

Running Inclusive University Field Courses For Disabled Students

**Student Disability Partner Review and
Advice for running University field courses**

Chloe Stevens
UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL | SCHOOL OF BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Why is this handbook needed?	4
A note on language use:.....	4
Disability and identity	4
Obtaining accessibility information for field courses	6
Field work.....	6
Physical accessibility information to obtain	6
Scope for adjustments to common physical barriers	6
Sensory information to obtain	6
Scope for adjustments to sensory challenges	6
Other relevant information for disabled or neurodivergent students	7
Residential accommodation information and options	7
Any other relevant information students could need	7
Providing accessibility information to students	8
Student declaration and relevant medical fitness forms	9
Consider the language used.....	9
Provide questions that can filter students needing adjustments to help admin load or risk of missing important information.....	9
Appropriate and important questions about disability	9
Contacting students who have declared any disabilities	11
Planning and implementing reasonable adjustments for field courses	12
Example of field work adaptations	12
Other common adjustment options.....	12
The funding for adjustments	12
Running the field course and managing different needs	13
Examples of good practice	14
Residential Dale Fort field trip in Biology.....	14
Stages of the planning process.....	14
Typical activities of the field trip	14
Concerns about field trip accessibility by the student.....	15
Adjustments	15
Typical marine projects done by students at field centre.....	15
The project done by the student	15
Further resources	17

<i>Checklist for obtaining accessibility information for field courses.....</i>	18
Field work.....	18
Residential site.....	20
<i>Appendix 1 –.....</i>	22
Example student declaration form	22
This is the student declaration form used for the 2024 Biological Sciences Field courses at University of Bristol.....	22
<i>Appendix 2 –.....</i>	23
Example email template for contacting students with declared disabilities	23

Introduction

This handbook is designed to **assist and empower staff who run or facilitate field courses** to provide **accessible and inclusive courses** that any student can experience fully. It is a guide produced with insights from the lived experience of navigating field courses and practical aspects of a university course as a neurodivergent and disabled student and accessibility auditor.

This guide was produced as part of a Student Disability Partners project run by Dave Lawson in the Biological Sciences teaching school at the University of Bristol. Disability partners were employed to audit, review, and create teaching resources, including any student-facing administrative materials. The project aimed to assess and offer feedback to staff to improve the accessibility of resources and the teaching programme in Biological Sciences through the lived experiences of current University students at the undergraduate and research master's levels.

Funding for the project was provided by the University of Bristol Institute of Teaching and Learning (BILT) Education Development Grant.

Why is this handbook needed?

“Education and training providers have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to anticipate the adjustments that disabled students and trainees may need.” - Disability Rights UK.

I personally have experienced being told by field course leaders that I couldn't attend their field courses due to my limited mobility without even discussing possible adjustments. I was offered a conversation with one course leader to discuss my needs and with limited effort we managed to make a field course I could participate in, enjoy and be successful at. Accessibility requirements are often not complicated but just require some creative thinking and a bit of forward planning. Making a field course/research project accessible for me is the difference between me feeling I have a future in Zoology or not.



– Chloë Stevens

A note on language use:

Using person-first language has historically been the dominant way to talk about people with disabilities in literature and in healthcare.

However, increasingly in the last few years, many disabled people have adopted identity-first language in a move towards acknowledging and identifying with disabilities as an important part of their lives and identities.

Identity-first language is particularly used by autistic people in a move towards expressing how this neurodivergence is an inherent part of how we experience the world.

e.g. Autistic person – rather than historically used ‘Person with Autism’.

Identity-first language is typically used because disabilities are not something that can be separated from the person. It would be odd to say ‘a person with tallness’; their height is not separable from them, so we typically say ‘tall person’.

It is okay to use either language when referring to people with disabilities, but if someone expresses a preference for themselves, it is respectful to use the language they would prefer.

Disability and identity

Disability in this context will be in line with the definition under the 2010 Equality act: if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.

