**Disability Guidance for Line Managers and Supervisors**

TT2023

Disabled staff and students in MPLS have many contributions to share, and are essential members of our University. They deserve to live and work with dignity, and be supported to succeed. Disability can be experienced in a wide range of ways, from temporary periods of ill health to ongoing, chronic illness. It can involve physical and/or mental conditions, and visible and non-visible ones, some of which may overlap and intersect. It’s not about being ‘special’ and ‘different’ – disability should be normalised as part of our human experience. Each disabled person has individual, tailored needs that may fluctuate or change.

In the UK, 22% of the population, or 14.6 million people, indicated they had a disability in the 2020/21 financial year, with the prevalence of disability rising with age.[[1]](#endnote-1) Mobility was the most frequently reported ‘impairment type’ (46%), followed by stamina, breathing or fatigue (33%), and mental health (29%). In the University, the Disability Advisory Service continues to see rising rates of student disclosures, with student records in 2020/21 representing 24.3% of the total Oxford student population, well above the HESA national average.[[2]](#endnote-2) Data for staff is not systematically collected and disclosure rates are an issue. According to the University Staff Experience Survey in 2021, about 9% reported having a disability, and in MPLS, it was about 8%.

Neurodivergence is part of this conversation. There is growing awareness that people whose brains work or develop differently from the perceived norm can have varying strengths and struggles living in a neurotypical world. Staff and students may have a formal diagnosis or not (wait times for assessments can be very long), suspect they are neurodivergent, or not recognise it themselves. Disability includes neurodivergence (and there can be co-occurring conditions) and the current legal framework situates requests for reasonable adjustments as a result of neurodivergence within the ‘disability’ category, but neurodivergence can also be considered separate to disability – i.e. some neurodivergent people may not consider themselves disabled.

Living in an ablest society that has built barriers to full participation can be incredibly challenging. It is important for the University (and each one of us as members of this institution), to tackle disparities and do what we can, as proactively as possible, to reduce the barriers faced by disabled people so that they can fully engage in our University community. It is our moral and legal responsibility, and these efforts will help recruit and retain diverse talent to advance our educational mission and to ensure that everyone feels welcome and accommodated at Oxford.

Here are some ways in which we, particularly line managers and supervisors, can support disabled colleagues and students. Many of these are basic, helpful reminders of good practice.

