

A response from The Open University (OU) to the Committee for Employment and Learning

Inquiry into post-19 Special Educational Needs provision in education, employment and training for those with learning disabilities

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Introduction

The Open University (OU) is responding to the Inquiry as a higher education institution, and as such, cannot respond with the same expertise as a specialist provider of services for individuals with learning disabilities might. It is important to state from the outset that The Open University does not provide support for individuals with learning disabilities as defined in Annex 1 of the Inquiry's Terms of References. The response, therefore, cannot comment upon specifics of provision, needs and demands for those post-19 year old individuals with special educational needs.

However, The Open University wishes to offer its expertise and share examples of practice that may appeal in general terms to the Committee, and that may be transferable, in order to enhance provision for post-19 Special Educational Needs students. This expertise may be in the areas of education, pedagogy, accessibility, and research and training for those who work with and care for individuals with learning disabilities.

This response also acknowledges that the Committee's review is primarily focused on moderate and severe learning difficulties as outlined in Annex 1 of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry. The Open University can respond with information on its provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, which is classified as a learning difficulty. This provision is contextualised within the support the University provides for disabled students more generally. The Open University is also willing to give oral evidence at Committee as part of the Inquiry.

The response begins with a general statement about the OU's provision for disabled students then addresses each Term of Reference in turn.

The Open University – provision for disabled students

The Open University is open to people, places, methods and ideas. It currently has 20,139 students who declare a disability, forming around **12%** of our total student body. 532 of this number study in Northern Ireland, around 10% of our student body here. A breakdown of these students' declared disabilities is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Disability (Category)	No. of students in Northern Ireland population with disability in this category
Sight	41
Hearing	37
Mobility	140
Manual skills	80
Speech	19
Dyslexia	80
Mental health	204
Personal care	45
Fatigue/pain	213
Other disability	50
Unseen disability	111
Autistic spectrum disorder	7

Latest figures obtained March 2014

A significant proportion of students with disabilities and long-term health conditions choose the OU because it suits their lifestyle. The Open University has developed a pan-institutional approach to accessibility and inclusivity, all of which delivers, promotes, reinforces and further influences the disabled student learning experience. For disabled students, The Open University also offers a range of specific support. In Northern Ireland, a disabled student will, in general, have most contact about provision of their support requirements handled via educational advisers at the National Centre in Belfast. The OU requests, where appropriate, and support students to apply for a Disabled Students' Allowance, and hosts a fully-equipped Access Centre for DSA Assessments.

The Open University's Disability Resources Team arranges production and delivery of alternative formats of study materials and assistive equipment and services for home study, tutorials, day and residential schools, and assessment. Disabled students usually declare more than one disability or condition – in Northern Ireland the number of students in this category was 119. Further information provided to students with disabilities can be viewed here: <http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/help/topic/disability>

Terms of Reference (1)

To examine the current range of choice and opportunities available for those with Learning Disabilities on leaving full time schooling

The Open University offers higher education opportunities to those individuals with a range of disabilities, and pertinent to this Inquiry is those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Students declaring this specific learning difficulty may be able to receive support to study a range of qualifications (as detailed above). The Meeting Your Needs publication (**Appendix 1**) provides a general guide for students (including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder).

Terms of Reference (2)

To seek the views of young people, family carers and groups representing children and young people with learning disabilities on what services they would like to see in place and how the current situation meets their needs

The Open University is willing to engage with young people, family carers and groups representing children and young people with special educational needs to discuss any transferable practice in working with students with a range of disabilities which may be of use. In particular, The Open University's free courses may be of use and interest to any carers or groups who wish to avail of training and development in the area of Autism. The OU also offers carers and parents the opportunity to study conveniently around caring responsibilities. Flexible, distance-learning can be fitted around individuals' lifestyles and allowing study to be carried out at home or on the move, using a variety of devices such as laptops, iPhones, and tablets. The Open University's flexible, part-time route enables students to manage the intensity of study and to continue to work around their other work, family and financial commitments, from their chosen location. Distance learning is mainly online, and involves reading, watching or listening to material supplied, with regular support from the assigned tutor and the chance to interact with the tutor group for peer advice. In early 2013, the OU launched its [OUAnywhere app](#) which enables learners to access their OU course on any mobile device, making learning even more flexible. This app was recognised at this year's Guardian University Awards, where it took two awards for Distance and Online Learning and Student Experience. Carers who may mainly be in the domestic context would particularly benefit from distance learning, as there is no need to physically attend a university campus.

Terms of Reference (3)

To research best practice in post-school provision for those with learning disabilities

Terms of Reference (4)

To examine if the quantum and quality of post-school provision for those with Learning Disabilities is meeting the demand and develop recommendations to address barriers to participation and delivery of high quality provision

Although The Open University cannot contribute specialist expertise in these areas, we are willing to share transferable practice in the area of addressing barriers to participation and delivery of high quality provision for OU students who declare a disability, particularly in the areas of (a) student support to widen access and participation to higher education and (b) learning resources relating to disability.

