

2438	Amending the bye-laws for disability representation- introduction of a disability officer (open place) PTO for 2021-22 and mandate for review
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Proposer: Laura Taylor (Invisible Disabilities Co-Officer)
Seconder: Patrycja Poplawska (Cultural Societies Representative on Societies Executive)

Summary:

Disability, defined by the Equality Act 2010, is “a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities”. This is the definition used within UEA and uea(su) for the purposes of identification, support and access to reasonable adjustments. Disability is defined as a protected characteristic under this definition.

Current disability representation within uea(su) democratic structures does not provide adequate space for the representation of all disabled students. The use of ‘physical’ and ‘invisible’ labels within existing roles is exclusionary in nature by not allowing representation of students who do not identify with either of these labels. Furthermore, the term ‘invisible disability’ is contentious. The nature of uea(su) at present does not provide adequate spaces for disability representation outside of the Student Officer Committee, which can be inaccessible to disabled students.

The academic year 2021-22 is set to be a particularly important year for disabled student representation at UEA, with the ongoing reasonable adjustments review set to make long-term change to provision for disabled students alongside the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

Therefore, this motion proposes the adoption of the PTO role disabilities officer (open place) for 2021-22 to ensure there is adequate representation in the short-term, and a mandate for review and restructure of disability representation for 2022-23 within the adoption of our new democratic structure.

Council Notes

1. In the recent history of uea(su), it has been rare than both disabilities officer places have been elected in the first election cycle, and in some years only one of ‘physical’ and ‘invisible’ has been filled.
2. Currently, the role of disabilities officer (physical disabilities place) is unfilled for 2021-22.
3. The disabled students’ liberation society has been inactive for a number of years (alongside most SOC sub-committees). This society was previously responsible for a large number of motions for disability liberation.
4. The reasonable adjustments review will be underway for the duration of 2021-22 (it began in February 2021 and will run until the end of next academic year). This review will act to make long-term change to the process and structure of reasonable adjustments for disabled students. The Undergraduate Education Officer and PTOs have begun to form student representation in this group and understand the importance of inclusive and effective student representation in this review.
5. Disabled students have been adversely affected by the pandemic disproportionately to other student groups, and representation of the needs of this group will be of high importance in the transition out of COVID-19 restrictions.
6. We acknowledge that many students who meet the Equality Act 2010 definition may not identify with the term ‘disability’. While this is an important discussion to be had, at present it is the most relevant label under which student representatives discuss the needs of students who need to access reasonable adjustment and support.

Council Believes

1. The use of only ‘physical’ and ‘invisible’ labels in Student Officer Committee positions for disability is exclusionary by not providing adequate representation for students who do not identify with these two labels, which may include, but is not limited to, neurodiverse students and those with a mental illness classed as a disability under the Equality Act 2010.
2. The term ‘invisible disability’ is contested for reasons such as its vague nature, and the ways in which non-disabled people choose to use it.

3. The effective representation of disabled students is of great importance in the academic year 2021-22 due to
 - a) the ongoing reasonable adjustments review for which disabilities officers are involved in providing representation. It is important that the voices represented here are inclusive of all disabilities and that there are sufficient union members able to provide student voice.
 - b) the current and on-going situation of COVID-19, during which disabled students have been disproportionately affected and the potential for changing restrictions and return to more 'normal' life to impact disabled students
4. The lack of an active disabled students liberation sub-committee has adversely affected the ability of disabled students to advocate for liberation and improvements.
5. The lack of recruitment into disabilities officer roles in the Student Officer Committee is not due to a lack of interest from disabled students. The roles can be inaccessible for disabled students who may face more limitation to time and energy than non-disabled students, making it more difficult to balance voluntary positions with a degree and often paid work.
6. The addition of this role for bye-election ahead of 2021-22 will increase the chance of the Student Officer Committee achieving sufficient representation for disabled students ahead of this important year. While it is not certain that all three roles will be filled, this will increase the likelihood of there being at least two elected representatives and will provide space for people excluded by the existing labels. This will allow for a more comprehensive discussion of how disabled students are represented as we move into 2022-23.

Council Resolves

1. To amend byelaw 4 to introduce the role of disabilities officer (open place).
2. To amend the role descriptions of all disabilities officer positions to update the number of officers from two to three.
3. To amend byelaw 4 to renumber subsequent PTO roles after addition of the new position, which will become 4.19.
4. To mandate uea(su) to hold an election for this role prior to the start of the 2021-22 academic year.
5. To mandate the Campaigns and Democracy Officer to evaluate disability representation throughout union structure to ensure there is representation throughout the democratic structure, and to evaluate the use of 'physical' and 'invisible' labels and viable alternatives.
6. To mandate the Campaigns and Democracy Officer and/or incoming disabilities officer to bring a motion to Union Council prior to the 2021-22 election season with proposed changes to structure of the roles and terminology used.