* **Importance of confidentiality.** Individual health concerns are sensitive matters, and while some people are open about their disabilities, others are not. Stigma still exists and people can be concerned about the impact of disclosure in the workplace or educational environment. It can take a lot of effort, trust and initiative for disabled students and staff to share sensitive information particularly where power dynamics are involved. Preserving confidentiality is paramount – ask the individual what can and cannot be shared. If there is an emergency or risk of harm involved, speak to your department’s HR team for advice.
* **Normalise conversations about disability.** It can be powerful when people at all levels of seniority talk about their disabilities if they feel comfortable to do so, as it normalises these experiences and can promote a stronger sense of belonging within our workplaces. Building trust within teams is crucial, so that members feel comfortable to bring their true selves to work. You don’t and won’t have all the answers, but your willingness to engage in a conversation – and to listen – is valuable. Examples include this piece [with Sarah Stephenson-Hunter](https://staff.web.ox.ac.uk/article/using-my-experiences-to-break-down-barriers) and [staff experiences with hidden disabilities](https://staff.web.ox.ac.uk/article/shared-experiences-hidden-disabilities).
* **Have conversations about individual needs.**  Everyone should have regular one-to-ones with their managers/supervisors or equivalent (e.g. Heads of Department or deputies for academics). These can be achieved in formal and informal ways (e.g. [Personal Development Reviews, Career Development Reviews](https://pod.admin.ox.ac.uk/pdr), career conversations), and encompass work updates and feedback, and broader career development. Incorporating discussions about mental health, disability, and wellbeing is incredibly important. Having open, collaborative conversations can be a helpful way toward collective and creative solutions.
* **Thoughtfully and thoroughly consider requests for reasonable adjustments.** We should be enabling all our staff and students to effectively carry out their work or study, with those responsible ensuring as high a standard as practically possible (rather than the bare minimum). For disabled people, employers have a specific duty to consider reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. There are many factors to consider, and these should be approached in partnership with the disabled person – see below for specific frameworks. Securing funding is a consideration, though there may be many beneficial adjustments done at little or no cost. Adjustments may have already been made in similar situations, so consulting your department can be really useful. The University’s Equality and Diversity Unit has guidance on [reasonable adjustments](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/reasonable-adjustments) and those specific to [mental ill-health](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-mental-ill-health), as well as a [Staff Disability Advisor](mailto:staffdisability@admin.ox.ac.uk) available for further support. For new staff starters, costs for adjustments that require significant funding could be applied for through the government’s [Access to Work](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/funding) scheme (try to do this at the earliest possible time as there can be delays with this process).
* **Complete a Workplace Adjustment Plan with disabled staff.** This [framework](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/workplace-adjustment-plans) for staff is a helpful starting point to guide discussions about reasonable adjustments. It facilitates a clear recording of agreed adjustments, which can help when line managers change or an employee’s job or role changes within the University. It is intended to be regularly reviewed and revised as needs change.
* **Encourage students to connect with the Disability Advisory Service.** Disabled students can access a wealth of support through the University’s [Student Welfare and Support Services](file://CON-USERSVR07/Home$/admn3491/Documents/Meetings/ED%26I%20Team/Bullying%20and%20Harassment%20data%20for%20MPLS.docx). There are expert disability advisors who can develop Student Support Plans, counselling services, and peer support. There is also a [guide for staff](https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/supporting-disabled-students) on supporting disabled students.
* **Act proactively**. There can be fear and anxiety associated with disclosing one’s disability/disabilities, and it takes energy and effort to do so. The more that we can act proactively to help remove the onus on disabled people to constantly ask for what they need, the better. Consider what can be done to make your practices more inclusive from the start. It’s also important to note that when we are meeting requests, we’re not doing people ‘favours’, we are fulfilling legal requirements and acting as good and reasonable citizens.
* **Lab environments**. Science benefits from the participation of disabled people. Accessibility of our laboratories, particularly in old or historic buildings, is a continual challenge. This highlights the need for systemic, structural changes in addition to the individual needs already identified. The University’s [Access Guide](https://www.accessguide.ox.ac.uk/) provides some information about University buildings, but likely not to the level of detail needed for staff and students working in particular labs. Flag any issues to your department colleagues (who can also raise with relevant central teams) – in Human Resources, Health and Safety, Estates, and Communications – to address lab accessibility and safety in a coordinated manner. In addition to physical space, meetings that could be made hybrid would improve accessibility.
