

Disabled Students Survey

SNOWDON
TRUST



Executive Summary



**Lucy,
Snowdon Scholar**

University can offer many exciting opportunities for individuals to pursue academic goals, move towards career aspirations, create friendships, sample independence, and embrace new life experiences - however, evidence suggests disabled students accessing higher education face many obstacles in harnessing opportunities that non-disabled peers do not face.

The injustice experienced in access and opportunity can span the entire university experience, from sourcing funding, accommodation and assistive technology through to social and learning opportunities.

In 2020, Policy Connect and the Higher Education Commission produced the report 'Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all', to explore the 'what and why' behind the challenges. Building on these findings, Snowdon Trust and Global Disability Innovation Hub have collaborated through this survey to amplify the voice of students, sharing their lived experiences - including studying during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Executive Summary: Challenges

Six key challenges were identified from the Disabled Students Survey:

1. **Funding is fragmented and often inflexible;** with geographical variation and shortfalls in the support.
2. **Accessible accommodation options are limited and expensive;** with challenges across both the private and university markets.
3. **Administrative burdens create stress and anguish;** taking valuable time away from study and social life.
4. **Assistive Technology is not currently meeting students needs;** with barriers including cost, expertise and delays in access.
5. **Social activities are often inaccessible;** limiting opportunities for disabled students to engage with all areas of student life.
6. **Transitions to employment are daunting;** with limited support or guidance on how to navigate the next step.

Students also highlighted how COVID-19 has amplified challenges, particularly for clinically vulnerable students and those relocating for study. However, students identify how remote learning has provided both an opportunity and a challenge.

Recommendations have been developed from the cross-cutting themes raised by the survey respondents and case study interviews, some of which echo and reinforce those previously identified in the 'Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all' report from 2020 (1). The consistency across these findings demonstrates the persisting inequality and emphasizes the pressing need for change.

The Disabled Student Survey has determined 6 key themes and aligning recommendations, which draw attention to the need for a unified approach across government funding sources (including transition to the workplace), removal of financial barriers to appropriate accommodation, and stronger leadership of social inclusion practices to ensure an equitable experience for all students. It is hoped these recommendations will be used as part of the strategy setting in the Governments National Strategy for Disabled People.

Executive Summary:

Themes & recommendations

Theme 1: A unified approach - Funding is fragmented across student finance, local authorities and individual universities, creating inconsistency in provision and processes throughout studies and onto workplace transitions.

Recommendation: *The Government must implement a unified funding system, to overcome regional disparities and ensure adequate support to allow for an equitable student experience.*

Theme 2: Removing barriers - The ongoing and cumulative burden of additional challenges; from affordable accessible accommodation to appropriate assistive technology diminish opportunity to engage fully with the university experience.

Recommendations:

- *Universities need to provide affordable accessible accommodation to align with the costs and options available for non-accessible accommodation on campus.*
 - *The Government should ensure students have access to adequate assistive technology, and providers and universities must provide appropriate training for its effective use.*
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Theme 3: Streamlined systems - Improved communications between students, university departments and funding streams are desperately required to reduce the time-consuming and mentally draining burden of administrative tasks.

Recommendations:

- *Universities should assign one point of contact to disabled students responsible for liaison across departments and supervisors.*
- *The Government should implement funding navigators to advise and support disabled students through public funding applications.*

Executive Summary:

Themes & recommendations

Theme 4: Equitable experience - Senior university leadership must champion a more inclusive approach across social and academic planning to meet the diverse needs of the student body.

Recommendation: *Student unions, with the backing of senior university leadership, should equip student societies with the knowledge and means to deliver an accessible social calendar and freshers week.*

Theme 5: Holistic outcomes - The need for tailored support to maximise outcomes, ensuring the implementation of assistive technology and enabling streamlined transitions to the workplace.

Recommendation: *The Government should invest in a centralised hub of information to support disabled students with their onward journeys, drawing together expertise from across the university, disability and employment sector.*

Theme 6: The individual - Support needs vary greatly for different individuals. A more flexible and individualised approach to working and learning practices, as evidenced during COVID 19 will lead to stronger outcomes.

Recommendation: *Universities must embed the positive learning, adaptable approach, and accessibility principles from COVID-19 in building back stronger and ensuring the needs of the individual are met.*

"The thing I would most like you to take away from this, is that there are so many bureaucratic barriers and these bureaucratic barriers form such a substantial, determining part of the disabled student experience". - Matt

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About the survey

Snowdon Trust, founded in 1981, provides grants and scholarships to disabled students studying in the UK in higher education and those training for employment.

Every 7 years Snowdon Trust conducts a student survey to capture and communicate the experience for disabled students across the UK. The 2013 report focused on Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) shortfalls and unequal access to funding between undergraduate and postgraduate students. Since publication, the cap on funding for postgraduates has been increased (2).

For the 2020/2021 student survey, Snowdon Trust has collaborated with **Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub)**, bringing together expertise to explore the holistic experience of disabled students across the country.

GDI Hub is a research and practice centre driving disability innovation for a fairer world. Solutions-focused experts in Assistive Technology, Inclusive Design, and Culture and

Participation, GDI Hub supports and delivers world-class Research, Teaching, Innovation, Programmes and Advocacy.

To capture student stories, an online survey was circulated among current and recently graduated disabled students. The survey received 236 responses and 8 in-depth case studies were conducted.

Through this collaborative report Snowdon Trust and GDI Hub hope to inform policy and drive positive change within higher education practice by amplifying students' voices.

Thank you to the students and graduates who gave up their time to share their stories.

Thank you to the Boshier-Hinton Foundation for funding this project.

Background

In 2018-2019, 14.3% of students studying in higher education in England had a disability (3). Two recent reports exploring disabled student experience provide the foundations on which this report builds.

Firstly, the 'Arriving at Thriving; learning from disabled students to ensure access for all' (hereinafter referred to as: Arriving at Thriving) highlighted challenges around access to learning, financial burdens and social exclusion. Twelve key improvement areas were identified, including improved leadership and accountability. The report data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (1).

The second report, by Disabled Students UK (a student-led grassroots organisation), explored the impact of COVID-19 on disabled students, raising challenges around inaccessible teaching, support delays and increased flare-ups of medical conditions. The report also highlighted how COVID-19 has created change within the sector, showcasing the ability to deliver rapid adjustments and flexible learning (4).

This Disabled Students Survey comes at a unique time, harnessing the momentum for change and capturing opportunities to build back stronger from COVID-19. The report brings further insights to this growing evidence and provides additional personal experiences that have not yet been captured, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled students' experiences.

The research and findings of this report were developed alongside multiple stakeholders, but with a focus on disabled students voices, identifying both challenges and opportunities, and how these impact learning and outcomes. By understanding the complex and multi-faceted barriers faced by disabled students, opportunities for positive change can be sought.

"Thank you for this survey, I felt I was finally ready to get out these emotions and thoughts in a good way and hopefully for them to be heard." - Haylea

Research collection

The research aimed to enhance understanding of the disabled student experience, capturing insights from students to identify key challenges and barriers.

Method

Evidence from secondary research suggested clear priority areas for the development of an online survey. The research questions focused on funding, accommodation, rounded university experience, COVID-19 and future aspirations. The survey was participatory from the outset, with disabled students taking an active role in shaping research questions.

The survey was circulated in November 2020 among universities, student unions, disabled student services, alumni and disability organisations - targeting undergraduate and postgraduates who had studied or were studying at UK universities beyond 2015.

Eight students were interviewed virtually, to capture rich descriptive accounts of their own stories. The interviews showcased the breadth of experience across universities, courses, level of study and impairment specific experiences. Interviews were transcribed, summarised and returned to the students to ensure they felt their voice was accurately represented.

