



Reducing the persistent exclusion of disabled students in Higher Education

Executive summary

- Since 2018, [HESA reported](#) that the number of UK students with a declared disability has increased by 46% making up almost 20% of home students.
- The [Disabled Students' Commission](#) stated that disability disclosure rates have increased among UK higher education (HE) students, from 5.4% in 2003/4 to 13.9% in 2018/19.
- According to [HESA](#), in 2018/19 the proportion of disabled first-degree undergraduate qualifiers receiving a first/2:1 (75.2%), remained smaller than the proportion of non-disabled qualifiers receiving a first/2:1 (76.7%).
- The proportion of disabled qualifiers who received Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) achieving a first/2:1 was larger than those not in receipt of DSA (76.1% and 74.5%, respectively, see report by the [Disabled Students' Commission](#)).
- [According to DSUK](#), a higher proportion of disabled leavers were unemployed 15 months after qualifying than non-disabled leavers (6.1% compared with 4.7%).

Policy recommendations

1. **Provide guidance for the sector** upon prior consultation with disabled students' organisations and university representatives and centring students' voices in all processes of policy enactment.
2. **Provide clear guidance to senior leadership** on how and what to communicate to administrative staff at each stage of the inclusion process

including initial assessment of needs and information on Disabled Student Allowance (DSA); appropriate, timely, and consistent support throughout disabled students' university experience; and reduction of their administrative burden.

3. **Implement Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for staff** concerning disclosure processes and the effect of intersection of multiple social markers on disabled students' university experience and performance.
4. **Make it a legal requirement** for universities to provide inclusive and accessible teaching and learning resources, ensuring an anticipatory approach concerning material in advance of programme's start; live captions; diversified pedagogic material and flexible forms of assessment drawing upon the experience of the pandemic and foster students' creativity.
5. **Provide better outreach resources** on widening participation concerning transition periods from secondary level education to higher education (i.e. digital passport) and from higher education to the labour market.
6. **Provide national guidance** on integrated coordination systems between schools, universities, assessment services and career services.

About the research

The accounts and studies were collected in a British Education Research Association Special Series focused on bringing forward an ecological approach to disability in UK higher education, built on evidence-informed good practices and studies. The work demonstrates

what connects and enables disabled students, professionals, academics, researchers, and grassroots organisations to create and sustain universities as inclusive spaces for disabled students and academic communities.

Why do marginalisation and exclusion of disabled students happen in HE?

- Disabled students are not effectively consulted in advance of their course registration. This delays disabled students' knowledge of and application for the DSA, preventing timely access to necessary learning resources and reasonable adjustments. This results in 15% of learners dropping out and 43% of disabled students spending more time on administrative tasks than they had expected.
- The sector continues to operate an inconsistent approach when defining and practising reasonable adjustments and adapted provisions. Disregarding anticipatory duties in planning and provision, not enough CPD and/or support for staff.
- Lack of inclusivity in teaching, learning and assessment methods with a recent return to exclusively face-to-face pedagogy.
- Uncertainty regarding funding, delay in essential provision and the absence of necessary short-term resources to cover delay in statutory funded provision.

There is a need to focus on how the sector can better listen to and engage with disabled students as experts of what provisions and measures are deemed inclusive. Much of disabled students' marginalisation is attributable to the higher education institutions' failings to enforce reasonable adjustments, bureaucratic burdens in assessing students, lack of staff flexibility and limited budgets.

Impact

Effects are lifelong and impact on their academic performance, their mental and

physical health, and their future career opportunities and they result in:

- A significant administrative burden on disabled students, acting as a barrier to study which includes delays at all stages of the application and grant process of the DSA, a lack of flexibility with the provision, and increased difficulties in coordinating a number of different figures (needs assessors, suppliers, support workers and universities).
- More mental health and stress due to non-disclosure for fear of stigmatisation or for not receiving the right support during their studies, leading to students' burnout.
- More time to finish their degrees due to difficulties to navigating academic practices.
- More dropouts due to lack of feeling a sense of belonging to higher education.
- More difficulties for students to recognise their abilities and applying for the right graduate job opportunity.

Impact on institutions as shown by recent studies, and the effects include:

- Lack of diversity in student body and loss of talent of academic staff.
- Inconsistent focus on quality assurance which results in poorer institutional performance, followed by course and institutional low student rating.
- Non-disclosure of disability impacts on teaching quality as professionals struggle to address students' learning needs.

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