



DSC

Disabled
Students'
Commission

Three Months To Make A Difference

Key areas of challenge for disabled students requiring urgent action from institutions and policy makers in HE

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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has put many pressures on our society and the economy. However, students and higher education providers (HEPs) have proved to be remarkably resilient, creative and fast-acting. We have also seen changes, that some disabled students have been requesting for years, introduced within weeks.

For all HEPs, the wellbeing of their students is paramount and during the COVID-19 pandemic, extra care has been available. While initiatives introduced in response to the pandemic have benefitted many disabled students, they have proved a significant barrier to others. The shift to online learning and assessment coupled with the uncertainty created by the pandemic presents barriers for disabled students; primarily students with hearing and visual impairments and those who need to plan carefully to ensure they can engage and participate in learning and social activities.

So now more than ever before we need to ensure we **communicate clearly** with disabled students within the higher education (HE) community and we must do this **consistently** providing students with **certainty and choice** wherever possible. While the initial peak of the pandemic may be abating in England, we will be living with COVID-19 and its implications for the coming months and potentially years ahead. And just one of those implications is that for the foreseeable future, communication online will be the 'new normal'. Though clearly as the threat of the spread of the virus becomes less intense, this will be blended with face-to-face interactions. The 'new normal', while problematic for many, will often mean greater and more significant challenges for some disabled students as well as benefits for others.

There are now just three months before the new academic year starts. There is a need for urgency to ensure that the disabled student experience is addressed as campuses re-open, particularly in view of the additional challenges of social distancing and other measures required to reduce the threat of the virus.

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) was established by the Universities Minister and is funded by the Office for Students (OfS). The DCS aims to ensure that disabled students have a positive and successful experience in higher education. The DSC has run a series of roundtables to inform this booklet which is intended to support the sector in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This booklet outlines seven key areas that present challenges for disabled students and which urgently need to be addressed by institutions and policy makers in HE within the context of their obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The Commission will be addressing longer term issues that arose during the roundtables in the course of its work.

Furthermore, the Commission will be asking the OfS to take account of how providers have responded to the recommendations made within this booklet to institutions through its next round of Access and Participation Plans monitoring, which is due in the spring of 2021.

The sector now has a real opportunity to build on its pandemic response to date and to make a difference to the experience of disabled students and we are confident it will.

Professor Geoff Layer, Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission

1. Provide disabled applicants with support and guidance that is reflective of the COVID-19 pandemic in the clearing process

Clearing has already begun. However, 2020 will be unlike any previous year. Firstly, many applicants will have received calculated grades and will not have had their planned examination. Secondly, disabled applicants may be concerned that their impairment was a factor in determining the grades they were awarded; and thirdly, applicants and their parents will want to understand how HEPs have responded to the pandemic and for disabled applicants, particularly those who are shielding, these questions will require detailed and considered responses including information on the option to defer.

The DSC will work with **UCAS including the UCAS HUB, Uni Connect partnerships and Discover Uni** to ensure they provide information specifically for disabled applicants on the clearing process, covering issues which may have arisen as a result of the pandemic.

Institutions need to assure themselves that the mechanisms in place for supporting disabled applicants through the clearing process are sufficient in the current context and will need to provide clear, realistic information regarding the accessibility of site, facilities, geography, access to buildings and learning, as many applicants may not be able to visit.

Challenges for HEPs

1. provide specific guidance and support for disabled applicants prominently on the HEP's website
2. ensure that virtual clearing open days include information on accessibility and support for disabled students
3. provide (where possible) face-to-face visit/tours for students with mobility and visual impairments
4. ensure that information, advice and guidance (IAG) provided to disabled students is reflective of the pandemic. For example, does it cover the learning delivery method and how reasonable adjustments are being made for disabled students? Accommodation provision during the pandemic? What support can disabled applicants expect on starting their course particularly if they are continuing to shield? Does IAG for parents cover the HEP's response to the pandemic?

