

Disability: The Students' View

These three short articles have been written by students with disabilities who were asked to reflect on their experiences of higher education. LTSN-GEES would like to thank all of the students and staff who assisted in the production of this section*.

1) Choosing a university – the view of a sixth form student with disabilities

James Robertson, Student

Having recently passed eleven GCSEs, the majority of which at A* or A, I have embarked on my A level studies and, if all goes well, I hope to go to university. I feel now is a good time to reflect on my success, identify what worked well, and decide upon an appropriate action plan for my future studies.

I should explain first that I am disabled, and rely on a wheelchair for much of my mobility. This brings about an added complication when it comes to looking at suitable universities. Not only do I need to consider the course being offered, but also choose the university according to its provision or students with disabilities.

In my case, having Cerebral Palsy means that, as well as having limited use of my legs, my fine motor skills are also affected because the movement in my upper arms is impaired. This impairment makes it difficult for me to write at speed. The importance of this had never really occurred to me until I reached the stage in my schooling when I was required to sit exams, or write to dictation in class. I used to get extremely frustrated because my brain was thinking what to say faster than my hands were able to write it, and so by the time my hand was ready to write I would have forgotten what it was that I wanted to say in the first place!

After what seemed like hours of consultation with the local education authority and the head of special needs at my school, we were able to find a viable solution to my problem, which would enable me to reach my full potential. In the end it was decided that I should be allowed twenty five per cent extra time, as well as an amanuensis who would type as I dictated.

This method was so effective that I have decided to use it again in the next set of exams I do. A similar system implemented at university level would be invaluable to me, because it would mean that I would be able to cope more easily with the level of work that is expected. Having a note-taker in lectures and seminars would mean that I could participate and not miss out on valuable notes. I have used a Dictaphone at school to record what teachers say, but it has been a slow process converting the tapes into useable notes. I also used a Dictaphone to record my notes for exam revision. It goes without saying that the lecture theatres themselves should be fully accessible for wheelchairs, and have enough space so the user can maneuver in and out of position!

Of course, I have come to rely on the benefits that Information and Communication Technology brings, including using a lap-top, email, and voice recognition. It will be essential that the university I choose is able to support me in this important area.

Until recently I found it very difficult to achieve fully independent mobility because I was reliant on a manual wheelchair, which I found difficult to push. Now, however, I have a powered chair that makes things easier. That said, I still think it is important that the university I choose has a campus that is relatively flat and compact to make getting about less of a struggle for everyone. Where possible, I feel universities should ensure that all their buildings are made accessible for wheelchair users. This does not just mean putting any old ramp in any old place, ramps should be at the right gradient so they can be managed independently – and also in the right place!

As far as possible, students with disabilities want to be independent, but we have to accept that there are some things we are unable to do. I am unable to cook, because I do not have the strength in my arms to carry pots and pans full with food, or to chop vegetables. I also find some aspects of dressing difficult. A good university in my opinion will recognise these needs, and work with me to find a way of overcoming them.

A solution offered by a number of universities is the "buddy system". Each disabled student is allocated a buddy, often a postgraduate student, who looks after their personal care needs like helping with aspects of dressing, cookery, note taking etc. The disabled student is able to claim a grant to pay their buddy and is also entitled to ask for a change of buddy if necessary.

I think the buddy system is an invaluable resource for students with disabilities, because it provides them with the means to be more independent, and also a friend with similar interests and background who can help if they get into difficulty.

Also important is that students with disabilities don't feel they are being segregated. I personally would like the accommodation designed for the special needs of the disabled student to be integrated into the normal accommodation, rather than being kept separate. Nearly all my friends now are able-bodied and it would be a shame if I was just able to mix with disabled people as I have worked hard to be integrated up until now.

As you can see I have a lot to consider before I apply for a university place. Luckily though help is at hand in the form of my local careers service. They offer personal advisors, specifically dedicated to the needs of disabled people, who can give personal consultations to help me make my final decision, by providing an objective, unbiased account of the different institutions and courses available. They can also provide me with useful literature in order to help me make an informed decision.

My final decision will be based on a number of different criteria. Obviously two extremely important factors are whether the university is geared up for, and aware of the needs of disabled people; and whether they offer the right course. Equally important is the location of the university, far enough away from home so I feel independent, but close enough to allow me to come home if I run into difficulties.

Obviously, I need to spend more time than most in making my choice of university and course. It is a big decision and there is lots to consider, but I'm looking forward to enjoying the student life and to getting a degree as an important stage towards building myself a career.

2) A Dyslexic Student in Higher Education

(Anon)

An interview was undertaken with a dyslexic student in the final year of a degree in the Geography subject area. He had been diagnosed as dyslexic at the age of 9 and had this verified in his first year at University. However, it was the first term of Year 3 before the Local Education Authority recognised that extra resources were required as a result of his disability and now, six months before graduation, he is yet to receive the laptop, software and printer to which he is entitled.

The student acknowledged that adjustments had been made in the learning, teaching and assessment practices that he had experienced since starting university. Examples of this were a blue slip of paper attached to his coursework to identify it as having been written by a dyslexic student; free photocopying credits; extra time in exams and support with his dissertation.

However, it was clear that certain issues continued to present problems: "People say it is better for dyslexic people to do coursework but I always do better in exams because I can memorise notes and then just regurgitate them. I write scatter diagrams and visualise them when I get into the exam – I don't actually know it but I know where it is in the diagram".

