The Disabled Student Commitment: formal consultation

Disabled Students' Commission
Preface

The Disabled Students’ Commission (DSC) was established by the Office for Students (OfS) just before the Covid-19 pandemic struck the UK in early 2020. Since then, the DSC has listened very carefully to the views of disabled students and the many skilled colleagues who support them. We have used a rigorous process of roundtables, research studies, focus groups, surveys and discussions. There are many committed staff who support disabled students and many examples of innovative practice across the sector but unfortunately, typically there is not a holistic approach across the institution led by a senior leader as a driver of change. Since our inception, we have looked at the evidence presented to us and clearly taken the view that whilst disabled students do remarkably well, too often it is against the odds. The sector needs to make a quantum shift in the way it supports this group of students.

During the various Covid-19 lockdowns and subsequent periods of transition, it was clear that many of the changes put in place did benefit disabled students. Indeed, one clear comment we received was:

“If all of the above changes were possible in a short space of time, why is it that disabled students were previously refused when they had been requesting the same for years?” - Covid-19 Roundtable participant

Progress was being made, for example, on the recording of lectures, access to extenuating circumstances and flexibility in assessment processes. However, we need to ensure that these were not just temporary changes, and that we do not go backwards. We need to enshrine some of the changes for the benefit of our most vulnerable students. We need to create a sense of belonging in which students are able to focus on what they went to higher education for and not spend untold hours fighting their way through the system.

Through our research, disabled students told us that they wanted four things:

+ communication
+ consistency
+ certainty
+ choice.

Consequently, we have developed this Disabled Student Commitment, and it is a call to the sector and its bodies to make the step change that is required to create a more inclusive environment. The Commitment calls on Higher Education Providers (HEPs), Government, funders, agencies, regulators and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to look at what they currently do, what innovative practice they can share, and how they can change. All of these organisations have legal duties towards disabled students. The Commitment does not seek to replicate or replace legal duties but asks organisations to do more by focusing on how they can improve the disabled student experience.
It is for HEPs to determine the steps that they will take, the timescale they adopt and how they direct resources towards their fulfilment of the Commitment. Similarly, it is for Government, funders, agencies, regulators and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to address their approaches to fulfilling the Commitment.

The Commitment is applicable to all students irrespective of level or mode of study. Based on direct consultation with disabled students, we have tried to be inclusive in respect of language and vocabulary, and clearly, consideration of intersectionality and multiple conditions should be at the forefront of the Commitment.

We are now formally consulting on the Commitment, and the timescale and process is outlined below. We urge you to prepare to adopt this Commitment and to feed back on how we can make it clearer. Following the consultation process, the DSC will proceed to work to develop a student-facing version of the Commitment. Thank you to all those who have supported us in constructive conversations to help shape the Commitment so far.

Our students deserve this step change.

[Signature]

Chair of the Disabled Students’ Commission and Disability Access Ambassador for the University Sector to the Cabinet Office, formerly Vice Chancellor at the University of Wolverhampton
1. About the consultation

Building on research since our inception in March 2020, the Disabled Students’ Commission is launching a Disabled Student Commitment, which is a call to the sector and its bodies to make the step change that is required to create a more inclusive higher education environment for all. The commitment calls on Higher Education Providers (HEPs), Government, funders, agencies, regulators and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to look at what they can currently do, what innovative practice they can share, and how they can change.

The Commitment does not seek to replicate or replace legal duties, but asks organisations to do more by focusing on how they can improve the disabled student experience.

Please use the consultation to let us know how we can make the wording clearer. Once the consultation has closed, we will explore further the ways HEPs can sign up to or monitor their progress in relation to the Commitment. We will invite you to provide your initial thoughts on this within the survey, and also within follow-up roundtables.

Finally, please note that the DSC will create a student-facing version of the Commitment as part of its launch. This version will be finalised based on responses from this consultation and will mirror the existing principles.