2. Ensure ease of access to funding for individual-level reasonable adjustments

The extension of the UCAS acceptance deadline, together with a general trend towards later decision making, coupled with both the uncertainty created by the pandemic and the fact that many organisations are working remotely is likely to lead to delays in Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA). Very likely, this will create added stress and uncertainty for disabled students.

The support requirements of returning disabled students may well have changed due to the shift to online learning and assessment. Ensuring online learning and assessments are developed with accessibility in mind (see point six below on blended learning) will reduce the need for individual-level reasonable adjustments, but adjustments to the home learning environment may still be required. Some disabled students will now require reasonable adjustments when they previously have not and some students will now be considered disabled under the Equality Act 2010 when they were previously not. It is extremely important that a disabled student does not face the added burden of delay in the assessment of their needs. Delayed support packages will put students at a considerable disadvantage. It is imperative that a disabled student has the support they require from day one as delays will impact on their learning experience.

Given that there could be delays to students receiving DSAs, **the DSC calls upon HEPs to provide support for disabled students waiting for assessments, working with and trusting the student in devising interim reasonable adjustments.** The majority of adjustments will not require individual level funding and the expenditure will be covered by DSAs in the longer term. **The DSC recommends that in the interim HEPs cover the cost of individual level adjustments from their hardship funds and in the event the DSA assessment is different, calls upon the DfE to fund the gap in cost, providing the expenditure has been granted in line with strict value for money principles. This is a relatively small financial commitment for Government but will make a significant difference for disabled students.**

The DSC will continue to liaise with the SLC over the processes for DSA applications to ensure that it continues to enhance the student experience.

Challenges for HEPs

5. ensure students are provided with a timetable for the introduction of reasonable adjustments
6. in the event of delay to reasonable adjustments, outline expectations of the student and their academic department.

3. Ensure student support meets and considers the requirements of disabled students during the pandemic

“When we went into lockdown there was inconsistency when I let disability and wellbeing services know I was struggling - there wasn’t sufficient feedback to tutors and I had to ask myself for extensions. Reasonable adjustments weren’t adjusted for lockdown.”

Student roundtable participant

Before the start of the academic year 2020-21, there is time to reflect on the support provided to disabled students during the peak of the pandemic and to learn from that experience. Disabled students may have experienced a flare-up of conditions, stress and trauma during the lockdown period. Consequently, their wellbeing should be thoroughly considered and supported whether they are transitioning into HE for the first time, starting a new year, re-entering following a year spent abroad or in the workplace or, in the case of postgraduate research (PGR) students, transitioning between their research and being a paid member of staff.

The Commission heard that disabled students participating in the roundtables, which included part-time and PhD students, felt that their circumstances were at times inadequately considered by their HEP. Some students have established support networks which they will lose if they move location, and some will have experienced hardship and trauma during the pandemic, for which they are likely to require continued support.

For disabled PhD students, the lack of extensions where their research has been impacted was a significant concern. It is also likely to be a concern for other students, where extensions have not been available. To reduce the potential for student hardship and the number of students needing to apply for extenuating circumstances, **the DSC recommends that HEPs ensure that the impact of the pandemic is considered in the management of student financial support, stipends, visa requirements and assessment policies.**

Challenges for HEPs

7. ensure that student wellbeing services reflect the changing needs of disabled students as a result of the pandemic
8. effectively communicate, in a range of fora, policies and processes that are changed or newly introduced in response to the pandemic
9. create a roadmap outlining support for students who are recovering from COVID-19 or have experienced hardship and trauma as a result of the pandemic.

4. Consider disabled students when making university campuses and accommodation Covid-19 secure

When the lockdown was announced, many students left their accommodation to return to their permanent residence. For some disabled students, it was necessary to return home to be with a familial support network. For disabled students who remained on campus during this time, many HEPs implemented systems to check on students' wellbeing and safety.

With lockdown measures easing, and students who left now being able to return, disabled students are considering whether they are able and prepared to leave their support network. In doing so they will want to know what measures are in place to support their transition back to student accommodation.

As students return, HEPs planning will need to take particular account of the requirements of disabled students to enable a socially-distanced campus. This also gives the opportunity to be more inclusive of the disabled student population.

