

## Step 4 (optional): Consult more widely

### What you could do...

Your original sample is likely be small so, if you have the resource to do so, you might want to consult more widely. There are different ways you can do this including surveys, polls and forums.

### What we did

We re-wrote the examples of communications according to the three different models identified, and using the language that the students had used. Using a survey, we asked students about their preferences for each type of communication, including different aspects of the text such as headers, introductory text, and questions. Students were asked their preferences for either retaining the current language, choosing one of the three models or suggesting something different. We also asked students their preference for how they would like others to talk to (and about) them as a 'disabled' person, choosing from the options identified in the step 1. Our students used such identifiers as:

- A disabled student
- A student with a disability
- A student with study needs
- A student with additional study requirements
- A student with barriers/obstacles to study

### Things to consider:

- Make sure that you sense check your survey with several people before you send it out.
- If you consult more widely, it is useful to offer the option of making other suggestions for language.

## Step 5: Make changes to the language you use as necessary

### What you could do...

Use the findings to decide what changes are needed in your documents and communications.

### What we did

We shared our outputs with different teams within the University responsible for communication with disabled participants. Our findings were taken into account when these teams revised their documents and communications.

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## Improving your communication by engaging people with disabilities in the language used by your organisation



Many universities and other organisations use terms such as '*disabled*' and '*impairment*'. Disabled students have reported they are uncomfortable with words like this and that this is a key factor in whether they choose to disclose their disability.

We identified the differences between the language students use to discuss their disabilities and that used within our University, we found that our current language model is not popular with students. We are now working to improve our communication, and students have told us they appreciate having their say in the language used.

The following summarises the steps we took in our work and how you can do the same.

## Step 1: Listen to the language that people with disabilities interacting with your organisation use about themselves

### What you could do...

There are different ways you could do this, including observation, focus groups, interviews, listening to conversation, or by examining the language used in public forums.

### What we did

We ran focus groups with small groups of students. We grouped students by broad disability categories and by Faculty, so they would have aspects in common. We sent them an activity in advance, asking them to reflect on their learning journey. At the focus group they discussed this journey and we listened.

### Important notes:

- Ensure there is informed consent.
- Take care not to prime or direct the participants so that they don't change their language for this context.
- You might want to prompt participants in advance to think about how much or how little they feel comfortable sharing.

## Step 2: Get their input on the language that your organisation uses

### What you could do...

Ask participants to comment on and critique the language of disability within forms, guidance, website information, disability profiles, instructional materials, scripted conversations, and disclosure questions.

### What we did

We chose three examples of communications that students would receive:

- The section entitled 'If you have a disability' which features on the module description areas of the website.
- The disability disclosure question that students answer during registration.
- An example of an anonymised student disability profile.

We asked small groups of students to critique the examples both by writing comments on the form then recorded the discussion within the group for transcription.

### Important notes:

- Take care not to direct the participants.
- If they comment on structure rather than language per se, don't stop them as this is also useful for the analysis stage.
- Try to use a broad selection of examples that participants engage with in different ways.

## Step 3: Analyse

### What you could do...

Look for differences between the language in your communication examples and both the language that participants are using and the criticisms that they are raising. If you find lots of differences in language between participants, try to look for common or shared themes.

### What we did

For the focus group data, we analysed the transcripts of the recordings using discourse analysis and coded this in Nvivo. We were looking for the language students used in relation to their disability, their study needs and the support they wanted and received. For the critique of the examples of communication, we analysed the areas they were critiquing and the changes they suggested. We analysed both the paper copies of the examples that they annotated and the transcripts of the discussions.

We looked for themes in the way they talked about their disability, their study needs, and the support they received, using thematic discourse analysis to distil the key themes into three models: a medical (or deficit) model; a study support model, which focuses on the university supporting the student; and an empowerment model, which focuses on transferable skills and coping strategies.

### Things to consider:

Try not to let your thoughts about language and disability influence your analysis; listen with an open mind. For example, many people believe that talking about disability as an illness is negative, but some disabled people may not see it this way.