**Timing**

Start: 31 October 2022  
End: 9 December 2022

**Who should respond?**

We welcome responses from anyone with an interest in disabled student inclusion in the higher education sector. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Disabled students
- Staff, academics and senior leaders at higher education providers
- Disability practitioners working directly with disabled students
- Representatives from sector bodies, agencies and funders whose work interacts with disabled student support
- Employer organisations and public, statutory and regulatory bodies
- Other stakeholders, including third sector disability-specific organisation
How to respond

Please respond by **noon on 9 December 2022**.
Please use the online response form available at: [https://advance-he.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/disabled-student-commitment-formal-consultation](https://advance-he.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/disabled-student-commitment-formal-consultation)

Your response and next steps

We will use your responses to inform the following two areas, ahead of our official launch of the Disabled Student Commitment in early 2023:

- to finalise the wording of the principles
- to inform how we operationalise, embed and monitor activity.

Advance HE will process any personal data received in accordance with all applicable data protection laws. Please see our Privacy Policy for further details.

Further support and enquiries

Please email [dsc@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:dsc@advance-he.ac.uk) for any enquiries related to the consultation, including whether you require this document in an alternative format or if you need assistance with the online form.

Please note: this email address should not be used for submitting your consultation response.

For more information about the DSC’s work to date, please visit the DSC website at [https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/disability-equality-higher-education/disabled-students-commission](https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/disability-equality-higher-education/disabled-students-commission)
The Disabled Student Commitment

1. Introduction

The purpose of the Disabled Student Commitment (the Commitment) is to secure an enhanced and improved experience for disabled students within higher education. The Disabled Students’ Commission (DSC) calls upon higher education providers (HEPs), Government, funders, agencies, regulators and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (henceforth referred to as other organisations) to adopt and promote the Commitment.

Firstly, the Commitment encourages HEPs and other organisations to look holistically at their practices and policies, which influence their fulfilment of the Commitment in consultation with disabled students. Secondly, HEPs and other organisations are encouraged to outline how they intend to enhance experiences.

The Commitment is designed to be a self-regulatory tool, and the DSC recognises providers and other organisations will not be able to implement the Commitment in its entirety immediately. Some actions to fulfil the Commitment will need to be phased and for this reason, the DSC encourages the development of a delivery plan to fulfil the aspiration of the Commitment.

The experience of higher education is at its best when there is a partnership between students, staff and institutions. To help ensure an effective partnership, it is important that disabled students at all stages of their engagement with higher education fully share information about their condition and give consent for the HEP and course funder to use that information appropriately.

The Commitment initially focuses on information sharing about a student’s condition and assumes that appropriate information sharing and consent have taken place. The Commitment then guides the reader through four key touchpoints of the higher education journey and outlines the commitments that the DSC would like HEPs and other organisations to make.
2. Requests to share information

The sharing or disclosure of information is a key touch point for students. The DSC recognises that HEPs and other providers have a range of record systems, which require information, but often the systems do not work together, resulting in repeated requests for information. The disabled student view is very clear that they find it frustrating, off-putting and disrespectful to be repeatedly asked to share the same information about their condition.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to:

1. Work towards asking students to share information about their condition once during their course of study, although students may want to update the information shared about their condition.
2. Endeavour to ensure that if a disabled student is required to share information more than once, it should be in relation to their support requirements only, not their condition.
3. Commit to ensuring explicit student consent is in place before information sharing occurs and that where students choose not to provide consent that they understand the implications of their decision.
4. Seek to have open channels of communication, to ensure appropriate, and timely, information sharing across the institution with relevant individuals and departments.