The social model of disability frames a disability slightly differently, and this relates to the aim of this handbook. It describes the disability as being a barrier created by society through poorly designed infrastructure, inaccessible events or lack of diversity education,

rather than being something that sits inherently in the individual disabled person. The idea is that adjustments and changes to the way things run in society can remove these barriers so that the impacts are minimised and everyone is equally able to live their daily lives.

In the context of University Field Courses, the social model of disability would view barriers disabled students face in participating in the course as an issue with the way the course is run or designed because it excludes certain groups of people.

Obtaining accessibility information for field courses

Fieldwork

The field course leads need to gather this information either from personal experience visiting the site or from the field site staff.

For buildings and urban areas, additional information may be available through sites such as <https://www.accessable.co.uk/>

Physical accessibility information to obtain

- Terrain type and variability
- Steps or obstacles for wheeled walking aids and wheelchairs
- Distance of walking or maps of field site
- Incline information
- Field course equipment carrying and use
- What are the fundamental tasks involved in the field trip?
- Are there electric charging options at the field site for electric wheelchairs or medical device charging?
- Toilet facilities at the field site
- Travelling to the field site/field trip

Scope for adjustments to common physical barriers

- Vehicle access to field sites
- Option for different members of the group to carry out the different tasks
- Suitable alternative routes or available ramps for use of mobility aids, wheelchairs or mobility scooters
- Help with carrying and using physically challenging equipment by a personal assistant
- Alternative field sites with better access and similar field study scope

Sensory information to obtain

- Length of time each day in outdoor conditions
- Noise levels of main activity environment and potential impact on communication
- Weather and climate of the field site which may have implications on sensory regulation

Scope for adjustments to sensory challenges

- Potential to work in a smaller, quieter environment
- Options for shelter and breaks from outdoor conditions
- Option to reduce artificial lighting in labs/classrooms

Other relevant information for disabled or neurodivergent students

- What are the group work elements required on this course?
- Is there any relevant allergen information for this trip?
- Travelling to the field site, independent transport requirement for getting there?

Residential accommodation information and options

- Step free sleeping arrangement option
- Wheelchair accessible accommodation
- Single room sleeping arrangement option
- Disabled toilet facilities
- Disabled changing and showering facilities
- Solo bathroom option

Any other relevant information students could need

Providing more information is better than too little, it saves disabled students having to do extra work in finding information prior to the often-tiring task of explaining needs and devising adaptations.

Providing accessibility information to students

- Be **specific** about physical requirements, 'fitness level' is subjective and should be left for individual students to judge for themselves based on the information provided. Consider instead giving information like distance, terrain and inclines.
- Use **clear, explicit** language, avoiding 'turns of phrase' or subjective measures of access challenges or fieldwork tasks. It is better to say information in the most unambiguous way rather than try to be 'polite' or implicit about it.
- Be **honest** about estimates of potential barriers and challenges. Providing accessibility information is separate from 'selling' your field course. Misleading information could cause serious issues for students.
- Include **links** to the field centre, site maps and any other resources relating to the field work being proposed.
- Provide as much information as you have available so that disabled students do not have to put extra work into finding out whether they can attend a field course that others often don't have to think twice about.

Student declaration and relevant medical fitness forms

[This may be the role of administrative staff and not the field course leader]

Before running a trip, information from students will need to be gathered. Aim to have an option of an 'early' form, which gives staff and students time to put adjustments in place, and a 'late' form, which will get up-to-date information if anything has changed for the student.

Consider the language used

- Research appropriate terms or check with relevant staff when asking about specific conditions or information.
- Avoid grouping together disability and medical questions with Protected Characteristics, these are not the same thing.
- Be clear in what information you need from the student, breaking this down into multiple smaller questions can be easier for the student and staff.

Provide questions that can filter students needing adjustments to help admin load or risk of missing important information

- A box to tick for the student to express want or need for further discussion with field course staff.
- Basic question of students to indicate they have medical conditions or disability so that these students are flagged and are directed to answer further questions.

