

# Talking to students about disability and study needs



## Why universities talk about disability

It's against UK law for universities to treat 'disabled' students unfavourably. All universities have a duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure 'disabled' students are not discriminated against. We therefore need to talk to students about disability and the adjustments that need to be made to allow them to study effectively.



### Language is important

You'll be aware that communication with a student is key to effective support; the language you use can build understanding or create barriers. This is particularly the case in communicating about disability and study needs; for example, using the term 'disabled' might not fit with the way a student with dyslexia sees themselves, and this could make them feel uncomfortable or less likely to tell you about their needs. The following tips can help you avoid creating barriers by using language a student feels comfortable with.



### Listening and mirroring

**Listen to the words a student uses to refer to their disability or study difficulties and use the same words when you respond.** This can help the student feel comfortable and encourage them to provide more information, which will make it easier to support them. For example:

- if a student says they have extra study requirements because of their dyslexia, you should use 'study requirements' and 'dyslexia' rather than terms such as 'disability'.
- if a student refers to a medical condition by name, such as epilepsy, try to use the name of the condition, or the word 'condition' in response.
- if a student uses the word 'disability' or 'disabled', mirror this term back to them in your response.



### It's okay to ask

Sometimes you won't have a student's language or way of phrasing as a reference point. In such cases, it is good practice to ask the student how they would like you to refer to their disability or study needs. Try to ask in a way that is part of the normal flow of conversation, and even if a student replies that they don't mind, don't take this at face value; try to mirror any language they then use as much as possible. For example:

- You've mentioned that [...]. Because of the legal requirement to support students, the University would describe this as a disability. Which term do you prefer to use?



### Written communication

If you are writing to a student with whom you have had no prior communication, you won't be able to mirror their language. A recent study revealed that students have no single preference about the language used to talk about disability. However, it showed that more students are comfortable with the terms 'additional requirements' or 'study needs' and many students are uncomfortable with the term 'disabled'. Examples of questions you might use are:

- Is there anything that makes it difficult for you to study?
- Is there any support you need to help you study effectively?

#### Related resources -

**Student guidance:** Communicating with the university about your study needs

**Organisation guidance:** Improving your communication by engaging people with disabilities in the language used by your organisation

Lister, K. and Coughlan, T. (2018). *Student perceptions of the language of disability, deficit and empowerment*. In: Proceedings of the fifth Widening Participation Conference, Open University, Milton Keynes. Available from: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/58832/>