Limitations

The scope of this research was to capture the experience of students in higher education in the UK. This report does not capture the accounts of those working within higher institutions or funding bodies.

The survey was widely circulated with respondents being self-selecting.

"One thing that we can do as disabled individuals is to speak up and explain our challenges as opposed to trying to fit in with the able-bodied framework." - Farhana

Survey respondents

A total of 236 students and graduates responded to the survey.

Representing 60 different institutions from across the UK, studying a variety of subjects, including physical and social sciences, humanities, arts, computer science, medicine, law and education.

190 respondents are still studying, 70 of whom will graduate in 2020/2021 and another 120 graduate beyond 2022. The remainder graduated prior to 2019.

Disability

Participants were asked, based on UCAS categories of disability (5), to select the option/s that best described them. 50% selected two or more answers, highlighting the prevalence of multiple disabilities in the cohort.

65%

undergraduates

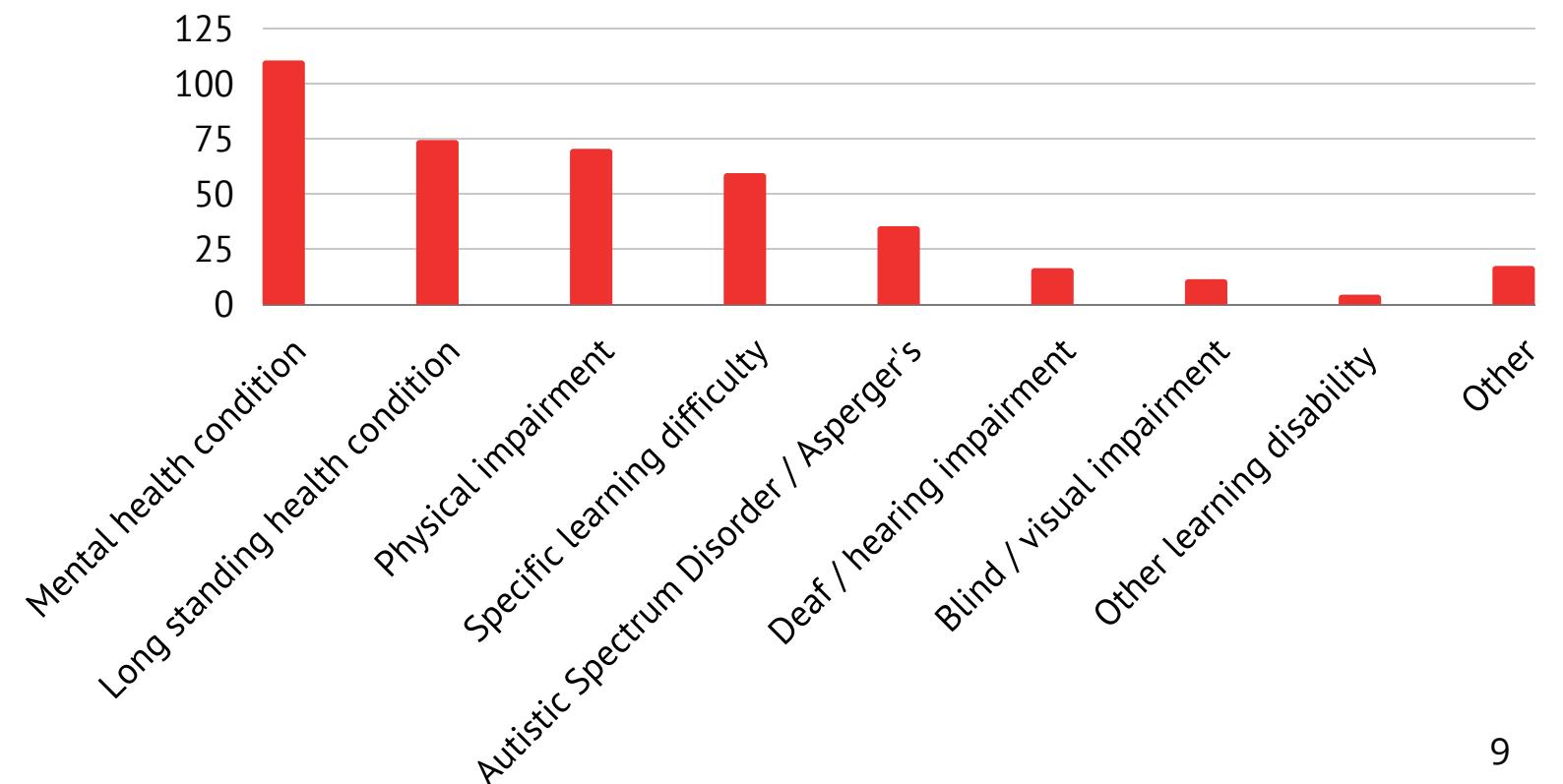
35% postgraduates

13%

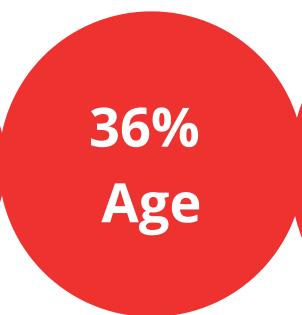
international
Students

50%

have two or
more disabilities



Students were asked which factors of their identity impacted their university experience.



The responses demonstrate the complex intersectionality of factors that can impact the student experience.

Student Voices

"Being a young, disabled female brings challenges. People don't believe you and you feel like you can't bring up your problems"
- anonymous

"Disability is by far the most impactful factor on a day-to-day basis, as the fight to get the accommodations I need is never-ending. Nationality and socioeconomic background are a solid second...I wasn't eligible for the vast majority of funding schemes as I am not a UK national." – anonymous

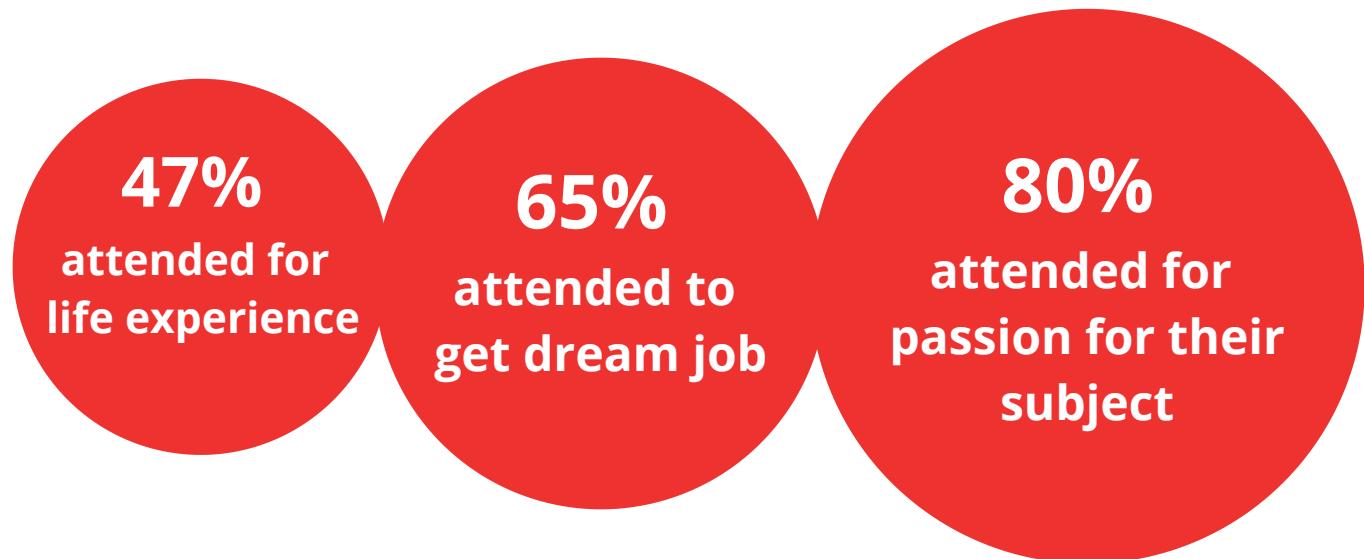
"Because I was older, I could mitigate many negative impacts of disability when access adjustments went wrong; I was better equipped to push for change and stick up for my rights" – Steph

"[I found it] Harder to relate to the majority of people at university because I am limited to what I can do with my mobility and for religious reasons I don't drink, so socialising can be more complicated" – anonymous

Decision to study

Attending university is often expected to be a highlight of a person's life-experience, providing opportunities, new experiences, a stimulating learning environment, independence and the chance to meet new people.

