Dear ELSAnians,

Welcome to our first special edition newsletter for International Day of People With Disabilities (IDPWD), celebrated on December 3. This is an annual occasion designated to support people with disability and to raise awareness on the importance of inclusivity, accessibility and sustainability in our societies. This year, the IDPWD theme is: "not all disabilities are visible," which focuses on our understanding that not all disabilities are immediately apparent.

In light of this significant day, our Welfare Officer, Giulia Peluso, has interviewed the Head of Wellbeing at the Queen Mary Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS), Simon Jarvis. In this newsletter, we would like to share with you the highlights of the insightful interview! We hope that by sharing this information, we can continue these important conversations, and work towards an accessible future for all.

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**Interview with Simon Jarvis, Head of Wellbeing at QM Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS)**

**What is considered a disability?**

In the UK, under the terms of the Equality Act, a disability is something that has a significant long-term impact on day-to-day living. There are two key considerations to make here: "long-term" is usually defined as 1 year or longer; and "significant" is a broader and perhaps trickier concept, which in relation to Education can mean something that is going to affect your ability to study and/or to practically use the facilities at University.

**What is disability awareness and why is it important?**

Disability awareness starts from knowing what the definition is, and then talking about the different kinds of disabilities that people would have as well as how that would impact them. It also includes trying to understand what it means to live with a given condition.
trying to understand what it means to live with a given condition. This is because - although it is permanent - people might appear that they are coping absolutely fine from the outside so people would not consider the additional strength or additional work put on these people. Some people who do not have a disability might think: “I’ve got a deadline tomorrow, I might stay up all night”. If you have a disability, this is probably not going to work because you might run out of energy very quickly and the quality of what you produce is probably going to be quite low. Depending on which condition you have, this can also make you quite unwell.

It is very important because unless people at University understand the day-to-day challenges some disabled people face, it is very hard for us to get to a point where the University is inclusive enough to accommodate everybody, and for those students to successfully feel proud of the University support. People like me are employed to make sure that not only staff are aware, but that all our policies and procedures incorporate that awareness as well.

How does the QM DDS help those with a disability (or mental health condition)?

Our major function is to advocate for the students and act as a conduit between the students and the school, as opposed to the students having to have multiple conversations every single year with every single professor or tutor. We also use our expertise to help the University ascertain what constitute “reasonable” in the context of reasonable adjustments. We also deliver specialist support. In normal times, you would see lots of people receiving 1:1 support, whether that is study support or mentoring support, to keep them on course. Overall, we want to make sure that students can study successfully (i.e., at a level which is commensurate with their underlying ability) rather than having them to run into problems and be faced with the option to interrupt their studies or even drop out.

What do you like most about your role and why?

What I like the most about my role is the thought that the DDS is making a difference in the lives of the students. I have worked with the students at Queen Mary for 12 years but I have worked at other Universities, too. What I like about the students at QMUL is that they are very bright and extremely polite, they are very nice young people to support. The majority of students are form a low social-economic background, a lot of them are the first to go to University and with a BAME background. If they are able to complete a degree, then they can go ahead and become successful in their own careers. It is great for them, it is great for their families and it is a very nice thought to know that you are a part of that.

What does Wellbeing mean to you?

Wellbeing can cover so many and different things, so I will start by saying what it does not mean. Wellbeing does not mean support services, support those with a mental health concern or just advising counselling. It encompasses everything associated with the life at University. The campus should be pleasant; it should have flowers and plants, nice buildings, people smiling at you and look like somewhere you want to be. Wellbeing should mean that our policies and procedures are friendly to all our staff and students, and do not put unnecessary barriers and unnecessary bureaucracy up. Wellbeing should mean that we have a culture where we look out for one another, where people are genuinely interested in their colleagues and the staff-student relationship is supportive. Overall, it cannot be reduced to intervening when someone is unwell because it is very much about preventing that someone becomes unwell. It is prevention rather than cure and it is everybody’s responsibility.
What can we do to show support to those who have a disability? How can this without a known disability approach those who do?

There is much less stigma around disabilities than there used to be, so we should try and talk more openly about it. Those who have a disability can talk about the challenges that they are facing as well as those that they have overcome. We should all try and push more disability awareness and make it clear that people with disabilities are welcomed. The disability and dyslexia service has never been better resourced, so it is important for us to address that in our community and promote such information.

Do not make assumptions: just because someone has a disability does not mean they are not able to do certain things. Also, do not be embarrassed to ask questions. If you are unaware of what a condition you have been told is, gently ask for an explanation of what it means. If one of your friends has a learning disability which you are not familiar with (e.g., dyslexia or dyspraxia), it can also help to look up for resources online and inform yourself. The disability and dyslexia service has plenty of resources on their website, together with the kind of support available at University.

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**QM DDS CONTACT DETAILS**

The Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) offers support for all students with disabilities, specific learning differences and mental health issues at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). Appointments with disability advisers, mental health advisers (including the mental health co-ordinator) and their specialist one to one study skills tutors can all be offered face-to-face, or arranged online.

You can email the DDS on: dds@qmul.ac.uk, or alternatively you can call them on: +44 (0) 20 7882 2756

To find out more about the great services offered please click on the link here!

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Send us a message if you have any questions at qmul@uk.elsa.org, and keep an eye on our social media pages to find further information and links for the events :)

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With much ELSA love,

The ELSA QMUL Team