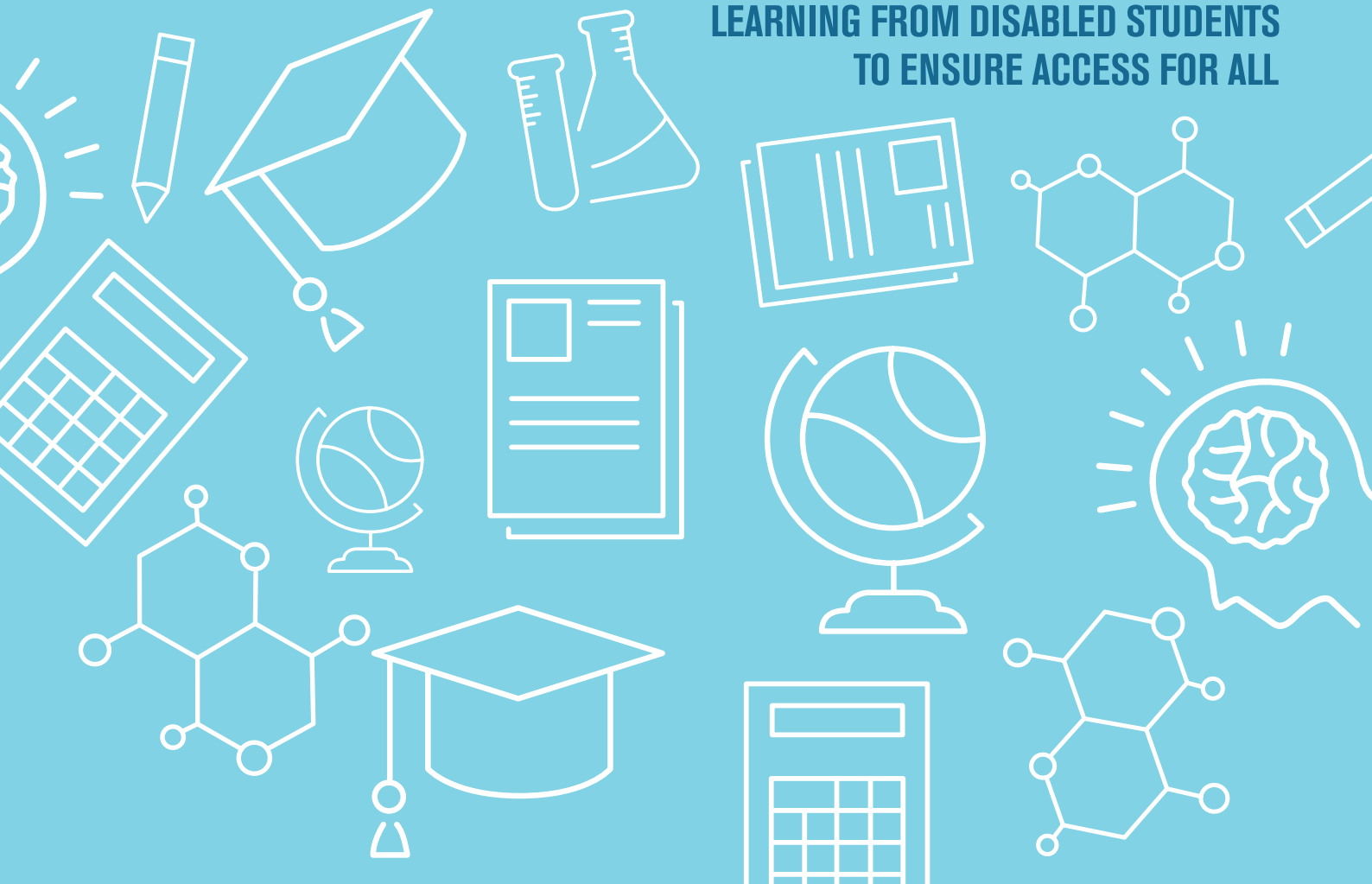




ARRIVING AT THRIVING

LEARNING FROM DISABLED STUDENTS
TO ENSURE ACCESS FOR ALL





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Co-chairs' foreword

2020 is a landmark year for the anniversaries of three of the most important pieces of UK legislation for disabled people: the 50th anniversary of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act; the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act; and the 10th anniversary of the Equality Act. In addition, it is the 20th anniversary of the creation of the Disability Rights Commission, which harnessed this legislation to drive forward progress for disabled people. While great improvements have been made over the past few decades, we know that there is still more to be done.

We began this inquiry in July 2019 hoping to shed light on the experiences of disabled students in higher education, and to find constructive solutions to the challenges and barriers they face. Too many students face forms of disadvantage which impede their success in higher education, and it is imperative that the higher education sector comes together to tackle these.

Our inquiry examined the key themes of student experience, looking at the student journey as a whole and exploring the factors that influence it. Throughout the process, we heard directly from students about their struggles to get basic access to teaching and learning; their social isolation or exclusion; and the sometimes fraught periods of transition into and out of education, including into the workplace. We heard about the undue pressures disabled students experience as a result of administrative and financial burdens, which increase stress and can worsen mental wellbeing.

We also heard about the higher education providers, academic and support staff, and disability practitioners who work incredibly hard to support disabled students. These groups all face their own challenges in providing this support, but continue to strive to ensure access and inclusion for all students. This report contains many examples of good practice and innovation in creating an academic and social environment which prioritises and values the needs of disabled students.

We believe that in order to create the change necessary within individual institutions and across the higher education sector, a senior leader at every institution must take on responsibility and accountability for the experiences of disabled students, making this a personal and institutional priority. Without this, practical support for disabled students can vary widely within an institution, causing unacceptable barriers for students.

In support of this work, we ask the government to create a new system to support disabled people from the classroom to the workplace. This journey could start with Education, Health and Care Plans, moving through to the DSA and Access to Work, and address disabled people's financial, practical and other needs. This cross-departmental system should have the strategic objective of removing disadvantage and ensuring full access and inclusion for disabled people in learning, employment, and all stages of life, including in higher education.

We find ourselves now in a radically different situation nationally and globally from when we began this inquiry, due primarily to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The necessity for higher education providers to rapidly transition to online delivery of teaching and learning has benefitted some disabled students, but for others it has caused further problems for accessibility and inclusion.

We must harness this time of great change in the sector to ensure that accessibility is built in to all teaching and learning from the outset. A key principle for achieving this is to listen to disabled students about what they need, and to embed this feedback into processes of change. In addition, our evidence has shown that changes made to improve accessibility for disabled students almost always improve the experiences of the wider student cohort, enhancing quality for all.

We are very grateful to the wide range of individuals and organisations who contributed evidence to this inquiry. We would particularly like to give thanks to the disabled students who shared their experiences with us through the roundtable evidence sessions and the student survey; we hope we have done justice to your voices.



We must pay tribute to our committed group of commissioners, whose knowledge and expertise was indispensable in the development of our findings and recommendations. Thanks also to Policy Connect for inviting us to co-chair this inquiry, and delivering this report. Finally, great thanks go to UPP, Jisc, and ACCA, whose generous sponsorship allowed this inquiry to take place.



Lord Philip Norton

Chair, Higher Education Commission



Rt Hon. Lord David Blunkett

Co-chair, HE Commission



Professor Kathryn Mitchell

Co-chair, HE Commission



Key findings

The number of disabled students entering higher education has increased greatly over time, meaning that more disabled people than ever are accessing the opportunities available through continuing their studies. However, research into their experiences has suggested that disabled students also face a number of challenges and barriers to full access and participation in higher education, over and above the difficulties experienced by the wider student cohort.

This report examines the challenges and barriers experienced by disabled students through the key themes of teaching and learning, living and social, and transitions and employment. We also examine a fourth theme which arose from the evidence-gathering and analysis process, that of bureaucratic and financial burdens. In each of these themes the report addresses the challenges for disability practitioners and higher education providers (HEPs) in supporting an ever-growing disabled student cohort. We have made 12 recommendations which, if implemented, should lead to significant improvements in disabled students' experiences of higher education and hence in their attainment, continuation and graduate outcomes.

Many of our findings make hard reading, and we cannot shy away from the fact that our evidence demonstrates an unhappy situation for many disabled students. Much progress has been made over the past few decades, including efforts by the government to encourage HEPs to embed inclusive design into their curricula; the increase in Disabled Students Premium funding from the Office for Students; the increase in funding made available through the Disabled Students' Allowance over its history; and the recent establishment of the Disabled Students' Commission. However, our findings make clear that the road to progress has not ended, and it is vitally important to continue to call attention to the needs and experiences of disabled students.

There are numerous practical changes that HEPs can and are implementing themselves to improve disabled students' experiences, and we have included case studies and brief examples of good practice throughout the report to highlight the range of positive work already taking place in the sector. We hope that this report will help to spread this good practice, as well as allowing HEPs to take stock of the situation and reflect on the possible challenges for their own student cohorts. However, the focus of the majority of our recommendations is on what the government and the Office for Students can do to create and ensure improvement across the HE sector.

Key findings

Many disabled students are not fully able to access teaching and learning

Throughout our evidence we heard about students, due to a lack of accessibility, regularly being physically unable to get to or sit in lecture theatres or other academic spaces; unable to access learning materials; not receiving lecture capture where it has been promised; and not receiving other reasonable adjustments set out in their support plans, including adjustments to assessments. A number of written submissions confirmed the difficulty that support services professionals experience in trying to get academic staff to provide the reasonable adjustments set out in students' support plans. Levels of support and accessibility vary between institutions, departments, modules, and even individual teachers. Some students feel there is no accountability at their institution for ensuring they are able to access teaching and learning. At some HEPs, however, senior leaders have made great progress on these areas by clearly prioritising the needs of disabled students. This shows that whole institution change is possible when led from the top.

Disabled students face heavy bureaucratic and financial burdens

We found that disabled students face a number of additional pressures in comparison to non-disabled students, including the heavy administrative burden created by having to apply for, be assessed for, organise and chase up the support they need. We received a great deal of evidence about problems with the Disabled Students' Allowance, such as the fact that the application process is lengthy and complex; the processing of an application is not fast; and the equipment and support allocated sometimes is of poor quality, provided extremely late, or not provided at all. We heard that many disabled students struggle with the financial burden of extra costs relating to their disability, including the cost of accessible accommodation, medical evidence, prescriptions, and the DSA charge. Disabled students often interrupt their studies because of the financial burden, a lack of support, and struggling to fully access their teaching and learning. We also heard about the ways in which complaints processes inhibit disabled students from complaining, including because of a lack of support to cope with the bureaucracy of the process. Some HEPs prioritise and thus provide resources for supporting disabled students with some of these processes and burdens, but widespread system change is needed to tackle these issues for all students.

Awareness and accessibility are needed to facilitate better social inclusion

We heard from students about the complete lack of accessibility of social activities, clubs and societies. This includes a lack of accessibility information on adverts for student union or club activities and events, a failure to provide accessibility adjustments when requested, and a lack of consideration of accessibility when planning events/activities. 26% of 513 respondents to the student survey said they always or often feel excluded from social activities, societies and clubs because of a lack of disability awareness. Less than half of respondents said they 'never' feel excluded. We found that there is a widespread lack of awareness or care among the wider student cohort for the existence of disabled students and their needs. Many disabled students told us that they felt their gender, race or class negatively affected their experiences in higher education. Various students' unions and Disabled Students' Campaigns have good practice to share about improving awareness, changing culture, and ensuring the inclusion of disabled students in social life.

Information and advice are key to successful transitions

We heard from HEPs and practitioners about the difficulty of encouraging students to disclose their disability pre-enrolment, and thus of putting support into place before the start of term. Schools and colleges use the medical model, referring to Special Education Needs and Disability rather than 'disabled students', meaning that some students don't identify themselves as disabled. Many students arrive to higher education without knowing about the DSA, and thus without having applied for support. Practitioners noted that many school and college careers advisers seem to know little about disabled students in higher education, and/or the DSA. Confidence around disclosure and 'disabled' status was also identified by HEPs, practitioners and third sector organisations as a challenge for students during work placements, and for disabled graduates' entry into employment. Many charities and support services departments within HEPs work to provide a high level of support for disabled students as they transition in and out of higher education, and into the workplace. However, changes are needed in order to improve the success of these transitions.

Recommendations

Overarching themes

Recommendation 1: A senior leader in every HEP, such as a Pro Vice Chancellor, must take on the responsibility and accountability for driving change to improve the experiences of disabled students attending their institution.

Teaching and Learning

Recommendation 2: HEPs should undertake a review of disabled students' access to teaching and learning. This should leverage the existing structure for academic curriculum reviews, and must be carried out by a strategic group which has representation from disabled students, the student services department, academic staff, and senior leadership.

Recommendation 3: The Office for Students should require HEPs to include information in their Access and Participation Plans about the training they provide for academic and professional staff, describing how this addresses disability inclusion, and including metrics on how many staff are undertaking the training and how often. Training related to disability inclusion should be mandatory for all staff.

Bureaucratic and financial burdens

Recommendation 4: The Office for Students should conduct and collate research on the extent to which HEPs monitor and reduce the administrative burden on their disabled students, with a view to establishing this practice as a key indicator of an HEP's support for disabled students.

Recommendation 5: The government should create a new system to support disabled people from the classroom to the workplace. This journey could start with Education, Health and Care Plans, moving through to the DSA and Access to Work, and addressing disabled people's financial, practical and other needs. This cross-departmental system should have the strategic objective of removing disadvantage and ensuring full access and inclusion for disabled people in learning, employment, and all stages of life, including in higher education. Whether DSA forms part of this system or is absorbed by it, this new system must learn the lessons of the problems we have identified with the DSA: to be focussed on outcomes for disabled people; to harness the opportunity for modernisation; and to reduce the length and complexity of the process, and the administrative burden on disabled people.

Recommendation 6: While this new system of support is being developed, or if it does not come to be implemented, reforms need to be made to the DSA to align it with the government's objective of empowering and supporting disabled people. This includes:

- Creating a five-year strategic plan for the DSA, outlining the government's vision and strategy for the current functioning and future purposes of the DSA and focussed on outcomes
- Undertaking an operational review of the DSA application process to find areas for improvement and modernisation, reducing the length and complexity of the process
- Devising a system for the allocation of support which prioritises and ensures quality and student choice, as well as value for money.



Recommendation 7: Disabled students should receive a maintenance grant from Student Finance to help them with the financial burden they experience. b) HEPs should revise the criteria for their hardship grants or funding so that they're better targeted to supporting disabled students. c) The government should also review disabled students' eligibility and access to benefit funding.

Recommendation 8: The government should fund independent support for disabled students in higher education going through a complaints procedure (internally or externally), for example by providing funding to an existing organisation in the disability sector. In conjunction with this, the Office for Students should provide support to students' unions about how to help disabled students through an internal complaints process.

Living and social

Recommendation 9: Students' unions must take on the access and inclusion of disabled students as an institutional priority. HEPs should support this by providing funding additional to the block grants they provide to students' unions, to enable students' unions to improve their practices with regard to the inclusion of disabled students.

Recommendation 10: The government should monitor the provision, quality and cost of student accommodation, with a particular view to the experiences of disabled students. HEPs should have a policy with a target for the affordability of the student accommodation owned or run by the institution, agreed with input from students.

Recommendation 11: The Office for Students should implement a strategy for monitoring the qualitative experiences of disabled students in higher education. This should include making mandatory the voluntary section of the National Student Survey on disabled students' experiences, so that HEPs must include this when they send out the survey, and monitoring and analysing the resulting data. The NSS must also be brought into compliance with digital access regulations so that all disabled students can access it.

Transitions and employment

Recommendation 12: The government should launch an information and awareness campaign for schools and colleges about 'disabled student' status, disclosure, and the DSA. This should include working with disability charities to create a disability services handbook with clear and practical guidance and information on all of the aforementioned topics, to be updated annually.



Introduction

The Higher Education Commission embarked on this inquiry in July 2019, following a review of the existing research into disabled students' experiences. 2020 is a landmark year for the anniversaries of three of the most important pieces of UK legislation for disabled people. This year is the 50th anniversary of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act, the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act, and the 10th anniversary of the Equality Act. This legislation pushed society to take strides forward in its treatment of disabled people: protecting disabled people from discrimination in education, the workplace and other spheres; and legally requiring organisations to provide reasonable adjustments for their disabled employees or students.

However, despite the progress made by this legislation and in wider society over recent decades, disabled people still face significant barriers to equality. 31% of disabled people in the UK were living in poverty in 2017/18, in stark contrast to the 20% of non-disabled people living in poverty that year.¹ Disabled people are much more likely to be economically inactive or unemployed, and more likely to be working part time rather than full time.² There is a shortage of accessible housing in the UK, preventing many disabled people from living independently, and disabled people are more likely to experience health inequalities and major health conditions than other people.³

Despite recent improvements in the participation and attainment of disabled students in higher education, persistent gaps also remain between disabled and non-disabled students on measures of access, continuation and attainment. The Commission set out to find out why these gaps persist; what the challenges are for disabled students, and the HEPs and disability practitioners who support them; and what solutions or best practice exist which can be shared with the sector. We identified teaching and learning, living and social, and transition and employment as the key areas of student experience to be examined, hoping to uncover the barriers present at all stages of the student journey. Higher education can give disabled students a better chance of success in their careers, giving them new life experiences, the opportunity to meet new people and develop new skills. We must ensure that they are supported to make the most of higher education, and their lives beyond it.

The impact of COVID-19

The emergence of a pandemic in early 2020 necessitated a rapid transition to online learning by HEPs, adapting to a new model of higher education where students and staff cannot engage with each other in person. This transition presents a very mixed opportunity in terms of the benefits it could bring for disabled students: some in the sector noted that disabled students have been pushing for years for increased flexibility of learning, including the option to study online from home at times, but many HEPs have been resistant to this. HEPs have now been forced by the pandemic to develop the capacity to provide extensive online education, and to create new structures and models of teaching along with this. As a result, institutions have the opportunity to permanently embed these possibilities into their teaching and learning offer going forward, including after the end of the pandemic, which could benefit disabled students now and in the future.

However, the economic, social and educational consequences of COVID-19 have the potential to affect disabled students particularly negatively. According to the Office for National Statistics, around 65% of disabled adults said coronavirus-related concerns were affecting their wellbeing, leading to increased stress and anxiety. Disabled adults were also significantly more likely than non-disabled adults to report spending too much time alone, with 35% of disabled adults reporting this in comparison to 20% of non-disabled adults⁴, which can have serious impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

In relation to employment, the necessary lockdown of society in an attempt to prevent the further spread of the virus has led to a severe economic downturn, with the UK's GDP falling by 20.4% in the second quarter of 2020.⁵ Graduates who leave education during a recession are less likely to find work than graduates from previous years, and more likely to start off in lower-paying occupations than they expected. In addition, people under the age of 25 are two and half times as likely as those over age 25 to work in sectors that have been closed down.⁶ These findings will all impact disabled students and graduates more harshly than others, as disabled people are already more likely to be working in lower paid employment, unemployed, or in poverty.

The National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) recently produced a report gathering evidence on the effect of coronavirus on disability practitioners and disabled students, and their ability to work and study. The report highlighted the varying effects for disabled students of different impairment types: while some students found it much easier to study when not having to make an exhausting commute to campus, some students with hearing impairments have struggled to access online lectures which haven't been captioned. Some students with social communication difficulties or autism have described struggling with the amount of multi-tasking required by online lectures and seminars, and students with mental health concerns are reporting high levels of anxiety and stress which are impacting on their ability to study.⁷

Disabled Students UK, a grassroots campaigning organisation led by disabled students, also published a comprehensive report compiling further research by their own organisation and others on the effects of the pandemic on disabled students⁸, which reinforces the NADP's findings. In response to this evidence and their own roundtables, the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) published a report, *Three Months to Make a Difference*⁹, which makes recommendations to HEPs on how to support disabled students with their varied needs throughout the pandemic. In conjunction with this, the DSC produced a pamphlet providing vital information, advice and guidance to disabled students on how to access reasonable adjustments, funding and support during the pandemic.

The OfS have produced a number of briefing notes on the steps being taken by universities and colleges to support their students and staff throughout the pandemic, including one published in June focused on disabled students.¹⁰ The briefing note highlights the wide-ranging work being done by a number of HEPs to ensure that disabled students continue to be able to access teaching and learning while remote learning is in place. This includes the work done by support services staff to help disabled students to cope with the challenges, changes and anxiety created by the situation. In addition to the work of HEPs, in June the Universities Minister Michelle Donelan announced the creation of a new online resource called Student Space, which will be funded by the OfS with up to £3 million and led by Student Minds. The resource was developed to close the gaps in student support services which became apparent during the pandemic, and will provide access to a range of mental health and welfare support services.¹¹

Office for Students target

Another of the aims for the scope of the inquiry was to consider the feasibility of the Office for Students' target to reduce the disability attainment gap, which is the difference between the proportion of disabled students receiving 2:1s and 1sts in comparison to non-disabled students. The OfS set out its target in 2019, and asked HEPs to work towards eliminating this gap by the academic year 2024/25. This is clearly an ambitious target, which if achieved would certainly be a positive outcome for disabled students. However, it must be considered whether this is the right or sole target for the OfS to set its sights on. Depending on how individual institutions go about eliminating their disability attainment gaps, this could go hand in hand with an overall improvement in disabled students' experiences of HE. Alternatively disabled students might achieve these improved grades while still experiencing severe administrative or financial burdens, or significant social isolation and loneliness.

Methodology

To gather evidence for this inquiry, we initially held two roundtable evidence sessions with small groups of disabled students and disability practitioners. We asked students to discuss their experiences relating to the themes of teaching and learning, living and social, and transitions and employment. Through this process, we gained a great deal of rich qualitative information about disabled students' experiences, and we planned and structured the report around the issues students described to us during these sessions. To complement this and create a wider evidence base, we ran an online survey for disabled students in the UK. The survey received 513 responses from students across a wide variety of impairment types, and from over 70 different HEPs.

In order to explore the challenges for HEPs and disability practitioners in providing support to disabled students, we held two further evidence sessions with expert witnesses from HEPs, sector organisations, and representative bodies. We also held a public call for evidence which received 70 submissions from a range of stakeholders. This enabled us to hear from a number of different HEPs and disability practitioners about the common challenges they experience and their innovative solutions to these, including examples of good practice which are embedded throughout the report.

We incorporate evidence from students, charities and HEPs from Scotland and Wales as well as from England, but due to restrictions on time and the length of the report, our recommendations are aimed at HEPs and governmental and regulatory bodies for higher education in England. We hope that the relevant counterpart organisations in Scotland and Wales will make use of the evidence presented and consider applying our recommendations in a manner appropriate to their specific contexts. We are also aware that numerous FE colleges provide HE courses, and while we have not been able to gather evidence relating to the specifics of this kind of provision, we similarly hope that our evidence and recommendations will be useful to them.

