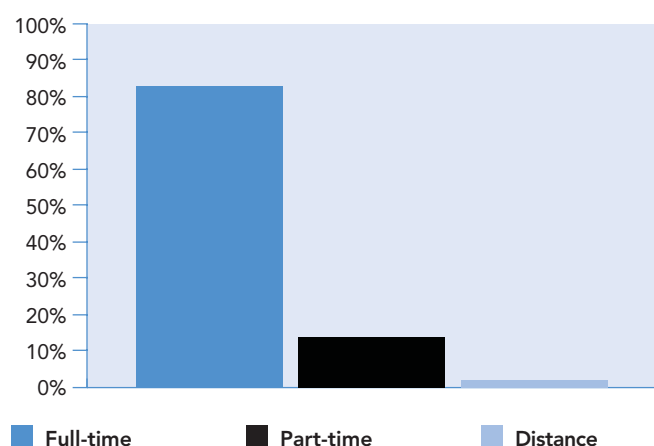
Number of Respondents



2.4.2 Mode of attendance

Compared to the latest HESA statistics (2005/06) there are far more disabled English and Creative Writing students studying full-time than part-time. HESA figures show 64% of disabled students studying full-time and 36% part-time. No separate figures were available for distance learning.

Percentage of Respondents



¹⁷ A copy of the questionnaire is available on the English Subject Centre website at <http://tinyurl.com/klqclb>.

2.4.3 Year and level of study

All disabilities (49 respondents)		
Undergraduate Applicant	8%	4
Undergraduate Year 1	14%	7
Undergraduate Year 2	22%	11
Undergraduate Year 3	18%	9
Undergraduate Year 4	8%	4
Undergraduate Course Completed	6%	3
Postgraduate Year 1	8%	4
Postgraduate Year 2	2%	1
Postgraduate Year 3	0%	-
Postgraduate Year 4	4%	2
Postgraduate Course Completed	8%	4

A broad cross section of students responded with 78% at undergraduate level and 22% at postgraduate level. The most recent HESA figures (2005/06) cover all subject areas and show a split of 83%/17%.

2.4.4 Students by disability code

Short descriptions of the conditions covered by each of the disability codes are given in Appendix 2 below.

All disabilities (49 respondents)				
Disability	This study		UCAS 2004 1st year intake	
1 – Specific learning difficulty*	31%	20	32%	108
7 – Unseen disability e.g. diabetes, heart condition, epilepsy	20%	13	13%	44
6 – Mental health	17%	11	9%	29
9 – Other	9%	6	25%	86
4 – Mobility	6%	4	5%	18
2 – Blind/partially sighted	6%	4	4%	13
10 – Autistic spectrum (Asperger's syndrome)	5%	3	2%	5
3 – Multiple disabilities	3%	2	4%	15
8 – Deaf/hearing impaired	2%	1	6%	20
5 – Personal care support (not available at time of HESA 2004)	–	–	–	–
Total Disabilities		64		338

* Specific learning 'difficulties' are now sometimes referred to as 'differences': see Appendix 2.

The 49 respondents reported a total of 64 disabilities. Where possible specific disabilities have been taken into account when analysing the comments in later sections. It is difficult to compare this breakdown against the UCAS figures (2004) as our study collected more detailed data in the categories '7 – Unseen disability' and '9 – Other' by prompting students with examples.

Two areas where there are noticeable differences between the profile of survey respondents and the UCAS figures are Asperger's syndrome and mental health. In the case of the first it could be speculated that increases in awareness and therefore in diagnosis and support have led to more students reaching HE level. In the case of mental health, Student Services departments have recently worked hard to encourage students to declare any difficulties they have suffered and this may have increased the figures. The growing provision of mentor schemes may also be playing a role as students will now increasingly be able to see that practical support is in place (Heyno (2005)).

Neither the survey results nor the UCAS figures record any students in the '5 – Personal care support' category as studying English or Creative Writing. This category was little used and has now been discontinued.

It is noticeable that the number of students with a specific learning difficulty is approximately 20-25% lower than the number across all HE subjects (approximately 30% of the overall total). More recent figures from HESA suggest that specific learning difficulties account for as much as 50% of all disabilities declared by students (DIUS (2009)). (This difference is likely to be accounted for by the high number of students identified as having a specific learning difficulty only after their course has commenced.)

3 The overall impact of disability

3.1 Level of impact

All disabilities (46 respondents)		
Major impact	43%	20
Little impact	41%	19
No response	11%	5
No impact	2%	1
Other comment	2%	1

Thirty-nine (84%) of respondents stated that their disability had had some impact on their studies with just over half of these feeling that it had had a major impact. (Of course it might be that those students who felt their disability had had a major impact on their studies would have been more likely to respond to the survey in any case.) The reasons given for answering 'major impact' varied, although there appeared to be two main areas of concern.

The first was the attendance level of students with mobility problems. This had resulted in missed lectures (often due to fatigue) and, in a few cases, the need to intermit for at least one assessment period. Attendance levels were also a problem for students with mental health difficulties who felt overwhelmed by the volume of work.

The second main area of concern, particular to students with specific learning difficulties, was study skills. A large percentage of those with specific learning difficulties faced significant problems with reading comprehension, essay planning and essay writing. (See 4, below, on Independent study.)

A major impact – I developed two of my three disabilities during my PhD. It caused me to have a year's suspension. On return, I've lacked stamina, concentration and found using archival resources difficult. I've also found other people's attitudes the hardest thing - people want to talk to me about my health, not my studies. (Unseen disability)

A major impact – unable to attend summer school/short courses etc as no funding for communication support – feel this has reduced my chances of becoming a published writer – other students got great benefits from these optional parts of the programme. (Hearing impairment)

Creative writing is an excellent experience for a dyslexic student as the assignments are spaced out, and workshops give a huge amount of feedback. Literature, however, is not an ideal course, because of the workload, reading, exams and minimal feedback. (Specific learning difficulty and unseen disability – Epilepsy)

A major impact as far as my Mental health/stress levels are concerned. A limited impact on my academic performance, as I am self motivated, the impact being upon my ability to work when suffering from stress and depression. (Asperger's syndrome/Mental health)

A major impact - my attendance is very poor due to my disability and therefore I am always behind in my work and my grades suffer. (Mental health)

I think it has had a major impact. I think if I didn't get as frustrated that my ideas wouldn't come out in the right way for others, or if I didn't feel as rushed to read criticism for essays, I would feel more easy in how I'm doing my degree. (Specific learning difficulty)

With the help of my dyslexia helper and the use of a Dictaphone, problems are minimised. Major problems are just reading/performing aloud and the frequency of exams. (Specific learning difficulty)

I find the areas you would expect to be hard – the reading and concentration and writing, etc., but as an individual I feel because I have this problem I do not feel I have as much right to ask for help of teachers. (Specific learning difficulty)

3.2 Have students considered withdrawing from their course?

All disabilities (46 respondents)		
Yes	47%	23
No	43%	21
No response	10%	5

Nearly half of the survey's respondents (23 students (47%)) had considered withdrawing from their course at some point. This figure varied significantly across the different disability categories. None of those with hearing or visual impairments had considered withdrawing from their present course, possibly reflecting how hard they had had to work to obtain their places in the first instance. Those with medical conditions and mental health problems were the most likely to consider withdrawing (over 60% in both cases).

At one point it got 'on top of me' and I didn't think my health would carry me through, but I persevered with the help of a good friend on my course and also with support from the department. (Mental health)

If I had not enrolled with the Office of Disability Services, I am certain I would have dropped out of classes. With their help, I am able to have a little more flexibility in absences. (Unseen disability)

I have considered dropping a class, or dropping out of school altogether because it is too frustrating to try to make teachers understand that I really am sick. Since MS is an invisible disease, I often feel as though they think I am faking it and using it as an excuse to skip class or take more time with assignments. (Unseen disability)

As I've become more accustomed with how to manage my disabilities, and able to undertake more work and start increasing my pace of work, the staff around me still assume I am unable. And will not support my endeavours (e.g. preparing for conference papers etc, as they think it is too much for me.) I have been told 'in my professional opinion you are too unfit ...' yet it is not an academic's place to say this, only a doctor's. This has created extra struggles and I have enquired about withdrawal, so that I could start somewhere new so that I may be treated as an student scholar, not a sick person. But I think I have invested too much in my study, and will probably try and stick it out - I guess what I'm trying to say it is possible to be killed with too much kindness! (Unseen disability)

My first years as an undergraduate, when I was fighting for recognition of my (invisible) disability and the right to park on campus. It was truly awful, no support at all. I nearly left over it. (Multiple disabilities)

Physically there were times when I couldn't attend, but with the internet and home study I was able to fulfill all the course requirements. (Unseen disability – Lung disease)

I have already had to give up a year's studying due to my health. (Mobility)

Seven respondents, though, took a different approach and commented not just on how their disability had helped their studies but also on how their studies had helped them feel more confident that it was not as disabling as they had feared. The latter benefit was particularly noticeable among students with mental health problems. Two out of three respondents with Asperger's syndrome directly related this to their ability to focus on the detail of a topic.

Has meant that I have come into contact with some tutors on a more personal, one-to-one level and been able to get guidance and help from them. I feel this has helped my relationship with many of my tutors because I have had to be upfront about my disability. (Mental health)

I have been able to write about my experiences. (Mental health)

I figured out how my thought processes worked and how to manage time. (Attention deficit disorder, Dyslexia)

I have had to develop strategies to work and these challenges are often rewarding when personal goals are reached. (Visual impairment and MS)

I feel more confident in tackling the symptoms of my illness through my academic success. (Mental health)

As I have Asperger's syndrome I am very focused and this can be extremely useful. I also have Bipolar Disorder and have written about my experiences for a creative writing module. I find it very easy to write when I am in an 'up stage' of a Bipolar cycle. (Mental health and Asperger's syndrome)

I think autism has meant that I have a better memory for vocabulary, and the plots and details of novels I read. I also think it makes me more logical and has helped me to construct logical arguments in a systematic way. (Asperger's syndrome)

3.3 Have any disability-related experiences helped students with their academic work?

All disabilities (46 respondents)		
No	52%	24
Yes	33%	15
No response	11%	5
Other	4%	2

Within the 'social model' of disability (see 1.1, above), learning 'difficulties' can be reformulated as learning 'differences'—learning styles not taken into account by traditional teaching and assessment methods. With this in mind, we asked students whether they had had any positive experiences as a result of what society labels as their 'disability'. We should perhaps have made what we meant clearer in the phrasing of the question, as of the 15 (33%) positive respondents, just over half commented on the helpfulness of staff and increased levels of support that they received.

4. Independent study

For the purposes of this survey, 'independent study' was taken to mean all directed and undirected reading- and writing-related activities undertaken by students outside the classroom. The preparation of presentations was also included in this section.

Students were asked to comment on whether they had faced difficulties with a range of common study activities. They were also given the opportunity to expand on exactly how these difficulties had affected their studies.

4.1 Student experiences of independent study

All disabilities (49 respondents)		
Difficulties experienced	94%	46
No difficulties experienced	4%	2
No response	2%	1

4.2 Independent study activities causing difficulties

All disabilities (of 46 with difficulties)		
Essay planning	59%	27
Essay writing	54%	25
Quantity of reading	52%	24
Reading secondary texts e.g. criticism	41%	19
Taking notes on reading/research	41%	19
Long essays/dissertation	39%	18
Proofreading	39%	18
Reading primary texts e.g. novels, poems	37%	17
IT – use of online resources	26%	12
Preparing an individual presentation	24%	11
IT – use of virtual learning environments	20%	9
Preparing a group presentation	17%	8
Other (please specify)	13%	6
IT – use of word processing software	11%	5

An overwhelming majority of respondents (94%) reported experiencing some difficulties with independent study. Seventy-six percent of those facing difficulties gave qualitative feedback that showed how their disability had had a direct impact on their studies. This high level of feedback suggests that respondents were not feeding back on general difficulties not related to their disability.

In some cases respondents went as far as stating when they thought that a difficulty was not related to their disability.

Essays caused the most difficulty: essay-planning (59%) was rated the most difficult activity, closely followed by essay-writing (54%). Students with specific learning difficulties (80% and 89% respectively) faced by far the most problems.¹⁸ A typical response was the following:

Essay planning is also difficult for me, as I am not adept at succinctly forming an argument in such a tight form.
(Specific learning difficulty)

Reading, and responding to reading through note-taking, was the next most problematic general area: quantity of reading was rated as a difficult task by over half the respondents (52%), with students with specific learning difficulties (74%) and visual impairments (75%) facing the biggest problems. Whilst physical accessibility is an issue for some students with specific learning difficulties (i.e. features such as font style and background colour), the fundamental issue for most is the time that it takes to comprehend text due to problems with decoding and working memory. Students with visual impairments are more concerned with the basic lack of accessible materials such as audio books (for more details of which, see below, section 4.4.2 (B)).

Poor concentration was at the heart of many of the difficulties faced by students. This particular issue illustrates how the root causes of similar difficulties can differ between disabilities. Students with mental health difficulties said that they found it hard to focus due to anxiety. Meanwhile, two students with obsessive compulsive disorder had a tendency to become overly focused on specific points however minor they might be. Students with specific learning difficulties were hampered by difficulties with reading that made it difficult to comprehend text at the first time of asking. Students with mobility problems or unseen illnesses such as chronic fatigue syndrome said that fatigue was the main cause of their concentration problems.

Time management was another very problematic area for many of the respondents – often the result of lack of focus, unrealistic ideas concerning the amount of time needed for independent study, and of poor concentration.

No disability-specific problems

Overall, I don't think my problems with coursework have been to do with my disability but more because I am older and (1) was rusty (2) didn't gain the IT skills needed at school. (Specific learning difficulty)

Problems with reading

Reading for long periods of time difficult due to headaches.
(Specific learning disability and unseen disability)

Sometimes I find it hard to read a lot because of an obsessive concern with pronouncing each word perfectly in my head, especially speech. I have to go over certain words many times so they feel right. This problem varies in severity, but can stop me reading altogether when bad.
(Mental health – OCD)

¹⁸ Results broadly in line with a recent survey of dyslexic and non-dyslexic students across seventeen UK universities (Mortimore and Crozier (2006)).