Challenges for HEPs

10. specify the support that will be available for students shielding in university and privately managed accommodation at the start of the new academic year and in the event of future lockdowns
11. communicate how spaces on campus have been adjusted for social distancing
12. identify and review any unintended consequences arising from making a campus COVID-19 secure. For example, face-masks are a barrier for D/deaf students and people who use lip reading.

5. Facilitate disabled students' participation in welcome and induction weeks and ongoing social activities

HEPs have long recognised the importance of induction and welcome weeks for disabled students and most provide specific activities for disabled students alongside the usual opportunities to explore HEPs facilities, new surroundings, register and socialise with their new peers.

Induction week can often be daunting for disabled students. This year it is likely to be more so, particularly for students who need to strictly observe social distancing rules and may have been or are still shielding.

HEPs need to carefully plan their induction and welcome activities to ensure, where possible, a balance between face-to-face and online activities including events specifically aimed at disabled students. **The DSC recommends that there is always an online option provided.** Choice will be key. For students with some impairments, for example D/deaf students, the opportunity for face-to-face interactions will usually be preferable.

The need to rethink induction week presents Students' Unions as well as HEPs with an opportunity to consider ways to organise social activities with disabled students at the forefront. The DSC will liaise with **NUS** to ensure they are playing a role in communicating the importance of inclusion to Students' Unions.

Challenges for HEPs

13. ensure disabled students, particularly those who may be shielding can fully participate in induction
14. Students' Unions should ensure they provide a range of face-to-face and online activities to enable disabled student participation.

6. Ensure blended learning is delivered inclusively and the benefits of blended learning are considered in long-term planning

Blended approaches use multiple methods to deliver learning, combining face-to-face interactions with online activities. In the pandemic, blended learning is becoming the new normal and many disabled students have welcomed the change. **The DSC recommends that HEPs continue to explore how blended learning can be used to create a more inclusive learning environment in their longer-term response.**

Having rapidly moved to online learning, HEPs will be reflecting on how online methods can work effectively alongside face-to-face delivery and further exploring the possibilities of online learning, with the aim of creating a more inclusive learning environment.

Some disabled students will neither want nor be able to resume face-to-face learning, but the use of face-to-face with online learning simultaneously provides an opportunity to overcome this barrier. HEPs can consider synchronous online learning, happening in real time, at the same time as face-to-face learning. For example, some students participate in person while others participate remotely, in turn enabling and easing the challenges of social distancing.

Asynchronous (happening at different times) online learning can also be explored and is likely to be of particular benefit to disabled students with fluctuating health conditions. It is also likely to be of benefit to international students who are learning in different time zones.

Consideration will also need to be given to support workers. In face-to-face learning environments, consideration needs to be given to social distancing and where the support worker is positioned within the learning space. The support worker also needs to be included in the calculation of the number of people allowed within a certain space. In the provision of online learning, HEPs will need to consider what support workers are required and how they can effectively support students as well as how students can engage effectively with the support worker.

As with face-to-face learning, students engaging with online elements of their course require accessible materials in advance, but they also require information on what elements of their course will be delivered online and how. Disabled students at the roundtables said they had experienced inconsistency within departments, and across modules and courses as to the methods used to deliver learning. This highlights the need for clear communication to students and for HEPs to ensure staff are aware of expectations for online delivery. The requirements of disabled staff also need to be considered as, similarly to disabled students, they may also require different reasonable adjustments to be able to engage effectively in online learning.

Three months to make a difference

D/deaf and autistic students, as well as students with visual impairments and those with multiple complex requirements, require particular consideration in the delivery of online learning. As previously highlighted, the provision of materials in advance is likely to help many disabled students. HEPs can also support students by using live captioning and sign language interpretation. If they have not already done so, HEPs should consider running test lectures to anticipate technology problems that students with particular impairments may experience. Where live captioning and sign language interpretation cannot be provided, materials should be made available as soon as possible to ensure students engage in their course alongside their peers.