The complexity of the problem

The number of disabled students has risen rapidly over the past decade, and continues to rise. In 2014/15 there were 197,000 disabled students studying at English universities and colleges, which increased to 272,000 in 2018/19.¹² The disability most often reported by first-year disabled students is a specific learning difficulty, with 36% of first-year UK disabled students at UK HEPs reporting this particular condition in 2018/19. This is followed by those reporting a mental health condition, who made up 27% of UK disabled students at UK HEPs in the same year.

There has been a particularly significant increase in students reporting a mental health condition, as the number more than doubled between 2014/15 and 2018/19, as well as an increase of 90% in students reporting a social communication or autism spectrum disorder in the same time period. Similarly, there was an increase of 62% in that time period of students disclosing more than one condition or impairment. There are a number of possible reasons for these increases, including an increase in diagnosis in the general population and willingness of students to disclose, as well as HEPs' efforts to increase access to higher education by those in traditionally underrepresented or marginalised groups. In 2019, then-Universities Minister Chris Skidmore also referred to the positive impact of DSAs on the number of disabled students entering and succeeding in higher education.¹³

A written submission from the Open University highlights the scale of the challenge faced by some institutions in supporting an ever increasing cohort of disabled students:

“ We have over 24,000 students with declared disabilities – more than the total student population of many universities – with an increase of 9% in the numbers of students declaring a disability between 2013/14 and 2017/18 ... and a 90% increase in the last decade. ... Between 2013/14 and 2017/18, the number of OU UK students declaring a mental health disability has risen from 15% to 24% of all OU UK disabled students. ”

The Open University, written submission

It is certainly a positive development that more disabled people than ever are taking up higher education, but it also presents a challenge for HEPs, who must contend with continually further stretched resources and overwhelmed support services departments. This is made more difficult by the heterogeneity of disabled students' needs even within particular impairment types: there is not necessarily a standard or 'best' way of supporting autistic students when each individual student's needs can vary widely. It is also more challenging for disability practitioners working within HEPs to support a student cohort with such a wide range of conditions or impairments, in comparison to perhaps ten or twenty years ago, when the definition of a 'disabled student' was narrower.

Barriers to data collection and data sharing create a significant challenge in understanding the nature of the disabled student population in higher education. The number of students in receipt of the Disabled Students' Allowance is much lower than the number of students declaring themselves to be disabled, but the former figure is sometimes used by individual institutions or at a sector level to describe the disabled student cohort or to plan programmes and funding. Some students also reported incidents through the evidence sessions where they had consented to information about their condition or impairment being shared between members of staff or accommodation services in order for support to be provided to them; however, staff sometimes refused to do this, citing data privacy and GDPR concerns.

Another facet of the complex problem of supporting disabled students is the difficulty of ensuring equal support across an HEP. Students, HEPs and disability practitioners described throughout the inquiry the variation between and within HEPs in terms of the level, kind, and quality of support for disabled students. Disabled students feel frustrated by the possibility that their experience of higher education might have been significantly better at a different institution, but they feel there was no way for them to have known this before starting at their current institution. Students also described huge variations in the level of support they received from one department, one module, or one lecturer to another, another factor which contributes to their frustration and negative experiences.

Legislation, regulations and monitoring

Legislation – The Equality Act

The Equality Act was introduced in 2010, merging and replacing a number of other pieces of legislation relating to equality and protecting specific groups of individuals from discrimination. Some of these other pieces of legislation included the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Race Relations Act 1976, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Equality Act creates a singular piece of discrimination law intended to cover all protected characteristics from indirect or direct discrimination, including disadvantage, unfair treatment, harassment or victimisation.

In relation to disabled people, the Act institutes a duty for public and private sector organisations (including HEPs) to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ in order to make sure that disabled people are not being disadvantaged. This includes making changes to the organisation’s provisions or practices, its physical features, or providing auxiliary aids, if a disabled person would be disadvantaged without these adaptations or provisions. It also includes an anticipatory duty on organisations, meaning that some of these changes or provisions should be made in advance of a disabled person needing them, rather than as a reaction to someone having been disadvantaged.

The Act is enforced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, a non-departmental public body established in 2007 by the Equality Act 2006. The EHRC joined up the work of three previous equality organisations: the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the Disability Rights Commission (DRC), and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). The Disability Rights Commission was initially established in 2000 by the Labour government of the time, alongside a substantial uplift in the amount of funding available from the Disabled Students’ Allowance.

Some of the HEPs and disability practitioners who have contributed evidence to this inquiry have described a perception that awareness of and legislation on the rights of disabled people weakened after the Equality Act (2010) took the place of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). There is also a fairly widespread perception that disabled people are at the bottom of the list of equality and diversity priorities. Some stakeholders perceive this to have happened partially because of the DDA and the Disability Rights Commission being amalgamated into a larger equality legislation and organisation, removing the specific focus on the rights of disabled people. Other contributors to our evidence suggested that the Equality Act is perceived as lacking teeth or not being enforced properly when it comes to the rights of disabled students.

The EU Web Accessibility Directive

In October 2016, the EU set out a new directive on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies, seeking to ensure that these are accessible to all users, including disabled people. This directive came into force in the UK in September 2018, and applies to HEPs as well as other public sector bodies. The directive is reflected in the new Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018. As Jisc explains, “It requires public sector bodies to take the necessary measures to make their websites and applications accessible by making them perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust”.¹⁴

The directive means that websites which were created after September 2018 will have to have been made accessible by September 2019, and new websites created by public sector bodies must have accessibility for all users built into their design. Existing websites will have to have been made accessible by September 2020, to allow for the additional time required to make changes to the existing structure. In addition, all mobile apps belonging to public sector bodies must be accessible by June 2021. In a previous report, Policy Connect recommended that the Government Digital Service produce a guidance document making clear that colleges and universities are covered by the regulations, including guidance on how they apply to virtual learning environments.¹⁵

Monitoring – The Office for Students

The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulatory body for higher education in England. The OfS was set up in January 2018 to take on the responsibilities previously carried out by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and the Office for Fair Access. The OfS receives an annual letter from the Department for Education which sets out the OfS's priorities for the coming year and how much money the body can distribute to higher education providers.

Outside of its more general targets for the participation, experiences and outcomes of all students, in December 2018 the OfS set five targets to achieve equality of opportunity in higher education. One of the targets is to eliminate the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between disabled and non-disabled students by 2024/25. The gap is currently 2.8%¹⁶, but eliminating it completely has proven difficult over the past years. The OfS uses a range of powers and support measures to work towards its equality targets, including publishing an access and participation dataset; collating and sharing evidence of best practice; administering the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, which includes metrics tracking the outcomes of disabled students; and introducing tougher requirements on HEPs' evaluation of their activities.

The chief mechanism which the OfS uses to monitor HEPs' work on equality targets is each institution's Access and Participation Plan (APP). Submitting an APP is a key condition of registration with the OfS, without which an HEP cannot access public funding or award qualifications to students. APPs explain the data the institution has collected on underrepresented or 'widening participation' groups within its student cohort, outlining the gaps between these groups and the whole student body with regards to participation, progression, degree outcomes and post-graduation outcomes.

APPs also outline the current and future actions the institution plans to take in order to tackle the gaps identified and to meet the institution's specific equality targets, as well as responding to the OfS's equality targets. An institution's APP is submitted to and reviewed by the OfS, which may come back to the institution requesting further detail or explanation, or changes to the plan such as making its targets more ambitious. All institutions must also submit a shorter annual impact report to the OfS on the progress of the plan in terms of its targets and actions. If the OfS becomes concerned about the lack of progress being made or the unsuitability of particular actions or targets, it may request that the institution submit another full APP earlier than the five year date.

The OfS also supports HEPs through the Disabled Students Premium, a funding pot which is allocated to HEPs based on their predicted number of disabled students. The funding is currently £40 million annually, which is shared between all institutions registered with the OfS. This additional funding is intended to enable HEPs to cover the additional costs of supporting disabled students, including by making teaching and learning more accessible and inclusive by design.

In 2019, the OfS established the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC), an independent and strategic group which replaces the Disabled Students' Sector Leadership Group (DSSLG). This included nominating a commissioner from the OfS to be part of the DSC, helping to run a public appointments process for the other commissioners, and providing a grant to a third party organisation to enable it to host and provide the secretariat for the DSC. The DSC will advise, inform and challenge the higher education sector in England to improve support for disabled students, including by evaluating models of support and sharing best practice.

The Disabled Students' Allowance Quality Assurance Group

The Disabled Students' Allowance Quality Assurance Group (DSA-QAG) was an organisation mandated by the Department for Education to quality assure the provision of support by organisations through the Disabled Students' Allowance. The organisation did this by vetting the organisations which registered with it, and conducting regular audits of assistive technology service providers, needs assessment centres, and organisations providing non-medical help services. The group closed in December 2019 because of DSA reforms which meant that the group was no longer financially viable.

The sector organisations and disability practitioners we spoke to for the inquiry expressed mixed views about the work of the DSA-QAG. Many felt that it was important to have some kind of organisation providing monitoring and quality assurance over DSA provision, and the DSA-QAG's submission to the inquiry states that "The quality assurance frameworks were largely effective in driving good practice in the sector groups registered with DSA-QAG", providing accompanying statistics to this effect. However, some organisations and practitioners felt that the DSA-QAG's oversight was overly focused on the monitoring of processes and paperwork rather than the quality of the support and services being provided.

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE) is the ombudsman for higher education in England and Wales, and it examines complaints from students about any act or omission of a member. This can include complaints about service quality, course provision, academic appeals, and disciplinary and fitness to practise procedures. This doesn't include examining complaints relating to academic judgement, but the organisation does look at the process around academic appeals. This includes situations where mitigating circumstances weren't taken into account, if the appropriate procedures weren't followed, and whether the procedures were fair and reasonable in the circumstances.

It's a condition of registration with the Office for Students that HEPs must also be members of the OIAHE. Members can be anyone receiving public money, which includes traditional universities but also FE colleges offering HE courses, alternative providers, and any organisation delivering a course on behalf of another member. HEPs in Scotland are covered by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

The OIAHE has an information sharing agreement with the OfS, whereby they share information about complaints relating to individual institutions with the OfS if the information indicates a systemic breakdown at the provider. They also share complaints information where the information highlights a lack of understanding of a particular issue across the sector, and where more guidance from the OfS might be needed. The OIAHE doesn't specifically pass on information based on themes such as the complaints originating from disabled students.

The role of senior leadership

Much of the evidence we received from a wide range of stakeholders highlighted the fundamental importance of senior leadership for creating change within an HEP. Various submissions explained that in order to foster the will for change and the necessary actions from the many disparate areas of an institution, there must be a strong message from senior leadership that disability inclusion is a priority for the leader and the institution. Without this, small groups of staff might carry out impactful but uncoordinated work which may be difficult to sustain long-term; support for disabled students could vary significantly within an institution; and it can be difficult to evaluate actions taken or to measure and sustain widespread improvement of support.

One student highlighted during a roundtable evidence session the confusion and inaction which can result from the lack of a visible senior staff member with responsibility for the access and inclusion of disabled students:

“ As a student, I don’t know the hierarchical structure. I don’t know who it is I’m supposed to meet. I have a point of call for my disability and that person is then supposed to be able to go to this person, this person, this person. In reality, nothing happens because no one is going to claim responsibility because we’re all terrified to take on responsibility. ”

Student at evidence session 2

The University Mental Health Charter, a recently published landmark charter which sets out key principles for improving the mental health outcomes of the whole university community, also highlighted the importance of leadership for this work:

“ While real and sustainable change in universities requires engagement from the whole community, and multiple interventions by a range of actors, the role of strategic leadership is undeniable. University leaders play a significant role in helping establish shared culture, structure and environment that supports change and individual wellbeing.¹⁷ ”

The Russell Group published in May 2020 their report into tackling education inequality.¹⁸ One of the report’s five ‘key lessons learned’ is that successful access and participation work must be owned by the whole university, but also that achieving this requires sustained support from senior managers. In the report, Russell Group universities commit to “Ensure ownership of, and accountability for, efforts to widen access and support student success sits with Presidents and Vice-Chancellors and their senior teams”, given the importance of this for successfully widening participation and success for disadvantaged students in HE.

Recommendation 1:

A senior leader in every HEP, such as a Pro Vice Chancellor, must take on the responsibility and accountability for driving change to improve the experiences of disabled students attending their institution.

This should include examining all areas of student experience, including teaching and learning, living and social, and transitions and employment; driving through changes that will put accessibility at the heart of the culture and processes in every HEI; and ensuring that students can easily access the levers that drive change, such as complaints.

1. Teaching and learning experiences

Chapter Overview

In this chapter we examine how disabled students experience teaching and learning in higher education, including their physical access to spaces of learning, their ability to access physical and digital teaching and learning resources, and the provision of reasonable adjustments. We found that some disabled students, due to a lack of accessibility, are regularly physically unable to get to or sit in lecture theatres or other academic spaces; unable to access learning materials; and frequently don't receive the reasonable adjustments set out in their support plans. This clearly seriously inhibits students' ability to learn and to receive a good degree. We heard from disability practitioners and HEPs that their ability to support disabled students well is inhibited by the lack of training for academic and other HEP staff, and by difficulties with funding. We recommend that HEPs undertake a review of disabled students' access to teaching and learning, carried out by a strategic group which has representation from disabled students, the student services department, academic staff, and senior leadership. We also recommend that the OfS should require HEPs to include information in their Access and Participation Plans about the training they provide staff and how this training addresses disability inclusion.

Access to teaching and learning is one of the most fundamentally important factors in a student's experience of higher education. If disabled students can't get into their lecture hall, can't read the lecture slides or course texts, or aren't able to perform at their best under a particular assessment style, then they have little hope of making the most of higher education or having an experience of higher education which is on a level with their non-disabled peers. Access to online resources, accessible lecture capture and reasonable adjustments have also become particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, the evidence we gathered suggests that many disabled students are experiencing the problems described above. Although some HEPs do well at embedding accessibility into their buildings and curricula, examples of which will be examined throughout the chapter, too many disabled students are unable to fully access the spaces and resources of teaching and learning. This leaves them at a huge disadvantage in terms of assessments, continuation rates, and overall grades.

Physical access to campus

Students at the roundtable evidence sessions highlighted the barriers they experience to basic physical access to teaching and learning, such as struggling to get into lecture halls, seminar rooms, libraries, and exam halls.



One day, when one of the staff was ill, I was abandoned in a seventh floor building with no way of getting down and I had to miss my afternoon lecture.

Student at evidence session 1



I was told that I would be on one campus because it's split between two campuses. Every semester I had to remind timetabling that, actually, I couldn't go to where they put me. It got so bad that I had to take a taxi twice a day just to get to my lectures.

Student at evidence session 1

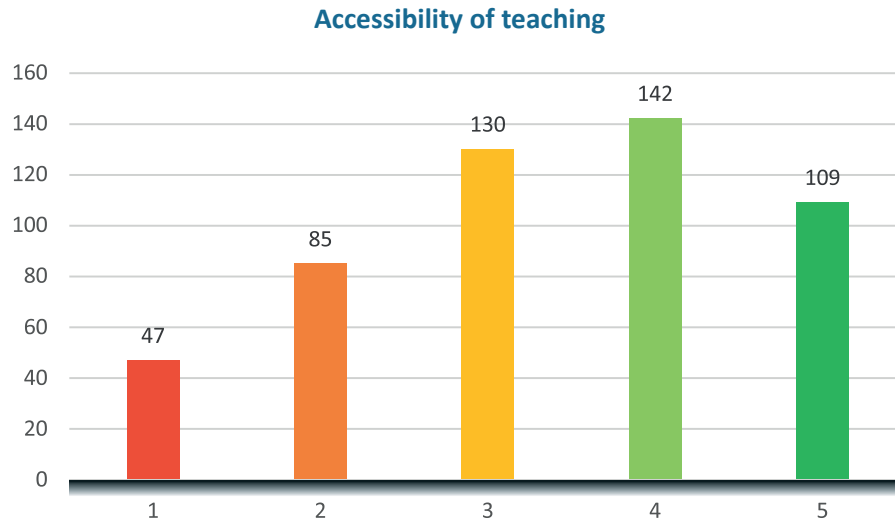


During exam season especially, because the room is inaccessible and it takes my Disability Support team ages to sort out a room that is accessible for me, for my needs. Then they don't take that into consideration when it comes to exam time, so I'll be put back in one of those rooms that takes a very long time to get to because it's blocked by some stairs the normal way, which means I have to take the longer route. That makes me more stressed about getting to the room than the exam itself.

Student at evidence session 1

These problems with physical access can prevent disabled students from attending their lectures, or can require them to spend a significant amount of time organising adaptations such as alternative rooms or seating. As described in the third quote, the pressure of having to negotiate their own physical access to teaching can cause great stress for disabled students, possibly having a knock-on effect on their mental health and their performance in coursework and exams.

We asked disabled students about their experiences of teaching and learning through the online survey. The question for the graph below was 'To what extent do you feel that the teaching of your course (e.g. lectures, seminars, online information and resources, types of assessment) is accessible to and inclusive of you?'



Note: the scale ranges from 1, 'not very accessible', to 5, 'very accessible'.

49% of respondents rated the accessibility of their course as 4/5 or 5/5. However, 26% of respondents rated the accessibility of their course as only 1/5 or 2/5, which is a significant proportion of the 513 respondents. In order to get more detail, this question was followed by an optional open text box with the following question: 'Please describe the aspects of the teaching of your course that are particularly accessible or inaccessible.' 325 students responded to this question, 63% of all survey respondents. The responses could be categorised as follows:

| Accessible | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Lecture capture | 56 |
| Supportive lecturers | 29 |
| Information online | 24 |
| Materials before lectures | 16 |
| Adjustments to assessments | 14 |
| Everything is accessible | 11 |
| Adjustments for impairment | 4 |
| Good physical accessibility | 4 |
| Flexibility in attendance | 2 |

| Inaccessible | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| No lecture capture | 47 |
| Failure to implement support plan | 26 |
| Inconsistency of support | 22 |
| Physical inaccessibility | 18 |
| No materials before lectures | 14 |
| Sensory inaccessibility | 11 |
| Structure of course content | 11 |
| Inaccessibility of texts | 10 |
| Lack of adjustments for impairment | 10 |

Physical inaccessibility was the fourth most common theme in open text responses describing the inaccessibility of teaching and learning. The majority of responses within this category described a lack of wheelchair access for certain academic buildings or rooms; inaccessible seating; the scheduling of lectures and seminars too close together in time and/or far apart geographically; and not being able to sit at the front of a lecture in order to see or hear better, due to lack of space.

Some students at the evidence sessions described academic staff as being highly motivated to help fix problems to do with physical inaccessibility, including taking on the work of reorganising where lectures are being held. However, other students described academic staff dismissing their needs.



In terms of accessibility of rooms on campus. It's, like, well, if it's up the stairs, 'Surely, you can manage with just a few flights of stairs,' or, you know, 'Your friends can help with your chair and move this.' So often, you know, we have so many times where lifts have been broken and they've just said, 'Oh, well, you don't really need that,' or the hearing loops haven't been working, 'Well, you don't really need that.'

Student at evidence session 1



Accessibility of resources (online and physical)

Students at the evidence sessions also highlighted problems with the accessibility of teaching and learning resources. This included books, articles and other texts not being provided in accessible formats for students with visual impairments or specific learning difficulties. This can be because of the font type, size or colour used, or documents being created that are not able to be read by screenreaders.



I've had a really terrible year so far this year with uni. There has not been a single document accessible to me. Lectures have been inaccessible, the activities that we've done in seminars have been inaccessible. Rooms have been inaccessible. Note taking hasn't been provided where it should be. The responsibilities the lecturers expect of my note takers have been far beyond what they are supposed to do. My first assignment is due in next week and I've had to apply for mitigating circumstances.

Student at evidence session 2



As someone with a disability, it is not the norm in the higher education sector for a variety of reasons. You are constantly reminding people that you cannot see. You are constantly reminding people that the resources [they say] they're making accessible to you are not accessible and I absolutely echo what you guys have all said across the room that it gets tiring.

Student and disability practitioner at evidence session 2



These experiences are reinforced by responses to the student survey. Similar issues were described with lecture slides and notes, with additional problems such as images sometimes being used in materials which don't have image descriptions attached to be read by screenreaders. Some academic staff use videos without captions, meaning that deaf or hard of hearing students either cannot access them or have to 'out' themselves as disabled in order to ask for an adjustment.

These issues are reflected in the above 'Inaccessible' table by categories including sensory inaccessibility, inaccessibility of texts, and lack of adjustments for impairment. Unsurprisingly many of these categories slightly overlap, and the issues within them are connected by common causes such as a lack of awareness and/or understanding from academic staff of disabled students' needs. In the ANMHP's report on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled students¹⁹, 35.7% of disabled students responding to a survey stated that 'Access to course materials' was a factor that was impacting on their studies. This may partly be down to remote learning precluding the possibility of going to the HEP's library, but could also be due to a lack of accessibility of online resources.

Accessing reasonable adjustments

One of the most common problems described by students at the evidence sessions was the failure of academic staff to implement the student's learning support plan. These plans are given different names at different HEPs, including 'Individual Learning Plan' or 'Personal Learning Support Plan'. The plans are usually an agreement between the disabled student and an HEP support services professional on the kinds of adjustments and additional support that the student requires as a result of their impairment or condition, in order to be able to fully access teaching and learning. At some institutions this plan is also discussed and agreed with an academic representative from the student's department.

However, in the evidence sessions and student survey many students explained that their support plans are not being put into place. This can be because the academic staff have not read them, whether due to a lack of time or lack of awareness that particular students have support plans. Existing research also highlights a lack of awareness from staff of disabled students' needs as a common problem, which in turn leads to reasonable adjustments not being put into place.^{20,21}

Students described academic staff refusing to carry out certain adjustments, such as sending out the lecture slides in advance of the lecture or allowing the lecture to be recorded (often known as 'lecture capture'). Students also described feeling that some academic staff perceive them as not really needing the adjustments set out in their support plan or possibly considering them to be lazy.

