

Anna-Ruth Cockerham for SRC Member for Students with Disabilities

Introduction

Five years ago, I was diagnosed with Functional Neurological Disorder with chronic pain, non-epileptic attacks, and chronic fatigue, among other symptoms and conditions. My disability affects me across every aspect of my life, and I experience the effects of a lack of accessibility and understanding of disability every day.

In my second year, I had to change my degree from Chemistry to Maths as it became clear that the lab work would not be accessible to me, and this year I found myself needing to defer exams after a bad bout of health. Throughout my degree, I have struggled with the transition to living independently and managing my social life as a disabled person. Unfortunately, my negative experiences reflect those of many disabled students.

In my first year of university, I started working on making competitive debating a more accessible hobby both in St Andrews and across Scotland. Since then I have produced multiple guides on running accessible debate competitions and have been an Equity Officer - working on student welfare and accessibility - at thirteen competitions across the country. In my role as Equity Officer on the Scottish Students' Debating Council, I have been working to implement a comprehensive access policy, ensuring all Scottish debate competitions have a minimum level of accessibility. This year as part of Debates, I organised a Disability Panel Discussion and Q&A with five fantastic speakers, and I am convening the St Andrews Open.

More recently, I've worked to improve support for disabled students in St Andrews. I founded the Facebook community for disabled students - bringing us together to support each other and discuss the difficulties we face - and last summer I produced an online web guide to all of the support and resources available for disabled students from the University and beyond - working to fill in the gaps left by incomplete or difficult to navigate University and government web-pages. I also co-founded the Students for Lecture Capture campaign in the hope of improving access to this incredibly helpful resource for disabled students across the university.

I'm running for SRC Member for Students with Disabilities because I am passionate about the work that I have done, and I am looking forward to the ability to expand on my work in the SRC. I want to give a larger voice to all disabled students and improve the social and support structures available to disabled students from the Union, as well as advocating for a greater focus on accessibility and disability awareness across the University.

Increasing representation of disabled students

Currently, disabled students have difficulty feeling like their voices and grievances are heard by the union and the university. Disability is diverse in how it affects people, which can often leave some groups of disabled students feeling their experiences are not properly represented by a single student. I am committed to improving the representation of disabled students by:

- **Establishing a disabilities sub-committee** to better represent the wide-ranging views and experiences of different disabled students, work to signpost support services, raise awareness of disability in the wider student community, and foster a supportive social community for disabled students. The sub-committee would have specific representatives for first year and postgraduate students to represent the unique issues they face, as well as positions representing students with different types of disabilities like neurodivergences, chronic illness, physical disability, and mental health.
- **Conducting surveys of disabled students every semester**, and producing a report on our experiences which can be used to track the progress and success of projects supporting disabled students, as well as highlight important issues facing different groups of disabled students for the University, Union, and other bodies like the NHS to work on.
- **Advocating for specific disability focus groups on new building projects and university policies**, to better inform how they can support disabled students.
- **Advertising my work on social media weekly** and in monthly emails to interested students as well as having an **online tracker of my progress**.
- Working to **structure the disabilities sub-committee and the role of SRC Member for Students with Disabilities** so that it can be more accessible for a wide range of disabilities.

More accessible events and societies

Many disabled students face isolation or difficulty engaging in the social life of St Andrews due to the inaccessibility of society and other union events. I will work to improve the accessibility of events and societies, as well as running extra exciting social events throughout the year to bring disabled students together. I will do this by:

- **Creating a yearly Disability Pride Week** with a variety of events focussed on raising awareness of the diverse experiences of disabled people and supporting disabled students. For example, we could run BSL and Disability Awareness Workshops, panel discussions on disability, events focussed on disability and employment, and a Disability Support Fayre showcasing all the support available for disabled students and accessible societies and student activities. Events like this already take place in Brighton, New York, and Italy.
- **Creating a quiet room in the Union** for students to use if needed during nights out. Not only will this be useful for people with sensory overload or who are dealing with medical issues, it can also be a useful place for people who

experience other difficulties on nights out,. This space could also be used to signpost resources like the Zero Tolerance Policy, Nightline, Peer Support, and support reporting sexual assault.

- **Introducing an Accessibility Pledge** (as already used by the CUSU) where societies will pledge to run accessible events, produce standardised access information for their events, and make their advertising materials more accessible. I will also work with Societies Committee to **introduce an award for accessible events and societies** as an incentive for societies to commit to this.
- Currently, a lot of societies struggle to run accessible events because they struggle to come up with more accessible ideas or don't know what to account for. I will **produce a written guide for all societies and student groups on running accessible events**, including information accounting for mobility, sensory, or dietary needs among others, as well as ideas for accessible venues, low-noise activities, and alcohol-free event ideas.
- **Advocating for Disability Awareness training to be mandatory** for members of the SRC and SSC as well as Union Staff.
- **Working with the AU and Sports Centre to encourage the addition of classes and events adapted to the needs of different disabilities**, and better advertising of them where they exist.
- **Running events aimed at bringing disabled students together**, especially at the start of the academic year.

