IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON DISABLED STUDENTS AND RECOMMENDED MEASURES

A REPORT BY DISABLED STUDENTS UK

We are a loose collective of current and former disabled-students in the UK.

The Coronavirus has caused widespread disruption to society in the UK and worldwide, as well as to UK Higher education life. In early March universities were mostly running as normal with extra hand-washing advice - by mid-March this had turned into social-isolation for at-risk groups, universities changing in-person teaching to an online model as well as rapidly shutting down services.

University communications have often been very long; constantly changing and often fail to mention issues that specifically affect you as disabled students. It can be difficult to contact staff, many universities are insisting on deadlines being maintained (despite our lives being turned upside down) and there is a lot of uncertainty about exams and more.

You are not alone!

This guide aims to pull together advice and links to support resources for UK-based disabled students at this time.

The university's legal duties to you as a disabled student remain, they should have been thinking of disabled students all along. Don't be afraid to let them know that you are needing access and support.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report

In the past month, several reports have surfaced which provide insight into disabled students' struggles in accessing higher education during the pandemic.[1] In this report, we want to bring these findings together to highlight the issues experienced by disabled students and suggest ways forward. We also add our findings from informal surveys conducted with a large number of disabled students. In this way, we hope to both gather useful information in one place and add disabled students' voices to the discussion.

The report begins by detailing some of the general pressures experienced by disabled people during the pandemic and is followed by a discussion of specific study-related difficulties. We go on to examine the way that the responses to the pandemic from universities as well as the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding bodies have impacted disabled students. We recommend better approaches. Finally, we look at what the higher education sector can learn about inclusion from this pandemic.

1.2 Considerations

It is worth keeping in mind that as the entire world is affected by this virus, many organisations are under-staffed and people who are working in the organisations we refer to are likely to be:

- Trying to work from home, and or offices with very few staff.

- Covering colleagues' work.

- Using unfamiliar, slow and now overloaded IT systems.

- Managing caring responsibilities on top of work (e.g. children, elders or sick folk).

- Having unclear messages or limited messages from their own management.

It is likely that email and online methods will be more effective than phones to contact people and organisations as remote-phone access is probably harder to set up quickly. There are likely to be delays or slow-downs in every area of life. If you can manage automated-systems, we recommend using these where possible so it frees up staff-intensive resources. In this guide we will try to estimate what reasonable response times should be in these circumstances.

1.3 Disabled Students UK

Disabled Students UK is a grassroots disabled-led organisation. We envision a world where disabled students have the same access to higher education as non-disabled students. We are working to make universities truly accountable to their disabled students and to disability law. www.disabledstudents.co.uk

2 EXPERIENCES

2.1 As a disabled student

Many common pandemic issues are hitting disabled people harder
Disabled people in the UK have been harder hit by the effects of the pandemic. They are more likely to live in low-income households[2], and are consequently more likely to experience **financial hardship** during the pandemic and be less likely to have access to a computer and reliable internet.

In 2014 DSA started requiring that disabled students paid £200 toward assistive technology such as computers. Since then there have been indications that 30 percent fewer students are able to accessing such tools, predictably hitting the most vulnerable students the hardest.[3]

Because of the extra time and energy needed for disabled students to coordinating their support, they have less time and energy to do paid work.[4] Of those disabled students that were in employment at the start of the pandemic many have had to withdraw due to the virus risk, further exacerbating their financial issues.

The time and cost of being a disabled student also means that other responsibilities, such as having to **care for children or other household members**, have a greater negative impact on disabled students. In a survey conducted by the Association of Non-Medical Help Providers (ANMH), 11.1 percent of disabled students reported caring

responsibilities impacting their studies.[5] In addition, disabled students are also disproportionately likely to have had to return to **abusive home environments.**[6] It is important to mention that many of these issues are compounded for students who belong to multiple marginalised groups.

2.2 Disability–specific pandemic difficulties

Some disabled students have been instructed by their doctors to **shield or isolate** themselves completely due to a higher risk from the virus. This means that they are confined within their homes and must worry about what may happen if they catch the virus. Such students are likely to require additional mental health support and practical help - especially those remaining in student halls. Disabled men under 65 are 11.3 times more likely than non-disabled men to die from the virus, while disabled women under 35 are 6.5 times more likely than non-disabled women to die from the virus.[7]

While only a small proportion of disabled students are shielding, a larger proportion has had some part of their **health and social care** cut due to the risk of infection. For instance, they may not be able to take medication they usually take, receive hospital care that they would usually get, or use personal assistance which they usually rely on. As a result of this, many disabled students are experiencing untreated **flare-ups** of their conditions with unusual amounts of pain, fatigue and cognitive problems.

In addition, some disabled people excluded from the **government register** of "vulnerable people" have experienced issues such as food insecurity. For instance, blind

people who used to rely on online food orders suddenly had no way of getting groceries.[8]

Finally, the unique ways in which ableism has been manifested during the pandemic has taken a mental toll on many disabled students, including, but not limited to:

1. The seemingly constant discussions on whether the lives of those with preexisting conditions should be valued as much as as the non-disabled

2. The "do not resuscitate orders" being pushed on perfectly healthy people who are autistic or have learning disabilities[9][10][11], seemingly resulting in higher death rates even than what we see in care-homes[12]

3. The worries around the way the Coronavirus Act 2020 limits their rights, for instance leading to higher risks of those with mental health difficulties being involuntarily committed[13]

4. The worries around being deemed unworthy of saving in a triage situation if they caught the virus[5]

5. An anecdotally reported increase in disability harassment (e.g. those who are visibly disabled being harassed for going outside when they "should be shielding", those who are blind being harassed for not being able to keep a distance without help and those with fatigue conditions being harassed for needing to sit down in between walking)

Understandably those disabled students who have had any space to follow current events have been weighed down by the way that the civil rights we have fought so hard for, are now being eroded.

All of the above mentioned stressors naturally have an impact not only on disabled students' health and well-being, but also their ability to study.

