GOING BEYOND OUR LIMITS

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Introduction

We all have what we may think of as our limits – degrees of competence we believe we cannot go beyond or skills we think we cannot master. It would be foolish to claim that each of us is capable of anything and everything to which we set our minds. But going to university is really about progressing beyond our perceived limits.

The 'fuel' for this progress can come from yourself – self-confidence, self-belief or just a willingness to give it your best shot. The enemy is the fatalistic notion that one's abilities are fixed; that one is naturally bright or not; and little can be done to change this (Dweck, 1999). Good teaching instils in students a sense that achievement is not predetermined but flexible (Yorke and Knight, 2004). It is important for all students to believe that they can make a difference

Another source of 'motive power' is your fellow students. Your class or tutorial group comprises people who are rarely in direct competition with you. Working collectively (where this is allowed) gives everyone access to the skills and ideas (good and bad) of the whole group. Indeed, the ability to work effectively with a set of other students is a skill many geography departments try to develop in their students and which many employers value. According to the Geography Benchmarking Statement, which applies to all geography departments, students should acquire the key skill of dealing with "interpersonal situations, including working with groups/teams and recognising and respecting the viewpoints of others" (Quality Assurance Agency, 2000).

Finally, universities are no longer (if ever they were) institutions which require everyone to study in identical ways. A major stimulus to recognising that different students have different needs, which universities have an obligation to meet, was the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) in 2001, which came into force in stages between 2002 and 2005. Perhaps you do not think of yourself as 'disabled'? Yet the Act defines as disabled anyone who has "a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities". This can include not only the user of a wheel chair and people with even minor impairments of sight or hearing, but the student who stammers or has dyslexia, autism, epilepsy, arthritis, vertigo or M.E. The guidance is that the definition of disability should be very wide. So, if you are not disabled, then the chances are that someone in your group of fellow students will be. The breadth of teaching methods used in geography – laboratory work, use of computers, oral presentations, fieldwork, site visits, dissertations – means that many students may have difficulties with some aspect of the geography curriculum (Hall and Healey, 2004).

Universities are now required to make reasonable adjustments to how they teach students in order to avoid the charge of discrimination. Currently the word 'reasonable' is poorly defined and will remain so until the courts have established case law. However, the advice to universities is to interpret 'reasonably' in a broad manner, unless adjustments are impossible, the costs excessive, other students would be disadvantaged, or safety issues are predominant. Even in these cases, the presumption is that the university will find a separate and accessible way of achieving the same learning objectives for those students with disabilities.

So, students who come within the wide definition of those 'with disabilities or impairments' can ask for reasonable adjustments to be made to help them study. Universities are required to anticipate the range of disabilities that you might have, and they should have plans that can be put into operation when individual students arrive. Through the university you can also access the Disabled Students' Allowance, which provides funds to help buy support services or equipment that will help you study more effectively at university (Department for Education and Skills).

Disclosure

Of course, universities are not mind-readers. Unless you tell them about your needs, they cannot judge whether you might have particular difficulties that other students do not have with life at university or a geography degree course, and hence whether they should consider making reasonable adjustments to help you. Equally your fellow students cannot know whether or how to help unless they too know – which may place you in a dilemma. Although help may level the uneven playing field, how much do you want people to know about you? Only you can decide this.

It may be that your disability is obvious – blindness, for example. The issue here is that people – keen to help – will assume that they know what you really need. This, the rushing forward group, needs training in what to do, if anything. If your disability is not obvious and perhaps affects you only intermittently (e.g. epilepsy or depression) or in certain circumstances (agoraphobia, for example), then you have to decide what and how much to tell the university about yourself. If you do not – and you are not obliged to – the university cannot make any different provision for you. If your condition is normally under control – a chronic pain problem, for example – then you may be able to cope except under occasional circumstances (perhaps a field course that involves climbing a mountain in cold weather). The rule under the Act is that once you have told anyone in the university about yourself, everyone in the university who needs to know will be told. You do not have to tell each lecturer separately. Equally, the information about you is strictly confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone unless they need to know in order to help you.