When I had ME I used to find the act of physically holding a book very difficult sometimes. (Unseen disability)

I am a very slow reader and catching up with reading can be hard when you have up to four books a week plus background reading. This is why my essays suffer and I have to rush them for deadlines. (Other disability)

I sometimes found reading and planning stuff tricky, as I lost concentration a lot due to the OCD and constant ruminations. (Mental health difficulties)

When reading, if I can hear any talking around me that is understandable to me, I cannot take in what I am reading. In university this has been my biggest problem as there is nowhere quiet enough to go to read. Not being able to obtain information from project briefs and handouts is very frustrating. (Specific learning difficulty)

Not understanding some of the briefs for the essay and presentation. Reading some text which doesn't hold my interest and not being able to visualise images whilst reading the text. (Specific learning difficulty)

Sometimes it takes me longer to comprehend the meaning in texts, so at times it takes me longer to complete reading assignments ... Not every time, but sometimes it is hard to make sense of some of the words – but this is usually during times of stress, when I find it hard to comprehend texts. (Unseen disability)

It is difficult for me to digest a great deal of information in time for seminars. I find that I must reread texts in order to grasp their meaning, which limits my ability to reference secondary sources. (Specific learning difficulty)

The amount of reading was expected, but the short time to read it and understand it was extremely hard, as having to read it four or five times just to get a basic understanding makes it hard to keep up with the course. (Specific learning difficulty)

Problems with essay planning, writing and proofreading

I do far too much research for essays. As a result of this, I have not been able to complete the last essay for this year. I have gone around and around the essay until I've lost all bearings, and now I am at risk of having to come to terms with an uncompleted year. A big issue that I have with essays is the feeling that there is always something else, or that I have gotten the wrong end of the stick. (Mental health)

I found proofreading hard as I would over-check things. (Mental health – OCD)

It becomes so frustrating to put in hours of work and to still fail the course work, even though in a conversation I seem to know what I'm talking about, the written work does not express this. (Specific learning difficulty – Dyslexia)

I think that I should be able to submit my essays online, as I frequently have mobility problems that affect me going into university. This would be an efficient way to help disabled people and give them the same opportunities as everyone else. (Other disability – Arthritis)

My proofreading is better now that I have the software to help. The essay writing is still a problem because the lecturers don't always say what they are looking for and don't give a proper brief. (Specific learning difficulty)

I cannot recognise spelling or grammar mistakes so if they are not picked up by the computer I have no idea if the essay contains any. (Specific learning difficulty)

Writing an essay can take me three or more times longer than others take to write the same amount. I can proofread work several times and still miss mistakes such as 'were' and 'where'. (Specific learning difficulty)

Autism has meant I take much longer to do assignments because I can't break down open-ended or unspecific questions very well. Also I battled to fit all the possible answers into word limits given. (Asperger's syndrome)

I am not good at articulating my thoughts in writing, so I tend to lose the overall thread. I find proof-reading easier to do by paper than on screen but cannot afford to keep printing out copies. (Specific learning difficulty)

General problems with independent study

I can't see well and using a computer a lot causes very bad headaches. (Mental health and Asperger's syndrome)

The difficulties I experienced were largely due to fatigue. (Mobility)

Concentrating hard for long periods of time is a trigger for my seizures. (Epilepsy)

Anxiety triggered by certain subjects like death, illness (e.g., in a text or assignment). (Mental health – OCD)

When immobile, nothing can be done by self – and other than the brilliant lecturer/mentor on my course I would have had absolutely no idea who to turn to for help and what to do. (Mobility)

Developing ME in the middle of my PhD was a major challenge as my concentration span dropped to zero and I felt too ill to sit at a computer. This has improved somewhat over the past year, enough for me to finish and submit. (Mobility)

Standing in library queues, making photocopies or using computers in very hot rooms affects my heart condition. (Unseen disability and Other disability)

4.3 Students' support strategies

For some sections of the survey students were asked whether they had sought support, from whom they had sought support and what strategies they had used to improve their ability to study.

4.3.1 Did students seek advice and support on independent study issues?

All disabilities (of 46 with difficulties)		
Yes	83%	38
No	15%	7
No response	2%	1

Thirty-eight respondents (83%) who faced difficulties with independent study sought some form of support in order to address the difficulties that they faced. A small minority reported that they had not sought help. Answers to other parts of the survey by these seven respondents suggest that many of them have had more negative experiences dealing with subject staff than other respondents, and that this might have had an impact on their failure to seek support on later occasions.

There are instances of outstanding teachers, and instances of horrible ones, when it comes to how they deal with students with disabilities – again, since MS is an invisible disease, I sometimes felt as though they didn't believe me if I ever presented a problem I was having. I think, though, since I am registered with the Office of Disability Services (and always provide my teachers with a letter from them) they should believe me. Maybe it is just my perception that they don't, but that is enough to make me uncomfortable. (Unseen disability)

4.3.2 Sources of support for students struggling with independent study

All disabilities (of the 38 respondents seeking help)		
Study skills/dyslexia tutor	37%	14
The lecturer for the subject	34%	13
The university disability service	34%	13
Your personal tutor	29%	11
A friend or family member	26%	10
A counsellor or therapist	21%	8
Another student in the subject	16%	6
Other	16%	6
The departmental disability tutor	11%	4
IT support	3%	1
A personal assistant	8%	3

The table above shows that students approached a wide range of people for support.

On average each student approached two sources of support. The most sought-after support came from subject lecturers (34%), the university disability service (34%) and study skills/dyslexia tutors (37%). Some disabilities have well developed support networks outside of the academic department and these services were well used. Twelve of the 14 students accessing study skills support had a specific learning difficulty whilst five of the eight using a counsellor had Mental health difficulties. Those with long-standing medical conditions were most likely to go to a friend or family member who already had a good understanding of their problems.

I didn't contact the DRC [Disability Resource Centre] until 2003 because it didn't exist till then! Its presence has brought about a sea change in attitudes to disability. (Unseen disability)

Departmental disability advisor didn't think they were responsible for postgraduate students! We don't have personal tutors in our uni. Reluctantly I've had to ask my PhD supervisor for advice. (Unseen disability and Other disability)

Some lecturers are only available two days a week, which makes their time extremely valuable. Other students on the course have been very helpful in explaining the work to me. (Specific learning difficulty)

The Disability Co-ordinator is wonderful—without him the university would have turned me down, feeling my needs too complex for me to make satisfactory progress on the course. (Hearing impairment)

4.3.3 What adjustments or techniques have helped students to address the difficulties that they have faced?

All disabilities (of 46 with difficulties)		
Problems not resolved	39%	18
Essay planning – mind maps	20%	9
Reading – use of assistive technology software e.g. 'Jaws', 'SuperNova'	17%	8
Note-taking – visual methods e.g. colour coded highlighting, mind maps	15%	7
Essay writing – writing frames, bullet pointed headings	9%	4
Proofreading – use of assistive technology software e.g. 'TextHelp Read and Write'	9%	4
Other		

Of the 46 respondents (94%) that faced difficulties with independent study, 18 (39%) still faced a number of unresolved issues. A wide variety of techniques had been utilized by students in attempting to address their problems. In addition to the ones offered as options in the questionnaire a further 14 strategies were cited by respondents. Two were mentioned by three respondents:

- Additional time for coursework
- Discussing work with a support worker

The other twelve were mentioned by one respondent each:

- Medical assistance
- Home internet access for seeking staff advice
- Charity funding to make up the DSA shortfall
- Discussing work with other students
- Home access to IT
- Sound blocking headphones to improve concentration
- Use of audiobooks
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques
- Coloured overlays
- Improved skills in referencing
- Practical support from an assistant e.g. typing, carrying

For the last two years of my PhD I've had an enabler to do some of my typing; she has also helped with online research and the physical tasks of carrying my thesis for binding, etc. (Unseen disability)

Having the internet enabled me to send in work/seek advice during periods of incapacity when I was unable to attend in person – this proved invaluable. (Unseen disability – medical condition)

Generally the only help I received was an increase of allowed absences. Extended deadlines may have been made available to me, but I never felt comfortable taking advantage of them, as I felt that would be making excuses for being lazy, instead of accommodating my illness. Sometimes I felt that way about the extended absences as well. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

I go through my essay with student support, yet received no software from my LEA [Local Education Authority] as they misfiled my application. (Specific learning difficulty)

I purchased some sound-blocking headphones which have helped me to gain knowledge from texts immensely as well as audiobooks. I still don't have the time to read nearly enough, though. (Specific learning difficulty)

Practising my presentations with my dyslexia helper beforehand. Having help proofreading work so words and mistakes are picked up. I now have access to a computer so I can write work up on it before handing it in. However, many problems still unresolved. (Specific learning difficulty)

For more guidance on what help is available, see 4.4 below.

4.4 Proposed support strategies for staff

4.4.1 Inclusive teaching

English degrees have always been demanding in terms of out-of-class work such as reading and essay-writing. Evidence suggests that this emphasis is proving increasingly difficult to manage for students used to a far greater proportion of contact time at school (Green (2005); Smith and Hopkins (2005)). Many of the problems described earlier in this chapter will therefore have a familiar ring: they overlap to a very considerable extent with problems experienced by students more generally, particularly in the first year. Below we suggest some ways of addressing these problems that should be beneficial across the board. Some of these approaches might be worth implementing across a whole department; others will have a more limited

application. The major theme throughout is clarity: breaking down complex tasks into their component parts and clarifying the rationale behind teaching strategies will help to obviate some of the anxiety and difficulties in concentration described in 4.2 above. It will also help students manage their time more effectively. Additional strategies, geared to the requirements of students with particular disabilities, are described in 4.4.2 below.

A. Providing materials in an accessible format

It is common sense to ensure that the materials you provide students with are as easy to use as possible. Responses to the survey suggest that there is more that lecturers could do in this area. A few simple pointers appear below.

For information about providing accessible copies of primary texts to students with particular conditions, see section 4.4.2 (B) below.

- As a general rule, ensure that as much of your teaching material as possible is available in electronic form, online, for easy access. This will allow students with different requirements to customise it as appropriate. On the other hand, make sure you also circulate hard copies, as use of computers may be problematic for other students.
- Saving texts for student download in 'rich text format' (ie. with an .rtf extension after the filename) rather than as 'Word' (.doc) or PDF (.pdf) files will be helpful for many disabled students, as rich text files are easier for assistive technology software to access. Many other formats include programming code invisible to the naked eye but which interferes with software trying to read the text.
- In the electronic text files you create, use a sans-serif font such as Arial or Verdana in point 12, avoiding italicisation, underlining and capitalised text as much as possible. Align text to the left and do not justify the text.¹⁹ Make sure that the material you provide is clearly structured (using headings where necessary) and that its usefulness is obvious to the students. Use the 'headings' function in 'Word' to create a clear structure for your document that users will be able to access by viewing the 'document map'. You can also use hyperlinks.²⁰
- If you distribute photocopies to students, try to avoid using photocopies of photocopies ('second-generation photocopies') and also try not to reduce the size of photocopied material too much (in order, for example, to fit everything onto a single sheet).

B. Helping students with out-of-class reading and note-taking

Reading extensively is, as the comments in 4.2 show, problematic for disabled students for many different reasons, both physical and psychological. The most important – and obvious – way lecturers can help is by first making sure that they have explained the requirements of the course as clearly as possible – making clear in reading-lists (sent out early) and/or other course material which books (or parts of books) are compulsory reading and which are optional. Providing long lists of books and articles without any indication of how and why students might engage with the material will cause unnecessary anxiety.

Note-taking is a vital skill for English students, but one very rarely explicitly addressed by tutors. The responses of students

¹⁹ '[J]ustified text can lead to some users focusing on the 'rivers of white space' between the words, not the words themselves' (Harrison, (2007).

²⁰ See Harrison (2007) and the JISC TechDis website at www.techdis.ac.uk/accessibilityessentials, which also includes guidance on creating accessible pdf files.

on this survey suggest that more structured tuition on both reading and note-taking would be valuable. This need not be a mechanistic or boring remedial process. There are many creative and interesting ways to help students structure their reading and note-taking, including the following:

- Asking students to keep a reading log in which to record their immediate reactions to their reading, either in a structured way related to the themes of the course or as completely free 'response statements'.²¹ The log could form part of the assessment, or be entirely optional. It could also take a number of different forms: a physical logbook, a 'Word' file, a blog, a video or audio diary.
- Setting small-scale assessment tasks linked to out-of-class reading.
- Asking students to post reports on their reading on an online discussion forum. Again, this could be structured or free, and perhaps form part of the assessment. Students could be asked to post after reading a certain number of lines or chapters, and/or post answers to specific questions, on particular topics, or in the personae of characters from the book.²²
- On a first-year course, holding a special note-taking seminar, in which all participants discuss different ways of reading and annotating a particular passage.
- Encouraging or requiring students to form out-of-class support groups linked to particular classes.²³
- Directing students towards one of the many study skills books on the market, or online resources designed to support note-taking.²⁴ Reading skills are obviously at the heart of any English degree, so it might be worthwhile to question some of the recommendations made by these sites (some techniques, for example, may seem inappropriate when applied to literary texts). One possibility might be to discuss recommendations made by these sites in a special session – or even try out different methods with students and discuss the results, linking the activity to specific themes/structures in set texts – thus developing study skills at the same time as developing curriculum knowledge.
- Providing guidance for students on your module using multimedia (e.g. videos, podcasts) as an alternative or supplement to the traditional course handbook.

More generally, time-management is a crucial skill that many students will need to learn – and weakness in this area will, of course, be particularly damaging for those, such as disabled students, with particular complications in their lives. As well as encouraging them to break down large tasks into smaller elements, and to take advantage of calendar software, you can point your students towards a number of useful websites.²⁵

C. Help students plan and write essays

Essay-writing was problematic for nearly all respondents to our survey – and, of course, difficulties in planning and writing essays are not unique to disabled students. All students are likely to need help getting to grips with lecturers' expectations for written work. Many courses now include sessions aiming to develop essay-writing skills, sometimes as extra modules run either within the department or in an external student support centre. Whatever the provision is at your institution, it will be worthwhile to incorporate in your own modules activities specifically designed to develop essay-writing skills. For example:

- On a first-year course, running a session discussing the course handbook's guidelines on essay-writing and/or the official assessment criteria. The discussion could be complemented by sample essays (either genuine student essays from past years, used with permission, or specially-composed models). The discussion need not be abstract – it could be integrated into discussion of a particular author/text.
- Asking students to unpick and analyse the arguments of a critical essay – perhaps even one of your own publications. More generally, explaining to students how you yourself come to make particular arguments about texts (and to articulate those arguments using particular rhetorical strategies) should help them in their own written work.
- Providing students with a framework, or 'writing frame' (in the form of headings and/or the beginning of sentences). As part of an exercise on a particular topic, this could be done in such a way as to stimulate thought in all students rather than forcing the adoption of a simplistic essay structure.
- Allowing students to submit essay-plans and/or drafts. There are many different ways of doing this: on a one-to-one basis; as in-class peer assessment; in lieu of detailed feedback on the final essay; as part of a portfolio. One possibility is to redesign the assessment structure of a module to include a two-stage assessment, the first part involving notes/preparatory materials such as an essay plan and a second part consisting of a formal essay.
- Encouraging students who might benefit (not just dyslexic students) to use graphical organising (or 'mind-mapping') software to think through their ideas and plan their work visually. Programmes such as 'Inspiration' and 'Mind Manager' allow students to view information both as visual images and in written form, enabling 'Word' documents to be reformatted diagrammatically.²⁶
- Allowing students to submit written work online.

21 For an example of a structured approach to log-books, see the English Subject Centre case study by Joanna Moody, 'Studying literary texts: the learning process' at <http://tinyurl.com/lrjw7v>.

22 For an example using roleplay, see the English Subject Centre case study by Rosie Miles, 'Text.play.space: creative online activities in English Studies' at <http://tinyurl.com/lkkyvc>. For a freer approach, using comments submitted to a VLE, see Pam Knights's description of a 'freeze-frame exercise' for the Subject Centre's 'Duologue' project at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/duologue/uses/sndandfpg.htm. There is a possibility that reading and writing lengthy log postings may prove overwhelming for some disabled students and exacerbate feelings of low self-esteem, so use of this teaching method needs to be sufficiently loose and inclusive to eliminate such problems.

23 Sometimes referred to as PAL (peer-assisted learning): for a short introduction, see Swain (2008); there is guidance for English students in Green (2009), 60-1, 192-9.

24 Such as the Open University study skills pages (<http://tinyurl.com/39zq3k>) or the SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) scheme at www.studygs.net/texred2.htm.

25 For example, the handy tips provided by the Open University at <http://tinyurl.com/mjtw4v> and by the University of Surrey at www.surrey.ac.uk/Skills/pack/timeman.html. See also Green (2009), chapter 3.

26 The University of Oregon has put together examples of how such diagrams might be used in arts and language subjects: <http://cbss.uoregon.edu/clearing/index.html>.