2.3 Working Conditions

Mental health, flaring conditions and adapting to new working conditions

In line with the pressures detailed in the previous sections of this report, many disabled students are reporting heightened **anxiety and stress**. This is impacting on their preexisting mental health conditions, physical health conditions, concentration and energy levels, which in turn are affecting their studies.

The survey responses of 126 non-medical support workers showed that 46 percent were concerned about the **well-being** of their students due to issues of peer isolation, depression and anxiety[14]. Many especially pointed out this difficulty for those with preexisting mental health conditions or autism. It is worth mentioning here that many of these students have had much less of the support that they usually rely on from GPs, support workers, and community psychiatric nurses.

In an informal survey conducted by Disabled Students UK, the most common issues reported by disabled students were related to **anxiety, fatigue and concentration**.

This included problems with using screens for long periods of time, taking in information online, planning work and coping with change and unclear demands.

These are issues that many disabled students struggle with normally but which have been exacerbated by the extreme situation.

In addition, many disabled students are experiencing issues with the unfamiliarity of current working conditions and preexisting conditions **flaring** up. Disabled students spend years adapting their study environment to their non-typical needs. Now they have suddenly been asked to adjust to a new environment (and perhaps new needs if they do not have their usual medical care). This will, understandably, require extra support.

2.4 Inaccessible teaching and assessment

The changes to teaching have hit disabled students hard. In a survey conducted by the Association of Non-Medical Help Providers, 81.3 percent of disabled students agreed that "Because of the changes to my academic work, online teaching, and assessments, the Covid-19 situation is negatively impacting my studies". Out of the disabled students surveyed, 57.6 percent said that not having **access to teaching** was impacting their studies[5], 35.7 percent stated that not having access to course materials was impacting their studies and 73.4 percent stated that not having access to academic resources such as libraries and workshops was impacting their studies.[5]

One reason for this is that universities have historically put little thought into **online accessibility**. For instance, only 31 percent of universities have Accessibility statements - a required document under the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018 (PSBAR).[5]

While we cannot go into depth regarding the various ways in which online teaching has been inaccessible, we wish to provide a sample of reported issues. All of these issues can be addressed if the university takes a preventative approach, providing teachers with clear guidance on best practice in inclusive online teaching and encourages staff to think of creative solutions together with disabled students when unforeseen issues appear:

1. Internet being too inconsistent for BSL (deaf/hard of hearing)

2. BSL being possible but the lecturer forgetting to include the BSL interpreter in the webinar (deaf/hard of hearing)

3. Captions being of poor quality (deaf/hard of hearing)

4. The lecturer not describing what is on the slides they are showing (blind/visually impaired)

5. Students who need scribes not having access to them (mobility impairments)

6. Students who need scribes not having access to them (mobility impairments)

7. Exam questions not being provided in audio format

More specific issues are discussed in the sources that we reference at the end of this report. Further information on accessibility during the pandemic can be found at:

- ndcs.org.uk

- diverseeducation.com

- accessiblecollege.com

- insidehighered.com

- mapping-access.com

3 RESPONSE

3.1 Decreased support from DSA and universities

When disabled students shift environments, their support also needs to shift. This means that service providers must be **flexible in the support** they offer and often means that students require more support for a period.

In these circumstances, it is important that DSA funding bodies and universities step up to quickly and painlessly offer extra study skills support, mentoring support, counselling and advice for disabled students. All this serves to make the transition to working remotely as smooth as possible and not put the disabled student at a "significant disadvantage".

Many of the issues mentioned above are issues that disabled students can receive help with through the Disabled Students' Allowance. 85.2 percent of surveyed DSA students agreed that "my DSA learning support is important for me at this time" and 61 percent agreed that "I feel that I require **additional DSA support** through this period due to the changes to my academic studies".[5]

However, instead of increasing support to meet the increased demand, the survey responses of 105 non-medical support workers indicated that on average, **only 74 percent of normal support is currently being delivered.**[5]

3.2 Blocking extra support

Part of the problem seems to be that DSA funding bodies like SLC **are blocking extra support** due to not acknowledging that the stress of the pandemic is causing disability-related academic issues. The Student Loans Company claims that no extra mentoring sessions can be authorised to assist with stress due to COVID-19 because it is not a study-related concern.[15] It is hard to see how the body in charge of funding for disability support at university can fail to understand the biological fact that both physical and mental health conditions are exacerbated by stress, leading disabled students to currently experience greater difficulty in completing academic work and have a greater need for support.

A large proportion of disabled students report to us that they have not been given the same **tools, software or adapted furniture** which they had used and relied on at university - despite having been expected to do all of their studying at home for more than 2 months. In addition, **some support is not being provided in a way that is accessible:** SLC is choosing not to allow needs assessments and non-medical help through chat and email instead of text-relay for deaf students.[16] Chat not only functions better but takes less than half the time.

While some universities are stepping in to pick up the slack, some even increasing their disability support, others are decreasing their support just like the DSA. 48.8 percent of disabled students report a **lack of access to university or college support services** impacting their studies.[5]

Some disabled students are reporting delays in accessing disability support as administrators have been **furloughed, redirected to other tasks or let go**. Others are reporting that their complaints regarding being denied reasonable adjustments have been put on hold by the university and regarded as "non-essential" activity. Finally, a large number of disabled students report **staff being impossible to reach, failing to send out information about the support available or being unsure of what support is available when asked.**

Disabled students' need for support has increased during the pandemic while disabled students' support from DSA and universities has decreased. We can only conclude that the Department for Education has failed in their responsibility to give disabled students equal access to education during the first part of the pandemic response, and hope that they learn from this during the second part.

3.2.1 *Solution: increased support*

It is crucial that DSA funding bodies and universities must not be allowed to use the pandemic as an excuse to cut back on disability support at a time when disabled students' support needs have increased.

Universities must make sure that their **disability services stay fully staffed**, with extra staff recruited if necessary, and that they are given the resources to communicate clearly with students about what support is available to them. We also recommend that universities invest in offering **additional counselling** (as many already have) and that staff members **check in individually** with those students who have mental health issues, are shielding, or are neurodivergent. For disability support staff to be able to do this job well universities must invest in their staff instead of furloughing some and overworking others.