The Commitment also calls upon:

5. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Education (DfE) to support and promote the roll-out of the disability passport scheme across the sector building on the evaluation of the pilot programmes, as soon as practically possible.
6. DfE and the Student Loans Company to explore how a students’ existing support assessment from school or college can be used for the purposes of needs assessment for Disabled Students’ Allowances.
7. Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to commit to producing accessible information focusing on the nature and breadth of the job roles that exist, the appropriate application of fitness to practise requirements and the support available to disabled professionals.
3. Information, advice and guidance in accessing higher education

Whilst disabled student participation in higher education is reasonable, as are the academic outcomes in comparison to other demographic groups, the individual experience is often very challenging. Therefore, it is crucial that students fully understand the nature of the study, the support available and the challenges and opportunities that exist before commencing their studies.

A range of organisations, not just HEPs, have responsibility for and provide information, advice and guidance on higher education, and they all need to ensure that disabled people are considered within this.

The Commitment calls upon:

8. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to commit to improving and extending their existing information and advice for disabled applicants and enhancing personalisation through the Hub to support informed decision making from an earlier point.

9. All UK funders of higher education courses and research programmes to require that disabled students are able to access the higher education programmes that they fund.

10. HEPs and other organisations to commit to ensuring that information, advice and guidance for disabled applicants and students is accessible to all applicants and students, and not just to those who have shared a condition.

11. HEPs to commit to providing comprehensive information about how they support disabled students by acknowledging potential barriers/conditions in the delivery of education and services including information technology, libraries, wellbeing, catering and accommodation.

12. HEPs to include a specific disability focus within their outreach strategy and plans. The OfS is encouraged to specifically support this approach.

13. HEPs to commit to ensuring that their open days are accessible to disabled applicants and disabled parents and carers of applicants.

14. Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to commit to producing accessible information focusing on the nature and breadth of the job roles that exist and the support available to disabled professionals.
4. Joining the higher education community

First experiences within a new community are crucial in enabling integration and inclusivity. This is particularly the case for disabled students entering higher education for the first time and is likely to impact on their sense of belonging.

It is important that HEPs, student unions and guilds work together to support disabled students’ introduction to higher education and to ensure that they can participate confidently in all activities. Often, disabled students face barriers simply because of the decision-making process. HEPs are encouraged to ensure that disabled students and staff are informed of that decision process and where senior authority rests.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

15. All students are aware of the support available to disabled students and understand how to provide information on their condition.

16. The requirements of disabled students are met during welcome activities and induction processes.

17. Disabled student support requirements will be in place on day one of their course.

18. A support plan is developed and implemented for all disabled students, and that staff responsible for their delivery understand what they need to do.

The Commitment also calls upon:

19. Students’ unions and guilds to hold welcome activities for disabled students, and all clubs and societies to address the requirements of disabled students.
5. On-course delivery

It is vital that we create a culture in which all students can excel. For disabled students to excel their requirements need to be met, and then they can fully engage with their course and achieve positive outcomes without unnecessary and stressful distraction.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

21. Inclusive practice is embedded in curriculum design. This will help them to ensure that anticipatory reasonable adjustments are embedded with consistency and certainty in learning delivery and materials.

22. There is choice in the form of assessment for each module where possible and appropriate.

23. Individual reasonable adjustments required in addition to inclusive reasonable adjustments are in place at the start of a course, and for HEPs to review technology aids that could be standard for all.

24. All staff teaching and staff supporting a disabled student understand the barriers faced by the student.

25. Extenuating circumstances, complaints and appeal policies do not require disabled students to reshare information that evidences their condition and indicates how disabled student issues will be addressed.

26. Graduation ceremonies are accessible to disabled students.

The Commitment also calls upon:

27. Advance HE to ensure that supporting disabled student learning is included in the guidance for the award of a Fellowship.
6. Moving out of studying in higher education

Moving out of studying and into employment is a crucial step for disabled students, as this is where the biggest gap in outcomes exists. However, it is often difficult for HEPs to make a real difference.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

28. Careers and employment guidance are provided by condition/barrier, and emphasis and consideration is given to positive attributes and benefits of the condition and the skills that students will have developed for employers.

