

## Disabled Students and Fieldwork: Towards Inclusivity?

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### Abstract

*Awareness of the need to develop inclusive practices which give equal opportunities to disabled students in HEIs has been stimulated by the Quality Assurance Agency's (2000) Code of Practice - Students with Disabilities and the Special Education Needs and Disability Act (2001). This paper reviews some of the ways in which the barriers to their inclusion in fieldwork may be dismantled. Many of the modifications are of benefit to all students undertaking fieldwork.*

### Introduction

*'Institutions should ensure that, wherever possible, disabled students have access to academic and vocational placements including field trips and study abroad' (QAA, 2000, Precept 11)*

*'Inclusive field trip design will envisage a variety of potential participants, and accommodate as many varied needs as possible without compromising the educational objectives'* (University of Strathclyde, 2000, p.2)

Awareness of the need to develop inclusive practices, which provide equal opportunities for disabled students in various parts of their courses, is beginning to spread through Higher Education Institutions in the UK. This has been stimulated by the publication of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2000) *Code of Practice - Students with Disabilities* and the extension of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) to higher education through the Special Education Needs and Disability Act (2001).

The Geography Discipline Network (GDN) has recently undertaken a project, funded by HEFCE, involving geographers, earth and environmental scientists and disability advisors, to help raise awareness of inclusivity issues. The aim has been to identify and promote the principles and good practice of how to provide learning support for disabled students undertaking fieldwork and related activities. The advantage of focusing on fieldwork is that many of the issues faced by disabled students in HE are magnified in this form of teaching and learning. If the barriers to full participation by everyone can be reduced or overcome, it is likely that our awareness of the obstacles to their full participation in other learning activities will be heightened and the difficulties of overcoming the barriers will be lessened.

The net outcome of the quality assurance and legislative changes is that HEIs will need to treat disability issues in a more structured and transparent way. In particular, we may expect to see a relative shift of emphasis from issues of recruitment and physical access to issues of parity of the learning experience that disabled students receive. The implication of this shift is that disability issues 'cannot remain closed within a student services arena but must become part of the mainstream learning and teaching debate' (Adams and Brown, 2000, p.8). But there is an opportunity here as well as a challenge. As we become more sensitive to the diversity of student needs, we can adjust how we teach and facilitate learning in ways which will benefit all our students.

### Fieldwork and disability

The images of fieldwork presented in undergraduate prospectuses emphasise masculine, youthful, able-bodied people conquering difficult terrain (Hall, *et al.*, 2001). Such images can deter those who do not share the displayed characteristics, and although Virtual Field Courses may provide new learning experiences for some disabled students, this sidesteps the main issue of access by disabled students to the full curriculum, including fieldwork.

The Disability and Discrimination Act (1995) defines a person's disability as 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. More than 4% of undergraduates in the UK (22,500) self-assessed themselves as having a disability in 1998/9: given that there is no obligation to divulge, the actual number may be closer to 10%. Less than 5% of those reporting were wheelchair users or had mobility difficulties, disabilities often regarded as providing the greatest challenges to would-be field class organisers. The most common category was unseen disabilities such as epilepsy, diabetes or asthma (39%), followed by dyslexia (26%). Remembering that there are many different types of disability is important in planning for inclusion because detailed needs differ for different groups and individuals, and a personal approach within an overarching strategy is required. It is easy to make erroneous assumptions about what students with particular impairments can or cannot do, when usually the best thing to do is simply to ask them.

The reaction of many staff, when faced with the realisation of the wide variety of disabilities that students in their classes or on fieldwork may have, is one of lack of confidence. Mention of specific medical conditions may leave staff feeling concerned that they will be expected to develop medical expertise in order to support disabled students. This is where an understanding of different concepts or models of disability becomes important (Oliver, 1990). Medical models of disability tend to individualise the problems experienced by disabled people, and assume that they are subjects for treatment and cure. By comparison social models shift the focus from what is 'wrong' with an individual, to 'society's failure to accept disabled people for who they are and to provide adequate facilities for them' (Kitchen, 2000, p.7). The emphasis thus moves from pity or sympathy, on to generic barriers to participation in mainstream activities which need to be identified and overcome through strategic planning.

### Dismantling the barriers to inclusion

Steps, ramps and remote locations have traditionally been the focus of much consideration, but this represents an overly simplistic response to disabled students' needs. In reality, there is a range of potential barriers to inclusion, certainly including physical barriers (such as print size, audibility, as well as building and site access) but embracing other types too. Barriers of personal attitudes (of staff, other students, the general public) and barriers of institutional and organisational systems (particular course requirements, time constraints, regulations), may well be more significant for individual students in the longer term. Moreover, the barriers faced may be complex. For example, mature students with mobility problems may feel that their presence on an excursion to an upland location may damage the experience of younger able-bodied people for whom the visit was initially conceived, even if appropriate transport was arranged. A student with severe dyslexia, faced with completing Health and Safety paperwork at short notice, may not be able to comply with the legislation involved in visiting a particular site, and may either exclude herself or expose the group to unnecessary risk. Lecturers aware of someone with mental health difficulties or an addiction may approach the university management assuming that the student's behaviour on a residential class might compromise the achievements of other students, without having discussed this with him. A mix of attitudinal, organisational and physical barriers to participation is the norm, rather than the exception. And it is at this level that Departments need initially to plan, so that these situations do not arise.

