

IMAS: Experiential learning opportunities for Healthcare Practitioners

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**“I think everyone
should be given
this training – from
doctors to physios
and all healthcare
and education
professionals.”**

Bradford University Physiotherapy student

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Health inequalities related to disabilities remain stark and entrenched¹. Health outcomes for disabled people tend to be poorer through more preventable chronic and secondary conditions, avoidable hospitalisations, and higher rates of early morbidity². While awareness of these inequalities is increasing, accessing and receiving high-quality healthcare remains a challenge for many disabled people³.

Healthcare practitioners from across a range of different disciplines play a key role in the solution. Given there are 14.1 million disabled people in the UK⁴, healthcare practitioners will support many disabled people throughout their careers⁵. However, many practitioners report feeling overwhelmed, under prepared and lacking in confidence to support disabled people, especially those with intellectual disabilities⁶. In addition, practitioner empathy and attitudes towards disabled people is frequently reported as a barrier to high quality care⁷. This may be due, in part, to health care education and provision for disabled people still tending to be grounded in a medical model perspective⁸, which highlights individual deficits, rather than a social model perspective which emphasises assets-based and personal activation approaches, and takes into account the social and environmental aspects of disability.

Emphasising the social model of disability encourages healthcare practitioners to develop a person-centred approach and better equips them to involve disabled people in their own care². Experiential learning opportunities, involving a combination of theory, interactive elements and facilitated reflection have been demonstrated to be particularly effective in this⁵.

Here's where IMAS comes in! Independent research highlights that those involved in Mixed Ability sport report increased empathy, reduced fear of communication and having their preconceptions around disability challenged⁹. Since 2019 IMAS has been applying this learning to healthcare by providing experiential opportunities for healthcare students and practitioners including social workers, physiotherapy students and medical students. Impacts of these learning opportunities have been tracked across practitioner cohorts and are outlined in this research summary.

“It's useful to know how a disability affects someone from a personal experience because it's all well and good reading about something in a textbook or something that's a lot more generalised, but when you hear about a person with specific difficulties or what they feel in themselves it's going to be very different on an individual level than on a group basis.”

- Uday, 3rd year Medical Student, Sheffield University

A greater understanding and application of healthcare concepts



As part of IMAS' experiential learning opportunities, healthcare practitioners explore new ideas and are reminded of, and encouraged to apply, key concepts such as diagnostic overshadowing, social prescribing, asset-based approaches, social model of disability and patient-centred approaches through interaction with IMAS Trainers:

“Seeing [the social model of disability] through sport has made me realise a lot more about how useful it is and how it can be applied in other ways as well. Taking it out of theory and into practice has been really helpful.”

- Rebekah, 3rd Year Medical Student, Sheffield University



Healthcare practitioners are encouraged to recognise and label what they are learning from IMAS Trainers through interactive discussion groups led by Dr Mark 'Doc' Purvis, a retired GP with over 30 years' experience and former Head of GP Education for NHS England in Yorkshire and the Humber. These discussions create a dynamic IMAS healthcare curriculum. As well as reinforcing the 'flipped' nature of the learning (with the IMAS Trainers being experts-by-experience rather than the healthcare practitioners as the experts-by-learning), this brings the hidden curriculum into focus and allows participants to explore their learning experience at deeper levels. For example, on a recent placement, one of the Medical students discovered that she was exploring 'survivorship', including her own previous challenges and life events, through her work with the IMAS Trainers.

An insight into individual experiences and impacts of disability

Hearing from IMAS Trainers is always a powerful experience for healthcare practitioners and often prompts reflection on patient-centred approaches:

“It’s important for social workers and health staff to hear that, actually, you really need to hear what people are saying about their lives and not make your own judgement on that, and take it that what they’re telling you is real and true. You don’t know better because you’ve had a textbook on it.”

- Claire, Bradford Community Learning Disability Team

On placements with IMAS, students are paired with an IMAS Trainer. This means they work together to determine areas of mutual interest, decide preferred methods of communication depending on accessibility needs and preferences, and design and coproduce a project together. The projects cover an array of areas and have so far included sporting events such as rock climbing sessions, co-produced presentations, blogs and posters to highlight areas of interest, personal training plans, and even an ‘X-Factor themed’ online karaoke event. The outputs explore stories and experiences of the IMAS Trainers, often highlighting challenges they have faced, and celebrating successes and achievements.

The placements are mutually beneficial for both the students and the IMAS Trainers they are paired with:

- Healthcare students gain valuable insight into the barriers many disabled people face, particularly in accessing health care. They experience connecting, listening, and communicating with a wider range of people, and explore how they can contribute to making society and healthcare fairer, more equitable, and more accessible during their careers.
- IMAS Trainers report the pairings boost their confidence and self-esteem, give them an opportunity to explore their ideas, share their stories, and help educate health care professionals on the barriers they have faced, in order to break down these barriers for others in future.

