

Disabled Student Commitment Advisory Group (DSC) – Written evidence (YDP0038)

The transition from education to employment for young disabled people: evidence submission

Introduction

This is a submission to the House of Lords inquiry launch into 'The transition from education to employment for young disabled people'. The submission is founded on the work of the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC).

Background to the DSC

Over the last few years there have been two important initiatives in place to support enhancing the disabled student experience in higher education (HE), namely:

- The Disabled Student Commission (DSC)
- Universities Disability Access Ambassador (DAA)

The DSC was established by the Universities Minister (The Rt Hon Chris Skidmore MP) in July 2019 through the appointment of Professor Geoff Layer (then Vice Chancellor at the University of Wolverhampton) as its chair. Eight lay commissioners including two disabled students were appointed through a public appointments process managed by the Office for Students (OfS). A secretariat was funded by the OfS and after a competitive tender process, Advance HE were selected.

The DSC's Terms of Reference described it as an independent body within the system to challenge the sector to enhance the disabled student experience in HE. It began its work in March 2020, days before the first lockdown which significantly impacted on its plans.

The DSC was funded for a period of three years until March 2023, after which the OfS decided to establish a committee of its Board to take its work forward.

Additionally, Geoff Layer was appointed as the Universities DAA in 2021 and for the period of the DSC ran the two strands together to maximise efficiency and impact.

The DSC's activity

In agreement with commissioners, the DSC adopted a student lifecycle model to seek to influence change with regular publications and guidance focussed on areas such as access to HE, the student experience and the transition to employment.

For its three convening years, the DSC worked in consultation with disabled students, sector bodies, third sector organisations, practitioners, universities and colleges. Through several research and consultation exercises – mostly in a remote format - the DSC was able to listen very carefully to the feedback it received, and translated this into particular recommendations and guidance to the sector, its bodies and for disabled students. It successfully influenced changes in approach within sector bodies and organisations such as UCAS, OIA and QAA to seek to create a more inclusive sector for all. It also fed directly into the planning of initiatives such as DWP's Access to Work Adjustment Passport.

Published in June 2023, the OfS commissioned an independent high-level evaluation of the DSC which reported favourably on its work and impact. The evaluation report can be accessed [here](#).

The DSC's publications and guidance, including its three annual reports, can be downloaded from Advance HE's [landing page](#) for the DSC. Of key relevance to this call for evidence are the results of the DSC's survey of disabled students that was published in 2021. The survey was completed by 473 disabled student respondents. On the topic of the transition from higher education to employment, key findings suggested:

- Concern about entering an increasingly competitive job market, with one respondent commenting: "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."
- Limited access to work experience opportunities/placements during Covid-19, with one respondent commenting: "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."
- Deterioration in mental health directly affecting disabled students' capacity to apply for jobs or confidence in entering the workplace
- Disabled students requesting more information, advice and guidance around workplace discrimination, adjustments in interviews and in the workplace

- Only 7.9% of respondents reported being aware of disability-specific careers advice within their higher education provider, despite 77.2% of careers services reporting to offer this service (AGCAS, 2019).

In addition to this research, other activities highlighted the challenges faced by disabled students transitioning to employment. For example, by recognising or accrediting courses taught at higher education providers, Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) create a route into particular professions. However, when commissioners from the DSC surveyed representatives at the PSRB Forum in December 2020, many reported either that they did not publish advice for disabled students on fitness to practice, or were unsure if they published advice. Furthermore, a significant proportion of PSRB representatives were unsure how they supported disabled students with respect to reasonable adjustments.

The Disabled Student Commitment

In April 2023 the DSC published its keystone report: a final challenge to the sector in the form of the [Disabled Student Commitment](#) (the Commitment). Sector bodies, universities and colleges have been called upon to formally adopt the Commitment to secure an enhanced and improved experience for disabled students within HE. The Commitment also calls upon the OfS and the Department of Education (DfE) to reflect on and communicate how they intend to keep under review support for disabled students in HE and disabled student outcomes.

The Commitment was a culmination of the research and evidence gathered since the DSC's inception in March 2020. The principles were formulated and finalised in collaboration with the sector in several phases, including roundtables and bilateral meetings with sector bodies and organisations, promotion at various conferences and events, followed by a formal consultation which was launched in October 2022.

Formal consultation responses were submitted via an online survey, which asked respondents to consider any challenges regarding the implementation of the Commitment and to ensure the language used throughout was clear and inclusive. The consultation survey received 70 responses, of which 53 were current students within HE, 18 were from individual HE providers, as well as a range of responses from Government departments, regulators, sector representative bodies, student representative organisations and third sector organisations. A summary of the formal consultation response can be accessed [here](#).

The Commitment is the most recent, definitive and direct call to action with regards to how the disabled student experience can be enhanced leading

into employment. The Commitment has been helpfully divided into the following sections:

- Requests to share information
- Choosing a course of study
- Transition into the higher education community
- On-course experience
- Moving forward (ie. into employment)

The Commitment is designed to be a self-regulatory tool, in which higher education providers and other organisations are asked to work in consultation with their disabled students to look holistically at their practices and policies to evaluate how they meet the Commitment, and then to outline within a delivery plan how they intend to enhance the disabled student experience.

On the transition to employment, the Commitment calls on higher education providers to ensure that:

- Careers and employment guidance acknowledges the barriers that may be experienced by disabled students, and emphasis and consideration are given to the positive attributes and skills that disabled students will have developed during their time at university.
- The relationships built with employers include recognition of opportunities for disabled students and graduates.
- Disability-specific support in preparation for employment and the recruitment process is provided.
- Employability activities are referenced whilst on course and embedded throughout the student life cycle.

Through a set of other recommendations, the Commitment also calls upon other institutions, such as DWP, and employer organisations to act to improve the environment for disabled students moving into employment. In addition, other sections of the Commitment set out complementary actions to support the transition to employment and overall its individual principles are designed to overlap and intersect in order to holistically disabled students' experiences across the student lifecycle.

Disabled Student Commitment ongoing work

An Advisory Group has been established to take forward the work established by the DSC, namely the Disabled Student Commitment. The first AG meeting will take place on 20 September 2023.

While the Terms of Reference will be agreed by members in the initial meeting, the Advisory Group's key focus will be to ensure that the

Commitment continues to meet the needs of disabled students and effectively supports those who are implementing it. The AG will be chaired by Professor Deborah Johnston (a former commissioner and current Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic Framework) at London South Bank University).

A clear sign-up process for the Commitment, alongside the development of a suite of tools and resources designed to support HE providers, sector bodies and other organisations to take up the Commitment are currently being scoped.

Oral evidence

The Advisory Group would be eager to provide oral evidence to the enquiry, or speak to individual members of the Committee, if possible.

21 September 2023