“ **One of the huge problems with that, that I've experienced and I know many of my peers have, is that academics do not understand them and they don't understand, particularly, invisible disabilities. It is a real issue when you are trying to action a support plan and so often people presume that you are lazy.** ”

Student at evidence session 1

As seen in the previous table, 'Failure to implement support plan' was the second most common theme in students' responses to the survey. The majority of responses in this category stated that the requirements of the student's support plan were almost never implemented, rather than only happening sporadically, or staff occasionally forgetting. Many of the responses also described students repeatedly reminding staff about their support plan and chasing up adjustments, only for the adjustments to continue not to be implemented. Very few students said they received support from HEP staff with chasing up their accessibility adjustments. Lead Scotland stated in their submission:

“ **We receive more calls about this than any other topic on the helpline from students experiencing issues with accessing appropriate reasonable adjustments from academic staff.** ”

Lead Scotland, written submission

Students at the evidence sessions highlighted the perceived expectation that they must know the content of and be able to refer to equality legislation in order to enforce the reasonable adjustments that they are entitled to. However, many disabled students do not know enough about equality legislation to be able to do this.

“ **I just want to highlight as well, how difficult it is for disabled students to even know what their rights are. Like, we don't know. We're not lawyers. And we're very much expected to be able to recite to you how the Equality Act means you have to do this.** ”

Student at evidence session 1

Some of the responses to the survey described the consequences of this failure for their support plan to be implemented, with students explaining that they have struggled to keep up with classes, missing lectures and falling behind, or experiencing heightened anxiety. Some struggled to meet deadlines or complete coursework as a result of not having full access to teaching, and one respondent stated that they failed an academic year because the support they needed wasn't put in place despite being set out in their support plan. As well as having a serious negative effect on students' academic work, some of the students' responses expressed their perception that academic staff are not concerned about disabled students or their needs, which was inferred from their failure to read and implement students' support plans.

Good practice



Like many universities we have a system of learning support plans (here called King's Inclusion Plans KIPs). This works well in general where staff are comfortable with the adjustments that are necessary. Where issue can arise is when academic staff feel they can't implement adjustments (or they disagree with what is proposed). In some cases staff receive KIPs and just ignore them.

My strategy to address these issues has been to:

- 1. Conduct a survey of academic staff on KIPs and inclusive practices to identify the concerns and challenges faced and to identify good practice.**
- 2. Develop a baseline of inclusive practice in each faculty, so that students are aware of anticipatory adjustments already made, and hence not required to be stated on a KIP. These are called Faculty Disability Accessibility and Inclusion Statements and are currently being developed (with two so far published but most awaiting approval by Faculty Education Committees).**
- 3. Seek improved technology within the institution to make communicating disability needs a more smooth (and secure process).**
- 4. Offer training to academic departments covering what we do and what KIPs etc are for, but also giving space to supporting staff.**
- 5. Developing guidance for staff on supporting disabled students and inclusion.**
- 6. Seek higher level support for the above.**

All of above has been helped by having Faculty Disability Liaisons – staff in each faculty with the role of linking Disability Support and the Faculty.

Barry Hayward, Head of Disability Support, written submission



Lecture capture

Many of the responses to the student survey which described academic staff not putting into place reasonable adjustments specified the refusal to allow lecture capture as a particular challenge for students. This theme also arose at the evidence sessions.

Lecture capture is still an opt-in system at our university and lecturers don't opt-in. Even though it's supposed to be provided for disabled students, they prioritise the lecturer's right to opt-out. So, as a third year that's had on my student support plan, 'Lecture capture,' since first year, I've only had one of my modules throughout my entire degree recorded.

Student at evidence session 1

Things like lecture capture, that is absolutely vital for people who can't attend lectures, who struggle to keep notes. For so many different reasons, that is necessary, but so often, academics are saying, 'But if I implement lecture capture, the students won't turn up.' It's not a question of saying, 'Well, the students won't turn up,' it is, regardless of that, 'I need this to be able to study, and if you choose not to implement it because you're worried about two people not turning up after a night out, you are absolutely denying me access to the education facilities that I need.

Student at evidence session 1

There is a considerable amount of debate in the higher education sector around the positives and negatives of lecture capture. Lecturers have reservations around the use of lecture capture for a number of reasons: some are concerned about intellectual property and copyright; some are concerned that lecture recordings might be used as a replacement for lectures during industrial action; and some are concerned that lecture recordings will be used for performance monitoring, without the consent of the lecturer. Many regional branches of the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) campaign against these possible outcomes because of their qualms about how HEPs will use lecture recordings.

From a pedagogical perspective, some academic staff worry that their teaching styles might change or have to be changed as a result of being recorded; others fear that attendance will drop if they allow their lectures to be recorded, as students could just watch or listen to the recording from home. The latter can be an issue for lecturers in terms of the amount of time and effort they put into preparing lectures, but also because some believe it will have a negative effect on students' grades. However, recent work by academics reviewing the wide range of existing literature on the effect of lecture capture on attendance and grades, summarises that:

There is no systematic evidence to suggest that access to recordings alone significantly impacts attendance and the impact of access to recordings on performance is related to a range of individual student characteristics such as level of study, ability, and approaches to learning.²³

The same paper reviews the lecture capture policies of 35 UK HEIs and finds that the majority of policies in HEIs with ‘opt-out’ systems (where the lecture is automatically recorded unless the lecturer opts out) do address concerns around intellectual property rights and the usage of recordings. Jisc have produced a guide for HEPs on writing lecture capture policies that address all of the relevant legal considerations, such as intellectual property, copyright, data protection and liability.²³

Some support practitioners have highlighted the issue that lecture capture can be an ‘easy win’ for HEPs to implement and thus is sometimes put in place instead of making more difficult, long-term or structural changes which would benefit disabled students. It’s clear from the variety of problems presented in our evidence that lecture capture is not the solution to all of disabled students’ access issues. However, it’s also clear from the student survey that lecture capture is an important tool for disabled students, as the provision of lecture capture and a lack of lecture capture were the most common themes in survey responses describing the accessible and inaccessible aspects of students’ teaching and learning.

As highlighted in the second quote in this section, many disabled students need lecture capture in order to fully access their teaching and learning. Numerous survey respondents described the importance of lecture capture for catching up when they weren’t able to attend because of their condition or impairment, a circumstance which is impossible for disabled students to avoid. Respondents also described how recorded lectures are a vital tool enabling them to re-listen when the lecture was very information-heavy, the pace of the lecture was fast, or they didn’t understand something the first time. Many of these benefits also apply to students who are not disabled, such as students for whom English is a second language; lecture capture is just one tool where its wider implementation could improve the learning experiences of the whole student cohort.

Good practice

The University of Derby worked with teaching staff, union representatives and students when developing its lecture recording policy. The policy states the expectation that all teaching sessions are recorded but provides the option for academic staff to share alternative digital recordings as pre/post-sessional resources where the recording of a live session would not be appropriate.

The policy is in place to recognise the importance of lecture recording as part of an inclusive teaching experience making sessions more accessible for all for students but clarifies that recordings will not be used for staff performance management. The University works to make sure that lecture recordings are not misused so that staff can feel confident that recordings are serving students well and enhancing their learning experience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic all teaching and learning has been temporarily moved online, which has potentially made access easier for some disabled students. However, research referenced in the introduction to this report has demonstrated that disabled students with visual or hearing impairments are not always able to access online lectures; these issues must be comprehensively addressed by HEPs as soon as possible while the pandemic is ongoing.

Assessment Methods

Assessments are an important area of teaching and learning to get right for disabled students. Even if disabled students are fully able to access the teaching, materials and resources of their course curriculum, they can still be disadvantaged when it comes to the mode of assessment of their knowledge and understanding. Existing research demonstrates that assessments are a key issue for disabled students, and that many disabled students are not given the option of alternative assessments²⁴, whether because of teaching staff's lack of knowledge and training about alternative options, or because of a perception that an alternative assessment would confer an unfair advantage on the disabled student.²⁵

At one evidence session, a disability practitioner who is also currently a disabled student highlighted that many disabled students choose not to take courses with exams because exams are an unsuitable assessment style for them. However, disabled students should be able to choose whichever modules interest them and to expect that their institution will make adjustments to the assessment so that all students are able to perform at their best.

“ It’s interesting you’ve all said you’re doing the coursework based stuff. That happens all the time and I say to my students and I’ve fought tooth and nail for quite a lot of people I work with that we will look at alternatives to exams. You’ve got to choose the module you want to do because of your genuine interest in it. Every time, they would choose it because it will be, like, ‘Well, there’s not exam in this. It’s two bits of coursework instead’. It’s just wrong. ”

Student and practitioner at evidence session 2

Lead Scotland explained that in their experience, some HEPs seem to avoid making changes to the mode of assessment:

“ There seems to be a lot of resistance and reluctance to offer assessments in alternative formats, especially as an alternative to examinations ... adjustments to the way an assessment is accessed seems to be more common than providing an actual alternative assessment. ”

Lead Scotland, written submission

While extra time during an exam or being able to use a laptop instead of handwriting can be very helpful adjustments, some disabled students simply cannot best demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through an exam. Some HEPs are trialling flexible and innovative developments in alternative assessments for disabled students. The Disabled Students' Commission also recommends that during the changed circumstances of the pandemic, where appropriate and possible, disabled students should be given a choice of assessments to meet learning outcomes.

Good practice

“ Lecturers who have attended inclusive assessment training regularly adopt patchwork assessment (e.g. requiring students to deliver poster presentations, reports and written reflections) or realistic, employment based case study scenarios, as opposed to more traditional essay based written assessment to allow students to demonstrate a range of skills and abilities. ”

Cardiff Metropolitan University, written submission

There is a wealth of research on inclusive teaching and learning, including on ‘Universal Design for Learning’ (UDL), which outlines how teaching and learning can be made accessible to a diverse cohort of students from the outset of course and resource design. This includes many of the practices described in this chapter, such as accessible virtual learning environments and online resources; lecture capture; multiple means of presenting information; and offering a range of assessments. Reviews of this research literature have highlighted that UDL increases the satisfaction of the wider student body with teaching and learning, as well as ensuring that disabled students are fully able to access their course.²⁶ Research also shows that better design for inclusivity of teaching and learning can reduce the number of support interventions or reasonable adjustments needed by disabled students, making their experiences of studying more straightforward and reducing the administrative burden of organising these reasonable adjustments for students and staff.²⁷

Recommendation 2:

HEPs should undertake a review of disabled students’ access to teaching and learning. This should leverage the existing structure for academic curriculum reviews, and must be carried out by a strategic group which has representation from disabled students, the student services department, academic staff, and senior leadership.

This review should include examining physical access to academic buildings, the accessibility of materials and resources, and the accessibility of assessment practices, among other areas. The group should also examine the provision of materials such as lecture slides or notes in advance of teaching; the current level of implementation of lecture capture; and methods for expanding this. The inclusion of representatives from the student body and support services department should ensure engagement with disabled students themselves, and allow the support services department to make its voice heard by other areas of the HEP.

The challenge for HEPs

In the public call for evidence we asked HEPs to tell us to what extent they feel able to meet the Office for Students’ target to eliminate the gap between the proportion of 2:1s and 1sts awarded to disabled students versus non-disabled students by 2024/25. A number of HEPs stated in their submissions that they feel able to or are on track to meet the target, including a few who have already eliminated the disability attainment gap at their institution. However, some submissions expressed concern at the short amount of time allowed in which to achieve this, particularly given the already stretched resources many institutions are facing.

“ The OfS target is very challenging given the relatively short lead in time to 2024/25. With Access and Participation Plans taking effect from September this year, and the recruitment cycle for 2024/25 starting in September 2023, that leaves a three-year period in which to effect significant change throughout the sector, with no appreciable additional resource to do so. ”

Bishop Grosseteste University, written submission

Another message we often heard during the roundtable evidence sessions with expert witnesses from the sector was that many HEPs clearly do care greatly about the experiences of their disabled students, but that it is not a simple task to tackle these complex problems. One of the key difficulties is the challenge of creating a whole institution approach within a massive, diffuse institution. The needs of disabled students are perceived by some as competing with other equality agendas for time, attention and resources, and disability equality does not often emerge as a top priority for many HEPs.

The scale and complexity of tackling the problem must not obscure some of the very specific challenges faced by HEPs, which should be considered individually in order to find solutions. One challenge mentioned frequently in evidence sessions and written submissions is the difficulty of engaging academics in accessibility and inclusion work. It's evident from the 'Accessing reasonable adjustments' section that academics not putting in place reasonable adjustments, let alone anticipating the needs of a diverse student cohort when planning lectures and seminars, is a key barrier to disabled students' access to teaching and learning. Academic staff may already be overwhelmed with the competing demands of their teaching and research responsibilities; this unsustainable workload should be taken into account by HEP leadership, and mitigated where possible. However, there are also other potential causes of this challenge which could be addressed by HEPs, as we set out below.

Lack of training for staff

The challenge of engaging academic staff in accessibility work is directly related to the lack of training available or taken up by these staff members. As explained by some written submissions, a lack of training means that academic staff can lack the knowledge and confidence to know why and how to implement reasonable adjustments and to make their teaching accessible:

“ Barriers identified by survey and by senior academics include time, knowledge, training and confidence of teaching staff. They identify adjustments to assessment tools as their main area of concern, as well as a lack of confidence and knowledge about how to implement recommended adjustments, legal requirements and inclusive practice approaches. ”

Sheffield Hallam University, written submission

Practitioners at the evidence sessions affirmed that this is a key issue in their experience:

“ The training of lecturing staff, academic staff in awareness of a range of issues, but particularly in inclusive practice, delivery of learning and teaching and provision of materials and provision of support. ”

Practitioner at evidence session 2

Evidence provided by Jisc, drawing on their own research, elucidates the scale of the problem:

“ Evidence from Jisc's 2019 Digital experience insights survey of over 6,500 teaching staff from 61 organisations found that 17 per cent of FE and 15 per cent of HE teaching staff said they used assistive technologies in their role. Of these staff, nearly a quarter in FE and 40 per cent in HE said they did not have the support they needed to use assistive technology effectively. ”

Jisc, written submission

Some of the students, practitioners and HEPs giving evidence have suggested that some older academic staff are more set in their ways when it comes to teaching methods and styles, and resistant to change. However, older staff who have been working in academia longer may also be further removed from new developments in technology and adjustments to teaching. Training on how to provide reasonable adjustments and make teaching and learning more accessible could be paired with training to improve staff awareness and understanding of disabled students' needs and experiences.

Recommendation 3:

The Office for Students should require HEPs to include information in their Access and Participation Plans about the training they provide for academic and professional staff, describing how this addresses disability inclusion, and including metrics on how many staff are undertaking the training and how often. Training related to disability inclusion should be mandatory for all staff.

Academic staff and support staff should receive training on the needs of disabled students, their rights under law to be provided with reasonable adjustments, and training on how to provide reasonable adjustments. It should also be a mandatory part of a higher education teaching qualification to be trained on reasonable adjustments and to prove that you understand them. This should include training on alternative modes of assessment.

Good practice

Our organisational structure ensures academics embrace accessibility, with accessibility officers in each faculty ensuring it is at the forefront of academic staffs' minds. We provide tutors with the profiles of their students with disability, and encourage them to discuss requirements directly with the student and mutually agree on a teaching/study strategy. To ensure our tutors are fully equipped, we provide them with a range of information and resources including disability descriptors, guidance notes, and free online learning about individual conditions. We also have a disability advisor service which can advise staff, and help them deal with the most complex issues and cases.

Associate lecturers are required to complete an 'AL-Essentials' course, which provides training on teaching and communicating with students with special circumstances, and on anticipatory duty to support the needs of students. Faculties also run face-to-face sessions for new staff - level 1 tutors - where supporting disabled students is normally a feature.



The Open University, written submission

International students

Another area which arose through our evidence was the unique challenge of supporting disabled international students. Similar issues such as disclosure of disability or even students recognising themselves as 'disabled' can be exacerbated when coupled with cultural differences and language barriers.



Over 40% of UAL's students are international and rates of disability disclosure are much lower among international than Home/EU students. UAL would welcome support from the sector on how we can best reach disabled international students, to help them to understand the concept of disability and their rights and entitlements, as early as possible in their studies.



University of the Arts London, written submission

Practitioners raised through written submissions that disabled international students suffer under the differential funding of support:

“The number of hours which HEI are willing to fund per academic year for an international student ranges between 6-8 hours. This is highly insufficient. Home students usually get 30 hours per week through the DSA, which immediately places international students at a disadvantage.”

Anonymous, written submission

International students can also be more vulnerable to social isolation because they lack established support networks of family and friends in the UK. In research on loneliness and social isolation by WonkHE, 17% of UK students said they consider themselves to have no true friends at university, but 20% of international students said the same, rising to 29% of disabled students responding.²⁸ This additional complicating factor makes the support provided by HEPs even more important, as support practitioners are a fundamental pillar of a much more limited range of interventions into international students' health and wellbeing.



Case study – the University of Kent

The University of Kent implements a number of systems, strategies and processes as part of its commitment to inclusivity and accessibility in teaching and learning.

One of the university's key projects working on this area is the OPERA (Opportunity, Productivity, Engagement, Reducing barriers, Achievement) project, which is part of the Student Support and Wellbeing (SSW) department. The OPERA team champions the creation of accessible information and use of Productivity Tools (assistive technologies) throughout the university. This includes working closely with the IT department and web accessibility team so that changes and updates to the university's websites and online resources are coordinated and designed with accessibility in mind.

The OPERA team are currently mapping all of the contact points of the student journey from open days through to enrolment and study and finally graduation, to identify the resources and webpages that an applicant and student will be interacting with. Following this, they will engage with the department which owns those resources and webpages to raise their staff's awareness about the accessibility of the information and processes.

Some of the web development team's recent innovations include a new template which will be universally used across the entire website. The development phase for the template was iterative, with a number of extensive user testing sessions conducted with students with disabilities. The students were able to evaluate the flow of the website and test its compatibility with their own assistive technologies alongside the web development team's use of traditional web accessibility testing tools.

The web development team have also developed a browser-based web editing tool called Site Editor, which allows content creators to ensure the accessibility of the new webpages they're creating. For example, the software will not allow a page to be published if images do not have alt text descriptions.

At a more senior level, the head of Kent's Student Support and Wellbeing department sits on a number of university committees, so that the needs and concerns of the department and the university's disabled students are raised at a strategic level. This is in addition to the ongoing networking and support for the broader inclusive learning and teaching environment. This has been essential in pursuing the objective of embedding accessibility and mainstreaming inclusive approaches. The strategies developed and advocated by the SSW department have a universal benefit to all learners. In addition, accessibility is increasingly viewed as an opportunity to improve the student and staff experience, and not as an additional workload.

Another key outcome from discussions at university committees is that they have allowed for feedback to be received in order to identify the best strategies for promoting the Kent Inclusive Practices (KIPS). KIPS are simple but powerful mainstream adjustments to learning and teaching delivery at Kent, which are informed by an in depth analysis of disabled students' Inclusive learning Plans to identify the most frequently requested adjustments.

In addition, the university's external work on accessibility has led to a partnership with Kent County Council (KCC), which has seen the university and KCC align key strategies around meeting the requirements of the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations (2018). This includes creating a single approach to Accessibility Statements, training, procurement, auditing, and the use of assistive technologies within both organisations.

2. Bureaucratic and financial burdens

Chapter Overview

In this chapter we examine the bureaucratic and financial burdens which negatively impact disabled students' experiences of higher education. We found that disabled students face a number of additional pressures in comparison to non-disabled students, including the heavy administrative burden created by applying for, being assessed for, organising and chasing up the support they need. We received a great deal of evidence about problems with the Disabled Students' Allowance, such as the fact that the application process is lengthy and complex; the processing of an application is not fast; and the equipment and support allocated sometimes is of poor quality, provided extremely late, or not provided at all. We heard that many disabled students struggle with the financial burden of extra costs relating to their disability, and that disabled students often interrupt their studies because of the financial burden, a lack of support, and struggling to fully access their teaching and learning. We also heard about the ways in which complaints processes inhibit disabled students from complaining, including a lack of support to cope with the bureaucracy of the process. These pressures prevent students from focusing on their studies by taking up their time and energy. We recommend that the government designs a new cross-departmental system to support disabled people with their financial, practical and other needs from the classroom to the workplace. In the meantime, the government should make a number of operational and strategic reforms to the DSA process. Disabled students should receive a maintenance grant to help with the additional costs they face which are not covered by the DSA, and the government should fund independent support for disabled students going through a complaints process. We also recommend that the OfS should conduct research on the extent to which HEPs reduce the administrative burden faced by disabled students, and provide guidance to students' unions on how to support disabled students through a complaints process.

While gathering evidence for the inquiry, we heard about a number of complex problems faced by disabled students which cross over the key themes of teaching and learning, living and social, and transitions and employment. These problems do not arise solely from the behaviour of individual students, teachers, or support staff, but are features of various systems which govern how disabled students access learning, support, and funding in higher education. Some of the factors which contribute to these systemic problems come from a number of different origins: for example student loans funding; the DSA equipment charge; NHS charges for doctor's notes; and high accommodation costs; all these can accumulate to create a significant financial burden on disabled students. There are few immediate or simple solutions to the issues described in this chapter; but the government, the OfS, and HEPs can and should do more to tackle these systemic problems and reduce the burdens on disabled students.

Administrative burden

An issue which was raised repeatedly at the evidence sessions is the administrative burden on disabled students. We heard from much of our evidence that disabled students often have to spend more time than other students on studying in order to keep up, but they also have to get through a mountain of related tasks just to enable them to have proper access to teaching and learning. Disabled students at many HEPs have to organise meetings with their support services department to discuss and agree a support plan for adjustments to their teaching learning. As previously described, many students then have the responsibility for chasing up the implementation of their support plan by their lecturers and tutors.

“ It ends up six people from the university contacting me at different times, which, some would be my disability advisor, some would be a life centre advisor, some might be my academic tutor ... as someone who is dyslexic, with a mental illness, this is extremely stressful to deal with because I can't talk with six people at the same time. ”

Student at evidence session 1

These tasks in themselves require a large amount of administrative work and organisation. This is greatly compounded by the challenges of the application, assessment and implementation of the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), which will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter. Existing research reinforces this finding and the negative consequences of this administrative burden on disabled students' studies and emotional wellbeing.²⁹

If disabled students need financial assistance to support themselves while studying, they have to contend with the sometimes lengthy and complex application and assessment processes for state funds such as Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, or Housing Benefit. If disabled students wish to access perhaps a larger amount of financial support or support as a one-off, they may apply to their institution's hardship fund or that of a charity, which can entail another long application process. As summarised by a disability practitioner during an evidence session:

“ I would say admin associated with disability support is just enormous and a real barrier to people accessing support. ”

Practitioner at evidence session 2

Mitigating circumstances forms

Another facet of the administrative burden is the frequent need for some disabled students to apply for mitigating/extenuating circumstances forms in order to get extensions for essay deadlines or other academic work. Students highlighted what they felt was the unnecessary task of having to fill out a unique mitigating circumstances form for every essay or deadline, for reasons relating to their impairment which will remain the same or will recur frequently throughout their degree.

