

Making students welcome

A summary of useful advice compiled by Jim Endersby (Associate Dean: People, Culture and Inclusion, MAH), Mike Pudan (Sussex Disability Advice), Freya Summer (Diversity and Ability) and John Walker (Disability Equity Director, MAH)

Even before the Covid pandemic, many of us noticed increased levels of anxiety among our students, who often find participating in teaching sessions challenging. Covid has created additional barriers, disrupting the lives and education of many of our students – particularly those with mental health challenges or disabilities. The long-term effects are hard to predict, but in future we will need to make extra effort to ensure our teaching spaces are safe and welcoming, particularly when sessions rely on student participation and discussion.

When teaching staff meet disabled students for the first time they sometimes feel unsure about what action they should take and how best to start a conversation with students about their needs. Higher education is a space for disabled students to explore their own journey, not only as a young adult but also as a disabled person. And like all students, they arrive with little knowledge of what they need to learn independently, so they sometimes feel lost and isolated. In trying to address these concerns, staff may worry about confidentiality issues, or about making students feel they're being singled out or made to feel different. Similar concerns can arise when colleagues want to help students from BAME communities, or those whose identity (whether it relates to their gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religious beliefs or other characteristics) might make them feel marginalised or disenfranchised.

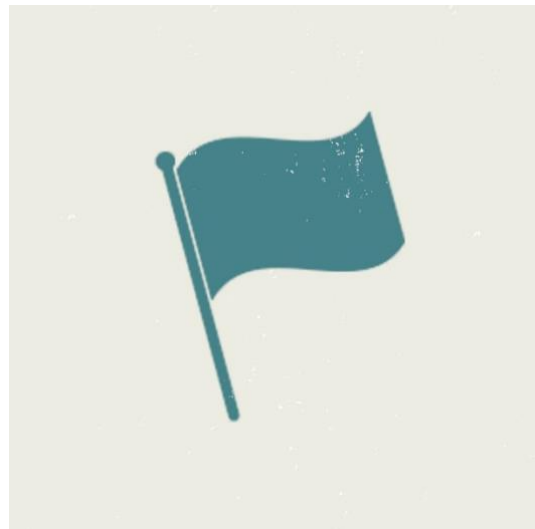


However, here are a few easy things you can do will enable every student to engage successfully with their education:



If a student is flagged (orange on Sussex Direct) you **must** read their disability support memo, which will help you understand their individual needs. It explains the nature of the impairment and any reasonable adjustments that have been agreed between the student and the Disability Team. In many cases, the adjustments will be actions that you are already taking, or could easily take, for all students (e.g. using lecture capture and providing teaching materials in advance).

If a student is flagged in green, they have a set of difficulties that do not warrant any additional adjustments beyond a pre-agreed, standardised set of changes to their teaching, learning or assessments. The university has adopted standard adjustments for these students. However, please invite them to identify particular barriers that you can enable them to overcome. There is additional information about these [specific learning differences](#) on the university website.



Disability support memos will often ask you *not* to call directly on flagged students during classes, because it increases their level of anxiety. Try to use other methods to encourage participation. For example, you might try inviting students to work in small groups for part of the seminar (encourage each group to choose someone to speak for the group and suggest they take turns, but don't force them to).



You can also try starting a discussion with very low-risk questions (How's your week been? How's university going so far?) and then moving to general ones (was there anything that

particularly interested or surprised you in this week's lecture?), before you plunge into the details of that week's reading.

In addition to reading the disability support memo and implementing its recommendations, it would be beneficial to you and them if you reach out to flagged students to offer your support and discuss how the adjustments would work from one task to another. By registering, they have asked for the information about their disability to be shared with you, so there's no problem about confidentiality. (But, of course, you shouldn't share that information with anyone else, unless the student gives you their explicit permission.) It is best to simply email all flagged students before class starts to tell them that you're there to support them through their studies. (You can use the "blind carbon copy/bcc" function of your email software to send a single email without revealing anyone's name to other students). Encourage them to contact you if they wish. Make it clear that if they are facing any barriers accessing the class, they should just tell you and you will help to resolve the problem. Depending on their response, try to stay in regular touch, so you can learn how to work effectively with disabled students. Don't forget to ask what their preferred mode of communication is.



You could also email all the students to emphasise that you're happy to have their feedback on any aspect of the class at any time. Encourage them to email you with suggestions and comments, or come to your student hours. You could also create a Padlet for anonymous comments if you wanted to. And please give the class feedback on their feedback (e.g. "some people would like more small group discussion time; what does everyone think?")

At the first teaching session, make some time for a short discussion about the process of learning in the module and what expectations you have (and add them to your Canvas site). You might offer some guidance on how students can best focus their energy. Don't assume that they all know what a seminar is, why we have them, or what the purpose is. It often helps to share your own experiences and your own learning journey through the topics you are teaching, and how you overcame your own challenges. (Again, a Padlet or similar opportunity for them to share issues anonymously may help.)



In any class, it may be helpful to negotiate a few ground rules to ensure all are included. For example, please make it clear that any of them can leave the room at any time if they need to; they don't need to raise their hands, ask permission or give you a reason. And if they don't feel able to come back, they don't have to. This really helps anxious or neurodiverse students (who may find being in one room for an hour or more stressful), but it's good to make the same rule for everyone so that nobody feels singled out.

If necessary, you discuss any disruptive behaviours that might cause problems for individual students (e.g., suggest all phones are on mute and ask people not to answer calls, or respond to chats or social media posts during class). And agree on a short break in longer sessions.

The most important thing is to try to put all students – disabled and non-disabled – at their ease, and keep repeating that you're there to support them and are happy to receive feedback at any time. The small actions you take, your kindness and humour, your keenness to engage and learn from the students, your ability to inspire them to explore your field is important for all students, disabled or non-disabled. If you aim to treat every student in the same, friendly way, you'll be helping them to create a genuinely inclusive learning space for themselves and each other.

See [further information about teaching and supporting disabled students](#) on the university website.