Thanks for having me today. I don’t know if you’ve read my bio in the conference agenda, but if you have then you should have a sense of what I’ve achieved, educationally.

However, I stand here today as somebody who was assessed as being unlikely to achieve much in life, when I was around 2 years old. Talk about being pushed over before you’ve had a chance to stand.

When I started primary school, the head peripatetic teacher of deaf children told my mum she didn’t think I would be able to remain in a mainstream environment for anywhere beyond a couple of months. “We’ll see,” said mum.

I was turned down for medical school because of my deafness. To be fair, they did think I would be able to become a doctor, but not a surgeon due to the need to use my hands to communicate. The only option was to apply to Aberdeen as they had separate medical and surgery degrees. I was only 17 and couldn’t bear the thought of being 4 or 5 hours away from my family. Ah, the wisdom of youth…

Despite all this, I think I’ve not done too badly in life. A bit more money would be nice, but… Seriously - I’ve faced many barriers and limited choices. This is something that isn’t unique to me, but for many others as well. I’ll try to condense a few key learning points in the next 15 minutes or so.

For me, the biggest barrier has to be attitudes and a lack of understanding. Often, these two go together to make up one big barrier. For deaf people, we celebrated the passing of the British Sign Language – BSL - (Scotland) Act 2015 last year. An Act that legislates for the need to promote BSL and to ensure access in BSL. This is a great step for the language and for deaf people, and education is very high up on the agenda in work around this Act. 8.9% of deaf children leave school with no qualifications, compared to 1% of the general population.

After all, give a man a fish to eat, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. But if you expect or assume that the man can’t fish, you won’t try to teach. This comes down to expectations. In my case, and countless others, we weren’t expected to achieve because people believed we couldn’t. I’m sure there are many cases where people haven’t achieved at all because they were told they couldn’t, or they weren’t encouraged.

However, having legislation isn’t the sole answer. We’ve had the Equality Act for a few years now, and yet people still have issues with barriers for whatever reason. Which partly goes back to attitudes and a lack of understanding. There has to be a completely holistic approach – reasonable adjustments on courses mean nothing for a student if the interview stage isn’t accessible. A fully accessible college or university isn’t a reality for a pupil who’s struggling without support at school and who won’t be able to get the required grades. Scottish Government data shows that deaf school leavers are less likely to go on to higher education. 26% in comparison to 39% of hearing school leavers. 38% of deaf school leavers successfully enter further education after school but there have always been concerns about support and how well this works, and the data isn’t too clear about what happens after that.

I know of many people who have had to drop out of college or university because they didn’t have the support they needed, or were expected to organise their own support. Being a student is hard enough work, without the additional burden of needing to organise interpreters, notetakers or other support. Some education institutions are very good at being proactive and taking responsibility for this, while others aren’t. This perceived difference in attitude is probably down to a lack of knowledge and understanding. What’s wrong with going beyond “reasonable” – aiming for perfection, even?

The cost, quality and availability of qualified support can be problematic, but surely you can’t put a price on an individual’s life ahead? A man fishing comes to mind – time and money well spent early on will usually mean less time and money later on. As a social worker, I’ve seen one too many adults struggling with life because there was no investment in them as young people. Education is often a major determinant of life chances. Would you be listening to me today if I didn’t have a university education times three and the support of some brilliant people with spot-on attitudes?

I’ve said legislation is all good, and for deaf people hopefully the BSL Act will bring more accessibility and better education, but there’s no legislating for real, practical steps. Bringing in deaf staff to assess deaf students, or disabled staff to assess disabled students for example. Nobody knows better than somebody who’s had the actual lived experience, and they can be positive role models as well. Mental health issues are on the rise for students, and no wonder. Role models offering counselling and one-to-one support could be very useful. You can’t offer much empathy if you don’t have anything to empathise with.

Or at the very least, staff who are trained properly with in-depth knowledge, skills and experience – this is especially true for BSL, and having staff who have limited BSL. You wouldn’t expect a tutor or adviser to have primary school English, would you? Yet in terms of BSL, far too many professionals have primary school BSL, or worse, nursery level even.

While on the topic of communication – my last point will be to say feedback is crucial. Engage with your students. Talk to them. Find out what they think. What they feel. No news doesn’t always mean good news, especially when it comes to disabled and deaf students who can’t shout things from the rooftops.

And unfortunately that’s all we have time for but I’m really looking forward to the Q&A session, so get thinking. Thank you!