Factsheet – Using Support Workers in Higher Education (Clinical Placements)

This document has been developed by RNIB’s Physiotherapy Support Service as a template for use by visually impaired students and higher education institutions in developing an appropriate role for Support Workers in the clinical setting. It covers a range of issues that need to be considered when disabled students are negotiating their support requirements.

The appendices attached to this paper are not intended to be definitive and should be used as bases from which to develop local documentation.
Factsheet: Using support workers

This factsheet offers advice for blind and partially sighted people in the clinical setting, who may benefit from using a support worker.

1. Introduction

Many visually impaired students use a range of technology to enable them to participate in their chosen programmes of study; many are very knowledgeable about such equipment and become skilled in its use. Certain components of the programme may, however, remain inaccessible to these students because of their visual impairment.

In particular, when a student undertakes a clinical placement for the first time, there is likely to be a mass of information that all learners need to assimilate in a relatively short time. This is commonly a point at which study support systems have not been fully explored or implemented.

Student responsibility

It is important that all students arrive at the clinical placement with a range of study strategies already in place. This involves finding efficient ways of accessing, retrieving and applying information in whatever medium it is presented: text, workshops, presentations/in-service training.

It is crucial that students continually reflect upon and modify their study strategies according to their own requirements and those of the particular clinical placement being undertaken.

Assessment of study needs

All disabled students should be eligible for an assessment of study needs. This is often organised through the institution’s Disability Service with an appropriate assessment centre which may be either internal or external to the institution. This assessment is required before the student can access the Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA). If the student is considering using a support worker, this matter needs careful thought and discussion prior to, and during, the assessment to ensure that adequate funds are recommended for payment of such personnel.
2. Advantages of using a support worker

Whether or not a student chooses to use a support worker will be a matter for each individual but there may be many advantages to this method of accessing the clinical component of the curriculum.

A student may be familiar with using a Closed Circuit Television (CCTV), listening to recorded or synthetic speech, or using magnification software to read material. Using a support worker is similar, but a person, rather than a specialist tool, provides the interface between the student and the study environments/materials, effectively compensating for the student’s impaired vision. It is very important to note, however, that the student’s autonomy is retained and that s/he should remain in control of the work being undertaken.

A range of people are involved in the process of facilitating the student to access the clinical education experience successfully. The most satisfactory outcomes result when the student, academic staff, clinical staff, disability advisers and support staff work together effectively and maintain good communication channels at all times. Crucial to this process is for the student to be aware of, and to understand, her/his own role within this context. The student should (possibly with guidance in some cases) be able to identify her/his strengths and weaknesses in relation to skills acquisition, acknowledge personal requirements, and should know about, and be prepared to access, sources of help. Once specific requirements are recognised, financial assistance is available for many individuals through the various components of the DSA (see separate factsheet).

3. The role of the support worker (general)

A support worker's role is to enable the student to gain improved access to the visual environment. Depending on the student’s requirements, the support worker can undertake a wide range of tasks; these could include reading, acting as scribe, driving, guiding, describing diagrams or describing the physical environment.
It is an important exercise for the student to consider all the tasks which comprise the whole of the clinical experience. The student may be able to access support for this activity through the University’s Disability Service and through undertaking an assessment of study needs, usually arranged through an appropriate assessment centre (as stated above). It is important to identify which tasks remain difficult or impossible for the student to perform after having received training on appropriate assistive technology and available support systems. The most effective way in which these barriers to learning may be overcome may be by the employment of a support worker.

Factors to be considered

Effective reading

It is important for the student to consider reading in the broadest sense of this term. Sighted people can, through the visual system, access a vast amount of information from a variety of sources, often at considerable speed. In order to compensate for a visual impairment, a student may choose from a wide variety of options. As for sighted people, however, there is no single solution which will effectively meet all the reading requirements of a visually impaired person. Changing fonts, enlarging text, using magnifiers or CCTV, telephone services, internet, scanners with optical character recognition (OCR) software, digital information access systems (DAISY) format, braille and other tactile systems may well be essential for a student’s clinical programme. There may be other tasks, however, which can be more efficiently undertaken by a support worker.

Hand written material often poses a challenge and at present there is no technology available which can overcome this barrier. Enlarging handwriting does not necessarily make it easier to read and, of course, this option is of no help to someone who cannot access text visually. In this instance, therefore, a support worker is likely to be the only solution.