“ I have an issue with the coursework and the deadline because I realised the deadline is the same for everybody at my university. So as somebody that suffers from severe PTSD, at times it's really hard for me to meet the deadline ... You have to submit mitigating circumstances, and that's for every student. There's no special criteria for somebody who is disabled. ... [You have to submit a mitigating circumstances form] for every essay. ”

Student at evidence sessions 1

“ At my university they didn't offer any extensions at all. So, every time, I had to fill a special considerations form. ... First of all, they didn't inform me that was the protocol, so it took me ages to find out what the protocol was. Then, every time I submitted a form for an extension, I photocopied the same form because they wouldn't keep it on file. I was just, like, that's just such a simple thing that they could do, which would make life less stressful. ”

Student at evidence session 1

One student highlighted the difficulties for students with particular impairments, such as dyslexia, in having to repeatedly fill out an extenuating circumstances form:

“ I get two weeks extra because of my physical requirements ... on top of that, I have dyslexia and dyspraxia also. So, on top of that, I have all of that, and then they want me to apply for each set of essays and coursework, an extension, and sometimes I don't even get an email back saying, 'Your extension has been approved,' or whatever. ”

Student at evidence session 1

Another issue raised at an evidence session by the NUS Disabled Students' Officer Piers Wilkinson is that many HEPs' mitigating circumstances forms and systems were not designed with disabled students and their needs in mind:

“ The entire systems are designed for every student to be able to apply, and it's basically the understanding that it's a car accident or a family bereavement that the system was built for. [The form] goes to someone that has no training on disabled student issues or the barriers, as well as often it being different, in terms of threshold, for each school. So, sometimes it will go to an administrator for them to decide, having had no background in medications, or adjustment-based provision or even just generic understanding of what disabled people-, who we are and what we do. ”

Piers Wilkinson, NUS Disabled Students Officer

This might mean that the criteria of circumstances under which you can request an extension are not relevant to disabled students' experiences, or that the forms are administratively complex, creating an extra burden for disabled students who are already overburdened with work. It can also mean, as described in the above quote, that the administrators deciding whether to approve or deny an extension request don't have the required knowledge or expertise to understand why a disabled student needs the extension.

Recommendation 4:

The Office for Students should conduct and collate research on the extent to which HEPs monitor and reduce the administrative burden on their disabled students, with a view to establishing this practice as a key indicator of an HEP's support for disabled students.

The OfS's work should establish examining and reducing the administrative burden on disabled students as one of the key indicators of the quality and success of an HEP's model of support for disabled students. The OfS and its What Works Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes should gather and share research and best practice on this topic. We hope that this will lead to HEPs improving their systems and practices to reduce unnecessary levels of administration, and increasing the resource for support staff so that they can further support disabled students with the administrative burden.

The Disabled Students' Allowance

We received a vast amount of evidence through the evidence sessions, student survey, and written submissions about the problems with the DSA process for students, HEPs and disability practitioners. Various aspects of the system either work too slowly, do not ensure quality or appropriate equipment and support, or increase the already significant administrative burden faced by disabled students. There are also significant problems with the system for the allocation of support work to practitioners and agencies, which will be explored in more detail later on in the report.

Application stage

The most common complaints from students were around the length and complexity of the application process, which is still paper-based; the length of time it takes for applications to be processed; and the length of time it takes for support and equipment to be put in place. Numerous submissions to the call for evidence from HEPs, disability practitioners and third sector organisations highlighted the DSA as a key barrier to disabled students, particularly because of the administrative burden and difficulty of the process.

The administration burden required to apply for DSAs, particularly the requirement for reading, form filling, physical access to assessment centres and the stress of providing evidence and being required to provide medical evidence for approval or rejection is a process that may risk the disengagement of the most vulnerable students.

AbilityNet, written submission

A significant number of our most vulnerable students struggle with the thought of navigating the DSA process, they worry about stigma and can have difficulties providing appropriate medical evidence.

Sheffield Hallam University, written submission

The provision of medical evidence was often particularly highlighted as a barrier to even finishing the application process. In its written submission, the Association of Non-Medical Help Providers stated that:

The requirement of students to provide medical evidence to support their eligibility for DSA appears to create a barrier to them progressing with their application. According to the SFE [Student Finance England] data, many applications are pended at this stage and are ultimately not progressed.

Association of Non-Medical Help Providers, written submission

Other organisations providing support underlined that students with particular conditions or impairments face more of a challenge in providing medical evidence:

Students with mental health problems having to prove that they have a chronic condition and provide extensive evidence during the DSA application phase is a significant challenge. This process is very paper laden, stressful and a difficult process for these students.

University Mentoring Organisation, written submission

Some HEPs provide support for students going through the application process, which is a positive example of good practice, but also takes up a lot of time for resource-limited support services departments.

Assessment stage

Evidence from written submissions also highlighted problems with the assessment stage of the DSA process. The DSA-QAG describes a range of issues with Needs Assessors in its written evidence.

“ Unlike NMH [non-medical help] support workers, who are required to meet the DfE’s mandatory criteria, there are no qualifications required to become a study needs assessor. It is at the discretion of each assessment centre (private or HEP based) to determine the suitability of an individual for this role and the disabilities for which they can assess. ”

DSA-QAG, written submission

The DSA-QAG’s submission details statistics from its audit work. This information casts serious doubts on the quality of some of the assessments of disabled students’ needs being undertaken. Close to or just over half of the Needs Assessment Reports (NARs) reviewed failed to provide sufficient evidence across a number of measures, including whether students had previously had a DSA assessment; whether students already possessed a computer and how suitable it was for their needs; what the key impacts are of a student’s condition or impairment on their learning; and information to validate the key recommendations made by the assessor.

The failure to provide information and evidence on these areas in the NAR can lead to delays in the approval of the report and recommendations by Student Finance, as well as the possibility that the equipment recommended and provided might be inappropriate for the student’s needs.

Another issue with Needs Assessors was raised by many HEPs and practitioners:

“ We are currently experiencing significant difficulties with Needs Assessors making recommendations for providers who are not available in this area. ”

University of St Andrews, written submission

From the evidence we received, this seems to be a common outcome of needs assessments for many HEPs. The cause of this will be explored in the ‘Provision of equipment and support’ section. The consequence is usually that the student is left waiting for weeks or even months for their recommended support to be provided, which has an obvious negative effect on their studies. Some HEPs provide transitional support while the student is waiting, but this is uncertain and can be costly.

A related challenge is that once the assessor recommends certain equipment and support, the provision of this support work and equipment is allocated to organisations who are not notified that they have been allocated this work. A letter is sent to the student and their institution explaining the support and equipment they have been recommended and the organisations which will provide them, but students are often not aware that the onus is on them to contact the organisation to arrange the support being put in place. Having to carry out this step themselves creates an extra layer of difficulty, stress and bureaucracy for students.

Provision of equipment and support

The late provision of equipment and support through DSA was frequently mentioned by respondents to the student survey and students at the evidence sessions. This seriously disadvantages disabled students who need DSA-funded equipment or support to be able to properly access their teaching and learning.

I've yet to find anybody who's received DSA in prompt time. I received my DSA assessment in the third week of my first term at university. The equipment that I was ordered, arrived two months into my third year. So, I did not have a laptop for two years. I can't hand-write properly so I was unable to attend lectures properly.

Student at evidence session 1

Some students reported receiving equipment that isn't appropriate, relevant, or useful for their needs, which may relate to the previously described issues with needs assessors and assessments.

I had to pay extra for a laptop due to, obviously, what they were providing wasn't suitable for what I was wanting. It was quite a large amount I had to pay just for a better laptop. Out of all of the big box of equipment, I only used the laptop and the printer. All the other stuff I found really pointless.

Student at evidence session 1

Assessors do not have any information or take into account your university course into their assessment. For example, if you do a computer modelling degree, you are given a DSA laptop with software on that allows you to access stuff. ... The issue was, the software that I needed to use for my course melted, effectively, the computer, because the DSA provided laptop wasn't powerful enough.

NUS Disabled Students' Officer, evidence session 1

This was echoed and summarised by a submission from the Thomas Pocklington Trust, a charity which supports people with visual impairments:

Equipment provided is often not fit for intended purpose or durable enough to last the entire degree course; equipment offered isn't always appropriate, in part because access to mainstream or new technology is not being considered and/or allocated.

Thomas Pocklington Trust, written submission

Another key issue for students relating to the provision of equipment is the £200 upfront charge for a DSA laptop. The government introduced this charge for students funded by Student Finance England in the 2015/16 academic year, and it requires that disabled students pay the first £200 of the cost of a laptop provided through the DSA. The logic behind this change is that buying a laptop is now a standard cost of undertaking a degree, and the DSA is intended to provide for the additional costs incurred by disabled students as a result of their condition or impairment. However, many disabled students cannot afford this initial cost, and previous research by Policy Connect has shown that the introduction of the charge corresponded to a 20% decrease in the take-up of DSA equipment in England.³⁰

“ I could not afford that £200 for so long. When I finally could, if you want to pay more upfront, you can get a better laptop, the laptop I was eventually given was too heavy for me to actually carry because I couldn't afford to pay the premium to get a laptop that was actually suitable to my needs. ”

Student at evidence session 1

Other issues relating to DSA funding were raised through the evidence sessions and written submissions. The funding for non-medical help is capped at a level which does not fully cover the cost of providing support for deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired students, such as sign language provision or support for getting around campus. The additional cost of this support must then be funded by the institution. This sometimes leads to a situation where particular institutions gain a reputation for being specialists at supporting deaf or blind students, and thus end up with a far higher proportion of those students in the student body than the average, but receive no additional funding from the government to support those students.

In a positive development, in 2020 the Minister for Universities Michelle Donelan announced that from the 2021/22 academic year, DSA funding would be simplified from four sub-allowances with individual caps to one allowance with a £25,000 cap, applying equally to full time and part time undergraduate and postgraduate students. The Thomas Pocklington Trust welcomed the news as positive for students with vision impairment, while noting that the overall budget has reduced slightly, which may result in students with the most complex needs not being able to access the full range of equipment needed.³¹

Some HEPs raised a different problem with funding in their written submissions, which is that many students who need support do not meet the eligibility criteria for DSA despite the fact that they would benefit from additional support.

Disability services' ability to deliver effective meaningful one-to-one support is stymied by the threshold of DSA eligibility, which results in many students being unable to access specialist mentoring, meaning that we either offer them nothing or something very short-term.

Queen Mary, University of London, written submission

A fundamental problem raised by nearly every one of the dozens of disability practitioners who submitted written evidence is the two quote system for the allocation of support. When a Needs Assessor has decided what equipment or personal support a disabled student requires, the system requires them to find two quotes for the cost of provision, and the provision of equipment or support is allocated to whichever organisation quotes the lower cost. The Association of Non-Medical Help Providers explains:

“ NMH provision for Student Finance England is based on a 2-quote system where the lower price is always selected for service delivery. Across DSA service providers there is a growing awareness that the introduction of a competitive principle of DSA provision is having a detrimental effect. ... The downward pressure on pricing is understandably being passed on to the individual support staff who are beginning to leave the higher education sector due to low pay and poor job security. ”

Association of Non-Medical Help Providers, written submission

An anonymous submission from a disability practitioner within an HEP underlines the effects of this system:

“ Quality of support has been steadily driven down as competition in the sector, based on price, has increased. This is due to two factors: 1) the flooding of the market for support; 2) experienced support workers leaving the sector, citing reduced pay and reduced workload. ”

Disability practitioner, anonymous, written submission

Another consequence is the proliferation of support agencies who contract large numbers of support practitioners, often on zero-hours contracts. We heard that some agencies try to bid as quickly as possible and with as low a cost as possible when approached for a quote, and only after confirmation that they've won the contract do they approach their list of practitioners to see whether anyone is actually available to provide the support work. This sometimes leads to Needs Assessors selecting providers who don't have any practitioners on hand at the time or in a particular geographical area to support the student they've been assigned, as described earlier on in this section. The repercussions of this system for disability practitioners themselves will be explored at the end of this chapter.

It's clear from previous research that the DSA makes a significant difference to many disabled students. In 2018 the DfE commissioned IFF Research to carry out research into disabled students' experiences of the DSA.³² As part of this, 1773 disabled students (not all in receipt of the DSA) completed an online survey, and researchers followed up with qualitative interviews of 50 students. When asked about their overall experiences, many of the statistics were positive: 68% of DSA recipients surveyed agreed that the support they received enabled them to participate more fully in their course than they would be able to otherwise, and 55% of those in receipt of DSAs agreed that the DSA support they receive meets all of their needs, although 28% disagreed. In addition, 81% of students surveyed were satisfied with their overall experience of the assessment process, including the recommendations made in the assessment report and the amount of funding they were entitled to.

The research also found similar themes to our evidence in this report. For example, 40% of disabled students hadn't heard of the DSA before they started their course; only four in ten students surveyed had received support with completing the application form; and 30% of students surveyed found the application form fairly or very difficult. The research noted that students with particular conditions or impairments, such as mental health conditions, long-term health conditions, or SpLDs, were more likely to find the application form difficult or to struggle to provide evidence. IFF Research's report concludes that these difficulties, combined with confusion or doubts among some disabled students about their eligibility for the DSA, can deter students from applying or from completing the application process.

The DSA is a core element of the support disabled students receive during higher education, and it clearly has great potential to have a positive impact on these students. The government and the sector must not settle for a system which doesn't function as well as it could, or which creates further challenges and barriers for some disabled students.

Lack of strategic plan

Some disability practitioners and representatives of HEPs described issues arising from changes made to the DSA, and the fact that these sometimes seem to conflict with what is generally understood to be the purpose of the allowance. However, these issues arise in part because of a lack of clarity from the government about their strategy and vision for the DSA.

Some HEPs, practitioners and third sector organisations described the confusion created by the often opaque changes made to the DSA system.

“ In early 2019 when the change to dyslexia evidence accepted by SFE came into force – there was no clear guidance, no clear implementation date, and the change has actually made matters more complicated for HEPs – it doesn’t seem like HEPs were even properly consulted on this change. ”

Head of Disability Services, anonymous written submission

Another key issue which was frequently raised was the 2016/17 changes to the DSA which meant that lower levels (Bands 1 and 2) of non-medical help support are no longer covered by the DSA, and must be funded or provided by HEPs themselves. This change was part of the government’s drive to encourage HEPs to embed inclusive practices into their curricula and support provision, which should eventually mean that individual lower level support is less frequently necessary. However, in practice, this means that the amount of support that students with lower level needs receive depends on the HEP they attend, as described by this students’ union:

“ DSA changes have] also increased inequality for disabled students across the country as the level of support they receive now depends on the ability or willingness of their institution to fund aspects of their support. Exactly what DSA was designed to avoid. ”

Sheffield University Students’ Union, written submission

This change in DSA funding only applies to Student Finance England, and so to students who were ordinarily resident in England before beginning their studies, leading to disparities in funding:

“ Adapting to the elimination of Band 1 and 2 funding from the DSA] is particularly challenging for Welsh HEIs as we are operating a two tier system between the support available from Student Finance England and Wales. This can lead to some students getting more support than others impacting both quality and engagement. ”

Cardiff Metropolitan University, written submission

The opacity and lack of guidance around the intent and implementation of changes to the DSA clearly do not serve HEPs, practitioners or disabled students well. It seems to some stakeholders that the government does not have a clear vision for the role it wants the DSA to play in the higher education sector: is it aiming for the DSA eventually to be rendered obsolete by the development of inclusive design and accessible teaching and learning in HEPs? Many practitioners insist that some disabled students will always need additional support that cannot be provided solely by their HEP. It is not clear what the government’s ‘end goal’ for the DSA is, what changes might be planned for the future, and over what time period these might happen. It is also not clear how the government aims to balance the competing priorities of value for money, quality support, and student choice.

Recommendation 5:

The government should create a new system to support disabled people from the classroom to the workplace. This journey could start with Education, Health and Care Plans, moving through to the DSA and Access to Work, and addressing disabled people's financial, practical and other needs. This cross-departmental system should have the strategic objective of removing disadvantage and ensuring full access and inclusion for disabled people in learning, employment, and all stages of life, including in higher education. Whether DSA forms part of this system or is absorbed by it, this new system must learn the lessons of the problems we have identified with the DSA: to be focussed on outcomes for disabled people; to harness the opportunity for modernisation; and to reduce the length and complexity of the process, and the administrative burden on disabled people.

This system should be designed in collaboration with disabled people and disability sector charities. A new cross-departmental lifelong system will get rid of problems with transitions from one source of funding and one style of support provision to another, where disabled people currently have to repeatedly disclose, explain and evidence their additional needs in order to receive support. This system should have the effect of lowering wait times for disabled students to receive support when they move to higher education, and of increasing the take-up of support in the workplace.

Recommendation 6:

While this new system of support is being developed, or if it does not come to be implemented, reforms need to be made to the DSA to align it with the government's objective of empowering and supporting disabled people. This includes:

- Creating a five-year strategic plan for the DSA, outlining the government's vision and strategy for the current functioning and future purposes of the DSA and focussed on outcomes
- Undertaking an operational review of the DSA application process to find areas for improvement and modernisation, reducing the length and complexity of the process
- Devising a system for the allocation of support which prioritises and ensures quality and student choice, as well as value for money.

The government should lay out plans for the functions it would like the DSA to serve in the future, as HEPs move towards more inclusive practice. It should end the two quote system for the allocation of support, which our evidence has demonstrated is leading to worse outcomes for students and practitioners. It should also ensure sufficient funding for students whose support needs currently exceed the cap. The government's operational review should work to reduce the complexity and administration required in the process of application and assessment for a DSA; plan the shift to an online application; institute a GDPR consent box so that details of the support agreed can be automatically sent to the support provider as well as the student and HEP; and change or modernise any other areas which are found to create a heavy burden on students. The review should have input from disabled students, disability practitioners, and third sector organisations.

Financial burden

Another key systemic problem faced by disabled students is the financial burden. Disabled people often already have to contend with an increased cost of general living: possibly having to pay for medication, doctors' notes, specialist equipment for daily living, specialist transport, particular food for dietary requirements, and so on.³³ This is particularly difficult for disabled students in higher education, who spend a disproportionate amount of their time organising the support and reasonable adjustments they need in order to be able to access teaching and learning, as well as possibly having to spend more time than average studying because of difficulties related to their impairment. This means they have less time available in which to take up paid work, or that doing paid work at the same time as studying might negatively impact negatively on their health, wellbeing, or studies. It's not surprising that a 2012 report by the NUS highlighted that disabled students graduate from HE with a higher level of debt, and experience particular financial strain while studying.³⁴

Students at the roundtables talked about the financial burden they experienced, of which the cost of medical evidence was a key factor:

“ Following the mitigating circumstances issue, despite it being on my student support plan, every single time I wanted to apply and say I needed the extension because of a flare up or an issue, I had to go and get medical evidence ... people don't realise how much a medical letter can cost. It costs upwards of £80 every single time. ”

Student at evidence session 1

The barrier presented by costs associated with the Disabled Students' Allowance was explored in the previous section of this chapter, but it is not the only factor in the financial burden on disabled students.

“ I had a disability advisor who talked me through the [DSA] application process. It was at the time all the PIP payments and stuff were being cut, so I wasn't able to apply for any of those. All they said was, 'You can apply for this but we can't offer you any additional funding whatsoever. So, you're going to have to make up the shortfall for all of this.' I had to make up the shortfall for my accommodation costs, I had to make up the shortfall for my equipment costs and that suddenly meant I am, again, having to choose between my own equipment and my mother's food or my food. ”

Student at evidence session 1

Some submissions to the call for evidence highlighted the problems experienced with benefit funding, which adds another layer to the financial burden on disabled students. One aspect of this is the recent cuts to some of the benefits which disabled students rely on.

“ Theoretical calculations suggest that disabled students may face increased financial challenges (potentially leading to drop-out) in coming years based on the level of Universal Credit available to full-time students who are in receipt of PIP being in most cases of natural migration or “new claim” substantially lower than would have been the case under the legacy benefit system. ”

Staffordshire University

Other submissions highlighted the potential for disabled students to go without vital benefit funding for an extended period of time, due to the length of the processes, and the way in which receipt of different benefits such as Housing Benefit and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) are interconnected:

“ Students have issues making claims for disability benefits to which they are entitled. With regards to PIP, this is a complicated application which the Students’ Union generally expect to have to take to at least mandatory reconsideration and then tribunal. This is not a quick process and affects other benefits as often PIP gives students access to other benefits they need as a disabled student such as Housing Benefit (one of the criteria for being eligible for Housing Benefit as a full time student is being on PIP). We have been involved in cases where the time between putting in an appeal request for a student and representing them has been 10 months ”

Sheffield University Students’ Union, written submission

One particular facet of financial difficulty faced by some disabled students was raised during the evidence sessions by Dr Liz Marr, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Students) at the Open University (the OU). She explained that disabled students who are undertaking part-time distance learning are only able to access part-time maintenance loans if they can prove that they are physically unable to attend a campus-based university because of the adjustments they require relating to their disability. This situation is a result of the Student Loans Company taking an overly strict interpretation of Section 157M of the 2018 amendment to the Education (Student Support) Regulations, which states:

“ Students who are treated as in attendance on a course

157M.–(1) A student to whom this regulation applies is treated as being in attendance on the designated part-time course for the purpose of qualifying for the loan for living costs.

(2) This regulation applies to–

... (b) a disabled student who is undertaking a designated part-time course in the United Kingdom but is not in attendance because the student is unable to attend for a reason which relates to the student’s disability

”

As a consequence, disabled students wishing to study part-time as well as at a distance are hugely disadvantaged by being unable to receive a maintenance loan unless they can prove that they are both physically unable to attend a campus university because of needs relating to their condition or impairment which cannot be accommodated by a campus university; and can provide evidence that they have researched and discussed this with campus universities. In practice, the OU has students who have been asked to provide evidence of written correspondence between the student and a campus-based university, where the latter states that they cannot accommodate the student because of their disability; this is nearly impossible for the student to get, given the possible reputational consequences for an HEP of stating this in writing.

The significance of the financial burden on disabled students was also reflected by the responses to the student survey. One question on the survey asked students: ‘Please tick the three areas where you feel you face the biggest barriers to enjoying and making the most of higher education.’

Students could then choose from a range of pre-written options, and an 'other' box. The below table shows the number of respondents who selected each pre-written option:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Financial | 213 |
| Accessibility of teaching and learning resources | 204 |
| Staff/student attitudes | 203 |
| Student support services | 196 |
| Physical access to teaching | 171 |
| Social/club inclusion | 160 |
| Public transport | 104 |
| Accommodation | 68 |

It's strikingly clear from the above data that the financial burden is the most common barrier which survey respondents consider to prevent them from making the most of higher education.