Planning

The best rule is 'plan early'. Plan accommodation and transport. Check what the courses you choose require you to do; ask the staff if in doubt. Talk to the university's student support or disabilities officer or your department's director of studies if you

need advice on whether or how you might cope. The Disabled Students' Allowance can take some time to process through an assessment centre, so apply in good time for the start of session. Other useful people to consult are the Library (e.g. dyslexia or visual impairments or reaching books on top shelves); and the computer service if there is IT equipment that might make life easier for you, but you are unsure of technicalities or compatibility.

You might want to read some of the books about how to study geography at university such as those by Kneale (2003) and Clark and Wareham (2003). There are several websites that will help particularly those with disabilities and impairments such as those run by SKILL and TechDis. The book and website *To a Degree* (Clark, Wareham and Turner, 2006) is also useful.

Students with dyslexia

For those with dyslexia, it is the word-intensive tasks that are the major hurdle. For fieldwork and laboratory work instructions are usually succinct, and they can be checked with the staff and fellow students to ensure you have not mis-interpreted anything. In lectures focus on the key points. Boil the ideas down to the fewest and most important, perhaps using a mind-map or spider diagram to show how they fit together. If the lecturer produces notes in a handout or website, ensure you get a copy to re-read and annotate. Ask if you can tape record lectures – you will probably be allowed to – as this will allow you to review the lecture later.

Trying to be helpful, lecturers may provide long reading lists for the essays they set. If a lot of reading can be taxing, do not hesitate to ask the lecturer to identify the key texts from among those listed. Again, finding the key points quickly is the key. So, look at the abstracts of articles and their concluding paragraphs (and similarly for book chapters) to get the key ideas concisely.

When you use a computer, it may be easier to work on screen if you alter the default settings in terms of the background colour of the screen, the typeface, type colour and the point size. If handouts on white paper are problematic, then you could ask the department to print lecture handouts and module guides on coloured paper.

Students assessed with dyslexia may be granted extra time to write their examination answers; do ask your tutor if this would be useful for you.

Students with hidden impairments

If your impairment is not immediately obvious (as it is if you are the user of a wheel chair, for example), then the onus is on you to decide whom to tell and when. If your epilepsy or diabetes is under control, perhaps no one need know. But on a field visit, far from the normal routine for managing your condition, an incident may be better handled for all concerned if someone knows the right things to do to help you, should the need arise. Field work, including dissertations and placements, will usually be subject to a risk assessment by the lecturer and students concerned. Legally you need to factor into the planning any hidden conditions and show that you know how to deal with them in the new circumstances of the field course. If you have a stammer,

worsened by stress, how are you going to do the interviews? If your skin condition is exacerbated by strong sunlight, how will you cope on the field course to West Africa? There are ways of coping with such matters, but they need to be thought through explicitly and in good time. If arthritis slows your writing speed, you could ask for extra time or a scribe to write your examination answers at your dictation. These are standard adjustments to examination procedures that are easily given when appropriate.

Visually impaired students

Much depends on your degree of visual impairment. If partial, you could ask the staff to print out lecture notes, handouts and websites on bigger paper, enlarged or in different colours. Otherwise, you may ask the university's support service to arrange for a note-taker to attend lectures and other classes with you. The recording of lectures will normally be allowed – on tape or digitally. The lecturer may be able to help too (if you remind him/her gently) by describing in words what s/he is showing on slides, rather than just saying, "...as you will see...".

When it comes to doing the reading for essays, the lecturer can be asked to identify which of the items on perhaps long reading lists are the most important. This will help you and your text reader, if your university can arrange the services of such a person. The Library may well have a machine to scan printed text and read it out in a synthetic voice. The Library may also be able to organise the translation of printed text into braille or Moon. Identifying the key texts is an important job for your tutor and planning early is beneficial to allow time for the brailling process to take place.

