Disabled Students' Commission

Annual Report 2020-2021: Enhancing the disabled student experience

Report authored by Disabled Students' Commission

Contents

Glossary of Acronyms

The following table presents abbreviations and acronyms presented in the Disabled Students' Commission annual report:

Acronym	Expansion
AGCAS	Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. An expert membership organisation for higher education student career development and graduate employment professionals.
ASR	Automatic Speech Recognition
BSL	British Sign Language
DfE	Department of Education
DSA	Disabled Students' Allowance
DSC	Disabled Students' Commission
DSSLG	Disabled Students' Sector Leadership Group
EHC	Education, Health and Care Plan
HEC	Higher Education Commission
HELOA	Higher Education Liaison Officers Association. Professional association of staff in higher education who work in student recruitment, outreach, marketing and admissions
HEP	Higher Education Provider
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics' Agency
NADP	National Association of Disability Practitioners
OfS	The Office for Students
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
PSRB	Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SLC	Student Loans Company
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UUK	Universities UK

About the Disabled Students' Commission

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

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

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

The Commissioners were appointed through a public appointments process ran by the OfS, which comprises:

+ Geoff Layer (Chair) – Vice-Chancellor, University of Wolverhampton

+ Chris Millward (Commissioner) – Director for Fair Access and Participation, OfS

+ Susan Daniels (Commissioner) – Chief Executive, National Deaf Children's Society

+ Sarah Greer (Commissioner) – Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost, University of Worcester

+ Patrick Johnson (Commissioner) – Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, University of Law

+ Deborah Johnston (Commissioner) – Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education), London South Bank University

+ Piers Wilkinson (Student Voice Commissioner) – Disability Adviser and Consultant

+ Sean Cullen (Student Voice Commissioner) – Disability Officer, Brunel University

+ Dr Sam Parrett (Further Education Adviser) – CEO, London and South East Education Group

Further information about the DSC, its Terms of Reference and its work can be found on Advance HE's website. Information about the Chair and Commissioners can be found in appendix two.

Foreword

The Commission has just completed its first calendar year since its conception and, to mark this milestone, we are releasing our first Annual Report: Enhancing the disabled student experience. This report looks back at what the Commission has achieved in its first year as well as setting out the ambition for the forthcoming year. It is the first of the annual reports that will continue to be published at the end of each of the three scheduled years of the Commission.

In this, the first year of the Disabled Students' Commission, we set out an agenda which is to work with the higher education (HE) sector to promote change, removing barriers for learners and to empower the disabled student experience, enabling them to thrive.

Our agreed approach was to organise our work-plan to follow the student lifecycle, enhancing the disabled student experience all the way from the transition from school or college, through HE and then to enter into postgraduate study or employment. This remains our approach, however the unprecedented circumstances presented by the pandemic meant that we needed to refocus our attention for a time on the immediate challenges that the pandemic has had on the disabled student experience and access to higher education.

Disabled students already face significant challenges during their higher education experience. The impact of the pandemic meant that 2019/20 was arguably the most difficult year that all students have experienced, with the radical and fast-paced changes that were necessitated within the sector by Covid-19. However, many of the challenges and restrictions were even more pronounced for disabled students and so, as a Commission, it became apparent that we had a role to play in supporting these students through the difficult time.

In doing this, we worked with a number of key sector agencies in order to develop a series of recommendations and guidance for higher education providers and sector bodies, and we also produced a guide for students themselves to help them to ask the right questions and seek the appropriate support in making their decisions on where to study.

In looking ahead to 2021, the Commission will return its attention to the student life cycle based work-plan, though of course the current changeable nature of policy in higher education due to Covid-19 will continue to underscore our work. We will continue to work closely with the important sector agencies that will be instrumental in transforming the experience of disabled students in higher education. Crucially, we will also continue to listen to the views and feedback of disabled students, as we did during 2020, because the student voice is critical to ensure we are helping to drive the changes that are needed.

This focus will see the Commission:

+ promoting a more proactive guidance framework for disabled applicants to higher education

+ researching the experience of students through the pandemic

+ working with higher education providers, Advance HE and Jisc to enhance Blended Learning for disabled students

+ focusing on the changing employability needs of disabled students and graduates in the new world

+ working with the Student Loans Company and others to promote ease of access to the Disabled Students' Allowance.