“[I’m] more aware of inequalities and disadvantages within the community and able to communicate better with people. Also having an idea of the options that are out there in the community to support patients.”

- Emma, 3rd Year Medical Student, Sheffield University

Challenging perceptions around disability



Participating in Mixed Ability activities encourages critical thinking about preconceptions around disability. Facilitated discussions challenge these in a non-judgmental way. For example, participants in IMAS healthcare sessions reflected that they had not previously seen sport as an effective healthcare option, they had assumed Mixed Ability sport would be less competitive than 'mainstream' sport, that Mixed Ability participants would be less skilful than they are and that they would not have previous experience of sports such as rock climbing. Initial concerns about communication with disabled Trainers were also quickly allayed through the partnership working.

“Before [the placement with IMAS] I didn’t realise how little we’d been taught about disability and the social model of ability and disability. I think it’s been really useful”

- Uday, 3rd Year Medical Student, Sheffield University

Sport as an effective treatment option

Experiencing Mixed Ability sport, and hearing IMAS Trainers' stories of how sport has helped them with both physical and mental wellbeing, alerts healthcare practitioners to how sport represents an effective treatment option that is often overlooked, especially with disabled patients. Social workers participating in a one-day workshop with IMAS said that being able to signpost people to Mixed Ability sport was a great tool to have in their toolkit, and aligns well with the emphasis on community care. Several participants reported already having people in mind that they work with to signpost in this way before the workshop was over.

The orthodoxy for following more medication-focused methods of treatment was challenged by Sam Evans, a physiotherapy student who joined IMAS for a 4-week placement. During his placement he learned about the beneficial effects boxing can have for people with Parkinson's, and how the combination of repetitive skill practice and cognitive engagement has shown to improve balance and gait. Shortly after this, Sam met a patient with Parkinson's who he described as active and looking for alternative ways to manage his condition. Sam decided to refer him to Mixed Ability boxing with Unorthobox. **He reflected that:**

"It's always important to involve [the patient] in their goal setting and the exercises that they want to do. Unorthobox presented the perfect opportunity for the patient to engage in a new challenging activity and allowed me to put into practice what I had learnt while working with IMAS"



Summary



IMAS' experiential learning opportunities equip healthcare practitioners with the knowledge, skills and confidence to support a diverse range of patients and to take an assets based approach to healthcare. Not only does this result in more effective treatment and support for patients, it also begins to address systemic health inequalities and contributes to a shift towards a fairer and more equitable society.

“I really enjoyed my time at IMAS and would absolutely recommend it to the other students. It provided a unique opportunity I wouldn't have normally got in my training and I learned a lot and took a lot away from it ... [I've gained a] better awareness of the issues people with disabilities face in society and healthcare and what I can do to help that situation”

**- Daniel, 3rd Year Sheffield University
Medical Student**



Interested in IMAS' experiential learning opportunities?

IMAS' experiential learning opportunities are offered over a flexible time period ranging from one-day workshops, with an interactive presentation, practical activity and facilitated reflection, to full-time placements. We would be happy to explore options that best suit your needs.

Placements include:



Partnership working with an IMAS Trainer



Participation in practical Mixed Ability sports sessions across a variety of sports including boxing, football, KinBall, rugby and bowls



Interactive small group discussion sessions exploring the interaction between healthcare and disability, and other relevant healthcare concepts



Participation in weekly workshops with IMAS Trainers



Guided reflection on placement activities and links to course material / exploration of learning



Workshop exploring links between sustainability and healthcare (hosted by Nifty Sustainability)



Access to interactive online resources exploring the Mixed Ability model

The different elements of the placement provide a unique learning experience with a variety of positive impacts for healthcare students and current practitioners alike. To find out more please get in touch:

 contact@mixedabilitysports.org  mixedabilitysports.org

References:

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- 9 Dyer J, Sandford R, Beckett A. 2018. Evaluation of the Mixed Ability Sports Development Programme. Available online at: www.mixedabilitysports.org/wp-content/uploads/MASDP_EvaluationReport2019.pdf
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About IMAS

IMAS believes that everyone should be able to benefit from the transformational power of sport to create healthy and happy communities. To make this vision possible, IMAS provides interactive and accessible training delivered by participants from a range of backgrounds to create sporting environments that are safe, welcoming and non-judgmental. This has been shown to overcome a huge range of barriers for people who may otherwise struggle to participate, as well as benefiting clubs and the wider community.



Sign our manifesto

IMAS' values are upheld in its Manifesto.

To find out more about Mixed Ability sports, and sign the Manifesto, visit the website:

 mixedabilitysports.org

 contact@mixedabilitysports.org



This resource was developed by **Nifty Sustainability** as a result of tracking IMAS experiential learning opportunities across a variety of formats and healthcare practitioner cohorts including physiotherapy students, medical students and social workers. Research methods included ethnography, observation, focus groups, facilitated reflection, semi-structured interviews and email conversations.

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