

## Studying with Impaired Health – Why (We) Care?!

Studying with a health impairment or disability – these are issues of considerable relevance for a university and a part of its usual routines. According to a recent survey by Deutsches Studentenwerk, about 11% of students in each year group are affected by a health impairment that has an impact on their course of studies. In some cases, this even amounts to a significant obstacle or burden.

The impression that this observation must be exaggerated is mistaken: 90% of impairments go initially unrecognised by external observers, or their visible effects are misinterpreted. Furthermore, only a small fraction of impairments is of hereditary origin or congenital: most disabilities are acquired in the course of life, as the result of diseases or accidents.

Considering this issue carefully is rewarding for a number of reasons:

- Enabling talented individuals with health impairments to study is a demand of justice. The Hessische Hochschulrahmengesetz (i.e. the legal framework for Hessian Universities) requires universities to provide students with an equal and independent access to the academic programs on offer, in accordance with the pertinent standards of (“barrier-free”) accessibility. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD), incorporated into German law in 2009, emphasises the important role of participation in higher education for disabled persons. Furthermore, Goethe University demonstrates its commitment to the goals of accessibility and equal participation, for people with and without impairments alike, in its activities centered around the university's Action Plan on Inclusion.
- Society as a whole benefits when a wide range of diverse people is allowed to unfold their talents and ideas to the greatest possible extent. In view of an incipient shortage of qualified personnel and the challenges of demographic change, we are called upon to attend to all potentials and options available and put them to good use.
- Moreover, all students benefit from a way of teaching that considers the principles of accessibility: Clearly readable (and legible) presentations, a clear articulation and manner of speech, and a well-ordered climate of academic discussion in courses, for example, help learners generally to grasp complicated subject matters. A climate of learning in which it is acceptable to voice one's needs, weaknesses and deficits, if need arises, supports everyone in dealing with upcoming problems – even those pertaining to the „mainstream“.

To help you address such issues of disability and impairments, we prepared the Lecturer's Guide (Lehrendenleitfaden), which is to provide you with a cursory introduction to the range of health impairments and disabilities at issue and an idea of how to deal with them in an academic context. The overview focuses on general guidelines that may help you to deal with the impact of impairments in a well-informed, sensitive and understanding way, and provides information on common forms of impairments.

Furthermore, we summarized some advice on accessible teaching, which will enable you to conduct your courses in a way that makes it generally easier to join the discussion and acquire the intended knowledge and understanding.

For further questions and advice, we cordially invite you to turn to the [colleagues and institutions](#) at the GU.

## Short Advice on Accessible Teaching

The following chapter provides some primary advice on how to teach your courses in an accessible way, according to the principles of accessible teaching („Barrierefreie Didaktik“). If you would prefer to have more detailed information and expertise on this matter, you may consult the courses for lecturers provided by IKH at Goethe University or consult the Inklusionsbeauftragten for further advice.

### Time budget:

Many students with health impairments find themselves needing more time to accomplish certain tasks. This affects, among countless other things, also their course of studies. Additional time may be required to cope with the impairment as such or due to the additional efforts many activities of daily life demand in such circumstances, or it may be a consequence of the medical and other assistance needed. This requirement needs to be taken into account. As far as examinations are concerned, modifying the conditions of an examination by way of an accommodation called „Nachteilsausgleich“ may be the appropriate and legally sound way to do so.

### Sight and Sound:

Make sure you are easily seen and heard in the classroom. Don't turn away (averting your face) from the audience too often. Use microphones, even with smaller groups of people. This enhances comprehension and spares persons with impairments the trouble of asking for it to be done. Remember to use [easily readable fonts and writing styles](#) (website in German) in an adequate size. Sound arrangements concerning sight and sound support all students, being of special importance to those with a visual or hearing impairment. Please support the use of visual and hearing aids or the work of specialised interpreters when you are asked to do so.

### Making Room:

Lecturers may use the opportunity before the beginning of a lecture to ask students to reserve several seats in the front rows for their fellow students with impairments. These seats may be left unoccupied until it is clear that they are not required, and then taken by any student whatsoever afterwards.

### 2-Way-Principle:

Try to present your subject in a way that regularly addresses more than one mode of perception or “channel”: address more than one of the five senses. In many cases, it is a good idea to supplement auditive/verbal presentations with visualisations, or to supplement speech by writing.

Occasionally, abstract concepts may be easier to grasp with the help of tactile, textured objects as illustrative/demonstration material (e.g. models). This principle opens an additional avenue to the scholarly and scientific topics at hand and furthermore supports those whose perception is impaired in one way or another. In addition, the verbalisation of visual representations trains and enhances the verbal competences of students, often in a subject-specific manner and challenges learners to reconsider the content they have been looking at. The opposite direction, i.e. visualisation, may be similarly fruitful.

### **Accessible documents / files**

If you intend to hand out any course material in digital form, please provide accessible digital files. Information on digital accessibility, and on how to prepare accessible files may be obtained in courses taught by studiumdigitale at Goethe University or found in numerous manuals online.

Providing files in accessible formats enhances the use of modern (media) technologies and supports students who use unusual devices to read, such as those with visual impairments (using e.g. screen readers), or students that need to adapt the material to their individual reading requirements for some other reason, e.g. a mobility impairment.

### **Well- ordered discussion in a supportive climate**

Try to establish a climate of discussion that encourages everyone to voice their (academic) views and concerns – and where participants interact and speak one after the other, but not at the same time. Avoid private side-talks. A good climate of discussion generally enhances the prospects for notable learning achievements; it especially supports people struggling to cope with social life and interactions, as well as those with visual or hearing impairments.

### **Atmosphere: Open and accessible**

Try to create a social atmosphere of openness and awareness in your courses, in which all participants feel welcome with their individual concerns. In such an atmosphere, it should be normal and acceptable to address personal (academic) problems and limitations among other things, so that they will not be allowed to impede academic progress.