Recommendation 7:

- a) Disabled students should receive a maintenance grant from Student Finance to help them with the financial burden they experience.
- b) HEPs should revise the criteria for their hardship grants or funding so that they're better targeted to supporting disabled students.
- c) The government should also review disabled students' eligibility and access to benefit funding.

This maintenance grant could be non-means tested, in consideration of the administrative barrier to students created by means testing, particularly when disabled students already face a serious administrative burden. However, there must be some kind of mechanism for ensuring that only disabled students are applying for/receiving the funds, such as needing to be registered as a disabled student with their institution's support services department.

Interrupting studies or dropping out of higher education

Recent OFS research has demonstrated that there is a small gap of 0.9 percentage points between the continuation rate for disabled versus non-disabled students. However, there is also significant disparity between students with different impairment types: in 2016, full-time undergraduates with cognitive or learning difficulties actually had a higher continuation rate (91.4%) than non-disabled students (90.3%), whereas students with mental health conditions had the lowest continuation rate (86.8%).³⁵ Understanding why disabled students interrupt their studies or drop out of higher education is a vital element of understanding their overall experiences of higher education.

We gathered information and opinions through the evidence sessions and public call for evidence about why disabled students interrupt their studies or drop out of higher education. Students at the evidence sessions explained in clear terms the attitudes of their institutions towards interruptions of studies, and the negative consequences for students of doing so.

“ Oxford and Cambridge are quite unique in promoting suspension of your studies, which a student can undertake at any point in their degree. We have a really disproportionately high rate of disabled students suspending, and it’s the first suggestion if you’re not getting on with your course, they suggest that you suspend your studies for a year and come back. Which, for students who are disabled and who don’t get better in a year because you can’t just cure disabilities, isn’t effective whatsoever. ”

Student at evidence session 1

“ A lot of our students end up going on a leave of absence and they never return, because the minute that you go on a leave of absence, you are blocked from accessing any university support. So, you’re kicked out of all of the counselling, you’re kicked out of any financial support, you have to suddenly pay council tax and the university won’t help you, you lose your student loan. So, a lot of our students are made homeless if they want to [take a] leave of absence, but they’re also told to do that by the university. If they live in university accommodation, they’re also kicked out. ”

Student at evidence session 1

Interruptions of studies are sometimes the most appropriate option, for example for students who have become particularly unwell and would benefit from time off to focus on their health without the additional pressures of studying. However, some of the written submissions we received suggested that HEPs encourage students to interrupt their studies or drop out because it is simpler for the HEP.

“ We also often hear that if a student has had some absences or their condition has flared up, the default position by the university is often to ask the student to interrupt or withdraw, rather than exploring other more holistic options to support retention. ”

Lead Scotland

There are other external factors influencing whether students interrupt or drop out, such as the support they receive from outside of their HEP:

“ Students with ASC/MH [Autism Spectrum Condition/Mental health] disproportionately drop out – I think the lack of external NHS support plays a big role in this, especially for those who don’t have supportive families and for those with complex needs, where they face long waiting times for specialist services, and HEIs can’t necessarily provide the right support in the meantime. ”

Queen Mary University, written submission

Other HEPs raised the issue of the financial burden on disabled students, which some might find too difficult or stressful to cope with:

“ Anecdotally, based on experience within the Disability Service, it seems that the most common reasons for withdrawing from study are financial. Several students we work with have started by taking a period of time out and then ultimately decide not to return to study, as they are unable to manage the financial implications. ”

University of the Arts London, written submission

In addition, submissions by charities supporting disabled students emphasised that problems with access to teaching and learning and accessing DSA support are key issues which can lead disabled students to interrupt their studies or drop out. The Thomas Pocklington Trust is a partner in a longitudinal research study into the experiences of visually impaired students in higher education, and summarised their findings from research on the most common reasons for students taking many years to finish their course or dropping out:

“ DSA funded equipment not being in place at the start of the academic year; the student not receiving allocated Non-Medical Help support that was meant to be funded through DSA; reasonable adjustments not being put in place for exams; materials consistently not being accessible, including lecture material, textbooks, library catalogues, forms and information; a failure of HE providers to make anticipatory adjustments. ”

Thomas Pocklington Trust, written submission

“ Several students that I was working with left their courses as a direct result of their negative experiences on their courses regarding accessibility. Most often, students persevere but experience unnecessary levels of stress trying to compensate for non-inclusive teaching, or dealing with discrimination from their tutors. ”

SpLD tutor, anonymous, written submission

The University Mental Health Advisers Network reinforced this with its own summary of reasons for why some disabled students drop out, including some relating to stigma around mental illness:

“ Slow access to adjustments and inconsistent implementation; HEPs not set up to manage issues accessing DSA funded support e.g. equipment; lack of understanding of mental health as a disability and mental ill health in general; lack of flexibility in NMH support provision e.g. penalties for cancelling sessions, even if due to ill health, difficult to change provider, lack of choice. ”

University Mental Health Advisers Network

HEPs must be extremely careful about recommending that disabled students interrupt their studies, or allowing them to choose to do so before fully exploring alternative options. Many potential negative consequences of doing so have been highlighted by the quotes from students, including that disabled students who interrupt their studies or drop out lose access to support from their HEP and the DSA, as well as losing their student accommodation and financial support. It is not always the case that a disabled student's health or challenges with studying will improve following time out of education.

Complaints

When disabled students don't receive the reasonable adjustments they're entitled to according to equality legislation, or when they experience other kinds of discrimination such as stigmatisation or harassment, their primary option for rectifying the situation is to make a complaint to their institution. However, we heard from evidence submitted by a number of practitioners, third sector organisations, and the OIAHE, that complaints processes can create significant barriers for disabled students.

To get a picture of the current situation, we must understand to what extent disabled students are participating in complaints processes, and what they are complaining about. We heard from the OIAHE's evidence that disabled students are overrepresented both in overall complaints made and in successful complaints:

Our data about the complaints we have reviewed shows that in both 2018 and 2019, just over 20% of the complaints we resolved were from people identified as disabled students. ... In our view, the difference in the % of students complaining to the OIA who are known to be disabled in comparison to the % of known disabled students in the general student population, is significant. ... Of the cases we resolved in 2018, 27% of disabled students received a positive outcome in comparison to 19% of non-disabled students.

OIAHE, written submission

However, we also heard from other submissions that it is rare for disabled students to complain formally about the discriminatory behaviour they experience. It's therefore likely that far more disabled students are experiencing discriminatory behaviour than the number represented in the complaints data from individual institutions or the OIAHE.

Six of the participants in the Longitudinal Transitions Study left before completing their course, five linked this directly barriers to accessing their course. However, only one of the participants in the study made a complaint to their institution for this to have been formally recorded.

Thomas Pocklington Trust, written submission

Despite having an awareness of many situations in which students have been discriminated against, and many situations in which students have dropped out due to lack of reasonable adjustments, the DSN has only heard of a single student who has made a formal complaint.

UCL Disabled Students Network, written submission

Lead Scotland is a charity which enables disabled adults and carers to access inclusive learning opportunities, and which runs Scotland's national helpline for disabled students. The charity reported in its written submission that the majority of the complaints-related calls received are about students not receiving the reasonable adjustments they need to access teaching and learning:

Over a third of our calls relate to a disabled student making a complaint or appeal after experiencing issues around appropriate support and adjustments on their course. Students and their families regularly report experiences of disability discrimination, normally in the form of 'failure to provide reasonable adjustments', rather than overt direct discrimination.

Lead Scotland, written submission

The OIAHE's data on complaints necessarily reflects the fact that students have to have exhausted their institution's internal complaints process before taking a complaint to the OIAHE, and so the nature of the complaints are often either more complicated or more serious.

“ The majority of complaints we receive relate in some way to a student's academic progress such as the outcomes of particular assessments, or the decision not to allow a student to continue to study, or to require the student to repeat some element of the course. ”

OIAHE, written submission

Problems with the process

During internal complaints procedures, disabled students must either represent themselves, or hope to be represented by someone from their students' union or association. Students representing themselves in an internal complaints process take on a very stressful, tiring and administratively heavy burden, and the prospect of this can be enough to put off some students from going through with a complaint. Disabled students also have to consider the possible effect of this strain on their studies and on their health, both of which might be more precarious as a consequence of their condition or impairment. This is reinforced by statements from the OIAHE:

“ Anecdotally, we are told by students and bodies working with disabled students, that some disabled students decide not to pursue a complaint as far as the OIA because it will use up time and energy that is needed for their study, paid employment or other commitments. That such a significant number of disabled students do pursue their complaint with us is at least suggestive that a greater number are also dissatisfied with their experience but have not felt able to pursue the matter. ”

OIAHE, written submission

Students who benefit from support or representation from someone from their students' union or association may have help with some aspects of the process, but these representatives may have limited experience with complaints and therefore may be able to offer only limited support or advice. Students' unions are likely to have limited time and resource to offer students going through a complaints process. Lead Scotland also highlighted another issue with assistance from these representatives:

“ Student associations are mainly staffed by student volunteers and although they are separately constituted from institutions, callers report either a perception of, or actual experience of bias in favour of the institution. ”

Lead Scotland, written submission

Students might also fear the possible consequences of complaining:

“ Many of the students we speak to are reluctant to make formal complaints for fear of repercussion in how they will be treated and subsequently assessed on their course. ”

Lead Scotland, written submission

If students reach the conclusion of their institution's complaints process but are not satisfied with the outcome, they can take their complaint to the OIAHE to be examined independently. However, some students choose instead to sue their institution. Some written submissions stated that the enforcement of HEPs' compliance with the Equality Act seems to rely on individual students threatening litigation once they have exhausted the internal complaints process. It is rare for students to have any independent support with this action unless they fund this themselves.

“ The legislation, i.e. the Equality Act and now the Public Sector Bodies Accessibility legislation, is fine, but ensuring that HEPs are compliant relies mostly on individual students threatening litigation. ”

Queen Mary, University of London, written submission

One sector organisation stated that HEPs often settle these cases out of court and put in place non-disclosure agreements which prevent students from discussing details of the case publicly.

“ Universities have a tendency to employ reputational management techniques, including settling out of court and using non-disclosure agreements. ”

University Mental Health Advisers Network, written submission

This resolution leads to less incentive for institutional change and learning from the cases, and prevents the development of case law. It can also obscure the extent of the problems disabled students experience at individual institutions and across the sector.

The UCL Disabled Students' Network highlighted the fundamental contradiction in the dysfunctions of internal complaints processes:

“ The connection between students not being given support and students not complaining is not accidental. There is a vicious cycle. A lack of university support is keeping students from raising issues about a lack of university support, which in turn leads to a further lack of university support. ”

UCL DSN, written submission

Lead Scotland's written submission underlines the severe impact on disabled students of not receiving the reasonable adjustments they need to be able to learn, and of having to launch a complaint in an attempt to receive these.

“ The impact of not getting the appropriate support to learn and study at college and university can be significant, with callers and their families reporting a deterioration in physical and mental wellbeing, an increase in suicidal thoughts, lower pass marks than expected, interruptions to their studies and ultimately for some students, early withdrawal before completion. Students who have had to leave their course before completion report worsening of their impairment, isolation, depression, unemployment or underemployment, and reliance on social security benefits. ”

Lead Scotland, written submission

The evidence detailed above strongly suggests that disabled students are being prevented from complaining for a number of reasons, chiefly the length and administrative burden of the process, and the lack of knowledgeable independent advocacy and support available.

Recommendation 8:

The government should fund independent support for disabled students in higher education going through a complaints procedure (internally or externally), for example by providing funding to an existing organisation in the disability sector. In conjunction with this, the Office for Students should provide support to students' unions about how to help disabled students through an internal complaints process.

This support should be provided by an independent organisation such as a non-profit organisation working in the higher education or disability sector. There are already non-profits that provide similar services, but increased funding to increase the capacity and advertising of these services could make a real difference to disabled students who might want to complain. Improved take-up and satisfactory completion of internal complaints processes could potentially avoid students having to resort to an external complaints process or legal action. To complement this, HEPs should also consider reviewing their complaints procedures with disabled students and staff, as best practice. This will help HEPs to fulfil their legal duty to make anticipatory adjustments.

The challenge for disability practitioners

Through the public call for evidence we heard repeatedly about the numerous challenges for disability support practitioners in providing good quality, consistent support to disabled students. Some of these challenges are common between practitioners who are directly employed by an HEP or working within a support services department, versus those who work as freelancers or for an agency. However, the latter face some particularly difficult problems. It's important to explore all of these challenges in order to ensure that disabled students receive the best support possible.

Some of the challenges we heard about through the evidence sessions and written submissions related to the inherent difficulty of providing a reliable and sustainable level of support to disabled students year on year, when each academic year brings a totally different new cohort of a different size and range of needs. There is great heterogeneity within the grouping of 'disabled students' in terms of the consequences and challenges of different impairment types or conditions. What's more, each disabled student with a particular impairment type has unique challenges and support needs. Providing support to disabled students requires great attention to the particular circumstances of each individual student, but support practitioners are often pressed for the time required to deliver this care and attention.

The majority of the problems we heard about from disability practitioners were consequences of the competitive two-quote system for the allocation of equipment and support provision contracts, described in the Disabled Students' Allowance section of this chapter. As explained during that section, most disability practitioners are now working as freelancers or employed by agencies on hourly or zero-hours contracts. Not being directly employed by an HEP may provide some workers with valuable flexibility around the hours they work, but it can also have a range of negative consequences, the first of which is logistical difficulties with providing support provision.

Practitioners are often unable to book rooms themselves in which to hold support sessions with a student, and so the student has to deal with the stress and pressure of trying to book a room when there is a scarcity of appropriate and available spaces. Alternatively, some practitioners hold support sessions in libraries or cafés, but these environments can be unsuitable for the privacy needs of students. The Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education (ADSHE) confirmed that they consider this to be a key problem:

Lack of rooms for confidential space; agencies and HEPs not understanding the nature of 1:1 specialist support e.g counselling services would not expect to have meeting in shared spaces, so why should 1:1 tutors.

ADSHE, written submission

Practitioners described other problems with freelance or hourly/zero hours contract work for agencies. This included potentially not having sick pay or holiday pay, and no job security, with no reliable allocation of a certain number of hours of work or amount of income. There is little in the way of training and progression opportunities, and more experienced practitioners have to compete with less experienced practitioners for the same work and same level of pay. While practitioners directly employed by an HEP might have managers with a vested interest in supporting their career development, those working freelance or on zero hours contracts often have to fund their own CPD, which is difficult to afford when in an already precarious financial situation. This can prevent them from keeping up to date with new developments in research and working practices, affecting the quality of support they provide. One anonymous practitioner described the outcomes of this system:

The current structure of DSA support is forcing the most experienced and qualified NMH Band 4 professionals to leave. Respected professionals with integrity are failing to secure regular hours from one employer, whilst maverick types are working for an increasing number of agencies, loving the freedom and (unwittingly) overstepping professional boundaries due to lack of governance. Under zero hours' contracts, a Deliveroo style of employment pervades amongst agency NMH providers.

Anonymous practitioner, written submission

It's not surprising that a two-quote system to allocate support work to the cheapest provider would drive down pay levels for the practitioners providing the support. Furthermore, as previously described, the low pay and lack of job security drives out experienced workers. This has a significant effect on the quality of the support provided, as attested to by many written submissions.

We think DfE were misguided in their assumptions that a bidding process would improve quality and value for money for the taxpayer. Instead, many students are now provided with a worse quality experience which is not flexible enough to meet their needs and overall has expanded the private sector offer without any improved outcomes for students.

GuildHE, written submission

Another consequence is that disability practitioners not employed by an HEP have less influence to improve the systems and methods of support for disabled students in that institution:

Due to the changes that have been made to the provision of support with most of the tutors being employed on what are essentially zero hours contracts by agencies who have forced down the hourly rate and have little or no understanding of disability there is no opportunity for the wealth of knowledge that is held by those dealing directly with the students to share that knowledge or influence policies.

Cheri Shone, disability practitioner, written submission

The many pressures of this system of support allocation can have a severe effect on the wellbeing and livelihoods of disability practitioners themselves. This in turn has an obvious knock-on effect on their ability to provide good quality support to disabled students.

“The current system of zero hours contracts acts to reward agencies and institutions for employing a large number of tutors. ... But this also reduces the amount of work available for each tutor. In practice the amount of work given to individual tutors is not large enough to earn a sustainable living income.”

Tom Bayley, specialist study skills tutor, written submission

Tom Bayley goes on to explain:

“I can no longer afford to do my job. ... My original pay was £45 an hour. ... My pay rate has dropped year on year. Currently is down to as low as £23 an hour from Randstad. At the same time the amount of work I have been given per week has been declining. ... Last academic year I earned around £12,000. This academic year I have earned less than £3500 pounds in the five months from September to January. I was forced to sign on.”

Tom Bayley, specialist study skills tutor, written submission

The evidence we have received illuminates a clearly unacceptable state of affairs for disability practitioners. Practitioners cannot provide the best quality support possible in the face of the range of pressures and dysfunctions of the current system. As we suggest in Recommendation 6, the government must take into consideration the challenges for disability practitioners when reconsidering the strategic purposes and operational methods of the Disabled Students' Allowance.



3. Living and social experiences

Chapter Overview

In this chapter we examine disabled students' experiences of the social side of higher education. This includes how students interact with and are treated by their peers and teachers, experiences of accommodation and student union activities, and intersecting factors of their identities which influence and complicate their experiences. We found that disabled students are often socially isolated from their peers because of a lack of understanding or awareness of their needs, and a total lack of accessibility of student union events and activities. Accommodation is sometimes unsuitable for disabled students' needs and is too expensive, increasing the financial burden. We also heard that factors such as class, gender, and race, have a strong influence on disabled students' experiences, complicating or worsening the challenges they face. Social exclusion and isolation are negative in themselves, and have knock-on effects on students' wellbeing, academic success, and success in later life. We recommend that HEPs provide block grant funding for student unions focused on increasing accessibility for disabled students, and that government takes a clearer role in monitoring student accommodation codes to ensure accessibility in accommodation for disabled students. We also recommend that the OfS introduces a requirement for HEPs' Access and Participation Plans to report on the training provided to staff around disability inclusion.

The theme of living and social encompasses many of the things that students might spend the majority of their time doing: relaxing at home, exploring the local area, taking up new hobbies, having fun and making friends. These activities are a fundamental part of participating in higher education, allowing students to build up their personal and social skills, develop themselves into well-rounded people, and make long-lasting friendships.

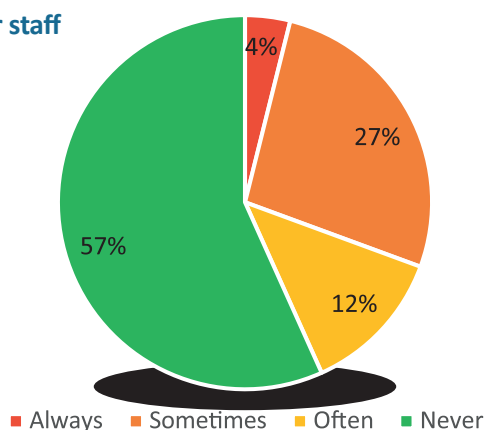
However, for disabled students, this ideal of the higher education experience must sometimes seem distant from their reality. Through the data we gathered from our online survey, we heard that 26% of respondents always or often feel excluded from social activities, societies and clubs because of a lack of disability awareness. Existing research reinforces that disabled students are often isolated socially, feel misunderstood or rejected, or even experience mistreatment by their peers.³⁶ Through the evidence sessions and survey, students also reported a lack of awareness or care for their needs, problems with their accommodation, and the serious financial burden that many experience. While the COVID-19 pandemic continues and social activities may be carried out through a mix of face-to-face or online interactions, we must ensure that disabled students are not further isolated or excluded by either of these formats for social engagement.



Culture

Students told us through the survey about experiencing discrimination and mistreatment by their peers and university staff. The question for the chart below was ‘Do you ever feel that other students or university staff treat you differently, in ways that are unhelpful, because of your disability?’

Differential treatment by peers or staff



This was followed by an optional open text box with the following question: ‘If you answered ‘always’, ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ to the previous question, please describe your experiences.’ 183 students responded to this question, 36% of all survey respondents. The responses could be categorised as follows:

| | |
|--|----|
| Lack of understanding | 93 |
| Failure to provide reasonable adjustments | 27 |
| Different expectations because of impairment | 22 |
| Stigma | 20 |
| Direct discrimination | 17 |
| Harassment | 15 |
| Invisible disability | 12 |
| Failure to provide support | 8 |
| Impairment | 2 |
| Isolation | 2 |

Some of the responses fell into categories of discrimination under the Equality Act. We used a Disability Rights UK factsheet for students on disability discrimination³⁷ to inform the definitions of these categories. ‘Failure to provide reasonable adjustments’ is a category of discrimination under the Equality Act, and thus the most common form of discrimination experienced by disabled students. This is not surprising, given the evidence detailed in the Teaching and Learning chapter.

Many other responses described behaviour that doesn’t constitute discrimination, but is still upsetting or unhelpful for disabled students to experience. For example, the majority of responses described examples of students and staff demonstrating a lack of understanding of the experiences and needs of disabled students. In responses relating to staff, this lack of understanding was sometimes linked to the failure to provide reasonable adjustments.

It seems that within the general student population, there is a lack of awareness and respect of the existence and needs of disabled students, and their right to be included. Students at the roundtable evidence sessions gave a number of examples of the mistreatment of equipment or accommodations which they needed:

“ One of the troubles I found at university with communal washing machines was that some of the students would rip the braille labels off the machines, which would mean that it’s just no good for me to use. ”

Student at evidence session 2

“ I was in a particular block and next to my accommodation was a toileting pen for my guide dog to use ... But other students didn’t really respect it. I’ve seen it used for many purposes. Including, I went at about seven o’clock in the morning to toilet her once and there was a man asleep in there. I’ve had several instances of very drunk students vomiting in it. People parking their bikes in there. People putting bin bags in there. ”

Student at evidence session 2

Many survey respondents described being questioned by other students about the reasonable adjustments they receive, with other students not understanding the reasons for the adjustments and suggesting that reasonable adjustments give disabled students an unfair advantage over others. Respondents also detailed how other students seemed to find their experiences and needs especially hard to understand if they had an invisible disability such as a mental illness or chronic fatigue, or a social communication disorder such as being on the autism spectrum.