On behalf of the Commission, thank you for reading and sharing the Disabled Students' Commission's first Annual Report.

We look forward to continuing this important work.

Professor Geoff Layer, Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission

Executive Summary

During the Disabled Students' Commission's (DSC) first meeting in March 2020, the Commissioners designed a vision statement to capture longer-term aspirations:

The Disabled Students' Commission will challenge, inform and advise the higher education sector to accelerate the pace of change regarding support for disabled students, and will influence higher education sector agencies and institutions to remove barriers to learning. Our vision is to empower disabled students' experience across all levels of study, by securing a higher education environment in which they can thrive.

Within the initial meeting of the Commissioners, it was agreed that the DSC's work-plan should follow a student lifecycle model. This would address key milestones such as the transition from school to further education (FE) and higher education (HE) settings, the application process, the student experience while at university, as well as the transition into postgraduate study or employment. However, due to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic – declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020 – it was agreed that the DSC should pause its original work-plan and urgently respond to the impact of the pandemic on disabled students.

In June 2020, the DSC ran four online roundtables with a range of participants, including disabled students, practitioners, experts, sector bodies and stakeholders, as well as those leading and implementing their HEP's response to Covid-19. Preliminary feedback and discussions between the Commissioners steered the roundtable topics, which covered: (i) clearing, (ii) blended learning, (iii) transition and induction and (iv) disabled student voice. Around 40 people participated in each roundtable, and while the DSC recognised that the roundtable methodology had its limitations in relation to robustness of the findings, it met the need to respond urgently and to uncover the initial barriers faced by disabled students in higher education as a result of the pandemic.

Across each of the roundtables, the most notable feedback provided by disabled students was that the flexibility and support they had been requesting for years (and had previously been told was not possible) had now been implemented by their provider in a short space of time as a result of the pandemic. For many disabled students the increased flexibility was widely welcomed and helped to overcome existing barriers such as attendance. However, the rapid shift from predominantly face-to-face interactions to virtual ones did not benefit all disabled students, and some reported issues with the blended learning approach and a difficulty learning online. The concerns were nuanced and often differed by impairment type, highlighting the need to not treat disabled students as a homogenous group, and to recognise that the support requirements differ in complexity.

Findings from the roundtables also noted the danger of the pandemic compounding existing issues that disabled students already faced, such as access to Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and a delay to the implementation of reasonable adjustments. Some students expressed concern that reasonable adjustments and specialist equipment would not be in

place at the start of the academic year, which would put them on unequal footing from the outset. Students and disabled student experts also highlighted several unintended consequences as a result of making campuses Covid-19 secure, such as the use of facemasks impeding on Deaf students' ability to communicate, as well as prospective disabled students unable to visit campuses during open days to check the provider meets their accessibility requirements.

To respond to these issues in more detail, the DSC published two guides for the sector and students in July 2020: Three Months to Make a Difference and a guide outlining considerations for students when applying to university in light of Covid-19. The former highlighted seven key areas for institutions and policy makers to address in regard to disabled student inclusion, and was intended to assist in the response to Covid-19 with just three months until the start of the new academic year. The latter guide similarly highlighted findings from the roundtables, and was designed as a practical toolkit for disabled students to ensure a smooth start to their higher education journey. The Commissioners organised a number of bilateral meetings with the agencies mentioned in both reports, to monitor and support the progress of their response to the recommendations.

In 2021, the DSC intends to return to its original work plan, with the impact of the pandemic continuing to underscore their work. In order to progress actions efficiently and effectively, each Commissioner has been assigned as a link to relevant sector agencies and interest groups, to progress each of the individual work strands and to challenge and influence key topic areas relating to disabled students.

As the situation with Covid-19 continues to be fast-changing, it has become markedly difficult for the higher education sector to decide on the best course of action with regards to policy and decision-making. However, the recommendations to the sector outlined in Three Months to Make a Difference remain relevant. Noting the consistency in disabled students' support needs helps to alleviate this concern and also makes space for moving forward.

The DSC will continue to revisit the recommendations made in Three Months to Make a Difference, and will also consider the following; to ensure its ongoing work captures a range of viewpoints and to ensure the disabled student voice is not homogenised. These recommendations can also be applied to the higher education sector more widely.