Appropriate and important questions about disability

- Name or short description of health conditions/disabilities that may impact the student on the field trip, or that the field course leader needs to be aware of. This includes any/all: sensory impairments, mental health conditions, mobility conditions, long-term illness.
- How may these conditions impact your participation on the field course?
- Do you take medication which:
 - A) someone administering first-aid in an emergency should be aware of.
 - B) may impact your participation in parts of the field course and that those running the field course should be aware of.
 - C) you carry a supply of with you
 - if necessary, field course leaders may get in touch for further information.
- Do you have any allergies? Please provide detail that staff may need to be aware of.
- Do you have any dietary requirements linked to special conditions such as diabetes, coeliac disease? If so, please provide detail.
- Do you have any other relevant information which could impact your ability to enjoy and/or benefit from the field course activities to the full, which you would like to share with your field course leader? E.g. a protected characteristic which you may prefer/need specific adjustments for.

If yes, please briefly outline the circumstances and their potential impact.

- If there are any reasonable adjustments that would/could be helpful to you in mitigating the impacts of these circumstances, please outline them here.
- Would you like further discussion with the field course leader to plan reasonable adjustments for the field course?

See Appendix 1 for the form used by Biological sciences Year 3 practical research skills field courses.

Contacting students who have declared any disabilities

Students who have declared any disabilities on their declaration forms will need to be contacted. Consider the following points for contacting a disabled student:

- Get in touch with students well before the field course is due to take place.
- Ask the student how they would prefer to communicate their needs in terms of over email or an online or in-person meeting. Offer the student to involve anyone who can support them with this including staff, friends or carers.
- Frame the email around solutions, and options that may be possible for the upcoming field course, rather than potential barriers.
- Send the student an overview of the field course tasks so that they can consider and explain their challenges of participation in a specific way.
- Don't ask for personal or medical information from the student, this is not appropriate.
- Do ask what concerns the student may have about their participation in the field course.
- Avoid open-ended questions in your email, these can be overwhelming.

See an example of an email template for contacting students who have declared any disabilities, in Appendix 2.

Planning and implementing reasonable adjustments for field courses

Making adjustments to field courses is less complicated than sometimes thought, it requires creative thinking and co-creation with the disabled student.

Many disabled students will have experience with adapting their lives and university studies but may not have direct experience of making field work accessible. Together as staff and student you will be able to work out specific adjustments for the field course.

Example of field work adaptations

Kelsey J.R.P. Byers, John Innes Centre: Carrying out fieldwork in the rainforest of Panamá on butterflies.

Field work plan:

- Hiking deep into the rainforest for over 1 hour to chase and catch butterflies, then hiking with the butterflies back to the car.

Adjustments to the field task which still addressed the fundamental aims to catch butterflies:

- Drop Kelsey off along a drivable road in the rainforest and pick her up later.
- Butterflies come to focal plants so Kelsey can sit in front of these and still catch the butterflies.
- Pack a stool for Kelsey to sit on and bring plenty of water.

Other common adjustment options

- Having a postgraduate student to help as a personal assistant for field work including:
 - manual field tasks
 - help working and communicating with other students in group tasks
 - company for working at alternative field sites
- Hire of a vehicle for transport between field sites.
- Equipment for technological alternatives to field tasks e.g. drones, lab study, tablets for communication.

The funding for adjustments

Costs associated with implementing adjustments for disabled students and students with Study Support Plans can be applied for via the school. This is to ensure that adjustments can be made without necessarily impacting your project budget. Please discuss this with the School Manager or Student Admin Team before submitting project information to students.

Running the field course and managing different needs

1. Start the field course with an **open discussion between staff and students** so that everyone can communicate their accommodations or hopes for the field trip.

Example conversation starters for this could be:

- How do people feel about doing this field work?
 - What are people most looking forward to about this field work?
 - How do you find doing group work?
 - Do you have any communication differences that you would like the others to be aware of?
 - What accommodations will people need to make the work possible and more enjoyable?
2. **Check in with students** that have extra needs for field work or have expressed anxiety around the field course. Needs are normally variable so encouraging everyone to check in can help everyone have a chance to express difficulties and will make your job as staff easier.
 3. **Do not make assumptions** about disabled people's abilities, maintaining good mutual communication and respect is important. This is simple yet often missed by people in everyday life.
 4. Is there an option for the level of **group/solo work to be modified** to fit the student's needs? Joint sample collection could be then divided into solo ID work and data interpretation.