We understand the decision by the SLC not to carry out ergonomic assessments remotely; however, informal surveys that we have conducted show that many disabled students are suffering without their adapted tools. We, therefore, insist that it is crucial for **interim ergonomic provision** to be put in place, with the guarantee that a full assessment will be provided when it is once again safe to do so. Considering that many disabled students are also unable to access their teaching due to not having a computer we urge SLC and other funding bodies to **reconsider the requirement that disabled students pay £200** toward such assistive technology.

The Professional Association for Disability and inclusivity practitioners in further and higher education (NADP) recommends that "The Student Loans Company reconsider the decision not to offer additional **mentoring** support for students where circumstances surrounding studying with Covid-19 has increased their stress and anxiety levels." We agree, however, mentoring is not enough. Many students will require more **study skills tuition, assistive technology training**, etc. than the hours that are currently included in their needs assessments. In these cases, the change to increased support should be smooth, accessible and must not place an administrative burden on the students.

3.3 Administrative requirements

DSA and University administrative requirements put disabled students at a **disadvantage** Beyond insufficient funding and furloughed staff, another significant barrier to support for disabled students is the high demand for unsupported administrative labour that students must undertake.

In an informal survey conducted by Disabled Students UK, disabled students were asked what solutions would help them most in lock-down. Out of 19 options (including increased support, free computers and universities having a no-detriment policy) students felt the most important solution was: *"Removing the need to prove some aspect of my disability if I have already **provided evidence** for being disabled once to my university."*

As mentioned above, disabled students often have **decreased time and energy resources**, a problem that has become worse during the pandemic. At the same time, **the time and effort required** by universities and the Student Loans Company to get support are substantial. This applies to everything from hardship funds to increased DSA support.

Many students report trying to contact their university disability service about needing additional or changed support during the pandemic, only to find that they have to jump through hoops to get that support. In addition, disability support staff are often stretched so thin that getting clear **instructions** and having their requests processed without significant **delays** is often impossible. This all proves too much for many students, many of whom simply **give up** on the support they need.

The failure to provide disability support during the pandemic is a vivid example of what disabled students have been arguing for many years: Requiring students to perform extensive administrative work in order to get their disability support is effectively the same as **refusing** them support.

Moreover, in the context of the pandemic, it is often impossible for students to obtain the required evidence in the form of **diagnoses and medical notes**. Many students who are waiting for a diagnosis of specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia have been unable to receive one due to the lockdown. To make sure that these students do not go without support the Student Loans Company has declared that they will temporarily accept evidence from a specific type of needs assessments instead[16]. However this applies only to a specific set of diagnoses.

This is not a new problem. In 2016, the Equality and Human Rights Commission recognised this issue in their technical guidance on the Equality Act 2010, emphasising that when the processes of requesting and arranging support involve too much work by the disabled student, it puts the student at a **"significant disadvantage."**

Despite this, the SLC has refused to offer **blanket increases** in support or to ease administrative requirements for disabled students: "Any requests for additional hours will be reviewed on a **case by case** basis and issues presented by COVID-19 will, of course, be considered. SLC does not believe that it is necessary or appropriate to change established processes and allow non-medical helper providers to request additional hours of support themselves. We would encourage providers to ask students to engage their needs assessors in good time, to allow for additional recommendations to be made and reviewed before a student has used their full agreement of hours."[16]

As an example, let us imagine that a student needs additional DSA support such as mentoring due to the stress of the current situation having caused a **flare-up** of their condition:

- First, they would likely contact their university to ask **who is responsible** in this instance, DSA or the university. In the current situation getting hold of someone to ask is likely to be tricky and they may have to go through several of their university contacts.

- If the responsibility for the support lies with DSA, university staff is likely to recommend that the student contact their **needs assessor**. In this situation getting hold of the needs assessor is likely to involve delays.

- When the student has reached the needs assessor and explained the situation the needs assessor may ask for **proof**.

- If the student is **lucky**, evidence from a GP is enough and they don't have to wait for months to see their specialist doctor to acquire this proof. Again, if they are lucky, the GP may offer a phone appointment within 3 weeks. If they are unlucky, their GP currently offers no appointments for patients needing medical notes and so the student must again wait months to acquire this proof.

- In the GP appointment, the student will explain their difficulty in the same way that they did to the needs assessor and their university. The GP will ask the student what adjustments they need. The GP will then **write down what the student is saying**, put their signature on it and send it to the needs assessor.

- At this point, the needs assessor will create an amended needs assessment and send this to the university. Again, this is likely to involve delays in the current circumstances.

- Finally, the student must contact their **service provider**, which hopefully is offering their service at a distance, to book an appointment. More delays.

Please note the **irony** of asking a student who is suffering from a **flare-up** and who needs help to make their work more efficient to go through this time-consuming and

taxing process. Also note the unnecessary burden it puts on our already **pressured NHS**, when all the doctor is doing is confirming what the student themselves is saying. Unsurprisingly many students do not get through the whole process but give up somewhere in the middle. It is not an exaggeration to say that many disabled students spend their whole degrees fighting for basic accommodations, even in non-pandemic times.

3.4 Disabled students are being forgotten

Society tends to relate to disabled people in two ways, often simultaneously: by acknowledging their needs if we can position ourselves as saviours or by ignoring their needs if it is hard to do so. The government has spoken a lot about "protecting the vulnerable" during the pandemic, but simultaneously, there have been numerous widespread breaches of disability rights. The Higher Education sector, in particular, has a long history of ignoring disabled people's needs, to the point where they often forget that disabled students exist.

In the weeks before the lock-down, **students who had to shield** because they were at higher risk from the virus were often forgotten while universities encouraged students who lived with elders to stay home. Then, when the universities closed their buildings, they gave little thought to how to **make online learning accessible** or how to provide disability support. Disability advisors had to think on the spot, and often problems were not discovered until disabled students made it clear they could not access the teaching. Even once discovered, problems have frequently gone unresolved due to the staff shortages and administrative barriers described earlier in this report. Disability services are not working at full capacity and disabled students have been forced to perform excessive administrative labour in order to access support, effectively barring them from it.