(a) Student Support

The Open University's approach to accessibility and inclusivity delivers an excellent student experience for our disabled students. Over 80% of the OU's students with disabilities report that the Disabled Students' Advisory Service has helped them to succeed in their studies. The Open University's open-access policy is indicative of positive ways to address barriers to participation, albeit in this instance, to higher education.

For disabled students, the OU also offers a range of specific support. In Northern Ireland, a disabled student will, in general, have most contact about provision of their support requirements handled via educational advisers at the National Centre in Belfast. The OU requests, where appropriate, and supports students in their application for a Disabled Students' Allowance. The OU also hosts a fully-equipped Access Centre for DSA Assessments.

The Disability Resources Team arranges production and delivery of alternative formats of study material and assistive equipment and services for home study, tutorials, day and residential schools, and assessment. Many study materials are available in a range of formats including:

- Transcripts of audio-visual material (e.g. broadcasts, videos, CDs and DVDs)
- Spiral-bound books or texts
- Digital audio formats of texts
- Electronic copies
- Large print

Support also includes:

- Small equipment loans, such as digital voice recorders
- Communication support at tutorials/day/residential schools
- Equipment/aids and human support at residential school
- Advisory service and training materials for students

Reasonable adjustment for assessment may include alternative or modified assignments, extra time and rest breaks at exams, or invigilated examinations in the home. Question papers can usually be provided in Braille, audio, large print or special colours and answers may be allowed to be presented in alternative formats.

The Open University's Disability Advisory Service supports staff with any disability-related enquiries, and provides resources and training. This includes specialist advice on dyslexia, mental health and visual and hearing impairment related to study.

Evidence shows that disabled students who receive a DSA have higher completion rates, and students who declare a disability and receive other disability support are more likely to progress in their studies. Ongoing research and evaluation into the disabled student learning experience and new assistive technologies is shared with the wider education community to foster good practice.

Disabled student support is interlocked with annual monitoring and reporting to the OU's Equality Scheme and the Widening Access and Success Strategy. The OU's commitment to making study accessible for disabled people makes study more accessible in general.

Two examples of good practice by The Open University to support participation include those of supporting students to attend residential schools. This can be found in **Appendix 2**. For staff members who work as Disability Support Assistants at residential schools, a training guide has been produced by the OU's Disability Resources Team. This can be viewed in **Appendix 3**, and may prove a useful template for organisations or individuals creating a similar guide for staff working with students with learning disabilities.

(b) Learning resources related to disability

The Open University currently offers relevant education opportunities in specific learning difficulties through a level one, online module, [Understanding the autism spectrum](#). The Open University also provides a free course entitled [The autistic spectrum: from theory to practice available](#) on its [OpenLearn](#) website.

The Open University's Faculty of Health and Social Care has a Social History of [Learning Disability Research Group](#) (SHLD), one of the aims of which is to make links between the history of learning disability and broader social policies. The Research Group has produced several publications to date and organises an annual conference. Details can be found on the website. At the time of making this Inquiry response, SHLD, in collaboration with the University of East London (Rix Centre) and University of Leeds (School of Fine Arts, Art History and Cultural Studies), was awarded a grant of just under £1m from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to develop a co-produced digital and living archive of learning disability history. The project will explore issues involved in developing an accessible digital archive in collaboration with people with learning disabilities, alongside stakeholders in the fields of technology and design; new media; health and social care; heritage, archives and museums; and education.

Of potential additional interest to carers is the wide range of free health and care resources available on OpenLearn. The Body and Mind (Health Sciences) section currently offers a free course [Choose Health: Managing long-term conditions](#) offers people who are considering caring for family members or friends, the chance to explore what this might involve, and the opportunity to learn more about long-term conditions and the implications for home care. The website uses three cases of end-stage renal failure, phenylketonuria and rheumatoid arthritis. Other relevant free introductory courses available are on autism, public health, complementary medicine, diabetes. For a full listing please visit <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/body-mind/health/health-sciences?seeall=1>

The Open University's Education programmes (undergraduate and Master's level) have modules that engage the understanding of disability in the context of education. In the main the course does not take adopt a segregated approach to developing practitioner understanding of disabilities and therefore integrates consideration of the same in most modules. There are however 3 that specifically consider how we understand and work with the impact of disabilities on children, young people and adults in learning contexts. Only one of these considers a 'learning difficulty' only, the other two focus on inclusive practice for all disabilities, physical and learning. Further detail on these modules can be found in **Appendix 4**.

Terms of Reference (5)

Given the complete and interrelated needs of individuals in these groups to identify the barriers to coordination across departments – regionally and locally – and make recommendations for improvement.

Terms of Reference (6)

To report the Committee's findings and recommendations to the Assembly.

The Open University is open to convening any forum to assist in coordination, and is willing to give evidence to the Committee where relevant, on a general basis, regarding support for disabled students, and widening participation to higher education.

Appendices

- 1: The Open University Meeting Your Needs publication
- 2: Example of practice from The Open University's residential school for students with disabilities
3. Supporting students with Asperger syndrome – Training guide to support staff at residential schools
4. The Open University Education modules relating to disabilities and learning disabilities/difficulties