

Diverse Learning Needs of Students

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CM: Ceri Morgan

IG: Ian Gadd

AS: Andrew Southall

BF: My name is Bridget Ferguson, and I'm the Deputy Head of student wellbeing services. To give you a description of me, I am a white woman in my 40s wearing glasses, working from my home office

CM: And I'm Ceri Morgan. I'm an accessibility advisor at Bath Spa University. I have white hair and I'm a white woman wearing black.

BF: I'm going to talk about our student demographic and the legal context in which we're working. We're going to talk a bit about the barriers to learning and the different kinds of accessibility. And I'm going to talk about accessibility in the context of disabled students, and ways that we are increasing accessibility at Bath spa. So firstly, our student demographic. We have almost a quarter of students identify as disabled, which is considerably more than the UK average of 14%. We have a low number of international students at 6.5% percent compared to a UK average of 22%. We have a high proportion of women, almost 70% of our students are women compared to 56%. in other universities. We have a small proportion of students who identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic 10% Compared to 26.3%. in UK universities. That's largely because we have students that predominantly live in this area of the country and we live in a very white area of the country in the southwest.

Here are some of the priority groups that Student Wellbeing Services work with:

- students who identify as disabled
- students requiring mental health support
- students who have been in care
- students who are estranged from their families
- students who have adult caring responsibilities.

The legal context that we're working in is under the Equality Act 2010 so we are subject to the public sector equality duty as a Higher Education institution. That duty lists nine protected characteristics which are:

- age
- gender
- disability
- sexual orientation
- gender reassignment
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- marriage or civil partnership
- religion or belief.

The university has a requirement to eliminate harassment and discrimination and enhance equality of opportunity between those with those protected characteristics and those without.

Those students who identify as disabled also fall under the Equality Act. This Act gives a legal definition of disability as being a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term effect. Essentially something that's going on for 12 months or more and has an impact on daily activities. The university has a legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments for students who identify as disabled.

Here is a visual of our disabled versus non-disabled students. As you can see almost a quarter. And this is a breakdown of the conditions that those students have. As you can see the vast majority fall under two categories, those with specific learning differences, the most common of those being dyslexia, and those who have a mental health condition, which is 33% of students. So that's the fastest growing category of disabled students. We have 5% on the autism spectrum, which is considerably more than the UK average of 1% of the population.

To give a little bit of a rundown of those main categories. We've got students with specific learning differences; Dyslexia, ADHD, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia fall under that definition. Some of the common barriers are short term memory, impairment, visual processing issues, reading speed, and comprehension and concentration issues. Symptoms can vary hugely between different students and it's very much an individual thing. It's also not uncommon for students to have a number of presenting differences; for example, dyslexia, and ADHD and dyspraxia and it can have a quite significant impact on student's mental health and well-being. Student are often supported by one more than one team, for example the mental health team and the accessibility team.

Mental health is our second biggest category. This is far from an exhaustive list of mental health conditions, but the most common that present to us are:

- depression
- anxiety
- self-harm
- suicidal ideation
- panic attacks
- eating disorders.

Some of the impacts that mental health can have on students is their ability to attend taught sessions, their engagement with materials, their competent comprehension of materials, and their ability to complete or submit assessed work. I've certainly had several students that have completed assessed work and not been able to submit it due to anxiety or the need for it to feel that it needs to be more perfect.

There are many ways that Autism Spectrum Condition can affect how a student engages with their studies. As a very brief overview, this affects how students communicate and interact with the world. They may have difficulties or differences in social communication and interaction and sensory differences. This can include sensitivity to light and sound, and textures. It very much affects people differently to different degrees. Some inclusive measures that can help students on the autism spectrum include being very clear with your speech and instructions; providing routine and structure where that's possible; and providing materials in advance. So very fluid timetables and surprises are difficult for autistic students often to manage.

There is a big category consisting of long term medical conditions, mobility impairments and sensory impairment. As with all the other categories, these can be both visible and invisible. And they can impact on attendance, ability to take notes or engage in taught sessions. Some examples of invisible conditions include diabetes, epilepsy, chronic fatigue syndrome, and fibromyalgia; examples of visible conditions are cerebral palsy and quadriplegia. Obviously, there are many, many different conditions and these are just a few examples. For ways to enhance accessibility, we look at how we enhance accessibility on an individual level, and then look at how we do that on an institution level.