The Special Education Needs and Disability Act establishes that 'an educational provider would discriminate against a disabled student if he failed to make reasonable adjustment to any arrangements, including physical features of premises, for services that place the disabled student at a substantial disadvantage in comparison to persons who are not disabled' (DfEE, 2000). The key phrase 'reasonable adjustment' has yet to be tested in law, but the DfEE provide clear guidance that academic and other standards should not be compromised by the adjustments. They also suggest that 'reasonableness' is a function of practicality, cost,

**P L A N E T**

effectiveness, disruption, the significance of the element of course or service being accessed and the needs of other students. However, field course providers should be aware that the social aspects of fieldwork, including domestic arrangements such as sleeping, eating, washing and recreation or relaxation, will also need accommodating. A code of practice on the implementation of the Act should be available early in 2002 from the Disability Rights Commission (<http://www.drc-gb.org/drc/InformationAndLegislation/InformationAndLegislationMenu.asp>).

Fortunately, disabled students and the HEIs in which they study have both gained from recent financial changes. Since 1990 disabled students have had access to an allowance to cover 'disability-related costs', such as personal assistance and adaptive technology. In 2000 these allowances were increased to up to £10k pa for full-time and part-time (50% or more of full-time course) undergraduates, and £5k for postgraduates. These allowances are no longer means-tested and can be used to help disabled students with the additional costs of participating in fieldwork. Since the academic year 2000/2001 HEIs have been eligible for mainstream funding for the first time to support their provision for disabled students. Some universities have used some of this money to establish departmental disability representatives. Departments running field courses may be able to make bids to their institutions under this funding for equipment that would be of benefit to particular groups of disabled students, such as modifications to minibuses to provide access to students in wheel chairs or the purchase of laptops to take on field trips to help dyslexic students. Some of the physical barriers can thus be readily overcome.

Course planning, particularly careful consideration of the intended learning outcomes of particular activities, is the key to overcoming many institutional or organisational barriers. Fieldwork should be undertaken in particular locations for specific educational reasons linked to the course outcomes. These reasons are not usually connected with the participants' abilities to climb mountains or tramp city streets, listen to shouted instructions in the teeth of a gale or over traffic noise, sustain concentrated physical effort over extended spans of time, or work in close proximity to other people in areas without ready access to toilet facilities. Consequently, the field course needs organising in a way which is appropriate for as many people as possible, and integrating into the programme in a manner which renders its intended outcomes very clear, in advance. Opportunities for prior negotiation with disabled participants should be included. Only students who achieve the course outcomes will be successful, and the provision of appropriate physical or personal aid will not compromise the academic standards expected. Figure 1 shows examples of the modifications which can assist disabled students to succeed in meeting the learning outcomes, emphasising the collateral benefits for others. The guides produced by the GDN give many examples of others.

- Providing written details about the main features to be seen in the field and the activities and projects to be undertaken to benefit a deaf student also clarifies the learning to be experienced by all the students on the field trip.
- Making a video of a classic geological site that is not accessible to a student in a wheel chair may also be used in other classes and as part of the pre-fieldwork introduction for students visiting the site in subsequent years.
- Investigating an alternative local-non-residential field course venue for a student needing daily dialysis treatment, may lead to the alternative location also being offered to other students, particularly benefiting those with family responsibilities and those who cannot afford the cost of a residential field course.

Figure 1: Some modifications and additions to fieldwork that are of benefit to many students

**Conclusion**

The curricula provided by individual departments vary in their starting positions on a spectrum from inclusive to exclusive (Figure 2). Some

departments have already embraced diversity and inclusivity as part of their course philosophy, and have built curricula, including fieldwork experiences, around this concept. Disabled students are encouraged to apply, can be reassured that their disabilities will not be an impediment to fulfillment of the course requirements, and that appropriate physical and organisational support is available. For other departments there may be a longer journey, which may begin by offering disabled students surrogate or different field experiences, or providing physical support to particular styles of activity, whilst considering more fundamental changes to fieldwork expectations over a period of time. Many of the adjustments to be made will nevertheless benefit all students undertaking fieldwork, not only disabled ones.

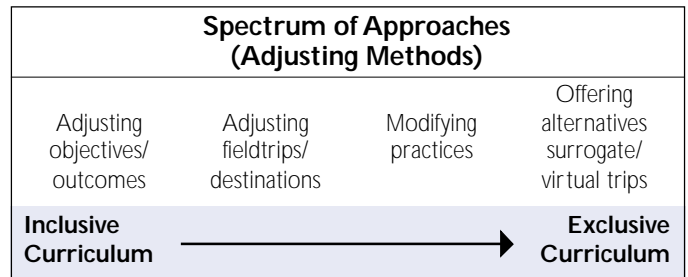


Figure 2. The curricula provided by individual departments vary in their starting positions on a spectrum from inclusive to exclusive.

**Note**

The GDN has produced six guides and a survey report on 'Providing learning support to disabled students undertaking fieldwork'. They are available at: (<http://www.chelt.ac.uk/gdn/disabil/index.htm>). The Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences is committed to continue to promote effective practices in providing learning support for disabled students and to offer guidance on how this might be achieved.

**References and Further Reading**

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**Editor's Note**

Readers may also be interested in the two shorter disability articles (in the "have you seen this?") section this edition of PLANET written by McCarthy and by Adams, on TechDis, and special education needs and disabilities respectively.