

Encouraging student disclosure: ensure students feel safe and confident when sharing information

The University would like to ensure that all students feel safe and confident to share information about their disabilities, and that staff are confident in handling disability-related information. This page provides answers to frequently asked staff questions about information sharing and confidentiality in relation to disabled students.

Information about disability is sensitive personal data and is subject to stringent data protection requirements. Students must give their explicit consent before information about their disability is shared. However, once the [consent to share form](#) is signed, it is the duty of university staff to share information relating to the disability. This should be done safely and sensitively, according to the terms set out on the consent form, to ensure that effective adjustments are put in place. The goal is to reduce as far as possible the number of times a student must describe their disability or disabilities.

Encouraging and supporting student disclosure

Why we need to provide multiple opportunities to students to disclose a disability

Students can be nervous about declaring a disability and there are many other reasons why students choose not to do this. Repeated requests and information about how the university supports disabled students might assuage their concerns and encourage them to come forward. If more students declare on application or as offer-holders, the university will be able to put in place timely support for the beginning of students' studies.

Well publicised opportunities to disclose will provide evidence of meeting the anticipatory duty to support disabled students required by the Equality Act. There is no need to include such opportunities in every single communication. Once reasonable direct opportunities have been provided and high profile general information is available, responsibility to disclose can reasonably be expected from the student.

Why students choose not to disclose

There are many reasons, but those commonly reported are:

- Concerns that disclosure will have a negative impact on an application
- Concerns about staff attitudes and responses to disability
- Concerns about confidentiality
- Previous experience of discrimination
- Lack of awareness that their condition would fall under the heading of disability – this often applies in cases of hidden disabilities such as long term health conditions, mental health conditions, or specific learning difficulties. International students may have different preconceptions about what might constitute a disability.

How to encourage students to tell us about a disability

- Place clear information on your website welcoming applications from disabled students. Consider adding profiles of disabled students to your alumni pages. Ensure pre-entry documentation includes ample opportunities to declare – do not rely on application form information alone. [View sample text](#)
- Ensure that time is given at open days and access events to highlighting the services available to students with disabilities and stating that applications will be unaffected by disclosure.
- Provide re-assurance that any information will be treated confidentially and as sensitive personal data and therefore processed in line with the [University's data protection policy](#).
- Widely promote the contact details of the Disability Lead and Co-ordinator on your website and in communications with current and prospective students.
- Clarify the breadth of conditions the term disability encompasses. Many students do not realise they are eligible to receive disability-related services. The Disability Advisory Service uses the phrase: *This includes, for example, students with sensory or mobility impairments, long-term health conditions, specific learning difficulties, autistic spectrum conditions or mental health conditions.* Use communication about examination adjustments to invite contact if there are any concerns about disability.
- Clearly explain how to disclose a disability. Students can: contact the disability lead or co-ordinator in their college or department; contact the Disability Advisory Service; update their student record in Student Self Service, or speak to an academic member of staff.

Responding to disclosure

What to do if a student declares a disability to you

Note the date and brief details of the conversation in your records.

Gain the student's consent to share this information.

Actively listen to the student: they may wish to share with you the impact of their disability, what barriers to study they experience or what strategies they use to overcome difficulties—however do not prompt the student to share these details. Tell them broadly about the support the university can offer and the role of DAS and Disability Coordinators in working with the student to arrange support.

Email the student after the meeting to confirm your conversation.

If the student has consented to their information being shared, refer the student to the Disability Advisory Service, via email, copying the student. Mark all such email correspondence as confidential in the subject line.

If the student has not yet given their consent to share information, advise the student to contact either the Disability Advisory Service or the Disability Co-ordinator at their college (for undergraduates) or department (for graduates).

All notes, emails and other documents must be stored securely.

What if a student wants me to know but no-one else?

If a student approaches you indicating they wish to share personal information, you should not give absolute assurances of confidentiality.

If the student asks you not to share any information with others please explain the significant limits to the support and services that can be provided without disclosure. Explain that if consent is given, information will be shared confidentially and on a need to know basis, data will be stored securely, and according to the permission given on the 'Consent to share disability information form'.

If possible, ensure the student knows before disclosing any information that you cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality even if they withhold consent. You should say that you might still have to make a disclosure in exceptional circumstances, where there was evidence of risk of serious harm to the individual or others.

If a student withholds consent to share information, they should still sign the consent form. Note the date, time and brief detail of your conversation in your records. Send a summary email to the student. Ensure that the subject of the email is marked confidential.

Please don't tell my... only tell...

Explain the limitations of support the university can provide if information is not shared. You could offer support in helping them discuss their disability with the member of staff with whom they have concerns. It is helpful to encourage students to think and talk about the strategies they have developed to overcome any difficulties, as well as the impact of their disability.

If the student wishes to restrict the sharing of information, they should still sign the Consent to share disability information form. The form should be modified by hand to reflect the student's specific requests regarding the individuals to whom a disclosure can be made. Note the date, time and brief detail of your conversation in your records. Send a summary email to the student. Ensure that the subject of the email is marked confidential.

Responding to concerns about students

What to do if you suspect a student might have a disability

Although some formal reasonable adjustments are not possible without disclosure and appropriate evidence, there is a responsibility to act if there are reasonable grounds to conclude a person has a disability. If you would like to discuss your observations anonymously, contact the Disability Advisory Service to see if there appears to be grounds to move forward.

The best approach is to talk to the student directly. Rather than suggesting a disability is present, discuss the nature of the problems you observe and ask sensitively if these kinds of issues have presented themselves before. Ask the student what impact they are having on their

studies. Ask if the student feels they need any support in dealing with these difficulties. You should not say 'I think you have dyslexia' or 'it seems you might have Asperger's'.

After some discussion, you can suggest they talk to an appropriate person. This could be their GP or a college nurse or you could offer to contact the Disability Advisory Service on their behalf, depending on the nature of the issues. Advise the Disability Advisory Service that you have concerns but there is no existing diagnosis.

If you and the student are concerned that disability exists, consider if there are any immediate steps which you can reasonably take to make adjustments which are proportionate and remove current barriers to study. The Disability Advisory Service will be able to provide advice if needed.

Record the actions you have taken and a summary of your discussions with the student. This will be useful should the college or university be challenged that it did not take note of any presenting evidence of a potential disability.

Related documents

[Guidance on Confidentiality in Student Health and Welfare](#)

[DAS Student Consent form](#)