- Providing guidance on time management (see 4.4.1.B)

D. Consider alternative modes of assessment

Another way of dealing with students' difficulties with essays could be to rethink the overall pattern of assessment, cutting back on the number of essays required and using a range of other forms of assessment in addition. It is worth going back to first principles. What skills and knowledge are you trying to instil in your students?²⁷ It is likely that some of these qualities (including incipient essay-planning and essay-writing skills) can be assessed (and developed) using assessment methods other than the essay. A few possibilities are listed below:²⁸

- Small-scale writing exercises, such as reviews, critical bibliographies and critical/creative work.
- Vivas, as an alternative to essays, either as presentations to a class or as recorded one-to-one conversations with a tutor, perhaps supplemented with a portfolio of other work.²⁹
- Group-work outside class in teams (for example, 'problem-based' learning³⁰). The allocation of different roles to different members of a team of this sort can help unlock individual skills – and also counter the loneliness felt by some disabled students.
- Assessed contributions to an online forum (cf. section A above).
- Online exercises or projects, perhaps involving work with internet text archives such as Early English Books Online (EEBO) or Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO). Adequate 'scaffolding', ideally through one or more hands-on sessions in a classroom equipped with computers, for this sort of activity is essential.³¹
- Student-produced videos or podcasts: either pieces of creative work or filmed/recorded argument (e.g. in the form of an interview or mock radio programme).
- Computer quizzes (using, for example, the quiz function in a VLE).³²

As all students are different – with different skills, enthusiasms, cultural backgrounds and 'learning styles' as well as different physical and psychological conditions – variation in the assessment régime should be beneficial for all students. Variation will only work, however, if the purpose and nature of the assessment is clear to students: a multiplicity of insufficiently-glossed means of assessment will only cause confusion and anxiety.³³

4.4.2 Student-specific teaching

As section 4.3.3 above demonstrates, disabled students have a bewildering range of potential sources of support, be it personal assistants, 'assistive technology' or psychological counselling. If you can find out from a disabled student what devices they

are using in their work outside the classroom, you may be able to tailor both the requirements and learning materials of your module accordingly. You will also have a clearer sense of how the work you receive from them has been produced – something that may well be invaluable when assessing their work and providing feedback. You might have to make the first move: one recurrent feature of this survey is the shyness of disabled students in asking for the help they need.

A. Helping specific students with out-of-class work

- It may be helpful for some students to be given extra time for out-of-class work; for others, it might compound their anxiety. This is an area where liaison with your Disability Services department, as well as with the individual student, will be useful. Loosening some of the formal requirements of the course could make a particularly big difference to students with ME or mental health issues.
- Some disabled students employ personal assistants (such as dyslexia tutors) to help them with their studies. If you know that a disabled student is being helped in their out-of-class work by somebody else, it would make sense to make sure that the help is appropriate to the module in question – that, for example, guidance on essay structure and related matters is consonant with your idea of good written work, and that you are happy that the student is being given sufficient opportunity to satisfy the learning outcomes through their own best efforts.
- Mind-mapping (see A in section 4.4.1 above) can be helpful in structuring work for a wide range of students, but it is likely to be particularly beneficial to those with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Some dyslexic students will have had mind-mapping software funded for them by their Disabled Students Allowance; others (particularly those not in receipt of the DSA) will not know of its existence and may need guiding towards it, perhaps in the form of a free programme such as 'FreeMind' or 'Compendium'.
- Students may also be using proofreading software, such as 'Editor'. It might be helpful to find out how the software works, to check that they are using it in the best way.
- Some students may need to know about the requirements for a module before other students, as their preparations for it (accessing texts, etc.) may be particularly protracted.
- Some students will benefit from a reduction in required reading (providing that they can still fulfil the module's learning outcomes), focusing in depth on a limited number of texts/topics.
- Mentors provided by the university will be a useful source of support for some disabled students, helping them plan and review their academic work.

27 A suggestive list of desirable student attributes has been compiled by Ben Knights (Ellis (2008), 22).

28 For more ideas, see the English Subject Centre web area on assessment, at <http://tinyurl.com/nbccrk>. For research on parity between different types of assessment, see the report of a HEAT project at Roehampton University: www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=2_1_7_26_9.

29 Heather Symonds at the University of the Arts London has pioneered the use of the viva as an optional mode of assessment on undergraduate fine arts modules: see the downloadable handbook, 'Viva Voce', at www.lcc.arts.ac.uk/lcc_disability_support.htm.

30 An approach related to 'inquiry-based learning' or 'enquiry-based learning'. See Hutchings and O'Rourke (2001).

31 For an example, using the 'marked list' function in ECCO to set a frame around the activity: see Stephen Gregg's English Subject Centre case study, 'Using Eighteenth-Century Collections Online as a learning and teaching resource' at <http://tinyurl.com/n2yvsk>.

32 For some examples of how multiple-choice computer quizzes can test sophisticated knowledge about literary texts, see the work uploaded to the Humbox repository by Matthew Sauvage, at <http://humbox.eprints.org/374/>.

33 Lesley Coote provides guidelines on writing assessment outcomes for creative assessment in her project report on the English Subject Centre website, 'Creative assessment in the English Literature degree', at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/technology/tech21.php.

- Students not in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance (see above, p.6) may not know about the full range of assistive technology devices available. The EmpTech website is a good source of information³⁴ There are also many different types of software now available to help with writing, including proofreading software and predictive text software such as 'Let Me Type', much of it free.

B. Accessible materials

Electronic text can now be transformed (often by disabled students themselves, using appropriate software and hardware), into many different formats, meeting the requirements of students with many different conditions: text size, colour and contrast can all be adjusted and the digital file used as the basis for the production of audio and braille materials. Electronic text can also be accessed by disabled students on small devices such as PDAs or e-readers and automatically read aloud online by artificial voices.³⁵ For all this to be possible, however, an electronic version of the text needs to be available. This is obviously straightforward when it comes to materials produced by lecturers themselves and to work published on publicly-available websites³⁶. The situation is, though, more complicated for other texts. Indeed, this is an area where English Studies as a discipline could play a significant role in pressurising publishers to provide equal access for disabled people to published texts.³⁷

- Scanning books or long sections of books (as a means of creating electronic texts) is likely to breach copyright.³⁸ It is possible to get electronic copies of some books directly from publishers (the Taylor and Francis website, for example, provides e-books of over 17,000 titles³⁹). Detailed guidance on contacting publishers with special requests for material, and on in-house work that may be necessary when the electronic text is received, is available from JISC TechDis.⁴⁰
- Many older primary texts will be available in online editions. The texts of these editions, however, will often not be reliable. This need not be too much of a problem for shorter texts, which can be corrected. It is obviously far from ideal for longer texts. If there is no alternative, make sure that the student knows what the shortcomings are. You can highlight

differences between different editions of the same text in specially-devised teaching activities.

- Many novels and plays have been recorded as commercial audiobooks (often only available on CD or cassette). Many audiobooks, however, use abridged texts.⁴¹ Free online software is now available that can read aloud long texts: 'Read the Words' is one example. Software is also available allowing lecturers or students to annotate sound files.⁴² More comprehensive commercial alternatives include 'Texthelp', 'Read' and 'Write' and 'Clareoread'.
- Some modules can involve students in the creation of accessible versions of texts: for example, podcasts.⁴³

Some disabilities will require materials to be adapted by you in particular ways: detailed guidance on this, with some useful links, is available from the Open University.⁴⁴

Working with a computer is easy for some disabled students and impossible for others. Some, therefore, might need hard-copy versions of material provided to the other students online. Some disabled students will struggle physically to use books (though they will have no problems reading), whilst access to the library will be very difficult for others. In some cases, it will be possible to arrange longer access to short term loan items for some students. Discussing the situation with your librarians could reveal other possible strategies that would be helpful for particular students.

C. Different forms of assessment

Providing students with a varied diet of assessment, as suggested in section A in 4.4.1 above, may not be sufficient for some disabled students, who will need special permission to meet learning outcomes in a different way from their peers. In legal terms, if a disabled student is very seriously disadvantaged by having to write essays, devising a different form of assessment for them that would meet the same objectives as an essay would clearly be a 'reasonable adjustment' (see 1.2 above). It would obviously be preferable – logistical circumstances permitting – to make the alternative form of assessment open to all undergraduates.

34 www.emptech.info.

35 For example, at www.readthewords.com/.

36 For guidance on simple ways to make electronic documents more accessible, see www.techdis.ac.uk/accessibilityessentials.

37 For details about the very poor availability of accessible books across the board, see the RNIB's 'Right to Read' campaign at <http://tinyurl.com/yh6zgrj>, where the claim is made that 'more than 95 per cent of books are not available in large print, audio or braille'.

38 Disabled students and their staff are caught between two legal safeguards: 'Disability law protects disabled learners by requiring the educational institution to make appropriate provision. Copyright law protects publishers from inappropriate copying of textbooks.' (JISC TechDis Guide to Obtaining Textbooks in Alternative Formats (www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat)).

39 At www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk/html/index.asp. Ebooks cost the same as their printed equivalents although as there are no alternative distribution channels it is not currently possible to seek out the sort of discounts that might be available from a supplier such as Amazon. Publishers are beginning to make it possible to buy and download sections of books as well as or instead of complete texts.

40 Guide to Obtaining Textbooks in Alternative Formats (www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat). There is a searchable database of publishers' details at www.publisherlookup.org.uk.

41 Suppliers include BBC Audiobooks (<http://bbcaudiobooks.com>), Calibre (www.calibre.org.uk/) and Listening Books (www.listening-books.org.uk/). An example of a commercial audiobook service that delivers audio files for use on iPods and similar devices is Audible (www.audible.co.uk). The speaker of an audiobook, of course, imposes an extra interpretative layer between reader/listener and text, which will make some lecturers wary of their use.

42 For example, 'Audio Note Taker'.

43 See, for example, the English Subject Centre case study by Matthew Rubery, 'Plot-casting: Using student-generated audiobooks for learning and teaching' (www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/technology/plotcasting.php).

44 At www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/inclusive-teaching/learning-materials.php.

5 Seminars, lectures and tutorials

For the purposes of this study, class-based activities were taken to mean all activities that might take place in lectures, seminars and tutorials. Students were asked to comment on whether they had faced any barriers to participating in classes.

5.1 Student experiences of class-based activities

All disabilities (49 respondents)				
Activity	Lecture		Seminar/ Tutorial	
Difficulties experienced	84%	41	66%	33
No difficulties experienced	10%	5	14%	7
No response	4%	2	16%	8
N/A	2%	1	4%	2

Forty-two students (86%) reported experiencing difficulties with class-based activities with lectures causing more problems (84%) than smaller classes (66%).

5.2 Class-based activities causing difficulties

All disabilities (of 42 with difficulties)				
Activity	Lecture		Seminar/ Tutorial	
Note-taking	66%	27	59%	19
Attention span	61%	25	53%	17
Contributing to class discussions	41%	17	47%	15
Writing tasks	37%	15	34%	11
Giving presentations	37%	15	44%	14
Viewing presentation slides/the board	27%	11	13%	4
Reading aloud	27%	11	47%	15
Small group work	22%	9	25%	8
Physical accessibility of rooms	20%	8	13%	4
Handouts – quality	20%	8	25%	8
Handouts – availability and timing	20%	8	25%	8
Participating in drama/performance	12%	5	16%	5

It is clear from these responses that attention span (61%) and note-taking (66%) are the most problematic issues for students in lectures. The same is true in smaller class sizes (53% and 59% respectively) although a number of tasks requiring verbal communication also have a noticeable impact – reading aloud (47%), contributing to class discussions (47%) and giving presentations (44%). Cognitive problems, psychological problems and mobility problems all make note-taking difficult, as of course do visual and hearing impairments.

Students with mental health difficulties, visual impairments and Asperger's syndrome all reported a greater level of difficulties than other students and, whilst some of their difficulties appear obvious, the extent of their responses seems to demonstrate that no suitable solutions have yet been found. For example, 75% of mental health students facing difficulties reported that giving presentations and participating in class discussions had led to problems. The nature of many of the difficulties faced by students does not require interpretation and can be clearly seen in the following comments:

Physical problems with classrooms

Classroom - poor acoustics so small group work difficult as I cannot hear other students in the noisy environment. I have repeatedly asked students and tutor to provide notes/handouts/copies of their work so I can follow but few comply. (Hearing impaired)

Some rooms are more difficult to simply get into, while others are more accessible but relegate me and my wheelchair to be in the back of the room which makes it more difficult to see the board/screen/etc. Again, note taking is usually an issue since there are few 'wheelchair' accessible desks forcing my own lap to serve the purpose. (Mobility)

This is two-fold. Firstly, being in a wheelchair, it is difficult to write (take tests, write for assignments, or take notes) due to a lack of 'table' space. Most students sit at desks whereas I must use my own lap as mine. Secondly, some of the books required for classes are immense in both girth as well as weight, making things that much more problematic. (Mobility)

When I had ME hour-long lectures were really hard. Getting myself onto campus and into the lecture room sometimes made me too tired to actually listen to the lecture. I missed lectures and seminars on a regular basis. (Unseen disability)

Attending each and every class is difficult because I often feel great levels of fatigue. English teachers generally only allow three absences before they can fail you, which presented a problem until I got in touch with the university's Disabilities services. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

Problems with note-taking

The worst part for me is the note taking. I am often unable to keep up with writing fast, as my arms cramp, or can lose feeling. In most other classes, it is easy to copy someone else's notes since it's usually a list of facts, but I think notes in English are much more individualised (usually) and therefore hard to copy from someone else later. A recording device would have perhaps been useful in some lectures, but I could not afford one. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

I can't write for long (or sometimes, at all). Group work makes me feel guilty for whoever I'm working with carrying the burden. I get through the other half of my degree by pacing myself with the reading then the lectures don't matter so much. Creative writing is all about practising what we learn in the lecture/seminar. I can't do things in my own time because there's nothing to fall back to. (Mobility/Unseen disability – ME)

By putting lecture notes online students with disabilities would undoubtedly benefit, as lectures are fast-paced and note-taking is difficult. (Specific learning difficulty)

In lectures I must write down almost everything the lecturer says, so as to not forget any valuable information. This is restricting, because by writing I am not wholly listening to the argument, which limits my understanding – my notes often do not make sense to me, as I struggle to keep up with the lecturer. I also find that when reading I can not keep my place on a page, so I make every effort not to read aloud in class. This in particular has made me rather quiet in seminars, as I must read slower than my peers, which limits my capacity to comment on texts. (Specific learning difficulty)

I have recording equipment but transcribing can take up to five hours just for one lecture. (Specific learning difficulty)

Problems with staff delivery of teaching sessions

Sometimes I felt the teacher also spoke unclearly or too fast, and sometimes presentations are hard to view. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

At times it was hard to hear the teacher very well because of other students in the classes, clicking pens, coughing, tapping feet, etc. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

The fast-paced nature of lectures and seminars mean that if you miss something or you forget it then it's lost forever! (Unseen disability – ME)

Problems with materials (or absence of materials) provided by staff

Crowded ['PowerPoint'] slides (Specific learning difficulty)

Photocopied handouts with extracts on them can be very difficult to read—especially when the original piece of work being copied is of poor quality. (Visual impairment)

Sometimes handouts are very long and they say read and I feel pressured to have read them by the same time as others. I am meant to get them ahead of time, but this is rarely the case. (Specific learning difficulty)

One of my problems is I lack a concentration span, whether that's in general or in a class I cannot hold a thought for too long without glazing over. The handouts were difficult to get hold of in some lectures, and reading in seminars was embarrassing as I needed to get overlays out, but felt 'weird' to do so, so struggled instead to read aloud. (Specific learning difficulty)

Some lecturers don't use 'PowerPoint' which is a struggle as we have to try and get everything down. (Specific learning difficulty)

If tutors could give out the lecture handout before the day it's needed it would have been more helpful, as following a lecture slide in a lecture is really confusing to take in what's being said, writing down the notes and continuing on through the handout. (Specific learning difficulty)

Verbal questions can cause problems, if they aren't specific and don't have an obvious purpose (i.e., if they're woolly or rambling), or if they are asked aggressively. (Asperger's syndrome/Mental health)

Problems in contributing to classes

Presentations have been quite hard, for I get very stressed and anxious. But the worst experiences depend on my mood. If I am feeling bad and I turn up for a seminar, I may feel extremely vulnerable and unable to contribute. (Mental health)

Difficulties arise from social interaction in these areas, both in my lack of understanding of some common social clues/cues, and in my inability to engage appropriately with others, at times. (Asperger's syndrome)

Very self conscious and anxious when presenting, difficulty answering questions with memory problems. (Mental health)

The tablets I am on can make me very tired and sometimes my mind wanders, which is very annoying in class. Whilst reading aloud I am always very self conscious, due to the fact my attention span is so short. (Unseen disability – Epilepsy)

Sometimes I simply cannot write as fast as other students, or fast enough to complete writing assignments on time (if they are to be finished in a class period. This in particular has made me rather quiet in seminars, as I must read slower than my peers, which limits my capacity for comments on texts. (Specific learning difficulty)

Reading aloud and participating in drama/performance, I struggle, even when using an aid such as a pen or my finger to follow the words as they can seem to jump on the page, and I frequently will lose my place and struggle to say words which I can read perfectly well silently. Due to this I often will not offer to read out loud or perform as struggling to read steadily or coherently frustrates both me and all those I am reading with or to, amplifying the problem (Specific learning difficulty)

A lot of the time I'm struggling through fatigue (especially after the first hour). I can't concentrate. I lose whatever I'm talking about, I can't remember what has just been read out. (Mobility, Unseen disability, Other disability)

5.3 Students' support strategies

5.3.1 Did students seek advice and support on class-based activities issues?

All disabilities (of 42 with difficulties)		
Yes	79%	33
No	19%	8
No response	2%	1

5.3.2 Sources of support for students struggling with class-based activities

All disabilities (of 33 seeking support)		
The university disability service	39%	13
The lecturer for the subject	33%	11
Study skills/dyslexia tutor	24%	8
Your personal tutor	21%	7
The departmental disability tutor	15%	5

A friend or family member	12%	4
A counsellor or therapist	9%	3
Other	9%	3
Another student in the subject	6%	2
IT support	-	-
A personal assistant	-	-

A noticeable minority of students facing difficulties (19%) again declined to seek support. The profile of those that did not pursue support differed somewhat from those who did not seek support for independent study problems (cf. 4.3.2, above), as they reported a more positive experience of dealing with subject staff. There was no overwhelming consensus on the reason for this although one comment provided a possible explanation:

No – I felt embarrassed really – like I shouldn't have enrolled for the course if I couldn't cope with all its demands – to some degree I still believe this. (Unseen disability)

Similarly, several respondents said that the advice they would offer to new students would be not to feel afraid to ask for help when necessary (see 10.2).