Universities are now making **long-term plans** for how to teach students in the academic year 2020/2021. However, many of these plans (such as the announcement by Cambridge University that they will have exclusively online lectures for the entire year), do not appear to have included impact assessments regarding how disabled students will be affected.[17] For instance, plans of resuming small-group teaching are not considering how **students who lipread** will be able to understand their tutors if they are wearing masks.

In the US a number of scholars of disability, health equity, institutional policy and inclusion, as well as disabled faculty and allies have put together an excellent statement on why online provision of education needs to continue:

"Campus re-openings are an issue of civil rights, particularly disability, racial, and gender equity. Given the disproportionate representation of COVID-19 infection and death in Black and brown communities, university policies that emphasize in-person work and teaching run the risk of compounding the impact of racial inequity. These policies also risk endangering already-marginalized members of university communities, including staff and contingent faculty who are less likely to have the option to take time away from work. As a matter of justice, equity, and ethics, we call upon university administrators and communities to value the lives of marginalized racialized and disabled people over the purported economic value of campus

re-openings. [...] Members of campus communities who are particularly vulnerable to the virus should not be treated as disposable or allowable collateral damage in the course of the pandemic."[18]

In particular they caution against only allowing online access for those who are on some kind of list of the most "vulnerable", as we know these tend to be very incomplete. (Do read the whole statement which is brilliant in its entirety:[5])

Lack of consideration for disabled students in the initial phase of the lock-down led to unnecessary and unacceptable suffering. It is crucial that disabled students are taken into consideration going forward.

4   SOLUTIONS

4.1   Blanket support and treating students as experts

We have identified four ways of reducing the administrative work of disabled students:

1. Helping disabled students with administrative tasks

2. Reducing but not removing the need for administrative tasks

3. Offering blanket support to all students

4. Offering blanket support to all students who have already declared a disability, waiving the requirement for additional proof

4.2   Increase administrative help

It is crucial that universities and other service providers do not cut back on their disability support administration at this time but rather invest in the work of these staff members. This includes both providing **clear information** to all disabled students about how to access the support that is available and stepping in to do **administrative work** for individual students.

4.3   Reduce need for administration

We ask that universities and DSA funding bodies relax their **evidence requirements** not just in keeping with what evidence is strictly possible for disabled students to acquire at this time, but also with the aim of ensuring that disabled students are not put at a significant disadvantage due to the administrative burden.

The current situation does not allow for additional support hours to be granted on a **case-by-case** basis, requiring the student to spend time and energy that they do not have explaining their situation or chasing up evidence. This is not an accessible solution.

Ultimately, disabled students are the experts on their own conditions, and they know much better than any needs assessor what their needs really are. We ask DSA

funding bodies and universities to consider **working from the assumption that disabled students are competent and honest,** and trust that they themselves can determine whether something like study skills support or dictation software will be useful for them or not. We believe that these products and services will only be useful for, and thus only be requested by, those students who genuinely have a need for them.

Reducing the burden of proof on disabled students also **reduces the administrative workload for universities and DSA funding bodies.**

4.4   Provide blanket policies

A number of Higher Education Institutions have already implemented some **blanket policies which benefit all students,** including those who are disabled. These include:

1. No-detriment policies ensuring that students do not receive lower grades than what is indicated by their past work (although this must be extended to apply to postgraduate taught and research students)

2. Changed rules for coursework extensions, such that students can apply for a 2 week extension without any evidence

3. Providing laptops, software and internet-access dongles

4. Provide disability specific blanket policies

In addition, we must see an increase in **policies which allow students who have already provided evidence for their disability once to access support without needing to provide additional evidence** that for instance, their illness is flaring up. This includes waiving the requirement for evidence when disabled students apply for:

- The university hardship fund

- Coursework extensions beyond 2 weeks

- Funded extensions of 6 months (PhD)

- Suspension of course fees for self-funded students (PhD)

4.5   Impact assessments and Office for Students

The Equality Act (2010) specifies that the responsibility of higher education institutions to make their services accessible to disabled students is **anticipatory** - when developing university policy they are required to consider and prevent potential problems for disabled students before those problems appear. One way to achieve this is to perform robust **Equality Impact Assessments**.

Going forward, universities must create impact assessments which allow them to:

1. Make their online teaching and assessments accessible.

2. Ensure that those students who need to continue staying at home after lockdown eases will be allowed to continue their education from home.

3. Ensure that changes to the way on-campus teaching is done do not put disabled students at a disadvantage

The failure of universities to keep disabled students in mind, and the failure of the Office for Students (OfS) to hold them accountable for it, demonstrates an **issue with the wider structure of incentives and oversight in higher education**. The Office for Students evaluates mainly graduation and employment outcomes rather than provisions during the course of academic programmes. Historically it has focused on promoting "good practice" through competition and releasing guidance rather than enforcing compliance with the Equality Act. This has never worked for protecting the rights of disabled students, and we believe it will become clear during the pandemic that it is also an ineffective method of protecting the rights of other students.

This faulty approach has continued during the pandemic. This spring has presented an excellent opportunity for OfS to create clear rules for what universities need to do in order to give their disabled students equal access and applied penalties for those who fail. Instead OfS has created a briefing around "good practice" in the sector. Predictably, this has done little to protect students who are being excluded from their education by universities that do not have the minimum human resources or safeguards in place to consider disabled students in a crisis.

Addressing the possibility of universities not following the law in their briefing, OfS simply argues that individual students should make complaints about this. This response is problematic for three reasons: 1. It is not preventative, as the approach to disability in higher education must be by law. 2. Speaking to a large number of disabled students who have started on and then had to give up the complaints process has made it clear to us that this route is inaccessible. 3. OfS is essentially pushing their own responsibility onto individual disabled students.

That OfS should have a role in enforcing the law is made clear by its own regulatory framework. Condition of registration E2 states that the higher education provider must have in place adequate and effective management. A higher education provider is failing to comply with this condition if "the provider fails to comply with legislation on equality and diversity, and does not have regard to its policies on equality and diversity"[19] Having such a condition of registration but doing nothing to enforce it nor investigate whether it is being followed does nothing put pay lip service to marginalised communities.

