

UNESCO Guidelines on Including Learners with Disabilities in Open and Distance Learning

The Open University: serving 18,000 disabled students

The Open University (OU) began operations in the UK in 1971 with the declared aim of being 'open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas'. By combining a distance learning system with an open admissions policy it soon attracted tens of thousands of students of all ages - many of whom had been unable, for various reasons, to attend campus institutions. Students with disabilities were quick to see the opportunity. Within a year the OU had created an Advisory Committee on the Disabled followed by the appointment of a dedicated advisor and the setting up of a Disabled Students Office.

These initiatives were 'firsts' in UK higher education, long predating any national legislation requiring such services, and they released a huge unmet demand amongst the adult disabled population. There was scant provision elsewhere in the sector and many disabled adults had been unable to achieve the entry qualifications to access full time higher education anyway. They therefore sought entry to the OU in increasingly large numbers. By 1980 some 2,000 OU students declared a disability of some kind. Today the OU has 18,000+ disabled undergraduates, more than fourteen per cent of the total OU student body.

The OU pioneers readily admit that the early services were unplanned, reactive and under-funded, but they became steadily more systematic. The OU made a speciality of harnessing technology to facilitate study for people with a wide range of disabilities. For example, research at the OU in the late 1970s led to the development of talking (synthetic speech) versions of a calculator and word processor for blind students. Another major step was the creation of the Audio Recording Centre (ARC). This enables volunteer readers to record some 15,000 pages of study material each year, as audiocassettes in the early days but today as DAISY digital talking books available on DVD, memory stick, or to download. 36,000+ disabled students had benefited from this service by the time the ARC celebrated its 25th anniversary in June 2014.

The OU has had partnerships with national organisations for the blind and the deaf for decades. These were strengthened by the introduction of the OU's Home Computing policy in 1987. After a successful pilot project a permanent collaboration was established involving specialist colleges within the National Federation of Access Centres and the OU. In more recent times the OU has added an Access Bus (<http://www.open.ac.uk/students/disability/access-centre/ou-access-bus>) to complement this provision.

Face-to-face interaction is also vital. Where OU courses include residential programmes, some sessions have catered specifically to disabled students (e.g. through sign-language interpretation). Whenever a student declares a disability the OU interviews them to identify their individual needs (e.g. equipment, grants, accommodation at residential events, special examination arrangements, etc.).

Identifying requirements upfront and responding in an integrated manner is the key to assuring the quality of these services. Besides having students identify their needs, the OU also has a complementary programme that ensures faculties consider accessibility from the very first moments of the design of new modules. This programme enables responsibility for accessibility to be distributed across the University and accessibility to be truly embedded into curriculum design and student services. Services for disabled students, like all aspects of OU provision, are subject to internal and external review processes but the built-in quality culture is what really underpins their success.

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