Designing for inclusion - Learning Outcomes and Course Descriptions

by Tina Elliott and Caroline Davies

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) says that the standards required for entry onto and success within courses and modules should present no unnecessary barriers to disabled applicants and students. The DDA refers to these core, requirements as 'competence standards' (**1**).
The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice, Section 3 Disabled Students (revised draft version), makes clear that the design of new programmes, and the review and revalidation of existing programmes, must include consideration of whether they are inclusive for disabled students. (**2**)
A number of standards are set when courses are described during course development and validation (for example see University of Edinburgh guidance (**3**)). This involves the setting of learning outcomes. Although the DDA does not specify that learning outcomes are competence standards, learning outcomes are generally regarded as the core requirements of a programme of study, which means that the achievement of these outcomes is non-negotiable. As competence standards, learning outcomes must be written so they do not directly discriminate against disabled learners.

This article provides information and guidance for disability practitioners who may be asked to support academic colleagues to assist them in creating learning outcomes and course descriptions that present no unnecessary barriers to disabled students. Ideally it should be read in conjunction with 'Designing for Inclusion – Competence Standards', by Davies, C. and Elliott,T. (2009) (**4**).

Some key principles in support of inclusive design

Removing unnecessary barriers to disabled students during validation procedures means it is less important to know whether a student has an impairment or not and fewer adjustments need to be made for individual disabled students. This can save time and resources in the longer term. Focusing on accessibility considerations means that flexibility can be designed in to the course, accommodating the fact that students have multiple experiences and learning styles impacting on their learning and how that learning is demonstrated. Addressing the entitlements of disabled students through inclusive design is generally regarded as also benefitting the learning experience of non-disabled students.

There are four key aspects of curriculum design determined during validation which can potentially create unnecessary barriers for disabled students: **learning outcomes**, **teaching and learning methods**, **assessment criteria**, and **assessment modes**. Below is a brief look at inclusive design considerations for each.

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes set out what the learner will be expected to know, understand and do (and at what level) as a result of being explicitly taught,

developed or supported on the course. They are the means by which the student and the tutor understand what is expected of the student.
Learning outcomes should include three elements: an action verb, the context (what learning is about), and an indicator of the nature of the subject or the required standard. The wording of learning outcomes is crucial in capturing intended learning. To be inclusive, learning outcomes should also not present any unnecessary barriers to disabled learners.
Learning outcomes that do not prescribe the way they will be taught and assessed allow for greater flexibility. Reviewing the answers to these questions will help determine core requirements.

1. What is the pedagogical purpose of the requirement? How does it achieve that purpose? Are there other, more accessible, ways of achieving this? For example participation in certain field trips may be difficult for a wheelchair user. Is it essential that the learning outcome states this as the requisite or only mode of learning and assessment?
2. Is there any negative impact of the learning outcome on disabled students? A person with a speech impairment may find it difficult to make oral presentations? Is there a need to include the word 'oral' in a learning outcome about presentations?
3. Would the learning outcome be substantially changed if a particular requirement were removed or substituted ie by removing the word 'written' from the requirement to keep a work experience diary?
4. Have changing circumstances, practices or technology made a previous requirement redundant? For example the capacity to physically lift a patient is no longer required of nurses as lifting aids are available.

Adapted from the CATS Fact Sheet
'Determining the Core Requirements of a Course' (**5**)

Example of a learning outcome – barriers and solutions

Learning outcome: At the end of this module the successful student will be expected to be able to behave in ways which enhance group performance.

Potential barriers: Some students with Asperger's Syndrome or mental health difficulties may not be perceived to be behaving in a way that contributes to the effectiveness of a group. The word 'behave' is open to interpretation. The disabled student may consider that completing their allocated task makes them a good contributor whereas the lecturer might perceive this learning outcome as being about effective collaboration and team work. Verbs such as 'behave' and 'enhance' are open to different interpretation.

Suggested amendments: A review of this learning outcome would involve questioning what the student will actually be required to know, understand or do. To make the learning outcome more inclusive it could be rephrased to read '… the successful student will be expected to perform effectively in a group-work setting.' or '… the successful student will be expected to evaluate their performance in a group work setting.' The wording will depend upon

whether it is the actual group work skill which is being assessed or the student's self awareness of their own skill level.

