



# Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences

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# Contents

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Executive summary	3
1. Introduction	5
1.1 Background to the survey	5
1.2 Survey sample	6
2. Summary of findings	7
2.1 Access and transition into higher education	7
2.2 Remote learning, teaching and assessment	11
2.3 Employment	15
2.4 Mental health and wellbeing	16
2.5 Support from your provider during Covid-19	18
3. Conclusion and next steps	21
4. References	23

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# Executive summary

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) commissioned a survey to take place between May and June 2021. The aims of the survey were to gain an understanding of the differential impact of Covid-19 on disabled student experiences, including an investigation of the following:

- + transition into university (either as a degree apprentice, foundation student or undergraduate student entering higher education for the first time) or entering the first year of postgraduate studies
- + experiences of adapting to remote learning, teaching and assessment
- + perspectives on employment
- + mental health and wellbeing
- + support provided by the university during Covid-19

There were a number of open-ended, free-text questions included within the survey, allowing students to provide further detail on their experiences. The following headline findings emerged from analysis of the responses:

### Access and transition into higher education

- + Notably, nearly three quarters (72.7%) of students (either entering higher education for the first time as a degree apprentice, foundation or undergraduate student, or as a postgraduate student) felt that their transition was negatively impacted by Covid-19, whereas only 10.4% and 3.2% of students felt it had 'little impact' or 'no impact at all' respectively. Many felt that the experience of university they had envisaged did not materialise.
- + Ahead of commencing their study, nearly half of students (45.5%) reported that they were not offered an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the campus (such as navigation around campus and accessibility of university buildings and facilities).
- + Out of those who experienced a delay to their Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) payment as a result of Covid-19, 75.6% reported that they were not offered any interim support by their university to cover this delay.

## Remote learning, teaching and assessment

- + While over a third of students found adapting to remote learning and teaching 'very difficult' (36.3%), just 18.3% of students reported the same experience (very difficult) adapting to remote assessment.
- + The barriers and challenges related to remote teaching and learning varied by impairment type, however a high number of students enjoyed the flexibility of learning 'at their own pace'. Overall, the majority of students supported a move to a blended-learning model but did not wish to remove face-to-face interaction altogether.
- + With regards to assessment, a number of students felt that remote assessment 'removed barriers', and in particular expressed positivity towards assessment methods such as open-book examinations as an alternative and flexible way of meeting learning outcomes.

## Employment

- + Over half of students reported feeling 'quite concerned' or 'very concerned' (32.3% and 22.6% respectively) about their employment prospects as a result of Covid-19. The reasons for this were varied, citing concerns around entering a competitive job market, feeling worried about re-entering populated office spaces, and feeling like they have been unable to gain direct work experience over the past year.
- + Only 7.9% of those considering employment upon graduation reported that they received disability-specific careers advice and support from their university. Students expressed a wish to understand better how Covid-19 might affect their access to employment, such as learning 'how to obtain working from home' as a reasonable adjustment in employment.

## Mental health and wellbeing

- + 80% of all respondents reported that Covid-19 had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Students reported experiencing feelings of isolation and/or loneliness (82.6%), a lack of motivation (81.6%) and increased stress levels (80%). A higher proportion of students with a reported mental health condition (87.8%) said that Covid-19 had impacted negatively on their mental health and wellbeing.
- + Other concerns that factored into a decline in mental health and wellbeing included a reduction in healthy behaviours such as exercise, dealing with bereavement and living in difficult home environments (including living with other family members who were required to shield).

## Support from the university

- + Overall, students rated positively that their university had clearly communicated with them any actions taken as a result of Covid-19.
- + In particular, students praised the role of their tutors and lecturers in considering and accommodating their support requirements throughout Covid-19, including being 'more proactive in providing learning alternatives'. Students were also positive about the greater accommodations offered to them for assessments (ie open-book examinations and increased flexibility around mitigating circumstances and extensions).
- + Many students noticed a more positive attitude and increased understanding from staff across the university towards their disability (and in particular mental health and wellbeing), and hoped that a more empathetic and responsive approach to disabled students' support requirements would continue beyond the end of Covid-19.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background to the survey

On 23 March 2020, the UK government announced the first nationwide lockdown. This meant that students in higher education (HE) were instructed to continue their studies from home for the foreseeable future. In July 2020, the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) conducted a series of online roundtables to understand the key challenges faced by disabled students as a result of the shift to remote teaching and learning. Using the findings, the DSC published [Three Months to Make a Difference](#) (July, 2020), outlining the key areas for institutions and policy makers to address ahead of campuses reopening. While the DSC will be seeking to understand in the coming months whether recommendations outlined in the report have been actioned, it is clear that the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities, and disabled students continue to face unprecedented challenges.

The DSC therefore agreed to commission a survey, ran by Advance HE, to understand the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences across the HE lifecycle. The survey included questions related to the following themes:

- + transition into university (either as a degree apprentice, foundation student or undergraduate student entering higher education for the first time) or entering the first year of postgraduate studies
- + experiences of adapting to remote learning, teaching and assessment
- + perspectives on employment
- + mental health and wellbeing

+ support provided by the university during Covid-19.