Considerations for future research with disabled students

+ While the pandemic has brought a number of advantages to disabled students, it hasn't benefited all. Ensure disabled students are not treated as a homogenous group when developing policy responses to Covid-19, and consider all impairment types (including those with multiple and complex conditions) when assessing its impact.

+ Consider how disability intersects with students' other identify characteristics, such as race (including nationality and ethnicity) and gender. As the Equality Act makes explicit reference to the duty of authorities to take regard of inequalities of outcome that result from socio-economic disadvantage, it is also important to consider evidence and data related to social background.

+ Increased consultation with disabled students (from all levels of study, including undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD students) is required to understand the variety and nuance in experiences. It is important for this consultation to also consider those entering higher education from non-traditional routes, such as apprenticeships and skills-based programmes.

+ Further primary research is required to bring to life the lived dimension of barriers to disabled students. The DSC will encourage and support the involvement of disabled students in research activities, to centre their voice and identify knowledge gaps.

1. Introduction

1.1 Disabled Students' Commission overview

The DSC's first quarterly meeting took place in March 2020. During this meeting, the Commissioners designed a vision statement that encapsulated the aspirations of the DSC going forward:

The Disabled Students' Commission will challenge, inform and advise the higher education sector to accelerate the pace of change regarding support for disabled students, and will influence higher education sector agencies and institutions to remove barriers to learning. Our vision is to empower disabled students' experience across all levels of study, by securing a higher education environment in which they can thrive.

The Commissioners decided that the priority and overall direction of the DSC's work plan would be to follow a student life-cycle model, with a focus on key milestones such as the application and admissions process, the student experience while at university, and finally the transition into further study or employment.

It was agreed that while there was a notable degree awarding gap[1] between disabled first degree undergraduate qualifiers and non-disabled qualifiers in 2018/19 (75.2% compared with 76.7%)[2], it was not so pronounced that it merited becoming the sole focus of the DSC's work plan. Instead, emphasis would be placed on improving and enhancing the disabled student experience, which in itself should lead to a narrowing of that gap.

In discussing how to approach the life cycle model it was agreed that while not necessarily in chronological order, each quarterly meeting would focus on a separate milestone, as the issues associated with disability evolved and changed along the life cycle.

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[1] The degree awarding gap is calculated as the following: (percentage of non-disabled qualifiers receiving a first/2:1) – (percentage of disabled qualifiers receiving a first/2:1)

[2] Source: Equality in higher education: students statistical report 2020, Advance HE

Some of the key challenges facing disabled students highlighted by the DSC were, but not limited to:

+ disclosing a disability to your provider, and reasons for a lack of confidence in disclosing a disability

+ the support and funding available for disabled students, including Disabled Students' Allowance[3] (DSA) and its ability to support activities outside of the day-to-day learning environment (eg extra-curricular activities, course placements)

+ ensuring support plans and reasonable adjustments are in place for the start of the course, and if not, communicating how long the delay will last

+ the lack of accessible learning materials available to disabled students, as well as a limited understanding and opportunity for staff training on how to provide such materials

+ navigating day-to-day university life, such as attending social activities, prioritising health over attendance and ability to access course placements

+ information, advice and guidance for disabled students upon entry to higher education.

Due to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the priority of the DSC's work-plan in 2020 changed course, shifting from a focus on research and collecting evidence on the above topic areas, to a shorter-term Covid-19 response. The immediate priority therefore became to produce a specific set of recommendations in response to the impact of the pandemic on disabled students, ahead of the 2020/21 academic year. A full outline of the DSC's Covid-19 response is provided in Section 2.

As the DSC adjusts back to its original work-plan, the Commissioners will continue to acknowledge the impact of the pandemic on disabled students in all areas of its work. Looking forward to the longer-term ambitions for the DSC, it will also recognise the intersectionality of disabled students and the differences in impact between different student groups.

To maintain engagement with the sector while working remotely, each Commissioner has also been assigned as a liaison with individual sector agencies, and meets regularly with the sector agencies to support and influence individual policy areas relating to disabled students. A more detailed work-plan, including the responsibility of each Commissioner is outlined in appendix one.