Some of the examples given by survey respondents demonstrated that other students and staff don’t understand the symptoms of their condition or impairment; don’t think the symptoms or the condition are real; think that the symptoms are being exaggerated; think that some disabled students just need to work harder or are being lazy; or don’t think they can really be disabled because they ‘look fine’. Even amongst students and staff who accepted the student’s disability, many lacked knowledge about how to support people with particular symptoms or conditions.

Some respondents explained that peers and staff members had different or lower expectations of them because of their impairment. This could relate to low expectations of their academic work, or being surprised if they have ambitions for their career. Some examples also described disabled students being spoken to patronisingly, or people addressing questions to their carer or personal assistant rather than the student themselves.

Invisible disability

As seen in the table above, another issue raised through the survey was that of having a hidden or ‘invisible’ disability. This could include mental illness, chronic fatigue, a chronic illness which ‘flares up’ at times and reduces at other times, or specific learning difficulties like dyslexia or ADHD. Some students described choosing not to tell others about their condition or impairment because of concerns that they would be treated negatively once people knew they were disabled; one respondent mentioned choosing to do this after having seen how other visibly disabled students are sometimes treated. Others described keeping their disability hidden because they feel embarrassed to disclose: stigma is clearly still a key issue for many disabled students.

Some respondents explained that because their condition or impairment is not visible, other people don't believe they are disabled, and thus dismiss their access needs or refuse to make the reasonable adjustments they require. Many of the students responding to the survey and participating in the evidence sessions described a particular lack of understanding of their experiences and needs from peers and staff because of having an invisible disability. This is an area that calls for specific attention when raising awareness of the experiences and needs of disabled students.

The impact of role models and peer support

Some students spoke of the positive impact of connecting with disabled peers, teaching staff or support staff, who could understand the challenges they face and give them meaningful support. Two students at an evidence session spoke with pride of volunteering as wellbeing ambassadors to help other disabled students.

“ We're situated in the student support services. ... We offer a range of different support, in terms of orientation, captioning, mobility support, help on trips. ... We supported seven students four years ago and now we support about 50. ... The amount of praise that we've had from all the students – it's made their lives enjoyable and, obviously, the university enjoyable. ”

Student, evidence session 1

Disabled teaching staff can serve as powerful role models for disabled students, as well as potentially leading the prioritisation of disability inclusion at their institution. Given this, HEPs could consider reviewing their recruitment procedures to ensure that disabled people are particularly encouraged to apply and not impeded by barriers in the application process.

“ Challenges such as delays in accessing reasonable adjustments, inaccessible technology and physical environments and a general deterministic attitude surrounding disability inclusion are all things that I have personally experienced. I believe the reason I have been successful thus far is due to the support of disabled senior academic staff and fellow students with disabilities. They have helped me to navigate support systems, had empathy where others sometimes lacked it and most of all inspired me that I could do it ... I would argue that supporting staff with disabilities in higher education helps change university culture, further benefiting all students. ”

Mirika Flegg, PhD student, evidence session 3

However, it's important for HEPs to consider their responsibility to support disabled teaching staff, rather than expecting these staff members to take on the task of helping disabled students or trying to create institutional change without any additional time or other resources.

“ By the time I was in my PhD many senior academics with disabilities, those people who were my mentors, had left higher education and many of my peers had dropped out. This appears to be a trend when considered across the sector. ”

Mirika Flegg, PhD student, evidence session 3

Student union societies, clubs and activities

The students we spoke to at the evidence sessions told us that there was a total lack of accessibility information on all student union activities and events.

“ **One of the key problems that we have is that none of our societies in the whole university, all 600 of them, they don't provide disability information. So we don't know if we can go.** ”

Student at evidence session 1

This places yet another burden on disabled students: to have to contact event organisers to try and find out the information they need, but also to try and negotiate adjustments to the event so that they can access it. Often these adjustments for their access requirements are simply not made. This excludes them from socialising with fellow students, from building up networks of acquaintances and friends, and possibly from developing their confidence and self-esteem through socialising.

“ **There was nothing accessible, and everything that was in an accessible place to start with always said, 'Oh, we're going to end up in this night club,' which was down about four flights, but I don't want to be stranded by everyone who's moving on to the next place. So socially, there was nothing.** ”

Student at evidence session 1

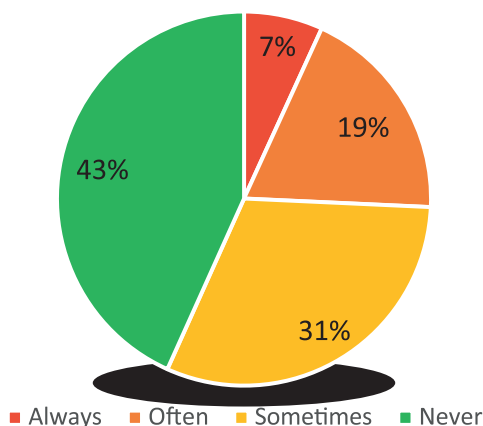
“ **The provisions for access and stuff are very last-minute thoughts. Like, oh, we arranged to do this, but it's not really going to work for you, so what do you want to do? Rather than thinking ahead and being like how can we make it inclusive? It's kind of left up to me to make that decision.** ”

Student at evidence session 2



These experiences were also reflected by the quantitative and qualitative data we gathered through the online student survey. The question for the chart below was ‘Do you ever feel excluded from social activities, societies or clubs because of a lack of disability inclusion?’ Less than half of respondents (43%) said that they never feel excluded.

Exclusion from societies and clubs



This was followed by an optional open text box with the following question: ‘If you answered ‘always’, ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ to the previous question, please describe your experiences.’ 216 students responded to this question, 42% of all survey respondents. The themes of the responses could be categorised as follows:

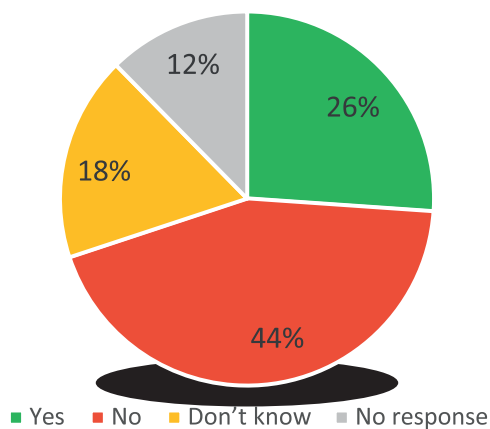
| | |
|--|----|
| Impairment | 48 |
| Lack of adjustments for accessibility (physical) | 38 |
| Lack of adjustments for accessibility (sensory) | 30 |
| Mental health | 26 |
| Drinking culture | 22 |
| Lack of provision | 19 |
| Difficulty with social situations | 13 |
| Lack of flexibility in attendance | 11 |
| No access information | 11 |
| Lack of awareness | 9 |
| Lack of understanding | 9 |
| Stigma | 8 |
| Time constraints | 6 |
| Lack of adjustments for accessibility | 5 |

It’s clear from this table that a lack of adjustments for their accessibility needs is the main barrier to disabled students’ participation in social activities, societies and clubs – taken altogether, 73 of the responses to this question described a lack of adjustments for physical accessibility needs, sensory accessibility needs, or unspecified accessibility needs.

The question for the chart below was ‘Is there anything that the student union does well to make you feel included and to cater for your needs?’ Students wrote their answers into an open text box.

It’s important to note that the category of ‘Impairment’ registers how many students wrote a response indicating that they consider their exclusion from social activities, societies or clubs to be a consequence of their impairment, rather than a consequence of a lack of accessibility or inclusion for disabled students. Students with autism or social communication difficulties were most likely to write a response which blamed their social exclusion or isolation on their own condition or impairment. This raises the issue of the low expectations some disabled students might have about the extent to which their peers should make an effort to accommodate or include them in social activities.

Is there anything the student union does well to support you?



Only around a quarter (26%) of all survey respondents said ‘yes’. Without a control group it is difficult to compare this to the experiences and opinions of non-disabled students, but it seems fair to conclude that many disabled students are not being well-served by their students’ unions.

11 responses could not be categorised as saying ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘no response’, largely because the information given did not relate to the question. Out of the 131 ‘yes’ responses, 113 responses could be organised thematically into the categories in the table below.

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Advocacy and campaigning | 17 |
| Culture of inclusion | 16 |
| Societies and clubs | 15 |
| Accessible events | 11 |
| Disabled Students' Officer | 10 |
| Sabbatical officer | 8 |
| Advice services | 6 |
| Accessible spaces and toilets | 5 |
| Support | 5 |

The table highlights the good work that some students' unions are doing. Many of the responses categorised under 'advocacy and campaigning' mentioned the student union advocating for disabled students in internal complaints procedures, or running campaigns to raise awareness of their needs. It seems from this that what disabled students value most from the work of their students' union is for it to be fighting for their access and inclusion. The fact that this is the top priority for respondents may speak to their often difficult experiences within higher education.

It should not be the case that many, or in fact any, disabled students accept their social exclusion or isolation as inevitable, or the fault of their condition or impairment. Students' unions must do more to reach out to disabled students, to ensure that their activities and events are as accessible as possible, and to put accessibility information on all advertising of events or activities. While the pandemic continues, this includes considering how it might be possible to involve disabled students in safe, socially distanced face-to-face activities, as well as making sure that online activities are accessible to all students.

It should not solely be the responsibility of a disabled students' campaign or group to offer accessible activities, or solely the responsibility of a Disabled Students' Officer to work to change this. Changing the culture of the students' union could also go some way to addressing the lack of understanding from peers raised in the previous section.

Recommendation 9:

Students' unions must take on the access and inclusion of disabled students as an institutional priority. HEPs should support this by providing funding additional to the block grants they provide to students' unions, to enable students' unions to improve their practices with regard to the inclusion of disabled students.

HEPs and their students' unions should draw up an agreement together of what they want inclusion to look like for all students. This could involve requiring the students' union or association to submit an annual plan demonstrating how they will work to engage with, include and ensure the access of disabled students to SU activities, events, buildings, clubs and societies. This could also involve providing training for all SU staff, students' union officers and volunteers to create awareness and understanding of the needs of disabled students; and ensuring that all activity and event adverts contain information on accessibility. Students' unions can also have the capacity to influence the culture among the wider student population, meaning that events such as a disability history month could have a knock-on effect of improving general awareness and understanding of disabled students and their experiences.



Case study – Sheffield University Students' Union

Sheffield University Students' Union carries out a range of programmes and strategic action to improve the inclusion of disabled students in the life of the university.

The Students' Union is committed to creating an accessible space where all students can develop and socialise. This includes trialling new initiatives such as a queue jump system, which allows students who identify as being disabled to skip the queue to the nights out that are run in union venues, as well as skipping the cloakroom queue, and getting quicker service at the bars. In the Students' Union main event venues, the union is implementing Attitude is Everything's Charter of Best Practice for improving deaf and disabled people's access to live music and venues; the Students' union is currently working towards achieving the Bronze award within the charter. It is also in the process of commissioning an external organisation to conduct an access audit of the Students' Union to identify areas which need to be improved on. This is alongside the union's longer term work, such as inclusion training being delivered to the Inclusion Officers of its student societies.

The Students' Union takes a leading role in building relations with disabled students. This is predominantly achieved through engagement with the Disabled Students' Committee (DSC). The union has specialist staff support for its student Committees, including an Equality and Liberation Coordinator who supports the Disabled Students' Committee (DSC). This academic year the union has supported the DSC to recruit new members, run social events, launch a campaign raising awareness of invisible disabilities, and feed into the universities work on increasing access. Its work with students helps to make sure that there is a dedicated space for disabled students to meet one another, make friends, and use their collective voice.

The Chair of the Disabled Students' Committee also has a place on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, which influences all work in the Students' Union. The Students' Union supports the Committee to campaign for change in the Students' Union and at the university and consult with the Committee on the union's work (this includes everything from how it runs its club nights, to how it conduct its recruitment). Through having support from a dedicated staff member and a sabbatical officer, as well as having a yearly budget and a place on the Students' Unions Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, disabled students are empowered to shape change.

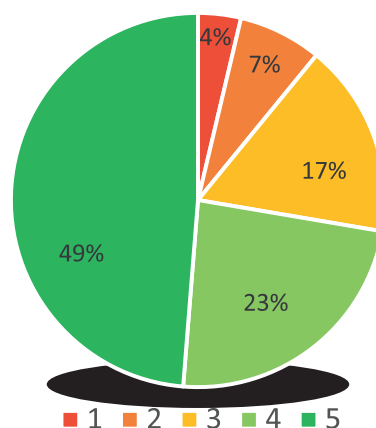
The university will often look to the Students' Union when there is a need to consult with disabled students. Recently, for example, the university requested the Students' Union recruit a student who is willing to sit on a new university group which is looking at increasing access for students. It is also often the Students' Union which pushes for wider consultations with students, and ensures that student representatives fully understand the work that they are involved in and feel confident to raise their opinions. Without the work of the Students' Union, the university would struggle to hold genuine and meaningful consultations with students.

Accommodation

In 2018/19, 1.1 million full-time students in the UK lived away from home, 63% of full-time students.³⁸ Various reports on the topic of student accommodation note that it seems to be embedded in the culture of higher education in the UK for most students to live and study away from home.³⁹ However, many students at the evidence sessions and responding to the survey described negative experiences with their student accommodation. Some students were stuck in rooms which weren't accessible, in some cases despite having declared a disability in advance of the allocation of student accommodation. On the other hand, sometimes when students are placed into rooms which have been labelled as accessible, their specific needs relating to their condition or impairment have not been taken into account.

The question for the chart below was 'To what extent do you feel that your accommodation meets your access needs?'

Accessibility of accommodation



Note: the scale ranges from 1, 'not at all', to 5, 'completely'. Less than half (49%) of respondents said that their accommodation completely meets their needs, although nearly three quarters (72%) rated the accessibility of their accommodation 4 or 5 on the scale.

There was also an optional open text box with the following question: 'Please describe any problems with or positive aspects of your accommodation (as it relates to your needs).' 203 students responded to this question, 40% of all survey respondents. The responses could be categorised as follows:

| Positive aspects | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Live at home | 35 |
| Spacious room | 10 |
| Sensory accessibility | 7 |
| Proximity to campus | 6 |
| Physically accessible | 5 |
| Accommodation team | 3 |
| Single occupancy accommodation | 3 |
| Opportunities for socialising | 2 |
| Proximity to public transport | 2 |
| Proximity to healthcare | 2 |

35 respondents mentioned that they live at home. A further 26 respondents explicitly stated that they do not live in student accommodation (and thus are either living in private rented accommodation or at home). Some respondents decided to state that they live at home because they felt the question did not apply to them because of this, although the question asked about positive aspects and challenges of any kind of accommodation, not just student accommodation. Other respondents stated that they live at home in order to highlight the fact that their accommodation suits their needs **because** it is their home, i.e. it is somewhere that has already been adapted to their needs, or somewhere where they are more able to make the adaptations they might need, as opposed to dealing with the increased bureaucracy of making adaptations to rented accommodation.

In the opening 'basic information' section of the survey, 28% of respondents identified themselves as living at home. A 2015 NUS report highlights that disabled students often choose to live at home, noting that disabled students "faced difficulties in finding suitable accommodation and were perhaps also more reliant on their parents due to their disability."⁴⁰ It is hardly a demonstration of equality if disabled students are forced to choose to live at home because of the cost or difficulty of finding accessible accommodation, or having adjustments made to accommodation. Having to live at home can further disabled students' social exclusion and isolation.

The majority of respondents to this question identified problems with rather than positive aspects of their accommodation, as described by the below table.

| Problems | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Cost | 26 |
| Physical inaccessibility | 23 |
| Poor condition of accommodation | 19 |
| Sensory inaccessibility | 14 |
| Distance from campus | 11 |
| Behaviour of flatmates | 5 |
| Lack of space | 3 |
| No single occupancy accommodation | 3 |
| Lack of living support | 2 |

Cost

It is clear from the table above that one of the key problems for disabled students with regards to their accommodation is the cost. To a certain extent, this is also likely to be the case for many non-disabled students, as the cost of renting in student accommodation or the private sector is very high, having increased by up to 77% at some institutions over the last decade.⁴¹ However, some disabled students are still paying more than the average rent because of their need for an accessible room.

A report by the UCL Disabled Students Network highlighted that a number of students who requested that the university cover the additional cost of their accessible accommodation were refused, or had to fight for a long time to be provided with this funding.⁴² Guidance from Student Finance England on the 2016/17 DSA changes states that:

“ DSAs are not available towards the additional costs of accommodation where the accommodation is provided, managed or controlled by the institution or its agent, by which we mean an organisation or individual acting on behalf of the institution for the provision of accommodation. DSAs remain available for the additional costs of accommodation not provided by the institution or its agent, but only where the additional costs are incurred solely because of the student’s disability. Institutions should not pass any additional costs of specialist accommodation on to the student. ⁴³ ”

Even the cost of standard accommodation can weigh more heavily on disabled students because of the often increased cost of living as a disabled person, as described in the previous chapter. It was also raised at one of the roundtable evidence sessions that disabled students sometimes face being fined by their student accommodation providers because of issues or ‘damages’ which are unavoidable due to their impairment. Piers Wilkinson, the NUS Disabled Students’ Officer, described an account sent to him by a disabled student in advance of the session:

“ He sent me a very long list ... he gets fined weekly for furniture in his room, that is his wheelchair. He gets fined weekly for scuff marks on his door, because it’s not automatic, he has to open it with his wheelchair, it’s an electronic one. He gets fined for having a fridge in his room, even though the fridge was provided by the accommodation service provider for his medicines ... culminating [in] about £700 worth of fines every term. So it’s one of those things, when it comes to accommodation, it’s not just the fact that accommodation is ridiculously expensive. ”

Evidence session 1

Physical inaccessibility

Students at the evidence sessions described the social exclusion and isolation they experienced as a result of being put in rooms which were inaccessible for them.

“ I only stayed in [my halls] for six weeks because it just wasn’t accessible. It did have a lift but I wasn’t allowed to use the lift, in case there was a fire. So everyone that went upstairs to socialise, we were living in the ground floor flat, and I was stuck in the flat on my own. I thought, it’s not worth paying all this money, just to be on my own. So I moved back home. ”

Student at evidence session 1

Students also highlighted the one-size-fits-all approach often taken when assigning students to accessible accommodation, with little notice paid to their specific needs.

“ If you apply for a room and you put down, ‘I have an accessibility need.’ They go, ‘Fantastic, we’ll put you in a disabled access room.’ That is absolutely pointless if that disabled access room is on a ground floor in a very rowdy flat and you have a sensory impairment. Entirely, we have accessible rooms that are on the third floor without lifts and they will put students in wheelchairs up there ... When I had to live in this accommodation, the University did not pass on that I needed an accessible room. So the very next room I moved into, the bathroom, I couldn’t even get into, and I had to spend two weeks without access to a shower, and I had to go and use somebody else’s flat, the other side of the college. ”

Student at evidence session 1

In addition, it was raised that the planning and allocation of accessible rooms sometimes didn't take into account a student's need to get to other social and academic spaces on campus. This compounds disabled students' isolation and negatively affects their ability to build up social capital.

“ I think the few cases that we've had where it has been done effectively, they then think that's the end of their job. You don't need access to any other space besides your room and so then, after they've got the room sorted. No, you can't get to the dining hall, you can't get to the common room, you can't get to anything else in college, but you have a bedroom. ”

Student at evidence session 1

Recommendation 10:

The government should monitor the provision, quality and cost of student accommodation, with a particular view to the experiences of disabled students. HEPs should have a policy with a target for the affordability of the student accommodation owned or run by the institution, agreed with input from students.

The government should utilise the national student accommodation codes held by Unipol and UUK/GuildHE for this monitoring work. HEPs should also make disabled students aware that they should not be paying extra for accessible accommodation: depending on who the accommodation is owned by, this cost should either be covered by the HEP or the DSA. Accommodation is an important factor in the health and wellbeing of disabled students, and it is in the interest of HEPs to keep track of whether students' accommodation is suitable and accessible. This work could be led by the support services department. In addition, HEPs could provide a comprehensive guide to students of the accommodation available, including highlighting information related to accessibility.

Good practice

“ One of the things that made a massive difference for me, when I moved into my halls of residence. I moved into a flat of seven people. And one of the things that really worked for me was that the security team came round, introduced themselves, and they took me and my guide dog out to a small patch of grass, and we basically, about once a week, we'd wander up and down the patch of grass and they would check in on me. That made all the difference. Because it meant they weren't security with a big S, they were somebody to call if I needed help. So, that's what I found really good. ”

Student at evidence session 2

Intersectionality

We also sought to use the survey to find out about how disabled students experienced other intersecting factors of their identities, and the effect these factors had. Existing research has highlighted the simultaneous importance of and lack of intersectional data on disabled students.^{44,45}

The question for the table below was ‘Do you feel that your experiences as a disabled student are also affected by other factors, for example your gender/sexuality/ethnicity/social class/faith/other? If so, could you explain how?’ 138 students responded to this question, 27% of all survey respondents. The responses could be categorised as follows:

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Class | 42 |
| Gender | 38 |
| Race/ethnicity | 17 |
| Sexuality | 16 |
| Trans status | 15 |
| Age | 12 |
| Nationality | 8 |

Class

Directly linking to the issue of the financial burden on disabled students, the most common theme within students’ responses was that of class. The responses described the ways in which being working class negatively affected many areas of the students’ experiences in higher education. Students explained how the lack of a personal or familial safety net worsens the effects of the financial strain they experience, which is compounded by gaps or delays in DSA funding, and the low level of support available from benefits.

In the area of social and cultural difficulties, students described being doubly prevented from participating in social activities because of their unmet access needs and financial difficulties. Some students described the difficulty of being the first in their family to go to university, and thus not having family members who understood higher education processes or who could give them advice. Additionally many respondents described feeling like they don’t fit in with their peers, perceiving that many of their peers are middle class and don’t understand their life experiences as well as their condition/impairment.

Some respondents described the particular experiences which they associated with being working class and which they felt their peers couldn’t empathise with: either having to live at home to save money or not having a room at home to return to; having to work to support themselves because of financial difficulties or being unable to work because of their impairment and thus even more burdened financially; struggling to focus on academic work because of financial worries; or needing an accessible room but being unable to afford the cost. At a more basic level of subsistence, some students described having to choose between paying for food or their prescriptions, or between food and medical evidence for mitigating circumstances forms.

Gender

The vast majority of responses relating to gender were written by female students, and described the fact that their conditions or impairments are not taken seriously by academic staff, support staff, or their peers. Many respondents described being perceived or treated as if they were exaggerating their problems or symptoms, being dramatic, attention-seeking or hysterical. Some respondents described how their impairments are more commonly diagnosed in men, and thus people don't believe that female students can be autistic or have an SpLD. On the other hand, some respondents described their experiences of having conditions such as chronic fatigue/ME or mental illness which are either more commonly diagnosed in women or stereotypically associated with women, and are thus treated less seriously by peers or staff.