The survey ran for four weeks between May and June 2021. Further qualitative research (asynchronous online focus groups) will be conducted in August 2021 with those who expressed an interest within the survey, to understand in more detail any key themes that emerged from the survey responses and to explore any differential impacts between student groups.

## 1.2 Survey sample

Overall, a total of 473 disabled students responded to the survey. The survey was promoted via relevant sector organisations and higher education institutions (HEIs).

302 respondents (64%) were first degree undergraduate students (with the remaining being 13.1% postgraduate master's students, 7.6% PhD students, 6.8% combined master's students, 4.9% foundation degree students, 1.1% studying on a degree apprenticeship and 2.1% 'other').

Respondents had a range of impairments, including 246 respondents (52.2%) with a mental health condition, and 226 respondents (48%) with a learning difference such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D. A further 103 respondents (21.9%) reported having a social and/or communication condition such as a speech and language impairment or an autistic spectrum condition.

Out of all respondents who disclosed an impairment, health condition or learning difference, 45.8% had more than one condition. Take up of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) was higher than the disabled student population at the national level, with 57.2% of respondents in receipt of DSA, in comparison to 32.2% nationally.

Compared to the 2019-20 Higher Education Statistics Agency student records (Advance HE, 2020a), postgraduate students were overrepresented in the current sample. The majority of the sample were full-time students (87%), whereas 12.3% were studying part-time. Nearly half of all respondents (48.8%) were studying a non-SET subject, while 38.9% of respondents were studying a SET<sup>1</sup> subject (7.3% of respondents selected 'Other' and 4.1% of respondents were studying a joint honours).

With regards to age, gender and ethnicity and socioeconomic background (parental education), the current sample was broadly representative of students at the national level, with some differences highlighted below:

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<sup>1</sup> SET subject groups refer to science, engineering and technology subjects.

- + There was an overrepresentation of women (66.2%) in the current sample, as compared to the 2019-20 HESA student record (57%). 26.5% of respondents identified as male, and 5.3% identified as non-binary.
- + A slightly lower proportion of students in the current sample were aged 24 and under (60.6%), compared with 74.2% of students aged 25 and under at the national level.
- + 77.1% of the sample identified as white, which is slightly higher than the proportion of white UK-domiciled students at the national level (75.7%). A slightly lower proportion of the sample identified as BAME (20.5%) in comparison to UK-domiciled students at the national level (24.3%).
- + A slightly higher proportion of respondents had a parent with a HE qualification (58.8%) in comparison to at the national level (48.9%).

Although not necessarily representative of the views of all disabled students studying in HE in England, respondents' views will help inform recommendations made by the DSC. The capture of data about students' perceptions and experiences alongside demographic information also enabled Advance HE to assess any initial differences in responses among students groups, and this will be investigated in further detail in the DSC's follow-up research.

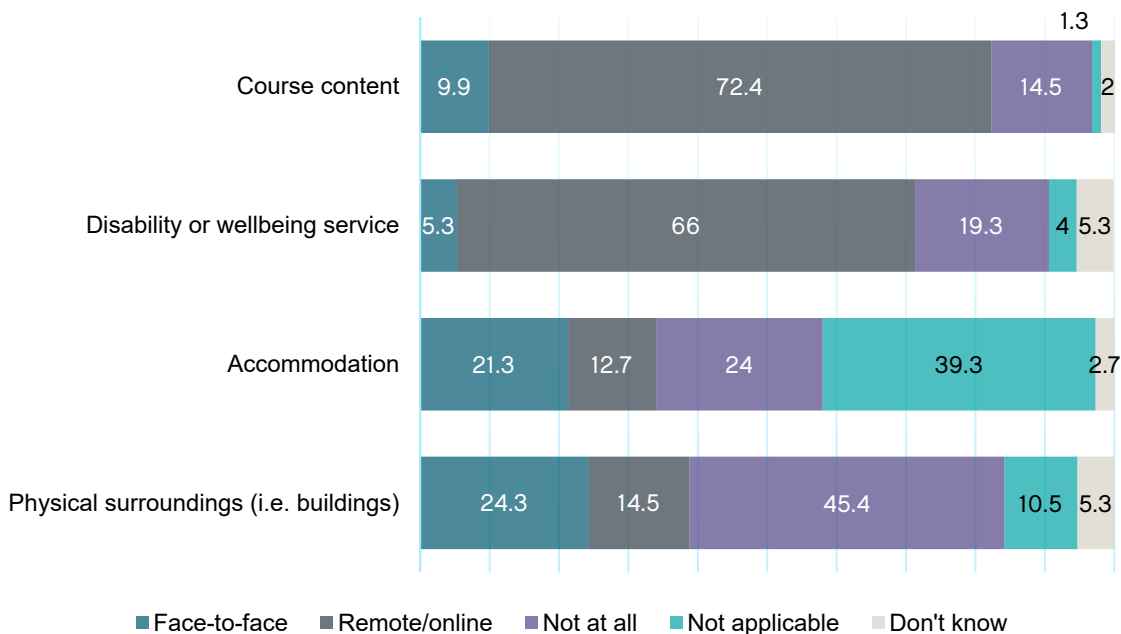
## 2. Summary of findings

### 2.1 Access and transition into higher education

The first section of the survey included six questions (including two open-ended, free-text response questions) exploring disabled students' experiences of transition into university during Covid-19. These questions were asked to those who, as of September 2020, were either entering HE for the first time as a foundation student, degree apprentice or undergraduate student, or entering their first year of postgraduate study.