Here are some of the ways that we help individual students. Students who have medical evidence of a condition or disability can be eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance, but that doesn't include international students. We do have funding to fund students within the university who aren't eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance.

Accessibility advisors are a key point of contact for disabled students and help them to access the support that they need. One of their key tasks is to prepare Academic Access Plans for students, ensuring that appropriate reasonable adjustments are documented and implemented. Reasonable adjustments are adjustments that disabled students might need to access their learning properly.

For students with mental health conditions, we also have an Enhanced Support Process. This is a process for students that present the highest risk, either to themselves or others. Students in this process are often those that are actively suicidal, or significantly self-harming.

We have a Support to Study process which can support any student who is struggling, either with their academic studies or with independent living. We also have some transition events for disabled students, which helps introduce them to the university and to their accommodation, and gives them an overview of support measures at the university before they arrive. It includes events specifically for autistic students, which is particularly helpful in lessening that sense of surprise and newness, and developing some familiarity before teaching starts.

I'll share a little bit more about Academic Access Plans, because this is a key document for teaching staff. It's prepared by Student Wellbeing Services and they are available to academic staff who have students with a plan.

It's a document outlining any reasonable adjustments that are needed. I've listed a few very common ones here, which can include a student needing extra time, alternative assessments, alternative arrangements for presentations, and an awareness that a student may need more absence than usual. There are many, many more, but that's just some of the common ones that appear in plans.

How are some of the ways that as an institution that we increase accessibility to the learning environment. Ideally, we have an environment that's so accessible, that the need for individual adjustments is minimal, although it's always going to be necessary for some students. But the more accessible we become as an institution, the more we increase, essentially, the learning capacity of all students not just those with those categories that we have listed and disabled students. This is a strategic priority for the university this year and it includes the development of an inclusivity Toolkit. This includes a very comprehensive readiness checklist for academic staff to check that their teaching modules are accessible e.g. recording and captioning their lectures; providing materials 48 hours in advance; making sure font type and size is appropriate and accessible; that the background is visible; and making sure that the content is inclusive and diverse. And that includes reading and material lists. That's a big piece of work going on at the university this year.

Here are some final thoughts: I think it's really important to remember that barriers to accessibility for students are often invisible. In terms of creating an inclusive environment for everybody, it's really important to consider accessibility from the outset, as opposed to a kind of final thought add on. That can be both about the physical environment. Obviously, if you're in a place that is being built from scratch, that is one of the requirements. But in terms of existing buildings, looking at your teaching space, and checking have I got a layout that is accessible to all students? Are my teaching materials accessible? Is the content of my teaching materials accessible? And in terms of the institution, are our policies accessible? It's really important to ensure that they are undergoing an equality impact assessment from the very outset. And an equality impact assessment is essentially exactly what it says. It's a tool to help universities ensure that their policies and practices are fair and meet the needs of their staff and students, and that they're not inadvertently discriminating against any protected group.

IG: Thank you, Bridget. It was a great overview. One of the things that I was thinking about as you were talking, is that we are multiple institutions. We have our own institutional structures and policies, and national frameworks, and then international frameworks to shape what we can do and how we approach things. I was thinking about what are the things that we as a project collaboratively can do? We are at the start of this process and accessibility is very much the core of the project. Members of the project from the start have been really thinking about accessibility, but we're going to be bringing colleagues and students in as the project develops, who won't necessarily be as familiar or as knowledgeable about it. I was thinking about one of the things that we could adapt and apply more collaboratively is around that inclusivity checklist? Could you talk a little bit about the equality impact assessment?

BF: Essentially it is a tool for higher education institutions. It's often a last minute add on, that people think let's tick the equality impact assessment box. And actually, what's really important is that it's considered at the very beginning. So rather than developing a project and then going, oh, is it accessible? It's actually, these are the things we need to consider from the outset; what's the content of our material? Is that accessible? Is it inclusive? Is it diverse? How are we presenting that material?