However, there is hope. In an unusually proactive move, the OfS recently warned that it could impose financial penalties for universities who engage in recruitment practices which undermine student interests.[20] This sets a precedent for OfS intervention which has the potential to improve protections for the rights of marginalised students.

We urge the Office for Students to use the Disabled Students' Commission, Disability Rights UK and Disabled Students UK to create a list of concrete rules for universities to follow as regards disability rights in the autumn. These can range from specific rules such as "no disabled students must be excluded from receiving their education if they feel unable to leave the house due to an increased risk of dying from the virus" to more structural rules such as **"the university must publish transparent, accountable, achievable and progressive Equality Impact Assessments**

for their autumn plans. These plans must have concrete action points based on the 2010 Equality Act, and the university must publish updates on whether these have been achieved."

We urge the OfS to impose sanctions on any university which does not comply with these rules.

5 WIDER CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITY FOR PROGRESS

Disabled students have long been denied reasonable adjustments which they need in order to be able to access education on equal terms.[21][22]

During the pandemic, many accommodations which have previously been denied disabled students, have suddenly been put in place for non-disabled students - from lecture recordings to coursework extensions. Blanket compassion and patience has been extended to the majority of students by this change in circumstances, with many universities eliminating the need for students to prove or justify the disadvantages they have encountered, setting broad no-detriment policies ensuring everyone is treated with understanding and sympathy. There have been outliers, who have argued that we must not "relax standards" or trust students' stories of hardship blindly, however such attitudes have often been publicly condemned.

On the one hand, it is **inspiring** to see university communities coming together to find creative solutions, and heartwarming to see the kindness and care we are able to show each other when we are all trying. On the other hand, the fact that disabled students were long denied these same accommodations when they needed them, highlights the **stark difference in the sacrifices we are willing to make for disabled and non-disabled students** (especially as universities continue to deny disabled students accommodations during the pandemic.)

During this pandemic, it has become clear to a large number of students, some of whom have had to drop out or otherwise suffered due to inaccessibility, that the **excuses** they were told as to why it was impossible for them to get certain accommodations (such as issues with workers' rights making lecture capture impossible) were not true. These same accommodations were quickly put in place when they became necessary for non-disabled students.

If the pandemic has shown us one thing it is that universities **are capable of making enormous adjustments and showing great care and flexibility** for their students in times of need. When they fail to do so for disabled students, or when they require disabled students to go through layers and layers of bureaucracy in order to get that support, it is a choice that universities make.

As we try to convince universities to adopt the same caring and flexible approach also toward their disabled students during this pandemic sometimes we encounter resistance. Some universities argue they have just put in place the online provision that we have long been fighting for. They wonder why we are not happy.

This fundamentally misunderstands accessibility and the responsibility of universities. **Accessibility is not a tick-box exercise**. Disabled students are varied. While online provision of education is a huge advantage to some disabled students, others

cannot access it at all because the way the university has chosen to put it in place does not make accommodations for their disability.

When we conducted an informal survey most disabled students indicated that their education has become less accessible to them during the pandemic, not more. This is because what disabled students need is not for universities to put in place a specific list of accommodations. What we need is flexibility and compassion, to have our needs considered and valued, during pandemic times and beyond.

The pandemic highlights the **advantage of adopting a more flexible and inclusive approach** going forward: universities that had some inclusivity built into their provision of education (for instance using lecture recordings to a greater extent) were better **prepared for the pandemic.**

Flexibility is also going to be crucial for universities to be able to **continue to offer their services to a wide range of students**. Many disabled students will need to continue to stay at home for their protection, as will some students within other marginalised groups who are at higher risk or have competing responsibilities. (Have a look at this excellent interactive walk-through to understand the issues with forcing disabled students to attend face-to-face teaching during the pandemic: September 7th, 2020

We also predict that the number of students who need flexibility is likely to grow in the coming months, in part due to the recession, in part due to other effects of the virus such as post-viral fatigue. Allowing students to attend teaching online will also mean that institutions can announce their plans earlier and be more prepared if for instance there is a second wave. As stated by the Accessible Campus Action Alliance: "Principles of accessible and universal design recognize that measures taken in advance are preferable to last-minute measures that are often more expensive and less convenient to all parties."[18]

As the crisis phase of the pandemic fades and the higher education sector is able to respond with more consideration rather than simply react, it is faced with a choice. It could continue ignoring disabled students and other minorities in the autumn and beyond, slowly driving out students for whom education is no longer accessible.

The other option is that the sector could **learn from their own newfound experiences of adapting - and start to shape a more flexible, inclusive and personalised approach to higher education which is simultaneously more resilient to shocks**. Not only would this approach help universities finally comply with disability law, but it would also allow them to offer their services to a broader range of students, developing a broader range of talent and progressing our society.

The pandemic can be used as an excuse to deny disabled students their rights, or it can be used as a springboard for creating more humane and inclusive universities.

6 KEY DOCUMENTS

There have been a number of surveys into UK disabled students' experiences since Covid-19 kicked off.

- The Association of Non-Medical Help Providers undertook a student survey, receiving 3614 student responses.[5] This is a survey of both student recipients of DSA funded 'non medical helper (NMH) support and of the front-line staff of the providers' themselves which gives a great 'both sides' overview of issues. The first 25 pages are report and summary of findings, the latter 120 pages are the anonymised direct quotes from the surveys.

- The National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) released a report based on information from members of staff at colleges and universities working with disabled students.[15] and guidance for universities about making their teaching and learning more accessible.

- DSA answers to stakeholder questions[16]

- Disabled Students UK conducted two informal surveys of its members

- NADSN have an entire Covid-19 resources page for disabled staff working at universities. Under Section 2 they have published their position paper about the immediate future. Many disabled students also work as disabled staff and issues that affect disabled students often also affect disabled university staff (whether current students or not).

7 SUPPORT

While most people are anxious right now, many of us have impairments that make uncertainty more practically difficult to deal with as well as more distressing. For students with mental health or autism spectrum conditions for example, saying "just think about something else" is a lot easier said than done. For students with some impairments managing disruptions to health and social care is taking up all your time and energy.

