

PEOPLE'S NEWSROOM

MAKING EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE

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Barriers for disabled students accessing higher education remain, but online learning during Covid reduced these barriers. Let's not go backwards.

Disabled students have been calling for universities to offer teaching both online and in person for years. Over lockdown, universities did what was “impossible”. Disabled students, for the first time, had the resources we needed to learn at home at our own pace, and we proved what is possible when learning is accessible. However, many universities are reverting to fully in-person teaching and many barriers remain for disabled students.

I have recently graduated from Cardiff University with a Journalism and English Literature BA. Without the pandemic and the adoption of online learning, I would not have graduated due to the barriers I experienced as a disabled student.

However, students should not have to choose to study remotely due to access barriers; students should be able to access online learning on days they need to stay at home.

I work at Diverse Cymru: a charity promoting equality for all in Wales. Under the [Equality Act 2010](#), which replaced previous anti-discrimination legislation (including the Disability Discrimination Act 1995), universities have a legal requirement to ensure Disabled students are not discriminated against and can access universities as non-disabled students can. However, at Diverse Cymru, we know that Disabled students continue to experience many barriers to education that do not impact on non-disabled students in the same way.

From timetables that do not reflect the challenge of moving between university locations and poor lift maintenance to a lack of Disabled toilets, many physical barriers remain.

Ceri-Anne was in her second year at Royal Holloway studying Drama and Creative Writing when the pandemic hit. Her chronic illness results in pain, fatigue and mobility difficulties.

There were days when she “physically couldn’t go in” which led Ceri-Anne feeling like she was “lagging behind...everyone else was going in.”

“...many universities are moving back to pre-pandemic in-person models of learning that exclude many Disabled and non-disabled students”

“(Universities) are putting barriers into place,” says Alexandra who is studying Neuroscience at Cardiff University and uses a wheelchair. “I’ve had to waste all my energy working out how to access lectures, seminars, fighting for access. (Universities) are stunting my progress and what I can achieve.”

The pandemic saw universities rapidly adapt to offer learning online, removing many barriers to education for disabled students. 69.9% of disabled students in the UK say online learning is equally or more accessible compared to in-person learning.

“Just having the option (during Covid) to study online alleviated so much physical discomfort and pain,” says Ceri-Anne.

Emily was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome when she was 16. Lockdown meant she studied for her A Levels at home.

“I don't think I could have got my levels, if I didn't have the access to do it from my bed,” she says.

“I found the quality of my work increased because I didn't have to spend all my energy on walking into college or having the stimulus of classrooms.”

Studying Occupational Therapy at Cardiff University, Emily found online learning enriched her learning: “I could pause it. I could slow it down. I could do 10 minutes in the lecture, rest and come back to it. Even if I didn't have a disability, just being able to pause it and write notes was amazing.”

Online learning also helps students to access the full university experience rather than being forced to choose between studying or socialising.

“I could still have the social side, which is really important,” says Emily. “I find my condition does really neglect the social side.”

However, when offering online learning, it's crucial that lecture recordings are made available on the day they are recorded to ensure students do not fall behind.

“Having lecture recordings released a week later I got so behind with some of my modules,” says Alexandra.

“students should not have to choose to study remotely due to access barriers”

Unfortunately, despite protests from students, many universities are moving back to pre-pandemic in-person models of learning that exclude many Disabled and non-disabled students.

A spokesperson at Cardiff University said, “Whilst we remain a University where the majority of our students will return to study on campus, Cardiff has seen clear benefits of online and blended learning which have introduced huge amounts of flexibility and led us to make significant advances in delivering accessible content and inclusive student engagement... Most of our lectures (continue to be) recorded, and students can access most online.”

Despite reassurance from Cardiff University's spokesperson, many students have found that the flexibility of lockdown learning has been forgotten with some lectures and most seminars not being recorded. For example, despite Emily having the need for recorded lectures on her access requirements, her lecturers now expect her to attend all her lectures in person.

Diverse Cymru is calling for universities to continue to offer learning both in-person and online whilst also ensuring higher education becomes more accessible.

“90% of the accessibility issues that I faced at uni could have been non-existent if online learning was just a natural, more prevalent part of the university system, says Ceri-Anne.

Cardiff University stressed, “It’s vital that students contact our Student Disability Service to ensure that appropriate and tailored adjustments are discussed, considered, and implemented for all aspects of their study.”

However, disabled students should not have to request access to online learning but it should be an automatic option. Emphasis shouldn’t be on the student for advocating their own access requirements, be they disabled or non-disabled.

“The hybrid learning options that became available as a result of covid benefitted so many people: both disabled and able-bodied people. Providing those options creates a much more inclusive and equal academic space,” says Ceri-Anne.

Emily and Alexandra have started a society at Cardiff University for Disabled students to form a community. They want universities to continue to offer learning in person and online whilst working to make university more accessible. “It’s not dramatic things that we are asking for, it’s things that can easily be done,” they say.

Diverse Cymru is working in that direction by calling for universities to ensure three things. Firstly, that Disabled students can access all their learning **both** online and in-person. Secondly, that all recorded content is made available to students on the day it is recorded. Thirdly, that Disabled students lead the conversations on how to make universities more accessible.

As Disabled students, our ideal university would have timetabling tailored around students’ access requirements, completely accessible campuses, and all teaching would be recorded. Every Disabled student would be assigned an advocate on starting university who would ensure that their access requirements were met. Universities can make this dream a reality, championing inclusivity and leading the way for a more equal society.

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