In relation to reference or background material, it is often the case that visually impaired students do not need to read everything; indeed, it is important that they are selective in order to use time efficiently. Assistive technology cannot read selectively, skip through documentation to give an overview or find areas of
particular interest. A support worker may be able to do this more effectively and efficiently.

**A support worker could provide access to information in a variety of ways:**

- Reading verbatim
- Skim reading documents
- Locating relevant articles/books in learning resource centres
- Carrying out online literature searches
- Reading research material selected by student
- Reading documents that cannot be electronically scanned, such as tables, overprinted material, coloured text, or text in complex layouts
- Finding relevant information in files/patient records and reading these
- Describing diagrams, X-rays, photographs or graphical representations
- Providing information and sorting papers
- Paper filing
- Enlarging text on a photocopier
- Processing documents with a scanner
- Brailling text
- Reading on to a digital recorder

**Other tasks**

A student’s clinical education programme may require the completion of documentation by hand or the use of equipment or computer systems which cannot be made accessible. A support worker could:

- Complete writing tasks
- Complete documents and forms by hand
- Read from or use computer systems which cannot be made accessible

Some clinical placements may require the use of other types of visual information. Clinical assignments may require the student to give presentations using visual methods (e.g. Power Point presentations) and some assistance with preparation and delivery
may be needed. Assistance with using flip charts (accessing and delivering information) may also be required.

When travelling, especially in remote areas, it may not be practical or safe for the student to undertake the journey without assistance. A support worker could:

- Act as a sighted guide for travel to meetings or unfamiliar journeys
- Guide the student at meetings or conferences
- Identify and/or introduce the student to key people
- In exceptional circumstances and with the specific agreement of the support worker, s/he could act as a driver if the student needs to travel where public transport is inadequate
- Provide observation, for example, in academic, clinical or social settings

4. Support workers and clinical placements

There are a small number of students who will require a support worker to enable them to participate fully in the working environment.

4.1 The role

- To provide the interface between the student and the clinical environment.

- To enable the student to gain full access to the clinical setting, remembering at all times that the student retains control of the work being undertaken and over decisions relating to the nature of the support provided.

- To enable the student to gain improved access to the visual environment in general and being prepared to undertake a wide range of tasks which could include: reading, driving, guiding, describing diagrams or describing the physical environment.

- Depending on local arrangements and regulations relating to confidentiality of patient-related information, a support worker
can be used to provide specific support in the clinical environment. For example to:

- Act as guide within the hospital site until the student becomes independent
- Describe the environment, including equipment, until the student becomes familiar with her/his surroundings
- Provide access to information such as medical notes, charts, and X-Rays
- To describe the visual aspects of a patient’s physical condition to enable the student to work towards making a clinical diagnosis
- Act as a note-taker
- To observe and provide feedback on the demonstration of practical techniques
- To provide access to equipment (e.g. monitors and therapeutic machines)
- To ensure the health and safety of the student and peers in clinical situations

Obviously, for a person who has not been in the clinical area before, some tasks might require initial input from clinical staff to enable effective performance. It is important to note that there are limits to the role of the support worker and the student and the Clinical educator need to be aware of these.

4.2 Arranging a support worker

- The mechanisms for this vary from place to place. Many universities have a bank of individuals who can act as support workers, some of whom may be available for work based placements. The student should have investigated this well in advance of the placement.
- Some hospitals/clinical settings do have members of staff who may be able to act in this capacity or who work part time and may be willing to come in for extra hours.
- A key part of the process is for the clinical educator (or manager) to identify a member of staff in the Trust’s Human Resources Department who can facilitate the process.
- Different Trusts seem to have different systems for accepting support workers onto the premises. The majority that we have dealt with require them to sign honorary contracts with the Trust to enable them to work with the student in the
presence of patients. We have, however, come across a situation where one Trust was demanding a CV, 2 references, a CRB check and in-house training for a support worker before s/he would be allowed onto the premises. In reality this was a major barrier and meant that our student was forced to manage the placement without support (other than that which could be provided by the clinical educator). This could be seen as discriminatory practice; it certainly was a barrier to full participation and put a lot of extra strain on the clinician.

• If a member of staff can be identified who is willing to act as a support worker and is already in post at the Trust, it means that many of the above issues do not arise.