Survey respondents were asked what had influenced their personal decision to go to university:



Only 10% said university "very much" met their expectations, with students on average rating their experience at 6.86 out of 10.

Student Voices

"I initially felt very depressed when I went to university, I just couldn't help but feel that the experience I was having did not match what I was promised by the photos in the prospectus"
- Matt

"Studying at university has opened doors for me and made me more confident. I realised you can be disabled and successful, which is a huge step forward!" - anonymous



Riana on identity & experiences

Riana is doing a PhD in philosophy, she hopes to work in academia.

"I love university, learning many new things and meeting many new people. I have met some great friends throughout my university experience and I continue to do so. I find the work amazing, it's a really stimulating environment, you have the chance to academically debate, research what you want for your PhD and work with supervisors at the top of their field."



Case study

"In terms of identity and experience at university I feel it depends on where you are and what you are doing. In academia there is not much diversity. There are not many Indian, disabled women.

I think also when people see me they automatically think that my disability is the biggest hurdle. Actually, sometimes it's really not, often it is other factors to do with your background and who you are that may dominate a certain situation or thought.

I do worry about the job market, it's about getting the right support for my employment and knowing who best to ask.

It would be great to talk to other people to elicit experiences. A network of other disabled academics to connect with would be great, to help understand how to navigate and access the job market. This I hope will ensure equal practice.

I've always really wanted to go into academia; there are not many disabled academics so I feel like it's time for disabled academics to make a difference."

Funding

Disabled students can face financial strains that non-disabled peers do not face. This is due to additional support requirements such as learning expenses (interpreters, equipment), accommodation (including additional rooms for carers) and day-to-day living costs (such as the cost of personal assistants).

To help cover any disability related expenses there are multiple streams of funding students have to apply to in addition to student finance. Navigating the different funding streams available is time-consuming and complicated.

The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is public funding support based on individual needs assessments (non-means tested). Proof of disability or medical condition is required (6).

Historically, the DSA was capped within the areas of; specialist equipment, non-medical helpers, extra travel, other general disability related costs. From Autumn 2021 a structural change will see an overall DSA cap of £25,000 per annum that enables greater flexibility (2).

Aside from the DSA, some students may also apply for support from their university for education-related expenses, such as help for library related tasks (7). The amount of support available is dependent on institution.

Furthermore, when a student has day-to-day support needs their home local authority is responsible for covering the cost e.g. for personal care (6, 7). The amount of funding available depends on the authority the student resides within and varies across the UK. If the student attends a university outside of their home local authority there is an added layer of challenge in applying for a transfer.

From survey responses, case studies and secondary research it is apparent that students are immensely frustrated by the funding system. This can be due to a shortfall, but largely their stress results from the arduous task of navigating multiple streams of funding. Once funding is granted, students then talk about the undertaking required to ensure the promised support is in place for when it is needed.

Funding sources

21% of respondents felt that a more streamlined process to accessing funding would have made the biggest difference.

Funding routes that disabled students accessed include:

- **Student finance** - loan to help cover course fees and living costs
- **Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)** - to cover study-related costs, for example specialist computer software, or non-medical help such as a British Sign Lanaguage interpreter
- **Local authority** - personal care for day-to-day care needs required irrespective of being a student.
- **NHS Continuing Healthcare Funding (CHC)** - for adults with long-term complex health needs.
- **University** - an Individual Learning Plan through the Disability Support Service identifies support to be provided by the university, such as note takers, library help or specific learning environments.
- **Hardship funds** - for additional costs they encounter as a disabled student, processed through a central university system.
- **Charities and grants** - many disabled students will apply for additional funding to cover shortfalls.

Examples of shortfalls include:

- **Accommodation** - local authorities can provide care support but are unable to cover carer accommodation. The student is therefore required to finance two sets of university accommodation. Accessible accommodation is also often higher priced and less flexible.
- **Equipment** - specialist equipment to succeed within specific fields of study may be beyond the funding available through core support services.

Survey response: Funding

The greatest shortfalls experienced were in accommodation, fees, study equipment and human support.

41%

reported they needed additional support to navigate the funding application process

24%

of those who received charitable funding said they would not have been able to attend university without it

39%

agreed that the administrative burden of applying for funding put them off attempting to access it

87%

felt their disability created greater financial challenges than their non-disabled peers

44%

felt more available funding would have made the biggest difference to their university experience

Student Voices

"Due to my disability I need a live-in carer. I have to find ways of funding their accommodation, as my university won't provide this. If it wasn't for things like charities and organisations, I wouldn't be able to go to university, as I cannot afford two sets of accommodation as a student" - Hope

"Applying for funding is hard when you don't know it's there and what is available to you" – anonymous

"I can't get a part-time job; there are so many jobs I can't do easily due to my deafness" – anonymous

Burden of funding

The injustice within the system and reliance on charitable trusts was of great frustration. Inequalities were felt in relation to non-disabled peers, as well as dealing with discrepancies in funding and support available from different local authorities and universities.

Frustrations were not solely due to the perceived lack of adequate funding. Students were exasperated by the complexity of the public funding system, which left them uncertain about what they were entitled to, and to whom they should apply for it.

Even once funding was granted, students had to spend significant time chasing funds and ensuring that the agreed support was in place for the start of term. This required contacting multiple agencies and tireless self-advocacy. These additional hurdles placed great strain on students, increasing stress levels and impacting well-being often prior to even commencing academic work.

Student Voices

"My home borough and the receiving university borough were arguing about who should pay for my social care - it was an incredibly tense time because nobody knows. Everything is subjective and it can be on a case-by-case basis with no strict set guidelines that leaves disabled people in limbo." - Matt

"If I am honest, the system is very complicated. The university pays for some, the local authorities pay for some, DSA fund some. It can be pretty complicated when you've got pots of money everywhere and to be honest, I don't always know who should be paying for what. The system, as a whole is complex to navigate." - Riana

"There are constant roadblocks that you have to negotiate just to get to zero - just to literally get to a baseline that other people already reach." - Lucy

"I've noticed that the institutions who have a lot of funds, tend to be better at providing support." - anonymous



Thines on funding

Thines graduated in 2018 after completing a bachelor's degree in Politics and East European studies. He joined the Civil Service Fast Stream programme in 2019.



"I have a genetic rare bone disorder known as Osteogenesis imperfecta and am typically an electric wheelchair user. I have had over 200 fractures in my 27 years and spent a huge proportion of my childhood in hospital.

Case study

Going to university and being independent was a whole new venture for me. I was putting myself in a position to have a bit more autonomy, make decisions and assess risk - to understand the way things work for adults with disabilities.

I found issues with accessing finances were a constant source of stress during my 5 years as a student. It made the whole process of university less enjoyable and accessible and it made me feel less like I belonged and like I could experience being a student to its fullest extent.

My local authority funded my care support but was not able to fund a room for a carer. Therefore, I was left liable. I didn't have enough hours of care support to pay for carers which meant coming home at the weekends.

