Open University Students Association submission

Higher Education Commission: Disabled Students Inquiry

Executive summary

- Disabled Students at the Open University experience significant challenges negotiating the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) and student loan application processes.
- Delays in provision of DSA have presented barriers to disabled students from engaging with their courses at the university, and even led to students suspending their studies or dropping out altogether.
- Provision of alternative formats for learning is reported as both a problem and an area of good practice by Open University students, depending on individual experiences with different lecturers/tutors.
- The Open University was seen as providing excellent support in relation to taking into consideration disabled students’ individual circumstances when they are sitting exams to ensure they have appropriate conditions to succeed.
- The OU Students Association and the Open University work well together with the sometimes-limited resources available to support the disabled student experience.
- Elected student representatives have good relationships across the Open University and are listened to by University leadership.
- However, the Open University has a unique challenge, with a disabled student population larger than most other universities’ entire student bodies. As such, there are challenges around taking whole-institution approaches to providing support.
- There is a lack of understanding from policy-makers and regulators of the experiences and challenges faced by disabled students in a distance-learning context.
- A more extensive evidence-base is required by government and regulators to be able to put in place support that opens up the HE sector to disabled students rather than providing reactive solutions that often cause delays and a negative experience.

1 Introduction to the Open University Students Association and the Disabled Students it represents

1.1 The Open University Students Association, much like any other Student Union, aims to help students make the most of their time as students with the Open University, using the student voice to enhance the student experience, contributing to better outcomes, and promoting the interests of its students both within the University and in the external environment.

1.2 The Open University Students Association is run by students, for students and is supported by a staff team based at the Open University campus in Milton Keynes. The direction of the Students Association is determined by the Central Executive Committee (CEC), which is made up of elected student representatives, including a President, Deputy President, several Vice Presidents with varying portfolios, area/Nation and faculty representatives, and a Student member of the University’s governing body, the Council.

1.3 There are over 174,000 students registered with the Open University (2019 figures), making it almost four-times larger than the next largest UK university. There are over 27,000 known disabled students studying at the Open University (2020 figures), which is more than many UK universities’ entire student bodies. The majority of students are studying part-time and at distance across the 4
Nations of the UK and in continental Europe. There are OU students in 90% of UK postal districts. All OU students are automatically our members.

1.4 The purpose of this response is to provide evidence-based insights into the experience of disabled students in a distance-learning context, of which the Open University is an industry leader.

2 Methodology

2.1 The evidence that provides the basis for this response is drawn from disabled students at the Open University and a number of the elected student representatives, as well as Open University Students Association staff.

2.2 Participants were asked to complete online surveys containing some of the questions set out in the call for evidence.

3 Answering the questions set out in the call for evidence

3.1 Key challenges facing disabled students in terms of receiving support in Higher Education

3.1.1 Disabled students identified several key challenges in relation to receiving support in higher education. These can be separated into external factors, including processes around applying for support and funding, and internal factors, which pertain to systems and processes in place within the Open University.

3.1.2 The most common external challenge facing disabled students related to accessing Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). A number of students found the process of having to complete the DSA application every year when their circumstances had not changed to be distressing and felt that there should be a way around this. Additionally, DSA support is often not provided in a timely fashion, meaning that some disabled students are unable to obtain specialist equipment that they are relying on to engage with their courses.

“Having to fill in a DSA form every year. If nothing has changed then should continue.” – Open University Student

3.1.3 Access to funding, specifically student loans, was also raised as an external issue for disabled students. It was felt that disabled students are not treated fairly by the Student Loans Company, with additional requests made for evidence of disabilities and little or no additional time to fulfil requirements. Some students described feeling discriminated against or excluded from the process.

“Having to prove you are unable to attend a brick university due to disabilities so apply to Open University for long distance learning but struggle to get full funding i.e. course or a maintenance loan, which feels like discrimination.” – Open University Student

3.1.4 The challenge most regularly mentioned by disabled students regarding internal university processes relates to the provision of alternative formats for course content delivery. It was often the case that alternative learning materials requested at the outset arrived months into a module, leaving the student significantly behind other students. It was not clear from responses whether there is a known cause of this delay or what support is available to lecturers and tutors in this area.

“Accessing correct alternative formats in a timely manner. Ideally before the module has started...” – Open University Student

3.1.5 Provision of bespoke and ongoing support was another challenge raised in an internal university context, with disabled students highlighting that it can often be the case that they
experience multiple and varied issues around their disabilities, thereby making ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches to providing support throughout study not always adequate. There was, however, understanding that it is a very difficult problem to overcome given the volume of disabled students at the Open University.

3.2 Examples of good practice in relation to support that disabled students receive from the Open University

3.2.1 Interestingly, despite provision of alternative learning formats being one of the key challenges that disabled students face, it is also raised by other students as an example of good practice, with experiences of proactive engagement by University staff to offer support and provision of learning materials. This demonstrates that there are very different experiences of this issue across the university, which is something that our elected representatives have raised and are working with University staff to hopefully resolve the issues. It is an ongoing process, but the problem is better understood than it was and there is senior level buy-in to change it.

