

The Disabled Students Commission – supporting students on their journey through higher education

Schools and education authorities in England have had a duty to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils since 2002. Disabled pupils have been supported in this way within the school environment but what can they expect as they continue their education journey into higher education?

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Background

Schools and education authorities in England have had a duty to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils since 2002: originally, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended by The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001), and, from October 2010, under the Equality Act 2010. Disabled pupils have been supported in this way within the school environment but what can they expect as they continue their education journey into higher education?

Universities and other higher education providers also have obligations under the Equality Act (including the duty to make reasonable adjustments), and they provide a huge amount of support to disabled students either out of their own resources or supporting students who are in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs).

In this article we look at some of the findings in the [Disabled Students' Commission Annual Report 2020-2021](#): Enhancing the disabled student experience.

The Disabled Students' Commission

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) is an independent and strategic body with a key priority to advise, inform and influence English higher education providers (HEPs) and sector bodies to improve support for disabled students. Its aim is to help the sector achieve more positive outcomes for disabled students in relation to access, participation, success and progression. It is a successor to the former Disabled Students' Sector Leadership Group (DSSLG). It was established in March 2020 and is funded by the Office for Students (OfS).

The DSC brief is to challenge, influence and support the Department for Education (DfE), the OfS, HEPs and other relevant sector organisations to accelerate the pace of change in creating inclusive learning and living environments for disabled students.

The Disabled Students' Commission Annual Report 2020-2021: Enhancing the disabled student experience.

The Commissioners had decided that the priority and overall direction of the DSC's work plan would be to follow a student life-cycle model, with a focus on key milestones, but response to the COVID-19 pandemic became the immediate priority and they produced a very helpful set of recommendations in response to the impact of the pandemic on disabled students, ahead of the 2020/21 academic year. The challenges identified included a recognition that the provision in disability support is likely to differ between a school-setting and university-setting.

A particularly interesting aspect of the DSC's work in relation to the pandemic is the findings of a roundtable on blended learning run by the DSC. Feedback provided during this roundtable highlighted the advantages and disadvantages experienced by disabled students

using blended learning, as well as the differences disabled students experienced depending on their impairment type. The report contains an analysis of different types of impairment, what is working well and what is not and what needs to change (beyond ensuring a consistent departmental approach, streamlining of learning tools and provision of materials in advance). For example, students with a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D found it difficult to comment on 'live' information, as learning materials often require an immediate response. One of the recommendations was the importance of including synchronous and asynchronous learning as this may offer disabled students the flexibility they require by empowering self-direction and giving students more control over the pace and the spaces in which they learn. The importance of monitoring student engagement, particularly for those students with a mental health condition, was found to be an area where change was needed as was the need to be able to turn the camera on/off for those students with a social/communication impairment.

The report also includes some interesting analysis of data undertaken by Advance HE using 2018/19 data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) including:

- An increase in disability disclosure rates among students in UK higher education, rising from 5.4% in 2003/4 to 13.9% in 2018/19. Universities have worked hard to create environments in which applicants/students feel comfortable to disclose a disability, so this is encouraging progress.
- Degree class attainment varied by impairment type. For example, 77.2% of those disclosing physical impairment or mobility issues received a first/2:1, compared with 70.0% of qualifiers disclosing a social communication/autistic spectrum condition.
- Rates of unemployment following graduation were highest for graduates who were blind or had a serious visual impairment (7.9%) or had a physical impairment or mobility issues (7.7%). This was compared to 4.8% for graduates with a specific learning disability, a social communication/Autistic spectrum condition, or no known disability.

The DSC has identified a number of considerations that will inform its work going forward and some of these are particularly relevant to the transition from a school-setting to a university-setting including:

- The terminology around disability used in schools and colleges differs greatly to higher education. In schools and colleges, language and vocabulary focuses on education, health and care (EHC) plans, whereas in higher education the language focuses on disabled students. The DSC highlights a need to make language and vocabulary choices more seamless between the different settings, to remove ambiguity.
- Consideration of why a student with specific support requirements identified in an EHC plan who then progresses to higher education requires a second needs assessment and the number of repeated occasions in their educational life that they were required to evidence their disability and essentially begin the process from scratch creating delays and additional burden.

Preparing pupils as they transition into higher education has always been a priority especially in relation to pupils with disabilities and this report will help develop a greater understanding of some of the issues involved in that transition and better equip pupils as they begin their journey into higher education.

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