A friend's care package was far more extensive, able to fund his room and at least one other for his care support. It's a postcode lottery, where you are from affects your ability to get those extra sources of support.

I believe that on a national or regional level, there is a greater duty for the local authority you are leaving or entering to take responsibility to support the social care needs, so a student can lead the life they want to at university and beyond.

I sympathise with why funds might not stretch to give everyone, everything they need. But I feel there is a barrier put in place for students who must make difficult choices between sacrificing health and support to maximise their student experience."

Accommodation

Disabled students can face increased accommodation considerations and costs due to requirements for mobility and equipment, needing to be geographically close to lectures for navigation, being unable to share facilities due to infection and allergy risk, and needing an additional room for personal assistants.

Accommodation options vary by institution, largely they are halls of residence, on or off campus, with either shared facilities or self-enclosed studio flats.

11% of respondents reported the accommodation on offer contributed to their university choice.

Deciding where to live can determine a student's university experience. Respondents voiced frustration about the unfair disadvantage and financial pressure caused by limited choices and additional costs relative to non-disabled peers. A fragmented system and national inconsistency accentuated funding challenges for accommodation.

DSA may cover additional costs for accessible accommodation, however, if the university manages the accommodation, it is the university's responsibility (7,8). Where universities didn't have adequate, accessible accommodation options students reported having to stay in halls that were managed by a different institution. This created an extra layer of complexity which came fraught with issues.

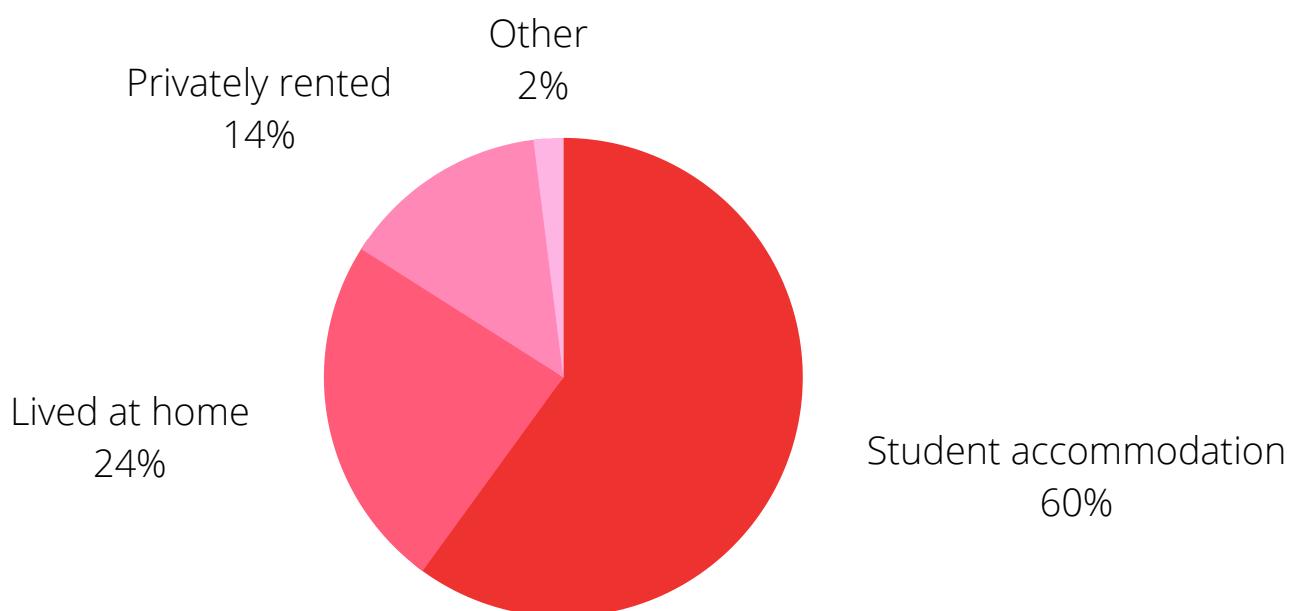
Some students received additional support from local authorities while others faced rejection. The greatest costs were incurred by some students who needed extra space for their mobility equipment or an extra room for a personal assistant.

For some, the cost of accommodation jeopardised their ability to remain at university. A number reported using crowdfunding to afford their required accommodation.

Survey results: Accommodation

Accommodation was the greatest financial shortfall. Many students expressed their frustrations at the additional costs, lack of choice for accessible options and the impact on social interactions.

60% of students surveyed lived in student accommodation



Student Voices

"Accessible college accommodation is a lot more expensive than standard college accommodation or private accommodation, I spend about 65% of my PhD stipend on rent" – anonymous

"Accommodation also was a problem. It was hard to find affordable accommodation as all those available and cheap were not accessible, I was placed in accommodation of young aged students from other universities, I was lonely" - Msafiri

"I find it unacceptable that I have to apply to a charity for further funding to help pay for adapted accommodation that should be available to me at the same cost and tenancy duration as an able-bodied student." – Phillip



Matt on accommodation

Matt received a Snowdon Scholarship and is in his 2nd year of MSc Politics and Communication.



"My choice of which university to go to was affected by how competent they were at responding to my disability needs. There needs to be more affordable housing. A scheme for people in my position to rent somewhere on the same terms as everybody else without having to pay extra for space for my wheelchair for example"

Case study

"For certain institutions the admissions process is very segmented. When applying for my masters I told the admissions team "if I'm accepted, please make sure you automatically assign me to a college that is accessible", and I filled in the form explaining what accessible means to me. When I got an offer, they said "congratulations! you've been placed in this college", and of course, that college wasn't accessible.

I'd already told admissions my access needs, so admissions really needed to explain to the accommodation people, but obviously this conversation didn't happen - this is one thing I'd really like to emphasize, university departments need to talk to each other.

By the time they sorted it, I'd already accepted an offer at another institution.

The contract on my current accommodation ends next September and I need to find some sort of career or path that will allow me to have accommodation by then. Now it's incredibly difficult to find housing, affordable housing that offers space for a wheelchair. If I wasn't disabled maybe I could move in with a friend or find accommodation that was less spacious, but affordable or live with other people, but that option is just not available to me. I think it's so much more challenging for a disabled person than a non-disabled person for these reasons."

Administrative burden

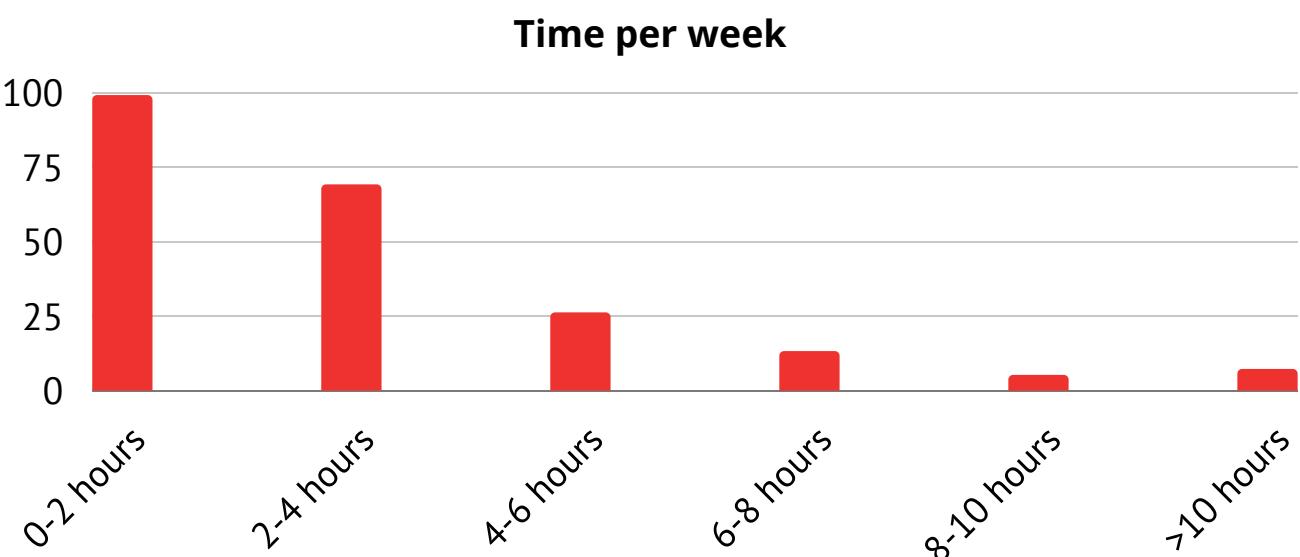
Bureaucratic challenges create an immense amount of administrative tasks with obstacles spanning the entire university journey; from the application process, to accessing funding, sourcing support and the continuous self-advocacy required to ensure access needs are implemented.