5. Working relationship with the support worker

It is essential that the relationship between the student and the support worker is conducted on a professional basis. It is equally important that the student should take and retain overall control. Inevitably, the student and support staff have a very close working relationship and it is crucial that they get on well together. It is important to be aware of the various issues that may have a bearing on the quality of this relationship. This could include such factors as the person’s voice and general behaviour as well as her/his availability and ability to adopt a flexible approach. During negotiation of the role of the support worker, factors such as temperament and preferred ways of working must be considered. If the student has a guide dog, it is important to ascertain that the support worker does not have any allergies and that s/he understands the nature of the interaction between the student and the dog.

6. Estimation of the time required with the support worker

It is important for the student to estimate the number of hours for which the support worker will be required each week. As mentioned earlier, the assessment of study needs should provide the opportunity for discussion concerning this issue. The time required often varies according to the student’s clinical education programme. It is, therefore, important to establish the maximum time likely to be needed as the student can always use and claim less. By agreement, it may be possible to estimate an average weekly time over a month. It is important to consider any 'down
time' when the support worker needs to be available, but is not working, for example between patient appointments. It is also important to note that the student may require a relatively high level of support in the early stages of a clinical placement which may need to be reviewed and modified at a later date.

7. Other issues

It is important to note that the support worker is there to assist the student and not to take away any of her/his responsibility for work or decisions. Unless agreed in advance, all communication with other people should be initiated and undertaken by the student.

It is crucial that peers and clinical staff members should understand the role of the support worker. It is the student’s responsibility to communicate this to the relevant people with guidance and support from appropriate staff as necessary. In some situations, the student may need to consider whether others may find the presence of a support worker to be intrusive as may sometimes be the case in clinical settings. It is important to balance the student’s support requirements with the needs of others and with considerations relevant to the general situation.

Support workers are usually expected to sign an honorary contract with the Trust and in doing so agree to abide by the institution’s policies and codes of conduct. They must treat all work-related activities as strictly confidential.

8. Record keeping

It is essential that accurate and complete records are maintained at all times. This should include a record of the student’s specific requirements, the negotiated role of the support worker, any modifications made to support arrangements and the codes of practice agreed to by both the student and the support worker. It is also important to keep comprehensive records regarding the times that the support worker is used by the student and of payments made.

9. Training

Support workers may require some training if the student has to undertake what may be regarded as unusual activities as part of
the general study programme. In the case of physiotherapy programmes, support workers will need to be familiar with a student's requirements, particularly in relation to the clinical elements of the course of which they may not have had previous experience.

Possible sources of training might include:

- Informal: on the job
- Formal:
  - Student
  - Academic staff
  - Clinical educators
  - Disability Service personnel
  - Access Centre personnel
  - RNIB’s Physiotherapy Support Service

10. Reviews

In the interests of maintaining high standards of quality, it is important that regular reviews of these services are undertaken and that the evaluation process should involve both the student and support worker. Although consideration should be given to the overall effectiveness of the service provided by the support worker, the review should include other support such as equipment and specialist training. It cannot be over-emphasised that all elements of support need to be effective to enable the student to perform as efficiently as possible.

Specific times should be identified and allocated for the completion of such reviews. These could be carried out by the student on an informal basis and more formally by the local Disability Services/Access Centre as appropriate. Academic and clinical staff may need to be involved in some of the discussions. Following each review, it will be essential to agree future strategies and implement modifications to the support as appropriate. A record to such agreements should be kept and used as a reference point at future reviews.
Appendix 1

Code of Practice for Individuals
Using Support Workers

Support workers are expected to agree to certain terms and conditions in relation to their employment (see attached document). These terms and conditions have been drawn up to protect both you and the support worker and to ensure that the support provided is appropriate.