Students were asked a series of Likert-scale questions to understand to what extent they were offered an opportunity to familiarise themselves with their chosen university prior to commencing study, either face-to-face, online/remotely or not at all. It was found that nearly half of all students (45.5%) were not offered an opportunity to familiarise themselves with their physical surroundings (such as via a campus tour) as a result of Covid-19, and only 14.5% of students were offered this on a remote basis. Furthermore, while 66% of students were offered an opportunity to familiarise themselves with their disability or wellbeing service remotely, 19.3% were unable to familiarise themselves with the service at all.

**Figure 1 – Opportunities for familiarisation with chosen university ahead of commencing study**



Taken together, the lack of opportunities for disabled students to physically familiarise themselves with their chosen institution ahead of commencing their studies may be the reason why many found their transition difficult, with one student describing the experience as *“very jarring and uncertain”*.

Notably, nearly three quarters (72.7%) of students felt that their transition into higher education was negatively impacted by Covid-19, whereas only 10.4% and 3.2% of students felt it had ‘little impact’ or ‘no impact at all’ respectively. In total, 139 respondents shared additional detail on their experiences in an open-ended question. For those entering HE for the first time as a foundation student, degree apprentice or undergraduate student, a number shared the observation that their expectations of what university might have been like had simply not been met:

*“It was the complete opposite of what I hoped my first year of university would be like.”*

*“Feeling like we had no taste of a normal university experience which was sad.”*

*“It completely reshaped the format of my first year, both academically and in terms of a wider student experience.”*

Respondents also shared the following concerns around transition into university within their responses, related more closely to their experience as a disabled student:

- + missed out on the ability to *“feel settled”*, *“make friendships”* and build crucial support networks



## Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences

Disabled Students' Commission

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- A number of students mentioned that they could only have limited visits from family and/or other carers to their accommodation, and these were often time-limited: *“Only one of my parents were allowed to help and only had an hour. As someone who gets fatigued it was challenging without their help”*.
- Students were unable to get to know staff on a more personal basis in order to discuss their support requirements: “I wasn’t able to develop as close relationships with tutors and teaching staff which I usually use as a large form of support”.
- + many students struggled to adapt to an online learning environment, with little support and guidance offered on the use of platforms and learning materials
- + some also reported an exacerbation of pre-existing conditions as a result of Covid-19, and worsening of their mental health.

For postgraduate students, the experiences of transitioning into a new level of study during Covid-19 were not dissimilar to those of foundation students, degree apprentices or undergraduate students entering HE for the first time. They felt unable to build support networks and struggled to adapt to changes:

*“The main relative impact has been social – PhD students usually form important bonds in the first year but I haven’t been able to meet with my cohort for most of the year. This has been very isolating and negatively affected my mental health.”*

*“Changes have been quick and often with little pattern. It has been hard to adapt quickly. Nobody has thought about autistic people when altering or moving parts of the course.”*

Finally in this section of the survey, students were asked whether they had experienced any delay to their DSA or Access to Work funding as a result of Covid-19. Of concern, 26.6% of disabled students said that they experienced a delay to their provision, and that 75.6% of these students were not offered any interim support from their institution while they were waiting for reasonable adjustments to be put in place.

A total of 85 students shared responses to an open-ended question asking what additional support they would have liked to ensure a smooth transition prior to commencing their studies during Covid-19. The following responses highlighted some interesting and important considerations for institutions and policy-leads, predominantly focused on a need for improved information, advice and guidance for disabled students, ranging from access to social activities to accessibility of online learning and teaching:

*“I benefited from having a Zoom appointment to meet my tutor before commencing the course. This helped establish rapport with the staff and clarify individual needs. It was also reassuring for me as I was anxious about studying at the postgraduate level.”*

*"I think I would have really appreciated it if my department had made an effort to get the students in touch with each other and offer online events to meet each other. I find making friends really difficult in a normal situation and this year has made it exponentially harder."*

*"I was unaware whether I needed to make my condition known to the university as I was studying online, it would have been helpful and reassuring to have known from the start."*

*"Having advice on how to manage online learning with learning difficulties would have been useful. We are at a disadvantage meaning long-term coping strategies are negated by the online format."*

