



3 December 2020

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Former Midwifery Student settles case against QUB for £20,000**

Sarah Walker, a former midwifery student at Queen's University Belfast, has settled a case against the University for £20,000. Sarah, who lives with Cystic Fibrosis, brought the case alleging disability discrimination.

In settling the case, which was supported by the Equality Commission, the University sincerely apologised to Sarah for the injury to feelings and distress she experienced while making no admission of liability.

Sarah Walker began her degree in Midwifery in September 2018. The University was aware that she lives with Cystic Fibrosis. Within two weeks of starting Sarah developed a chest infection and was admitted to hospital. During her absence, Sarah was assured that reasonable adjustments were in place, including a note taker at lectures and she would be able to resume her studies.

When Sarah sought to return to her course at the end of October 2018, she was told that she would have to withdraw for the rest of the academic year as she had missed too much of the first term including two practical classes.

Queen's University advised Sarah that she could return to her course in September 2019 and that they would arrange to meet with her beforehand to discuss reasonable adjustments. A meeting took place on 1 October 2019. By this stage the new academic year had already commenced. Sarah was unhappy with this meeting because at the start of the meeting she understood the University's position was that she would not be able to return to her course until September 2020 although by the end of the meeting she was told that she could return to the course on the following day.

Sarah believed that that she was not given sufficient clarity as to the reasonable adjustments that would be put in place if she returned and this, together with the fact that the course had already started, meant that she felt unable to return.

Sarah said: "I just wanted to study for my chosen career in midwifery. I needed some extra support and above all some understanding of the life-long condition that I live with.

"Unfortunately, I felt I had to withdraw from the course as I considered the support I needed was neither clear nor in place to allow me to progress."

“I’m very grateful of the assistance of the Equality Commission and of my local MP, Mr Ian Paisley, who both helped enormously during this stressful process.”

Commenting on the case, Evelyn Collins, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland said: “On this International Day for People with Disabilities, Sarah’s experiences highlight the importance of Universities ensuring that they take steps to support students with disabilities.”

“Universities must make reasonable adjustments to all policies, procedures and practices to ensure that a disabled student is not placed at a disadvantage compared to those who are not disabled. This means that educational institutions must make changes, where reasonable, not only in response to the individual needs of students but also proactively for disabled students generally.”

As part of the settlement terms, Queen’s University agreed to liaise with Equality Commission to review its equal opportunities policies, practices and procedures to ensure they are effective and conform with all the requirements of equality law and, in particular, with the provisions of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005.