This section introduces the information you need to advise disabled people who are thinking of going into further or higher education, whether for the first time or as a return to study. It highlights some of the issues that prospective disabled learners may need to think about when selecting a course, a place of study and other generic issues in further and higher education. It is followed by specific information in Sections 5 and 6 about studying in further education or work-based learning and higher education, respectively.

By the end of this section you will
- Know what information is needed for disabled people to choose the right course
- Know where to direct people to find out more about an institution and/or course
- Understand the different considerations for deciding where to study
- Know about the options for open and distance learning
- Understand the complaints process in education
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4.1 Choosing a course

There are several things to consider when choosing a course. Many of these are general student concerns such as:

- What are their future career plans?
- What level of course do they want to study?
- Do they meet the entry requirements?
- Do they want to study full-time, part-time or by distance or open learning?
- What subject-related options does the institution offer?
- Is their choice of institution likely to influence future employers?

There are also some questions which are specific to disabled learners, such as:

- How do they learn best?
- What adjustments will they need?
- Do they need to consider alternative teaching and assessment methods?

Finding out more about courses available

There are a number of sources of information that may be useful for finding out more about what to study, such as:

- National Database of Vocational Qualifications which contains information about different vocational qualifications, how they relate to one another and how they relate to jobs. To locate the nearest National database, contact your local LSC.

- UK Course Provider is a CD-ROM database with information on full-time courses in the UK. It also gives information about access and extra support for disabled learners.

- The Careers Advice Service (0800 100 900) gives general advice about courses anywhere in the UK. It is a useful means of finding out about courses available locally, but will not provide detailed advice on disability-related support. You can also search online at www.direct.gov.uk/careersadvice

- UCAS website and directory has a website detailing higher education courses and entrance requirements, www.ucas.com. The annual Directory has information on the courses that institutions offer.

- Other websites
  www.hotcourses.com
  www.bbc.co.uk/learning/coursesearch/returning/
  www.vocationallearning.org.uk/students
  www.direct.gov.uk
Disability and choice of subject
Always start exploring choice of subject based on what they want to do. Then they can think about the advice and support they might need, if any, to make the most of their study. There are a few professions that have their own fitness to practise regulations which relate to the physical demands of the job or health and safety requirements although in the majority of cases, disabled people will be able to meet the fitness to practise standards with appropriate reasonable adjustments.

Activity: reflection
Look back on the exercises that you did in Section 1: General principles (page 13) and Section 2: The DDA (page 28). Think about the advice you would give a disabled learner who was wanting to choose these subjects and what other options they may have.

Academic requirements
Academic requirements, or competence standards as they are known under the DDA, may vary between different qualifications and institutions, but courses must have clear and justifiable competence standards that will be assessed during the course. Information on competence standards was covered in Section 2, pages 37 and 53. Sometimes a person’s disability could have prevented them from achieving their full potential at school. If someone does not have the necessary entry requirements but would still be able to complete the course adequately, it may be worth talking to admissions tutors to see whether any admissions criteria can be made more flexible.

Mature learners with disabilities
Some people acquire a disability in the course of their adult life and then return to education in order to re-train or explore their potential in other areas. It is well recognised by educational institutions that mature learners are an asset to courses and bring with them a wealth of experience. If they are over 21 and do not have formal qualifications, institutions may look at other experience or qualifications they have gained. Check with institutions to see whether their experience and qualifications are acceptable.

Assessment methods
Learners might be assessed continuously throughout the course, have final examinations at the end of each module or year, have to submit a dissertation, undertake a viva voce (oral assessment) or a mixture of all of these. Under the DDA, education providers’ bodies must make alternative arrangements to their assessment processes for disabled learners so long as the competence standard that is being assessed is not compromised. Institutions are required to put in place alternative
arrangements to assessments for disabled learners and should be open about discussing the types of flexible arrangements that can be provided.

**Full-time or part-time**
Some people may feel that they will not be able to study full-time due to their disability, or in addition to having a job or family commitments. Many courses can now be taken part-time. Open and distance learning may also be a possibility.

**Disclosing a disability**
There should be many opportunities for learners to disclose their disability during the application process. The indication of additional learning support needs on the application form may be followed up by a meeting or letter from the disability or learning support office to discuss putting appropriate support in place.

Disclosing a disability early in the application process will enable staff to get support in place for the start of the course. However, learners do not have to disclose a disability and can disclose later on in the course if and when they need extra support. See Section 3: Disclosing a disability for more information about disclosure and the pros and cons of doing so.