Students who wish to use a support worker are, however, also expected to abide by the following Code of Practice:

You should:

- Keep all information between yourself and the support worker with whom you work strictly confidential.
- Respect professional boundaries and maintain a professional relationship with your support worker at all times i.e. do not enter into inappropriate personal relationships with the support worker.
- Arrive promptly at the agreed location for your sessions with the support worker.
- Read your emails regularly as it is the main method by which the academic staff and members of the Disability Service communicate with students and support workers.
- Advise the local Disability Service if you have any concerns about the nature and quality of the assistance which your support worker is providing.
- Not ask your support worker to attend classes or other sessions at which you are not going to be present or expect him/her to remain after you leave a class, unless prior arrangements have been made with the local Disability Service.
- Inform the local Disability Service if your Support worker fails to turn up for 3 consecutive appointments.
- Inform the support worker at least one day in advance if you are unable to attend a support session otherwise you may be charged accordingly.
- Not ask your support worker to exceed the hours specified in the contract or ask for any significant changes to the nature and/or location of the work without the agreement of the Disability Service.
- Not divulge any confidential information about your support worker to any other party without the Support worker’s agreement.
- Not abuse the system by making requests for inappropriate support.
• Ensure that you check and sign your support worker’s timesheet before it is passed to the local Disability Service for processing.

Guidelines

• You will be given a contact number for the support worker in order that you can make arrangements to meet with her/him. Please respect the confidential nature of this information.
• The support worker will not ask the lecturer any questions on your behalf unless an agreement has been made beforehand.
• It is your responsibility to inform the lecturer if your support worker is having difficulty in keeping up with the class. You should ask her/him to slow down or for clarification.

Working with academic and clinical staff

• You should take the responsibility of informing the academic and clinical staff that you will be employing a support worker in their sessions and explain briefly the nature of her/his role relating to the type of support.
• If you are new to employing a support worker and feel that you need guidance/support in communicating this role, someone from the Disability Service should be able to assist you.
• You should also inform the academic and clinical staff that the support worker will require copies of any handouts or Power Point presentations in advance of teaching sessions (if these are not already available electronically for all students).
• You are entitled to ask for these at the beginning of the session, or if these are not available, request a meeting with the member of staff at the end of the session to discuss any areas requiring clarification.
• If you have any difficulty with any of the above, please refer to the local Disability Service or subject area Disability tutor as soon as possible after any incident.

The Disability Service may review or withdraw support from a student who does not abide by the above Code of Practice.
Appendix 2

Code of Practice for Individuals
Contracted to act as Support Workers

As a professional working for students enrolled at the University, it is important that you adhere to the following Code of Practice which has been drawn up to reflect your professional status and to guarantee that appropriate respect for all parties involved is maintained at all times. This code is designed to protect the student and the support worker and to ensure that the support provided is appropriate.

You should:

- Keep all information between yourself and the student(s) with whom you work strictly confidential
- Not divulge any confidential information about your student to any other party without the agreement of the student, unless there is justifiable concern regarding the personal safety of the student and then only to appropriate professional agencies
- Dress and conduct yourself appropriately in all situations (this is particularly important in practical and clinical situations) and remember to wear your identity badge
- Respect professional boundaries and maintain a professional relationship with the student at all times i.e. do not enter into inappropriate personal relationships with the student
- Arrive promptly at the agreed location and be prepared for your sessions with the student
- Convey faithfully the subject, content and spirit of the lecture. Support workers are responsible for communicating information accurately and should endeavour not to make too many omissions
- Complete the session to the satisfaction of the student within the pre-agreed time
- Not give advice or offer personal opinions in any teaching situation
- Not function in any situation where your impartiality could be questioned
- Practise in situations where you have skill, experience and competence to do so
- Maintain accurate, self-signed timesheets of the nature and amount of support provided to the student. This timesheet should also be countersigned by the student before being passed to the local Disability Service for processing
Guidelines

- You will be given a contact number for the student(s) you will be supporting in order that you can make arrangements to meet with them. Please respect the confidential nature of this information.
- Read your emails regularly as it is the main method by which the Disability Service communicates with support workers.
- Wait for up to twenty minutes for the student to arrive at the assignment (lecture/seminar). After this time you are at liberty to leave if the student does not appear and you have not received any communication from or about her/him.
- Do not take notes if the student is not present or before the student has arrived, unless prior arrangements have been made with the local Disability Service.
- Do not take notes if the student leaves the room.
- Please inform the local Disability Service if a student you are booked to support fails to turn up for 3 consecutive appointments in the same subject area.
- Do not ask the lecturer any questions on the student's behalf unless an agreement has been made between you and the student beforehand.
- Inform the student if you are having difficulty in keeping up with the lecturer. It is the student's responsibility to convey this information to the lecturer and to ask her/him to slow down or for clarification of the subject. If you need to do this on the student's behalf you should obtain the student's agreement beforehand.