Examples of good practice

Residential Dale Fort field trip in Biology

Adjustments to the Dale Fort field trip in Biology, led by Professor Gareth Jones.

The student is autistic and has mobility issues due to a complex pain condition and hypermobility spectrum condition.



Stages of the planning process

1. The field course leader gathered information from the site manager of the Dale Fort field studies centre about accessibility by emailing them and explaining possible challenges faced by disabled students. Gathering maps, information about field site options, and accommodation options. This started 8 months before the field trip date.
2. Joint meeting between course leader and student to identify adjustments that would be beneficial and what further information may need to be gathered (7 months before field trip date). This included a list of adjustments for enquiry by the field course leader to the school for funding and implementation.
3. Email correspondence between the course leader, the school Disability Coordinator and the student to update when adjustments have been approved by the teaching department.
4. An extra demonstrator/post-graduate staff member was an approved adjustment in this case. Therefore, the application request for this position was advertised, and a demonstrator was chosen and allocated.
5. Joint meeting between course leader, disabled student and post-grad staff member to meet and discuss details of the field trip so that everyone understands adjustments that will be in place (6 weeks before field trip).

Typical activities of the field trip

- Stay at Dale Fort field centre in dormitories and conduct data gathering during the day and evenings at the rocky shore, forest and field areas as part of group research projects.
- Work indoors in a second-floor classroom/lab room shared by all staff and students on the field trip.
- Day trip to Skomer island with a walk around the island's perimeter led by Gareth Jones.
- Night walks for bat projects to set traps and identify areas for study.
- Walk from Dale village to field centre on arrival and departure.

- Use of field centre canteen and shared dining area for breakfasts and dinners, make own sandwiches in the morning in the central kitchen, all accessed by one flight of stairs.

Concerns about field trip accessibility by the student

- Student has a particular interest in marine systems and therefore expressed interest in finding a way to do a rocky shore study.
- Mobility issues with doing lots of walking, need breaks between physical activity
- Issues with group work due to communication differences and participation barriers due to being autistic and working with allistic students.
- Mobility issues with using stairs and sharing rooms with multiple people mean accommodation concerns.

Adjustments

- Extra member of staff – demonstrator/research student to attend the trip to stay with the student and help with accessing different aspects of the course.
- Arranging extra transport on arrival and departure between Dale Village and the field centre.
- Arranging extra transport options between the field centre and study sites.
- Plan alternative shorter routes and options for the day trip to Skomer.
- Option to bring food to the student if unable to use stairs.
- Equipment brought to facilitate alternative lab-based rocky shore studies or remote field working.
- Student uses headphones/ear defenders in the canteen and working in the lab to help with noise reduction.
- Accommodation option to be arranged to use a ground-floor accessible single room.

Typical marine projects done by students at the field centre

- Biodiversity studies of rocky shores using transects and manual investigation of life in rockpools and shore.
- Comparing effects of exposure on marine life in different bays with different exposure levels.

These projects need long field hours navigating the rocky shores of multiple bays to collect sufficient sample sizes and data, including working in rockpools and using expensive abiotic measures equipment. Access to bays is mostly by narrow footpaths with uneven terrain.

These projects require data collection by a group of students, which is not feasible alone.

The project done by the student

Lab-based behaviour experiments using anemones to test aggression projects can be done alone once samples are collected and anemones are set up.

Student developed the project plan and method alone. Therefore, it was decided they would complete the data collection on their own, not as part of a group.

Then the student went to bays and rocky shore over the course of one day to gather anemones with help from the post-grad staff member who was given the methods notes. Other staff also helped gather anemones from other inaccessible beaches. After this, all the anemones were checked and put in wet lab tanks for storage for the rest of the week.

Staff helped get equipment and seawater and carry anemones from the wet lab to the working lab to help the students set up the behavioural trials. Video camera equipment was provided so the student could run multiple trials and then review footage afterwards, as a reasonable adjustment to working alone. The student was then able to do the experiments over the course of two days with minimal assistance.