**Not being accepted**
Institutions rarely give reasons for rejecting applications to courses. Institutions cannot reject applicants on the grounds of disability unless they are genuinely unable to meet their specific needs. If someone thinks they have been rejected because of their disability, they should make a complaint. If someone is determined to take a particular course, retaking examinations may allow them to reapply next year. Better grades may be expected for retakes.

### 4.2 Choosing where to study

**Finding out more about the institution**
An institution’s prospectus and website provide course details and describe the facilities available. Each institution must produce and follow a Disability Equality Scheme (DES). The DES sets out how the institution will develop policies that promote inclusion of disabled people. The person responsible for disabled learners should be able to discuss with the student the support they need and how they can put in place the appropriate arrangements.
Contacting the Disability Officer or equivalent
Most institutions have a named member of staff who has responsibility for ensuring that the needs of disabled students are met. This person may be called the Disability Officer, Disability Coordinator, Additional Learning Support Adviser or Inclusive Learning Coordinator. It will be useful for a disabled person to contact this member of staff to find out more about the support that can be offered and the arrangements that can be made. The prospectus or website should tell you how to contact this person. You can also search their contact details on Skill’s online Into HE/FE directory at www.skill.org.uk/page.aspx?c=6&p=0

Visiting the institution
It is very important that disabled people are given an opportunity to visit the institution(s) where they are considering studying, either as part of an open day or a more tailored individual visit. This gives an opportunity to look at physical accessibility, support available, and the course delivery. As part of the visit, it is a good idea for prospective learners to arrange to speak with the person responsible for disabled learners who can discuss flexible methods of study, equipment, accessibility issues and funding details.

Location
Some people may want or need to be near their family and travel to the institution or university daily. Alternatively, others may wish to move to another part of the country. Some institutions have buildings on a campus, with all facilities on site – libraries, lecture theatres, supermarkets and bookshops. Others are based in large cities, where the buildings often cover several sites.

Accommodation
Disabled learners should find out the size and cost of the rooms, as well as how many years the institution can guarantee accommodation and the type of accommodation available: halls of residence, flats or rented housing. Learners should check that the accommodation could be adapted to meet their needs, eg accessible rooms and lifts, flashing light fire alarms or additional rooms available if they have a personal assistant.

4.3 Disability-related support

Finding out more about what the institution can offer
Under the DDA, institutions have a duty to make adjustments to their services so disabled learners are not placed at a substantial disadvantage. However, it is still important to contact the Disability Officer in advance to discuss how their individual needs will be met.
Some disabled people already have some idea of the support they will need, while others may not have received support before and are not aware of the support that is available to them. Either way, it should be explained that studying at post-16 level, particularly HE, is likely to provide different challenges to those they have faced before, and there may be certain facilities, specialist equipment or support services which will enable them to study. It is best for them to start thinking early about their support needs so that, if at all possible, support can be put in place before the start of the course.

There are examples of support arrangements that disabled learners might find useful in Skill’s information booklet *Adjustments for disabled students*. This may be helpful to discuss with prospective learners.

**Action: download**

Download and read Skill’s information booklet *Adjustments for disabled students* from [www.skill.org.uk/uploads/adjustments.doc](http://www.skill.org.uk/uploads/adjustments.doc)

Support available is dependent on the needs of the individual. It might include (but is not restricted to) the following:

**Equipment**
- Access to a computer with specialist software, eg voice recognition or specialist equipment, eg screen filter
- Access to a Braille note taker/embosser
- Radio microphone system
- Dictaphone for classes
- Flashing light fire alarms

**Personal support**
- Communicator, eg sign language interpreter/lip-speaker
- Reader
- Scribe/amanuensis/note taker
- Help in the library
- Extra tutorials or specialist tuition support
- Personal assistant/support worker

**Study arrangements**
- Course material in alternative formats
- Extensions to or flexibility in coursework deadlines
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- Extra support with planning assignments and examinations
- Handouts/booklists in advance (possibly for transcription)
- Handouts/exam papers on different coloured paper
- Private study area or additional help in the library
- Extra time for library loans
- Careful timetabling of work and examinations to minimise stress
- Extra time after group sessions to check understanding
- Ways of completing work other than group work
- Information conveyed in more than one way, for example, verbally and in writing
- Practical or field work arrangements

Examination arrangements
- Additional examination arrangements, eg extra time
- Separate exam room
- Use of a computer or amanuensis in examinations
- Examination papers in alternative formats

Other support arrangements
- Advance preparation for changes of routine
- Clear signs around the campus
- Good lighting
- Orientation and mobility training
- First aid training for staff and learners
- Designated room for resting or taking medication
- Timetable planning to ensure accessibility and avoid long distance between lectures
- Full access to rooms and buildings, eg study spaces, lecture rooms, toilets, catering and recreational facilities
- Car parking space or travel arrangements
- Area to exercise a guide dog

Health and Social Services support
For learners who require help with daily living and health needs, support should be requested from the local health authority and social services, in addition to education-related support. Funding for education, personal care and medical care comes from different sources, which means that arrangements can be complicated. It is very important to start discussions about health and social services support early, so that the
different agencies involved work together and ensure that everything is in place before the start of the course.