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"Checking coursework is really hard – I read what I think is there. Other people say that it doesn't make sense, but when I read it again it does."

The student's main criticisms of his experience in his higher education were:

- *The attitudes of some lecturers* – "you tell some lecturers 'I'm dyslexic' and they say they know, but they don't make themselves approachable. If they could just say 'I know you are dyslexic, if you need help come and ask me after class'. Lecturers say 'think for yourself', but I find that so hard."
- *Use of jargon* – "lecturers use language like 'key concepts' and 'objectives'. What I really need is examples."
- *Taking of notes* – "Notetaking in classes is very difficult. I can't keep up and at the end my notes are full of gaps and mean nothing. I need spaces in handouts to act as prompts."

3) Disability – a student perspective

Lyn Bibbings
Oxford Brookes University

Much has been written about students with disabilities and the differing needs they may have. Often such discussions have focused on facilities and materials that can be provided in order to ameliorate difficulties for disabled students, and little has been discussed about the 'whole' experience of a student with disabilities studying at university.

This short article summarises an interview with a student who is deaf and has some mobility difficulties, and tries to capture some of the key elements of that experience. The student had also recently spent a term in an American university and it is useful to reflect on some of the differences she noticed, and the effect these had on her experience of studying at university.

Nicola* felt the most important things for her, as a student at university, was to have the opportunity to try new things out. She felt that university was a time when she wanted to experiment and to exercise some freedom of choice.

We discussed her experience of classroom situations and in particular what happened in groupwork. Nicola's experiences had been varied, and she felt that one of the key influences on how other students behaved toward her was the relationship that the member of staff had with those students. Where staff had a good relationship with the student group, and particularly one of trust, students tended to respond more positively to the staff member requesting that other students should be helpful and sympathetic towards her.

While she was in America, she also undertook some groupwork and she felt that the pressure was taken out of the situation for both her and other students in that an individual mark as well as a group mark average was awarded.

Nicola feels that, for her, the differences in lecturers and their style of teaching, is more important than her contact with other students, and it can take time to 'tune in' to what is happening. She felt that this could be helped by lecturers discussing together the support she needs, and to 'even out' the level of help she receives.

In America she felt there was a greater recognition of student's special needs and that these were better resourced, although she recognised that she chose the university in America based on their response to her letter asking if they would be able to provide what she needed. For example, she had asked for a note-taker, an interpreter and accommodation adapted for a deaf person with visual alerts for the doorbell, fire alarm and telephone. A room was specially adapted for her, and instead of a note-taker she had a stenographer who emailed her the lecture notes 24 hours after the lecture with a verbatim report of what was said, both by the lecturer and by the other students and with summary notes. She found this especially useful.

In addition the campus had been large, and Nicola would have become very tired getting herself around. Her parents bought her a tricycle that she was allowed to ride in the corridors to lectures as well as around the campus. When the tricycle was stolen from outside the library the Dean paid, out of his own money, for a replacement, and her fellow students then held events to raise money to pay him back. This made her feel valued and part of the community.

Nicola also stated that while she was in America she was taught by a Professor who was blind, and who was aided in the delivery of his lecture by an assistant who helped him use visual material, and he used a web site to augment his face to face lectures. This was a novel experience for her as she had not knowingly had contact with a lecturer with a disability in the UK.

Nicola is enjoying being a student and feels that she is given opportunities to make the most of what she has, but that this is not enough to give her an experience equal to that of other students.

*These short pieces first appeared in the publication by LTSN Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (LINK Issue 3) and they have been slightly modified for the GEES community. The original articles are available at <http://www.brookes.cc.uk>

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education

Section 3: Students with disabilities - October 1999

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Students with disabilities

Foreword

- 1 This document is a code of practice for the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities for students with disabilities* in UK higher education institutions. The object of the code is to assist institutions in ensuring that students with disabilities have access to a learning experience comparable to that of their peers. It is one of a suite of inter-related documents which, taken together, will form an overall Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education for the guidance of higher education institutions subscribing to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the QAA).
- 2 The overall Code and its constituent sections are being prepared by the QAA in response both to the Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and its Scottish Committee (the 'Dearing and Garrick Reports') and the consequent remodelling of the national arrangements for quality assurance in higher education. The completed Code will identify a comprehensive series of system-wide expectations covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education. In so doing, it will provide an authoritative reference point for institutions as they assure, consciously, actively and systematically, the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications. The Code will assume that, taking into account nationally agreed principles and practices, each institution has its own systems for independent verification both of its quality and standards and of the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems. In developing the Code, extensive guidance is being sought from a range of knowledgeable practitioners.

*Within this code the phrases 'students with disabilities' and 'disabled students' are used interchangeably. See also introductory discussion under 'Who is disabled?'

- 3 Each section of the Code is being structured into a series of precepts and accompanying outline guidance. The precepts identify those key matters which the QAA expects an institution to be able to demonstrate it is addressing effectively through its own quality assurance mechanisms. The accompanying outline guidance is provided to assist institutions in maintaining and enhancing the quality of provision for students and other stakeholders. The guidance is not intended to be either prescriptive or exhaustive: its purpose is to offer a framework for quality assurance and control which institutions may wish to