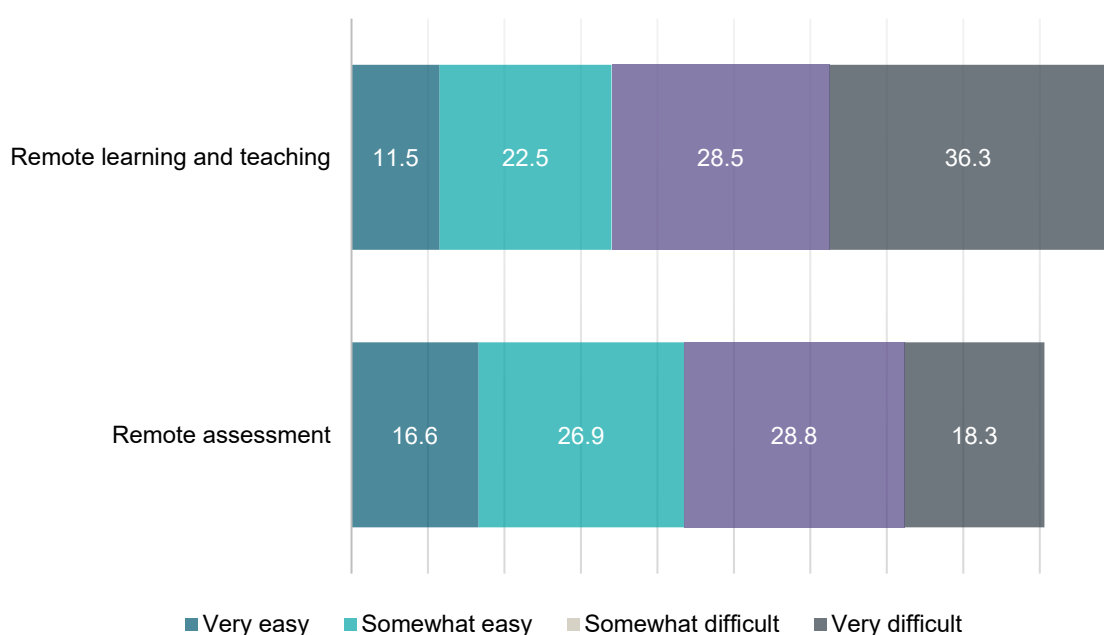
*"More direct, sustained contact with an academic/pastoral advisor would have been nice. I basically felt I was left to fend for myself even after contacting Student Support."*

*"I would have liked to have been able to access support earlier about the DSA process, and what was needed and would happen, and how much I could put in place before I started. I am only just receiving my final pieces of equipment and training now, after this year's study has ended."*

## 2.2 Remote learning, teaching and assessment

The survey then asked a further five questions about the remote learning and teaching and assessment experience for disabled students. Interestingly, while over a third of students found adapting to remote learning and teaching 'very difficult' (36.3%), just 18.3% of students adapting to remote assessment had the same experience. Figure 2 outlines the differences in more detail.

**Figure 2 – Disabled students' experiences of adapting to remote learning, teaching and assessment**



As stated within 'Three Months to Make a Difference' (DSC, 2020), experiences of remote teaching, learning and assessment often varied by impairment type. This was again highlighted in the survey data, as for example a higher proportion of students with a learning difference such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D found adapting to the remote learning and teaching experience 'very difficult' (47.3%). Evidence of differential impact across impairment types was also highlighted in Ranstad Student Support's deaf users' survey (June 2021), in which the two biggest challenges for deaf HE students while studying during Covid-10 were screen fatigue (85%) and moving to online delivery (69%). Additionally, 41.2% of Black, Asian and ethnic minority (BAME) disabled students found the experience 'very difficult', a slightly higher proportion than the total sample.

Open-ended responses shared within the survey shone further light on the differences in experiences between impairment types. A number of students with mental health conditions found the experience of remote learning and teaching “*isolating, not stimulating and demotivating*”. Students with chronic illness also found it much more difficult to concentrate, citing that “*the lectures were significantly longer than in person and with a lot less interaction*”.

In contrast, the following student who has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) highlighted their positive experience of online learning within the DSC's survey:

*“Online lectures are very helpful when you have OCD. Performing compulsions such as rewriting information can mean you miss the next vital part in in-person lectures or are left overwhelmed with anxiety because you couldn't complete your compulsion and then can't concentrate anyway.”*

Other students who found adapting to remote learning and teaching an easier experience (22.5% somewhat easy, 11.5% very easy) felt that they could more readily attend lectures and seminars as they were taking place at home:

*“Teaching was well organised, all resources remained easily accessed (eg everything on the reading list was accessible online). Attendance to lectures was higher without having to wake up earlier or commute.”*

*“It was odd and a bit sad not to see others, but online learning allowed me to pause and play and carry out my learning at an appropriate pace during which I could fully concentrate. In a normal lecture, I got distracted very easily and miss out on a lot.”*

With regards to assessment, students with a mental health condition such as anxiety, along with other impairments, felt that the in-home environment was preferable:

*“I hate in person exams. I much prefer being in a space I can control as it lessens my anxiety.”*

*“Online exams suited my disability as it gave me the opportunity to have rest breaks as needed. Typing exams wasn't too much of an adjustment as all of my assessed coursework is also typed. Definitely easier than the transition to online teaching.”*

*“Remote assessment also removed barriers for me. It meant that I didn't have to do badly in an exam because I was feeling ill that day. I was able to do work from bed and also felt more relaxed at home.”*

However, this view was not universal and some students struggled with their home environment (which likely would have also impacted on their learning experience):

*“Hard to focus, disruptive environments, not really an appropriate environment for someone with learning difficulties.”*

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## Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences

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Finally, 328 students shared free-text responses outlining the measures implemented as a result of remote learning, teaching and assessment, and which ones they would like to be taken forward to support disabled students in future. The feedback and suggestions were wide-ranging, and covered a variety of areas related to learning and teaching, assessment, and the support of disabled students more generally:

### Teaching and learning:

- + Overall, the majority of students showed support for a move to blended learning, and felt positive about the use of recorded lectures and seminars, so long as they are provided in an accessible format. This is reflected in the National Deaf Children's Society's recent survey to deaf higher education students, in which 41% of students wanted blended learning to continue:

*"More pre-recorded lectures and online support as it made it easier for my dyslexia and chronic illness to take things at my own pace."*

*"I'd like the option for remote learning to still be given to students who ask for it. As a disabled student, I have found remote learning – although challenging at times – easier than the challenges I would have to deal with if I had to attend on campus teaching."*

- + While the adoption of remote learning was welcomed, students did not wish for this to entirely replace face-to-face interaction and would like continued opportunities to meet peers (echoing previous findings around a need to build support networks)
- + Students wished for increased pastoral care and support around their learning requirements
- + Increased training for staff and students around the use of online learning platforms was required
- + A number of students suggested greater embedding of mental health into the curriculum, ie a recognition of "triggering content" and support for "mental wellbeing with completing work for classes".

### Assessment:

- + A large number of students felt positive about alternative assessment formats, including open-book examinations held over a longer period of time. For many, this helped to decrease anxiety and was preferable for those who struggle with memory recall:

*"Alternative assessments for students being the norm. Allowing students to select a type of assessment without having to fill in forms or request it. By providing optionality and equivalence in assessment type, learning can be properly assessed."*

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*“Having 24 hour or 7 day exams should remain. They massively reduce the anxiety of exams and put everyone on a more equal playing field as I know for me personally that my extra time alone would not be enough for me to perform as well as I know I could with a longer time limit.”*

- + Students suggested that improved support for access to extensions and/or mitigating circumstances should continue
- + While a number of disabled students were no longer required to request an extension (due to the use of alternative assessment methods), some were concerned the provision of alternative assessment options could replace existing support in place for disabled students (ie rest breaks), and that disabled students were being *“placed on the same level as non-disabled peers”*. This will be an important consideration for institutions going forward, and disabled students must be regularly consulted on any changes:

*“I have had my extra time and rest breaks removed, giving other students without my disabilities an unfair advantage.”*

### General considerations:

- + Students wished for a more nuanced and understanding attitude towards attendance from staff, with a blended learning approach hopefully meaning that a student would miss fewer lectures and/or seminars if unable to leave their home:

*“The ability to complete some work from home has helped when I have been unwell, which has on occasion been a benefit despite the issues. This would be helpful moving forward for me and others I am sure, as I hate that my attendance might have been affected (you often require a set percentage to get financial assistance etc.) if I had to stay at home due to my disability.”*

- + Students wished for a continued effort to raise awareness and increase understanding of mental health and wellbeing, compassion around disability and *“emotional empathy”* from staff:

*“Nothing Covid specific, but the compassion and understanding surrounding my health has been invaluable.”*

*“I want universities to remain more understanding of the reasons why people might need extra time or greater support. I’ve received much more understanding from staff during Covid times. But the issues disabled students face will remain once Covid goes away, and must not be forgotten.”*

### 2.3 Employment

In this section of the survey, respondents were asked a number of questions around employability, and the impact Covid-19 could have had on this stage of the student lifecycle. Over half of students reported feeling 'quite concerned' or 'very concerned' (32.3% and 22.6% respectively) about their employment prospects as a result of Covid-19. The issues caused by Covid-19 are likely to exacerbate any existing difficulties disabled graduates face entering employment, with AGCAS's recent research with the University of Southampton (July, 2021) highlighting that graduates with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed (20.5%) than graduates without disabilities (15%).

Within the DSC's survey, the reasons for students' concerns were varied, with the following key themes emerging from an open-ended follow-up question, answered by 291 respondents:

- + students felt worried about the state of the economy and entering a competitive job market where there are potentially fewer opportunities:

*"Employment prospects weren't very strong beforehand, and now there seems to be a lot more competition for jobs. As someone with dyslexia, I feel like I'll be more likely to be overlooked."*

*"Employment is already a daunting prospect for those who are disabled like myself. Knowing that there are fewer jobs as companies and universities are trying to save money is worrying, as the job market is more competitive."*

- + over the past year, a number of students have experienced delays and setbacks during the academic year (in addition to barriers they already faced) and have been unable to gain work experience due to restrictions:

*"My degree has taken a year and a half longer than it should – I worry that employers will look down on me for needing this."*

*"I didn't get to go out on placement and feel this is a step back in understanding the role I hope to be employed in."*

- + some students felt concerned about re-entering populated office spaces and some who have "severe anxiety about Covid-19" are worried about how to "take up a job that involves contact with other people".

- + many students reported a deterioration in their mental health, directly impacting on their capacity to apply for jobs after graduation:

*"I feel like I've gone backwards in terms of my mental health and stability as a result of Covid-19, and that will make it harder for me to go through the application process towards employment."*



Conversely, those who felt 'not very concerned' or 'not concerned at all' (21.5% and 12.3% respectively) about their employment prospects after university were either considering working in a sector where they believed there to be more opportunities (ie healthcare, teaching), or already held a secure job that would continue after graduation.

Respondents were then asked whether they had received any careers advice and support during Covid-19 to support them in their journey towards employment. Out of all those considering employment upon completion of their current study (as opposed to further study etc), only 7.9% reported that they received disability-specific careers advice and support from their university. This could be attributed to overall low levels of engagement and awareness with careers services overall, as 77.2% of careers services offer initiatives to engage students with a disability or physical/mental condition (AGCAS HE Careers Service Survey, January 2019).