Some responses described the difficulties of experiencing misogyny in the form of sexual harassment or sexual violence, and the serious impact this can have on any student's wellbeing and ability to study, which compounds the existing difficulties of being a disabled student. Another sub-theme which arose was within responses written by female students of colour, who described the struggle they faced to be listened to and taken seriously in academic settings or when advocating for their needs in relation to their condition or impairment.

Race/ethnicity

In addition to the experiences described above by female students of colour, some students described feeling invisible to their peers and staff because of their race or ethnicity and condition or impairment, or feeling like peers and staff don't go out of their way to help them because of these combined factors. Other students described experiencing derogatory comments because of racial stereotypes, or even experiencing their peers using racial slurs, and the negative effect this has on their mental health. One respondent described feeling alone and isolated because of the difficulty of finding a counsellor who understands their experiences as a black, bisexual disabled woman, and who might be able to empathise with the complex mix of barriers they face in society.

As this section illuminates, many disabled students contend with a number of intersecting factors which strongly impact their experiences in higher education. Many of the experiences described relate to societal and cultural issues of class, misogyny and racism, which cannot be solved or entirely mitigated by HEPs. However, HEPs do have a responsibility and capacity to influence the culture at their individual institution, including the way that students and staff treat one another. When planning action around this, the full range and complexity of disabled students' experiences must be taken into consideration.

Recommendation 11:

The Office for Students should implement a strategy for monitoring the qualitative experiences of disabled students in higher education. This should include making mandatory the voluntary section of the NSS on disabled students' experiences, so that HEPs must include this when they send out the survey, and monitor and analyse the resulting data. The NSS must also be brought into compliance with digital access regulations so that all disabled students can access it.

The OfS's strategic target to eliminate the gap between the degree outcomes of disabled and non-disabled students is welcome. However, it is not enough for the same proportion of disabled students as non-disabled students to be awarded 2:1s and 1sts if disabled students still have a very negative experience of higher education, for example being excluded from socialising or experiencing a severe financial burden. The OfS's recent analysis of APPs mentions that it will pilot a student submission alongside HEPs' APPs, which could be an opportunity to implement this recommendation.

The challenge for HEPs

Many of the challenges described throughout the Living and Social chapter are ones which HEPs have limited control over. The broad cultural issues described in the Culture and Intersectionality sections have a range of complicated external causes, and there is no obvious or straightforward route for HEPs to take to create cultural change. The majority of student accommodation is now owned and run by private providers rather than HEPs, and many of the factors contributing to the financial burden on disabled students are external ones. Additionally, students' unions and students' associations are usually the primary organisers of social activities, clubs and events in higher education, but these organisations are independent of the HEP itself, and so the HEP has no direct control over the accessibility of these activities. We must look to examples of existing good practice to explore how these areas can be improved.

One area where HEPs can have a more direct influence is the accessibility of the institution's campus, whether academic buildings, libraries, or social spaces. This can include the students' union building, which is often owned by the institution and rented to the students' union. One of the key challenges relating to this is that adapting older buildings to make them accessible can be extremely expensive, and is certainly more costly than designing accessibility in when planning new buildings.

Many respondents to the student survey also described struggling to navigate their HEP's campus because of geographical features such as hills, the distance between campus buildings, or between different campuses belonging to the same HEP. However, these issues can be mitigated by institutions, such as by offering a free shuttle bus between campuses, or subsidising the cost of public transport for disabled students who have to use it more because of mobility issues. While it can be expensive and challenging to tackle some of the many barriers to accessibility and inclusion which originate from outside of the HEP, these barriers must be broken down as part of HEPs' duty to make reasonable adjustments for the needs of disabled students.



Case study – University of Worcester

The University of Worcester has pioneered and developed what it calls a ‘whole university approach’ to inclusion. This approach means that it examines every activity of the University and the way in which each activity and facility promotes inclusion and participation, whilst simultaneously contributing to educational excellence, student and graduate success. New facilities are designed with the intention of creating a truly inclusive environment, going well beyond minimum legal compliance.

Built in 2013, the University of Worcester Arena was the first indoor sports arena in the country purpose designed to include the wheelchair athlete. Changing rooms are large enough so that a team of wheelchair athletes have the space they need to change between daily and sports wheelchairs. The run-off space on the playing courts is sufficient to enable a wheelchair athlete to compete fully for the ball and then stop before hitting a wall. The wide, automatically-opening front doors are reached by an elegant ramp, symbolising the Arena’s inclusive nature.

The University is currently well advanced in working with England Disability Cricket and other partners to create the world’s first indoor cricket education centre, purpose designed to include visually impaired cricketers and physically disabled cricketers as well as children’s club and first-class men’s and women’s cricketers.

It is the application of this whole institution approach which led to every residential room built by the University in the 21st century being designed to include a wheelchair turning circle, and every floor being served by a lift, even where building regulations do not require it. Every student wheelchair user should be able to visit their friends in every room and on every floor.

In 2019, the University won the national award for Loo of the Year for their on-campus, whole community-accessible, change-inclusive toilet.

The University of Worcester has worked hard to create an environment where inclusion is a given. This approach has demanded a continual development of its own democratic practice. It relies on the vital combination of institutional autonomy and good governance, which is indispensable to purposefully create sustainable, inclusive change. This approach has created an inclusive culture in which students are central - there are currently almost 400 student course representatives at the University. Just over 10% of the University’s students have a declared disability. At Worcester, disability continuation and achievement gaps in the student lifecycle have been largely eliminated.



4. Transitions and employment

Chapter Overview

In this chapter we examine the challenges experienced by disabled students when moving into and out of higher education, including moving into employment after graduation. We found that for various reasons some disabled students don't disclose their impairment or condition before enrolment, which is a key challenge for HEPs, delaying the implementation of support and reasonable adjustments. We heard that students sometimes struggle to access freshers' fairs and careers fairs, as well as not always receiving careers advice and guidance tailored to them. We also heard about issues relating to employment, including the difficulty of carrying support and reasonable adjustments over during work placements; the barriers disabled students can face in recruitment processes; and the areas where employers sometimes lack clarity about how to support disabled applicants. Disabled people already face worse graduation and employment outcomes than non-disabled people, and so need robust information and support to enable them to succeed. We recommend that the government launches an awareness campaign to ensure that disabled students understand the benefits of disclosing their status as disabled to HEPs and employers, and to increase awareness and take-up of the Disabled Students' Allowance and Access to Work schemes.

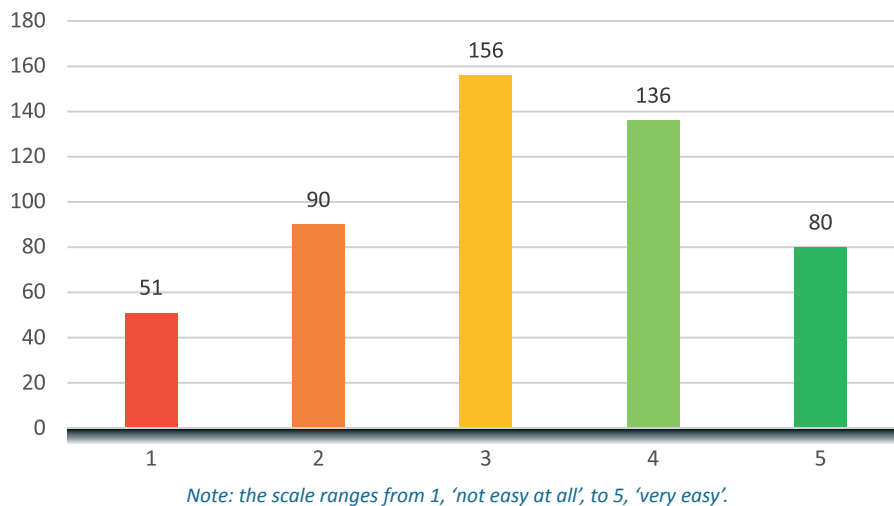
The transitions into and out of higher education can be times of great change and uncertainty, but also excitement and opportunity for all students. For disabled students, the impact of their experiences at these junctures can be particularly powerful and long-lasting. If the support they need to access teaching and learning isn't set up early on in the first term, disabled students can quickly fall behind and struggle to catch up, sometimes having to repeat an assessment, module, or the year. However, when students are empowered to disclose their impairment and needs pre-enrolment, HEPs are better able to ensure a smooth and well-supported transition into the vibrant new environment of higher education.

Careers advice and guidance is a particularly important area for disabled students because of the need to tackle stigma and lack of knowledge about disabled people's experiences and needs in employment. According to research from the charity Leonard Cheshire, 37% of disabled people reported that they don't feel confident about getting a job, believing that employers won't hire them because of their condition or impairment. This concern is legitimised by the charity's research showing that 24% of employers surveyed in 2018 said they would be less likely to employ someone with a disability.⁴⁶ It's clear that better awareness must be raised among employers of disabled students' needs, but also of the unique skills, talents, and personal attributes that they have to offer.

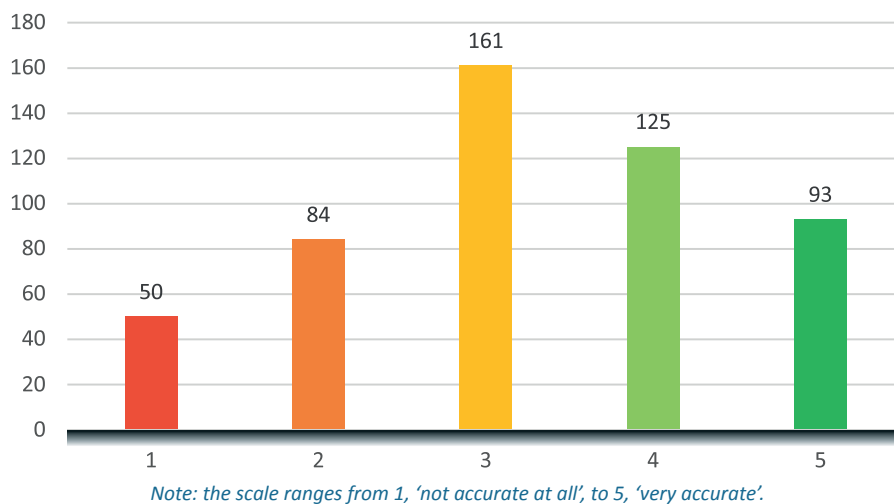
Pre-enrolment information and support

Disability practitioners and HEPs emphasised to us that the support and information disabled students receive before enrolling in higher education can be vital to help them make an informed decision about where to study, and to enable them to link into support services and funding. We used the student survey to ask disabled students how well-informed they felt pre-enrolment about the support available to them at the institution they had chosen to attend. The question for the graph opposite was 'How easy was it to find information before you started studying there about how your institution supports disabled students and their access needs?'

Pre-enrolment information about support



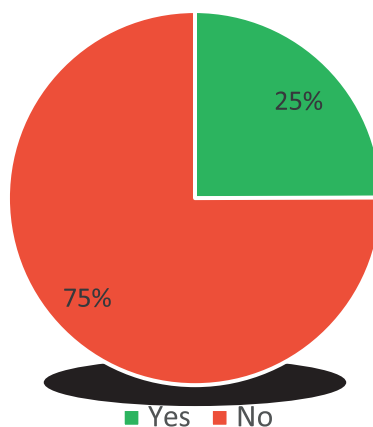
How accurate do you think this information was?



It seems that students felt it was moderately easy to find information about the support they might receive at their HEP, but there is still room for improvement, as more than half (58%) of respondents rated the ease of finding information about support between 1 and 3 out of 5 (30% answered 3/5). Similarly, 31% of respondents rated the accuracy of the information about support as 3/5.

Disabled students can also benefit from pre-enrolment transition support tailored to their specific needs, but it's difficult to know how widespread this good practice is across the sector. The question for the chart below was 'Did your institution provide any pre-enrolment transition support specifically for disabled students before your course began?'

Pre-enrolment transition



This question was followed by an optional open text box with the following question: 'If your answer to the previous question was yes, please could you describe the transition support you received and whether you found it helpful?' 130 students responded to this question, 25% of all survey respondents. The responses could be categorised as follows:

| | |
|--|----|
| Meeting/communication with support services department | 48 |
| Transition event/days | 21 |
| Early move-in | 11 |
| Support and adjustments agreed before start of term | 9 |
| Specialist provision during induction fair | 1 |

Not enough students described whether the support they received was helpful or not for any useful conclusions to be drawn from the data in relation to this.

It's difficult to assess the issue of disabled students not receiving enough pre-enrolment support with knowing how many of the students responding had actually disclosed a condition or impairment pre-enrolment. The challenges of encouraging students to do this will be explored in the 'Challenges for HEPs' section. However, it's clear that the area of pre-enrolment transition support presents a great opportunity for HEPs to expand their support provision and so to enable disabled students to start their higher education experiences on the right foot. This would give more disabled students the time to adjust to a new environment, new people, and a new way of studying, rather than trying to cope with these changes while struggling to organise reasonable adjustments, support provision, and accommodation adaptations.

A key factor highlighted through the responses categorised in the table above was the work of support services departments in reaching out to prospective students before enrolment to discuss and arrange support as far in advance as possible. Students described communications including emails, phone calls and in-person meetings with support services professionals. More importantly, students described how beneficial they found this communication, explaining that it was reassuring to know what help they could receive and to get to know members of the support services department. A recurring theme throughout the report has also been the importance of having equipment, support, and reasonable adjustment needs identified and set up before term begins, which was enabled by the outreach work of these support services professionals. All of these factors are made even more important by the changes and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, and so it is vital that HEP staff maintain regular, clear communication with disabled students during enrolment and throughout the academic year.

We heard from various students at the evidence sessions about some of the difficulties of accessing freshers' fairs, which can be a useful opportunity to meet new people and get involved with the societies and clubs on offer. These can be particularly challenging for students with mobility impairments, visual or hearing impairments, or a social communication/autism spectrum condition, which might mean it's challenging to cope with large crowds and loud, busy rooms.

“ We do freshers' fair which is horrendous if you've got a guide dog because you are just crammed in, you have no ability to move. ”

Student at evidence session 2

“ Each time they have a freshers' fair, where you go along and all the societies are sat out on tables and they hand out leaflets; I'm blind, so that's just not very accessible at all for me. And it's in a very busy environment. ”

Student at evidence session 2

Many HEPs submitted written evidence describing the work they do in this area, particularly good practice around quiet hours at freshers' fairs or offering early enrolment for disabled students.

Good practice

“ Due to the increasing numbers of students applying to the University with [Autism Spectrum] conditions, we introduced a two day Transition Event at the end of August 2018 in order to help both students and parents acclimatise and familiarise themselves with the campus and new environment before the start of the academic year. With the increased number of students identifying mental health conditions, we introduced a Quiet Enrolment in September 2018 where students had the opportunity to enrol away from the arrivals weekend and all the crowds of new students enrolling over those 2 days. This was further refined in September 2019 so that for two weeks prior to Welcome Week students were able to enrol. ”

Staffordshire University, written submission

“ The Disability Transition Officer (DTO) is based within the Disability & Dyslexia Support Service. The DTO arranges an annual induction day for students on the autism spectrum, regular visits to local schools and colleges, attends events where local schools and colleges visit campus, and runs our Open Day information stand. Talks are given at University Open days on the support that will be available to disabled students at the university and the disability service has a stand at the open day to provide specific and detailed information on support available. ”

The DTO has liaised with the Student Union and the Careers Service to arrange prioritised access for disabled students at quieter times. The DTO also recruits, trains and oversees approximately 30 'Disability Champions' – current disabled students who attend the events listed above and can also act as a 'ready made focus group' – e.g. for assessing the website's accessibility. ”

Sheffield University, written submission

Careers advice and guidance

One of the persistent achievement gaps faced by disabled students in higher education relates to what they move on to after graduation. Disabled students are less likely to be in employment six months after graduating, 50.6% of disabled graduates versus 57% of non-disabled graduates.⁴⁷ In the wider population, the unemployment rate for disabled people is nearly double the rate for non-disabled people (6.7% versus 3.7%).⁴⁸ Given these gaps, it's important to give graduating disabled students as much good quality support as possible in order to enable them to start their careers well.

Students described during the evidence sessions and through the survey the lack of knowledge and understanding demonstrated by some careers professionals with whom they had interactions.

“ One of the biggest barriers for the careers advisors that I've found is the expected lack of ambition they think I must have as a disabled person. ”

Student at evidence session 2

This was also an issue when trying to find out about the possibility of studying abroad as a disabled student.

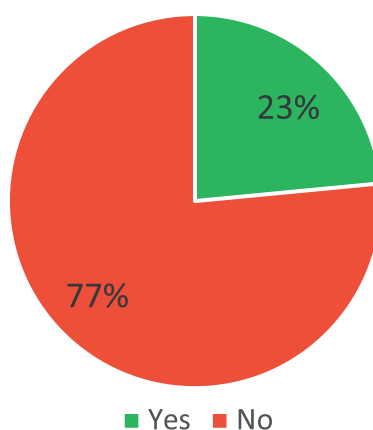
“ My biggest problem was when I went to have a meeting with one of the representatives from the study abroad team at the uni, asking them, how would my benefits be affected first of all. Someone who has got quite a complex medical list. ... because I've got quite a few complex medical conditions, how medical care would work out there and all this. They had no idea. They'd said, 'Oh, I've never been asked these things before'. I'm not going to go over and risk having no money and no access to healthcare. So, I, kind of, have put the idea to the side for a little while. I think some training around those topics would be useful, knowing what happens if you are reliant on benefits as I am. ”

Student at evidence session 2

It's not reasonable to expect careers services professionals to be experts in the potential needs of disabled students of every condition or impairment type. However, HEPs must recognise the importance for disabled students of good careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) by investing in the regular training and CPD of careers services professionals. This can be complemented by making use of the free and paid services of the range of third sector organisations working to support the employment of disabled people. These actions will enable careers services professionals to provide more tailored events and information to disabled students, thereby expanding students' horizons and opening up more opportunities to them.

The question for the chart below was 'Have you received any careers advice, work placements, or information about transitioning into employment or further study which were tailored to you as a disabled student?'

Careers and transition advice



5.6% of the overall respondents both said ‘yes’ and clarified that the advice or information they received was helpful; 1.2% responded ‘yes’ and said that it was unhelpful. Of the 114 responses which were ‘yes’ or ‘yes; helpful’, 83 responses could be categorised as below:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Careers events for disabled students | 33 |
| Information about opportunities | 16 |
| One to one support | 15 |
| Emails | 13 |
| Information | 11 |
| Work placement support | 3 |

It’s possible that the number of students responding ‘yes’ is particularly low because according to their responses, students are more likely to have sought out or received careers-related advice later on in their degree, and 65% of survey respondents were in the first or second year of study. However, only 23% responding yes seems remarkably low, and highlights that HEPs might need to emphasise to students the importance of engaging with careers advice and guidance before their third year, as well as the need for HEPs to provide specialist information, advice and guidance for disabled students.

The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services has a Disability Task Group⁴⁹ which produces research reports, training and events, and advisory resources for disabled students and for careers advisors in HE working with disabled students; this could be a valuable source of ideas for improving targeted careers advice and guidance. The Office for Students also has an A-Z page of effective practice in access and participation⁵⁰, but the pages relating to disabled students and separately to employability could be enhanced by further content. These pages could potentially serve as a hub for HEPs to share good practice with each other, such as case studies from HEPs providing successful and targeted careers advice and guidance to disabled students.

Good practice

When I was at Loughborough, I worked with the careers service there quite closely on support for disabled students, and we started things like workshops on disclosure and trained up the careers staff to think about the additional things that disabled people have to think about in a recruitment process. They were doing specific one-to-ones to look at how you present your CV in the best possible way considering a whole variety of disabilities, and all the stuff that a normal careers service do, but with a slant on disability on it. Then we also got some alumni funding to do a special event which we called Open Doors. We had a range of employers come in, including some self-employed people, because that's quite often a more realistic way for disabled people to go, to work for themselves. . . . We had an afternoon's conference where any disabled student, whether it's dyslexia, mental health, physical sensory, could come along, and it was really successful. We were actually shortlisted for a Times Higher Educational award based on that.

Student and practitioner at evidence session 2

Transitioning into the workplace

Work placements

Work placements can provide vital real-world experience of the knowledge and skills that some students are learning and training for through higher education. However, work placements were highlighted by various written submissions as an area where disabled students might particularly experience challenges or barriers to participation.

We receive a significant number of complaints from students about their experiences on placements. We have seen good practice in making adjustments and putting in place supportive measures for students to complete placements. However, even where these are in place, disabled students may be disadvantaged in comparison to their peers.

OIAHE, written submission

It's understandably challenging to transition a disabled student with access needs into a workplace where staff members might have little to no knowledge or understanding of disability, and little experience of working with disabled students or colleagues. Staff in the workplace may not have been trained on supporting disabled colleagues in the way that we would expect academic and support staff in an HEP to receive training relating to the disabled students they will inevitably support at some stage. Additionally, the reasonable adjustments, equipment and support which disabled students need in an academic setting might be different from what they would require in a workplace setting. One written submission summarises:

My EdD research has shown that accessing reasonable adjustments proves more complex in clinical placement than in the HEI. This is mainly due to lack of disclosure, transiency of placements, attitudes of clinical staff and challenges around how HEI support translates into the clinical areas.

Liz King, Registered Nurse Teacher and Senior Lecturer, written submission

On the other hand, even if the equipment and support required have been identified, there is sometimes a lack of awareness among students and staff over who will fund this. The NUS Disabled Students' Officer explained during one evidence session that Student Finance England do not fund non-medical help support during a student's work placement. This can be funded through the Department for Work and Pension's Access to Work scheme, but this only applies to paid work placements. Voluntary or unpaid work placements are a compulsory part of many higher education courses, potentially meaning that disabled students go through the placement without the equipment and support they need to succeed. In a worst case scenario, if support cannot be organised or funded, this can mean that disabled students are unable to participate and might fail the module or their entire course.

Recent research on the experiences of students in attaining and completing a work placement has highlighted that students with declared impairments or health conditions experience more anxiety than other students when it comes to work placements. Disclosure of an impairment or condition was again described as a key issue, particularly for students with multiple impairments: one chose to disclose their physical impairment but not their mental health issue because of fears about the particular stigma attached to mental illness. Early information about the content and requirements of the placement is key to help students manage anxiety; and good communication between the HEP, employer and student, enables students to get the help and support they need throughout the placement.⁵¹

Employment after graduation

Disabled students can face a range of barriers when trying to move into employment after graduation. Unlike non-disabled students, some disabled students with more severe conditions or impairments may not be able to get transition employment by working in the sectors that other young people often go into, such as hospitality or retail, between graduation and their ideal career. This limits some disabled students' ability to gain work experience and puts them at a competitive disadvantage with other graduates.

