

Hearing Impairments

Information about Hearing Impairments (HI)

If a student has a hearing impairment (HI), they have some degree of hearing loss but the level of hearing loss and precise nature of impact varies enormously from person to person. It can be mild, moderate, severe or profound, but it is important to note that even mild hearing loss can still significantly impact on access to communication and information. Dual sensory impairment (with combined vision and hearing loss) has different impact than either considered separately.

An individual's preferred method of communication will likely vary, depending on the nature of their hearing loss, the situation, the purpose of the communication, and whom, or how many people, will be involved. Hearing aids or cochlear implants, lip reading strategies and British Sign Language interpretation are common.

Implications for study

Students with HIs will clearly experience difficulty accessing all spoken language and audio activities: lectures, tutorials, group discussions, film or television clips, music and so on.

Students are likely to be very adept at utilising their particular communication method, but staff should be aware that all these strategies require intense concentration, are often very tiring and rarely fully compensate for hearing loss. For example, cochlear implants do not fully restore hearing, hearing aids tend to amplify all sounds, but include distracting background noise, and lip reading provides only 30% of words, so information might easily be missed or misinterpreted. Where a student requires a BSL interpreter, significant forward planning is necessary to ensure an interpreter will be available.

Guidance for working with students with hearing impairments

The following notes highlight factors to take into consideration when working with students with hearing impairments and suggest practical action and informal adjustments which might be made.

Communication

- Establish the student's preferred methods of communication and discuss with them the nature of their hearing loss. Ask them discretely about the *impact* of their disability and discuss with them what might be helpful (never ask or expect a student to discuss personal or medical details with you).
- Ensure text and email options (rather than telephone) are available for communications so students can contact key college and departmental staff.

When communicating with a person who is lip reading:

- ensure the room is well lit, but that you aren't standing directly in front of a window/light source that will cause your face to fall into shadow;
- make sure you have the student's attention before starting to speak;
- speak clearly and at a normal pace;
- it's ok to use facial expressions and gestures, but don't shout (can be uncomfortable for hearing aid users) or consciously alter/over emphasise lip pattern (can be hard to lip-read);
- be aware that strong accents, unfamiliar dialects, and facial hair that obscures the lips can make lip reading more difficult.

When communicating with a person who is using a BSL interpreter:

- always address the deaf person directly, rather than the interpreter;
- be mindful of the pace of the interpreter and respond accordingly to account for any delay in completing the translation;
- be aware that BSL users are likely to maintain eye contact with the interpreter rather than the speaker.

Environment

- Assess your teaching room for adequate lighting and limit background noise (open windows, noisy extractor fans and heating/cooling units).
- Reserve seating (if helpful) to ensure the student has a good line of sight to the lecturer/interpreter, slides, and other materials.
- Be prepared to wear a microphone/radio aid when teaching, try not to move around too much, face the audience as much as possible, and repeat questions from the floor.

Study

- BSL is a recognised language in its own right, with a distinct structure and syntax which differs distinctly from spoken and written English; this could impact on the structure or content of a deaf person's written work, which may not follow English language structure and reflects a more limited vocabulary (independent of the student's intellectual ability or potential).
- In **group work** establish communication guidelines for all students so the hearing impaired student can fully participate (e.g. people speaking one at a time, repeating questions and comments, raising their hand before speaking, sitting so that people's faces are visible, using/passing a microphone round if necessary, creating smaller discussion groups).
- Where possible, consider if smaller group sizes might help support communication difficulties; in some cases 1:1 tutorials might be appropriate.
- Provide a glossary of unfamiliar terminology in advance to help the student/interpreter prepare because translating/lip-reading unknown words is very difficult, particularly when trying to keep up with a lecture; write down new terms that arise during a session, with their meaning, and give time for reading as they won't be able to attend to the board and the interpreter/lecturer at the same time.
- If using DVDs, film or audio clips, these should be subtitled or a written transcript of audio provided prior to the class.

- Supplement verbal instructions or feedback in writing, and send a written summary after meetings/discussions with clear action points.

Planning / Organisation

- Give course information, timetables and schedules well in advance.
- Keep timetables as consistent as possible to help provide structure, and give advance notice of any changes (times, venues) so that support workers (e.g. BSL interpreters, notetakers) can be arranged.
- Consider the scheduling of lectures, meetings, tutorials, and exams where possible to take account of the potential for fatigue given hearing impairment.
- Additional consideration when planning field work and years abroad to anticipate potential stressors/barriers to participation and identify support in a timely way.

Examples of reasonable adjustments

The Student Support Plan (SSP) sets out the formal reasonable adjustments recommended by the Disability Advisory Service, and will provide additional specific individual information where needed. However, the following list gives some examples of possible reasonable adjustments.

Please note these adjustments will not be applicable to every student nor is this list exhaustive.

- Provision of verbal information in written formats - including contact details, instructions, in-class tasks, feedback, timetables, essay questions/titles.
- Access to infrared or loop systems in lecture, seminar or college venues, and portable loop systems for one-to-one/small meetings or communal environments where discussions may be required (e.g. Porter's Lodge, Dining Hall till, or tutorial setting).
- Evaluate need for a risk assessment for practical/laboratory settings, and a Personal Emergency Evacuation (PEEP) for College/Department buildings - this might involve assigning someone to locate the HI student in the event of an emergency, to confirm they have registered an alarm and to support them to safely evacuate where relevant; all evacuation routes should have clear signage and procedures provided in visual formats; provision of flashing or vibrating alerters to notify the student of an emergency alarm might be required.
- Allocation of a study bedroom in a quiet location, away from communal facilities or thoroughfares as hearing aids amplify all sound, including unwanted environmental and background noise.
- Provision of a note taker to capture a written record of the lecture or class for the student; Permission to record lectures or take notes on a computer and access to lecture capture.
- Access to a BSL interpreter to interpret orally delivered information and help the student to communicate with others.
- Reading lists and lecture/teaching materials (includes handouts, notes, PowerPoint slides, and articles for discussion) in advance so the student and interpreter can be prepared, look up unfamiliar terms, and familiarise themselves with new concepts/terminology).

- Provision of examination adjustments such as designated seating so the student can hear announcements, individual time prompts, and extra time for oral exams to check for understanding.

Additional resources

- For further advice and information staff may contact the Disability Advisory Service by email on disability@admin.ox.ac.uk or telephone **01865 (2)80459**, or see our [student](#) and [staff](#) web pages.
- [Action on Hearing Loss](#)
- [British Deaf Association](#)
- [CHES](#) (Consortium of Higher Education Services with deaf students) HE study guidance
- [Sense](#) – a charity supporting deafblind individuals
- [Sheffield Hallam University's](#) information on language modification