UCU
University and College Union

The Social Model of Disability: Motions Guidance

UCU policy endorses the **social model of disability**, which was developed by disabled people to identify and take action against oppression and exclusion.

The social model of disability holds that people with impairments are disabled by barriers operating in society that exclude and discriminate against them. For example, barriers can be social and cultural attitudes, organisational and/or physical barriers that prevent equal access. The social model advocates for a "nothing about us without us" approach in which disabled people should have choice and independence, and meaningful input into any decisions being made about us.

Words and phrases that reflect negative, outdated historical and medical or pitying views of disability are stigmatising, offensive and harmful. It's important that our conference reflect this, so we encourage you to use the language of the social model when drafting motions. Examples are outlined below:

- Use the term 'disabled people,' 'disabled workers,' in education, 'disabled pupils/students' (not 'people with disabilities,' 'workers with disabilities' or 'pupils/students with disabilities'). *

An exception: use 'people with learning disabilities' / 'people with learning difficulties' as chosen by this group of disabled people.

- Use 'non-disabled' people (not 'able-bodied' people) to describe people who are not disabled.

- Use 'impairment' to describe an individual's physical, sensory, or cognitive differences. 'Disability' is what is caused by the barriers in society.

- Avoid 'suffering from'. Use 'person with', 'person who has' or 'person living with' an impairment. E.g., a person who has Long Covid.

- Use 'invisible impairments' (not 'hidden disabilities')

- Use 'wheelchair user' (not 'wheelchair bound')

- Avoid describing people as 'vulnerable.' Be more specific. Why are people in this group more at risk? Are they disabled? Are they from disadvantaged backgrounds? Are they more at risk due to poverty or isolation? With regards to Covid, use people 'at higher risk of infection,' for example.

- Use 'access needs' or 'access requirements' (not 'special needs')

- Use 'declare / declaring' (not disclose / disclosing when talking about informing an employer or other of a disability

- Use 'mental distress,' 'trauma' or 'mental health conditions' rather than 'mental illness' or other terms that pathologise mental distress.

- Use 'neurodivergent person'/'autistic person'/'dyslexic person' (not 'person with autism' / 'person with dyslexia').

Notes:

Motions may refer to the Equality Act 2010 which doesn't use the social model; however, it may be appropriate to refer to people as being 'considered as disabled under the criteria set out in the Equality Act'. There is no such legal category as 'registered disabled' (although local social services may hold voluntary registers for e.g., sight-impaired people).

Resources

Social model of Disability – film

https://youtu.be/Do6U1j1vRYU

Social model of disability: Interactive guide for union reps

https://www.tuc.org.uk/resource/social-model-disability and;

https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/socialmodel.pdf