Support for daily living is funded through local social services. Learners should talk to social services at an early stage and ask for an assessment of needs if they have not had one – this is a legal right.

The institution or social services may provide personal assistants, depending on whether it is study or living-related. Sometimes this is done through a volunteer scheme where volunteers are trained, paid an allowance and provided with accommodation. Alternatively, learners can coordinate their own personal assistance through direct payments.

4.4 Open and distance learning

Open/distance learning allows people to learn in a flexible way to suit their needs. Generally open learning courses involve a mixture of home study and attending an open learning centre or institution occasionally for tutorials or seminars. This style of learning is not appropriate for everyone, as it involves a lot of self-directed study and minimal input from tutors. It can be a good alternative for people who are unable to attend an institution because they:

- Have an impairment that makes it difficult for them to attend a local institution
- Have constraints on their time (such as childcare or caring for a dependant)
- Are unable to find a suitable course at their local institution

Many institutions offer open and distance learning courses so it is a good idea to contact those nearest to the person’s home or work to find out if they have an appropriate course. Sometimes local adult education centres run courses designed specifically for people who find it difficult to get to an institution because of a disability. As well as local options, there are the following national contacts:

- National Extension College

The National Extension College is one of the largest correspondence institutions, offering distance-learning courses with support from tutors. A range of qualifications and subjects can be studied including GCSEs, A levels, accounting, marketing, IT skills, small business courses and counselling skills.
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Action: research

Visit the NEC website, www.nec.ac.uk, to find out about the distance learning courses available.

- **The Open University**
The Open University (OU) is the largest open learning institution in the country. Some OU courses are designed to help people enter a specific career, while others are for general interest and personal development. There are a range of courses from short courses to postgraduate courses, with the cost dependent on the course. The Disabled Student Services coordinate disabled learners’ services from the OU’s headquarters in Milton Keynes.

- **The Open College of the Arts**
The Open College of the Arts is linked to the Open University. It offers home study courses in areas such as creative writing, art and design, photography, textiles, music, art history, painting and drawing. The institution offers discounts on courses to people receiving welfare benefits.

- **Royal National College for the Blind**
The Royal National College for the Blind runs a number of courses enabling visually impaired people to work from home while gaining an NVQ Level 2 qualification in a number of areas. Anyone who is visually impaired, unemployed and eligible for work-based learning for adults funding can apply.

4.5 **Funding study**

Disabled learners, just like other learners, need to ask themselves how they are going to pay for costs such as tuition fees, accommodation, living costs, books and materials. They also need to think about any extra costs related to their disability. The funding available for course costs, living costs and disability-related expenses depends on the level and type of education. Refer to Section 5: Further education and Section 6: Higher education for specific funding information.

It is important to note that, from September 2008, any adult entering HE who already holds an HE qualification and wishes to undertake a second or subsequent course (called an Equivalent or Lower Qualification, ELQ) may have to pay full tuition fees for this qualification and will not receive any government subsidy for their fees, unless they are in receipt of Disabled Students’ Allowances or are undertaking a course that is exempt from the ELQ rules. The main courses that are exempt are undergraduate
medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, nursing, teacher training and social work. Any student in this position is strongly advised to discuss their options and fees with the institution that they wish to apply to.

**Welfare benefits**
Most full-time learners cannot claim welfare benefits. However, in certain situations, disabled learners can continue to get or apply for some benefits. It is important that learners inform the Benefits Agency/Jobcentre Plus that they are starting a course. This is a change in their circumstances, so they must tell them even if they think it will not affect their benefits. Refer to **Section 8: Welfare Benefits** for more information.

**Charitable trusts**
In all post-16 education, if funding from official/statutory sources is not sufficient, charitable trusts may be able to help raise the funds. Trusts can provide assistance with a range of activities; however, they generally have many more requests than they are able to support.

The local library may hold a list of trusts or your institution may be able to give you details. Skill also produces an information booklet called *Funding from Charitable Trusts*, which lists a select number of trusts and gives advice on how to apply.

