

A short guide to getting it right for disabled student placements

Guidance for Disabled Students prior, during and after placements

**Judith Waterfield and Bob West
University of Plymouth**

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Introduction

This set of student guidance notes consists of seven very important questions that you are invited to consider for yourself. The seven questions have been devised as a result of over 30 interviews with disabled students, before and after they participated in placement activities. Above all what you have here is the distilled wisdom of a wealth of peer reviewing. The questions, and the information supporting them, have also come from specialist staff in the university disability service, who have had many years of experience of offering guidance to students, and additional input has come from academic staff with responsibilities for student placement.

We hope that these notes will draw your attention to:

- The value of declaring a disability
- The importance of taking responsibility for yourself
- Being aware of the responsibilities of others
- Understanding the arrangements put in place for you
- Participating in feedback and sharing.

The main message of these notes is to impress upon you the difference between studying at a university and taking up a professional work placement. All the peer reviews highlight the importance of acting as early as possible to alert the relevant staff to the 'reasonable adjustments' that you might require in the work place. It is up to you to act responsibly on your own behalf.

When you have read through the questions and the supporting evidence you might like to discuss any important points that arise for you with your placement co-ordinator, or placement provider or a member of staff at the disability service.

The value of declaring a disability

Key Question: How do you view being encouraged to disclosure your disability?

- By enthusiastically welcoming the opportunity because you believe it will open doors to support, understanding and an opportunity to start planning as early as possible;
- By considering that it might have a positive effect in dealing with clients and the general public through mutual respect and recognition;
- By reluctantly agreeing to it without imagining any benefits;
- By deciding that it is not relevant to you because from your past experience you believe that your disability will not impact on your placement experience;
- By ignoring it when you know it is relevant and likely to have consequences;
- By declaring at the last possible moment therefore risking causing delays which may disrupt your placement experience and programme;
- By deciding that you might make a declaration mid-term, if things get difficult, despite the possibility that this could seriously jeopardize your placement.

If you choose not to declare, your decision will be respected.

Key Question: What practical outcomes will disability disclosure support?

Declaring that you have a disability will facilitate the following:

- early pre-placement planning, which may be crucial to the success of your placement;
- the issuing of placement agreements or where available the pursuit of a suitable elected placement;
- arranging 'reasonable adjustments' to be made to placement provision;
- setting up informed channels for liaison between the university and the placement provider;
- occupational health issues;
- health and safety at work;
- risk assessing;
- self-evaluation (strengths and weaknesses) for informing personal strategies in a shared and considered way.

Key Question: Who needs to know that you have a disability?

Disability disclosure, or the disclosure of a long term illness, is a positive act intended to form the basis of best practice planning for liaising with those who need to know.

Disability disclosure is governed by rules of confidentiality and the Data Protection Act (1998). Declaring your disability through the process of applying for a university place will alert both the disability support service and your academic department.

Your signed agreement will be required for information about your disability to be passed on to your placement provider.

The importance of taking responsibility for yourself

Key Question: How is it best to present yourself as an individual?

Taking responsibility for yourself and being pro-active about how you approach the planning, undertaking and evaluation of your placement is very important to your learning experience and the leaning outcomes.

It is crucial to the success of your placement that you try to anticipate the impact that your disability might have on your pre-placement and placement planning. This might include asking a member of the academic staff or from the disability support service if you can have a pre-placement planning meeting.

Make sure that you understand the implications of your placement, for example:

- is the location, and any outreach locations, accessible?
- what transport arrangements are required?
- are there any ramifications of the timetabling of the placement, such as shift work?
- are there suitable opportunities for breaks?
- do ICT compatibility issues need to be addressed?
- what facilities are there for taking refreshments?

Seeking to enter a profession it is important to become professional in how you work and learn, for example, by:

- keeping a personal record of your placement to help you be effective and efficient;
- managing your interactions maturely with the other stakeholders;

- talking to your placement coordinator and/or mentor because it is their job to offer you supervision;
- participating fully in planning meetings, discussions about 'reasonable adjustments' and through monitoring their effectiveness;
- being clear about your own strengths and weaknesses;
- making sure that you allow enough time to achieve the outcomes you want, particularly if you know you need more time than other students;
- knowing who to alert if things go wrong.

Being aware of the responsibilities of others

Key Question: Who does what and where do you go for information, advice and guidance?

- If you are in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) you will have a DSA Report detailing your support requirements and a Teaching and Learning Support Document (TLSD) will contain similar information to be shared with your academic department.
- The university disability support service is one point for information, guidance and advice and so is your university placement coordinator or personal tutor, or in your place of placement, your mentor or placement educator.
- Know how to contact those who are available to support you.
- Make sure that you understand who does what, both in your place of work and at the university.
- There may be overlapping responsibilities so it is important to be consistent in who you approach with your questions, concerns and issues.
- Build up a rapport by being clear and consistent in your interactions.
- Don't expect others to do what you have agreed is your own responsibility.

Understanding the arrangements put in place for you

Key Question: What can be done to help ensure that the placement will be made inclusive for you as a disabled student?

There are a number of elements to this:

- Get the ball rolling as early as possible so that staff can anticipate the 'reasonable adjustments' that you might need.
- Be actively involved in identifying the 'reasonable adjustments' with your placement coordinator, your placement provider and staff from the university disability service.
- During discussions try to make sure that what you need is identified at the outset, as rolling negotiations are not usually an effective way of working.
- You may wish to consider the timing of placements, the possibility of working part-time, the need for additional time to complete tasks, the provision of helpers or specialist technology, etc.
- If your placement is elected by you, consider whether the types of 'reasonable adjustments' likely to be required affect the types of placements you would consider?
- Make sure you understand how the 'reasonable adjustments' are intended to be applied.
- Monitor their effectiveness.
- Alert one of the relevant stakeholders if the 'reasonable adjustments' are not meeting their purpose, or if other unforeseen consequences of placement are disadvantaging you.
- Don't suffer in silence!

Participating in feedback and sharing

Key Question: How do you share observations and insights and make evaluations of placement after the event?

As part of your placement you will be expected to keep a record of your experiences. Other stakeholders in the placement process can benefit from your insights and this is an important aspect of your responsibility to become a professional.

Placement feedback covers all aspects of your placement but your experiences as a disabled person on placement are valuable in their own right.

Write or record feedback in a constructive way, identifying problems and where relevant the solutions that were successfully found.

There may be a misconception that negative feedback will adversely affect employment prospects, especially where the focus may be based on disability discrimination. This should not deter you from making a balanced appraisal of your experiences.

If, however, you feel that discrimination or harassment has taken place this should be reported at the time and not just left to a post-placement feedback exercise.