As well as providing blended learning delivery, HEPs need to consider blended assessment methods. While extra time is sometimes a benefit, for some disabled students it can be punitive and exhausting. **The DSC recommends that, where appropriate and possible, students are given a choice of assessments to meet learning outcomes.** One student at the roundtable described this as a ‘palette’ of assessments – but care needs to be taken to ensure consistency across courses, with observance of the latest guidance from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

A truly inclusive learning and assessment environment requires accessibility to be considered at the outset of course design. As new modules are introduced and existing modules revised, HEPs must ensure that accessibility is considered before approval is gained. The DSC will work with **the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)** to establish whether a long-term strategy can be implemented to offer a wider choice in the way that students are assessed.

As well as delivering learning, HEPs will be concerned about student experience and attendance. **The DSC recommends that HEPs consider whether monitoring of student experience and attendance has evolved in light of Covid-19 or are the usual measures still in place and if so, are they still appropriate?** During the DSC roundtables, an issue was raised that some HEPs have been monitoring how long students have been logged into the virtual learning environment, without taking the volume of materials uploaded into account. Such a measure may negatively impact disabled students **and the DSC recommends that HEPs should use the duration of online interaction as an attendance mechanism only as part of a wider picture of engagement.**

‘Attendance should be attendance, full stop.’

(Student Roundtable Participant)

When planning for the longer term, HEPs may need to determine how online learning material will be managed. It may help to consider the following: Can all material be kept online and for how long? In what instances will materials be removed?

Challenges for HEPs

15. develop an evaluation of the impact of online learning and assessment on disabled student experience and progression
16. create an inclusive online learning and assessment environment
17. consider synchronous and asynchronous learning delivery
18. ensure consistency in the learning delivery and assessment method within courses and modules
19. monitor the engagement of disabled students in blended learning using a series of mechanisms, rather than duration of online interaction alone
20. provide accessible reading lists to allow disabled students to sufficiently prepare academically
21. provide learning materials in advance
22. consider the needs of disabled students in planning for the resumption of skills based learning.

7. Embed accessibility as standard across all learning platforms and technologies

The rapid shift to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced perceptions of a world driven by new technology. We perceive students to be at ease with communication technology and platforms and yet, while many are, the platforms they are used to interacting on socially are often very different to the platforms used by HEPs to deliver online learning. **Training is therefore vital for both staff and students and the DSC recommends that HEPs consider their training provision.**

Training will help to ensure there is a consistency in approach across all courses and modules and that people are familiar with functions that will enhance accessibility. Where platforms do not enable an inclusive learning environment, HEPs should explore alternatives particularly as many platforms have implemented new functions in light of their increased use during the pandemic.

Applicants and students are ever-more reliant on online information. This makes compliance with the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 all the more important.

Challenges for HEPs

23. understand what accessibility functions exist within the online platforms used by your institution and take into account student feedback. For example, can live captions be used? Can students' control who they view to enable sign language interpretation?
24. train staff on accessibility functions of online platforms. For example, how to change backgrounds, raise hands and the use of chat functions.
25. brief students on how to use online learning platforms
26. ensure that webpages are compliant with the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018.

8. Background to this publication

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) is a new, independent and strategic group established by the Universities Minister to advise, inform and influence higher education providers (HEPs) to improve support for disabled students. Part of the Commission's role is to identify and promote approaches which work well for disabled students.

During June 2020, following the HE sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the DSC held four roundtables which considered the following subjects: disabled students' experiences of clearing, blended learning, and student transition and induction. Students and representatives from HEPs and other sector organisations participated in all roundtables. Students were provided with a separate opportunity to participate in the fourth roundtable to voice their views and opinions related to the topics. This booklet is informed by the contributions to the roundtables.

Given the rapid response of HEPs and the likely lasting impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of higher education, the DSC is working to ensure that the experience of disabled students to date is fully considered in the sector's longer-term response.

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Advance HE provide secretariat support to the Disabled Students Commission, and oversee the management, coordination and dissemination of research and other DSC outcomes.

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