

Supporting disabled applicants to higher or degree apprenticeships

Our top tips for Higher Education Institutions supporting disabled students on higher or degree apprenticeships.

15 November 2021

Over the past 12 months we have noticed an increasing number of enquiries from HE clients relating to disability support for disabled students on higher or degree apprenticeships. Largely, these have related to uncertainties over the respective roles and legal responsibilities of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers, and confusion about the funding available to students for adjustments.

Both the applicant's employer and the HEI that provides the learning element of their higher or degree apprenticeship are required to provide adjustments and support in line with the duty to make reasonable adjustments under the disability provisions of the Equality Act 2010. In practice, the support provided often fails to be joined up, leaving disabled students struggling with either the work element or the learning element or both. Many disabled students will be moving straight from school into working in a very different environment from the one they are used to, and the adjustments they are familiar with won't necessarily be the adjustments they need in the workplace. The levels of support available and the training given to staff supporting disabled students in the workplace are often far less than HEIs provide to students on other programmes.

This can have an adverse impact on students' health and well-being, as well as impacting on attainment rates.

Considerations for disabled applicants to higher or degree apprenticeships – guidance from the Disabled Students' Commission

Recognising that this can be a complex area for disabled students, HEIs and employers alike, in July 2021 Advance HE on behalf of the Disabled Students' Commission (and funded by the Office for Students) published guidance (the Guidance) for disabled applicants applying for a higher or degree apprenticeship. This is timely and very welcome.

Whilst intended as guidance for students as to what they should consider when applying for higher and degree apprenticeships, there is much in the Guidance that will assist HEIs and employers. Take, for instance, the checklist of factors that applicants may wish to consider. This includes key questions such as:

- How will their employer liaise with the university, college or independent training provider to ensure their requirements are met? Will a support plan be developed related to their individual learner record?
- What adjustments will be available to the end point assessment process by their employer and university, college or independent training provider?
- How will they be able to participate in their apprenticeship in the event they cannot attend the workplace, lectures, seminars, or meet deadlines because of their impairment? Will their university's, college's or independent training provider's mitigating circumstances policy apply?

HEIs will be used to planning for supporting disabled students for whom they have responsibility as the education provider, but established processes may not work seamlessly where there are dual responsibilities and this checklist flags some of the questions that should be considered.

Funding for reasonable adjustments for students on higher and degree apprenticeships is another area that can be confusing and the Guidance clearly explains what is available through Learning Support, Exceptional Learning Support and, for employers, Access to Work.

Conclusion

Higher and degree apprenticeships are likely to be an important element of the Government’s focus on flexible learning and skills enhancement, and ensuring that disabled students maximise their potential will be an important element of this.

Our top tips for HEIs are:

- Review current processes for supporting disabled students to ensure that they work for higher and degree apprenticeship students;
- Ensure that all relevant personnel understand the funding available for reasonable adjustments and that processes are in place to access that funding; and
- Establish clear lines of communication with employers and, subject to the consent of the student, work together to ensure both HEI and employer are clear about the support being put in place.

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