The student was given the option of whether to present the project alongside the other groups on the final day and where in the presentation's running order they would like to be.

Understanding was given in marking the field course report regarding working alone and implications on smaller sample size and project scope should be

expected.

Contextual marking was done by staff with field course reports, taking into account the implications of working alone, including sample size and project scope restrictions.

Staff and students from Bristol University involved in these adjustments are happy to give further information about this field trip if needed:

Professor Gareth Jones

Dr Hugo Harrison

Dr Rose Crichton

Chloë Stevens

Further resources

Useful information on Disability, discrimination and reasonable adjustments under the 2010 equality act: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/equality/equality-act-2010/your-rights-under-equality-act-2010/disability-discrimination>

Teachability Resources from the University of Strathclyde:

<http://www.teachability.strath.ac.uk/teachabilityintro.html>

Section on 'Creating accessible placements, study abroad and field trips for disabled students' : http://www.teachability.strath.ac.uk/chapter_5/introduction5.html

Bristol University guides:

Inclusive writing on disability <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/style-guides/writing/inclusive/disability/>

Inclusive writing on disability for accessibility and readability <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/style-guides/writing/inclusive/accessibility-readability/>

Blogs on EDI at Bristol University <https://edited.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/>

Equality impact assessment guidance <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/inclusion/governance-policy-and-guidance/inclusive-decision-making/>

University of Bristol best practice guide on running inclusive and accessible events
https://uob-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/ub20303_bristol_ac_uk/EVeAaM2dzPRBip98Bci6D-EBRlwQefLBMDhM52Dp6hmiFA?e=npaXVu

Checklist for obtaining accessibility information for field courses

Field work

This information needs to be gathered by the field course leads either from personal experience visiting the site, or from the field site staff.

For buildings and urban areas, additional information may be available through sites such as: <https://www.accessable.co.uk/>

Physical accessibility considerations	Details for this field course	Scope for adjustments	Has this been communicated to the students?
Terrain type and variability	<i>e.g. uneven, muddy..</i>	<i>e.g. there are alternative routes with tracks which offer the same environmental range</i>	Yes/Not yet
Steps or obstacles for wheelchairs/wheeled walking aids	<i>e.g. steps to access lab</i>	<i>e.g. there is a lift, there are ramps</i>	
Distance of walking, size of field site	<i>e.g. site is large, around 3500 acres</i>	<i>e.g. studies can be done close to classroom</i>	
Incline information	<i>e.g. hilly coastal area</i>	<i>e.g. a car can be used for transport</i>	
Field course equipment carrying or use	<i>e.g. need to transport and use high tech expensive kit</i>	<i>e.g. the rest of the group can carry kit to the site, or a personal assistant can help</i>	
Fundamental physical tasks involved in the field trip	<i>e.g. devising a project then collecting data around the jungle of Costa Rica</i>	<i>e.g. data collection does not need to be done by everyone in the group, some can do lab-based study or the analysis</i>	
Group work	<i>e.g. projects are typically done in groups for every stage</i>	<i>e.g. sample collection must be in a group for safety, then rest of the project could be done individually if needed</i>	
Length of time each day in outdoor conditions	<i>e.g. 12 hours a day in the field</i>	<i>e.g. not all members must stay in the field at all times, there are shelters nearby in which to take a break through the day</i>	
Noise levels of main field environment and	<i>e.g. loud environment full of</i>	<i>e.g. headphones can be worn to help regulate</i>	