You could also contact the Educational Grants Advisory Service.

Some companies can provide scholarships, particularly if their area of expertise is similar to the student’s course.

**Action: download**
Download a copy of Skill’s information booklet *Funding from Charitable Trusts* from [www.skill.org.uk/uploads/trusts.doc](http://www.skill.org.uk/uploads/trusts.doc)

**Career Development Loans**
These are loans from certain banks, which are available for job-related courses in FE or HE that last up to two years (plus an additional year if the course includes practical work experience). Learners can borrow between £300 and £8000 to pay for fees and/or other course-related expenses. The government pays the interest but only when the person is studying. Repayments begin one month after the course has ended or up to six months after the course has ended if unemployed. More details are available by contacting the Career Development Information Line.
Funding open learning
It is difficult to obtain a grant or bursary for open learning courses. No mandatory grants are available for doing home study. Local Authorities (LAs) have their own policies about giving discretionary grants and most do not award them for home study. However, it is always worth contacting them to find out. If someone has to study at home rather than at an institution because of the nature of a disability, the LA may be more likely to help. Financial support to help with the Open University course fees and study costs is available in certain circumstances. Check with the OU directly for more information on how to qualify for support. For open learning courses through local institutions, there may be fee waivers or reductions for people who are receiving means-tested benefits or on low incomes. For more information on fee support for open learning, learners should contact the institution directly.

4.6 Making a complaint

Most disabled learners enjoy very positive experiences in further or higher education. There are sometimes difficulties but these can usually be ironed out at the beginning without too much trouble. If learners do experience difficulties that cannot be easily resolved, appropriate courses of action include:

- Approach the Disability Officer to discuss the difficulty
- Most tutors are prepared to help learners who are having genuine difficulties, whatever the cause. They may be able to change assignment deadlines or offer extra tutorials
- Most students’ unions have a welfare officer who can give advice or act as an advocate on their behalf
- Counsellors are also helpful if they want to talk through issues with someone
- Disability organisations sometimes have an education officer who can help or advise learners. They may act as an advocate for learners who are having problems

If a disabled person is not getting the support they need, or feel they have been discriminated against, they may wish to make a complaint about the treatment that they have received. Section 2: The DDA has details of institutions’ responsibilities under the DDA.

Skill’s Information Service is always ready to help with information or advice if things are not working out as they should. Contact Skill on 0800 328 5050 or visit Skill’s website for further information on the DDA.
Resolving complaints at a local level

Often, the quickest and best way of resolving an issue is for the disabled learner, or someone working on their behalf, to discuss the complaint with the person concerned. This is normally much quicker and more effective than taking things externally. However, this may not always be appropriate or possible, and it may be necessary to make a more formal complaint.

All institutions should have a clear and easy-to-follow complaints procedure. This will normally involve writing to the Principal or senior manager of the institution. The procedure and timescales for making a complaint will vary between different institutions.

If this does not resolve the issue, learners in further education and work-based learning can write to their local Learning and Skills Council. Learners in higher education may be able to take their complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education if they have gone through the internal complaints procedure.

If a student is unhappy with the reasonable adjustments put in place for an external examination, they can make an appeal through their institution to the awarding body. If the exam is internal, ie organised by the institution or university, the complaint should follow the internal complaints procedure. It is important that complaints in relation to examinations are made as soon as possible after the exam as most institutions and universities will have time limits on how long after complaints can be submitted.

Taking a complaint further under the DDA

6-Step Test

If a learner thinks they may have been discriminated against under the DDA, they can use the Skill 6-Step Test to help assess whether disability discrimination has occurred, or contact Skill’s Information Service for advice.

Action: download

Download a copy of the 6-Step Test and familiarise yourself with the questions
www.skill.org.uk/page.aspx?c=191&p=305

Conciliation

Conciliation is a way of resolving complaints with the help of a trained third-party mediator from the Disability Conciliation Service (DCS). The DCS can help to reach a negotiated outcome more quickly and at less cost than taking a case to court. Both parties have to agree to conciliation. If a disabled person is not satisfied with the
outcome of conciliation, they can still take their case to court. Disabled people have to be referred to the DCS by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

Legal Action
If conciliation does not reach an appropriate solution or is not appropriate, a disabled learner can take their case to the County Court. There are prescriptive time limits on when a case needs to be lodged with the court or tribunal. Courts and tribunals may have the power not only to determine the rights of the case, but also award compensation and impose injunctions or interdicts. The EHRC supports a few cases but it is more likely that a disabled person will need to find other legal representation, such as through the Disability Law Service, which offers free legal advice and representation for disabled people.