

UMHAN Policy Paper on Examinations and Students with Mental Health Difficulties

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Why make adjustments?

- The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requires HEI's to make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities
- There is a strong business case. Estimates suggest that 1 in 4 people experience mental health difficulties at some point in their lives.
- Mental Health difficulties are the leading cause of disability amongst young people, and so should feature prominently in HEI's attempts at widening participation.
- The incidence of mental health difficulties is far higher amongst other groups which may be targets of widening participation efforts, than in the general population

What does the Disability Discrimination Act require?

- Where needs can be predicted, for example that every cohort of students will contain students with mental health difficulties, there is a duty to make anticipatory adjustments.
- Reactive reasonable adjustments, responding to individual student needs.
- Adjustments to assessments, including the design or delivery of an examination
- Altering the mode of an assessment, if a particular method, for example an examination, sets up unnecessary barriers
- Assessment criteria to be based on genuine competency standards.
- A condition that someone can do something within a certain period of time will only be a competency standard in very limited circumstances.

Disability Equality Duty

- To 'promote equality of opportunity between disabled persons and other persons'
- Take steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, even when that involves treating disabled persons' more favourably than other persons.

Definition of disability

- Defined by the Disability Discrimination Act as a physical or mental impairment which has lasted, or is likely to last for 12 months or more, and has a substantial effect on day to day activities. It would not take into account the effect of any medication
- A person who has had a condition, which is likely to re-occur is also covered by the Act
- In practice whether a person's individual condition constitutes a disability within the meaning of the act can only be established by the Head of a Tribunal. For that reason it is likely to be sensible to adopt wider criteria, than the act requires
- The majority of people who would qualify for protection do not consider themselves disabled

Definition of disability 2

- There will be students who have mental health difficulties, who do not meet the legal definition, but are never the less disabled, within the specific context of undertaking a course, or some particular aspect of a course (such as examinations), of Higher Education.
- There is no legal definition of what constitutes a mental health difficulty
- There is no longer a requirement for a mental health difficulty to be clinically well recognised in order for it to be considered a disability
- Whether or not someone is accessing medical treatment, can not, in itself, be taken as an accurate indicator of the level of difficulty.
- Requiring medical evidence, as the only possible gateway to adjustments is likely to have a disproportionate impact on people from South East Asian, and Chinese communities, as there are greater cultural barriers to accessing medical treatment.
- Lack of specific medical evidence does not mean that an HEI does not have any legal duty to consider adjustments

Anticipatory adjustments

- Anticipatory adjustments aimed at students with mental health difficulties have been fairly few and far between across the sector
- Many anticipatory adjustments for students with mental health difficulties would benefit the wider student population
- A portfolio approach to assessment is well worth considering
- Arranging for all examinations, that there is a main exam hall, and also several smaller rooms, and allowing students to elect to take their exams in a smaller room, without necessarily identifying mental health difficulties could be useful
- The stigma associated with mental health difficulties still probably means that only a fraction of potentially eligible students would currently request personal adjustments, and will therefore mean that student results are likely to be worse than they could be.

Anticipatory Adjustments 2

- Open book examinations are a way in which the balance between testing memory and knowledge is somewhat redressed
- Allow students to take into an exam a prompt sheet, which contains key points relevant to the topics they have studied.
- Allowing students to know what questions they are going to be asked in an examination before hand also significantly reduces the fear factor associated with the unknown
- Spacing exams through out the year, possibly at the end of each module would reduce the stress associated with examination periods.
- Many of these adjustments could also be reactive adjustments, but wherever possible anticipatory adjustments are preferable

Reactive Adjustments.

- With all reactive adjustments, it is important to tailor them to the individual student. Students with apparently similar mental health difficulties can be affected in very different ways
- If the amount of reactive adjustments, which are having to be made is high, or seems to be increasing, this should act as an indicator, that consideration needs to be given to the need for anticipatory adjustments.
- Many people in the disability rights movement would argue that if equality existed there would be no need for any reactive adjustments.

Location

- Allowing a student to sit near a window or a door, near the back of an examination room, or near the front.
- As anxiety difficulties can lead to people needing to use the toilet frequently, an examination room, which is close to a toilet, will be beneficial to many students.
- Allowing students to sit exams in a room, with which they are familiar can be helpful.
- In some cases students have been allowed to take examinations away from the university, for example in a student's own accommodation.

