



Rebecca Ogbonna Role Model Profile

History and Politics Student

What is your role/area of study at Queen Mary? What do you do?

My name is Rebecca Ogbonna and I am a final-year History and Politics student at Queen Mary University. I am also visually impaired and have lived with this disability all my life.

While my disability is a huge aspect of my daily life, it does not define me as a person. Instead, it is only a part of me.

My degree has fuelled my strong desire to make a difference to the world by empowering other disabled individuals that might feel like university is not an option for them because of their disability.

My role at Queen Mary is manifold. As well as a joint honours student, I am also a student mentor and editor for the Queen Mary History Journal. Overall, I am grateful to feel included and valuable within the Queen Mary community as a disabled individual.

What is your experience of being disabled at Queen Mary (or in your life more generally)?

When applying for my undergraduate degree, I was very scared about accessibility within higher education. Although I was reassured that universities tend to have far more funding and services available for those with disabilities, the fear of inaccessibility was something that often overwhelmed me.

Amongst many institutions, Queen Mary stood out to me because of their specific department of Assistive Technologies within the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS). Whilst many other universities were not as welcoming and supportive on Open Days, Queen Mary was more than willing to cater for my needs from the moment I attended the Student Shadowing Day in Year 12.

Since starting Queen Mary, DDS have always gone above and beyond to meet my needs and ensure that I am able to reach my highest potential. Examples of this include supplying digital copies of core texts at the start of the semester and also ensuring I receive extra time in exams.

Living with a disability can often be very isolating and frustrating. This is because many people do not understand my needs or often think that I am incapable because of my disability. I have faced many years of bullying and prejudice, but I am now in a better place at university.

I attribute this to the inclusive environment at Queen Mary and my growing confidence and acceptance of my disability.

How does Queen Mary support you?

Queen Mary has supported me through navigating my disability in various ways. Once enrolled, I was able to create a Student Support Summary with DDS which essentially outlines my needs to my different Schools.

I have been able to receive note-taking support, a reader and access to magnifiers as well as DDS-operated rooms that are fully equipped with assistive technology. I have also received orientation support to help me find my way around my new classes each semester.

In addition to my Student Support Summary, I also make sure that I personally make my needs known to each seminar leader at the start of each module. This allows full transparency about what my needs are and how they should be met. I am thankful that all staff have been co-operative and understanding of my needs.

How could Queen Mary do better to support its disabled community?

The disabled community should be celebrated every day. It is lovely to have a specific day where we acknowledge those with disabilities, but I believe universities should aim to integrate disability awareness into our wider community. Whether that be in the form of a specific module, in the case of History and Politics, or a support group focused on uniting disabled students throughout the campus.

I recognise that not every student is as open and confident in regard to speaking up about their needs. In some circumstances where I have spoken to module convenors and seminar leaders about my visual impairment, they have not always read my Student Support Summary before our first class. I think that there should be some sort of overall coordinator for ensuring the effective transfer of this information to avoid students having to take the first step.

Why do you want to be a disabled role model? Why do you think role models are important?

I believe role models are important because they can influence the actions of others and also motivate individuals to strive towards their aspirations and overcome the limitations they might face.

I would be honoured to be a disabled role model not because I wish to be a source of “inspiration”, but because I want to show other disabled students that they are valid and capable.

In my opinion, disabled individuals do not exist to inspire able-bodied people. For this reason, I wish to be a disabled role model in the hopes of unifying disabled people across Queen Mary and creating disability awareness across the campus.

What do you want staff and students at Queen Mary to know or understand about disability and the disabled community?

I would like students and staff at Queen Mary to be more knowledgeable about the different models of disability.

The medical model of disability states that one’s quality of life is diminished by having a disability. Hence, the medical model looks at how disabled individuals can be “cured”. In contrast, the social model of disability implies that there are systemic barriers and societal prejudices which hinder disabled people from living their lives to the fullest potential.

I am a proponent of the latter because I believe that the world is inaccessible for disabled people. This knowledge can be useful to Queen Mary student and staff because it will help make it clear that disabled people are disadvantaged not by their disability, but by the society they live in.

How can staff and students be a better ally to the disabled community?

Education in the form of disability awareness is imperative for students and staff to be a better ally to the disabled community. In doing so, disability inclusion will be promoted. Stop associating disability with a wheelchair. By educating yourself, you will be able to learn that disability comes in many forms. For example, there are hidden disabilities which are not always apparent.

It is important to listen to the voices of the disabled community. Some of us just want to have a space to talk about our experiences or even rant about ableism or our difficulties we have experienced during our day.

After you have educated yourself and listened to the voices of the disabled, you must then consider your privilege as an able-bodied person. This will allow you to amplify the voices of the disabled community. This can manifest in several ways. For instance, buying from a small business run by a disabled person or sharing tweets, podcasts and blog posts by a disabled individual.

I think another important aspect of being a better ally revolves around how you go about your daily life. This can include advocacy and your use of language. For example, if someone uses a term that is ableist and frankly offensive, speak up. Or when you go to a public building that is clearly inaccessible, speak up. Do not stay quiet when something doesn't sit right with you. Being an ally should not be performative. It is not always what you do in public but also what you do in more private settings.

In terms of your use of language, eliminate the use of slurs in your vocabulary and always be willing to call someone out if they do use the term and are not disabled.

Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences, life, work/studies?

As well as being a student at Queen Mary, I am also actively involved with the [RSBC Youth Forum](#). Our main focus is raising awareness of visual impairment and sharing how our disabilities impact our lives. I have participated in a number of projects such as the creation of our Youth Forum newsletter, podcast and [blog](#). Alongside this, I have also spoken as a visually impaired panellist at the WebRoots Democracy Festival concerning the debate on accessible Online Voting.

Outside of my studies, I am also really interested in fashion, cooking and journaling. Pre-Covid, I also enjoyed going to concerts and festivals with my friends.

My plan for the future is to continue advocating for disabled rights and pursue a career in the field of human rights and global development.