

School of Language and Literature

Disability Support

Frequently-Asked Questions

Who's the "School Disabilities Co-ordinator"?

Gundula Sharman (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/german/staff/details.php?id=g.m.sharman>) is Disabilities Co-ordinator for the School of Language and Literature. I work in collaboration with the University Disability Officer, Dr. Lucy Foley (whose office is within Student Support Services; see web page <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/disability/>) and I'm the contact point for any disabilities-related issues within this School . Also I liaise between staff and students in the School and the University Disability Officer regarding any provision for courses taught within our School. If you're unsure who to come to with a query, come and see me and we'll take everything from there. It doesn't mean that you can't contact tutors or Dr. Foley directly. We are all here to support you.

What does "disabilities" refer to?

When we talk about support for "disabilities" in the context of the university, we mean this in its very broadest sense. It can apply to any condition or issue for which you need support in order to compensate for the disadvantage the "condition" may result in. So, for instance, it may be a mobility impairment (we can ensure that venues for all activities are wheelchair-accessible), a sight or hearing impairment (material can be produced on an alternative format for Braille users, and aural assessments in language can be amended in order to make them accessible to hearing-impaired students), a mental health issue (this can impact on your studies and we can support you as needed), an issue with writing or reading (such as dyslexia) or any number of various situations. Basically, if you feel there may be an ongoing condition which is having an impact on your studies, come along for a chat and we can talk strategies to see what support might be practical (see <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/disability/> for info on the kinds of support we could discuss).

What kind of support is available?

When you first get in touch, we spend some time with you discussing the kind of issues you are experiencing and then make an appointment for you with Student Support Services, who will establish the most practical means of support for you. There are all kinds of approaches we can take, depending on the issues you are facing. In many cases, we can put in place provision for (for

example) copies of lecture notes, somebody to take notes in classes with you, additional support with exams or, perhaps, study workshops. Again, though, it very much depends on your own needs. The university will assess these needs with you, and we'll go from there.

Do some people receive special treatment, then?

Absolutely not. Support for disabilities exists in order to provide fair and effective means for everyone to work towards their degrees: where provision is made for a disabilities-related issue, it is put in place in order to reduce or remove the disadvantage the student in question would otherwise be facing as a result of the particular condition or circumstances. The idea is to make university study at Aberdeen accessible to everyone; we want to remove the obstacles as far as possible, not single anyone out.

Where do I go to get support?

In the first instance, it actually doesn't matter who you approach: often, people will talk first to an adviser of studies or a trusted tutor, who will then refer you to either myself or to Student Support Services. We all work in tandem on this kind of support and it's fine to approach any one of these people as a first point of contact. If you're not sure whom you should approach, feel free to do either of the following: 1. come along to my open hours, either during advising week/week 1 or during the semester (times are above), and we can talk over the kind of support you might need; from there, I would put you in touch with Student Support Services (with the University Disability Officer, Dr. Lucy Foley) for a follow-up, and I'll explain how that works, or 2. you can contact Dr. Foley directly for an appointment and then come along and see me for a chat after that.

Is it confidential? I'm embarrassed to talk to lots of tutors about it and don't want other students to know.

Yes, completely confidential. It goes without saying that nothing discussed between us will be passed on to anyone else without your permission (and the same goes for any discussion you have with Student Support). In some cases, I may suggest to you that it would be helpful for, perhaps, your course co-ordinators to know certain things (for example, in the case of a hearing impairment, it's helpful for tutors to be aware of the kind of condition they need to support, so that they can adapt their teaching delivery to be accessible to you) but, otherwise, the only information that is ever passed on is the request for specific provision. So, for example, if the underlying issue is dyslexia and the best support for your own case is to have copies of notes and handouts, the information tutors receive only states that they should provide you with this material, not the "reason why". If you feel at all unsure or uneasy about issues of confidentiality, do feel free to ask me about these. The idea is that you don't have to go round the houses and explain to lots of people: once you have been to see me and Student Support, info is then passed on strictly as necessary, and you won't then have to repeat yourself or confide in all your tutors unless you want to.

Other students will not know anything about support you receive unless you choose to tell them, and you won't be singled out in class or asked about your provision in front of anyone. Having said that, it's always useful to know that many, many, many students receive support and there will be several people (at least) on your course who are receiving some kind of provision. You are entitled to this support and there's absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about.

