Considerations for disabled applicants applying to undergraduate courses

Disabled Students’ Commission
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1. Foreword

To go to university or college is a life-changing decision and choosing where and what to study is one of the biggest choices you will make. Higher education is an opportunity that should be available to all those who can benefit from it and no student should be disadvantaged. It is therefore the responsibility of all universities and colleges to ensure that they are supportive and equitable so that all students can succeed in their study and prepare them for their long-term careers.

It is crucial that all students have the information that they need in choosing where and what to study, and it is particularly vital that disabled students are sufficiently informed so that they can make the choice that is right for them. This is why the Disabled Students’ Commission has put together this guide for disabled students applying for undergraduate study: to help you through the process of asking the important questions of, and making sure you have the necessary support from, your prospective or selected university or college – from the outset of your journey.

As a disabled student, it is important that, prior to starting university or college, you have the assurance and confidence you need that your requirements will be met to ensure you have the best possible experience of, and outcomes from, your undergraduate study.

Geoff Layer, Chair, Disabled Students’ Commission
2. Introduction

As a disabled person entering higher education, you may feel unsure if your requirements will be met in relation to learning, accommodation and socialising. Whether you have already secured a place at college or university or are currently applying through the UCAS clearing system, this publication aims to help you by providing pointers and questions to ask to help ensure a smooth journey.

Adjustments and support will be provided by colleges and universities to enable you to complete your course of study in line with the duty to make reasonable adjustments under the disability provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

Many of these adjustments are made through inclusive provision for all students. For instance, ensuring the library is accessible, installing assistive software on all student computers and providing recordings of lectures.

However, individual level adjustments may also be provided and if implemented at the outset of your course, can reduce the likelihood of you encountering barriers during your time in higher education. Individual level adjustments include the provision of equipment or support specific to your requirements.

This document contains a number of considerations that will help you to pre-empt any barriers that you could encounter and help to ensure that reasonable adjustments are implemented at the outset of your course.

The majority of questions can be asked of a college’s or university’s disability and/or wellbeing service. This is likely to sit within student services, although colleges and universities may have different names for their services.

If you are unsure of the person or service to approach, ask the student services or admissions team.
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At the outset, it is important to bear in mind that even if you have previously managed without reasonable adjustments, or if you know exactly what adjustments you require, the adjustments or support that you have previously had in school, college or the workplace may not be appropriate in a higher education context.

Higher Education is different and different adjustments or having individual level adjustments for the first time may be necessary to enable you to flourish. All elements of your course will need to be considered when determining which reasonable adjustments are most appropriate, including work placements, field trips and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies’ requirements and methods of learning and teaching delivery.

Universities or colleges will also have a range of accommodation available and you may need to be prioritised for an adapted room or simply require a fridge in your own room for storing medication. Either way, the more notice that is given the higher the likelihood of everything being in place from day one.

Please let organisations like UCAS, Student Finance England (SFE) and the universities and colleges to which you are applying know that you are disabled. They all have processes in place to support disabled students and the earlier you tell them; the earlier reasonable adjustments can be implemented. In the event a process does not work for you, do say something as it is likely that help can be provided and processes could be improved for others.
2.1 Providing information about your impairment

You are likely to be asked on a number of different occasions by different organisations and by different parts of organisations if you have a disability. For example, when attending an open day, when applying through UCAS, on your accommodation request form, or on registration.

This does not mean that different parts of the organisation are not communicating. It is to ensure at every possible opportunity that your requirements are met and to enable universities and colleges to monitor and evaluate their processes to enable them to meet the requirements of all students. If you are in doubt as to why you need to provide information, do ask for clarification. There should always be a purpose for asking questions relating to disability.

In addition, under data protection regulations, universities and colleges are required to store information confidentially and ask for your consent to pass it on. If you do not give permission for information about your impairment or the reasonable adjustments you require to be passed on, your university or college may still be able to make reasonable adjustments. However, there may be limitations in what can be implemented, as responsibility for effectively implementing adjustments does not usually rest with one person.
2.2 Applying via UCAS or directly to a university or college

The UCAS website includes information specifically for disabled applicants, and if you are applying via UCAS there is an opportunity to provide information on your impairment when completing your UCAS application.