Whilst a third of students had sought advice from the subject lecturer, even more students had approached the disability service for advice: it is striking that so many students felt the need to approach a non-disciplinary source of support.

5.3.3 What adjustments or techniques have helped students to address the difficulties that they have faced?

All disabilities (of 42 with difficulties)		
Problems not resolved	43%	18
Received course materials in advance e.g. reading lists, handouts, lecture slides	19%	8
Received additional one-on-one tutoring/assistance	19%	8
Recorded classes	19%	8
Received course material in different format	17%	7
Received extra equipment/resources	17%	7
Lecturer adjusted their teaching style	10%	4
Received note-taking assistance	7%	3
Was referred to experts/another service	2%	1
Subject content was modified	-	-

Of the 42 students who had experienced difficulties with class-based study, 43% had not yet found a suitable solution. Though the table shows that a number of strategies had been helpful in addressing some problems no strategy was mentioned by more than 19% of respondents. The recording of classes was surprisingly low in the rankings, at 30%, as a preferred coping strategy for students facing note-taking difficulties. Whilst

exact figures are not available, it is highly likely that many more than 30% of disabled students receive a recording device via the DSA. The number receiving notes in advance, as reported in the survey, also seems low given that this practice is often recommended in students' needs assessments. The shortfall in the figures is clearly partly due to poor implementation of support recommendations – something mentioned by students on a number of occasions throughout the survey.

A few other solutions were mentioned by students and these tended to be specific to individual cases.

My lecturer allowed me to leave class early and study in my own time. I didn't have to do writing tasks with the rest of the class. (Asperger's syndrome)

Sometimes the classes get way too hot, and I am unable to focus because of the heat. I recently received a cooling vest that I can wear in class to help with that. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

Mainly making sure the lecturer gives a break in the middle of the two hours. I try to go outside and get some air and to eat something. In hindsight I should ask for photocopies of whatever is being read out, but often if I'm feeling like I can't participate then I will tell the lecturer that I'm only observing that session. (Mobility, Unseen disability, Other disability)

One teacher did send me the slide shows since I could not take them down fast enough. Recording classes would have been immensely helpful, but I couldn't afford a recording device. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

Giving presentations, I practise individual presentations before my dyslexia helper. (Specific learning difficulty)

Problems were resolved simply by getting used to the requirements and the fatigue issues became less of a problem. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

5.4 Proposed support strategies for staff

5.4.1 Inclusive Teaching

Often, but by no means always, you will be aware of a student's disability when teaching in small groups. (If you are not, and the student is seriously disadvantaged by some aspect of your teaching, you are quite likely to hear about it.) Lectures with very big audiences, on the other hand, are likely to include attendees with disabilities about whose individual requirements you know nothing, and who will not necessarily tell anybody about their problems.⁴⁵ For these sessions, clearly, an 'inclusive' approach (1.3, above) is particularly valuable.⁴⁶

A. Lectures

Providing material in support of teaching sessions

Guidelines about the accessibility of learning materials are given in 4.4.1 above. Some lecturers routinely take along coloured handouts and a few handouts in large print to lectures, just in case they are needed by any students in the audience. Ideally,

⁴⁵ The legal position is that if a student has told any individual staff member of an institution about their condition, that institution is deemed to know about it and is legally obliged to make accommodations.

⁴⁶ Valuable advice on inclusive teaching can be found at www.techdis.ac.uk/getteachinginclusively.

try to remember accessibility when suggesting in seminars or lectures texts for further reading outside the classroom.

Many lecturers now use 'PowerPoint'. The standard guidelines for its use in lectures are as follows:

- Use a sans-serif font, preferably Arial or Verdana at point 30.
- Make sure there is a sharp contrast between text and background. Dark blue and cream are particularly easy to see.
- Don't use upper case alone; use mixed case (i.e. capitals at the beginnings of words only).
- Use bold, but not underlining.
- Text should be left-justified.
- Be careful not to use colour to make meaningful distinctions.
- Write no more on each slide than you would on a postcard.
- Avoid using too many animations.
- Use the slide design options: this will keep the text accessible.
- You can use the 'notes' field to gloss the slides: this will be useful for people viewing the presentation after seeing or without having seen the presentation.
- Read out what is on the slides. This will help all students to follow the lecture more effectively, as well as helping students with visual impairments.⁴⁷

If you use other technology in large lectures (e.g. electronic voting systems), try to think about accessibility issues in advance.

The wish for lecturers to provide transcripts or other supporting material before or after lectures crops up repeatedly in the responses to this survey. Lecturers have sometimes in the past been unwilling to provide recordings or complete texts of their lectures, interpreting the idea as a block on their creativity. It is clear from the survey, however, that students do not necessarily expect or require a complete text of every lecture. What they do, very emphatically, want is accessible material contextualising the lecture for them and helping them to understand it better. This could take a number of forms:

- Lecture 'notes' of some kind. These could take any number of forms or combinations of forms, including: headings on a sheet (provided either before or during the lecture) under which students write their own notes; a paraphrase of the lecture's argument (perhaps omitting detailed examples); a 'taster' set of notes circulated before the lecture to give students an idea of what to expect without giving away the details of your argument; notes in diagrammatic form created with graphical organizing software such as 'Inspiration'.⁴⁸
- An online copy of 'PowerPoint' slides, supplied after the lecture. There are various things that can be done with 'PowerPoint' files to make them particularly accessible and useful for students: guidance is available from JISC TechDis.⁴⁹
- A complete text, or video, or podcast of a lecture. Providing this will only be useful if students simultaneously have access

to all the other elements in the lecture ('PowerPoint' slides, handouts, a clear view of any videos, etc.).

Running sessions

The purpose of lectures is not always obvious, as Dave Ellis has recently pointed out:

What should students be doing in lecture theatres? Trying to write everything down? Being 'active listeners'? Only noting those ideas or facts that they consider to be particularly significant? Unfortunately, lecturing staff also seem to be unsure of the function of lectures. Their role as a forum for research-led academics to deliver thought-provoking ideas seems to have been replaced by the lecture as a medium for delivering essential facts upon which students can base their own arguments. (I realise this is a somewhat simplistic distinction.) (Ellis (2008), 21)

Most of the recommendations below (many of which will be second-nature to lecturers already) are about clarity.⁵⁰ Clarity is not the same as dumbing down: there is no reason why clear signposting and structure should prevent lectures from being subtle, exciting and thought-provoking.

- Make the structure of each session obvious to the students, perhaps in visual form (on a slide, or in a handout, or on the board); recap from time to time (and at the end), and mark transition points clearly.⁵¹ If you have made notes on the board, leave them up at the end of the session, so that students can copy them down or take a picture using their mobile phones.
- Hold the students' attention by switching the focus of the discussion or the medium of delivery every 15 minutes or so. This will help students with poor concentration, but also many other students too.
- Whenever you use new or unusual terminology (or a new writer's name), write it down on the board. When you have written it down, spell it out.
- If a student asks a question in a lecture, make sure you repeat it (so that everyone else can hear it) before giving your reply.
- Speak clearly (not too fast) and face the audience (this will help lipreaders); use a microphone if available (it may be linked in to aids worn by hearing-impaired students). Don't speak when you turn your back to write on the board. If you are using boards/overhead projectors, explain what you're doing as you do it. Don't move around the room too much – some disabled students will find it very difficult to track you. Adjust curtains/blinds to avoid appearing in silhouettes. If you dim the lights to show slides or a video and you need to speak, make sure that your face is illuminated.
- If you use an overhead projector, use printed rather than handwritten transparencies.
- Make it clear to students how you want them to engage with the lecture. Do they need to take notes, or have you provided

⁴⁷ For more guidance on the use of 'PowerPoint' see the JISC TechDis website at www.techdis.ac.uk/accessibilityessentials.

⁴⁸ Other software manufacturers such as 'OpenMind' are starting to include the option to import an existing 'Word' document in outline form. This can then be automatically turned into a visual plan.

⁴⁹ At www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=1_20_5.

⁵⁰ For more recommendations, see Horgan (2003).

⁵¹ Verbal 'signposts' in a lecture will make it easier for students recording the lecture to bookmark their recordings for later transcription.

them with enough supplementary materials (handouts, online resources, etc.) to allow them simply to listen? If you want the students to take notes, pause from time to time to allow enough time for them to do it properly. Many of the respondents to our survey were obviously under the impression that they were supposed to take very extensive notes in every lecture: that this was in fact their lecturers' intention in every case seems doubtful (cf. Smith (2004), 83-4). Supplying more materials in support of the lecture, as suggested above, should help counter some of this anxiety.

- Allow students to record the session if they want to. You may feel that it would more useful for a student to access the content of the session in some other way (and if so, you should tell them this). If a student insists, however, the law is probably on his/her side.⁵²
- Try to make sure that students who need to be close to the lecturer (for example, for lipreading) are able to be.

B. Seminars

- If you can, arrange the chairs in a seminar room in such a way that students can see each other's faces.
- In a free-flowing seminar, in which frequent student contributions change the course of the discussion, record the main ideas as they develop on a board (or ask a student to). Revisit the board at the end of the seminar.
- In your seminars, provide a variety of tasks, to allow different students to use their specific skills: ie. periods of individual reading/analysis (perhaps involving small-scale written tasks), periods of small-group activity and periods of plenary discussion. Some disabled students will find it very difficult to make any contribution to a seminar (either with students or with the lecturer), whilst others will wish to compensate for their anxiety about their written work by engaging fully in class discussion.⁵³
- If you require students to make in-seminar presentations, provide detailed support and guidance.⁵⁴
- One way to gauge students' experience of seminars is to distribute unofficial, mid-module evaluation forms. Student responses should highlight any substantial problems with the room, your delivery of the sessions, etc.
- Consider running 'problem-based learning' sessions without a lecturer present (see section D in 4.4.1 above).
- Consider supplementing your teaching sessions with 'peer-assisted learning' sessions run by students (see section B in 4.4.1 above).

- Teaching sessions can also be very valuably complemented by the use of online discussion fora (see section B in 4.4.1 above). In many cases, disabled students will find posting to a forum (at the most basic level, in a discussion around a given topic) easier than contributing to a seminar.⁵⁵
- Consider running some seminars in rooms equipped with computers: for some disabled students, this is a particularly comfortable environment.

5.4.2 Student-Specific Teaching

A. Running teaching sessions

Some disabled students will be happy for their disability to be public knowledge; others (many hearing-impaired, among others) will not want other students in a seminar or lecture group to know about it (whilst nevertheless seeking support from a lecturer). Many students want to maintain a low profile so that they will not be considered 'different' or 'special' by their peers. It is, of course, important to respect the student's intentions in such cases – though you will need to explain to them the potential problems that the lack of disclosure could cause.

- Failure to attend teaching sessions – for a variety of powerful reasons – is highlighted in a number of responses in the survey. In some cases, clearly, failure to attend should be allowed and other ways to achieve the aims of the teaching session sought: tutorials, perhaps (time permitting), or a worksheet with questions and readings relevant to the topic missed. In such cases, supplementing lectures with supporting material (as described in section A in 5.4.1 above) will be particularly useful. Other possible solutions include the use of video conferencing to allow students off-campus to participate in a session, and exercises in which students compile a record of the session that can be viewed later by the absentee (a live blog, perhaps, or retrospective seminar notes).⁵⁶
- Storage facilities in the department for bags, etc. will help some disabled students move around more easily. Some students will benefit from an area where they can rest and/or take medication between teaching sessions.
- Room allocation can be a problem for some disabled students, particularly if classes are often scheduled in rooms up steep staircases or many floors up.
- Some disabled students, while present at a seminar, may not be able to participate in the activities you have planned (discussion in small groups, etc.). If these activities seem to you to be essential to the seminar, try to think of ways in which their outcomes could be achieved by the disabled student in some other way.

⁵² This issue was addressed in 2003 by Skill, the former Disability Rights Commission (or DRC, now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission) and the lecturers' union, NATFHE. The resulting guidance can be viewed at www.skill.org.uk/page.aspx?c=181&p=292.

⁵³ A student might be unable to participate effectively in a class discussion for a number of reasons: for example, concerns about repeating someone else's point due to poor memory, inability to process others' contributions quickly enough to respond, and inability to read others' body language or intonation.

⁵⁴ A complex and useful framework is provided in Arran Stibbe's English Subject Centre case study, 'Emergence: a person-centred approach to oral rhetoric', at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/oralskills/emergence.php.

⁵⁵ On the other hand, live chat creates some of the same problems found in class-based discussion with the added potential embarrassment of poor spelling. A threaded forum discussion may therefore be more appropriate as it gives students time to compose and check their contribution. Those with severe writing difficulties may also benefit from using speech-to-text software.

⁵⁶ The next generation of conferencing technology is currently being tested by several UK HE practitioners, including the JISC: <http://tinyurl.com/n4emfr>.

- There are a wide range of devices that disabled students might use to help them in seminars or lectures, such as specially-modified keyboards.⁵⁷ In some cases, it will help the student if you modify your teaching approach: try to find out what would be most useful. Sometimes very basic problems will arise, such as the problem of holding a book on a table. (Solutions are often lo-tech, involving assistive technology such as blu-tak and drawing pins.) In lectures, wheelchair users will prefer to have a choice of places to go to: not all will be happy to be forced to be at the front (or the back).
- If a disabled student wants to bring a helper into your seminar group, make sure that the other students understand the processes involved and how they can help. (Some students, however, will prefer privacy, and want their helper to sit in a different part of the room.)
- If you use writing exercises in a teaching session, make sure you allow enough time for a disabled student who has writing difficulties to finish – or make it clear to them before the session begins that you do not expect them to write as much as the others.
- Some disabled students (for example, those using lipreading or synthetic speech machines) will require prior notice of the topic and main ideas of the seminars: otherwise, they won't understand all the words that you are using. (It would also help if they knew in advance about specific passages of text analysed in detail.) The same will apply to students using personal assistants as note-takers or signers. Some students will require access to handouts prior to the session (ideally in electronic form) so that they can turn them into a form that they can understand.
- Make students aware of software that could help with the transcription of notes and which could be funded through the Disabled Students Allowance.⁵⁸
- Copies of lecture notes will be particularly useful for hearing-impaired students and dyslexic students, confirming to them that they have 'heard/understood' key information.