Respondents felt the constant burden reduces study capacity, impacting academic achievements and a student's opportunity to engage in social activities. Students were left feeling frustrated and exhausted by delays in inclusive learning plan implementation and their ability to access promised equipment within adequate timescales.

Students felt that the administrative burden could be reduced by a single point of contact at a university and funding level, to guide disabled students through the process and systems, championing their requirements and reducing the barriers and mental burden.

43% of disabled students said they had spent more time on administrative tasks than they had expected.

Time students spent on additional, administrative academic tasks related to creating an accessible learning experience (Y axis = number of students, X axis = time spent per week):



Administrative burden

Student Voices

"My inclusive learning plan was sent late to my seminar leaders and so this impacted my anxiety as I thought they all knew but it wasn't sent out on time. I had to chase it." - anonymous

"Despite being informed in advance about the support I required, it was not in place when I arrived at the university. I had to ask for the same support every day and each time I had a different support personnel." – anonymous

"I have mobility issues, there were building works and the main lifts were out of action. It took me a whole term of negotiation, finding the right person from Building and Estates to give me access through the right entrance and give me a small locker so I didn't have to carry anything. I just wish that when I first made contact about my concerns, the solution was acted upon more swiftly." - Justin

"Having to chase tutors to obtain materials in an accessible format, organising mobility support, without which one was very constrained, ensuring that non-medical support was adequate, catching up with reading because materials were not provided on time." - anonymous

"I found it frustrating that different parts of the university did not talk to each other about my requirements, so I often found myself having to explain from scratch what my situation was."
– anonymous

Point of contact

Student Voices

"My specialist mentor has worked with me for years. She is wonderful, and I honestly think she has been instrumental in my academic success." – anonymous

"There is a person I am able to email and ask questions relating to university, DSA and other university-related enquires, they have always gotten back to me as soon as they have been able to which calms me when I'm getting very anxious" - anonymous

"My PhD supervisor has been working deliberately to shield me from having to do all the access fighting on my behalf. My mental health has improved dramatically because of not having to fight on my own." – Becca

"I never asked for any of these. He just wanted to ensure life wasn't made harder or more uncomfortable for me while still ensuring I got as much academic support as every other student."
– Samantha

"Allocating disabled students a disability advisor and weekly mentor cannot be understated, how much it helps students to get their concerns across when they're regularly being listened to by the right people." – Zoe

"My tutors were extremely proactive, making sure that reasonable adjustments were always in place." – Rebecca



Farhana talks administrative tasks

Farhana is a law PhD student and Snowdon Scholar. Her academic and professional journey has included an Undergraduate Degree, Masters (BCL), MPhil and Bar Professional Training Course.

"This year the university have allocated me a library support worker, she has been amazing and that support has made life a lot easier. It is enormously helpful to have somebody in place, who is efficient and reliable."



Case study

"As someone who is blind, mobility support means I will know how to navigate my way around new places. One year, there was a problem with the DSA providers: they didn't have anyone, which meant I didn't know how to get to class on Monday. It was down to me to constantly chase and organise. It's not just the one party that you're trying to chase, it's lots of people. The system is so fragmented, it's mentally exhausting. A lot of admin time is spent trying to make sure my mobility support is in place.

Speaking with other blind friends, there are many other things that we have to factor into our work on top of the work itself. I've found this to be the case from my undergraduate degree up until now.

It can be tasks like, getting library support workers in place and ensuring reading lists are sent to me on time so I can find the recommended reading pages in my version, which often don't correspond. It's about trying to organise my work so that when I sit down, I can actually start working as opposed to trying to find things.

Sometimes, I might spend the whole day on admin things and then think I've done nothing in terms of work and it links back to the question about taking out time to go to clubs and societies and the reality is, at least for me, I didn't. You're trying to sort everything out and then you're behind on your reading, you're constantly playing catch up. There isn't time for social events."

Assistive Technology

Assistive Technology (AT) describes products or systems that support people with disabilities. These devices and technologies facilitate participation to enhance overall well-being. Examples include wheelchairs, prostheses, hearings aids, visual aids, and specialised computer software and hardware that increase mobility, hearing, vision, or communication capacities.

The Disabled Students Survey revealed both financial and administrative frustrations related to assistive technology. Self-funding expensive equipment created additional financial burdens which non-disabled peers never encountered.

Additional administrative tasks associated with AT included; chasing funding source (e.g. DSA), securing training and implementing AT into course delivery. Similar findings were recognised in the Arriving at Thriving report, with challenges identified within the assessment process, allocation of AT organisations and staff training (1).

Although students can apply for funding for specialist equipment through the DSA there can be great delays in the approval and sourcing of devices (1). Once in receipt of the equipment, the training on its use takes time to organise and is often inadequate. Students are left at a disadvantage of not being able to use a piece of equipment that they had been granted.

The application process and equipment sourcing caused frustrations both in time delays and restricted choice of providers for purchasing and training. There was a sense that unless you were proactive and knew exactly what you needed, you might lose out due to limited central expertise in the current market.

Shortfalls in AT funding was one of the core reasons students turned to charitable trusts.

24% of students reported shortfalls in public funding for study equipment

Assistive Technology

Student Voices

"Not all lecturers would wear the audio equipment so I could hear them. Not all lecture theatres had loop facilities so I couldn't hear well in them. Despite requesting a support chair for the exams - none were provided." - anonymous

"Applying for the DSA was a long, time-consuming and at times frustrating process. Took me six months from applying initially to receiving my equipment" - anonymous

"[Having] more control over spending/ managing Disabled Students Allowances would have been better. The DSA process takes a long time and equipment and support arrived/started much later than my course did." - anonymous

"Sports equipment is also in a different league: a bottom-of-the-range racing wheelchair costs £650, whereas a pair of running trainers might cost £50." - anonymous



Farhana talks Assistive Technology

Farhana, who previously discussed the burden of administrative tasks, explains below how equipment challenges further added to her frustrations.

"I took time out to investigate and research options to make sure I knew exactly what it is that I wanted. I was being suggested other things I had read about myself and had discovered were not as good.



Case study

I think that unless you are proactive as a person with a disability and you know what you want, the chances are you're going to not be given what you need or something that doesn't work.

The one problem that I think all of my friends who are visually impaired have found is that the equipment training that's provided for the specialist equipment you receive through Disabled Student Allowance is really not great - there is a general consensus that some providers are utterly useless.

What is the point? They're getting paid but they're not sufficiently equipped to provide the training. So you really lose out - it's such a waste of public resources.

This again falls under admin tasks when I can't get equipment to work and the providers who were supposed to help me are completely clueless as to the problem and exactly how to deal with it. It takes a lot of time.