For essays, a scribe to write as you dictate may be useful, while voice recognition software is a possibility, although even with 'training' this software is not foolproof. The scribe may be able to help during examinations too, writing out your answer.

If you have a guide dog, their welfare will need consideration from the start – accommodation and familiarisation with the layout of the university. If you go on field courses (especially overseas) the dog's needs in term of the climate, inoculations and food will have to be planned for.

Fieldwork may pose other challenges for you, and your tutor will be able to talk you through them. Guidance, accommodation, access to your supportive equipment – all can be arranged if one starts early. The same applies to your dissertation. As should all students, start the planning early, identify with your supervisor what would be interesting to study, and work out the modifications to allow you to participate safely and learn effectively. Wherever you are – in the field, laboratory or lecture theatre – make sure you, your fellow students and the tutor know where the fire exits are, just in case the worst happens.

Hearing impaired students

The deaf and the Deaf are not the only one's who have difficulty hearing what staff say at university. The whirr of fans in air-conditioning systems, computers and projectors creates a surprising amount of background noise which can drown out quiet

speakers. Hearing a lecturer while in the field can be similarly disrupted by street noise, the wind or running water.

If your hearing is impaired, do ask the lecturer to use a microphone and T loop system. Getting copies of lecture notes and items on module websites will be similarly helpful, however severe your degree of deafness. If you lip read, you will need to educate lecturers and fellow students in tutorial groups as to the etiquette on allowing unrestricted lip reading. Place yourself in the teaching room where you can do this best. If you use a signer, then the university should be able to help recruit one for you. Your signer will need some training to familiarise themselves with new technical vocabularies.

When you are in discussion groups such as tutorials, you need to agree a convention whereby people, say, raise a hand or lean forward when they want to make a contribution, so no one – least of all you – gets left out.

Similarly, during fieldwork, you need to participate and not get sidelined. It may need some negotiation to get a signer to accompany you in the field or on site visits or placements. With communication being difficult anyway in the field, the rule for teaching staff is to write down instructions, so there is no confusion. If you are going overseas, note any differences in the compatibility of electrical equipment with UK standards, and you will know already that British Sign Language is rarely used overseas.

If you take modules involving laboratory work, then do ensure that you get a separate orientation and safety briefing and know where the fire exits are. It is particularly important that safety information is clear to you; do check you have understood it and ask if not sure. Your fellow students can help a lot here, but must not take over from you. During computer-based classes, you cannot look at the computer screen and the lecturer at the front of the class, so do ask for written instructions.

For some people oral presentations can be problematic. Alternatives to consider are: using PowerPoint; or getting a BSL interpreter to speak your signed presentation.

If your written English could be better, do discuss alternative types of assessment with your tutor, such as BSL presentations or more questions each requiring shorter answers.

Students with mobility impairments

For those with restricted mobility and particularly for those who use a wheelchair, accessibility has considerably improved during the last ten years – automatic doors, ramps and lifts have been installed, for example. But there can still be bottlenecks – doors not wide enough for electric wheelchairs, for example, or access to tutorial rooms and laboratories. So, it is still useful to check out locations beforehand. Can you see the projection screen from wherever the accessibility-friendly route leaves you? When lectures are held back to back in widely scattered venues across town, have you got enough time to get from one to the other? Do talk to your tutor if accessibility is a problem.

This is obviously particularly relevant advice for field courses and your dissertation. The department should seek your views on issues such as getting on and off buses, walking around towns, and moving across rough country to field sites. Many people may have limited mobility, not just those who use wheelchairs – those with arthritis, a heart condition, agoraphobia or asthma, for example. Options for alternative fieldwork could involve bringing the field samples to you rather than you travelling to them; or similar fieldwork could be conducted in a more accessible location; or the department might arrange a virtual field course based at the university. A less obvious issue is the degree of 'domestic privacy' you need on a residential field visit. If you opt for a placement during your degree scheme, then these discussions of accessibility will have to be held between you, your tutor and the prospective employer.

