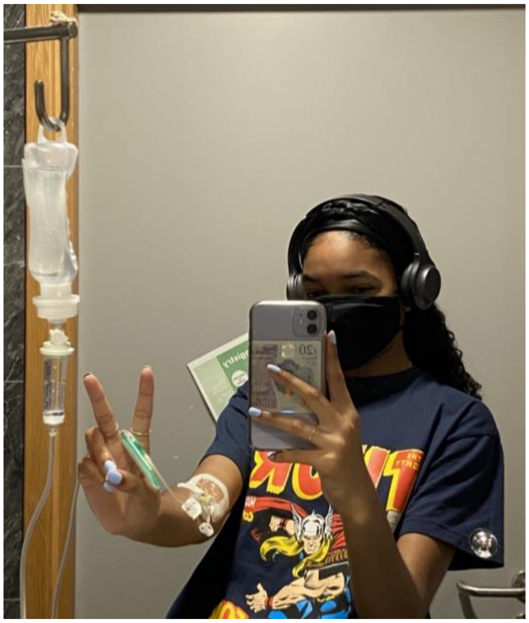

Nésa Thea Depeza Njie Role Model Profile

Genetics Student

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

I'm Nésa, a second year genetics student within the School of SBCS. I am currently planning to do my year abroad, at UWA. I have been part of the Queen Mary dance company since my first year. We're still online but hopefully we can dance in person soon. So, in terms of what I do, I study and I dance!

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

My experience in my first year was very up and down. I have Crohn's disease, so it's not a visible disability. People wouldn't know that I am sick or that I can't do some stuff. So when I say, I can't do this, people don't know why. When I joined Queen Mary, trying to get ensuite accommodation was really important to me, so that I could have privacy.

I was also diagnosed with dyslexia in my first year. I found the services to screen and test for it very useful, it was a very quick process with good signposting to services. I've been through most of my education without knowing about my dyslexia. For me, it's just another thing. After I was diagnosed, the Disability and Dyslexia Service was really helpful: they put a cover note in place for all my written work. Mostly my experiences have been really good.

Covid has brought on a whole other way of working, which has been hard. The University has piled on a lot for work for us. They say they include extra time for everyone, but it doesn't really feel like it. Especially in the sciences, there has been a massive increase in work in second year, and I feel I am ultimately expected to do it in the same time as everyone else. For me, reading and understanding and processing takes a long time, but I still have the same deadlines. It's a lot of pressure.

I saw this role model profile opportunity and I thought I would go for it. We often see disabled role models who have visible disabilities, and people forget about those with learning difficulties and invisible illnesses.

How does Queen Mary support you?

My experiences with the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) have been really good in terms of being able to reach out for the support I need and setting up various meetings e.g. study support. Also helping me to get ensuite accommodation which I found to be an easy process.

How could Queen Mary better support its disabled community?

I feel that services aren't fully accessible in terms of finding specific webpages or even knowing where to look for help in the first place. I feel like there should be a section on QMplus that links to the DDS site, as it can be hard to find tests for learning difficulties etc.

Lecturers also often don't seem to know how to adapt their learning resources for their (disabled) students. Teaching delivery is also not tailored to students' specific needs: I have not seen that any adjustments have been in place by lecturers to make their teaching more accessible to me and other students. Deadlines also don't seem to be adapted. It seems that while your School is informed about your disability and any support you may require, it is not clear that the individual lecturers have also been informed.

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

The main reason for getting involved is to try and help other people like me, so they can see themselves represented. I know there's people in the media, but not people I can relate to directly, especially people our age.

I want to help people feel comfortable speaking about disabilities, especially since coming into university with a disability can be quite daunting. People might be worried that they won't see themselves represented or find friends in the same position. Especially with everything being online at the moment, it is really hard for first year students to meet people. I am lucky with the friendship group I have, many of us have engaged with DDS and we help each other out with subject content.

I think it's really important to expose people to diverse disabilities and experiences. I have actually been surprised at how well known Crohn's disease is, even so, it's not necessarily understood. With dyslexia and other learning difficulties, there is still a stigma that we can't read or write, when it's more than that. People need to become more aware of disabilities and how it impacts not only our learning but our day-to-day life.

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

We can bring a lot to the community, we are not just a burden on society or someone who constantly needs looking after. We are trying our best and you are supporting us but we just need a bit more understanding and adaptability from everyone.

You probably don't know it but you will have engaged with at least one disabled person in your life. My main point is to try to be a bit more understanding: we can do things to the required standard, often better, but sometimes we might need a bit more time.

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

Be more proactive. Go out of your way to educate yourself, show an active interest in disability and disabled people's experiences. Engage with people about their conditions. We are not that different, we just have a different way of doing things. Everyone does. Disability doesn't have to be so alien to people. Show us that you care, that you're looking out for us and that you will support us to grow and develop.

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

The workplace is not accessible enough. There doesn't seem to be any training or support relating to disabilities. During my first year, I worked in a restaurant and it was an eye-opening experience. I was never given the opportunity to communicate my needs. So if I was late or feeling tired, I didn't feel that I could express why. I had to leave that job, as it wasn't helping me be physically or mentally healthy.

In workplaces, employers/managers might be notified about someone's disability, but then there often isn't any proactive follow up to that, to make sure that we can communicate our needs and they can ensure we are sufficiently supported.

If anyone would like to get in touch to chat, my Instagram is @_nesathea. I had a really nice conversation recently with a dancer who also has Crohn's from Australia and it made me feel less alone in this journey, I hope to provide the same support to others :)