B. Hearing difficulties

- In seminars involving students with hearing difficulties, try to make sure that students don't talk simultaneously. (One method is to ask each student who speaks to hold the same pencil in turn.) Use visual cues as much as possible yourself to indicate the structure of the seminar.
- If you have a deaf student with an interpreter in your seminar, allow time for the student to sign to the interpreter and then for the interpreter to speak. Prior consultation with the student and interpreter will often be necessary, so that signs for new/unusual vocabulary can be agreed in advance.
- If you use video in a lecture or seminar, remember that you will have either to show a subtitled version, or provide a transcript for the hearing-impaired student.
- Consider designing in more activities in which students write up work beforehand (perhaps online) for discussion later: the printouts can form the basis of student discussion in the seminar.

C. Visual impairments

- Give a verbal description of the seminar room to a visually-impaired student if your group is using it for the first time or if it has been rearranged since your last visit. The other students could perhaps all introduce themselves at the beginning of a session, so that visually-impaired students know where everyone is sitting. Say when you are leaving the room.
- If you use video in a lecture or seminar, use audio description (or description in braille).

As field trips and work placements are still relatively uncommon in English and Creative Writing programmes, we did not include a question on this topic in the survey. Ensuring that outings such as these are accessible for disabled students will present a fresh range of challenges: detailed guidance can be found on many of the websites listed at the end of the report. Similar concerns will apply to the use of teaching techniques involving substantial amounts of physical activity, such as some types of drama workshop.

⁵⁷ See www.emptech.info.

⁵⁸ 'Audio Notetaker', for example, lets the student colour code and bookmark a timeline of their recording whilst typing up notes.



6 Virtual learning environments (VLEs)

For the purposes of this study, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) were considered to be systems such as 'WebCT', 'Blackboard', 'Moodle' and 'First Class'.

6.1 Student experiences of VLEs

All disabilities (49 respondents)		
No difficulties experienced	55%	27
Difficulties experienced	22%	11
Course does not use a virtual learning environment	14%	7
No response	8%	4

6.2 VLE activities causing difficulties

All disabilities (of 11 with difficulties)		
Other	55%	6
Viewing course materials	46%	5
Downloading course materials	18%	2
Live online discussion/online chat	18%	2
Computer based assessment	-	-
Interactive tasks e.g. a quiz	-	-

This medium of study caused the fewest problems, with only 22% of students experiencing difficulties. The one group of students that stood out were those with visual impairments as all four respondents reported difficulties. As these difficulties related to viewing and downloading course materials, it seems to have been the case at the time of the survey that systems such as 'WebCT' and 'Blackboard' had accessibility problems (cf. Dunn (2003)). Absence of difficulty with computer-based assessment and with interactive tasks is most likely due to the absence of these two types of VLE-use from English departments.

Some students referred to insufficient instruction in the use of VLE environments. A student with hearing difficulties mentioned the lack of subtitles on multimedia which left him/her 'completely unable to participate in this part of the course'.

6.3 Students' support strategies

6.3.1 Did students seek advice and support on VLE issues?

All disabilities (of 11 with difficulties)		
Yes	82%	9
No	9%	1
No response	9%	1

6.3.2 Sources of support for students struggling with VLEs

All disabilities (of 9 seeking help)		
The University Disability Service	44%	4
IT Support	33%	3
The lecturer for the subject	33%	3
A friend or family member	22%	2
Another student in the subject	11%	1
Your personal tutor	11%	1
Other	11%	1

As with the previous sections, students sought help from a variety of sources with the university disability service, subject lecturers and IT support being the most common.

6.3.3 What adjustments or techniques have helped students to address the difficulties that they have faced?

All disabilities (of 11 with difficulties)		
Problems not resolved	55%	6
Made use of assistive software e.g. screenreader	18%	2
Other (please specify)	18%	2
Was provided with an offline alternative	9%	1
Lecturer improved accessibility of online materials	-	-

Of those struggling to use VLEs, 55% had not yet resolved their problems. As a category, visual impairment again stood out with three of the four respondents being among the six that classed their difficulties as unresolved. It is striking that no lecturer improved online accessibility.

6.4 Proposed support strategies for staff

6.4.1 Inclusive teaching

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions on how widespread problems with VLEs are for disabled students. Whilst the small number of complaints might be taken to mean that there are few problems, it is perhaps more likely that VLEs are still used only sporadically and that their use does not extend far beyond the online provision of resources previously distributed on paper. This is still very helpful to disabled students, as electronic resources can save time when trying to track down staff and electronic handouts are easier to use in conjunction with assistive technology software.

I have found 'BlackBoard' helpful, as, being disorganised, it has been helpful to be able to catch hold of the module guide, or tutor contact details. (Specific learning difficulty)

Lecturers making extensive use of VLEs and other forms of online learning material will need to be aware of the international guidelines on web accessibility produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and other key resources in this area.⁵⁹ It should be noted that mobile learning technology has expanded rapidly since this survey was conducted, though there is no evidence as yet of widespread adoption of it in English studies. Recently, social networking sites and other types of user-generated online content have had more take-up in the discipline.⁶⁰

There will of course often be a case for using e-learning materials that, while not fully accessible to all potential students, will materially help your current cohort. In Sue Harrison's words,

The guiding questions should be 'who will this benefit?' and 'what can I do for those who will be excluded by

this?' If a resource adds value to some of your learners and excludes none of your learners then there is no reason not to use it. You do, however, need to cultivate the awareness of what you might do if future learner cohorts included some who were unable to access that resource. (Harrison (2007)

Course materials on VLEs are not always presented in a very clear way. Consider using more text to explain what is going on.

6.4.2 Student-specific teaching

In addressing the concerns raised by students with visual impairments, the first port of call should be the Royal National Institute for the Blind's Web Access Centre, which provides tools and resources with which to plan, build and test accessible websites.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Latest guidelines are at www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/, though they are a less than ideal match for e-learning (see Phipps et al: (2005)). There is a clear guide on the Teachability website to creating accessible e-learning resources (<http://tinyurl.com/lgb55f>). See also Ball (2005). For a guide to making a website accessible, see Mark Pilgrim's free e-book, *Dive into Accessibility* (<http://diveintoaccessibility.org/>). The JISC TechDis website includes advice on using technology to develop new and alternative teaching practices, guidance on making old materials accessible and advice on how to use sound and images effectively (www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=6_2). A useful tool for help in designing handouts and presentations is Microsoft's Accessible Web Publishing Wizard for 'Office' (www.virtual508.com/). Much very useful material is collected together on the Lexdis site at www.lexdis.org/. See also Dunn (2003), a report on the accessibility of VLEs in UK HE and FE.

⁶⁰ Examples of how mobile technology can improve accessibility can be seen in an online video by Dave Foord at <http://tinyurl.com/kwhgh3>. For Web 2.0, see TechDis's 'Web2Access' resources, at www.techdis.ac.uk/getweb2access.

⁶¹ At <http://tinyurl.com/yf6lc5c>.



7 Exams

The survey asked disabled students about their preparation for exams, their ability to take exams and the effectiveness of their study skills under exam conditions.

7.1 Student experiences of exams

All disabilities (49 respondents)		
Difficulties experienced	61%	30
No exam-based assessment on course	22%	11
No difficulties experienced	10%	5
No response	6%	3

Of the 49 survey respondents 35 (71%) reported some experience of exam-based assessment with 11 (22%) reporting that there was no exam-based assessment on their course.

Of those taking exams 30 (86%) had experienced difficulties. The most hard-hit categories were students with specific learning difficulties and students with an unseen disability: 100% of respondents in each category had difficulties (15 and 10 respondents respectively). Although the numbers are very small, it nevertheless seems significant that three of the seven students with mobility problems had not faced any difficulties: this suggests that with the proper adjustments in place students with mobility-related conditions will not experience problems in this area. This view is supported by a more detailed statement from a student who had been allowed to take the exam at home.

7.2 Difficulties with exams

All disabilities (of 30 with difficulties)		
Remaining calm	73%	22
Time limits	57%	17
Revision	50%	15
Planning and structuring answers	50%	15
Understanding the questions	43%	13
Proofreading	33%	10
Other	20%	6
Accessibility of the exam paper	3%	1

The most common problem for students taking exams was anxiety during the exam itself. Twenty-two students (73%) reported this as an issue: in the comments below, the recurrence of the word 'panic' is notable. (Time limitations seem to be the main cause of this anxiety, as twelve of these twenty-two students also mentioned this as a concern.) Overall, seventeen students (57%) listed time limits as a problem, making it the second most common problem. The comments show that problems with revision also contributed to anxiety in the exam room. The only option measuring less than 33% was the accessibility of the paper. However, 13 students (43%) faced difficulties with understanding exam questions and given that over two thirds of these respondents had either a specific

learning difficulty or Asperger's syndrome – both of which could cause reading difficulties – it therefore seems that accessibility is actually a much greater issue than first appears.

Anxiety in the exam room

Panic when in a timed environment as my attention will wander due to the epilepsy. Also due to seizures, taking exams and keeping within timescales is extremely difficult. (Unseen disability – Epilepsy)

My illness tends to exaggerate stress levels and induces panic during exams. (Mental health)

Revision

Frequency of exams, I struggle to revise enough for two exams in a row (one straight after another) and often mix up facts for the wrong subject, i.e., writing about a character in a Shakespearean play in an exam about themes/characters in novels of the 19th century. (Specific learning difficulty)

Revision takes ages. It takes me ages to plan a question and then ages to write it. I haven't ever finished an exam. Because of difficulty in revising I have twice left an exam after 30 minutes because I panicked and couldn't remember anything. (Specific learning difficulty)

I found I over-checked things, couldn't concentrate to revise properly and got worked up because I was focusing on the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder too much. (Mental health – OCD)

Revision is hard because English is a very vague subject. (Asperger's syndrome)

I often struggle to set revision in an ordered manner, as I cannot say 'I will read all my film notes for the next hour with two breaks during that time', as my reading is too slow to stick to time restrictions. Also, I struggle with my attention span and taking a break can result in total loss of concentration. (Specific learning difficulty)

Time problems

Although I receive extra time in exams, even this does not seem to be enough time for me to structure and plan an essay effectively with the techniques taught to me by my study skills helper. (Specific learning difficulty)

I can't rush myself to complete work, because my mind just won't do it. I need to remain calm and take my time. Sometimes, more often than not, the time is not available to me. (Specific learning difficulty)

I don't like using my disability as an 'excuse', so I never asked for more time. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

Impossible to gather thoughts in short time required. (Mental health – Bipolar disorder)

Problems with understanding

I did often find the questions in exams too ambiguous to break down. (Asperger's syndrome)

Understanding the questions is extremely frequently a major problem for me; often it is the wording of the questions I struggle with. (Specific learning difficulty)

Despite including a cover sheet explaining my difficulties I am still being penalised for spelling and grammar mistakes. Also, until the final year of school I received no help or extra time in exams and so never managed to finish a paper. (Specific learning difficulty)

Not feeling up to the task of exams, or, in fact, any task in general. (Mental health)

Sometimes hand writing exam papers was problematic because of my bad shoulder. I wondered whether to ask for the use of a word processor but always decided against. (Unseen disability)

Planning and structuring answers, like essays, I can struggle to set out an answer straightforwardly, resulting in one part of an idea being at the beginning of an answer and the rest of the idea being half-way through. I often run out of time. If I do not understand the questions, or if I have revised and then sit down to the exam and forget all my revision, this can lead to me writing even slower, as I struggle to write relevant things down. (Specific learning difficulty)

7.3 Students' support strategies

7.3.1 Did students seek advice and support on exams?

All disabilities (of 30 with difficulties)		
Yes	59%	17
No	34%	11
No response	7%	2

7.3.2 From whom did students seek advice and support on exams?

All disabilities (of 17 seeking help)		
Study skills/dyslexia tutor	35%	6
The university disability service	29%	5
The departmental disability tutor	24%	4
Other	24%	4
Your personal tutor	18%	3
The invigilator	12%	2
A personal assistant	12%	2
A friend or family member	12%	2
The lecturer for the subject	6%	1
Another student in the subject	6%	1
A counsellor or therapist	6%	1
IT support	-	-

Although 86% of students taking exams faced at least some level of difficulty only 59% of these sought help. At 35%, the study skills/dyslexia tutor was again the most popular source of

support, with departmental or central university disability staff also seeing a number of requests. There was a slightly greater tendency for those with specific learning difficulties and mental health difficulties to seek support (both 67%), a statistic which could again be linked to the more formalized support networks that exist for these two groups.

7.3.3 Have students received additional adjustments?

All HE institutions have a system in place whereby specific adjustments can be made to the exams process to help disabled students. The particular adjustments used, however, vary from institution to institution, and from degree programme to degree programme. There is currently a lack of clarity about the effectiveness of the various adjustments on offer– and sometimes also about the extent to which marking procedures take them into account: further research is needed.

All disabilities (of 30 with difficulties)				
	Standard adjustment as part of university policy		Adjustment made in response to student request	
Adjustments received	50%	15	30%	9
No adjustments received	23%	7	13%	4
No response	26%	8	56%	17

Twenty (67%) of the students facing difficulties with exams received at least one adjustment as a result of their disability. The majority of adjustments were put into place as a standard part of university policy although nine students (30%) also reported receiving adjustments in direct response to a personal request. A small number of students (four: 13%) reported being turned down for an adjustment.

7.3.4 What adjustments have students received?

All disabilities (of 20 receiving adjustments)						
	Standard adjustment as part of university policy		Adjustment made in response to student request		Total *	
Received an additional time allowance	70%	14	30%	6	95%	19
Typed answers on to a PC	10%	2	15%	3	20%	5
Questions given in audio format i.e. reader, tape recorded	5%	1	-	-	5%	1
Was allowed to take rest breaks	5%	1	20%	4	20%	4
Dictated answers to an amanuensis/ scribe	-	-	10%	2	10%	2
Was offered an alternative form of assessment e.g. oral presentation	5%	1	5%	1	10%	2

Was taught new revision methods	5%	1	7%	2	10%	3
Received a modified exam paper	-	-	5%	1	5%	1
Other	-	-	3%	1	5%	1

* Some students answered 'Yes' to both options and so the total column will not always appear to add up.

In total, 20 students received adjustments. The provision of an additional time allowance was by far the most common adjustment (19 students (95% of respondents)). The only other adjustments to reach 20% were the provision of rest breaks and the right to word-process answers. Only one other adjustment was mentioned outside of the list provided, that of being allowed to sit the exam at home.⁶²

Seventeen of those students receiving adjustments (85%) commented on how helpful they found the adjustments that they received. Positive comments can be grouped as follows:

- Extra time (8)
- Allowed to word-process answers on a PC (4)
- Rest breaks (3)
- Separate room (2)
- Amanuensis (1)
- Revision advice (1)
- Exams deferred (1)
- Questions in audio format (1)

Of those that found the extra time helpful, four (50%) commented that they felt that yet more extra time was required (all four students have a specific learning difficulty). A couple of comments took the opposite line: one student felt that no amount of extra time would address her/his problems with written structure, whilst another found that the provision of a separate room helped minimize their anxiety and that therefore additional time was unnecessary. The subject of extra time has generated some debate in recent years and the extent to which it is beneficial in English exams is a topic that would benefit from further research (cf. Zuriff (2000), 99; Stretch and Osbourne (2005), 1).⁶³

Rest breaks and the provision of a separate room were both found to help alleviate the stress and anxiety experienced by many students.

The facility to type up exam answers was also found to be helpful as it enabled students to proofread and restructure their work more easily.

