



Information for students

**Disability disclosure for students
on a nursing, social work or
allied health professional education
programme**



Sheffield
Hallam University

SHARPENS YOUR THINKING

Purpose of these guidelines

These guidelines are intended to help applicants and students decide what, when and to whom they wish to disclose sensitive personal information about a disability or long term health condition. The University respects that disclosure is a personal decision and something that any student with a disability or long term health condition needs to manage with careful consideration. Professional education programmes for nurses, social workers and allied health professionals pose additional issues in terms of preparing for and undertaking professional practice. Therefore this document has been prepared to help students in considering and managing disclosure in academic and professional settings.

What is the Disability Discrimination Act?

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA 1995) and its amendments 2001 and 2005 provides rights for disabled people in employment (Part 2), the provision of goods and services (Part 3) and education (Part 4)¹.

What does it say?

The DDA says that employers or education providers are not allowed to discriminate against you because you have a disability. What this means is that they are not allowed to treat you less favourably because you are disabled (for example, not admitting you to a course because of this) and that they must make reasonable adjustments to enable you to do a course (for example, provide specialist equipment or software or human support)².

The DDA also means that Sheffield Hallam University as an educational institution and its partner organisations, NHS trusts etc 'promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons, to encourage participation by disabled persons in public life, and to promote equality of opportunity between disabled persons and other persons'¹.

The DDA covers such conditions as hearing and sight impairment, specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia, and mental health difficulties. It also covers a range of long term health problems eg diabetes, cancer, HIV, MS and epilepsy.

What does this mean to me?

Students are encouraged to tell the University about any disabilities they may have at their earliest opportunity. You will find that you are asked about this on a number of occasions during selection, admission, and induction events. Following initial disclosure to the University, the Disabled Student Support Portfolio will work with disability coordinators to provide support and direction to suit your specific needs.

The Disabled Student Support Portfolio, part of Student and Academic Services (SAS), provides excellent assessment and support focusing strongly on your academic learning experience. However it is important to remember that on any nursing or allied health profession programme you will spend a large portion of time in the placement setting. Thus when considering disclosure, equal attention must be paid to the impact of your disability or health condition for both settings. Reasonable adjustments, if required, should be made in both the University and placement environment for you, although these may differ. Placement learning issues should be discussed on an individual basis with the disability coordinators and you will need to make decisions about disclosure to relevant people in your placement settings.



I have declared to/told the occupational health staff about my disability/health issue. What happens next?

The Occupational Health Department cannot share any information about you without your permission³. This means that if you want to discuss your health issue/disability and how it might affect your learning as a student you have to tell us about it yourself. The best place to start is to talk to one of the disability coordinators. Discussions with the disability coordinators are confidential and will not be shared with other staff, students or placement providers unless you consent to this.

How much information should I disclose?

Disclosure is not an 'all or nothing' decision. You may not have to disclose the details of your disability to receive the reasonable adjustments. For example, you may give the Disabled Student Support Portfolio information about your disability that helps them support you appropriately from an academic perspective.

However in the placement context you may prefer to disclose more, specific information, only to your placement mentor but not to your other placement colleagues. All the options and the implications attendant on them can be discussed with your disability coordinator.

Do I have to provide formal evidence of my health condition or disability?

If you wish the University to support you formally on your programme, you will have to provide a letter confirming your health issue/disability from your specialist or GP. With dyslexia or similar learning needs, specific evidence of relevant psychological testing results is required. You can talk to the disability coordinator or other support staff about these issues at any time.

Disclosing disabilities, how will the University support me?

Sheffield Hallam University has a good system for encouraging and supporting disabled students in the University setting. Placement providers also see meeting the needs of disabled students as a high priority. However the University and placement providers are not allowed to share information about you and your disability with each other without your permission. Thus, if you need reasonable adjustments to be made by the placement provider, you are advised to agree arrangements with the disability coordinator for sharing information about your needs with relevant placement areas. You need to be comfortable with, and feel in control of, the disclosure process therefore you might agree that the disability coordinator should brief relevant staff or that you will do this personally. In addition, the earlier this disclosure occurs the better prepared the placement provider is likely to be.

Remember: reasonable adjustments for the disabilities you disclose your right under the law.

What can I, and the service users or carers I care for, or support, gain from this?

Both the University and the placement providers understand that students may not wish to disclose personal, sensitive information about themselves, however it is important that any decision about disclosure is properly informed. The following section outlines some of the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure as seen from a professional perspective. Individual issues can be discussed with the disability coordinators.

There are a number of advantages if you disclose your disability in the placement setting.