We don't claim to have a magic fix, but we list a few resources or ideas which might help.

7.1 Student Minds

Student Minds have created a Corona Virus resources page at studentminds. While these may not fix everything, some basic self-care strategies like taking time away from the computer, making efforts to stay in contact with close people, and doing non-virus and non-academic tasks, can really help reduce background levels of stress and anxiety.

7.2 Online therapy

Remember that many therapists are able to work online (and more will probably be moving online in this situation). Here are some free therapy and counseling options:

- freepsychotherapynetwork.com

- 7cups

- thehelphub

7.3 Mutual aid and volunteering opportunities

Some students have set up social media groups specifically for virus related issues or joined their local Covid-19 Mutual Aid group (see covidmutualaid.org) which is highly localised and provides opportunities to help one another out with a range of issues from food to support and advice. Sometimes doing something can feel better and be better for managing anxiety than feeling like you're doing nothing. There are ways to help remotely if in-person assistance isn't possible. Resources for social interaction and self development Finally, if you are able to, do take advantage of the many resources that are now moving online. From online dance parties and collective exercising to drawing tutorials, Your local mutual aid Facebook group will probably be a good source of information about these.

7.4 Collective social media group

A collective of disabled people have set up a Facebook group called The Bunker for disabled people to share and offer advice and links to relevant guidance for disabled people. It is largely focused on personal and social care issues. New-joiners have to answer some questions to join and agree to follow community rules for everyone's safety. Students' Union Your students' union may have useful sources of support and will know your university and local area well. Do look for information on their websites and social media. You may be able to contribute as well as receive support.

8 HOUSING/FINANCE

We are aware of a number of financial and housing difficulties disabled students may face, including:

- Having to leave university accommodation early.

- Needing to self-isolate and having risks to your health from housemates' behaviour.

- Managing financial issues like rent and bills.

- Incurring additional costs to maintain hygiene and safety.

- Paying for extra or more expensive support.

- Rent and landlords

If you are struggling with paying rent contact your landlord and explain your difficulties. Ask if they can agree to a break in paying rent, reduced rent or something else.

shelter.org.uk is widely considered a reliable source of information for housing queries in the UK

8.1 Bills and financial difficulties

If you are struggling with bills, many utility companies have hardship funds especially for disabled people. Contact them and ask for hardship support and if relevant to you, ask if they have any priority support for disabled people (some organisations like water companies will do things like bring you bottled water in the event of an outage if you are disabled).

If you are likely to go into debt or overdrafts, contact your bank and let them know you are struggling and ask if they can help.

Template email to an organisation:

> "Dear COMPANY,
> My name is XXX, my customer reference number is XXX.
> I am a disabled person who is experiencing additional financial and practical difficulties as a result of the Corona virus outbreak. «Explain issue as briefly as possible».
> Please can COMPANY provide me with «Make request for help briefly here»
> If you need me to provide further information please let me know. The most accessible contact method for me right now is XXX. «If you have unwanted contact e.g. phone, say so "Please do not contact me by phone, I am unable to hear/answer it right now"»
> Many thanks,
> SIGNOFF.

8.2 University hardship fund

Your university may also have additional hardship funds available because of the virus - sometimes they have even relaxed their criteria for use. Go and look at their website and contact the student finance team. If you email them, allow at least 3 days for a reply unless any auto-reply says it will be longer. If they have any online forms or automated systems and you can manage those that is best as it frees up the human-assistance for people who need it most.

The Scottish Government has brought forward early access to £11.4 million of discretionary funds — support for higher education students in financial difficulty — and administered by colleges and universities. **SAAS** has also created a list of questions and answers relating to higher education funding in Scotland.

If you have non-disability related issues such as childcare, caring or are at risk of, or are in an abusive situation, do also mention this to the university as they are supposed to be extra aware of these situations.

A template email to the hardship fund:

Hi,

My name is XXX, My student number is XXX.

I am a disabled student in my XXth year of a XXX degree at University-Name. I am struggling financially because of the Coronavirus. «Insert brief explanation of what you're struggling with».

Is it possible for the university to provide me with any financial or other assistance «briefly explain what you need - give costings if possible».

If you need me to provide more information, please let me know.

Accessible contact methods for me are XXX and XXX. «If you have unwanted contact e.g. phone, say so "Please do not contact me by phone, I am unable to hear/answer it right now"»

Many thanks

SIGNOFF

8.3 Mutual aid and collectives

If you are struggling with practicalities of moving or finances, search for your local Covid-19 Mutual Aid group, or Students' Union as they may be able to help. Some of them have small pools of money to help people financially.

9 PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CARE

Many disabled students are currently struggling with personal and social care support being disrupted by the virus, and increased risks to health from having Personal Care Assistants (PCAs) coming in and out of their accommodation. As of May 2020, the government has produced some guidance for Direct Payments users

9.1 Managing care

Grassroots guides for managing PCAs and Covid19

- An anonymised disabled person's guide

- A guide written by a junior doctor for disabled PCA users

- While you may not have or need a full support plan, this tool by the West England Centre for Independent Living (WECIL) and funded by Department for Health: createmysupportplan.co.uk may be useful to help you consider your needs and articulate them clearly.

- skillsforcare.org.uk Skills for Care have produced various pieces of guidance (being updated regularly) for **care providers** around Corona Virus at: covidmutualaid.org

9.2 Collective social media group

A collective of disabled people have set up a Facebook group called The Bunker: The Bunker for disabled people to share and offer advice and links to relevant guidance for disabled people. It is largely focused on personal and social care issues. New-joiners have to answer some questions to join and agree to follow community rules for everyone's safety. No question is "too stupid" so if you are lost, this is a great place to ask for help and knowledgeable people are usually quick to reply and kind (and if they're not, report to admins and they will remove unkind posts!).

9.3 Government vulnerable person list

If you feel you may be extra vulnerable, the UK government is about to set up a service where you can register to get assistance probably with food and meds deliveries (As of August 2020, assistance through this seems to vary by local authority).