For my undergraduate degree I was provided a Braille Display that came from one provider and then another provider delivered the training. It wasn't adequate for me to know how to use it. It's such a waste for an expensive piece of equipment to just be sitting there, I am not comfortable with that. I know it would have been invaluable to my work and indeed to my future employment in court if I could use it. I will have to organise some informal training for it."

Social activities

Social opportunities including university societies, groups and nightlife can be as important as academic study. Half of the respondents who were able to and chose to get involved in extra-curricular activities highlighted how it had greatly enriched their experience.

Overwhelmingly disabled students reported negative experiences during freshers week and felt it was the university's responsibility to consider everyone's access needs.

Many students emphasised how the time taken for administrative tasks reduced their ability to participate socially.

"Everyone else around you is having a splendid time, they're exploring the city, going out, whatever it might be, and you're stuck in your room because you don't know how to get to places." - Farhana

These findings support previous reports. The Arriving at Thriving report identified that freshers week was a source of frustration and over a 1/4 of survey respondents claimed always to feel excluded from social activities due to a lack of disability awareness (1).

Students shared the injustice felt when presented with access barriers. Those with sensory impairments particularly identified a lack of accessible information about social events, while students with physical impairments raised the concern of inaccessible environments.

Throughout the survey there was a general call from students for training to be offered to those in leadership positions within societies to support inclusive practice and cultures.

"Training should be offered to all presidents/treasurers of societies on disability and mental health awareness about how to host more inclusive and accessible events." - anonymous

Survey results: Social activities

Respondents were asked to rate how accessible and enjoyable they had found freshers week out of 10, 18% scored freshers week 0 out of 10 for being enjoyable and accessible.

46% scored freshers week 3 or less out of 10 for accessibility

50%

joined a group that enriched their overall university experience

40%

felt their time to join a group was limited due to medical / health commitments

30%

wanted to join a group but felt they were not accessible

Student Voices

"I hadn't been able to check the access beforehand, only seeing one step on google maps so thought it would be okay if I got a taxi. Inside there were three flights of steep stairs. The committee hadn't even considered me." - anonymous

"It was embarrassing to reach out to societies to enquire as to the accessibility of their events and also to figure out if I could attend something being dictated by the mere fact of if the room being used was accessible or not." - Thines

"It would be extremely useful for disabled students to receive funding to support extra-curricular activities. Most events organised by clubs and societies were held in locations which were difficult to access. Trying to arrange support to simply get to the venue on a pro-bono basis would take a lot of time and consequently, I made the decision not to attend, what with time being a very scarce resource" - Farhana



Thines on social activities

Thines appeared earlier in the report, where he shared his experiences of funding. Here he talks about the social opportunities and challenges university presents.

"Before I came to university, I was quite a shy and retiring type. I had missed out on a lot of social development with peers.



Case study

Living away from home for the first time provided the first real chance of sampling independence. I threw myself into societies as a way of really getting to know more people, testing my boundaries, exploring what was out there. I was involved with UNICEF on Campus society, President of my Departmental Academic Section and Disabled Students Officer for a year, remaining on committee after that.

In positions of leadership, I could do more. It enabled me to persuade and influence change in the union for making events more accessible for myself and others. I used my influence to organise multiple social events. A lot of places around my uni and town were non-accessible, organising events was fun but also a way to have a fully inclusive experience.

I felt I had to create those opportunities because general access was not available.

I purposefully ruled myself out of a lot of the freshers events because they were hosted in clubs that were intrinsically inaccessible and unsuitable, but due to various contracts and financial agreements it was more difficult for that change to happen.

I would love to see more events, especially as we transition out of COVID, thinking about how we do things differently, and make things more inclusive. There is real opportunity for institutions to have a more holistic and respectful view towards how they make their social calendar more accessible to everyone."

Transition beyond education

Survey respondents who were nearing graduation expressed their concern at the impending job market. **78% felt their higher education had led them closer to their dream aspirations**, but many were daunted by post-university life and the potential of discrimination they may encounter. Students expressed concerns that administrative burdens would continue into the workplace.

The government's Access to Work scheme offers support in work, ensuring employers are providing reasonable adjustments to create an inclusive work environment.

Examples include equipment, PA's, transport or British Sign Language interpreters (9).

Disabled students highlighted how Access to Work creates new administrative burdens and navigational obstacles from a different support system. These concerns were also highlighted in the Arriving at Thriving report findings, (1).

Respondents expressed how more joined-up thinking between DSA, universities, Access to Work and wider sector organisations could help transition to employment.

Respondents suggested a need for a collaborative, centralised hub of information and resource that involved peer-to-peer learning. Students highlighted the value of support to navigate the system, learning about rights, as well as connecting with others with similar lived experience. Tailored work placements could also support disabled students to make the transition.

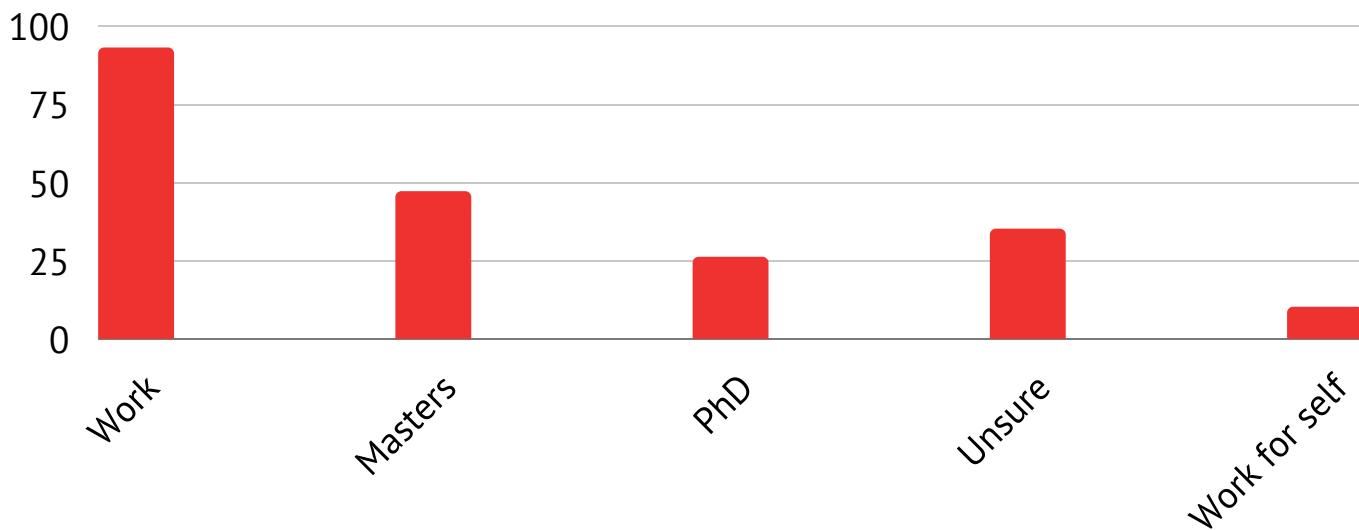
Over half of those surveyed who had accessed careers services found it helpful and showcased good practice examples. Others found it not to be accessible and lacking an individual approach.

"There needs to be preparation for disabled graduates for the minefield of reasonable adjustments and access to work, such that we can start our careers on an equal footing." - anonymous

Survey results: Transition

Students were asked about their immediate plans after graduating.