“When I first reported my disability I had a phone call from someone who was very helpful and understanding. Offered me comb bound books which were sent straight away and sent links for things which might be useful.” – Open University Student

3.2.2 Exam arrangements at the Open University were also raised by disabled students as an area of particularly good practice. Individual circumstances are considered and arrangements are made to accommodate them to ensure that everyone has the environment, allowances and provisions to make sure that each student has the opportunity to maximise their achievements. Disabled students reported feeling “listened to” in relation to this process.

“My best example would be the exam arrangements - my experience there has been very positive. The approach is effective because the approach is individual and I felt listened to.” – Open University Student

3.2.3 Student profiles were seen as a very positive way of ensuring that all tutors that disabled students come into contact with obtain knowledge and understanding of their conditions and individual requirements. These profiles are compiled by the University based on information provided by the student, and, unlike the DSA application process (paragraph 3.1.2), they do not need to be updated unless there is a change in circumstances. Although it was noted that sometimes tutors need to be encouraged to access the information, disabled students very much approved of the process.

3.2.4 The University’s Student Support Teams and Disabled Student Services were mentioned as examples of good practice by disabled students, with reports of individuals in those teams “taking ownership” of issues to try to get them resolved, rather than passing the student to various other departments within the university.

“When a member of [Student Support Team] staff takes ownership of a query, so finds the answer to relay to the student or passes them on to the correct member of staff. This stops a student being pushed from pillar to post, some students cannot cope with this and give up or if nobody takes ownership of getting the answer.” – Elected Student Representative

3.2.5 Peer support that exists in online forums, including the Disabled Students Group (DSG), which is facilitated and supported by the Students Association, was also seen as very helpful to disabled students, who are able to receive advice from other students who have experience of navigating the challenges presented by both the internal and external environments.
3.3 Views on existing regulations and legislation regarding disabled students’ rights in education

3.3.1 One view arising from the elected student representative body was that if issues with retention, integration, inclusion and support are still occurring and if any of them are on the rise, then that is evidence that existing regulations and legislation are insufficient and need to be reworked.

3.3.2 Another viewpoint from the student body was that the issue is more around the need to educate higher education providers about what is required in ensuring disabled students can access courses, support, and other services the provider has to offer, especially in a distance-learning context. This could be the responsibility of a regulating body.

3.3.3 Although the Equalities Act 2010 legislates that HE providers should not treat disabled students ‘unfavourably’ and that reasonable adjustments should be provided to avoid discrimination, the ability of HE providers to meet these requirements may be undermined by inadequate funding and resources.

3.4 Monitoring the support and provision for disabled students in HE

3.4.1 It was felt that there is a lack of understanding of the experience of disabled Open University students, with much of the focus of support and provision on students attending ‘brick and mortar’ institutions, leaving those in distance learning settings feeling marginalised. Disabled students studying at the Open University have a great deal to contribute in terms of understanding support requirements and processes.

3.5 OU Students Association resourcing to respond to different levels of demand from year to year

3.5.1 The Open University Students Association’s funding model is focused around a subvention process with the Open University. This involves a negotiation with the University in order to obtain funding and obviously takes place in the context of the Open University’s financial position.

3.5.2 In the context of the large number of disabled students at the Open University and therefore the number of disabled students that the OU Students Association represents, it was felt that both the OU and the Students Association do well in challenging circumstances.

“I think that we do well with the resources at our disposal. I think the communication between us and the University should be better, again we already do well but it can always be better. With a constantly changing cohort I feel it is always going to be a challenge but one we should always try to rise to.” – Elected Student Representative

3.5.3 Elected student representatives pointed out that disabled students are often more expensive to accommodate on campus, with transport, accommodation, learning formats and more needing to be considered (although the Open University operates in a predominantly distance-learning format, students still sometimes need to attend the campus for events, student consultations, exams, conferences, and to provide the student voice as representatives across the University’s academic governance structure). Both the Open University and the Students Association were felt to struggle at times to be properly resourced in this way. But this was seen to be due to inadequate funding from government to provide appropriate resources for disabled student population that has grown substantially in the last decade.

3.5.4 Additionally, it is worth noting that despite being likely to be one of the most visited parts of the Open University by disabled students, disabled access to the Open University Students Association is hampered by its location in one of the older buildings on the Milton Keynes campus.
3.6 Influencing the University’s wider institutional policies relating to support for disabled students

3.6.1 Elected student representatives highlighted positive relationships that they have with staff across the university and reported feeling able to have important conversation with people in positions to make changes.

“Fortunately the OU staff I talk to will try to make changes if they can. I think across the board student reps have the ears of many in the OU and can make a difference if the staff we talk to want to make the changes.” – Elected Student Representative

3.6.2 However, there was also a feeling that the overall financial context was sometimes a barrier to delivering substantial changes.

3.7 Successes and barriers in taking a whole-institution (joined-up) approach to supporting disabled students

3.7.1 The issue around provision of alternative learning format was raised as the main example of departments and processes not being joined-up to create a positive experience for disabled students. It was reported by those who had bad experiences that it often took multiple phone calls to different departments to resolve the issue.