Obvious things are not presenting material all in one way as I did! Apologies. It's important to have visuals as some people absorb information through diagrams, some people need sound, some people need materials in advance. That's a very important one, actually, that has often been overlooked, that students with both mental health conditions and specific learning differences, but not exclusively those, but having materials in advance is a huge benefit. Because there's that ability to start to comprehend and absorb information before they're in the teaching session. So that they can concentrate in the teaching session. Whereas for lots of disabled students being able to have access in advance, gets them up to a level playing field with other students.

Ceri will certainly attest to this, that it is often a difficulty that students with dyslexia face, but certainly not exclusive to them. I think diversity in terms of presentation of material and an awareness of the kind of wider context of other barriers to accessibility, for example, poverty. Other commitments, whether that's working full time or carrying responsibilities, also have an impact, as do students who identify as disabled, have those barriers as well. So, it's having that state of mind from the beginning, as opposed to kind of thinking of it as a last-minute thing.

CM: I think the only thing I would add is if those things aren't considered, the impact is quite considerable. In terms of allowing someone to fully access a course, or to get the most out of their course, if the courses aren't accessible, don't have those accessibility features, that does have an impact on their experience of university. You can be the best tutor, the most brilliant academic with the most brilliant material. If you don't make that accessible, all of that becomes meaningless. An absolute keystone to being an effective educator is to consider accessibility and not just have it as an afterthought.

IG: I agree entirely. Just on your point about the kind of range of accessibility barriers, that is something that is built into the project from the start. Disabled and underrepresented students are very much a group that we're wanting to engage with. We're also wanting to work with students who have a technology gap; what happens if they don't have the latest equipment, or they have poor internet, but also students for whom studying is taking place alongside other responsibilities that mean that they can't necessarily meet synchronously at the same time as everybody else? Or they may be working at odd hours or in different ways. At the core of the project, in terms of the student groups that we want to reach.

Ceri, I wonder if you can just talk from your own experience, working with art and design students, some of the common barriers that emerge?

CM: I think maybe a starting point would be to think that they come in as creative artists, and they don't fully appreciate that a degree is more than just doing art. That art has to be reflected on, commented on and analyzed and that may be in a written form. My experience starts with students not having the right expectation of what they're going to be doing on a degree course. Maybe the transition, from college or school, where they've worked in quite small groups with one teacher, maybe with a support system in the classroom, and the transition to the university and being a much more independent learner. And taking responsibility for finding out where they need to be, and when they need to be there. That transition from high school or college to university is big. And perhaps the good strategies that they have in place, which they have used to come to university maybe a little shaky before they work out how to put those strategies in place at university. Things

like, managing their time, money, managing all the different kind of systems and where to look for information, remembering passwords, being in the right place at the right time. All those things, which become easier as they progress, initially are often really difficult for students with specific learning differences.

I think if students are put on the spot or expect to read something in a seminar and then discuss it, that's quite difficult. Often, even if they are able to do that, their whole competence around learning can feel more daunting than perhaps it should do. Provide everything in plenty of time, so they can organize their time. It's quite difficult to generalize but often students with dyslexia are very hard-working students, and often they're very organized students. So, they like to have everything in good time to allow them to do that.

I think it's time to think- what else are the difficulties? Things that might be quite mundane in terms of working in groups can often cause some kinds of concern or anxiety about who they're with. How will the group work with them? Will the group accept how they work? That is quite a common concern. As well as asking whether they can ask for something - is it okay to say I don't get this? With the Academic Access Plans, there's a lot of discussion about do I wait for my tutor to implement the recommendations in the plan? And I say, the plan is your empowerment to ask. It's a two-way dialogue and your Academic Access Plan empowers you or us.

IG: Shortly we will be circulating questionnaires to students and staff in art and design across the partners. They will be aimed at students who have had at least one year of prior higher education experience, or post school experience, and how COVID has impacted their learning over that year. The feedback we'll get will be supported by some focus group work, which will begin to examine what were the real challenges of the last year, but also, that some of the technology that we've relied on has some enabling factors as well, it's made some things possible in a way that wasn't as easy before. So really trying to get the students to help us draw up a kind of framework in terms of how we then build the immersive tech and pedagogical tools that the project. COVID has been a brutal experience for us. But thinking specifically about the student experience in terms of learning, both positive and negative. How was that dealing with the students who've been affected by COVID over the last year?