68% believed there will be many challenges entering the work place because it is not inclusive



Student Voices

"They had specific paid internships for disabled students and other underrepresented groups, which is brilliant! There is a very personal approach and this benefited me a great deal." - anonymous

"I worked with the careers service to tailor their support for disabled students (I was welfare officer of the association which represents disabled students). We had quiet rooms at all events, quiet hours before events, specific programmes dedicated to disabled students and support in work." - anonymous

"Help me learn about accessibility - both the law and the practical aspects that I can take with me to my workplace. Giving me confidence going forward by respecting my access needs." - anonymous

Careers Service

53%

45%
said it was not helpful

said it was helpful and tailored specifically



Lucy N talks transition

Lucy is studying a PhD in philosophy. She has had experience working as a teaching assistant and is considering her future options.

I've been really well supported through undergrad, but then crossing the fence from student to teaching is quite a different situation.



Case study

"I am going through the grad job market now, I am keeping options open after PhD.

The exposure as a teaching assistant was interesting. A few things came up, like whether to disclose my disability to my line manager, which I did, but then the question of whether to disclose my disability to my students. My line manager hadn't been through that scenario before so wasn't sure.

My conditions can vary a bit, sometimes I use a wheelchair sometimes crutches. There was no understanding of how I navigate the classroom as a disabled teacher, how will I manage the pull-down white boards? Switch on the overhead projector? Tables were packed in closely which was difficult to navigate.

Academia in general isn't necessarily the most accessible place for people with disabilities or chronic conditions. There's a pressure to publish so many articles a year, into specific journals, do conferences, travel.

If I travel to a conference there is at least 7 days where I will be unable to do things. That has influenced me looking at options outside of academia. It's just not a pace that I think I could keep up with. I have a few other disabled, chronically ill friends who experience the same thing.

I have made that decision for myself to look for other avenues of work that are more manageable and don't push me to burn out."

COVID-19

2020 was an unprecedented year. The global COVID-19 pandemic required higher education institutions to drastically alter the way they delivered teaching, halting in-person learning and moving online within a matter of weeks.

In June 2020 the Disabled Students Commission produced a report titled "Three Months to make a difference". The report recognised and highlighted seven potential challenges and areas that needed to be addressed urgently by universities and policy makers to ensure disabled students' needs on campus were accounted for and barriers removed prior to the start of the new academic year in September 2020 (10).

The move to online learning has been positive for some disabled students, who see it as the change they have been advocating for, enabling greater flexibility around when, where and how to study. It also reduced the often challenging task of travelling to and from university.

Remote learning doesn't however, suit all. Neurodiverse students reported challenges with multi-tasking during online sessions, and some deaf students have captioning and translation barriers (4).

Respondents of the survey were asked to fill in the section on COVID-19 if they had been a student during the pandemic. Of those that answered, 24 reported to be clinically extremely vulnerable, 65 reported to be vulnerable and taking extra precautions and 119 reported to not consider themselves at greater risk and following national guidance.

The results highlight how universities need to take learnings from COVID-19 to build back stronger, creating a more inclusive learning experience and planning for those who are clinically vulnerable.

Across both academic learning and the wider university experience a number of successes and frustrations have emerged.

Survey results: COVID-19

Out of the 174 students who reported either a positive or negative experience of online learning:

54%

found digital teaching a negative experience

45%

found digital teaching a positive experience

85%

reported greater financial stress in the pandemic

38% of those who had a positive digital learning experience reported having a mobility difficulty. Many commented positively on the reduced physical demand that working virtually allowed.

There were divided opinions on the challenges and opportunities online learning presented. Experiences varied between university, course type, personal circumstances, impairment type and access needs.

The divided opinion about online learning is demonstrative of the individual approach needed to meet learning needs with one solution not suiting all. A flexible and inclusive approach that can adapt to the individual is of most benefit as advocated for by Disabled Students UK (4). Universities should be taking forward the learning of COVID-19 to build back better, with a more inclusive mindset to delivering teaching.

“My university halls won't let the students cancel their contracts unless they can find a replacement for their room. But many students do not want an accessible room and disabled students that do need an accessible room book months in advance so they already have a room” – Hope

Survey results: COVID-19

Student Voices

"Lack of understanding of the difficulties online learning presents for students with hearing impairment greatly impacts studies and increases stress." - anonymous

"[I] Love online lectures because it saves lots of time and mental energy going in. Smaller lab classes are amazing." - anonymous

"All virtual so not as exhausted going places, plus don't have to catch up on lectures I've missed as much because I can keep up more." - anonymous

"They keep changing my weekly timetable as they try to find the best way to teach online. It's incredibly worrying; I dread when I get an email because it's never good. They always change something and then I have anxiety about those changes." – Harriet

"During Covid, having the option for a video call, as opposed to a phone call, has made dealing with anxiety-related issues a lot simpler." - anonymous

"Universities have opportunity to set an example to the rest of the world, due to their position in research and ability to make the world a better place - they have an obligation of being the first to create a good, supportive environment for disabled students." - Haylea



Lucy D talks COVID-19

Lucy is studying a masters in social research, she has spent the last 6 years working in widening access to higher education for disadvantaged students.

"I have a lung condition called Primary Ciliary Dyskinesia (PCD) which affects my ability to clear pathogens and mucus from the airways, resulting in recurrent respiratory infections, progressive airway damage and hearing loss."



Case study

"After months of shielding, making the decision to physically attend university in September 2020 was huge. I was assured that appropriate safety measures were in place, which gave me confidence. I moved all my hospital appointments and GP closer to my university, these tasks take weeks!"

After 2 weeks the case numbers started to rise and I made the decision to shield again. I was just trying to have a safe experience. I contacted my tutor, there was no problem with switching to online learning but then there was nothing about what I actually do to survive, how do I get food? Do my laundry? There was no planning for clinically vulnerable students.

The university put self-isolating students into my block, but they weren't following guidelines. I felt so anxious. I had to keep telling maintenance to not come in my room. It was exhausting, constantly repeating myself and chasing emails, taking time away from my studies.

I spoke to the head of colleges who said "*this is a disability services issue*" the disability services said, "*this is an accommodation issue.*"

Shielding was mentioned four times in my disability support plan, but at no point did anyone address what I might need. I felt it was no longer safe for me to stay on campus so I made the decision to return home, feeling ashamed and gutted."



Lily talks COVID-19

Lily is in the 3rd year of a BA in editorial and advertising photography. She tells us about her experience of being a student during the pandemic, the switch to online learning and the challenges/opportunities this has created as a person with a hearing impairment, dyslexia and mental health conditions.



Case study

"It's been up and down, more mental health wise. Being sat at a computer screen for 8 hours a day - I just couldn't do it or focus. It was really hard to start with and I struggled with hearing everything online.

This year I have had a note taker, provided by the university, which has been really helpful but as they are an extra person who is not part of my course, my lecturers don't always send her the links for online lectures, or they forget to press record. Its stressful because then I have to email around chasing them.

But overall, the move to online has been really helpful. Recording the lecture means if I don't hear or I miss something then I just watch it back.

It's so much easier now to access the information I need. It gives people like me something to bounce back on, alleviating so much stress.

With face-to-face learning, I found masks difficult. I lip read, and with masks I struggle and get really anxious about not being able to hear. My lecturers didn't realise that. I kept emailing the disability team who said they were looking into getting clear masks, and then nothing was ever resolved. In the end my lecturer brought one herself, wore it to class once and then forgot the following time.

It would be nice if I didn't have to be the one who pushes everything. I think those with invisible disabilities risk being forgotten about."

Snowdon Trust Students

Snowdon Trust supports individuals living with disabilities to achieve their educational goals, providing both grant and scholarship funding to support students in their academic pursuits. In 2019/20 a total of 95 students received grants and 13 received a masters scholarship (2).

Grants help cover the deficit in disability related costs not fully met by DSA funding and can be used towards sign language interpreters, equipment and accommodation. International students, studying at a UK institution, are also able to apply - an important opportunity as international students are not eligible for DSA funding.