You can also provide information in your UCAS personal statement, or application if applying directly to a university or college, about your impairment and how it has affected you.

Such information, may be good evidence of perseverance, determination, planning and other attributes that higher education providers are looking for.

In addition, some universities and colleges do use contextual admissions, whereby they recognise that applicants’ personal circumstances may have impacted on their educational and extracurricular opportunities and will take this into consideration when making an offer.

If a university or college knows that you have an impairment and they require you to undertake an entrance examination or to have an interview, they will be able to contact you in advance to ensure that reasonable adjustments are provided.

Even if you feel that there is no reason for a university or college to know that you have a disability because you have not had any issues at your previous education provider or at work, you may have been benefiting from inclusive provision, be moving away from your usual support networks or your impairment could change.

While universities and colleges do offer inclusive teaching and learning, you may require individual level adjustments in a higher education context or may simply require initial support.
2.3 When researching, visiting and prioritising providers for your chosen course consider:

+ the accessibility of transport including parking, the local area, your department, buildings, facilities and services – for a full list of questions to ask when visiting see page 20 of Disability Rights UK guidance Into Higher Education 2019

+ the specific provision for disabled students and the experience of the disability and wellness staff of supporting students with the same or similar impairments

+ opportunities that you have had to talk to other disabled students

+ whether there is a medical centre and mental health advisers that are part of or linked to the higher education provider

+ if you require accommodation adapted for wheelchair users, notifications in an emergency, step-free access, ensuite accommodation or a fridge to store medicines, find out what is provided in halls of residence. Where is the accommodation located and do you need to liaise with the disability and wellbeing team or accommodation office to ensure that your requirements are met? If you are prioritised for centrally located accommodation in your first year, will this be the case for further years of study? In the event you are unable to leave your accommodation for more than a few days, who will be responsible for ensuring support – the accommodation office or provider or the disability and wellness team?

+ is teaching and learning provided online and face-to-face or face-to-face only? Related to this, how frequently are you expected to attend teaching and learning activities?

+ what types of assessment method are commonly used? Examination only or course work? If it is written assignments as part of course work, do you have the opportunity to submit other types of assignment (eg videos and recordings)? This may constitute a reasonable adjustment but some providers use a wide range of assessment methods for all students

+ will work placement and field trip opportunities be accessible to you?
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+ how will you be able to participate in your course in the event you cannot attend lectures and seminars or meet deadlines because of your impairment?

+ is the careers advice and support provided developed in consideration of disabled student requirements?

+ the full-time and part-time study options available

+ how will you be able to familiarise yourself with your surroundings and course prior to the commencement of your course

+ if you are eligible and require help, can the disability and wellness office support you with your Disabled Students’ Allowances application?
2.4 Considerations before accepting your place, if applying through Clearing:

+ contact your potential university’s or college’s disability and wellbeing services. In addition to the above areas under 2.2, consider:
  – how will they implement reasonable adjustments before your course starts?
  – whether the type of accommodation you require is still available?

+ visiting the provider to assess the accessibility of transport, the local area, your department, buildings, facilities and services.
  – the provider may be running both virtual and physical tours for clearing applicants. If they are not running tours or you cannot visit, ask for information about accessibility on campus related to your own requirements (eg step free access, lift sizes, or distances between buildings)
  – they may have an accessibility map of their buildings and location/s and it may well be available online

+ making contact with the admissions officer or head of department for your course. Discuss course content, delivery methods (eg online and face-to-face methods or will delivery be face-to-face only), placement opportunities and assessment for your chosen subject to ensure there will be no significant barriers to your learning experience.
2.5 Funding for reasonable adjustments

While at university or college, personal care continues to be provided by your home local authority or the local authority in which you are studying in, depending on which is considered your main local authority. Ask your local authority as soon as possible about the support provided when you go to college or university and how to access it.

Similarly, to schools, universities and colleges are required to fund inclusive provision in line with their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 but some adjustments related to learning are funded through Disabled Students Allowances’ (DSAs).

The DSAs application process takes around 14 weeks so it is advisable to apply as early as possible and you can apply for DSAs before you have an offer from a university or college.