Time Related Considerations

- Students with mental health difficulties often experience difficulties with concentration, and some may benefit from extra time in exams
- Students have often been granted 25% extra time – this appears to be an arbitrary figure, and many students with mental health difficulties actually find it more difficult to concentrate over long periods, than many of their peers.
- Granting extra time in exams for some students with mental health difficulties may be counter productive
- Deciding whether extra time would be useful can be difficult and should usually involve a specialist Mental Health Advisor
- Spacing exams evenly may be useful for some students

Time Related Considerations 2

- Some students e.g. those with lethargy related difficulties may benefit from taking exams in the afternoon
- Allowing students to split taking their exams e.g. taking some in June and some in August
- Allowing students to submit some of their coursework over the summer may reduce the stress they experience during the examination period
- Scheduled rest breaks will help some students e.g. 15 minutes every hour
- A stop the clock approach would be useful to many students, who get distracted from concentrating on their exam, by anxieties. N.B. when such an approach is used the student may not actually use it, but the possibility of doing so, may be enough to reduce their anxieties.

Format of examination

- Students may need to bring food, drink or medication into an exam with them, or they may feel comforted by bringing in smaller personal items.
- Some students will feel less anxious if they can play background music
- Being accompanied by a person who they feel comfortable with, either at the beginning of, or throughout the exam may benefit some students.
- Being allowed to type answers or make use of an Amanuensis (scribe)
- Some students may benefit from a reader
- Where substantial adjustments are needed in response to a students anxieties it is worth questioning whether the student's ability can ever be effectively tested using examinations

Movement

- Some students will need to be able to get up and move around, undertake stretching or relaxation exercises, or to leave the room
- Students with mental health difficulties are more likely to smoke than the general population. Whilst not advocating smoking as in any way beneficial nicotine does reduce the symptoms of stress, and so students may feel the needs of a smoking break. (On no smoking campuses, there will be an increase in stress levels around examination times for those who smoke).

Problems Occurring During Examinations

- Making an adjustment does not guarantee problems will not occur, and the effects of adjustments should be monitored
- Mental Health difficulties are variable conditions so sometimes further adjustments will be needed
- Often interventions focus on changing the individual rather than the environment, so adjustments will often be being tried for the 1st time.
- A specialist Mental Health Adviser, will recommend the option requiring the least possible adjustment because making adjustments can impact negatively on the student's long term health prospects.
- Some students will encounter difficulties who have not previously declared mental health difficulties, they should be advised to meet with an appropriate professional, usually a Mental Health Adviser
- Where a student's performance is adversely affected by their condition, they should be given the option of retaking the paper as a 1st sitting
- If there are consistent discrepancies between a students marks in exams, and other forms of assessments, it needs to be considered whether exams are an effective way of assessing the student's ability

Alternatives to exams

- An alternative may be, any valid form of assessing the student's ability.
- UMHAN would dispute the view that examinations are a more rigorous form of assessment, than the alternatives.
- Any form of assessment should aim to give the most accurate snapshot of a student's ability, knowledge, understanding and achievement. For many student examinations do not serve this purpose
- With the advent of anti plagiarism software, concerns about other forms of assessment affording greater opportunities to plagiarise, should become increasingly irrelevant.
- Not all courses involve examinations. There does not appear to be anything particularly distinctive about such courses in comparison to other courses.
- Any alternative form of assessment must not pose the same of different barriers to the student.
- A piece of coursework is the most obvious alternative
- A presentation may be an acceptable alternative for some students

Areas that the sector needs to consider further

- UMHAN members believe what adjustments a student can expect is influenced significantly by the views and attitudes of the tutors involved. This is inequitable.
- Significant discrepancies exist within institutions and across the sector, which brings into question whether the Disability Equality Duty is always being adequately fulfilled.
- If an adjustment has been made within an institution or across the sector, there would need to be robust reasons for not doing so again.
- UMHAN members believe that what adjustments are made can be influenced by how a student is perceived by a course team. This draws into question how well the DDA is understood. UMHAN recommends mandatory training for all academic staff
- There is concern about how duties are interpreted on professional courses, with the perception among UMHAN members that fitness to practice criteria are sometimes more rigorously applied to students with mental health difficulties than to other students.
- UMHAN is not confident that systematic monitoring of the effects of adjustments takes place across the sector, or that students with mental difficulties are routinely differentiated from other students with disabilities, and this has the potential to mask inequalities.

Thank You for Listening

- I have been:

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