

Students with

# Physical Disabilities & Dexterity Difficulties

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## INTRODUCTION

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There are many reasons why a person may have a physical disability. People might have a condition affecting bones (eg brittle bones), muscles (eg muscular dystrophy), joints (eg arthritis), nerves and tendons (eg multiple sclerosis), spinal cord (eg specific back injuries), the brain (eg effects of a stroke) or their condition may affect their overall development and growth (eg someone with restricted growth).

Most conditions are stable, but a few are degenerative or may be variable over time with good and bad periods.

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## COMMON FEATURES OF THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES:

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- Tiredness – a physical disability might mean that the person has to work very hard at normal activities that others take for granted, such as moving from room to room, getting a cup of coffee, or carrying books. Thus day-to-day activities can be very tiring for them
- Balance and co-ordination – carrying books and equipment, or moving around a crowded room can present the student with difficulties
- May need to lie down or move around at regular intervals
- Potentially poor handwriting or inability to write
- Some people might have difficulties with speech, especially when tired
- Some students might have specific perceptual/spatial problems, such as hand/eye co-ordination

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## SUPPORT

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Clearly there are likely to be a number of challenges for students with a physical disability in studying art and design – but with appropriate support many are able to do so successfully. The areas to consider can be divided into four main categories:

- ❖ ACCESS TO ROOMS AND EQUIPMENT
- ❖ PARTICIPATION IN STUDIO ACTIVITIES
- ❖ PARTICIPATION IN LECTURES
- ❖ ASSESSMENT

Physical access for students with disabilities is the legal responsibility of the institution, and as far as practicable adjustments are put in place to minimise the physical barriers that might prevent students from accessing rooms and equipment. At admission stage, the ability of the institution to provide the necessary access and resources to enable the prospective student to successfully complete their course will have been taken into account. However, when booking rooms or planning sessions you will need to consider any students in your group who are likely to find access difficult, and ensure that appropriate rooms are booked. Where room-bookings are not flexible because a workshop requires specialist equipment or resources, think about potential access problems and if necessary discuss the options with the Faculty Disability Co-ordinator in advance.

Participation in studio activities may need ongoing consideration, and consultation with the student about what support or adjustments they might need in order to ensure that they are not disadvantaged. Sometimes it can help to "think outside the box" and find ways that the student can participate fully in activities – as the examples in boxes show:

A support worker can also help with taking notes in lectures, or with writing assignments. Specialist equipment such as a tape or mini-disk recorder or keyboard may also help a student who has difficulties with writing.

Assessments may also require adjustments, and thought about how any barriers to a student participating fully can be reduced. Again, discussing this with the student well ahead of time is a good idea. Adjustments may include allowing extra time in time-limited

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A sculpture student who had a muscle condition found he was unable to work with stone or clay. After discussion with tutors, he was able to complete the work successfully by sculpting in soap.

A student who developed arthritis during the course of her degree was very concerned that she would not be able to complete it successfully. However, working closely with a support worker and giving detailed directions for producing ceramics enabled her to complete the course and do well.

assessments, and rest periods if they are affected by fatigue. An assistant can act as a pair of hands and complete tasks under the student's direction. Remember that assessment and exams are stressful times for all students, so anything you can do to minimise extra barriers or sources of anxiety will be much appreciated.

# Case Study

## Jo's Story

I was so pleased when I got a place at university. We all thought everything was sorted out at last... but it's not.

I got meningitis when I was 13 and as a result I'm visually impaired and wheelchair-bound. The support was good at school and residential college where I did my A levels. They knew how to fight for me and how to let the university know my potential even though I'd been ill and my A levels weren't as good as expected.

I thought I'd done all I could to make everything go right. I got an assessor's report which explained all the details of what support I might need, even things like "If Jo gets tired she might need help with pushing her chair or reimbursement for a taxi, and please can tutors be discreet in class." The assessor sent this to the Disabilities Advisor at the university, who assured him they'd put everything in place. I visited three times before I started, to make sure everything was okay. I phoned the Disability Support office to tell them I was at the university, and I found it strange that no-one wanted to see me before I started lessons. I asked if I should come early to get my bearings as a visually impaired person in a wheelchair, but they said it wasn't necessary.