You are eligible to apply for DSAs if you have an impairment that affects your ability to study such as:

- specific learning difficulty, for example dyslexia or ADHD
- mental health condition, for example anxiety or depression
- physical disability, for example if you have to use crutches, a wheelchair or a special keyboard
- sensory disability, for example if you’re visually impaired, deaf or have a hearing impairment
- long-term health condition, for example cancer, chronic heart disease or HIV.

Further information on eligibility can be found here. If you are experiencing financial hardship you may be able to apply for help to pay for a new diagnostic assessment.

If you are eligible for DSA, you will need to inform Student Finance England who will organise for an assessment of your requirements to be carried out.
Further information on how to apply can be found [here](#).

If you are concerned about the assessment or are not provided with information on how the assessment is currently conducted, you can ask Student Finance England using their email [dsa_team@slc.co.uk](mailto:dsa_team@slc.co.uk).

Once you have received your assessment report, request a timetable from your chosen university’s or college’s disability adviser that outlines when reasonable adjustments will be implemented. Ask for a response over email/in writing, in case of any delays before the start of the academic year.

Like schools, many universities and colleges use student support plans. Ask for a copy of your support plan and check for accuracy. You should be asked permission, in line with data protection regulations, for the plan to be shared with relevant staff members and departments so that they can implement support. If you are unsure of who it will be sent to or if you feel that it is being shared too narrowly or widely, ask the disability adviser.
2.6 Mental health and wellbeing

Universities and colleges have a range of support available to all students focusing on wellbeing in higher education. Mental health support is key to this.

Starting higher education should be exciting and liberating, especially commencing a course of study you have always wanted to pursue. It can also be a daunting experience as you are meeting new people, in unfamiliar situations and you may be living away from your usual networks.

Knowing what to expect in higher education can help reduce negative experiences.

Student Minds has compiled a guide, Know Before You Go, which can be accessed here, to help you transition. In addition, many universities and colleges provide opportunities for disabled students to familiarise themselves with their new surroundings prior to induction week and the start of the first term.

If you currently receive mental health support you can talk to your chosen university’s or college’s mental health service provider about the support that they provide and the methods they use. Many universities and colleges have self-referral and walk in mental wellbeing services and others will operate an appointments based system. Some universities and colleges are also working in strategic partnerships with the NHS to provide support and treatment to students.

If you are moving away from your permanent residence you should talk to your current GP about accessing NHS mental health services while in higher education. Will you need to travel back to your permanent residence or will you be able to access your usual support via a different health trust and what are the current waiting times for support? Your chosen university’s or college’s mental health service, may also be to advise you and may be able to support you while you transition between health trusts.
2.7 Learning and assessment

On accepting a place, if you have not already done so, ask the head of department or course leader about the planned learning and assessment methods for your course and make sure that they are accessible to you and whether methods are the same across all modules of your course. If you do not feel that your university’s or college’s inclusive provision, nor your needs assessment, adequately took into consideration the planned learning and assessment methods then speak to the disability and wellbeing office who will be able to organise a review.

In the event you are unable to study due to your impairment or another circumstance during the course (eg pregnancy or death of a close family member) you can ask for an extension and the mitigating/extenuating circumstance procedures may apply.

Details of the mitigating/extenuating circumstances policy should be provided by student services within your university or college.

2.8 Student life

Many students’ unions have a range of clubs and societies covering interests in specific countries, continents and cultures as well as a breadth of sports and the arts. Most students’ unions employ staff to advise and support students too.

As service providers, students’ unions are obliged under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that their activities are accessible, and many have worked with their university or college to ensure that their facilities are accessible too.
2.9 Complaints

If you do not feel that your application has been handled fairly or you do not feel that your requirements have been met, then you can complain both informally and formally. You can contact the admissions or disability and wellbeing staff in writing or in person and request that they review your situation.

If there is not a satisfactory outcome to an informal complaint you can complain formally. All universities and colleges have formal complaints procedures and you will be to find them on their websites or request to be sent links to the process.

If you registered as a student and were not happy with the resolution you can complain within 12 months to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

Other organisations have complaints processes to:

- UCAS
- Student Finance England
- Office for Students

About this publication

This publication has been informed by a series of roundtables run by the Disabled Students’ Commission (DSC) in July 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Disabled Students’ Commission was established by the Universities Minister and is funded by the Office for Students (OfS). The DSC aims to ensure that disabled students have a positive and successful experience in higher education.
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