If you have any difficulties relating to the way in which the sessions have been organised, please, in the first instant, discuss this with the student. S/he should be encouraged to inform the local Disability Service of any difficulties which you may be experiencing.

Absence

- Inform the Service Co-ordinator of any planned absences at least one week in advance.
- In the event of sickness, please inform the Disability Service with the maximum possible notice.
- Absences during term time due to holidays are not permitted.
Working with academic and clinical staff

- Academic and clinical staff should have been briefed that they have a student who will be employing a support worker in their session. It is not your responsibility to do this.

- Similarly they should have been informed that the student employing the support worker will require copies of any handouts and Power Point slides in advance of lectures for her/his support workers (if these are not already available electronically for all students).

- You are entitled to ask for these at the beginning of the session, or if these are not available request that you can meet with the lecturer at the end of the lecture to discuss any areas requiring clarification.

- If you have any difficulty with any of the above, please refer to the local Disability Service or subject area Disability tutor as soon as possible after any incident.
Appendix 3

Support Worker

Job Description

To provide the interface between the student and the study environments/materials.

To enable the student to gain full access to the curriculum, remembering at all times that the student retains control of the work being undertaken and over decisions relating to the nature of the support provided.

To enable the student to gain improved access to the visual environment in general and being prepared to undertake a wide range of tasks which could include: reading, driving, guiding, describing diagrams or describing the physical environment.

To provide access to information in a variety of ways which could include:

- Reading verbatim
- Skim reading documents
- Locating relevant articles/books in learning resource centres
- Carrying out online literature searches
- Reading research material selected by student
- Reading documents that cannot be electronically scanned, such as tables, handwritten text, overprinted material, coloured text, or text in complex layouts
- Finding relevant information in files/patient records and reading these
- Describing diagrams, X-rays, photographs or graphical representations
- Providing information and sorting papers
- Paper filing
- Enlarging text on a photocopier
- Processing documents with a scanner
- Brailling text
- Reading text on to a digital recording device
Depending on the requirements of the student’s study programme, to complete documentation by hand or by the use of equipment or computer systems which cannot be made accessible to the student. For example to:

- Complete writing tasks
- Complete documents and forms by hand
- Read from or use computer systems which cannot be made accessible

Assessments may require the student to give presentations using visual methods (e.g. Power Point presentations and flip charts) and some assistance with preparation and delivery may be needed.

To enable the student to gain improved access to the educational experience in relation to communication, orientation and mobility. For example to:

- Act as a guide for travel to meetings or unfamiliar journeys.
- Guide the student at meetings or conferences.
- Identify and/or introduce the student to key people.
- In exceptional circumstances and by specific agreement, act as a driver if the student needs to travel to areas inadequately serviced by public transport.
- Provide observation, for example, in academic, clinical or social settings.

To provide in-class learning support including undertaking such duties as:

- Note taking
- Copying diagrams
- Reading
- Observing and providing feedback on the demonstration of practical techniques
- Accessing equipment (e.g. electrotherapy machines)
- Ensure health and safety of student and peers in practical situations
There may be a need for some limited modification and adaptation of learning materials as necessary to enable the student to gain access to information.

Depending on the student’s requirements, to provide general support as and when appropriate. Examples of general support might include:

- Acting as a guide to, from and around the campus until the student becomes independent. (Training in this area may, however, be carried out by the local Social Services or GDBA)
- Acting as a guide to, from and around clinical placement sites until the student becomes independent. (Training in this area may, however, be carried out by in-house staff.)

Depending on local arrangements and regulations relating to confidentiality of patient-related information, to provide support in the clinical environment. For example to:

- Act as guide within the hospital site until the student becomes independent
- Describe the environment, including equipment, until the student becomes familiar with her/his surroundings
- Provide access to information such as medical notes, charts, and X-Rays
- Describe the visual aspects of a patient’s physical condition to enable the student to work towards making a clinical diagnosis
- Act as a note-taker
- Observe and provide feedback on the demonstration of practical techniques
- Provide access to equipment (e.g. monitors and therapeutic machines)
- Ensure the health and safety of student and peers in clinical situations

Support workers can be asked to undertake a range of other duties which may from time to time be required by the student, the academic and/or clinical staff and the Disability Services personnel.