10 GUIDANCE

10.1 Assignment deadlines

As of May 2020, some universities have permitted automatic or sympathetic-deadlines systems. Each institution is different your Students' Union, disability service or academic department may be able to help you find out your university's rules.

You may feel the automatic extensions aren't good enough or are too difficult to access. In that case we recommend emailing the person you have most contact with or your personal tutor and explaining that you need more than the standard extension with your reasons. It is worth stressing in your request that as a disabled person you are more impacted than a non-disabled person would be in the same circumstances and that it is not feasible right now to obtain the usually demanded medical evidence.

Non-exhaustive list of possible additional difficulties:

- Managing disability, health and social care needs.

- Disruption or changes to any 1:1 support e.g. change of mentoring to remote.

- Experiencing more difficulties accessing online teaching e.g. difficulty hearing in online seminars.

- Worsening of your impairments because of stress and anxiety.

- Additional childcare or other responsibilities because of schools and services closing.

- Increased risk of being badly affected by the virus, so needing more strict isolation or quarantine.

- Housing difficulties.

- Needing to relocate to a different address.

Sample extensions request email:

> Dear PERSON,
> My name is XXX. My student number is XXX. I am a student in MODULE-NAME, which has coursework XXX due to be submitted on DATE. I would like to request a two-week «ASK for longer if you think you need it» extension until DATE for the following reasons:
> As a result of the Coronavirus outbreak and my disability I have been experiencing significant disruptions to my ability to study and complete my assignment on time «Insert very brief outline of issues here».
> I am unable to provide additional medical evidence at this time as healthcare services are closing down all but emergency care and Coronavirus treatment. «If you are losing out on regular care, outline this here as it may help your case».
> I understand university staff are also significantly affected by the rapid changes to university life, but I hope you can respond to this request as soon as possible, preferably no later than 5-7 days from now. «If you have unwanted contact e.g. phone, say so "Please do not contact me by phone, I am unable to hear/answer it right now"»
> I hope you are able to keep safe and well.
> SIGNOFF NAME

10.2 Exams

Every university seems to have done something different about exams. Some changed the formats, some turned exams to coursework and some cancelled exams outright. A common term in relation to exams is something called "no detriment" so it is worth investigating what your university is doing for this. Requesting further adjustments Once exam arrangements are published, you may find they are poorly accessible to you. You should carefully consider whether your issues are 'want' or 'need' as the situation is not ideal for anyone. The legal test for being entitled to request reasonable adjustments for exams is if you feel you are 'put at a substantial disadvantage compared to other students without your disability'. It is worth talking to your personal tutor, department exams tutor and or disability adviser about further exam adjustments. A template email for request Coronavirus exam adjustments could be:

Dear NAME AND NAME,

My name is XXX and my student number is XXX. I am a disabled student in the XXXth year of a XXXth degree in DEPARTMENT.

My summer exams appear to be NEWFORMAT with XXX adjustments already in place «XX could be no adjustments». I am concerned that NEWFORMAT will put me at a substantial disadvantage for «Give reasons briefly» because of my disability.

I know it has been difficult for university staff to make the huge changes needed because of Coronavirus disruption, but would the university be willing to agree XXX adjustment instead, «or discuss further adjustments with me» by XXX method to come to a solution that will be more accessible for me while still manageable for the university.

I am happy to discuss this further, «If you have unwanted contact e.g. phone, say so "Please do not contact me by phone, I am unable to hear/answer it right now"»

Many thanks,

SIGNOFF

10.2.1 *Deferring exams*

One option is to defer some exams from May/June to August if that would help you by having the issue made less immediate. It is not clear how supportive universities will be of deferral requests, but it can be worth asking for. Universities usually have exam deferral processes published online, so go and look at those for how to do it.

If you can't find a process, or find it too overwhelming, a template email to your personal tutor or named exams tutor in your department may help:

Dear name,

My name is XXX. My student number is XXX. I am a XXXth year student on the XXX course in DEPARTMENT. I am also a disabled student who is experiencing additional impacts on my life as a result of the Coronavirus. I have been unable to «find or manage the university's formal process at the moment». Please accept this as a formal exam deferral request.

In order to focus on my health and reduce stress and anxiety, I would like to defer my exams from XXXMonth to XXXMonth. This is because «outline issues you're having cos of the virus and any disability specific impacts here».

I am unable to provide additional medical evidence at this time as NHS services are now totally focused on emergency-only and Coronavirus care. One issue I face in addition to everything else is more difficulty accessing my ongoing healthcare «outline relevant impact here» which adds to my immediate and medium term difficulties.

I hope someone can respond to me within the next 5-7 days. «If you have unwanted contact e.g. phone, say so "Please do not contact me by phone, I am unable to hear/answer it right now"»

I hope you keeping safe and well at this time.

Many thanks,

SIGNOFF

10.3 Difficulties accessing online teaching and learning

While online teaching and learning are a bonus for some disabled students, they can present additional barriers for others. Learning online is very different to "in person". Martin Weller from the Open University, world leaders in distance learning, has written a guide for students

Many students who are deaf or have any kind of hearing or processing difficulty may find the sound quality of online lectures is poorer than they are accustomed to. Group discussions by audio or video may also be inaccessible or overwhelming. A number of options to improve access to these are possible:

10.4 Deaf and hard of hearing students

If you are deaf you may be able to change or add communication support by asking the university to: Help you invite your BSL/English interpreter, (Speech to Text Reporting) STTR operator or note-taker to teaching sessions so you get real-time notes and access. You may wish to watch and read the tips for using virtual interpreting or lip-speaking and remote STTR or electronic note-taking at Limping Chicken

- Add accurate captions to the video of online lectures within 5-10 days.

- Ensure that a set of real-time summary notes of an online lecture or key points in seminars are made and sent to you (and maybe other students in general.

- Students with other impairments

If you are not deaf you may have difficulty accessing real-time teaching session support but you may be able to ask your university to:

- Add accurate captions to the videos of online lectures within 5-10 days.

- Arrange provision of a note-taker so a set of summary notes can be taken.

10.5 Postgraduate/researchers

If you are a postgraduate researcher you may have had moderate to severe disruption to your programme:

- Closure of specialist facilities such as labs, computer suites and studios.

