

Usha Mistry suffers from myopic macular degeneration and atrophy and has had 14 operations since she was a child, but this chartered certified accountant hasn't let her condition hold her back. She has overcome all sorts of obstacles to reach the heights of Senior Lecturer at London South Bank University.

I've taught thousands of students over the last 26 years, from degree students to professional body qualification. The ACCA qualification has given me flexibility to study, not just for myself, but also to teach others with the same level of flexibility. I've never been unemployed as an academic. So, on those bases, I've thoroughly enjoyed the benefits of having that qualification and the doors it's opened up to me when it comes to what I'm passionate about, which is teaching.

But it's been a long road to reach this point. Usha was struggling at school until the intervention of her doctor turned her fortunes around.

My eye consultant wrote a letter to my school back in 1983, stating the reasonable adjustments I needed to fully engage in my education, i.e. sitting at the front in all my classes, enlarged exam papers, extra time in exams and a reading lamp. This totally changed my life in the sense that I was now aware of education more fully and it was fully inclusive. Disability awareness was highlighted at my school back in the 1980s, which I think was amazing. And that should have been done ages ago.

Technology has come a long way and has played a large part in opening up the profession, and working life more generally, to the visually impaired.

Back in my day, I relied heavily upon magnifiers and lighting to get through the qualification. But now we have computers and we can zoom in, you can adjust the filters to suit your eye comfort. There are text-reading facilities available.

Work has totally changed since the pandemic in the sense that there's been more development in the usage of technology over the last decade.

I'm currently using lots of IT technologies such as MS Teams, Excel. I use my smartphone for MS Teams chat and while teaching. I engage students using Kahoot! quizzes, I record my classes using Panopto, I upload my work to the VLE (Moodle). All these software packages and technologies are very good for visually-impaired people, as you can enlarge text, use the available listening facilities, reading facilities and speech facilities. I can connect with hundreds of students from the comfort of my home and reduce the commute and my dependency on others with regards to lighting and navigation, because I can do all that in the comfort of my home.

With these technological advances, the accountancy profession is fully accessible to those with disabilities.

I started to think about studying with ACCA after I graduated and realised what the profession was offering which the other professional bodies were not offering back in those days, in the early 1990s. I graduated with First Class Honours in my accounting degrees in July 1980.

I was concerned because my eye surgery was also coming up during that crucial period. I didn't want to miss out on gaining the qualification. ACCA was offering the best opportunity for me to study full-time and take good care of my health, because I knew that I could get my work experience later. The other thing was that being visually impaired and gaining work experience and a training contract was very difficult in those days. I completed my final ACCA exam in December 1991. I passed first time, gaining the highest mark of 75% in my finance paper. I became an ACCA affiliate in February 1992. I chose ACCA because of its flexibility, because I could pursue a career in all areas of accounting and finance.

It's a globally-recognised qualification which opens up doors to work in any sector. It is an evolving qualification that meets the needs of organisations, whether they be the latest developments in ethics, sustainability or technology. For those reasons I chose ACCA.

Usha says that ACCA put certain measures in place to facilitate her studies.

The ACCA facilitated my exams in a number of ways. I wrote to them, letting them know which disability I had, and I gave them medical evidence. As soon as they received the medical evidence, they accepted my disability and made the adjustments that I required. Remember, they are reasonable adjustments, so they did provide me with enlarged exam papers. They did give me extra time in my exam, they did provide me with a reading lamp. All this gave me an equal footing with what a normal person would have in attempting the exams.

Usha calls upon employers to appreciate the unique skillsets that those with a disability can offer.

The benefits that the visually impaired can bring to the workplace include the fact that we're more likely to be reliable. I have never taken sick leave apart from my operation throughout my career. We are more likely to be loyal, we're more likely to stay in a job for longer, we're more likely to be trustworthy, we are more likely to be empathetic as we've endured so many difficulties in life. We are more likely to be aware and conscious of the safety of our workplace than people without disabilities. I'm very, very cautious with health and safety issues. We are more likely to be punctual and tend to be early to work, even to meetings. Our students, customers and communities are diverse, and I think hiring diverse employees does enrich the organisation. Students with disabilities have certain experiences and can be very empathetic and connect with people in ways that a person without disabilities would not. I think that working alongside employees with disabilities can bring awareness to the workplace and other settings and make the organisation more inclusive and accessible to everyone. We can also teach our co-workers other ways to solve problems or to accomplish tasks, especially time-management – I seem to be much better at it than a normally-sighted person. I pace my work throughout the year, rather than procrastinating or leaving it to the last minute, panicking and missing the deadline. And I just think it's important to realise that visually-impaired people are just as capable as anyone else, if not more so.

Usha attributes the opening up of the workplace in part to the Equality Act's requirement for employers to remove barriers to disabled workers, which is called 'reasonable adjustment'.

I just don't want people to think that a career is a closed door, because there are ways of opening that door and I think reasonable adjustments have been the greatest thing ever.

Usha has so many accomplishments under her belt: top marks in her degree, becoming Head of the School of Accountancy and Finance, speaking at conferences, winning the Best New Researcher award in 2017 from the London School of Business Management, and in 2020 the Best Newcomer to the Business School at London South Bank University. She is also the Dignity at Work Champion at London South Bank University. So, where next?!

I'm currently volunteering for the RNIB and will perhaps sign up to be a resource reviewer for the Visually-Impaired Special Curriculum Project 2021–2022. I'd like to keep busy and have the same level of opportunities as a person who's 'normal'.