Both Cameron (whose case study follows) and Lucy N (who featured earlier within this report) were grant holders, using the funding towards equipment. Cameron explained how the headlight he purchased with the grant money remains a vital piece of kit in his work today as a medical doctor.

Snowdon Scholarships support the development of exceptional future leaders through substantial funding for masters programmes. Matt, Farhana, Riana and Lucy D featured in this report are Snowdon Scholars.

In the subsequent pages we hear from the 50 survey respondents who were awarded funding from Snowdon Trust. The extracts provided show the difference Snowdon Trust funding has made to their studies and university lives.

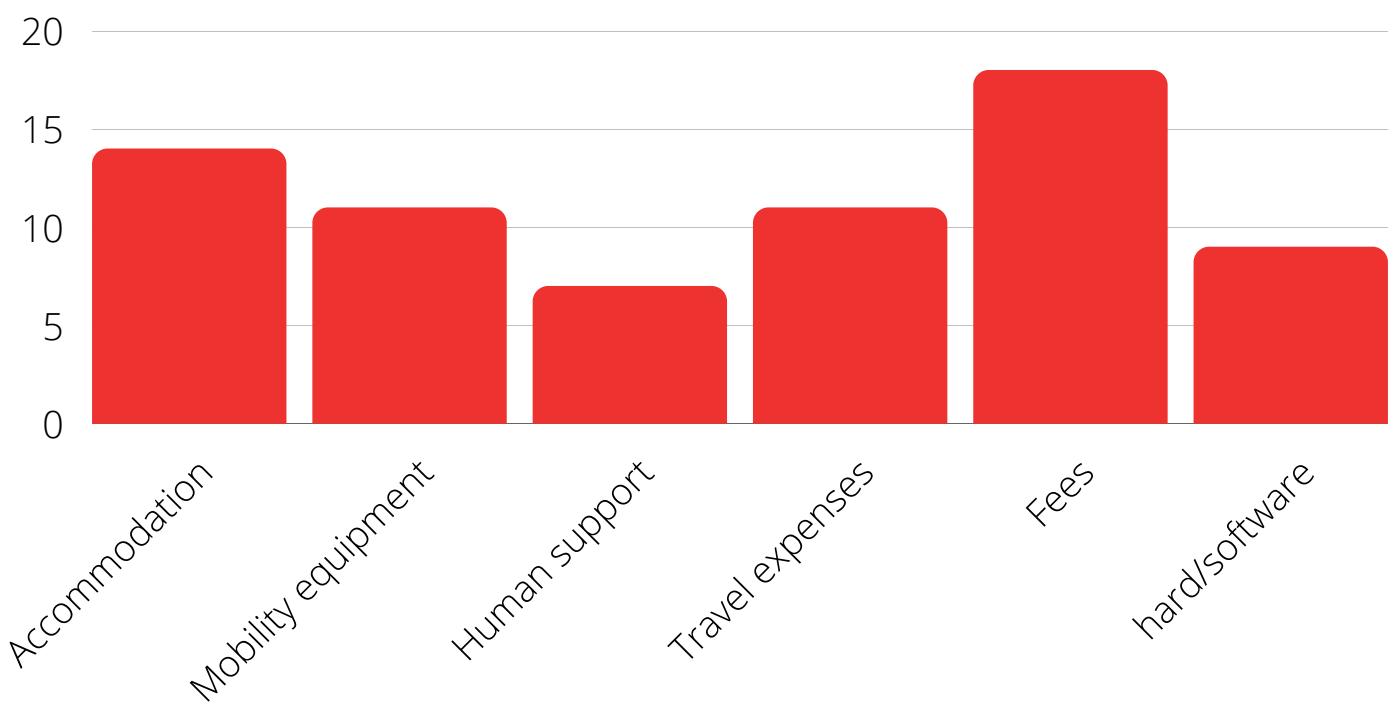
Many expressed how the funding had given them the opportunity to pursue goals that were otherwise unachievable. As expressed by Matt "**Snowdon was a lifeline**", providing him with the chance to make a much-needed radical life change and pursue his ambition of becoming a diplomat.

Other students commented how Snowdon had provided hope and developed confidence in their abilities, enabling them to realise their potential.

"Snowdon made my dream true, now I consider even the sky is not a limit" - Msafiri

Survey results: Snowdon Trust

Out of the 236 respondents, 50 respondents (21%) identified as receiving funding from Snowdon: 37 grant holders, 10 scholars and 3 who had received both a grant and scholarship. Respondents were asked what they had used their funding towards. They could select as many answers as were applicable. Accommodation included both adapted accommodation (12) and accommodation for personal assistants (2).



When asked to what extent they felt their disability created greater financial strain compared to non-disabled peers (0 = not at all, 10 = very much so), on average Snowdon students reported 7.8 compared to non-Snowdon students reporting 5.

Snowdon students rated their overall enjoyment at university (0 = not at all, 10 = loved it) as 7.5 compared to non-Snowdon students rating of 6.7. When asked if university had met their expectations (0 being not at all, 10 being completely), Snowdon students reported a higher 6.6 out of 10 compared to 5.8 from non-Snowdon students.

"Having someone that trusts me, my work and my motivations helped raise my confidence to not feel worthless." -anonymous

78%

felt that Snowdon support had helped them achieve academically

78%

believed Snowdon funding had increased their enjoyment of university

68%

felt Snowdon support enabled them to be involved in the university experience and community

90%

felt Snowdon funding enabled them to get more out of their university experience

82%

felt that Snowdon had given them confidence in their abilities

Student Voices

"Snowdon makes an effort to foster a sense of community which I think is quite special." - anonymous

"Changed my life completely. Allowed me to be more independent and was able to attend so much more at uni, I had choices again and felt like a normal student again." - anonymous

"I am forever grateful to Snowdon trust who were a beacon of hope kindness and support when I had none. Without their support for accommodation I would not have been able to cope with my university experience. I would not have been able to afford to attend. They were the only people who acknowledged my disability and gave me help." - Sarah

74%

Said that without Snowdon they would have been unable to attend university



Cameron talks Snowdon Trust support

Cameron graduated from medical school in 2019. He received a grant from Snowdon Trust for a powerful headlight which assists him when examining patients, taking bloods and moving round the hospital during night shifts. It remains an integral part of his work.

Case study

"I was a medical student and now I'm subsequently a practicing medical doctor with significant sight challenges. The equipment that I required during my medical training included a surgical headlight providing 250,000 lux of bright light. It was incredibly niche and very expensive because essentially many people with visual impairment don't go on to do careers like medicine, which is very vision heavy.

The Disabled Students Allowance didn't meet my financial needs in terms of being able to account for the range of equipment I needed to meet the competencies set out in the General Medical Council criteria to qualify and practice. The DSA is a very universal standardized form of help. It serves some good but doesn't really take into consideration individual circumstances or differences.

Because of the shortfall in funding, I approached the Snowdon Trust to see if they could help. The Snowdon Trust really acknowledge the difficulties that individuals with additional needs have in higher education.

Campaigning efforts have meant there is a lot to be celebrated with new reforms to the DSA. But this is a continuum. The system needs to better facilitate the needs of individuals, to meet their unique passions and dreams.

The whole process within higher education needs to be more personalised. We need to respond at an individual level, not to labels or generic disabilities. If this is ignored, there is going to be a huge amount of wasted talent in our society."

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"Support from the Snowdon Trust has been invaluable. Not only has it given me financial support in order to be able to attend university, it has also increased my confidence as a disabled student enormously - the support and confidence that the Snowdon Trust has in me by providing funding makes me realise that I am worthy of support, that I can succeed, and that being disabled is something that makes me versatile, and is not a weakness." - Lily



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