

**P-06-1251 Secure the Right to Remote Access for Disabled and Neurodivergent People, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 28.02.22**

Jeremy Miles wrote in reply to my petition for increased accessibility through remote access to education, that all universities have dedicated support teams for disabled students and that every university is expected to put in place reasonable adjustments to make education accessible. However, in my many discussions with other disabled students in Wales and England, we all have all noted that the support we get is performative and meets the bare minimum of our needs, to tick the boxes. Many of us are told that remote access is not a reasonable adjustment, but it was perfectly reasonable when it was for the sake of protecting the well-being of able-bodied students during the first year of the pandemic, why is it not reasonable to protect the well-being of disabled students now?

Many of us would find education more accessible if it were something that could be completed without over-exerting our bodies, the infrastructure exists already, the lectures are already being held, to record and subsequently distribute them would incur no extra costs to the universities. An anticipated objection I foresee is the matter of distribution of video including students, this obstacle is easily overcome, many universities and colleges already as common practice have students sign consent forms for this matter within the first week or two of each course. Students that don't want to be recorded can be put in separate sessions, each session is already delivered numerous times in a week, so again this can be achieved at no extra cost. Teachers have already been given the training on the use of cameras due to the pandemic. The government owes it to the disabled community to allow greater access to tools that can help us overcome common barriers.

Another point mentioned by the Minister of Education is that not all courses lend themselves entirely to being taught online, I know this well as a student of one such course. In such cases I propose that places of education do what they can to reduce the amount of times it is necessary for students to make the journey to them. This could be achieved through a crashcourse model, this is not a universal solution however as some students may feel they are better at processing information in small amounts regularly.

In my first year my attendance was high but my grades were low, due to the overexertion attending physically caused me. I'm in my third year now, my university hasn't offered me online lectures, and I scarcely attend yet my grades are at their highest because I am able to go through online resources at my own pace though, and commit more of my energy to completing work. I am incurring a debt of £9000 a year, to have access to a webpage, because I am unable to attend university at all currently I am robbed of the privilege of lectures, I am paying the same as able-bodied students who benefit much more from this course because the university grants them this privilege, but not me, they have refused.

With benefits facing cuts, and the increasing inaccessibility of these benefits, it only seems fair that the government make education as accessible as possible for the disabled community. Our supports have been taken away from us and for many of us, education is the only hope we have of, in some small ways, overcoming our disabilities and these obstacles put in our way. The government wants us to overcome our disabilities and become productive workers and yet through the lack of support granted disabled people this is not achievable for many of us. We are made to jump through hoops to get support (having to get doctors notes each time we need extensions and support, to prove that our chronic illnesses haven't disappeared for the sake of bureaucracy and nothing else, notes that we have to pay for which effectively makes this a tax on being a disabled student). Since the degradation of the welfare state disabled people have been fighting to keep our heads above the waves with many of us, unfortunately, drowning, at least offer us a lifebuoy, or better yet, help us onto the boat.

In my short life of 22 years, I have lost three disabled friends to suicide and one thing that affected each of them was education and academia being inaccessible, that existing within the institutionally ableist system of academia furthered their suffering as a disabled person. All three of these people were under the age of 25. How many friends will I have lost to this system by the time I'm 25, or 30, will there be anyone left to lose by the time I'm 35? Or will the neo-liberal machine eat them up, spit them out and stamp the life out of them all? This government owes it to the countless lives lost to ease our suffering, even in small ways. Is this government committed to saving the lives of young disabled people?

The friend most recently lost, died in the river that feeds the bay that the Senedd stands beside. They had completed an exam but their results weren't adequate, they had hope that education was the way in which they would find a happy stable life, after these results they lost that hope, and that loss was compounded by the pain and anguish living as a disabled person caused them. This was the final straw, and we will never get them back. How different would their performance have been if they were offered remote access? The gaps in their knowledge that affected their performance weren't caused by a fault in their ability or character, it was caused by the lack of this support. Lectures missed due to disabilities should be available to catch up on, in our own time, else we are being academically punished for the crime of being disabled. This government claims to acknowledge the social model of disability, described by the charity Scope like this "The model says that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference." This barrier, this obstacle, is easily overcome and could serve a great benefit to many people.

I myself, have not yet found the ability to look at the River Taff since this loss, but I implore you when you leave this building and see the bay, the water that carried them out of this life, I implore you to think of them, of the lives lost too soon, and ask yourself: "Have I done right by them? Have I helped this country step in the right direction to support those who urgently need it?" Have I helped people, or have I acted in favour of the Taff overflowing with the bloated broken rotting rancid corpses of the disabled people I chose not to help?"