3.7.2 Whereas for those who had a good experience of receiving alternative formats, it was a great example of how processes can be designed to work across departments and create a positive learning experience for disabled students.

3.7.2 Furthermore, it was noted that mental health support was not always consistent across Faculty areas, with some faculties offering more support than others to students suffering mental ill health.

3.8 Reasons behind disabled students suspending their studies or dropping out of higher education altogether

3.8.1 Several disabled students said that either they, or other disabled students they knew, had suspended their studies at some point or dropped out of higher education altogether.

3.8.2 ‘Falling behind’ was given as the main reason for this, with some students mentioning the delay in receiving alternative formats as a cause and others mentioning delays in DSA support being delivered.

“I know students that have had to drop out or defer their studies because of falling to far behind waiting for DSA equipment or alternative formats.” – Open University Student

3.8.3 Other students mentioned issues in their personal lives related to their disabilities becoming barriers to their continued engagement with their course.

3.8.4 Resource permitting, proactively contacting disabled students who have fallen behind in their studies was raised as a way that the University could improve retention rates and outcomes for disabled students.

3.9 Are you concerned about the level of administrative work disabled students are required to undertake to access the support and adjustments they need at the OU? How could this be improved?
3.9.1 The majority of disabled students felt that the level administration required within the Open University was appropriate and understandable.

3.9.2 A number of disabled students mentioned that in order to ensure they got the support and adjustments they required from the University, a certain level of additional administration was expected and reasonable.

“I understand that, in order to get the individual support needed, there needs to be information provided.” – Open University Student

“There is only administrative work required at the start of studying with the Open University. I did not find it excessive and was easy to fill in.” – Open University Student

3.9.3 Some students highlighted difficulties in obtaining the requisite evidence from their GPs in order to provide it to the university as a barrier presented by additional administration.

“...you have to jump through hoops to try and gain evidence and also pay for this from GP’s, which is almost impossible to get appointments at the best of times.” – Open University Student

3.9.4 Furthermore, a number of disabled students felt that the administration required in order to apply for DSA and student finance was much more of a barrier to engaging with their course.

3.9.5 A particular challenge in relation to administration raised by one student highlighted the difficulty dyslexic students have in completing the variety of forms required to receive additional support.

“As someone who is Dyslexic, forms can be a nightmare. Longer times to fill them in is beneficial. Or to have the option to save and return at a later date.” – Open University Student

3.10 Policy recommendations for government or regulators to improve disabled students' experiences of higher education

3.10.1 A major issue raised by a number of the Open University's disabled students was that the process of applying for DSA is so long that it is often not concluded until course modules are well underway, sometimes causing disabled students to fall behind. With this in mind, several students suggested that the process either be made shorter, or to be able to apply at an earlier date in order to ensure the process is complete before modules begin.

“I think you should be able to apply for DSA sooner than you can as in experience your studies have started for quite a while before DSA entitlement is approved.” – Open University Student

Recommendation: Streamline the DSA process to make it quicker for applicants. Additionally, provide more time for the process to be completed, and create a mechanism for disabled students whose circumstances haven’t changed to avoid having to go through the entire application process again

3.10.2 A suggestion from an elected student representative was that universities who cater for a higher number of disabled students should receive government funding based on those numbers in order to enable the university to provide appropriate support.
“…fund institutions properly based on the numbers and types of students with disabilities they have.” – Elected Student Representative

Recommendation: The government should consider the additional financial burden placed on universities with higher proportions of disabled students and provide additional funding so that universities can provide high-quality support and improve outcomes for disabled students.

3.10.3 An additional recommendation was that policy-makers and regulators should be better educated in relation to what good practice looks like in providing support for disabled students, including, importantly, in a distance-learning context so that they can be more effective in holding HE institutions to account and better understand the challenges both students and HE providers face.

“Ensure that the government and anyone involved in HE understands the needs of OU students and how they differ from students attending brick universities.” – Elected Student Representative

Recommendation: Ensure understanding across regulatory bodies and government departments of the different challenges disabled students experience in a distance-learning context, as well as building a comprehensive idea of what good practice looks like for distance-learning HE providers.

3.10.4 A point arising from comments from a number of students is that there is sometimes an implied assumption that all disabilities are experienced the same by disabled students and therefore by HE providers and providers of support. Some students highlighted that many disabled students have more than one disability or health concern, and not all disabilities are visible or obvious to others, so legislation and regulation should reflect this complexity in the way that it operates and talks about disabled students.

3.10.5 A more extensive evidence-base is required by government and regulators to be able to put in place support that opens up the HE sector to disabled students rather than providing reactive solutions that often cause delays and a negative experience, leading some disabled students to feel as though they are an ‘after-thought’.

Recommendation: Government, regulating bodies, universities, and students associations/guilds/unions should work together to create a culture that prioritises inclusivity in HE to achieve the best experiences and outcomes for all disabled students.

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