Guidance for Staff Working with Unseen Disabilities and Long-term Medical Conditions

Unseen disabilities and medical conditions cover a wide range of diagnoses including, but not limited to, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, pain conditions, myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME)/chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), and Crohn’s disease. Their effects may include fatigue, pain, general ill health, and a need for more frequent access to food or bathroom facilities. Some medical conditions may be stable, some variable and others progressive. An unseen disability may be congenital, but it can also be late onset or the result of an accident.

How do unseen disabilities and long term medical conditions impact on study?

The impact of an unseen disability caused by an impairment or medical condition will vary from individual to individual and will depend upon a range of factors, including course choice, time since diagnosis, and support available. Often, these conditions can fluctuate – a student may be well one day, but become unwell the next due to a sudden ‘flare-up’ in their condition. Students with unseen impairments and/or medical conditions may need support in the following areas:

- Managing fatigue and energy levels
- Breaks for symptom management
- Sitting or standing for extended periods
- Managing exposure to environmental triggers
- Poor concentration

Supporting and teaching students with unseen disabilities and long term medical conditions

Many principles of inclusive teaching are beneficial for students with unseen impairments and medical conditions. Particular examples are highlighted below:

- Ensure information is shared regarding the student’s difficulties according to best practice, in particular in relation to health and safety
- Keep timetables consistent (to assist the student with accessing any support in place) and where possible, schedule regular breaks
- Provide handouts in advance so the student can focus well during the lecture
• Reserve seating in lectures (e.g. if ground floor seating required)
• Ensure any specialist seating required is available
• Where applicable, ensure thorough risk assessments are completed regarding issues of medication and/or allergy/sensitivity

Reasonable Adjustments

• Arrangements to provide cover if the student is too unwell to attend (e.g. recording device) and supportive attendance monitoring
• Consider proximity to bathrooms and student’s accommodation when choosing venues for supervisions
• Where possible, schedule supervisions around any disability or illness-related appointment the student may have
• Rest breaks during any lengthy learning activity, such as practical work or exams
• Human support to assist with practical work to mitigate fatigue
• Ability to accommodate support for short periods at short notice

The Equality Act (2010)

If a student has been living with an illness or unseen impairment for more than six months, or if the effect is likely to be lifelong, then they will automatically meet the definition of a disabled person under the Equality Act (2010). In such cases, there will be a legal obligation for the University to make reasonable adjustments and not treat the individual less favourably for reasons relating to their impairment.

Key Support Actions to remember

• Keep in touch with the student, and, in general, accept their assessment of their health on a given day
• Give clear guidance regarding essential tasks and support with managing workload
• Keep timings of learning activities consistent
• Allow breaks for symptom management, such as eating or medication
• Understand that the student may feel embarrassment about discussing the detail of these conditions

Fatigue often accompanies chronic medical conditions and this is likely to make it more difficult for a student to focus for extended periods of time. It is good practice to integrate clearly defined ‘break times’ into longer teaching slots, as these benefit all students.

A student may find it difficult to focus or gain momentum on work if his/her condition is vacillating and difficulties commonly associated with many medical conditions are likely to
be exacerbated in stressful periods i.e. the run-up to assessment hand-ins or exam periods. Ensure that students are provided with early notification of assessment cut-off points, and maintain an open dialogue with a student regarding extensions. If a student has fully disclosed a disability, it is important to take this into account when considering extension requests.

Students may need tutors to be more flexible in terms of times of availability for supervision sessions, etc. Due to unforeseen absences, students with unseen disabilities may also require more contact time with tutors, so that they can check their understanding of key points. It is often useful if the tutor emails the student a concise record of what is discussed and agreed upon in a meeting.