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“Access Isn’t an Advantage, It’s a Right”: Rethinking Exam Accommodations for Neurodiverse Learners



Imagine being told you can have a break during a high-stakes exam, but the clock won't stop.

Or needing extra time for Maths because your processing speed is slower... only to be denied because your difficulty isn't physical.

For neurodiverse learners, this isn't imagination. It's reality. And it's time we talked about it.

Access Arrangements: What They Should Be

Access arrangements, like extra time, rest breaks, use of a computer, or a reader/writer, are designed to level the playing field for students with specific learning differences such as dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD. But too often, these supports are misunderstood or inconsistently applied.

Killian, a student diagnosed with dyslexia, was approved for 25% extra time in exams. But when he applied for 50% for his Mathematics paper, a subject that required significantly more processing, as recommended by his Educational Psychologist, he was denied.



“The Ministry only allows 50% extra time for physical impairments,” said his mum, Tracy.
“It’s incredibly frustrating. Cognitive load is invisible, but that doesn’t make it any less real.”



Keegan, a student diagnosed with ASD, ADHD, and dyslexia was allowed extra time, use of a computer and rest breaks. But with the rest breaks the exam clock wasn’t stopped it kept ticking!



“What’s the point of a rest break if it costs time?”
he asked.

Why the Current Model Falls Short

These stories aren’t isolated. They reveal a deeper systemic issue: access arrangements are still treated as privileges rather than essential supports.

This mindset:

- Forces students and parents to fight for every accommodation
- Prioritises bureaucracy over individual needs
- Penalises non-physical disabilities
- Reinforces ableist ideas of “fairness” rooted in sameness, not equity

In contrast, students like Keegan, who has ASD, dyslexia, and ADHD, have shown what’s possible when you empower learners to speak up. After facing inaccessible assessment design in university, Keegan responded with a 6,000-word feedback report, citing specific flaws in content delivery and misalignment with learning outcomes.

The result? The module was restructured.

Keegan’s advocacy highlights a powerful truth: access isn’t just about surviving in school. It’s about ensuring neurodiverse students can thrive.





Recommendations for Change

From Killian and Keegan’s experiences, and countless others like them, here are clear, actionable changes we need to see:

- **Stop linking support levels to visible impairments.**
Cognitive and sensory challenges deserve equal recognition.
- **Make rest breaks meaningful.**
If a student needs time to regulate, stop the clock. Otherwise, the “break” becomes a penalty.
- **Offer a range of standardised access options.**
Allow students to choose from a toolkit that suits their needs, not a one-size-fits-all model.
- **Train examiners and educators to understand invisible differences.**
Without this, decisions on access remain biased and uninformed.
- **Involve students in the conversation.**
Learners like Keegan don’t need to be protected; they need to be heard.

A Final Word: “Access Isn’t About Favouritism, It’s About Fairness”

Tracy, who spent years advocating for her sons, put it best:



**“I didn’t want them to have an advantage;
I just didn’t want them left behind.”**

As Killian and Keegan’s stories show, the right support doesn’t lower expectations. It raises students to meet them, on their own terms, with dignity and courage. It’s time we stopped asking neurodivergent students to prove they deserve help and started asking ourselves why we make it so hard to give it.

Finally, Tracy, Killian and Keegan would also like to share:



**“Parents, do not teach your children shame for its natural
consequence is learned helplessness and incompetence.”**