I heard there was another girl in a wheelchair on my course a year ahead who was doing well, but although I asked to meet her it never happened. I wanted to ask her how she'd managed, and about the social side. Things like whether there are steps up to the bar are really important!

On the first day I got myself to the first session on time, and I was really pleased; the two tutors remembered me and had some of the papers ready in large print. But they kept talking and handing out papers and we had to fill things in and tick things and I couldn't do any of that and I just felt like crying.

I had applied for the Disabled Student's Allowance, but they are always really late. Everyone I know had to wait ages to get their special equipment, and this is the technology that you rely on to close the gap. If I'd had that equipment I'd have been starting from the same line as everyone else, but when it finally arrived in the second term it was far too late.

Because my Dictaphone hadn't come I needed a scribe – someone who would read for me and write notes, as well as pushing me around. But often they wouldn't turn up and there wasn't enough resources to replace them, so I'd go along to a class and find there was no-one to help me, and I'd have to go away again. I asked the scribe to type things up so I could read them, but she didn't know where she could access a computer. So by the time she typed it up it was too late.

My material didn't come in large print when I needed it. The tutors always forgot and then they'd apologise in front of the class and rush off to get it leaving everyone waiting so I felt awful. I never got handouts before classes, although it's meant to happen.

The faculty and the disabilities department didn't communicate effectively, so I felt like it was always a battle. Ringing around, sending emails, chasing people up - by the time I'd done all that I had no time left and I got upset so I'd often miss classes. I ended up not on good terms with the Disability Officer.

There are practical issues: I do get very tired pushing the chair around all day. You have to practise dictating to someone for exams, remembering to say the punctuation and things like that. There is a lot of equipment that can help with studying, but I didn't know what was available.

I really tried to stay on but I'd missed a lot. I got ill a few times; I think some of it was the stress, and I ended up in hospital. I went home for a bit, and then I just couldn't face going back although the faculty were really good and wanted me to.

I'm now hoping to find a university nearer home, but this time I don't have the college to help me apply and I can't find out which universities genuinely support students with disabilities. We're made to think that every university will cater for every disability, but that isn't the case at all.

I've got a really good reference and personal statement but the course goals are set for the majority and we can't reach the goals like everyone else. To make a situation like mine work, if the university knows a disabled student is

coming then they need to make sure the faculty knows, the Disability Support office knows, and give the information to the tutors so they understand. Then they all have it in their heads - a name, not a number, not a statistic. "To do well Jo needs this and this to happen".

I would like to be a TV presenter, to represent people with disabilities. But I'd like all the background knowledge first, then they'll take me seriously, that's why I want to do a course in media. If the Government wants students like me to go to university then we need the resources, or we just can't physically do it.

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### Reflection/Contextualising

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Having read this personal account, how does it relate to your own experience – or your expectations if you are about to start teaching a student with physical disabilities? What are the key things that need to be considered?

<b>Physical Disabilities</b>	<b>Learning/Teaching</b>			<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Social Interaction/ group work</b>
	<b>Preparation</b>	<b>During session</b>	<b>Follow-up</b>		
<b>Issues</b>					
<b>Strategies</b>					
<b>Benefits</b>					
<b>What other support or information might you need?</b>					
<b>Where or who can you get this from?</b>					

## Points and Strategies

- Give students time – rushing to do anything physical may be an impossibility for them
- When timetabling, ensure that the allocated rooms are fully accessible and comfortable for students
- Allow students to use Dictaphone or minidisk recorders during lectures if note taking is difficult
- If they have a support worker with them (eg a carer or personal assistant) ensure when you address the student you speak to them directly and not through their support worker
- Understand that students may need to stand up, lie down or walk about during sessions
- Handouts/session notes/copies of presentations will reduce the amount of writing students have to do during lectures
- Ensure that the students' assistants used for carrying out the practical elements of their work only act as "arms and legs". The student will instruct them and assistants must act on instruction, not on their own initiative
- New and stressful situations can increase muscular tension and decrease students' dexterity and control, particularly for those with cerebral palsy. Find out if this is likely to be the case and try to ensure that students feel relaxed in their surroundings

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## Points and Strategies

- Field trips and other study trips can pose particular difficulties which will need to be thought through well in advance
- If in doubt, talk to the student! They will have their own strategies and ideas, so working together will help you to make the necessary adjustments to support them