

The experience of a wheelchair user Agricultural Engineering student at Harper Adams University College

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Background

Chris Swift joined Harper Adams in 1994 as an able bodied BEng Agricultural Engineering student. During his first year he suffered a debilitating illness, called Guillain-Barré syndrome, which forced him to postpone his studies. The College maintained links with Chris and by September 1998 he had recovered sufficiently to return to Harper Adams as a first year BSc Agricultural Engineering with Marketing and Management student and wheelchair user with little or no use of his limbs. Chris graduated with a 1st Class Honours degree in June 2002. and has continued his studies in Engineering at Cranfield University; where he first completed an MSc and is currently studying for an engineering doctorate.

Chris' Reflections

When I became ill in March 1995 whilst studying at Harper Adams, I had little idea what the future would hold in terms of physical recovery and also how I would go about rebuilding my life. Although it may seem trivial, the promise of a place being kept open for me to return to provided a focus for my journey through rehabilitation. On arrival back at Harper Adams in September 1998 I was interested to see how the other guys on the course would view a wheelchair user. When I was 19 I'm sure I would have been uncertain or even wary of such an "unknown quantity". Fortunately, I made some great friends, many of whom I am still in contact with today.

It's largely thanks to friends and acquaintances that many of the obstacles encountered during my studies were overcome. For example, I originally used my personal assistant (PA) to act as note-taker during lectures. Although this was moderately successful, a much better solution came from simply copying the notes of a friend on the course who had a much better understanding of the subject matter and knew what was important to include.

Solving problems of physical accessibility of buildings proved to be an iterative process. Despite preparation of my living accommodation with automatic doors and equipment such as an electric bed and hoist, it was impossible to plan all aspects of access to all campus facilities. The key to Harper's success with regard to accessibility was in being flexible enough to deal swiftly with any problems that I discovered, as they arose.

Harper also organised placement periods in such a way that I could continue to live on the university campus. This was incredibly important in that it would have been nearly impossible to find rented, adapted, accessible accommodation for a six month placement period elsewhere in the country. Such a move would also have an impact on everything from which agency would supply my PA's to which health authority would be responsible for servicing my wheelchair!

After graduating I completed an MSc through Cranfield University in Bedfordshire, but again an agreement was made so that I could stay in the known environment of Harper Adams, allowing me to focus on work. I'm currently living in Bedfordshire studying for an engineering doctorate, looking into ways to increase ride comfort for wheelchair users. As a personal project I have just started Molten Rock Equipment Ltd as a manufacturer and distributor of a new sports off-road mobility device for the disabled.

Harper Adams University College Perspective

It has been, and remains, unusual to have applications from physically disabled students. Whilst the college is on a single, relatively level, site it is divided into four by two intersecting public roads. In 1998, When Chris returned to college, the buildings were generally pre-1960 and not adapted for wheel chair

access. The nature of the courses (historically it was an agricultural college), the physical environment, the placement employment and the social life based around field sports discouraged applicants.

Prior to his return Chris visited the college and discussed both the best option academically and also his physical requirements. We proposed that he restarted his studies on an Agricultural Engineering with Marketing and Management course which could provide him with the skills and knowledge better suited to his physical limitations. Chris provided us with a wish list of facilities and access adjustments and when he returned he was provided with an adapted room with special showering facilities and powered doors. His PA had a room next door. Some improvements to access and ease of manoeuvring were carried out on his major routes and automatic doors and ramps were subsequently installed in the engineering department.

Although Chris arrived with voice activated computer equipment several adjustments had to be made to facilitate participation in classes and examinations. Initially his PA acted as note-taker but was soon replaced by a fellow student, funded by Kent LEA. Examinations answers were dictated by Chris to an engineering technician who was familiar with the terminology if not the level of understanding required. Chris participated in practicals mainly by giving instructions to others for the physical tasks.

The compulsory employment placement created a further obstacle as none of the companies we approached felt they could provide a worthwhile experience. To solve this problem Chris was employed by the college. During his first six months in the computer department Chris developed the web-site www.offroadmachine.com which is still in use. His second six months was spent in our engineering workshops, where he supervised the design and adaptation of a small off road vehicle for use by disabled drivers, funded by the vehicle manufacturer. He was awarded 'A' grades for both placements.

Lessons Learned

Following the adjustments made to the physical facilities the college is now in a position to take further disabled students. There are currently several students with limited mobility studying at the college. Harper Adams is part-way through a project to implement SENDA requirements, called HASDAS (Harper Adams Support for Disabled Applicants and Students) which will result in an integrated service provision for applicants and students with a range of disabilities and specific learning difficulties. Various policies have been developed. One outcome is that the college prospectus contains mention of the provision for disabled students. Funding was also obtained in recent years to improve access across the site (e.g. to install automatic doors and lifts) and this process is ongoing.

Generally the teaching and administrative staff worked very well together to accommodate Chris' needs. The engineering and administrative staff who knew him were receptive to his return, however there were initially wider concerns about how his studies and safety could be managed. The process of implementing support e.g. from local education authority funding, requires time and effort, and can only be done according to each individual's situation.

The overall experience was vastly beneficial, now the college is much better prepared to consider and anticipate requirements of special needs students.