When I had ME the rest breaks and scribe were helpful. The extra time is very useful but nowhere near enough. (Unseen disability/Specific learning difficulty)

Was able to sit in the alternative exam room and this was very helpful. Did not need the extra time however, and did not use it. (Mental health)

I was talked through the exam requirements before going into the exam period, so that revision was made accessible for me. (Specific learning difficulty)

The computer is incredibly helpful in exams as it aids planning and increases word count per minute, certainly for myself. Also, as I perform all of my work on a computer, having one in an exam situation is brilliant, in order to recreate a comfortable work environment. Extra time is a necessity I believe, although, as mentioned previously, I believe more time should be awarded. (Specific learning difficulty)

I was allowed to take the exams with the resitters in September. This has given me four months to resolve any issues that I may have. (Mental health)

I didn't feel extra time was needed. The problem was more the structuring of answers. (Specific learning difficulty)

Some of these things would have been helpful, but I never took advantage of them (partly because I did not know they would have been available). (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

7.4 Proposed support strategies for staff

7.4.1 Inclusive Teaching

The use of exams – and the difficulty many disabled students have in dealing with them – is an issue similar (and, indeed, related) to the use of the essay in coursework. In both cases, it is worth revisiting course requirements and considering to what extent the assessment form in question is essential to the learning outcomes. Some of the ends achieved through exams may be equally or better served by other forms of assessment. One possibility is to give students more choice in the extent to which they sit exams. Variations on the standard unseen exam are another possibility.

- If exams are used, it is obviously essential that the rationale of each exam is explained in advance, that questions are clear and straightforward and that the exam paper is fully accessible.⁶⁴ Be clear about what is being assessed: will grammar and spelling be considered as well as content?
- Ensure that students are able to access past examples of assessment, and that these can be provided in alternative formats if necessary. Various seminar activities can be devised to help students get to grips with exam requirements: mock exams, exercises involving students setting exams themselves, etc.⁶⁵

⁶² This is a common adjustment for Open University students who have deliberately selected distance learning to address a disability such as agoraphobia.

⁶³ Extra time can rapidly become unworkable. If students require more extra time than the current standard of 25%, exams will begin to be very long indeed. 50% extra time, for example, would mean that a three hour exam would last four and a half hours – at which point fatigue and the need for food would make things very difficult for the disabled students. Adding rest breaks to accommodate these requirements would mean that the exam would approach five hours. Clearly, alternative or redesigned assessment would in this case be a more sensible option.

⁶⁴ For an excellent checklist of things to consider when setting exam questions, see Race et al. (2005), 29-31.

⁶⁵ Some ideas are given in Race et al. (2005), 36-7.

- Consider whether you could accept answers to exam questions in a number of different forms.
- Consider 'student-friendly' alternatives to traditional unseen exams, such as open-book exams, take-away exams, open-notes exams (in which students do not bring books into the exam-room but are allowed to bring in notes) and multiple-choice questionnaires. Structured exams of various kinds – in which, for example, one question requiring a short answer might lead from or to another – can, if well designed, be a good way of assessing sophisticated knowledge and skills. If you think carefully about what you want to assess in an exam, one of these non-traditional formats may turn out to be a better method than an exam in the traditional essay-based format.

7.4.2 Student-specific teaching

In making specific adjustments, it is always advisable to take account above all of the individual student, without making too many assumptions about their requirements based on your general impression of what that student's impairment might imply. There are a number of different possibilities:

- You can discuss the exam in more detail with a student who has particular concerns. A different way of meeting the assessment may need extra time.
- In some cases, it may be helpful to run a mock assessment to allow a student to estimate how much extra time they require. Practising in advance will also help students who want to use an amanuensis in the exam-room.
- Some students may require a computer in the exam room.
- Some disabled students will find it very beneficial to take breaks. It is important, however, that rest breaks are given at

the time that the student wishes to take them as an enforced break could do more harm than good.

- Some students will have specific accessibility requirements, such as braille exam papers, taped questions or the reading aloud of questions before the exam. Other requirements will be more easily met, such as exam papers in large print or on coloured paper.
- Another possibility is to allow students to redraft their scripts if their handwriting is illegible: following the exam, the student reads their paper to an amanuensis who re-writes it, both rough and fair scripts being submitted to the marker.
- Dyslexic students and students with mental health problems can be particularly badly affected by vague or complicated exam questions which can cause considerable anxiety, fear and confusion.
- The timetabling of exams very close to each other (for example on successive days) will be very stressful for some students, including dyslexic students and students with mental health issues, such as schizophrenia. In such cases, liaison with the exam office will be possible.



8 Course management

8.1 Quality of course documentation

Disability (no. respondents)	Good		Adequate		Poor	
All disabilities (46)	52%	24	37%	17	11%	5
Mental health (11)	73%	8	27%	3	-	0
Unseen Disabilities (14)	64%	9	21%	3	14%	2
Mobility (11)	55%	6	36%	4	9%	1
Specific learning difficulty (18)	50%	9	39%	7	11%	2
Asperger's syndrome (3)	33%	1	67%	2	-	0
Visual Impairment (4)	25%	1	50%	2	25%	1

On the whole students were satisfied with the quality of course support documentation. Eighty-nine per cent of respondents felt it was 'good' or 'adequate'. Where the 'good' score was weaker, there were significant problems with accessibility and timing. Answers given elsewhere in the survey revealed that students with visual impairments found that printed materials were not always readily available in an accessible format. Students with Asperger's syndrome sometimes found that written information was too vague for them to follow easily.

We received a timetable of the creative writing course at the beginning of the year for each week. It was then moved to once a month which hasn't worked out, often being cancelled or no one told when the lectures are moved to. (Specific learning difficulty)

Material could be and is being changed to become more than adequate although there is a long way to go. (Mobility)

The deadlines were so close together. I realise subjects have to be taught before the essays can be done, however [it would be good] if all modules did like critical and cultural theory, having the questions in the module guide at the start, and you chose when you knew what you liked, rather than getting the essay four weeks before. (Specific learning difficulty)

Produce more handouts/key notes. (Specific learning difficulty)

Give me copies of the year's reading list before the semester starts so I can get the books and read them in time (and not suddenly change the reading list just after we've started the semester). (Specific learning difficulty)

Handbooks often contained many mistakes. (Multiple disabilities)

8.2 Pace of course

Disability (no. respondents)	Good		Adequate		Poor	
All disabilities (45)	38%	17	47%	21	16%	7
Mental health (10)	60%	6	30%	3	9%	1
Mobility (11)	55%	6	45%	5	-	0
Unseen disabilities (14)	50%	7	43%	6	7%	1
Visual impairment (4)	50%	2	50%	2	-	0
Asperger's syndrome (2)	50%	1	-	0	50%	1
Specific learning difficulty (18)	22%	4	50%	9	28%	5

The pace of courses was generally felt to be reasonable, over 80% of respondents rating it good or adequate. A noticeable exception were students with specific learning difficulties, 78% of whom rated the pace adequate or poor. This reflects the additional time that these students require for reading and writing activities. From comments made by students it appears that the heavy reading load characteristic of English courses causes particular problems as many also face organisational difficulties.

Deadlines are too close for me to spend a sufficient amount of time on each piece of work. Also, as an English student I am expected to read a number of books a week, which I often cannot do. (Specific learning difficulty)

Sometimes I felt that classes went too fast, but again, I am aware that 10-week quarters make it difficult to slow it down. (Unseen disability – Multiple Sclerosis)

I say the pace was poor... it was very slow. The time given to complete assignments wasn't enough. I was always rushed. But the teaching was spread out too much. They could have compacted it... they spent too much time on simple things. (Asperger's syndrome)

I felt there was too much emphasis put on the dissertation. (Mental health)

I find the lack of contact with others stressful, as I find it difficult to take the social initiative, and there are no formal structures in place to facilitate this. (Mental health and Asperger's syndrome)

8.3 Timing of assessments

Disability (no. respondents)	Good		Adequate		Poor	
All (45)	16%	7	58%	26	27%	12
Asperger's syndrome (3)	33%	1	33%	1	33%	1
Mobility (11)	27%	3	55%	6	18%	2
Visual impairment (4)	25%	1	50%	2	25%	1
Unseen disabilities (14)	22%	3	57%	8	22%	3
Specific learning difficulty (18)	17%	3	50%	9	33%	6
Mental health (11)	9%	1	64%	7	27%	3

Students found the timing of assessments poorer than the pace of their overall course, 85% classing it as 'adequate' or 'poor'. Throughout the survey students identified lack of time as one of the greatest barriers they faced. The comments show that assessment periods cause the greatest amount of difficulty, as the sheer volume of reading, writing and revision then required can become overwhelming.

The deadlines are ridiculous sometimes. I had to give in 3 x 3,000 essays in 3 consecutive days. So have most of my friends who do the course. It is silly to assume that someone could work to the best of their advantage under this pressure. (Mobility)

I have found that my subsidiary subject deadlines often clash with my English deadlines making it very difficult to put maximum time into coursework. (Specific learning difficulty)

Assessments are often all at once; it would be more beneficial if they split them up slightly. For example at Christmas we had 4 assignments due in, one 3,000 word, one 2,500, one 2,000 and one 1,000 that's a lot of words for someone with dyslexia and other disabilities to cope with. (Specific learning difficulty)

Exam frequency: exams seem placed too close, there seems no reason why exams can't be placed with even ten minutes/half an hour between them in order that I could remind myself of what I have revised for the next exam and not have to just hope I can remember something. (Specific learning difficulty)

8.4 Feedback

Disability (no. respondents)	Good		Adequate		Poor	
All disabilities (45)	34%	16	42%	20	23%	11
Specific learning difficulty (19)	37%	7	32%	6	32%	6
Unseen Disabilities (13)	46%	6	31%	4	23%	3
Mental health (11)	46%	5	46%	5	9%	1
Mobility (10)	60%	6	40%	4	-	0
Visual Impairment (3)	-	0	100%	3	-	0
Asperger's syndrome (3)	33%	1	67%	2	-	0

Students reported mixed experiences of feedback, 76% classing it as good or adequate. Students with specific learning difficulties were something of an exception with a third classing it as poor.

Feedback is rare, as my tutors are very busy. I only really receive productive criticism of a paragraph maybe per essay, which is insufficient. Creative work is criticised in workshops, which is very helpful. (Specific learning difficulty)

Be a bit more considerate bearing in mind I have already had to go through major testing and assessment to prove my disability and get a cover sheet for essays which seems to have no impact on their marking. (Specific learning difficulty)

I have had to wait long periods with no feedback on my work, which causes me stress and anxiety, although the feedback has been comprehensive and useful when I received it. (Mental health/Asperger's syndrome)

Feedback was very good with some tutors and poor with others. (Mental health)

I am still losing marks for spelling despite having a friend check the work and including a cover-sheet explaining my disability. (Specific learning difficulty)

Give more advice on assessment and what we need to pass. (Specific learning difficulty)

Provide more feedback, or set tutorial slots each term to consider progress. (Specific learning difficulty)

Learn how to respond to assignments in a more 'you did this wrong, this is how you improve it' manner. (Specific learning difficulty)

8.5 Timetabling

Disability (no. respondents)	Good		Adequate		Poor	
All disabilities (44)	43%	19	45%	20	11%	5
Specific learning difficulty (18)	50%	9	33%	6	17%	3
Unseen Disabilities (13)	38%	5	46%	6	15%	2
Mental health (10)	60%	6	40%	4	-	0
Mobility (10)	50%	5	50%	5	-	0
Visual Impairment (3)	-	0	100%	3	-	0
Asperger's syndrome (2)	50%	1	50%	1	-	0

Timetabling was felt to be good or adequate by 89% of students. The importance for students of receiving information early, to allow them to plan their workload in advance, was again highlighted: timetable changes and clashes can clearly exacerbate an already stressful time for many disabled students.

Timetabling was OK, but some people had clashes which the department was unable to sort out. Also, timetables were given out very late, meaning we had little time to prepare for the weeks ahead. In some cases, timetables were given out on the morning of the first day of lectures. (Mental health)

We received a timetable of the creative writing course at the beginning of the year for each week. It was then moved to once a month which hasn't worked out, often being cancelled or no one told when the lectures are moved to. Haven't received much feedback or many seminars on the subject. (Specific learning difficulty)

Timetabling for single parent with disability – very, very poor – difficult to undertake a degree with a disability let alone work around childcare issues – many lectures unattendable as clashed with personal responsibilities and no entitlement for help with childcare costs so lectures missed. (Mobility)

8.6 Proposed support strategies for staff

8.6.1 Inclusive teaching

A. Course documentation

- Course documentation obviously needs to be as clear and accessible as possible, for the sake of all students (cf. 4.4.1.A above). Details about modules need to be circulated as early as possible – and adhered to as far as possible. Last minute changes can have a serious impact on disabled students.
- Clarity in recruitment material about exactly what adjustments are possible – and what are not – and about the core competence standards⁶⁶ of the degree programme will greatly help disabled students thinking of applying to your department.
- Supplementing the standard formats (hard copy course handbooks, pdf files) with other media – videos, podcasts, diagrams – is also worth considering.
- Some student comments concern alterations to a schedule announced at the beginning of the course. Alterations of this type (change in the timing of seminars, the order of lectures, etc.) can be particularly problematic for disabled students, who will need to know about them as soon as possible (and in as accessible a form as possible).
- Some student comments on course documentation expressed anxiety about module/assessment requirements. It is worth revisiting your course materials to check that everything is explained as clearly as can be. Uncertainty about module requirements combined with a tight deadline can cause acute anxiety and exacerbate the effects of a variety of disabilities/conditions.
- Module or course handbooks can be combined with online exercises to help explain to students study skills such as referencing and essay structuring.

B. Timing

The student comments show vividly how difficult a log-jam of assessment tasks can make things for disabled students. Lecturers will be aware of the difficulties in ensuring, in a complicated degree programme, that assessments are adequately spaced out. Perhaps a reduction in the number of assessment tasks could be part of the answer? Giving students guidance on time management will help mitigate the problem too (see 4.4.1.B).

C. Feedback

- Clarity and accessibility are obviously a prerequisite for all feedback: not all disabled students unable to read your feedback will necessarily feel able to mention the fact. If actions to remedy a deficiency are not specifically pointed out, comments on essays can often seem cryptic to students.
- The most accessible means of marking hard-copy student work is with a black felt-tip pen.
- Student understanding of feedback can be enhanced by introducing elements of peer- and self-assessment into a module, and by explicit discussion (for example, in a seminar)

of assessment criteria (cf. Race et al. (2005), 135-141). If the students practise reading their own and other students' work (and/or specially-written sample answers) against the criteria, it will help them make better sense of formal staff feedback.

- It is sometimes unfortunate when students receive no feedback on their final piece of assessed work on a module, when such feedback could have helped them in their work on later modules. Is there a way in which you can make such feedback available and also make sure that students take advantage of it?
- If student numbers make individual feedback difficult, consider feeding back to a group of students, picking out key problems.
- Technology can help staff provide feedback in new and involving ways. One possibility is to record an audio file or podcast of your comments on a student's piece of work. Many students will find comments presented to them in this form much easier to take on board than written comments on an essay. Screen-capture software like 'Camtasia' can be used to link a recording of the lecturer's comments to a screen-capture video recording of the lecturer navigating through the essay in a 'Word' document, highlighting the precise section of text that is being referred to.⁶⁷

8.6.2 Student-specific teaching

- Some students may find it almost impossible to satisfy all the requirements of a reading list. It might be possible to reduce the volume of reading for these students, replacing it with an alternative (one-to-one tutorials, online exercises, etc.).
- Some disabilities may make giving advance notice of work particularly important: in such cases, particular modules could perhaps be finalised earlier than others. Students with visual impairments will need to make special arrangements about accessing texts.
- It may be necessary to change assessment deadlines for students with some disabilities, meanwhile making sure that they satisfy the learning outcomes of the course.
- It will help students with cognitive difficulties to know which aspect of an assessment task has lost them marks: is it problems with spelling and grammar, or with the organisation of an argument, or are there fundamental problems with the overall approach of the essay?
- Be aware that work by dyslexic students that looks as if it has never been proofread may in fact have been gone through many times by a student unable to take cognisance of her/his errors.
- Students may have a special cover-sheet or coloured label to attach to their assessed work, provided by the university's Disability Centre. If this is the practice in your institution, it would make sense to have a departmental policy on how to deal with notifications of this sort. It is important that all members of the teaching staff, including postgraduates and visiting lecturers, are aware of departmental policy on marking work flagged up in this way.

⁶⁶ See 1.3 above.

⁶⁷ See Russell Stannard's English Subject Centre case study, 'Using screen capture software in student feedback' at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/technology/camtasia.php.