* **Fieldwork.** If [fieldwork](https://safety.admin.ox.ac.uk/fieldwork) is required for work or study, in the UK or abroad, planning ahead is essential as one size does not fit all. Health and safety are primary concerns, and adequate risk assessments should be conducted. Situations will differ depending on the activity conducted, the locations involved, and the individuals participating. A person’s personal identity, disability, immigration status, and socioeconomic situation may present additional barriers to full engagement.
* **Supporting academics.** Given the nature of our academic structures, there may be little or no back-up for academics if they become ill or disabled, requiring time off or reduced work. Academics may feel that they are not able to pause, rest, or take leave, as they can be responsible for the work and wellbeing of their research group and students. There are examples in departments where second supervisors have been assigned – for example, a pastoral advisor assigned, or a senior researcher or postdoc stepping up temporarily. Cover arrangements made for parental leave could prove informative for other types of leave as well. COVID-19 has shown us the vital need to plan for sickness (whether temporary or long-term), and all research groups should have ‘back-up’ plans in place.
* **Managing work for periods of absence or reduced hours**. Depending on the circumstances involved, there are a number of issues to consider when staff or students take leave or reduce their hours. Line managers/supervisors should consider what work can be paused, removed, or delegated. Are there fixed term contract or immigration considerations to review? Is statutory sick pay applicable? Check with your HR team and available online resources related to [sickness absence](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/sickness-absence), other forms of [leave](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/leave), and [return to work](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/return-to-work-rtw-after-sickness-absence) procedures.
* **Addressing systemic issues**. Supporting disabled people at the individual level is key, but also significant is recognising when those individual challenges are actually exposing larger systemic inequalities. Raising issues through appropriate departmental, divisional, and central channels can help increase visibility of disability related matters. Having useful changes or adjustments *retained*, *maintained*, and *advertised* is important for consistent and proactive support benefiting more widely beyond the individual requestor. If you have the opportunity to feed in to workspace, building or lab design or improvement, aim to embed accessibility throughout, and include meaningful consultation with disabled people.
* **Building community.** Disabled staff and students may find value in connecting with others facing similar experiences. Networks and groups such as the [Disabled Staff Network](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/disabled-staff-network), the [Oxford Student Union Disability Campaign](https://www.oxfordsu.org/organisation/10507/), and Microsoft Teams groups for neurodivergent people at Oxford, and allies, are available ([Staff Neurodiversity Network](https://teams.microsoft.com/dl/launcher/launcher.html?url=%2F_%23%2Fl%2Fteam%2F19%3A4YMM34kuWsYFKWPZ2xUN9tdnj_0ltEKE-e32doBNnCw1%40thread.tacv2%2Fconversations%3FgroupId%3D4dcfb26c-f0d8-43ad-9af9-a5c84cbca2cf%26tenantId%3Dcc95de1b-97f5-4f93-b4ba-fe68b852cf91&type=team&deeplinkId=cd7c2a4b-8346-4be2-a0bc-e5fa6f22535c&directDl=true&msLaunch=true&enableMobilePage=true&suppressPrompt=true) for neurodivergent staff and allies, and the [Neurodivergent Community](https://teams.microsoft.com/dl/launcher/launcher.html?url=%2F_%23%2Fl%2Fteam%2F19%3ADVzBOJpykQW6OzDCAPmPVBb2L4qnT6YxCx-YwKIDZ8Q1%40thread.tacv2%2Fconversations%3FgroupId%3Df0c9b2f8-7d57-4c4a-916e-9942d9841a41%26tenantId%3Dcc95de1b-97f5-4f93-b4ba-fe68b852cf91&type=team&deeplinkId=98a6dfc6-a72f-414b-8fcf-4649f76aaa9f&directDl=true&msLaunch=true&enableMobilePage=true&suppressPrompt=true) for neurodivergent staff). Not only should there be separate safe spaces for disabled people to connect, but all other networks should ensure that their activities and practices are as accessible as possible to everyone.

**Additional resources not listed above**

* Departmental and HR contacts; examples of reasonable adjustments (to be added)
* [Equality and Diversity Unit pages on disability](https://edu.web.ox.ac.uk/disability-0)
* [Disability Advisory Services summary and links](https://edu.web.ox.ac.uk/support-for-disabled-students-0)
* [MPLS resources](https://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-in-mpls/disability-and-neurodivergence-in-mpls) on disability and neurodivergence
* [Occupational Health](https://occupationalhealth.web.ox.ac.uk/about), [DSE assessment](https://safety.web.ox.ac.uk/display-screen-equipment)
* [Staff Counselling Support](https://occupationalhealth.web.ox.ac.uk/staff-counselling-service)

1. UK House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 29 July 2022, *UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences,* <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9602/CBP-9602.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. University of Oxford, Disability Advisory Service 2020-21 Annual Report, <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/disabilityadvisoryservice2020-21annualreportpdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)