Another barrier can be the ideas that disabled students sometimes hold about themselves, the kinds of companies they could work for, or jobs they could do. These perceptions can be limited by cultural ideas of what disabled people can do, or by a lack of representation of disabled people in a wide range of careers. MyPlus Consulting, a company which supports and advises HEPs, businesses, and disabled students, confirmed that a key challenge for the students they work with is:

“ 76% don't want to disclose their disability to a potential employer for fear of discrimination. Disabled students don't know how and when to disclose a disability and need guidance on this. ”

MyPlus Consulting, written submission

A key component of this barrier is the confusion among employers and disabled students around what information it is necessary to disclose. Since the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010, it is not necessary for students to disclose their condition or impairment in order to request reasonable adjustments from an employer. While some students may wish to disclose their condition or impairment, it should be made clear to them that they do not have to do so in order to ask for and receive the adjustments they need during the recruitment process or in the workplace, and they should be supported and feel comfortable to ask for these.

The evidence we received also highlighted that it's more of a challenge for disabled students or graduates to ask for reasonable adjustments in the context of a workplace or a recruitment process than in an academic setting. In an academic setting, there are normally experienced professionals who tell students what kinds of reasonable adjustments are common and available, whereas many companies will not have this level of knowledge.

“ Students often don't know what sorts of recruitment or workplace adjustments they can or should ask for, and they can be too anxious or scared to be able to negotiate and advocate for themselves. ”

Tab Ahmad, CEO of EmployAbility, interview

This uncertainty about what reasonable adjustments to ask for can also be produced by the language used by employers, and reinforced by disabled students not knowing what the law states or to what extent they are protected by legislation.

“ It has become common for employers to use the legal term 'reasonable adjustments' in everyday conversation, such as asking disabled applicants 'Do you have any reasonable adjustments?' This can be off-putting for a student or potential recruit who may not be sure if their current adjustments are 'reasonable' or if they're appropriate for the workplace. In reality, the purpose of the law is to protect the needs and rights of the individual, whilst balancing this against the duty placed on employers, in a way that is fair, but not unduly onerous. In practice, the vast majority of adjustments that applicants request are likely to be considered reasonable, taking into account the facts and circumstances. ”

Tab Ahmad, CEO of EmployAbility, interview

These quotes further reinforce the benefits offered by external organisations with the expertise to advise disabled students about how to approach these issues.

Access to Work

The government provides financial support for disabled people who are in work or transitioning into work through the Access to Work scheme. The scheme funds a number of forms of support, such as aids or equipment in the workplace, travel to or in work, communication support at interviews, support workers and job coaches. However, as research by Leonard Cheshire highlights, only 23% of disabled adults in the UK who are currently or previously working say they currently or have previously received Access to Work support. 66% of employers surveyed in 2018 said that the costs of workplace adjustments are a barrier to employing a disabled person, showing that they are either not aware of or are not taking up government funding to support with these costs.⁵²

In addition, charity Versus Arthritis surveyed 1,582 people with arthritis in 2018 and discovered that only 59% of those surveyed had actually heard of Access to Work.⁵³ Similar to some of the issues identified earlier on in the report with the Disabled Students' Allowance, the government must work to increase awareness of Access to Work in order to enable disabled people to be supported in employment. Another solution to this is our recommendation 5, whereby Access to Work forms part of or is absorbed by a system of lifelong support for disabled people from the classroom to the workplace. This would remove the need for reassessment and other administration which can cause disruption and delays.

The challenge for employers

As the previous section briefly touched on, there are also challenges for employers when it comes to recruiting and employing disabled students or graduates. Many companies are not clear on how to get the information they need in order to support disabled applicants.

Under section 60 of the Equality Act it's unlawful for employers to ask if someone has a disability or health condition, or to ask information about any such condition. There are some limited exceptions to this ban on asking questions, the most commonly used of which is the right to ask whether a candidate requires adjustments during any stage of the recruitment process. This exception is to be interpreted strictly, and doesn't extend to asking further questions about the underlying disability or health condition.

Tab Ahmad, CEO of EmployAbility, interview

When trying to support disabled applicants who don't know what kinds of reasonable adjustments to ask for or what might be appropriate for their condition or impairment, some companies might ask for medical evidence of their condition or impairment in order to advise the applicant. Disabled graduates might provide a report from a disability assessment they received while studying in higher education, but as Tab Ahmad summarises;

A report about the adjustments required for higher education doesn't necessarily provide useful or relevant information for the recruitment process.

Tab Ahmad, CEO of EmployAbility, interview

There are further complications with requesting medical evidence of an applicant's disability, in that it contributes to the administrative and financial burdens on disabled students and graduates which were described in the Bureaucratic and Financial Burdens chapter of the report. Students or graduates who don't have an appropriate or accessible report from their HEP or a DSA assessor might have to get evidence from a GP, which takes time and can be very expensive. In addition, there are further questions about the legality of asking for this evidence, as well as the issue of the types of disabled students or graduates who are more often asked to provide evidence:

Requesting sight of highly sensitive medical information, for what is usually a straightforward adjustment to access one stage of a multi-staged recruitment process, is potentially disproportionate to the legal obligation it aims to fulfil - in breach of GDPR, as well as the spirit of the Equality Act. Finally, such requests tend to be made for certain disabilities but not others, namely neurodiverse conditions and mental health, effectively reinforcing damaging stereotypes around non-visible disabilities.

Tab Ahmad, CEO of EmployAbility, interview

Other challenges for employers relate to the size of the company, as smaller companies might be less likely to have recruited and employed disabled people in the past, and thus less likely to have useful experience or expertise of how to facilitate this. Companies that have employed people with particular conditions or impairments in the past might also have already invested in accessibility equipment or technology, saving time and financial resource in the future. However, many of the barriers discussed in this section are equally relevant for smaller and larger companies.

Case study – auticon

auticon is an IT and compliance consulting business which solely hires consultants on the autism spectrum. The company prides itself in creating autism-friendly work environments as well as delivering a service of outstanding quality to its clients, which range from major corporations (Experian, Linklaters, Channel 4, Allianz, Siemens, etc.) to small enterprises and start-ups.

auticon employs more than 150 consultants across the UK, USA, and Europe, who are deployed to work within client project teams on projects that match their skills and expertise. In the company's experience, having both autistic and non-autistic professionals in diverse project teams opens up new perspectives and significantly improves work output.

All of the consultants and clients are supported by auticon's specially trained job coaches. These job coaches carry out a range of essential work to support the needs of auticon's consultants, including preparing consultants for their prospective workplaces and briefing them about specific corporate cultures; facilitating reasonable adjustments; mediating feedback between the client and the consultant; and supporting them with their mental health and wellbeing. They also support the client team by briefing the consultant's future colleagues to raise their awareness and knowledge of autism, correct misconceptions and to let them know any specific adjustments that will enable them to work well with their autistic colleague.

One of auticon's missions is broadening the understanding and acceptance of autism in particular and neurodiversity in general as a topic in the companies they work with. In this regard, they have noticed a general growing interest in and understanding of neurodiversity in society. This is contributed to by auticon's consultants being physically in the offices of the clients they work with and having regular conversations with their team members if working remotely, which can change the perceptions and understanding of autism and neurodiversity of the other project team members.

auticon also works with businesses in an advisory capacity, helping clients to improve and develop their entire employment lifecycle to better support their neurodiverse colleagues. From attracting neurodiverse talent, recruiting, hiring, onboarding, managing and retaining them, auticon's niche experience is shared with companies. The advisory approach recognises that no one neurodiverse colleague is the same as the other, and likewise with any business – they offer a flexible and adaptable service to review, develop and create processes and support that will work well for both the individual and the business as a whole. A common challenge for teams is not knowing how to support their colleague. auticon help with this via their coaching experience by training neurodiverse champions within the business, so they are confident and able to provide advice to neurodiverse colleagues and their managers.

The challenge for HEPs

HEPs face a number of challenges in supporting disabled students' transitions into and out of higher education, and ensuring they have full access to career or external development-related extracurricular activities while studying.

Pre-enrolment disclosure

Various HEPs identified trying to encourage students to disclose that they're disabled before they enrol as a key challenge. The earlier that institutions know about a student's disability, the earlier they can put in place support arrangements and try to ensure that the student has an easier transition into higher education. However, there are a number of obstacles to this.

Each year a high number of students do not tell us of their circumstances until they enrol, or until they first experience difficulties. Student feedback tells us that there remains a reluctance to disclose earlier for fear of potential stigma and/or discrimination.

Cardiff University, written submission

Students with mental health conditions are the most prominent group who may not provide information about their circumstances at the earliest opportunity (or, if they do so, are less likely to provide detailed information about their circumstances so that a comprehensive response can be considered.

Bishop Grosseteste University, written submission

We heard from HEPs and support practitioners that some students don't disclose their impairment or condition on their UCAS form because they are worried about the stigma, including because they think that it will affect whether or not they receive an offer from that institution. Also, until recently the options for declaring a disability via the UCAS form only allowed students to tick a box for one particular impairment, or a box stating 'multiple conditions'. This does not provide the institution with sufficient information to be able to support students appropriately on the basis of that disclosure. However, UCAS have recently announced that they will be making changes to the form so that students can tick boxes for each of their individual conditions or impairments. This is a very welcome development that will better enable HEPs to understand and support their incoming disabled student cohort.

Another impediment to early disclosure is that students often don't consider themselves to be 'disabled' because schools and colleges don't use that language.

One of the things that we actually find very difficult as disability practitioners is the fact that schools and colleges still use the medical model. We talk about special educational needs, we talk about SENCOs and then these students move on to university and the completely different terminology. Disabled students. So when they come in to fill in application forms they don't understand the terminology.

Lynn Wilson, National Association of Disability Practitioners, evidence session 3

Disabled students are not being sufficiently informed or prepared at school about how to access support in higher education, and what that support might look like.

One of the biggest challenges for higher education institutions is around the lack of clear information, advice and guidance (IAG) for disabled students at the time when they are deciding whether or not to go to university.

Coventry University, written submission

HEPs also identified an issue with the kinds of assessments of students' needs which take place in schools and colleges: these are often not appropriate or relevant for higher education, which means that the HEP has to take on the cost of the assessment of the students' needs. These assessments often cost hundreds of pounds.

The lack of understanding of the type of diagnostic evidence required to access support is a big challenge in Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) as many students only have secondary school Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) evidence of extra time in exams (e.g. for slow processing) which is not acceptable.

Anonymous HEP, written submission

It is our opinion that real progress will be hindered until schools and colleges are more consistent in pursuing formal SpLD assessments and ensuring that learners are provided with copies of their assessments.

Cardiff University, written submission

Improving the system of diagnosis and support in schools and colleges could ensure that disabled students are better prepared upon the transition to higher education.

Addressing barriers to full diagnostic services and subsequent strategies/adjustments much earlier in a student's education would have the benefit of ensuring students are better enabled at the time they enter HE, rather than learning to use new strategies/equipment/adjustments during their HE studies.

Bishop Grosseteste University, written submission

Many of these factors impede efforts by staff at schools, colleges and HEPs to support disabled students with the transition from further to higher education, and this is compounded by a lack of information sharing and connection between the different points of the education system. One strategy to tackle the latter problem is now being developed by Enable Ireland in collaboration with Microsoft: an assistive technology passport, which serves as a record of the owner's assistive technology needs and of the technology and training they have previously received. A more general version of this, covering not just technology but other forms of medical and non-medical support such as British Sign Language translation or mentoring, could enable disabled students to declare their support needs with minimal administrative burden for themselves and support staff.

It's relevant to note that the previous two quotes relate to students with Specific Learning Difficulties, which is the second largest impairment group after students declaring mental health conditions. One SpLD tutor noted in their written submission the importance of considering other intersecting factors such as ethnicity when tackling the problem of lack of diagnosis or declaration of disability pre-enrolment:

SPLD is under diagnosed in BAME students from primary upwards. We need to collect evidence to ensure that BAME SPLD students get the appropriate support and that their challenges are not simply ascribed to cultural or EAL reasons.

Margo Fourman, SpLD tutor, written submission

Recommendation 12:

The government should launch an information and awareness campaign for schools and colleges about ‘disabled student’ status, disclosure, and the DSA. This should include working with disability charities to create a disability services handbook with clear and practical guidance and information on all of the aforementioned information, to be updated annually.

This should aim to inform and empower students and their parents, as well as teachers and careers advisers in schools and colleges. While the Department for Education is already doing work to raise awareness, it’s clear from our evidence that what they’re doing is not adequate. The findings suggest that more needs to be done, and evaluation of the methods and efficacy should be embedded within this work. Of course, these issues would be addressed by the implementation of our recommendation 5, that the government should create a new, joined-up system to support disabled people from the classroom to the workplace. We suggest recommendation 12 be implemented in the short term and also form part of the design of such a new system.

Careers Service resources

Resources in Careers Services are a constant issue. Very few universities have specialist disability careers staff and it is often just a bolt-on responsibility for one member of staff.

Mark Allen, AGCAS, written submission

As in most departments within HEPs, careers departments struggle to have enough funding, time and staff members. This presents a challenge for providing the kind of specialist support needed by disabled students, especially considering the heterogeneity of impairments and needs of disabled students. As has previously been noted, it’s impossible for any one member of careers staff to be a specialist in the needs of and opportunities for all disabled students, particularly when each year brings a new cohort of disabled students with unique and individual needs.

Lack of control over work placements

HEPs can be in a difficult position when it comes to work placements, as they may have a limited ability to monitor what happens during the placement. The ability to affect the behaviour of placement staff may also be limited, and could depend upon having a strong relationship with the staff who organised the placement. In addition, it can take a long time to build up relationships with local businesses in order to encourage them to offer work placements to the HEPs’ students, and HEPs want to do as much as possible to keep their relationships with these businesses positive.

Higher education providers are responsible for the experiences of their students whilst on placement, but do not have any direct oversight or authority over placement staff. Providers can be reluctant to take any action which might discourage the placement provider from hosting students in the future.

OIAHE, written submission

Case study – EmployAbility

EmployAbility is a not-for-profit organisation established in 2006, which supports neurodiverse and disabled students and graduates into employment. They provide free individual support to students and graduates, including opportunities for internships and graduate programmes with inclusive employers, assisting with applications, and providing advice and support during the recruitment process. They also provide ongoing support once in employment.

EmployAbility also educates employers and businesses about how they can be more inclusive to disabled applicants and employees. This is partially through training and education for the employers to feel more comfortable hiring and working with neurodiverse and disabled employees, but also through reviewing recruitment and adjustments processes to identify the potential barriers for disabled recruits. They promote best practice, and highlight behaviours which are directly or indirectly discriminatory, or could discourage disabled applicants.

For example, applicants with dyslexia might need extra time during a test or assessment; an autistic candidate might have difficulty making eye-contact during an interview, requiring an adjustment of perception from the employer, who should not treat this aspect of the person's disability against them in making a hiring decision. Candidates with anxiety, depression, or other mental illnesses may require adjustments of understanding, and specific training can help interviewers to be encouraging during stressful interviews, allowing candidates to demonstrate their ability to do the job itself, rather than experience exacerbated and spiralling symptoms as a result of the process.

Individuals with neurodiverse and mental health conditions often have particular need of EmployAbility's services: to speak on their behalf to employers, and to encourage them to believe that adjustments for their conditions exist, can be effective, and that with those adjustments in place they can compete on a level playing field and be useful members of the workforce.

EmployAbility has supported 13,000 disabled students and graduates into employment, including at prestigious technology companies, banks, law firms and in the public sector. EmployAbility's advice to businesses helps employers to be inclusive of neurodiverse and disabled applicants and employees at the same time as being compliant with the law, and prevents businesses from missing out on the talented disabled graduates they could be hiring.



Conclusion

Over the last few decades, awareness of and support for disabled people in law and in society have progressively increased. However, disabled people still face far too much disadvantage in all areas of life. We have gathered a wide range of evidence on the complex nature and effects of this disadvantage in higher education, alongside examples showing that much can be done, and is being done, to combat this.

Despite the many existing and emerging pressures on HEPs, such as funding, regulation, and student and staff recruitment, it's clear that many individuals and institutions have the desire to improve the experiences of disabled students in HE. We believe that this report has provided real evidence of the need for change, and of the way forward. Senior leaders at HEPs must take accountability for this challenge, and we must listen to disabled students themselves to find out what they need. Embedding disabled students' voices within change mechanisms and institutional infrastructure will ensure that these students' needs are considered and provided for.

The benefits of doing better for disabled students will ripple out through the HE community. When teaching and learning is designed to be inclusive and to consider the varying needs and abilities of all students, the whole student cohort benefits. Considering accessibility and inclusivity at the beginning of the development of a course, the design and construction of accommodation, or the planning of social events, enhances quality as well as saving costly bureaucracy from having to make things accessible later down the line.

All of our twelve recommendations – and we could have made many more – require implementing in their own right if we are to achieve lasting change. The ideal would be for this to take place as part of the system transformation we set out in recommendation five – for the government to create a new system to support disabled people from the classroom to the workplace.

Ultimately, higher education has the power to broaden horizons, introduce new people and experiences, illuminate new fields of knowledge, and provide a route to a fantastic career. Disabled students deserve to be supported not just to participate in higher education, but to thrive.



Glossary

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| ADSHE | Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education. |
| ANMHP | Association of Non-Medical Help Providers. |
| Disabled student | Someone studying in higher education with a condition or impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal daily activities. |
| DSA | Disabled Students' Allowance. Funding provided by the Department for Education for disabled students in higher education, helping to cover the additional costs they incur for the equipment and support they need to access teaching and learning. |
| DSC | Disabled Students' Commission, an independent and strategic group established by the Universities Minister to advise, inform and influence HEPs to improve support for disabled students. |
| FE | Further education, education in addition to that received at secondary school. |
| HE | Higher education, tertiary education at level 4 or above. |
| HEI | Higher education institution. Publicly funded universities and other institutions primarily providing higher education. |
| HEP | Higher education provider. We use the HESA definition of this term: any institution that provides higher education, including publicly funded universities and other HEIs, alternative providers, and FE colleges which provide some HE-level courses. |
| NADP | National Association of Disability Practitioners. |
| NMH | Non-medical help, a form of support for disabled students which is not medical in nature, e.g. note taking, study skills support, mentoring. |
| NUS | National Union of Students, a confederation of students' unions in the UK. |
| OfS | Office for Students, the regulatory body for higher education for England. |
| OIAHE | Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, the Ombudsman for higher education in England and Wales. |
| SpLD | Specific Learning Difficulty, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or ADHD. |

Contributions

Evidence Sessions One and Two

We held two evidence sessions with disabled students from a range of different HEPs. The sessions took place at the Houses of Parliament and the University of Derby. At both sessions we had between six and eight disabled students with a range of different conditions or impairment types, and one or two disability practitioners, all of whom were also disabled.

Evidence Session Three

John de Pury, Assistant Director of Policy, Universities UK

Mirika Flegg, PhD student at the University of Brighton

Lynn Wilson, Operations Manager at the National Association of Disability Practitioners

Gareth Hughes, Research Lead for Student Wellbeing at the University of Derby

Evidence Session Four

Professor David Green, Vice Chancellor of the University of Worcester

Dr Liz Marr, Pro Vice Chancellor of the Open University

Graham Coiley, Business Director of Amano Technologies and board member of the Association of Non-Medical Helpers

Rohan Slaughter, Subject Specialist in Assistive Technologies at Jisc

Mandi Barron, Director of Student Services at Bournemouth University

Student survey

We used Google Forms to run an online survey for disabled students currently studying in the UK. We received 537 responses to the survey. After cleaning the data and removing repeated or invalid entries, we received 513 responses from individual students at over 70 different HEPs. Particular thanks go to Piers Wilkinson for advising on an accessible survey platform, reviewing the survey questions, and greatly assisting with the sharing of the survey through social media and student union disabled students' officers around the UK.

Written submissions to the call for evidence

| | | |
|---|----------------------------------|--|
| AbilityNet | DSA QAG | Sheffield Hallam University |
| Access 1st | Geoffrey Cantor | Sheffield University Students' Union |
| ADSHE | GuildHE | Sheffield University |
| AGCAS | Ivan Newman | Staffordshire University |
| Alison Earey | Jan Hanson | The Open University |
| Andrea Muendelein | Jisc | The Open University Students Association |
| ANMHP | Karen Manghan | Thomas Pocklington Trust, RNIB, and VICTAR, University of Birmingham |
| Barbara Jones | Lead Scotland | Tom Bayley |
| Barry Hayward | Liz King | UCL Disabled Students' Network |
| Bath Spa University | Margo Fourman | University Mental Health Advisers Network |
| Bishop Grosseteste University | Mike Wray | University Mentoring Organisation |
| Brunel University | MyPlusConsulting | University of St Andrews |
| Cardiff Metropolitan University | NeuroKnowHow | University of the Arts, London |
| Cardiff University | Office for Students | |
| Carol Davidson | OIAHE | |
| Centre of Resilience for Social Justice, University of Brighton | Oxford Brookes University | |
| Cheri Shone | Pauline Sumner | |
| Coventry University Group | Peter Tyerman | |
| David Thompson | Queen Mary, University of London | |
| | Sally Daunt | |

In addition, we received a number of submissions from disability practitioners and support services workers who wished to remain anonymous. This amounted to 70 submissions received overall.

Interviews

auticon

Ben Watson, University of Kent

Brain in Hand

EmployAbility

Snowdon Trust

The Higher Education Commission

The Higher Education Commission is an independent body made up of leaders from the education sector, the business community and the major political parties. Established in response to demand from Parliamentarians for a more informed and reflective discourse on higher education issues, the Higher Education Commission examines higher education policy, holds evidence-based inquiries, and produces written reports with recommendations for policymakers.

The Higher Education Commission is chaired by Professor the Lord Norton of Louth, a Conservative peer and academic. The Higher Education Commission's work is generously supported by University Partnerships Programme, ACCA, and Jisc.

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The Higher Education Commission

Policy Connect's Education and Skills team run the Higher Education Commission. The Commission is made up of leaders from the education sector, the business community and the major political parties. Established in response to demand from Parliamentarians for a more informed and reflective discourse on higher education policy; the Commission examines higher education policy, holds evidence-based inquiries and produces written reports with recommendations for policymakers. The Commission is chaired by Professor the Lord Norton of Louth, a Conservative peer and academic and is generously supported by University Partnerships Programme, ACCA, and Jisc.



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