9 Staff attitudes and behaviour

9.1 How well do English or Creative Writing staff relate to students with disabilities?

All disabilities		
Well	35%	17
Adequately	29%	14
Not well	14%	7
No response	14%	7
Commented instead	8%	4

This topic attracted some of the more extreme responses in the survey. Seventeen respondents (35%) felt that their experience of subject staff had been positive. However, the figures vary widely depending upon the disability. In the case of mobility, mental health and unseen disabilities, 50-60% of respondents felt that staff related well. Students with sensory and cognitive impairments were far less happy with only 0-20% satisfied.

It is perhaps significant that some students chose to comment instead of giving a categorical answer. Many students felt that the level of support varied substantially within their department, some staff being very helpful and others refusing to recognise the need for support. Some acknowledged the large demands placed on staff time and suggested more awareness training and support for lecturers could be the answer.

Some of them are very supportive and others completely ignore, and do not appear to accept.

(Specific learning difficulty – Dyslexia)

Most seem to have had no experience of disability in any form and are unwilling to adjust their teaching style – or say they will then don't remember or understand the importance of what I have requested.

(Hearing impairment)

Hugely variable – difficult to generalize.

(Unseen disability)

Generally very understanding.

(Multiple disabilities)

I have no complaints. All the tutors and staff are very friendly. But I think that maybe some day training in the field of mental health may help them in dealing with people with mental illness.

(Mental health)

There is not a fuss made of the fact I am dyslexic by those who know I am; however, I believe that most do not know I am dyslexic – or what problems I have.

(Specific learning difficulty)

Not well – it is variable, but often the staff have led quite secluded lives really in terms of dealing with a wide range of people. There is talk of diversity and inclusion and equality but in reality all students, including the disabled ones, have to fit into the department's mould.

(Other disability)

9.2 How could lecturers improve their students' experience?

Thirty-eight respondents provided feedback on areas where they thought that subject staff could do more:

- Make handouts/'PowerPoint' slides available in advance (6)
- Nothing (6)
- Improve awareness of disability and its impact on learning (5)
- Adjust teaching style (4)
- Be prepared to accommodate individual needs (4)
- Provide reading lists in advance (3)
- Slower paced delivery during lectures (3)
- Provide more feedback (3)
- Improve timetabling (3)
- Be more aware that disability isn't always visible (2)
- Provide more information on assessment criteria (1)
- Be discreet in front of other students (1)
- Produce more handouts focusing on key notes (1)
- Provide more structured lectures (1)
- Ask other students to keep quiet or leave (1)
- Ensure that adjustments are implemented (1)
- Provide help with proofreading (1)
- Remove exam-based assessment (1)
- Provide clearly detailed administrative procedures (1)

There were several common themes, echoing comments quoted above in other sections of this report. The pace of delivery, be it of a class or a whole course, was frequently stressed, as was the requirement for course materials to be provided in advance. This set of concerns is related to the need, highlighted elsewhere in the survey, for disabled students to be particularly well organized (being forced to plan their time more carefully than other students). Providing advance copies of reading lists would allow disabled students to begin reading during the holidays, reducing the stress that they might otherwise experience during term time; it would also make it more likely that disabled students would read as widely as other students, in turn improving their capacity for high grades. The request for advance copies of handouts and presentation slides is linked to the problems highlighted in the section on difficulties related to class-based activities (5.2). Note-taking and attention span were both mentioned by over 60% of those facing problems in class. Providing advance copies of notes would enable these students to put a lecture into context and pave the way to easier note-taking strategies such as annotating slides or highlighting key points.

Other common answers to this question focused on the need for staff to be open to making individual adjustments when possible. This was often tied to a call for staff to improve their awareness of disability – although one student recognised that time limits made this impractical and instead made a more detailed suggestion about how this might be achieved (see first comment below).

Six students stated – in a positive manner – that they felt that nothing further could be done to improve their experience (though one student qualified this by explaining that he/she was only referring to lectures). It appears that most of the students that gave this answer have mobility-related disabilities rather than cognitive or sensory related ones.

Greater awareness

Increased awareness of Asperger's syndrome, and support and training, but not as an additional workload, so possibly setting up more focused pools of expertise, with a general increase in awareness and basic strategies.

(Asperger's syndrome/Mental health)

Have more training on dyslexia (Specific learning difficulty)

I know 'disability' is the hugest umbrella but, as my disability isn't visible (unless I'm looking especially lousy), there seems to be a complete lack of awareness or recognition that my brain might not function and that I can still study at degree level. (Mobility, Unseen disability, Other disability)

More readily understand what kinds of things could be done to accommodate problems, rather than leaving it up always to a student to know what they need. Maybe this is a shortcoming of the Office of Disability Services, because I am not aware of all that could be provided to me to help. But even so, I feel that teachers could also know some of the things that might be helpful. This is probably unrealistic, though. (Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

Providing more supporting materials for classes

Make the reading for future classes available beforehand. Slow down in lectures; sometimes they have so much to say they don't pause and it makes it difficult for everyone to follow, not just those with a disability.

(Specific learning difficulty – Dyslexia)

Provide more notes in advance, more written material – classes in format that makes the job of my palantypist easier so they can get me more comprehensive notes – i.e. tutor notes for support worker to look at difficult vocabulary beforehand. (Hearing impaired)

Perhaps encourage a more direct experience of literature through going to the theatre or using multimedia alternatives such as cinema or video. (Mental health)

Consider each student with a specific strategy for his or her own learning requirements. (Visual impairment, Unseen disability – Multiple sclerosis)

Listen more to my individual needs and recognise they will change over time. (Unseen disability/Other disability)

Better administration

Provide timetable, 'handouts' on the web and clear descriptions of admin procedures well in advance. Do not assume that all students can hear or see brilliantly, do not assume that 'reading' means reading text from a printed page very quickly and accurately. (Other disability)

Give me copies of the year's reading list before the semester starts so I can get the books and read them in time (and not suddenly change the reading until just after we've started the semester). One or two could slow the pace they go at as they often are talking about something else and changing the page of their presentations whilst I am still trying to copy what is on that page (having had to leave copying what was on the page before that). (Specific learning difficulty)

Handouts could be available sooner for the lecture, even just a draft version if they are not quite finished. (Specific learning difficulty)

Refresh teaching methods

Make some lectures more interactive.

(Specific learning difficulty, Unseen disability – ME)

1. Plan lecture more thoroughly. 2. Start on time. 3. Email us slides used in the lecture. 4. Keep other students quiet throughout the class or ask them to leave. 5. Classes on creative writing would be extremely beneficial. (Specific learning difficulty)

Slow down the lecture. Sometimes I think there is too much information covered in one class.

(Specific learning difficulty, Attention deficit disorder)

Give more advice on assessment and what we need to pass. (Specific learning difficulty)

9.3 Proposed support strategies for staff

Sections elsewhere in this report offer guidance on many of the areas (such as lectures and seminars) raised by student comments in 9.2. The suggestions in this section are therefore limited to material about the 'etiquette' of dealing with disabled students. Underpinning these recommendations is the central (and obvious) importance of treating disabled students as unique individuals and avoiding prejudging them in stereotyped terms as (for example) childlike, sweet, stupid, weird, noble, asexual, brave, embittered, victimised or disenfranchised. It can be difficult to avoid falling into these ways of thinking, not least because of their perpetuation in much media reporting around disability.⁶⁸

- Do not get too hung up about being politically correct or using the wrong words (for example, visual metaphors when talking to a blind student).⁶⁹
- Talk to students about the kind of help they might require. Do not assume that all disabled students will need help.
- Do not assume that the experience and requirements of all students with a particular condition are the same.
- Do not assume that a student is stupid because they ask you to repeat something or speak louder. Be patient when asked to repeat material.
- If a disabled student is speaking to you through an interpreter, make sure you address your answer to the student rather than to the interpreter.
- Wheelchair users can be protective of their space, so do not lean on their wheelchair when talking to them.
- Do not shout at a hearing-impaired student, but do make sure that you are facing them.
- Avoid discussing the problems of a disabled student in front of other students.
- Do not ask disabled students to 'speak for' all people with their impairment.
- Try to avoid making too much of a fuss about disabled students and their requirements in class. Many students will find being constantly singled out embarrassing.

⁶⁸ A good way of exploring past these stereotypes is to take a look at the BBC's disability website Ouch! at www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/.

⁶⁹ For more on this issue, with glosses on particular terms, see www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/understanding-and-awareness/communicating-with-disabled-students.php on the Open University's Inclusive Teaching website.

10 Advice for future students

A key aim of the survey was to find ways of making the experience of current students benefit students of the future. We therefore asked respondents to the survey what they felt the greatest barriers had been during their studies, and how they would advise future students to overcome them.

10.1 Barriers to study

Thirty-nine respondents mentioned particular barriers:

- Lecturers not making adjustments or not understanding the difficulties faced by the student (10)
- Lack of time (8)
- Assessment methods (4)
- Attendance (4)
- Other students not making adjustments (3)
- Communication (3)
- Writing difficulties (cognitive) (3)
- Reading accessibility (3)
- Reading volume (Specific learning difficulty and Visual impairment) (3)
- Depends on the disability (2)
- Embarrassment at asking for help (2)
- Non-academic staff not making adjustments (2)
- Poor memory (1)
- Lecture format (1)
- Library access (1)

Lack of understanding by others was the most frequently mentioned barrier, within which category the failure of teaching staff to implement adjustments was the most common problem. Some students also reported a lack of awareness in staff of how certain teaching and assessment methods could cause problems. Several students highlighted the lack of understanding of fellow students⁷⁰, whilst one student felt that university support staff were particularly unhelpful.

Several students suggested potential improvements, disability awareness training and improved communication between university disability services and academic departments being the most common proposals.

Lack of time and problems with time management were highlighted by eight respondents. These problems often resulted from the need for time to cope with the volume of reading. They thus, in part, link back to the issue of the accessibility of reading materials (see 4 above).

One other issue of note was attendance and problems linked to disability-related absence. Students facing this set of problems found it difficult to catch up without easy access to notes or recordings of classes.

Relationships with other people

Other people's attitudes. You can get alternative arrangements, assistive technologies, extensions, but attitudes are different. (Unseen disability, Other disability)

TIME! and people who do not believe your problem is real i.e. dyslexics often come up against teachers who do not accept dyslexia as a disability. (Specific learning difficulty – Dyslexia)

The stigma attached to the disability and the fact that some people can sometimes assume that because you're mentally ill or disabled you're somehow an inferior person. (Mental health – OCD)

Peer activity. Working with others. Making friends. (Mental health)

Lack of awareness and concrete, simple teaching strategies which work, and don't add horrendously to workload. (Asperger's syndrome/Mental health)

Support and understanding of teaching staff or having a course tutor who would co-ordinate with each subject to adopt best teaching practice for student. (Visual Impairment/Multiple sclerosis)

Lecturers' opinions. It makes a huge difference to know you have a lecturer who accepts and encourages you. (Specific learning difficulty)

Probably, in my own case, being afraid to ask for help – or unaware that it exists. (Unseen disability)

Pressure of reading and time

Amount of reading to be completed and not knowing where to go to access large print copies or talking books and being able to know they are the same versions as those being studied by my peers. (Visual impairment)

Not realising (or being told) just how much reading there is and what the deadlines are – especially if a slow reader/writer. (Specific learning difficulty)

[Disabled students] have problems to deal with that most students don't, so are always slightly behind, especially at times of stress. (Mental health – OCD)

The amount of time it will take me to write an assignment. (Specific learning difficulty)

The amount of reading they want students to do in a short period of time, and not giving a breakdown of the assessment criteria. (Specific learning difficulty)

Other things

The wordiness of it all!! And the fact that it is difficult to catch up if you miss something because of the subjective nature of many lectures. (Specific learning difficulty, Unseen disability – ME)

I think English and Creative Writing requires a degree of self-confidence, which many people with disabilities perhaps seem to lack. (Mental health)

⁷⁰ This raises the question of the extent to which universities should be responsible for teaching all students about inclusive practices prior to their entering the workforce.

Within Creative Writing, for my disability the problem has been the emphasis on attendance and participation. Working in small groups and reading to the group is very difficult. (Mobility, Unseen disability, Other disability)

I'm not sure. For me, very vague or open ended questions were an enormous problem. (Asperger's syndrome)

For a wheelchair user- it's library access. Actually having to get to the library especially when you are a distance learner. (Mobility)

10.2 What can future students do to maximise their chances of success?

Forty-one respondents suggested things new students could do to minimize the impact of their condition/disability on their studies:

- Don't be afraid to ask for help (17)
- Be active in making teaching staff aware of your requirements (15)
- Do it, i.e. don't be afraid to start the course (9)
- Be very self-aware/aware of your requirements/talk to peers who have the same condition/disability (5)
- Research what extra help is available and find out about the awareness of teaching staff at the application stage (4)
- Apply for the Disabled Students' Allowance (3)
- Obtain reading lists in advance (2)
- Plan/manage your time carefully (2)
- Consider your health and defer or study part-time if necessary (1)
- Don't do it if reading is your main difficulty (1)
- Don't work part-time (1)
- Network with other students to create a support base (1)
- Identify useful study techniques and software in advance (1)
- An academic support worker would be helpful for those with autism (1)

Many of those responding to this question were keen to emphasize that support is available if students are prepared to ask for it. Many also made the point that students are often their own best advocates as they will generally understand better than anyone else how their condition affects their ability to study. One respondent suggested finding out from peers with the same condition what teaching and assessment practices had been most helpful to them.

As students will not know exactly what to expect at HE level, several respondents made the point that future students should contact potential universities in advance in order to assess the level of support and the types of reasonable adjustment on offer.⁷¹

Time was again mentioned in various forms, particular emphasis being placed on the need for prospective students to plan well in advance of beginning a course in order to make best use of the possibilities.

One student had very negative advice:

ME: don't do any degree unless you are well enough to or do it part-time. Dyslexia – don't do English unless reading isn't your problem!

(Specific learning difficulty, Unseen disability – ME)

Choose your course according to the quality of the disability support at the university – investigate this thoroughly before you apply – this is more important than the course itself in many ways. (Hearing impaired)

Talk to other students who have gone through the experience. There is software that is useful, learning and study techniques, and moral support is always useful. (Unseen disability – Diabetes/Other disability)

Do not be afraid to ask for assistance, do not feel ashamed of yourself. (Specific learning difficulty – Dyslexia)

Don't get annoyed (with staff attitudes). Find the humour in it. Write a stingingly good piece of work that maybe illustrates the practical meaning of what it means to have to constantly adjust oneself to the environment (including the teaching staff)... (Other disability)

Seek help as early as possible from the department and Disability Services and try not to let the disability affect your socializing. But remember that people are very accommodating and helpful on the whole. (Multiple disabilities)

I think a support worker would be useful to help someone with autism break down the assignments into specifics, and not spend too much time answering questions to the nth degree. (Asperger's syndrome)

To talk to their tutor when they encounter a problem. To seek advice whenever they need it rather than struggling on their own. (Specific learning difficulty)

Reading just takes longer – I'm afraid you're going to have to accept it. (Visual impairment)

Always ask questions on assessment so you know what they want from you in your essays. (Specific learning difficulty)

Make the most of every day and every minute you can spend one-to-one with the lecturers. Do not work at a part-time job at the same time if possible. (Specific learning difficulty)

Become friends with other students of Creative Writing, providing a base which will both challenge and help you, undoubtedly improving your own work. (Specific learning difficulty)

To go for it! If you are struggling, talk to someone. I regularly email my tutors and ask for advice, apologise for my absences and apply for essay extensions. They will genuinely try to help in any way possible, making my life a lot easier when sometimes I feel like I just want to give up. (Mobility)

Get in contact with the university well beforehand and try to get copies of the reading lists. Start reading at the beginning of the Summer holidays so you're ready in time. Research and write essays as soon as you get them – otherwise you may end up with five essays to research and write up and good luck in your exams (that's all it feels you get, to a degree). Make sure to get as much advice as possible and do practice exams with the dyslexia helper. (Specific learning difficulty)

⁷¹ An important point, given the obligation on universities under the Disability Equality Duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' in advance of a disabled student arriving at the institution. See 1.2 above.