CM: I think an overwhelming positive thing was that lectures were recorded. I don't think I've met one student who hasn't caught up from having that access to recorded information and that's a good thing. We definitely experienced a few students who just don't have the technology; don't have a laptop, don't have access to technology, don't have Wi Fi at home, don't have Wi Fi that is reliable. But that the university offered a laptop scheme, and some funding to help address Wi Fi issues, I think was absolutely brilliant, because that was definitely a problem in terms of COVID.

IG: I remember working with students a few years ago, one of whom did not have a laptop and did pretty much all their interacting with the university through their phone, and then would simply be in a computer room when they needed to write and you realize how so much of what we were sharing was presupposing, that they had a screen that was big enough to be able to read in a way and that they were able to manage. It was only when things were getting very difficult, or there were particular expectations that you saw that that that didn't work, and I imagine with COVID, where they weren't able to get to a computer room, that would just make that even more challenging.

CM: Also, not having easy access to friendship groups so you can't check in with them for support. You can't say I've missed this, have I got this right, or what is it we've got to do by whenever? I think that as well had an impact.

AS?? We talked about confidence and the importance of students feeling that they can ask things. The online platform in some ways makes that more difficult. In order to have a casual conversation that a student suddenly has to write an email and then set up a meeting or speak in front of others online. And that suddenly becomes a greater challenge. Do you think confidence has been really badly affected? In terms of the student experience during the last year?

CM: I don't know. I think you probably would know more than I would. I think sometimes your confidence can increase and if you have the recordings, and you can go over them, and you'll become sure of information? And maybe it can increase? What are your thoughts Bridget?

BF: I don't have data on this but in terms of the Academic Skills Gap, I think that's widened. Because of the route [UK] students have come into university now, essentially having not been examined in the way that they would have done before. So that building of skills that would have been a natural part of the progression for most students to A- levels was not there in the same way. I think that gap that already existed in terms of academic skills widened.

AS: I think a lot of it is about confidence. But it's also about interaction. I think students who feel weaker or feel less confident, sometimes take a backseat or don't get involved in exchange. And if you're not doing an exchange of some sort, you don't internalize what you're learning so well. Just catching up with a recorded lecture is nothing like as good, as actually being there and asking a question, or being involved in a dialogue of some sort. If you can get people to recognize the value of their perceptions and the value of their engagement, then they often get over that hump and then see it has been really useful. A lot of it is inertia, because they often come from a background where their academic ability has been subjected to scrutiny, and they don't feel that they score well in it. So they try and move away from it, but actually, that's counterproductive. So, I think it's really important to just get them to exchange ideas physically in the world, if possible, but virtually in the world is not.

BF: I agree that students interacting in live sessions is really key to learning. I think the thing around recording of material is that for disabled students, particularly those with specific learning differences, and also to an extent those with mental health conditions, are not using the recording generally as an alternative to attending they're using it to be able to absorb the information because it's actually too much to absorb live. And it's reiterating learning as opposed to an alternative way.

IG: Yeah, that's really interesting. I think one of the things that's going to be quite important is that we will be recruiting a group of students per partner, who actively have identified that they are affected by one or more of these accessibility barriers. And they're going to work alongside us throughout the project. They're going to be

there to share their experiences, inform our decisions hold us to account. We want to see them very much as collaborators.

One of the ways that we're going to hopefully recruit them is to say that this will be a valuable experience for them to be able to strengthen that kind of collaborative and kind of group those group skills; and particularly their confidence, because they will be treated as equals - they're not going to be assessed. If anything, they assess us. So, for us, I'm hoping that that will be an empowering space as a group, to be able to not only shape the project, but also feel that they are contributing directly to how they and their fellow students are taught and will be taught.

I know that as a project, we'll be talking quite a lot about how we recruit them, and how we support them. And we will also want to make sure that Student Support teams at all partners are part of the support network behind those students so they're aware of what support they're getting from us as a project, but then also, what kind of support as students at their universities they can get through Student Support. It may well be that you will see those students coming to you having realized that, they can come to you in a way that might not have been the case before. I'm really looking forward to see how we can work with those students.