

Disability work – both endlessly rewarding and hopelessly frustrating



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There is an adage amongst University Disability Practitioners that you don't choose this line of work, it chooses you. This is certainly the case for me. Having read English at New Hall, it seems perhaps an unusual stretch to find myself dedicated to a career supporting and championing disabled students and working hard to build accessibility and genuine inclusion across the Higher Education sector.

I manage the Disability Advisory Team at the University of Leeds, heading up a large team which coordinates the support and ongoing casework of over 5000 disabled students, and which enables the University to meet its statutory obligations under the Equality Act. The changes witnessed over the 20 years I've been working in disability services cannot be overstated. Numbers increase exponentially year-on-year, the complexity

of navigating systemic barriers changes constantly, and a University education, once beyond the reach of many disabled people, is now far more accessible. This is why I do the job I do – for the opportunity to make tangible changes, for individuals, the University and across the sector as a whole. It is a career for which Cambridge prepared me well – the influencing and negotiating skills to challenge; the confidence to expect and instigate change; the communication skills needed to articulate it all.

I started on this path at the University of Cambridge, working for the Institute of Continuing Education International Summer Schools, at a time when a major piece of disability legislation came into force. I already had a keen interest in disability from my family background and the new legislation gave me an opportunity to learn more and do better. A chance training course with the University's Disability Resource Centre set me on my way and introduced me to likeminded individuals who taught me about disability, education, and genuine accessibility. Happily, I still work closely with colleagues from the DRC today. ▶▶



Having met (and later married) a Yorkshireman, I left Cambridge for the University of Leeds in 2005. I spent a brief time organising Summer Schools for school children on behalf of the National Academy for Gifted & Talented Youth, a role which coincidentally introduced me to autistic children and teenagers. When the University advertised for a Disability Coordinator to work specifically with autistic students, I jumped at the chance. It was the first role of its kind in the HE sector; very few autistic students either declared their autism, or accessed support at the time, and they were not well-served by existing support structures. To say it was an emerging field of work is an understatement. I had a caseload of two

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Coming from an autistic family, working with autistic students was very much a case of finding my niche. It is work I continue today, alongside the busy managerial and strategic side of my role, where I am responsible for ensuring that what amounts to 12% of the University's student population can access the high quality support and adjustments which enables them to study, and holding the University to account when they cannot. I represent autistic students nationally, as a member of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's Disability Experts Panel, and as Founder of the Association of Autism Practitioners in HE. I regularly work with the Department for Education and the Office for Students, I'm an active member of the National Association of Disability Practitioners, and I've been lucky to have the opportunity to research, lecture, present internationally and even go viral with a couple of pieces of work. As is so often the case with disability work, it is in equal parts endlessly rewarding and hopelessly frustrating as the slow turn of the super tanker that is the HE sector reluctantly yields hard-won victories. But at the heart are the students I work with, often right through from their undergraduate studies to the completion of their PhD, who make this job the fulfilling, varied work it is.



Sharing my work with the author of *NeuroTribes*, Steve Silberman.

I write at an interesting time for disabled students. The coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown has raised obvious and myriad practical issues in relation to accessing learning, all of which have kept me incredibly busy since March. But it has also given those of us working in the sector an opportunity to amplify the voices of disabled students, and to push through changes which have previously fought for space on the agenda. The overnight pivot to online learning benefited many disabled students, removing those physical barriers that the inaccessible infrastructure of many universities creates, enabling students to

study in a far more flexible way. It hasn't worked for everyone, but for many disabled students, the last six months has been the first time they have had genuinely equal access to their learning. The test now is to maintain the momentum and shape future practice so that we keep the parts that work best for students, remembering that what works for disabled students generally benefits all students. Whilst we continue to chip away at the larger barriers created by a society which does not recognise or value disabled people sufficiently, the hard-won ground gained during the pandemic gives me confidence that the Higher Education sector can adapt and change to recognise, celebrate and rely on the diversity of its student population for its future success and sustainability.