

## Disability Support Workers on Campus

Most institutions will have a member of staff who specialises, on behalf of the institution, in supporting disabled students. In smaller institutions, this person may either be part-time or may have another role as well. The person's job title may be Disability Officer, Disability Advisor, Disability Coordinator, Additional Learning Needs Advisor or Learning Support Manager (etc) and their post is often located in Student Services (though it can be part of a specialist Equality Unit or occasionally an Academic Services section). This disability specialist should be the first point of contact for staff and students who want to discuss any issues relating to an individual disabled student or disabled students in general.

In addition it is likely there will be a variety of support staff working with disabled students in different capacities. This information sheet provides a brief overview of those staff and their roles. You may come across these people on campus, but they are usually arranged by the Disability Service.

Support workers' exact job descriptions and role limits will depend on the particular student and university situation. However, one key point is that they are professionals, facilitating students' access, and are not part of the student group. Support workers may need direct contact with other staff, either acting on the student's behalf when that is appropriate, or requesting information to help them carry out their role (eg obtaining lecture notes in advance as briefing for interpreters).

Please do not engage support workers in conversation when they are actively working, and do not expect them to 'join in' student activities or participate in class discussion. A support worker should not act as the student's work partner or friend.

**Dyslexia tutor or learning support tutor:** such tutors may be either employed by the university or through an external agency or they may be independent (self-employed). They will usually provide one-to-one support sessions for students with dyslexia or other specific learning differences. These sessions are aimed at developing study skills, and may include assistance with proofreading assignments.

**Mentor:** a specialist employed to work one-to-one with students who have mental health issues, Asperger's Syndrome, other impairments or specific learning differences. The mentor will usually help the students with learning to manage their workload alongside managing the effects of their condition. They may also help the student to work on time management, organisational skills, prioritising work and any motivation issues. Mentors may occasionally contact teaching staff to negotiate changes to deadlines or other work-related issues.

**Library assistant:** employed for various tasks depending on the student's needs. They might help with retrieving books from shelves if the student is unable to do this, or help with photocopying and other practical tasks. The assistant may locate items in the library catalogue. Academic staff can help by ensuring that reading lists include a marker identifying priority items, and where only part of a book is relevant, the required chapters are clearly stated.

**Reader:** employed to read textbooks aloud to visually impaired students who are unable or find it difficult to access text. Some students with specific learning difficulties, particularly dyslexia, may also use a reader, especially in exams, to ensure correct reading of the questions set.

**Note-taker:** employed to take notes for a particular student in lectures/seminars/tutorials. This may be because the student has some degree of hearing impairment<sup>1</sup>, is physically unable to take their own notes or perhaps because, due to a specific learning difference, finds it difficult to write notes at the required speed. Note-takers may take notes by hand or using a laptop computer, depending on the student's requirements. Some universities employ note takers directly, while others use external agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to take notes oneself whilst lip-reading or watching a sign language interpreter.



**Communication support worker (CSW):** usually employed to work with deaf students. They may be interpreting information for the student by using British Sign Language (BSL), or modifying written<sup>2</sup> English to make it more accessible for the student. A deaf student who uses BSL is likely to have a CSW or an interpreter and possibly a note-taker in teaching sessions.

**British Sign Language interpreter (BSLI):** works with deaf students to interpret into BSL the words spoken by the lecturer and others, and (if necessary) will voice any comments the BSL user may wish to make to the lecturer or the class. Since interpretation is difficult and requires intense concentration, the interpreters may work in pairs so that one person interprets for, say, 20 minutes, then the other takes a turn. Interpreters will need to brief themselves before a lecture, and so will need access to lecture notes and other material in advance.

**Personal assistant (PA):** students with complex physical impairments may need the services of a PA. These assistants may help with accessing the campus, assist at mealtimes or with personal care (eg eating, drinking, using the toilet). Some PAs are employed solely for personal assistance and some also have a role in academic support. PAs are sometimes employed by the institution, sometimes by the student's home area social services department. Some institutions work with the Community Service Volunteers organisation and recruit CSVs to fulfil the PA role.

**If you have any difficulties with a support worker or you think a student may need a support worker,** you should contact your institution's Disability Service to discuss the matter.

**If your teaching activities are subject to changes** to timetable or venue, teaching styles, format and quality of print and electronic material, it is important that you liaise with either the support person or the institutional disability team on the implications of those changes.

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<sup>2</sup> Deaf students whose first language is BSL may have English as a second language – but their ability to read and write English can be variable. BSL is not simply English translated into signs in a sign-for-word style - it is a dynamic and creative language in its own right. Like most signed languages, BSL has a very free grammar and word order is less important than in many spoken languages. Deaf students may struggle to grasp the importance of word order and grammar in written English.