

# Reasonable Adjustments and Disabled Students' Experiences of Learning, Teaching and Assessment

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Despite the growth of research into the disabled student experience of high education, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Riddell et al., 2002), the voice of disabled students has rarely been heard beyond the anecdotal. This article summarises the findings relating to learning, teaching and assessment of the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) project 'Enhancing the Quality and Outcomes of Disabled Students' Learning in Higher Education', led by Professor Mary Fuller. The project has sought to remedy this research gap by documenting disabled students' experiences of higher education in the students' own words.

The study draws on longitudinal interviews with 31 disabled students about their experiences of learning, teaching and assessment across four universities. It also supplements these findings with material from a survey of 548 disabled and non-disabled students at one of the universities.

## Reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments form a key part of institutional provision for disabled students within higher education. This article uses project findings about students' experiences of reasonable adjustments to argue for fundamental change in both their design and implementation.

Reasonable adjustments are enshrined in current UK disability legislation. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended by The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA, 2001)) places a duty upon universities to make anticipatory reasonable adjustments for disabled students. The

Disability Discrimination Act 2005 also amended this legislation to require HEIs to produce disability equality statements, as part of the general disability equality duty for public sector institutions. UK legislation therefore requires all staff (both academic and support) to provide a learning environment where disabled students are not disadvantaged.

The project found that there was wide variation in the student experience of reasonable adjustments made to teaching, learning and assessment. This suggests that there are differences in how the legislation is being interpreted, reflecting the diverse policies and practices of institutions, departments and individual staff. These differences may reflect cultural variations in practice, but also highlights potential inconsistencies in the application of institutional policies and a hazy knowledge among many staff and students about reasonable adjustments. These findings help to explain why learning, teaching and assessment areas feature strongly in cases brought against higher education institutions under legislation in Australia, and in emerging UK case law (Adams and Brown, 2001; Adams, 2007a).

## Argument

Based on these findings, it is our argument that it is invidious to treat disabled students as a separate category; rather they fall along a continuum of learner differences and share with other higher education students similar challenges and difficulties; sometimes the barriers are more severe for them, but sometimes they are not (Hall et al., 2002; Healey et al., 2006). For the great majority of disabled students they are first and foremost students, not disabled people.

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In principle, reasonable adjustments should ensure that learning, teaching and assessment enable and measure the true academic achievements of disabled students, regardless of impairment. However, the problem with many reasonable adjustments is that they are aimed, often rather bluntly, at particular groups of students. For example, the most common assessment adjustment for students with dyslexia is to give them all a standard amount of extra time to hand in assignments or in which to sit examinations.

However, the problem with this practice is that there is rarely any theoretical justification for the additional time, and in any case no allowance is made for differences in the severity or form of the dyslexia. Elton (2000: 1) has argued that: "I cannot think of anything more unfair than ... to treat all students as if they are the same, when they so manifestly are not." Our project found that while many individual disabled students welcome certain kinds of adjustments, they make no use of others. For example, one student might use extra time in exams but not for handing in assignments, while for another the opposite may be the case.

It is our contention that far fewer reasonable adjustments would be necessary if learning, teaching and assessment were designed to be inclusive. In line with this approach, the Disability Equality Duty requires HEIs to make proactive system-wide changes rather than individual reactive choices when problems arise. With this argument in mind, it is possible to describe three distinct reasonable adjustment typologies.

## Types of reasonable adjustment

**Individual assimilations.** This kind of reasonable adjustment involves special arrangements made for individual disabled students to help them cope with existing learning, teaching and assessment practices. Examples include being given extra time or a separate room in exams, or being provided with a notetaker. Individual assimilations are the most common approach used within higher education. Waterfield et al. (2006: 81) have argued that one type of assimilated reasonable adjustments – special examination arrangements – can be seen as an example of "reactive practice which is indicative of an assimilation culture" (Box 1).

**Box 1:** Jean (education, dyslexia) experience of being given extra time in exams

"I have this label ... you are treated a bit different, which is good because you think ... I do need extra time in exams ... but I am aware ... of people saying to me 'Oh I didn't see you in the exam hall'."

**Alternative arrangements.** Alternative arrangements for learning, teaching and assessment are provided for particular disabled students. Examples include a virtual fieldcourse for a student with a mobility impairment, and a viva being provided for an individual student as an alternative assessment to test the same learning outcomes as a written assessment (Box 2).

**Box 2:** Andrew (education, cerebral palsy) was provided with an alternative fieldwork exercise

"Obviously there was a lot of stuff I couldn't do because of my legs and whatever. The river study was one particular thing. They accommodated me really well. They just said 'you don't need to do that' but Sheila, one of the assistants, she took me in the van and we went to a visitor centre and I evaluated the usefulness of the visitor centre. I was doing something, although it was different to the rest of them, I wasn't just sitting in a cabin with my feet up."

**Inclusive arrangements.** When inclusive reasonable adjustments are put in place they are provided for all students. One example of inclusive adjustments is to make alternative assessments designed to test the same learning outcomes available to all students. Another example is the provision of handouts before lectures (Box 3).