In an open-ended free-text question, 176 students shared a range of suggestions to support their disability during the process of transitioning to employment:

*“Support with adjusting back to normal life, and tips on improving my employability that are specific to the current situation and associated challenges.”*

*“More workshop events on disability disclosure during interviews, managing frequent appointments while in a fixed hours role.”*

*“I would like disability-specific support which covers worries about employer discrimination, finding jobs that work with my disability and to my strengths.”*

*“More support on making sure employers make proper (rather than just basic/generic) reasonable adjustments in the recruitment process.”*

## 2.4 Mental health and wellbeing

Respondents were asked three questions regarding their mental health and wellbeing throughout Covid-19. Of concern, 80% of all respondents reported that Covid-19 had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Just 13% said it had little impact. In addition, students with a reported mental health condition were more likely to say that Covid-19 had impacted negatively on their mental health and wellbeing (87.8%).

The above chimes with results reported in the recently published [Student Academic Experience Survey Report](#), wherein 34% of respondents were considering leaving due to their emotional/mental health (Advance HE, HEPI 2021), highlighting the toll of Covid-19 on all students. Additionally, Student Minds' report *University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic* (August, 2021), stated that disabled students were more likely than students with no disability to report that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, and more commonly for students with mental, learning or cognitive disabilities compared to students with physical disabilities.

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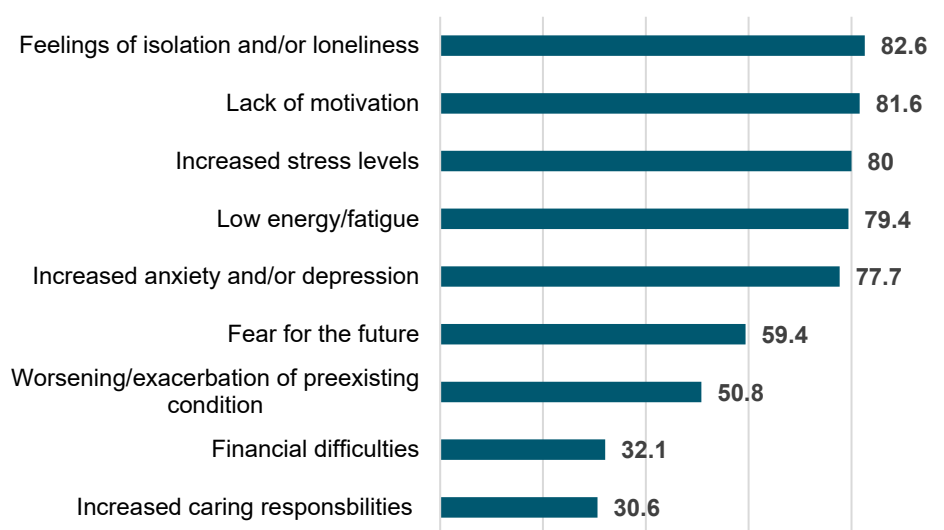
## Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences

Disabled Students' Commission

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Respondents were then asked whether they had experienced any of the following, related to their mental health and wellbeing and outlined in Figure 3. The chart shows that an overwhelming majority of students experienced feelings of isolation/loneliness (82.6%), lack of motivation (81.6%) and increased stress levels (80%). A slightly higher proportion of those who were required to shield as a result of Covid-19 experienced feelings of isolation/loneliness (85.8%) and increased stress levels (85.2%) in comparison to the total sample.

**Figure 3 - Disabled students' experiences related to mental health and wellbeing as a result of Covid-19**



A total of 184 students also highlighted additional challenges related to their mental health and wellbeing in an open-ended, free-text question:

- + fear of returning to 'normal' and to socialise again, especially if there had been a requirement to shield throughout Covid-19:

*"I am experiencing some fear and anxiety for things like classes and assessments going back to normal. My social skills that were thriving before the pandemic have depleted quite a lot, making me worried to interact with groups of people. I'm resentful and upset that I haven't been able to have a normal experience, studying and socialising, in spite of paying for my accommodation, normal tuition fees etc. I feel like I've lost a year and gained mental pain."*

*"I have mainly experienced increased anxiety about going outside in case I get sick. This has extended to university and meant I did not come in to do my research project lab sessions, despite no longer shielding."*

- + bereavement and feelings of grief
- + isolating and studying within difficult home environments, especially when others in the household were required to shield:

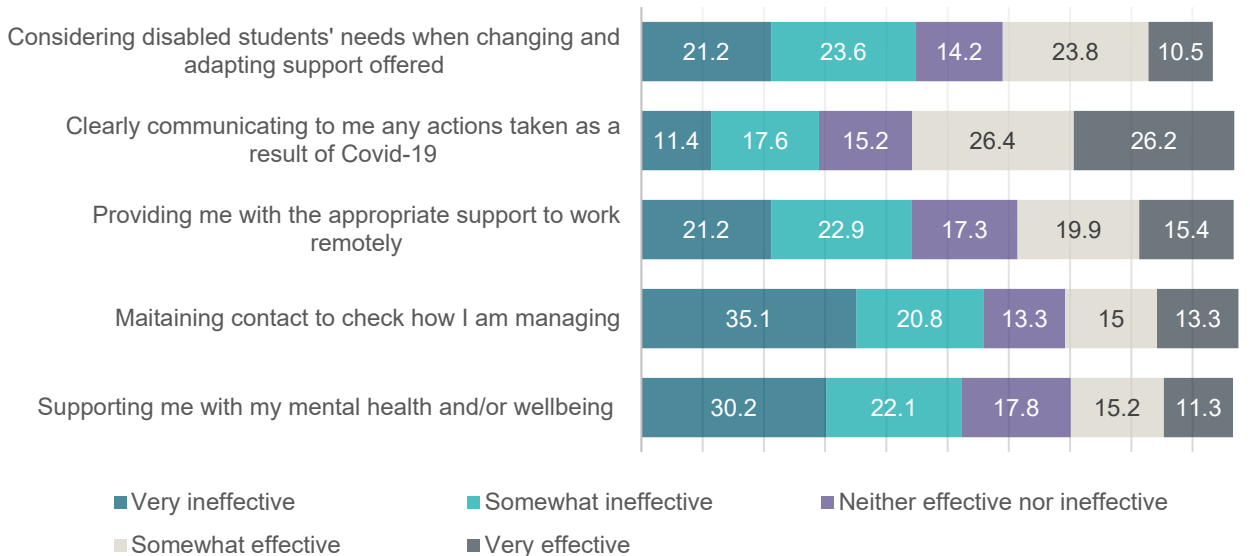
My family has a range of mental health conditions and disabilities. So to work towards my degree in this environment has been very challenging, especially as I myself have dyslexia and my mental health has really suffered.

- + unable to adopt healthy behaviours such as exercise
- + treatment for their disability delayed, and difficulty accessing support for mental health
- + concerns about academic success.

## 2.5 Support from your provider during Covid-19

In the final section of the survey, students were asked a series of statements focused on the support offered from their provider throughout Covid-19, and to what extent they felt this support was effective or ineffective. Figure 4 outlines the results in more detail.

**Figure 4 – Proportions of students who reported satisfaction with the support offered by their provider throughout Covid-19**



## Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences

Disabled Students' Commission

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Areas of support for which students rated 'very ineffective' with the highest scores were 'maintaining contact to check how I am managing' and 'supporting me with my mental health and wellbeing' (35.1% and 30.2% respectively). In contrast, 'clearly communicating to me any actions taken as a result of Covid-19' was rated more positively, scoring 26.4% and 26.2% for 'somewhat effective' and 'very effective' respectively. For the final open-ended question, students were asked to state two or three ways that their provider had been successful in supporting them and their disability throughout Covid-19. 276 students provided responses to this question, which echoed reported ratings from Figure 4:

*"Constant updates on what will be changing and happening."*

*"Weekly emails with links to support pages and an understanding of not wishing to travel to campus even if the restrictions had lifted."*

*"Very quick to respond to communication, which provides reassurances that my concerns are being heard."*

*"They have been accessible through multiple channels whereas I don't think they would have been pre-Covid."*

*"My university has been in touch to ask if there is anything that I need and my supervisor also maintains good contact with me."*

*"They have been very quick and responsive to my emails concerning any issues caused by my impairment. They have also been very comforting and helpful to talk to remotely on calls."*

In addition, many students praised their disability support teams, and the support they offered to ensure reasonable adjustments were implemented, and any other concerns addressed:

*"The disability support team have been in touch with me throughout the process of getting DSA, and have quickly responded to any queries I've had. They've made sure my information is up to date and available to the people who need to know, and that I'm aware of anything that might affect me, or my studies. Everyone has been very helpful and considerate."*

*"Disability support has been great and incredibly supportive. I was able to communicate with other disabled students and staff members, and being able to write down everything instead of speaking is a huge bonus to me."*

*"During times of anxiety, I have been able to contact the disability support and been able to talk about it in a constructive manner almost immediately after sending the email requesting help."*

Similarly, a number of students felt that their tutors and lecturers (and other academic staff) were very accommodating in supporting their requirements throughout Covid-19:

*“My PhD supervisor has been supportive and we have done meetings by video call.”*

*“My tutors have been understanding of my condition and how it hinders me.”*

*“My teaching staff and personal tutor have been great at supporting me. The placement team managed to source a remote placement for me and another student classed as clinically vulnerable.”*

*“My academic adviser was very helpful in giving me advice on how to address some of my challenges caused by health conditions.”*

*“Online learning is something that has been needed for disabled people for a long time, so it’s good it’s finally happening. The staff in my department have been very helpful in making me feel comfortable in my situation, particularly my tutor who saw me at my worst and made necessary arrangements and checked in frequently.”*

Finally, students reiterated the benefits they have experienced as a result of the shift to remote learning, teaching and assessment. In particular, this included more flexible access to extensions and mitigating circumstances, as well as the option to partake in alternative assessment formats:

*“My university have offered extensions to assignments and even on my dissertation due to the impact on my health.”*

*“Mitigating circumstances on exams and coursework were easy to access if needs be.”*

*“Eliminating the need for students to provide formal evidence when requiring an extension for submitted coursework. Making online exams 24-hours long to allow for students with disabilities to take rest breaks and extra time as needed, and adjust to the new mode of assessment more easily.”*

*“Being flexible on assignments, allowing for extensions and the ability to miss formative assignments. Allowing some exams to be deferred to the August exam period.”*

*“The remote assessments were done in an excellent way and asking for an extension on deadlines was no issue when needed.”*

*“Lecturers are more proactive in providing learning alternatives, my timetable is more flexible and essay extension requests are met with less hostility.”*

### 3. Conclusion and next steps

This report provides an overview of the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences in HE. Reported experiences were wide-ranging and highlighted both positive and negative impacts, and thus pose a number of important considerations to colleges and universities as they reflect on how to support all disabled students beyond the pandemic in a nuanced way.