Advocating for accessibility and a greater access to support in the university

Disabled students often have difficulty finding out about or accessing the support available to them academically, as well as for their wellbeing. In some cases, the appropriate support or adjustments, like step free access, is not even available. I will work to advocate for accessibility and a greater access to support within the university by:

- **Working to better advertise the support offered to students in diagnosing Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)** like dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, or ADHD from Student Services and demystifying the process of seeking diagnosis and support for these conditions.
- **Introducing a stand at the Freshers Fayre** ran in collaboration with disabled students and the Disability Team advertising all the support Student Services and the Union can offer.
- Making the online guide to support available for disabled students that I created last year a part of the work of the disabilities sub-committee or the role of SRC Member for Students with Disabilities so that it can be kept up to date in the future. I will also work to integrate it as part of the Union Help Hub so that it is easier to access.
- Running advertising campaigns targeted at removing the stigma surrounding accessing support, as well as advertising the different kinds of support that is available to disabled students.

- Many disabled students with conditions like chronic illness or physical disabilities can struggle with their mental wellbeing due to issues like pain or loneliness caused by an inability to access events. Often, these students do not view these problems as explicitly a mental health problem and instead part of their experience of their disability and so are reluctant to seek support from organisations like Peer Support or Student Services because they do not think they are for them. **I would work with the DoWell, Peer Support, Student Services, and Nightline to help them better advertise the support they can offer to disabled students specifically.**
- **Running a campaign targeted at newly disabled students or students who worry they may not be “disabled enough”** because their disability does not fit the usual notions of disability (for example because they have a mental health condition or chronic illness) who can still be supported by the Disability Team. This campaign will highlight the support and adjustments available to students with a range of disabilities as well as promoting a more inclusive notion of disability.
- **Creating informational materials explaining the process of declaring a disability and getting adjustments** that can be sent out during the summer or at the start of Freshers Week.
- Working with groups like Got Consent and Saints LGBT+ to **provide better information on disability and sex, and how people can actualise their sexuality or gender identity with a disability** - for instance, if their disability affects their sex life or ability to use things like hormones or binders. I would also look to **establish a group specifically for LGBT+ disabled students** to talk about these issues and offer each other advice and support.
- Where online accessibility information is available, many students do not know about it. I will speak to the Academic Schools and School Presidents to **get accessibility information linked to in all induction emails and webpages**, as well as working to advertise it through the Union.
- Working with to make **subject-specific information - like adjustments for labs, or certain kinds of coursework - available on the websites for each academic school.**
- Physics have recently created a Disability Rep in their Class Representatives. I would **call for a student Disability Rep to be implemented across all academic schools** and provide them training to help standardise disability adjustments and support across all academic schools.
- Currently, seeking adjustments in your modules can be very difficult as it can be unclear who to contact and can often involve contacting multiple members of staff. I will work to **simplify the process of getting your adjustments**, by advertising more clearly who you need to contact when and ensuring lecturers are made more aware of the adjustments people need and why they are important.
- Working to **advertise the academic adjustment policy** and the support that disabled students/students with disabilities can receive and are entitled to.
- Currently, there is not a lot of information available from the University on the disability support available for postgraduate students. I will work with the

Disability Team to create a webpage on the disability support available for **postgraduate students** better targeted at the unique aspects of research projects as opposed to taught modules.

- **Advocating for a member of the Disability Team to specialise in supporting research postgraduate students** and the different kinds of difficulties they have and adjustments they need.
- Working with the DoED and School Presidents to **encourage the standardised use of disability provisions like microphones, induction loops, online lecture notes available in advance, content notes, and lecture capture**. I will look to specifically highlight the benefits these things have to disabled students/students with disabilities as well as the more general benefits they can bring to the class as a whole to encourage this use.
- Calling for **informational materials produced by the University to be easier to navigate and to have clearer, more straightforward wording**, to reduce the confusion people experience in accessing support and dealing with their academic commitments. This is of particular importance to students with certain difficulties like brain fog, or memory problems.
- **Advocating for more accessible rooms to be allocated to Student Services** so that disabled students have less difficulty booking and accessing appointments.
- **Advocating for Disability Awareness Training to be given to all teaching staff.**