potential impact on communication	<i>animal sounds in which group work is also needed</i>	<i>sensory difficulties, group discussions can be done prior to going into the field</i>	
Weather and climate of the field site which may have implications on sensory regulation	<i>e.g. hot and humid in the field, field base is higher up and cooler</i>	<i>e.g. regular breaks away from the field can be taken, help to carry extra water or kit can be organised</i>	
Allergen information	<i>e.g. field site is in an area with free-roaming horses</i>	<i>e.g. site is not suitable for people with severe horse allergies</i>	
Electric charging information	<i>e.g. field site is remote with no electricity for charging devices</i>	<i>e.g. power packs and batteries could be brought by car for backup charging of electric wheelchairs or medical devices</i>	
Toilet facilities	<i>e.g. there are no sanitary toilets at the field site, a trowel is brought for toileting</i>	<i>e.g. there is a building with sanitary facilities and toilets 2km from the site which can be driven to</i>	
Travel to the field site	<i>e.g. students are expected to make their own way to the field site</i>	<i>e.g. staff will be travelling from the university with equipment therefore the student could join them to travel to the site</i>	
Hearing loop technology	<i>e.g. the lab has a hearing loop system but out in the field there will not be a permanent hearing loop</i>	<i>e.g. field staff could use a portable hearing loop system in the field or make sure to give all briefings and key information in the lab</i>	
Anything else about the field site that may be challenging	<i>e.g. field site has no phone signal so people must stick together</i>	<i>e.g. you may be funded to have an extra staff member to stay with you to ensure your safety</i>	

Residential site

Consider the details of where you are staying during the field course, and the arrangements for sleep, personal care, and eating.

Accessibility considerations	Details for this field course	Scope for adjustments	Has this been communicated to the students?
Typical sleeping arrangements for students	<i>e.g. bunk bed dormitories of a single gender of around 6 people</i>	<i>e.g. there is one wheelchair accessible dormitory shared with 3, suitable for anyone with restricted mobility</i>	Yes/Not yet
Room sharing	<i>e.g. typically shared with 5 other students</i>	<i>e.g. there are a few single rooms for those who need this</i>	
Visual alarms for deaf/Deaf students	<i>e.g. there are no visual fire alarms</i>	<i>e.g. student will be given a personal pager for staff to alert them in case of emergency</i>	
Disabled toilet facilities	<i>e.g. there are no wheelchair accessible toilets at this field site</i>	<i>e.g. with enough advanced notice, ramps and handles could be installed into the larger bathroom at the field site</i>	
Disabled changing and showering facilities	<i>e.g. there are some disabled changing and showering facilities in the staff building</i>	<i>e.g. students needing access to these facilities would be given this</i>	
Solo bathroom option	<i>e.g. all student toilets are in cubicle style bathrooms shared with 10 people</i>	<i>e.g. there are solo toilet rooms in the staff centre, and student could have access if needed</i>	
Dining and food arrangements	<i>e.g. canteen at the field site is down the stairs in the basement, and is typically very noisy</i>	<i>e.g. staff could bring food up and this could be eaten in the student common room where it is also quieter</i>	
Allergen information	<i>e.g. field centre has a cat, and the food</i>	<i>e.g. the cat is not allowed into the</i>	

	<i>preparation can cater to most food allergies but cannot be guaranteed free from traces</i>	<i>dormitories, there is a fridge that can be used if own food needs to be brought</i>	
--	---	--	--

Appendix 1 –

Example student declaration form

This is the student declaration form used for the 2024 Biological Sciences Field courses at University of Bristol.

[Spring field courses declaration form 2023-24](#)

Appendix 2 –

Example email template for contacting students with declared disabilities

Dear *Student*,

I am one of the staff members leading the *Life on Mars Field trip* in April. We have received the responses to the Student Declaration Form and I have noticed that you told us about your disability and some concerns around adjustments for the field trip. **I am emailing you now to start the process of us discussing what your concerns are** and how we can make reasonable adjustments to help you participate and hopefully enjoy the field trip.

Attached to this email is a **document outlining the typical main activities and information about the field trip**, the site that we will be staying at, and links to the field study centre website. It would be useful if you could look through this information and think about what accessibility concerns you may have for any aspects of the trip. Following this, we can communicate back and forth with additional input from the *Ziggy*, teaching school's disability coordinator if needed, to put **any adaptations in place that you feel would help you**.

How would you prefer to communicate about these field trip adjustments? We can meet in-person or online using Microsoft Teams, or continue to use email. Please reply to this email with your preference.

I look forward to making this field course accessible for you and to have you join us on our *Mars Trip*,

Kind regards,

Professor *Starman*