The range of experiences that emerged throughout Covid-19 reinforce the importance of not treating disabled students as a homogenous group, as often experiences differed by impairment type, as well as between different identity groups. As an example, students with a mental health condition found the in-home environment for undertaking learning and assessment preferable as it reduced the anxiety of being around other people, and allowed them to participate at their own pace. However, preferences were not universal and while some disabled students enjoyed the greater flexibility offered to them by learning and being assessed online, others wished for face-to-face interaction and a continued opportunity to build an educational support network to continue. This finding echoes previous research conducted by the DSC (Three Months to Make a Difference, July 2020), which recommended that implementation of blended learning should be done so in an inclusive way, with a possible option of online learning, happening in real time, taking place at the same time as face-to-face learning in order to accommodate a range of requirements and preferences.

Results from the survey also highlighted a number of policies and/or initiatives put in place by colleges and universities during Covid-19 that have benefitted disabled students. As an example, the flexibility introduced around the assessment process, including greater and more equitable access to mitigating circumstances has been widely welcomed. Additionally, the option to undertake open-book examinations over a 24-hour period is regarded as a positive development, and students felt as if this helped them to meet learning outcomes in a more inclusive and comfortable environment. In addition to practical changes, disabled students also noticed a positive culture shift, in that they noted a greater understanding and empathy from college or university staff towards their disability, and especially towards mental health and wellbeing. However, while there have been tangible benefits – particularly around greater flexibility and choice – it also exposed a real risk of introducing blanket policies that are intended to benefit all students. Some disabled students reported that by using open-book examinations, their reasonable adjustments (such as rest breaks) were limited or removed altogether and thus placing disabled students on the same level as their non-disabled peers.

Issues such as deteriorating mental health were also heightened by Covid-19, and while an evident concern in itself, was also significantly compounding other aspects of the student experience. As an example, students acknowledged that while they felt concerned about access to future employment, due to experiencing setbacks in their education over the past year (such as opportunities to gain work experience), their mental health was also a factor as they felt unable to complete applications. Poor mental health also contributed to the transition experience, and in particular for disabled students entering higher education for the first time who felt as if their vision of higher education did not meet their expectations.

In August 2021, the DSC will be conducting further, qualitative research with groups of disabled students who partook in the survey to understand their unique experiences in more detail, and to understand the intersections across different student groups where possible. Ahead of this additional research, the following recommendations should be considered by colleges and universities as a first port-of-call, as they plan what a blended HE environment might look like for disabled students ahead of the new academic year:

- + Manage the expectations of disabled students transitioning into college or university for the first time, by providing clear and concise information, advice and guidance around what may be different as a result of ongoing restrictions related to Covid-19, and how this might affect areas such as the timing of DSA payments and the implementation of reasonable adjustments. Colleges and universities should also consider implementing the following:
  - virtual campus tours or accessibility guides where possible, so that disabled students who are unable to attend face-to-face ahead of commencing their studies are provided with an opportunity to understand and plan their navigation around buildings, and to become acquainted with disability support services
  - provide a timetable mapping out when reasonable adjustments (if required) are expected to be implemented, and what actions prospective students need to take to be able to commence their studies on time with support in place
  - offer interim support and adjustments and/or loan equipment if a disabled student is known to experience delays to their DSA payment.
- + In any potential rush to return to face-to-face learning, maintain the remote learning infrastructure that has benefitted many disabled students during Covid-19. Keep in mind that the experiences of remote learning differ by impairment type, and that therefore multiple learning options (ie asynchronous learning) should continue where possible.
- + Consider offering a choice of alternative assessment options for all students, but do so in a way that does not disadvantage disabled students (ie ensure that rest breaks are not removed for disabled students within open-book examinations). Ensure disabled students are regularly consulted if implementing any long-term policy change.

- + Ensure disabled students are made aware of disability-specific careers advice, and provide information to disabled students in how to obtain reasonable adjustments within the workplace, such as the ability to work from home.
- + To support those experiencing poor mental health as a result of Covid-19, colleges and universities should continue to promote the adoption of healthy behaviours, such as sleep and exercise, and ensure mental health and wellbeing services continue to be accessible even if on a remote basis. Be aware that poor mental health may also compound other aspects of the student lifecycle and experience, such as an ability to prepare for employment.
- + Colleges and universities must be respectful and accommodating to disabled students who feel nervous about returning to campus, especially those who have been shielding. Where possible, address anxieties of students returning to campus in advance of the commencement of their course, and consult on any concerns specific to impairment type.

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