It may be that modules involving laboratory work will need some careful thought in terms of laboratory bench heights and handling equipment. The tutor will be able to advise you on how adjustments can be made to the task and equipment layout to ensure you get an equivalent experience to the other students. The same may apply to computer use – desk height, for example, or an adapted keyboard.

When it comes to essays and examinations, if arm strength or repetitive strain injury are concerns, the university may allow you more time to write examination answers or provide a scribe or typist to get your ideas on paper or into a computer. Do ask if these ideas would help you.

Oral presentations should not be a problem except that access to the lecture theatre (if that is where it is being held) may have been improved for 'the audience' but not for the lecturer, so check out access to the lectern and audio-visual controls.

Students with mental health conditions

General advice for those with mental health issues is tricky because conditions vary and really you are the expert in what is possible and tolerable.

Sometimes stress is an unwelcome trigger, reducing one's ability to work. Stress can be minimised by asking for the deadlines for items of assessed work to be spread out more evenly. In more serious cases part-time study may be more acceptable to you. Most universities offer the chance to intercalate, that is, to suspend your studies for a period until your personal conditions allow uninterrupted and productive studying. Do ask about these options if you think they might help you.

You may not want your condition widely known, but if your attendance at classes or examinations is likely to be disrupted by absences or appointments, you should let the Head of Department know, in confidence, so account can be taken. The growth of information on departmental websites and copies of fellow students' notes will help you catch up on missed sessions.

Residential field courses may be problematic for various reasons in terms of taking you away from your known settings and support networks. Do talk through the potential problems and possibilities with the tutor so that together you can judge whether it is possible for you to attend (perhaps with adjustments to the arrangements) or whether an equivalent learning experience needs to be devised. A single room for

accommodation might be possible during a field course. If you are on any medication do remember to keep taking it as normal.

Other types of teaching and assessment that might prove problematic include the following.

Group work – could a solo alternative be offered?

Oral presentations – use PowerPoint or tape record your talk beforehand and just play it to the group?

Essays – resist the temptation to be a perfectionist; do your best, then hand it in.

Examinations and their time pressures and severe stress – could extra time be offered, or an alternative form of assessment be used?

For your dissertation, there are clear opportunities as well as a few difficult areas. The latter can be dealt with by planning ahead, spreading the workload and keeping your supervisor in touch with developments. The good aspects of a dissertation are that you are in charge of the topic and how it is to be studied and you control the work rate.

A real life

Outside your studies there has to be a real life for you. Sport, paid employment or partying; volunteering or a hobby; it matters little what else you do as long as your life at university is rich and full. Geography (or any academic subject) will teach you many skills, but for a full life and a good job you need to develop other qualities – humanity, resilience, imagination, dedication, initiative – which a geography degree may go some way to fostering, but which will really be developed through other activities while at university. Do try to enrich your life by participating in other spheres while at university.

How everyone can help

It makes sense for students to help each other. It may be either formal collaboration when working as a team set up by the staff, or just informal help between students. There may be cases – when doing solo coursework, for example – when everyone has to work alone to avoid the charge of collusion (copying each other's work); but that will be made clear by the staff.

Always check out what help, if any, you or other people may need. Needs are very individual. Help only when invited to (though you can offer assistance) and in the ways the person needs. Help, but don't take over. Stand aside when help is not needed unless there is a clear safety issue emerging. Train others in the help you need. A good guideline is to find ways around the problems so the person can still do the work, rather than by sidelining them by doing the job yourself.

Words and language

In this paper I have tried to use language sensitively. I am aware, however, of clear divisions among and beyond those immediately concerned as to the most appropriate words to use when discussing these topics. I have tried to follow current generally accepted practice; if you feel that I have failed in some respects, I can only apologise.

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