I think I might have dyslexia but I've never approached anyone about this before.

It very often happens that issues like this simply don't present themselves until university because they have never had such an impact before; then, once you are here and find you have a great deal of reading and writing work to complete within a tight timeframe, these can come to the fore for the first time. Many, many students with dyslexia successfully complete their degrees just the same as students without dyslexia. If you have concerns about this or would like to find out whether it is dyslexia affecting your studies, please come along. After a chat about things, we'll refer you to Student Support Services, who will arrange to look into this further with you, and we'll go from there.

Who arranges support for me?

After your initial contact with me/Student Support/whichever you first approach, you'll at some point have a chat with me about things, and will also have an appointment with Student Support to decide the best means of support for you. Then, the provision required is "documented" via the Registry and an official, confidential form is generated and sent to me. I then pass on only the requested provision to the relevant course co-ordinators for the courses you are taking and (in the case of provision needed for exams) to the relevant exams officer. Course co-ordinators then ensure that tutors put in place any necessary support for classes, and exams officers and I make sure provision is met (if needed) for your exams. In some cases, I will put the provision in place directly, as is the case when note-takers are needed for classes. There is nothing you need to do here, other than keep in touch and let me know if you're experiencing any difficulties or if you have any worries. However, please do come and see me if you find that the provision is not working for any reason, and we can talk over new strategies. All teaching staff receive "Brief Guidelines" on the procedures for disabilities support too, as well as the School's "Teachability" report on making courses accessible, and issues relating to disabilities are regularly discussed at School meetings.

I've had some provision but it's not really helping. Can I change it?

Yes, definitely. Provision is put in place for you, in order to help remove the disadvantage your own circumstances or condition imply for your studies so, if it's not working, we need to review things. If for any reason you're worried about the support you're receiving, please come along and see me. For example, if you have provision for copies of notes for lectures but you find this is not addressing the problem, we could think about arranging a note-taker for you or tape-recording lectures. We would

talk this over and establish how to amend things. If you're not receiving provision you should have, please let me know asap; this may well just be an oversight and is easily fixed, but I can't know that it's happening unless you tell me the situation.

Does dyslexia make it impossible to do a degree in language or languages?

No, not at all. Please see section on "Dispensation for spelling and grammar", though (further ahead); it's always a good idea to come and have a chat about how issues with dyslexia can be supported within the context of a language-based degree.

I'm doing a degree in modern languages: can I get support on my year abroad?

Yes. The first thing to do is to be aware that the forms you complete when applying for your year abroad placement include a section where you can declare any disabilities-related issues.

Remember, by law you can't be discriminated against as a result of this, so it is there to allow you to warn the selectors ahead of time that they may have to take into account some provision for you. For example, if you have a mobility impairment, the institution you go to will need to be aware of it ahead of time to make sure that facilities are accessible for you. It is up to you to complete this section of the form.

If you are going abroad on a Socrates/Erasmus student exchange, the same request for provision applies at the host university. Universities in different countries have different protocols and departments, but they will provide basically the same support as you have here. Do be aware that the manner of teaching may be different there, so it may be that the provision will be a little different simply because it will work better that way.

If you're going to be working (on a British Council teaching placement, for instance), be sure to declare any necessary considerations such as a physical impairment. The British Council does vet its placements but, of course, will have to be aware of any disabilities-related issues in order to make sure your placement is not unsuitable. In the past, if the selection committee has been unsure about a disabilities issue, they have simply phoned me to ask whether the candidate suits the placement and vice versa.

If you're at all concerned or just wondering how this will work, please come and see me and/or the year abroad co-ordinator for your language department(s) during your second year. The preparatory talks about your "destination country" will help you in sourcing information about any support organisations you may want to contact too, and you are very welcome to come and talk to me about this as well.

Year abroad info – see:

British Council: <http://www.britishcouncil.org>

Socrates/Erasmus (all languages): <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/socrates/>

Is there further support I can have access to?

Yes. You can always come and see me during my office hours, contact Student Support Services and make use of the other support services offered by the university, such as the University Counselling Service, short courses (such as study skills) offered by ALSU, writing support from the School (contact me and I will refer you) and support from the Students' Representative Council.

University Disability Officer: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/disability/>

ALSU (Academic Learning and Study Unit): <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/alsu>

Links to info on supporting students in the university, including the University Counselling Service:
<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/central/students>