11 Best experiences

When first sifting through student responses to this survey, we were struck by just how high a level of detail had been provided. Wherever a text box was provided for further comments respondents frequently wrote far more than the one-line answers that often appear in surveys of this sort. A great deal of thought had clearly gone into each answer, involving both detailed reflections on experience (positive as well as negative), and thoughtful suggestions about what might be done to improve departmental practice. What came through time and again, hearteningly, was the students' love of their subject. Only two or three respondents made comments suggesting that they regretted starting their course, and further examination of these students' responses showed that the students had not been fully aware of what support strategies might have helped them. This chapter includes a selection of responses to a question asking respondents to identify their 'best experience' during their degree programme. The variety and warmth of the comments shows how beneficial English and Creative Writing courses can be for disabled students, and is surely the best possible argument in favour of an inclusive approach to teaching our subject.

Curriculum areas

The wide range of issues that have been put forward, the different genres and the people. (Mental health)

Looking at a wide range of ideas from all areas of life, from ways of reading the city to sexuality and gender, to Lacan. (Mental health – Bipolar disorder)

Learning about contemporary writers and how external context has influenced their work and methods of representation. (Mental health)

I have been learning about different ways people talk and language codes people use when talking to other people. (Specific learning difficulty)

Self-development

The speed at which the mind adapts to study at HE level. I found that I started to think 'differently': I analyse and evaluate more often and more effectively. I know better how to direct my own study and, if I want to, I can initiate or change my own learning pace, space and goal. (Mental health)

The opportunity to discover many books I would have never thought to read before. Also the freedom of expression and my own opinions. (Unseen disability - Epilepsy)

I like how it has no wrong or right answers, and you can discuss an idea and debate something, I feel it allows me to open up my views and develop my debating skills. (Unseen disability – Epilepsy)

Being able to write scripts and stuff and express myself without restriction. (Mental health – OCD)

In general, the best experience has been my growing reading comprehension skills, as well as my increased writing abilities. In relation to my disability, the best experience has been to assure myself that I still have the mental capacity to understand the works I read. The nature of MS is unpredictable, so my mental capabilities likely won't stay as sharp as they should be. Most of my lesions are on the left side of my brain, which affects language skills, and I often have trouble finding the word I want in conversation. Usually in papers I turn in, though, I am able to take my time and find the words I want. (Unseen disability – MS)

Interaction with others

Meeting new students/tutors and exchanging ideas/ getting new, fresh and valued feedback on my own writing. (Unseen disability)

I'm doing a PhD – the one-to-one sessions with my supervisor, he really challenges me mentally and we have very lively debates. (Unseen disabilities)

I feel the best experience is just being around other like-minded people (i.e. people who share a passion for writing). Workshopping our work together has given me a great insight into other people's work and my own, and given me more confidence in my abilities as a writer. (Mental health)

Discussing ideas in teams. (Mental health – OCD)

The literary discussion. I love to read but never before had the opportunity to discuss my opinions of a text in great detail. I have also found critical feedback on my poetry invaluable. (Asperger's syndrome/Mental health)

Actually getting the chance to go on the course thanks to a very proactive Disability Coordinator! (Hearing impairment)

The fact tutors will listen to you even if you do not believe in yourself. Tutors are supportive of all work, not just their own subject. (Specific learning difficulty)

My own sense of achievement; being able to discuss writing with others interested in the subject; feedback on my own writing (although not enough of this). (Mental health, Asperger's syndrome)

My MA in English Studies, which I found inspiring. (Unseen disability)

The best experience is listening to others reading your work out to a receptive audience. (Visual Impairment)

Getting good marks sometimes. Getting to know tutors. Learning some really interesting stuff. (Specific learning difficulty – dyslexia, Unseen disability – ME)

12 A checklist for departments

We end the report with a list of relatively straightforward measures to help disabled students which could be put in place at departmental level. Some items in this ten-point plan will seem obvious—and, indeed, will in some departments already be in place. These measures will help all students, not just those categorized as ‘disabled’, particularly if their importance is communicated to graduate teaching assistants and visiting lecturers as well as to full-time members of staff.

1. Ensure that your department has a clear policy on its relationship with the Disability Centre (or equivalent) at your institution.
2. Ensure that your department has a clear policy for informing members of staff about the presence of disabled students in lectures or seminar groups.
3. Provide disabled students with many opportunities to disclose their disability.
4. Review departmental materials such as course handbooks to make sure that they are accessible and easy to understand.
5. Create departmental guidelines on the use of ‘PowerPoint’, handouts and online materials similar to those in 5.4.1.A above.
6. Establish as part of the culture of the department the expectation that some support for each lecture will be available online before and after the lecture (see 5.4.1.A above).
7. Investigate the possibility of a more varied set of assessment types (see 4.4.1.D above).
8. Establish what the ‘core’ competence standards of your course are (see 1.3 above).
9. Create departmental guidelines on running teaching sessions ‘inclusively’, making recommendations such as those in 5.4.1.B above.
10. Ensure that the department’s attitude to marking written work (including work flagged up as being produced by dyslexic students) is as consistent as possible, and is clearly communicated to students.



Appendix 1: Useful websites

The following websites contain more detailed guidance on working with disabled students than it has been possible to provide in this report. Check the webpages in your own institution: many universities and colleges now have excellent web areas on disability and inclusive teaching.

[Making your teaching inclusive \(Open University\)](#)

www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/index.php

Detailed information and guidance about disability in general and the requirements of specific disabilities as well as excellent tips on inclusive teaching, illustrated with video clips. Also includes material designed for use in staff development sessions.

[SCIPS Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study \(University of Worcester\)](#)

www.scips.worc.ac.uk

Maps problems associated with particular disabilities onto the requirements of QAA benchmark statements for the different disciplines in HE. The homepage for English is **www.scips.worc.ac.uk/subjects_and_disabilities/english/** and provides links to English-specific advice about teaching students with a wide range of conditions.

[Inclusive Curriculum Project \(Geography Discipline Network \(GDN\), University of Gloucestershire\)](#)

<http://resources.glos.ac.uk/ceal/gdn/publications/icp/index.cfm>

www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/icp/index.htm

Useful across all disciplines despite its nominal focus on geography, earth and environmental sciences. Contains detailed guides for academics on teaching students with specific disabilities, as well as guides tailored for heads of department, support staff and lecturers, and a collection of case studies.

[Higher Education Academy](#)

www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/disability

Contains information about relevant events, a disability contacts database and resources and guidance on inclusive teaching and learning.

[DART: Disabilities Active Resource Tool \(Loughborough University\)](#)

<http://dart.lboro.ac.uk>

Although taking its raw materials from engineering and the built environment, a very useful website for lecturers in other disciplines. Includes very detailed case studies about individual disabled students and a database ('the DART matrix') of advice on how to help students with specific disabilities.

[Premia: Making Research Education accessible](#)

www.premia.ac.uk/

Very useful resources on postgraduate studies and disability, including case studies.

[SPACE Project – Inclusive Assessment](#)

www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=10494

Detailed, discursive reports from a research project (the Staff-Student Partnership for Assessment Change and Evaluation) on disabled students and assessment across a range of disciplines. Includes material on the student experience of assessment and on the piloting of new assessment methods.

[Action on Access](#)

<http://www.actiononaccess.org>

The disability area of this site contains a searchable directory of over 840 resources, many on learning and teaching, as well as details of a telephone and email helpdesk.

[Equality Challenge Unit](#)

www.ecu.ac.uk/inclusive-practice

Guidance on a range of equality issues in HE.

[Engineering Subject Centre Guide: Working with Disabled Students](#)

www.engsc.ac.uk/downloads/resources/disguide2ed.pdf

The second edition (2005) of a thorough guide to good practice, useful across all subject areas.

[Teachability \(University of Strathclyde\)](#)

www.teachability.strath.ac.uk/

A set of useful online publications offering advice on accessible course design, teaching, elearning and examining.

[Demos: online materials for staff disability awareness \(Manchester universities\)](#)

<http://jarmin.com/demos/index.html>

An older website with some broken links, but with much useful material.

[Teaching at Nottingham: Inclusivity](#)

www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/themes/inclusivity/

Video and text case studies showcasing inclusive teaching practice at the University of Nottingham.

[English Subject Centre \(Royal Holloway, University of London\)](#)

www.english.heacademy.ac.uk

As well as an area on diversity (**www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/access/index.php**), the Subject Centre website includes case studies showcasing innovative teaching ideas (**[.../explore/publications/casestudies/index.php](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/index.php)**), a collection of concise seminar tips (**[.../explore/resources/t3/index.php](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/t3/index.php)**), advice on seminar-teaching (**[.../explore/resources/seminars/index.php](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/seminars/index.php)**) and a set of pages on the student experience (**[.../explore/resources/studexp/index.php](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/studexp/index.php)**).

[JISC TechDis](#)

www.techdis.ac.uk/

Contains many useful resources on the use of technology to make teaching more inclusive and improve the experiences of disabled students, including information on obtaining textbooks in alternative formats (**www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat**), on the use of technologies to provide a more accessible learning experience (**[.../getfreeware](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/getfreeware)** and **[.../getm-learning](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/getm-learning)**), on the creation of accessible learning materials (**[.../getcreation](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/getcreation)**), and on web accessibility (**[.../index.php?p=9_4](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=9_4)**) and on e-assessment (**[.../geteassessment](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/geteassessment)**).

[Skills for Access](#)

www.skillsforaccess.org.uk/

Includes case studies on individual students as well as detailed guidance on multimedia accessibility.

[Guide to accessible web design](#)

<http://jarmin.com/accessibility/>

A lucid introduction for web-designers.

[Lexdis: Ideas for e-Learning](#)

www.lexdis.org/

Strategies for improving e-learning, put together by students.

[Assist-IT](#)

www.assist-it.org.uk/index.htm

Tutorials and software to improve IT accessibility.

[E-bulletins on inclusive practice](#)

www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk/networks/sig/index.asp

Concise advice on inclusive teaching from the HE Academy Psychology Network.

Appendix 2: Specific disabilities: brief descriptions and useful websites

This section includes short introductions to specific impairments, grouped accordingly to the disability codes used by UCAS. There are computer simulations of the effects of some of these impairments at www.techdis.ac.uk/simdis.

Specific learning difficulties (UCAS disability code 01, or 11 on university systems)

Much the most common, and best known, condition in this category is dyslexia. As its Greek etymology suggests, dyslexia involves 'difficulties with words', though of a number of different kinds: slow reading; misreading; weak comprehension of printed materials; difficulties in putting written items in a correct sequence; erratic spelling. It also frequently involves problems in organizing thought clearly (and thus in planning written work), weak concentration and also poor time management. Sometimes motor skills are affected too. At the same time, however, dyslexia can entail considerable creativity and sensitivity to verbal nuance (many artists and architects are dyslexic and a significant number of people with dyslexia work as writers). For case studies on dyslexic students in HE, see Pollak (2005).

Other conditions coming under this heading include dyspraxia, a condition including many elements also found in dyslexia which can also involve problems with physical co-ordination ('clumsiness') and confusion with sequences, unclear speech and social skills and often co-exists with a high level of creativity and problem-solving skills, and dyscalculia (problems with numbers, numerical concepts, reasoning and memory).

People with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder have difficulties with concentration and can suffer from mood swings and have under-developed social skills.

A number of people with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) also experience a form of visual stress known as scotopic sensitivity syndrome or Irlen's syndrome. This can make it difficult to focus clearly on text, particularly when black on white.

To register their positive intellectual elements, specific learning difficulties are sometimes referred to as 'specific learning differences'.

Dyslexia Research Trust

www.dyslexic.org.uk/

British Dyslexia Association

www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/index.html

Dyspraxia Foundation

www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/index.php

ADDISS: ADHD Information Services

www.addiss.co.uk

Dyspraxia and Neurodiversity Association

<http://www.danda.org.uk>

BRAINHE: Best resources for achievement and intervention re neurodiversity in higher education

www.brainhe.com/

Blind/Partially sighted/Visual impairment (UCAS disability code 02)

Visually impaired students have sight problems that cannot be corrected by using glasses or contact lenses. There is a wide range of visual impairments (see the table on the Inclusive Teaching website at www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/understanding-and-awareness/common-terms-relating-to-visual-impairment.php) and the severity of an impairment may vary from day to day. Most people registered blind are able to see shapes and colours to some extent – only about one in five are completely without sight. Many visually impaired students will already have highly developed ways of working around their impairment, so it will make sense to find out in as much detail as possible how your teaching methods can best fit in with these strategies.

Royal National Institute for the Blind

www.rnib.org.uk/

Deaf/Hearing Impairment (UCAS disability code 03)

Hearing loss may be associated with other injuries or medical problems, and comes in a number of different forms: see the list on the Inclusive Teaching website at www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/understanding-and-awareness/types-of-deafness.php. Often, there will be problems with hearing sounds of a particular pitch, something which cannot be corrected by hearing aids. As with visual impairment, this is an area where frequent consultation with the student is essential. Deafness and other forms of hearing loss are often not obvious to other people, so the condition can involve considerable anxiety and feelings of isolation. The first language of some hearing-impaired students is BSL (British Sign Language), rather than English, something which can cause very severe difficulties (Mole and Peacock (2006)).

British Deaf Association

<http://bda.org.uk/>

RNID: Royal National Institute for Deaf People

www.rnid.org.uk/

Watch Words: Deaf Awareness for Teachers

www.techdis.ac.uk/watchwords

Wheelchair User/Mobility (UCAS disability code 04)

Disabilities under this heading include a wide range of medical conditions, including damage to muscles (e.g. muscular dystrophy), joint damage (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis), many types of damage to the nervous system and spinal cord and damage to the brain (e.g. cerebral palsy, traumatic head injury). Many of these conditions will not require the use of a wheelchair, and many will also involve a wide range of symptoms unconnected with mobility. Mobility problems, meanwhile, will often lead to feelings of debilitating pain and fatigue.

Mobility, dexterity, pain and fatigue (Open University Inclusive Teaching)

www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/understanding-and-awareness/mobility-dexterity-pain-and-fatigue.php

Mental health difficulties (UCAS disability code 06)

This code covers a wide range of different types of condition which can vary in their severity and effects from day to day, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), schizophrenia and phobia. Mental health difficulties are often not disclosed by students.

Mind

www.mind.org.uk/index.htm

Royal College of Psychiatrists

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/

Understanding mental health difficulties (Open University Inclusive Teaching)

www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/understanding-and-awareness/understanding-mental-health-difficulties.php

OCD-UK

www.ocduk.org/

Unseen disability (UCAS disability code 07)

Though many disabilities are not immediately obvious to other people, this code is used to refer to a large number of disabling medical conditions, including epilepsy, diabetes, ME (chronic fatigue syndrome), HIV and AIDS, cancer, cystic fibrosis and kidney and liver problems. This is an area about which it is impossible to generalise: symptoms will vary widely and be constant for some conditions and variable for others.

Multiple disabilities (UCAS disability code 08)

This code is used by students with disabilities in more than one of the other categories.

Other disability (UCAS disability code 09, or 96 on university systems)

This code is used for disabilities which do not fall into the other categories: there will be details about the disability on the student's UCAS form.

Autistic spectrum – Asperger's syndrome (UCAS disability code T, or 10 on university systems)

People with autistic spectrum conditions experience varying levels of difficulty with communication (both verbal and non-verbal), socialising, empathy and dealing with unfamiliar situations. Often they will understand language very literally and be unable to interpret body language. Asperger's syndrome is very similar to autism but involves fewer problems with speaking and often coexists with high intelligence (in particular, a close attention to detail). Autistic spectrum disorders are often associated with specific learning difficulties.

National Autistic Society

www.nas.org.uk/

The Autism Centre at Sheffield Hallam University

www.shu.ac.uk/education/theautismcentre/

Cambridge Lifespan Asperger Syndrome Service (CLASS) – Autism Research Centre

www.autismresearchcentre.com/arc/default.asp

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'All the voices in this report, even the most critical, should be heard by us all, because not listening, not being open and sensitive to them, is somehow failing students and what lies at the heart of the subject.'

Professor Robert Eaglestone,
in the Foreword to this report



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