
Physical Disabilities and Mobility Impairments

Information about Physical Disabilities and Mobility Impairments

A physical disability or mobility impairment results in varying degrees of limitation in aspects of a person's physical functioning. They may be restricted in their use of one or more extremity (upper and/or lower body), their ability or stamina to stand or walk independently over short distances, their strength or dexterity to grasp or lift objects, or their speech may be impaired.

Physical disabilities or mobility impairments can arise from chronic medical conditions (discussed individually elsewhere), including respiratory, orthopaedic or neuromuscular disorders such as cerebral palsy (CP), stroke, muscular dystrophy, spinal cord injuries/paralysis, back conditions, arthritis, severe cases of repetitive strain injury (RSI), fibromyalgia, myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME)/chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), multiple sclerosis (MS), and cystic fibrosis.

For some conditions the impact is fairly fixed, but many will fluctuate and others are progressive in nature. People might use mobility aids to get around, such as a wheelchair (electronic, powered or manual), scooter, rollator/walker, or crutches, or they might require personal care assistance for essential aspects of daily living such as feeding, dressing, washing, and toileting.

Implications for study

Day-to-day domestic tasks and activities associated with independent living can present challenges for many students. If the disability is longstanding, they are likely to have well established coping strategies, but it can take time to adapt these to the Oxford context.

There may be an impact on the student's ability to travel between sites or ambulate within a building in a timely manner. Physical barriers can pose problems for entry and/or egress from a building, or manoeuvrability in small spaces. Students might experience difficulty manipulating study materials (holding books, turning pages), writing or typing, or carrying books/study materials between sites. In some cases, they may need a reduced pace of work or to avoid meetings/classes at particular times of day due to stamina, fatigue or concentration issues.

Guidance for working with students with physical disabilities and mobility impairments

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

Communication

- Talk to the student about their disability. 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.
- Consider keeping in touch more regularly than you otherwise might to monitor academic progress and ensure support requirements are being met; acknowledge that variable attendance might in some cases be due to their disability rather than lack of effort.
- When conversing with a wheelchair user for more than a few minutes, sit down at the same level or move back so that the student doesn't have to strain their neck; do not touch or attempt to move someone's wheelchair without their permission.
- Direct all communication towards the student, not their support worker, if they have one.

Environment

- Ensure all teaching locations (classrooms, lecture theatres, labs, field trips) are fully accessible and rearrange locations or make adaptations where necessary; assess the teaching environment for hazards and obstacles; ensure aisles are sufficiently wide and uncluttered; consider whether doors can be easily opened and whether temporary ramps are required; provide ergonomic furniture/height adjustable tables where necessary and ensure equipment is within reach.
- Consider whether a risk assessment is required in practical/laboratory settings, and whether a Personal Emergency Evacuation (PEEP) is required for College/Department buildings.
- Provide locations and allow activities which allow the student to manage their environment – for example, reserved car parking, space for a wheelchair or mobility scooter, reserved seating near to exits so the student can leave discretely or stand/stretch without disturbing others if needed, permission to take in medication or eat/drink when necessary, easy access to bathroom facilities or ergonomic furniture.

Study

- Recognise the impact of fatigue on attendance and concentration; provide opportunities to revisit topics, use of assistive technology (such as lecture recording facilities); occasional flexibility with deadlines or assistance with establishing workload priorities might be required.
- Handouts: provide electronically in advance; use well structured notes with clear sections so that students can annotate easily, and number slides clearly so students can identify them during the lecture.
- Rest breaks, extra time, specialist transport/accommodation, ergonomic furniture, and other individual arrangements might be needed for activities such as practicals or field work.

Planning / Organisation

- Give key course information, deadlines and timetables in advance; keep timetables as consistent as possible; give advance notice of changes to allow student/support workers to plan journeys and workload to compensate for difficulties with speed of working and fatigue; consider the

timing and location of meetings, tutorials, lectures and exams, and make allowance for possible additional travel time needed.

- Be aware of increased potential for absence to attend medical appointments.
- Additional consideration when planning field work, placements and years abroad to anticipate potential 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.**

- Examination adjustments such as extra time, a separate room, rest breaks, use of a scribe or a computer with assistive software, and consideration of appropriate examination scheduling.
- Provision of a note-taker in lectures; permission to record lectures or take notes on a computer; access to lecture capture.
- Support from a practical/lab study assistant; provision of assistive technology for in-class computer work.
- Provision of reading lists and lecture/teaching materials (includes handouts, notes, PowerPoint slides, and articles for discussion) in advance to allow the student adequate time to prepare; materials in electronic format so the student can access with assistive software.
- Privileged reader status at college / University libraries including extended and/or proxy loans.
- Evaluate need for a risk assessment for practical/laboratory settings, and a Personal Emergency Evacuation (PEEP) for College/Department buildings.
- Provision of onsite accommodation with ensuite bathroom facilities (if necessary) and the option to be able to keep the same room throughout the course (and vacations); allocation of a room in a quiet location, away from communal facilities or thoroughfares so that problems with sleep and concentration are not compounded.
- Provision of specialist ergonomic furniture; reserved car parking space.

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.
- See the DAS '[useful information and documents](#)' webpage for details of local wheelchair and scooter rental, accessible taxis, and guidance on the storage of mobility scooters.
- Visit the University of Oxford [Access Guide](#) for images and descriptions of building accessibility features.
- [HealthTalk](#) is a collection of patient experience videos which provide reliable health information and support for a range of health issues.