**Box 3:** Brandon (engineering, dyslexia), along with all the other students on his course, gets lots of handouts in advance which means he does not need his notetaker

"I can listen to the lecture and remember. We get lots of handouts and notes, which is good for me because rather than look at my notes I can look at theirs. In maths they gave us a CD at the beginning of the year and that has all the notes for the whole year, exam questions and answers."

Inclusive adjustments correspond with our argument that disabled students should not be treated as a separate category of student. This approach also allows for diversity in learning styles among students and avoids (often visibly) singling out disabled students from their peers. Instead, an inclusive approach to reasonable adjustments removes the distinction between teaching and assessing disabled and non-disabled students. While individual adjustments will always be necessary in certain cases (and we would argue these are a minority), inclusive practice in the provision of reasonable adjustments will remove the need for large numbers of often unwieldy individual adjustments.

## Variation in learning, teaching and assessment experiences

Two students with the same impairment can have very different learning, teaching and assessment experiences (Box 4); whereas the experience of individual disabled students may vary for different learning scenarios (Box 5).

### Box 4: Experience of two students with dyslexia

“I’m good at oral presentations but sometimes misspell on OHPs.”

“I hate oral presentations because it is very difficult for me to converse my ideas out aloud and this is not to do with confidence but speech problems.”

### Box 5: Jean (education dyslexia) had different experiences with different lecturers

“If she put an overhead up in a lecture theatre or a workshop ... she would ... do it paragraph by paragraph ... and she would read it out as well ... so I would get it audibly and visually.”

“She moves into the group as overheads are swishing on and off, she is talking about something else which is so important that I am supposed to be taking it down and I am a bit like ... ‘what do you want me to do?’”

All learners have diverse needs and experiences. This suggests that general policies may not meet

the specific needs of individuals. However, given the extent of the diversity it is also unsustainable to make numerous individual reasonable adjustments (although, as we have argued, this may be essential in a minority of cases).

The table below illustrates areas where disabled students appear to have significantly greater difficulties than their non-disabled peers. These areas include physical difficulties with writing, literacy skills and taking notes. However, there are other areas where disabled students have less difficulty than their fellow students – in knowing the standard of work expected, and with group work and oral presentations (Table 1).

These findings support our argument that assumptions about the disabled student experience, and indeed the ‘catch all’ category of ‘disabled student’ can be problematic. They also suggest that for the most part disabled students have similar experiences to non-disabled students of learning, teaching and assessment and support our argument against treating disabled students as a separate category. However, it is important to note that in a minority of situations disability-related barriers do have a significant impact on their learning, teaching and assessment experiences.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, far fewer adjustments for disabled students would be required if learning, teaching and assessment were designed to be inclusive from the beginning. Inclusive learning, teaching and

**Table 1: Selected learning experiences of disabled and non-disabled students in one university**

<i>Agree / Strongly agree</i>	<i>% disabled students (n=276)</i>	<i>% non-disabled students (n=272)</i>
<b>Areas in which disabled students have greater difficulty (10% + point difference)</b>		
I have had difficulty in taking notes	55	24
I have had difficulty due to the time given to read material not being realistic	45	32
I have had difficulties with the amount of time I require to complete assignments	55	39
I have had physical difficulties with writing	25	5
I have had difficulties with lecturers not understanding my circumstances	29	11
I have had difficulty with literacy skills	54	17
<b>Areas in which non-disabled students have greater difficulty (5%+ point difference)</b>		
It’s easy to know the standard of work expected	51	43
I have had difficulties with participation in group work	19	29
I have had difficulties with oral presentations	28	33

Source: Healey (et al., 2006: 40)

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assessment removes divisive distinctions between disabled and non-disabled students. This argument is at the heart of the universal design for learning movement which focuses on being usable by all students without the need for adaptation (Burgstahler, 2001). For example, Adams (2007b: 10) notes that "For me, the beauty of [universal design approaches], is that an individual's impairment is not seen as a barrier but rather, the focus of how best that individual learns."

Ironically, the main beneficiaries of disability legislation may in fact be the non-disabled students, because many adjustments (particularly inclusive adjustments such as well-prepared handouts, written as well as verbal instructions, online lecture notes, variety and flexibility in assessment) can be simply seen as good teaching and learning practices which benefit all students. "One unintended consequence of this (disability) legislation is that as departments and institutions introduce more flexible learning and alternative ways of assessment for disabled students, demand is likely to rise for giving greater flexibility for all students. Disability legislation may prove to be a Trojan horse and in a decade, the learning experiences of all students may be the subject of greater negotiation." (Healey 2003: 26).

Part of this negotiation may well focus on the definition of 'disabled student'. It is our argument that removing this separation will allow staff to appreciate better the diversity of learners and thus lead to greater sensitivity to individual student needs. A more constructive approach may well be to see all students (and staff) as impaired: "We believe that the claim that everyone is impaired, not just 'disabled people', is a far-reaching and important insight into human experience, with major implications for medical and social intervention in the twenty-first century." (Shakespeare and Watson 2002: 25).

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