- disclosure allows adjustments to be made which should enable you to fulfil your potential and achieve the learning outcomes of your course.
- when you are working to your potential then patients/service users/carers will receive better care and mentors will be able to support your learning more effectively.
- disclosure will allow you to concentrate on the work in hand on the placement clear from possible concerns you may have over the concealment of the effects of your disability.
- it is often easier to build an effective working relationship when the people involved feel they can be open about issues that are relevant to the placement. Meeting with the placement staff to discuss your needs can be supported by the disability coordinator or the clinical link if you want to build a relationship with your mentor before and after disclosing your disability to them.
- managing your disclosure at a time and pace that you choose and ideally before any issues emerge enables you to describe your disability in a positive way as well as any positive effects it has had on your life. For example, if you have a hearing impairment your other communication skills may be strong, such as attention and use of eye contact or body language. If you have dyslexia you may have particular strengths in creative thinking and provide innovative solutions to problems.
- you have the opportunity to show how you can perform effectively in the placement setting. For example, you may already have learned many effective ways to communicate and check information that you can explain to your mentor, forestalling any questions they may have with regard to these activities.
- you may have high levels of empathy with disabled patients and in some instances can be a reassuring presence for them.
- if you demonstrate a professional approach to the management of your disability/long term health condition whilst undertaking the programme and you can clearly be seen to have developed as a capable student health care professional, who also has a disability/long term health condition, this is likely to be interpreted positively by future employers. References do not have to divulge any details of disabilities or health conditions they can just acknowledge eg 'a highly professional approach to learning, under challenging personal circumstances'.

What if I choose not to disclose in the placement area?

In a recent study of health professionals who have a disability⁴, the main reason given for not disclosing their disability to their employer/education provider was that they were concerned about being stigmatised and discriminated against. This is not an easy fear to overcome but if you do not disclose your disability to those who have an obligation to support you then it is much more difficult to challenge discrimination later should you feel this is occurring. Other important factors are

- you give up the opportunity for reasonable adjustments to be made in the practice setting. This may impact upon your ability to fulfil your potential or pass your placement assessment because your mentor does not know what adjustments need to be made.
- failing to work to your potential through lack of reasonable adjustments may reduce the effectiveness of the care to patients/service users/carers that you provide. In extreme cases, it is even possible for patient care to be compromised because you have not been given the correct help to support your learning. If you make a mistake that is clearly a result of your disability, any investigation or disciplinary procedure will be unable to take into account that reasonable adjustments were not made.
- before your placement, you may think that disclosure is unnecessary because your health condition is not relevant to the work. However placement staff are likely to have a better understanding of what the placement entails so an open discussion with relevant staff before the placement starts may forestall problems and enable you to plan for situations that you had not previously considered.



The relevance of disclosure to becoming a professional practitioner

Why is this particularly important for nursing and allied health profession students?

In order to learn and perform safely and effectively, all students who are studying on programmes leading to professional qualifications need to develop an effective understanding of their professional responsibilities and duty of care in relation to the care and support of patients/service users/carers. This means that seeking disclosure advice and support regarding a disability, particularly in preparation for placement learning, is seen as safe practice and is thus an essential part of personal and professional development.

Seek disclosure advice

Taken together the advantages and disadvantages above make a powerful case for disabled students to seek advice and consider carefully any decision they make regarding disclosure. Your first port of call to do this is to meet for a supportive and confidential discussion with one of the disability coordinators.

If I decide I want to disclose my disability in the placement area, what happens next?

As part of a supportive and confidential discussion the disability coordinators will help you decide how and when you want to disclose information about your disability. They can also help you decide what information you want others to know and also discuss with you how you might want to manage the disclosure situation. For example, the disability coordinator could support you directly by visiting the ward area with you to discuss your disability and learning needs. Alternatively a 'placement learning statement' could be written, agreed by you, to be used to support disclosure and help negotiate reasonable adjustments. Following disclosure the disability coordinators can also continue to support you, if for example, any issues arise about your disclosure or the reasonable adjustment that have been made for you in the placement setting.

Summary

Information for students

Disability disclosure for students on a nursing or allied health profession education programme .

- the Disability and Discrimination Act (DDA) says that employers or education providers are not allowed to discriminate against you because you are disabled.
- Sheffield Hallam University as an educational institution and its partner organisations, NHS trusts (placement providers) are expected to promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons.

- the DDA covers such conditions as hearing and sight impairment, specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia, and mental health difficulties. It also covers a range of long term health problems such as diabetes, cancer, HIV, MS and epilepsy.
- once you tell us about your disability or health condition (disclosure), the Disabled Student Support Portfolio works with disability coordinators to provide support and direction to suit your specific needs.
- disclosure is not an 'all or nothing' decision. You may wish to limit the information that is given in different situations to different people. The disability coordinators can give support and direction with this.
- if you wish the University to provide additional support for your needs while you are on your programme you will have to provide information confirming your health issue or disability.
- there are many advantages if you disclose your disability (please see the main disclosure information document).

Remember: reasonable adjustments for the disabilities you disclose are your right under the law.

- choosing not to disclose a disability in the placement, can have a number of negative impacts, not least it may impact on your ability to reach your full potential on your programme.
- all students are strongly advised to seek advice and consider carefully any decision they make regarding disclosure. Your first port of call to do this is to meet for a supportive and confidential discussion with one of the disability coordinators.



References

- 1 Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and its amendments, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005
<http://www.opsi.gov.uk>
- 2 Thanks go to 'Skill' The National Bureau for Students with Disabilities for their document 'Disclosing your disability' www.skill.org.uk accessed Oct 2007, which has informed this advice sheet.
- 3 Data Protection Act 1998
<http://www.opsi.gov.uk>
- 4 Disclosing Disability: Disabled students and practitioners in social work, nursing and teaching. Disability Rights Commission
<http://www.maintainingstandards.org>

Disability coordinator details

Please note, all current contact details of disability coordinators for students on courses leading to professional qualifications are available from the administration and Student Support Services team at the

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