29. The relationships built with employers include coverage of opportunities for disabled students and graduates.

30. Specific support in preparation for employment is provided.

31. Employability activities are referenced whilst on course and embedded throughout the student life cycle.

The Commitment also calls upon:

32. DWP to work with HEPs to promote the disability passport scheme into employment.

33. DWP to promote better understanding among students and higher education careers advisers of the funding for reasonable adjustments in employment available and promote Access to Work to disabled students.

In addition, the DSC will work to ensure that:

34. Disability Access Ambassadors will commit to encouraging their sector to provide frameworks/routes to employment for disabled graduates.

35. Employer organisations will commit to producing accessible information focused on the nature of the role and the support for disabled employees so that applicants and students can make informed choices about future employment.

36. Employer organisations encourage the positive factors in employing a disabled graduate.
7. Next steps

The DSC is seeking to secure support for the Commitment from HEPs, Government, the OfS, the National Union of Students, the Student Loans Company, Research England, Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, Committee of University Chairs, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Advance HE and all other sector and third sector organisations.

In addition, the DSC will encourage:

37. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator, in its consideration of any complaints, to consider the actions taken by a HEP in its response to the Commitment.

The DSC will commit to:

38. Promoting the Commitment.
39. Developing a student-facing version of the Commitment in collaboration with UCAS.
40. Exploring the support that HEPs might require to implement the Commitment, for example, through events and continued liaison with relevant organisations.
41. Exploring the mechanisms through which good and innovative practice can be shared within the higher education sector in response to the Commitment.
42. Working with employers and professional organisations to seek to achieve the goals of the Commitment.
43. Reporting on its work to promote the Commitment.
Appendix 1: About the Disabled Students’ Commission

The Disabled Students’ Commission (DSC) is an independent and strategic group with a key priority to advise, inform and influence English higher education providers (HEPs) and sector bodies to improve support for disabled students. Its aim is to help the sector achieve more positive outcomes for disabled students in relation to access, participation, success and progression.

The creation of the DSC was announced in June 2019 by former Universities Minister Chris Skidmore, and established in March 2020. It is funded by the OfS and is supported by a secretariat provided by Advance HE for a period of three years.

The DSC will challenge, influence and support the Department for Education, the OfS, HEPs and other relevant sector organisations to accelerate the pace of change in creating inclusive learning and living environments for disabled students across the student life cycle.

The Commissioners were appointed through a public appointments process run by the OfS, and comprise:

+ Geoff Layer – Chair of the DSC and Disability Access Ambassador for the University Sector to the Cabinet Office, Adviser to the Vice Chancellor at Coventry University and formerly Vice Chancellor at the University of Wolverhampton
+ John Blake (OfS Commissioner) – Director for Fair Access and Participation, The Office for Students
+ Susan Daniels (Commissioner) – Chief Executive, National Deaf Children’s Society
+ Sarah Greer (Commissioner) – Vice Chancellor, University of Winchester
+ Patrick Johnson (Commissioner) – Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, University of Law
+ Deborah Johnston (Commissioner) – Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education), London South Bank University
+ Piers Wilkinson (Student Voice Commissioner) – Disability Adviser and Consultant
+ Sean Cullen (Student Voice Commissioner) – Doctoral researcher, Brunel University
+ Sam Parrett (Further Education Adviser) – CEO, London and South East Education
+ Group

John Blake succeeds Chris Millward, previous Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS and DSC Commissioner, who left his post in December 2022.

Further information about the DSC, its Terms of Reference and its work to date can be found on the DSC’s campaign page at www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/disability-equality-higher-education/disabled-students-commission.
Appendix 2: References


Disabled Student Commission (2020) Three months to make a difference, London: Advance HE.


GOV.UK (2022) Access to Work: get support if you have a disability or health condition, Available at: https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work (Accessed: 25th October 2022).


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Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address systemic inequalities and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector. We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

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