Learning and Teaching Methods

In some instances learning outcomes do not present barriers but other criteria may such as the learning and teaching methods, notional learning time, indicative reading, etc. As part of the course design process it is also important to check whether the facilities and resources students need to use for learning are accessible. This includes teaching rooms, websites, on-line books and journals, software and hardware, audio and visual materials, and e-learning such as Blackboard or on-line forums.

Example of a learning and teaching method – barriers and solutions

Learning and Teaching Method: IT teaching sessions held in computer labs, particularly those requiring group work.

Potential barriers: The location and layout of computer laboratories may be inaccessible or difficult to use for some disabled students. For example, no lift access, insufficient space to manoeuvre a wheelchair, or fixed benching that is close together. The computing equipment itself could be inaccessible for some, eg no text enlarging or screen reading software. Alternatively, assistive technologies could be installed on a computer located away from the rest of the workstations, making it difficult for the disabled student to join in group work activities.

Possible strategies: Undertake an audit of the computer laboratory location, layout, facilities, hardware and software to identify access barriers. A comprehensive audit may involve Estates, Disability Services, Information Technology and, importantly, feedback from disabled students. Where possible, plan to remove identified barriers to help ensure disabled students can access the room, move around within it, hear effectively, use their support workers, and access the equipment, facilities and software packages. Additional resources may be required to install hearing loop systems, height adjustable tables or enabling equipment and software.

Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria specify how a judgment will be made that the learning outcomes have been met. They enable the student and the markers to be clear about what is being assessed, the minimum pass requirements and the levels of attainment required for different marking outcomes. Consider the following aspects of assessment criteria in relation to removing potential barriers for disabled students:

- Level of achievement required (adequate performance, perfection, etc). Assessing achievement levels may be an issue if a student's impairment prevents them from performing effectively. For example if a high level of verbal presentation skill was an assessment criterion some students with speech difficulties would only ever be able to achieve a low grade.

Similarly if 'engagement with the audience' was a criterion for presentations, students with social communication disorders, such as Asperger Syndrome, those with high levels of anxiety, and some blind students may find this difficult to achieve.

- Required level of learner autonomy. Consider whether it is demonstration of a skill that is the required criterion or a knowledge of the skill and how it can be applied. For example is it necessary for a student to personally conduct a procedure rather than demonstrate knowledge by instructing another person to do so?
- Aids which may be part of the assessment process (for example, books, manuals, equipment) must be fully accessible.

The pedagogical purpose of setting criteria such as minimum levels of attendance should also be considered carefully as this could be problematic for some students with health and mental health difficulties.

Assessment Modes

Students should not be required to perform tasks which do not help demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes. Make students aware which skills and learning that have been taught in the module (or other modules), the chosen assessment modes focuses on. If a particular assessment mode presents barriers to some disabled students consider whether assessment of the learning outcome can be achieved by an alternative assessment mode that would have a less discriminatory impact. For example, students could have the option to complete:

- an oral viva rather than a written paper in order to demonstrate their knowledge of a topic.
- a learning portfolio rather than a time-limited exam as this requires students to work under pressure in addition to them demonstrating their knowledge; an alternative method such as this will not have the same time pressure.

Adapted from the CATS Factsheet
'Determining the Core Requirements of a Course'

Example of an assessment mode – barriers and solutions

Assessment mode: In-class tests

Potential barrier: The way the in-class test is delivered might mean that there is no opportunity for the extra time required by some disabled students as a reasonable adjustment, particularly if another class is timetabled in the room immediately afterwards.

The tutor may not be aware that a student requires the test paper in an alternative format. A disabled student may require an amanuensis or a computer with assistive software as a reasonable adjustment; this might be logistically difficult or impossible to arrange in class.

Possible strategies: Advanced planning is needed to ensure disabled students receive their recommended assessment adjustments for any in-class

tests. It may be necessary to book a separate room and invigilator, arrange for enabling equipment, extra time, a computer, materials in alternative format, an amanuensis or other support worker assistance such as an interpreter.

Summary
By reviewing learning outcomes, learning and teaching modes, assessment modes and criteria, it is possible to write course descriptions and to design curricula so they are inclusive and do not present unnecessary barriers to disabled students. Supporting academic staff to consider these issues will help remove barriers to disabled students in learning and teaching.

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Adapted from a fuller briefing produced by the authors for the University of Westminster's Inclusive Curriculum for Disabled Students (ICDS) project (**6**).

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