- Loss or reduced access to research data.

- Reduced contact with your research group or contact methods being poorly accessible.

- Concerns about maintaining your supervisor-supervisee relationships.

The best contact is probably your PhD or research group leader or graduate support departments as they will have most knowledge of your working area. You may wish

to contact disability services for advice if your academic and graduate schools cannot help.

If you are concerned about delays to research and funding, consider asking your funding bodies or universities about any hardship funds or extensions to funding that are available. Difficulties navigating online systems If you are struggling to access online systems, first talk to any mentor or study tutors you have. If you do not have this support, contact your personal tutor or a friendly tutor and ask if they would help you work things out. You may also find fellow students helpful as they may have experienced similar confusion to you.

You may wish to share this twitter thread for academic staff about making things accessible.

Difficulties accessing university services e.g. welfare Universities may still be running services with reduced staffing and overworking staff who are available. You should still ask for support and if responses are unsuitable and slow, ask to talk to the management as universities should now be stabilising their staffing.

Here is a list of free assistive technology and other resources

10.6   DSA

DSA is legally logistically separate from your university in England and Wales. Your first contact for any DSA issues should usually be your support provider (workers or equipment) or the Needs Assessment Centre (use the main centre contacts as individual staff may be unavailable whereas the central office can redirect your query to the best person to help).

If you have to extend your planned graduation date, you should inform your funding body then your assessment centre.

If you haven't been using your support, you can start using it now. You can also enter/continue the DSA process at any point. Contact the providers on your "DSA 2" award letter and ask them to help. If you have not heard from your providers and need help, do contact them. If you don't hear back or are not happy, contact your Needs Assessment Centre for help.

Support providers, assessment centres and funding bodies (and universities where assessments are done there) are all still experiencing disruption but should have improved since March and April. We hope our guidance will help you navigate these systems as efficiently for you and them as possible to minimise the delays to getting solutions in place. Support Providers If you are having issues accessing or using support workers then the first point of contact is either the usual method you use to contact the worker or the agency. If you find a worker doesn't reply in 3-5 days, go to the agency as the worker may be unavailable because of current virus disruption.

> Dear SUPPORT-WORKER/AGENCY,
> My name is XXX. I receive XXX support through DSA. I am experiencing «explain your difficulty» and would like to «explain outcome you want».
> Please can you let me know if you can assist me directly or tell me who I need to speak to with my problem.
> I hope you are all staying safe and well at this time.
> SIGNOFF

If any of your equipment is breaking down, you need to speak to your equipment providers. Again, email may be best while phone systems are re-set up. They should be able to respond within 5-10 days to start sorting your issue out. There are restrictions on physically handling equipment so they may need to suggest alternatives at the moment. If you are not getting a satisfactory response, you may need to make a formal complaint to them and talk to your needs assessment centre who may be able to help.

10.6.1 Needs Assessment Centres

If you need your DSA recommendations changed you should email your Needs Assessment Centre. It helps if you can provide your Funding Body reference number and a moderate amount of detail about what you need and why it is a disability-related need. Centres should respond to an email within 3-5 days and may be able to request changes from funding bodies for you once they understand what you need. If you need a phone or video call chat, ask for this.

10.6.2 Applying for DSA

You can and should still apply for DSA - sooner rather than later!

You can find a needs assessment centre at gov.uk. If the assessment is remote, you may wish to consider centres close to the university postcode as they will probably know more about the local universities.

10.6.3 Useful DSA information

- Allowances DSAS (Disability rights UK) (DRUK also have a helpline which can answer specific questions).

- YourDSAs aim is to provide useful information for the process, covering application, assessment, and receiving this support.

- The NUS, NADP and DnA produced an excellent 5min, 30s video about the latest information relating to SFE DSA

- Claim It campaign offers advice and information about Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) and other university-led adjustments.

If you know any prospective disabled students - tell them to talk to their university disability team and apply for DSA as soon as possible - so if there's any issues there is time to fix them!

10.6.4 *Evidence for DSA*

- The Specific Learning Differences (SpLD) Assessment Standards Committee **(SASC)** have considered the issues but had to decide it is not possible to do an entire diagnostic assessment remotely. They recommend doing remote interim interviews as a short term solution during the pandemic with a top-up in person at a later date. This is all explained (especially in Section 6) of this SASC document

- **Student Finance England (SFE)** have announced that they will accept some interim assessment reports with a top-up once things become more normal. This is explained in an "SSIN" (student support information note) called SSIN 04 (20 SASC DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT (If this link breaks, try searching for the title of the document and please let us know! The document date is nonsense).

- **SFE: Evidence for other conditions** There has been less clear guidance published, but SFE say to apply and submit what evidence you have and they will let you know if it is sufficient.

- **SFE: Section 5 for DSA long form only** If you are a part-time or postgraduate student (or don't have a student loan) and are using the longer English DSA application form. Instead of getting Section 5 physically stamped, Student Finance England (SFE) will accept an email to dsa_team@slc.co.uk from the student's Higher Education Provider from an academic email address which confirms the following

    - Student's name
    - Student's Customer Reference Number (CRN)
    - Course name
    - Course start date
    - Course end date
    - Student's year of study (e.g. second year)
    - Level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate)
    - Intensity of study e.g full or part time (if part time, what percentage e.g. 50% or 75%).

- You may also find that by now (August 2020) GPs are more able to fill in the DSA evidence form if you can email or post it to them. They can also write a

letter for you and email it back to you - as long it's a scan of headed paper it should be acceptable.

- **The Scottish Government** has brought forward early access to £11.4 million of discretionary funds — support for higher education students in financial difficulty — and administered by colleges and universities. **SAAS** has also created a list of questions and answers relating to higher education funding in Scotland.

DSA Needs Assessments will still go ahead during the Coronavirus outbreak, probably largely by telephone or remote video systems. Remote will be documented in DSA reports so that if recommendations are not as good as they should be, funding bodies are asked to be more flexible with reviews. If video or phone won't work for you, or you need support like a BSL/English interpreter, talk to the assessment centre about your concerns - there may be relaxation times when face to face assessments can be offered.

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