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[3] Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) cover some of the extra study-related costs you incur due to an impairment, mental health condition, or learning difference. This is a non-repayable allowance which is in addition to other student finance. Source: www.ucas.com/finance/additional-funding/disabled-students-allowances-dsas

1.2 Disability data

To help position the DSC's annual report, Advance HE undertook supplementary analysis of the data included in the [Equality in higher education: students' statistical report 2020](#). The report aims to assist the sector in better understanding the main equality challenges for students, and directing future efforts to overcome them. Using 2018/19 data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), it focuses on key protected characteristics as well as the interplay of these characteristics. The data focuses on the whole of the UK, rather than England only.

Some of the key findings below not only serve to position the ongoing work of the DSC and the different stages of the student life-cycle, but also to identify gaps in our current knowledge and prioritise questions for future primary research:

+ Disability disclosure rates have steadily increased among students in UK higher education, rising from 5.4% in 2003/4 to 13.9% in 2018/19. Disability disclosure rates continue to be markedly higher among UK domiciled undergraduates than postgraduates. To break this down, 17.2% of first degree undergraduates, 12.6% other undergraduates, 14.2% postgraduate research students and 13.8% postgraduate taught students disclosed as disabled.

+ In 2018/19, 75.2% of disabled first degree undergraduate qualifiers received a first/2:1, representing a small increase of 0.5 percentage points since 2017/18. Nonetheless, this proportion remained smaller than the proportion of non-disabled qualifiers receiving a first/2:1 (76.7%). The proportion of disabled qualifiers who received DSA achieving a first/2:1 was larger than those not in receipt of DSA (76.1% and 74.5%, respectively).

+ Degree class attainment also varied by impairment type. For example, 77.2% of those disclosing physical impairment or mobility issues received a first/2:1, compared with 70.0% of qualifiers disclosing a social communication/autistic spectrum condition.

+ A higher proportion of disabled leavers were unemployed 15 months after qualifying than non-disabled leavers (6.1% compared with 4.7%). However, higher rates of disabled leavers were also in some form of further study than non-disabled leavers (19.1% compared with 18.3%).

+ Rates of unemployment following graduation were highest for graduates who were blind or had a serious visual impairment (7.9%) or had a physical impairment or mobility issues (7.7%). This was compared to 4.8% for graduates with a specific learning disability, a social communication/Autistic spectrum condition, or no known disability.

1.3   Secondary literature review – literature focused on Covid-19

Literature published since the onset of the pandemic, declared by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020, differs greatly in terms of discourse and recommendations relating to disabled students have increased in urgency. Now in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, much of the literature is focused on how best to minimise the adverse impact on disabled students, and how to support them most effectively through this time.

This includes a report published by the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) in May 2020: 'Covid-19: Disabled Students in Higher Education: Student Concerns and Institutional Challenges' discussing the additional challenges faced by disabled students. The report compiled good practice developed within higher education institutions, and highlighted areas where more work needed to be undertaken urgently. Good practice was gathered using an interactive Jisc email forum, which NADP introduced as a support network for its members. NADP also used this forum to ask for more information on any policy changes, as well as requesting institutional case studies.

NADP highlighted the concerns of disability practitioners including the rapid shift to working from home and the associated equipment concerns for disabled students. Other issues included digital poverty and access to online learning, which was especially limited for disabled students from lower income families, as well as disabled students who were reporting difficulties in getting their DSA-funded computer equipment repaired. The report also presented the issues associated with the shift to asynchronous learning, which benefitted many disabled students as it allowed them to study more flexibly. However, the benefits were not universal and many of the concerns and complaints reports were related to specific impairment types. Finally, the report explored the issues faced by disabled students applying to university for the first time, and the difficulty they experienced organising DSA on a remote basis as doctors and consultants were less available to assist with medical diagnoses and provision of evidence.

While the report concluded that larger institutions benefitted from networking and sharing of good practice during the pandemic, smaller and more specialist institutions struggled to keep abreast of the necessary changes as they had less experience at supporting disabled students.

The DSC will continue to work with interest groups such as NADP and ensure that all provider types, including small and specialist institutions are considered in any guidance on supporting disabled students.

The role of online learning, teaching and assessment will no doubt continue to attract interest as providers have moved to a predominantly blended learning model in response to Covid-19 restrictions. In June 2020, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published 'Building a Taxonomy for Digital Learning', which defined and assessed the most common terms that providers use to describe the ways in which they and their students engage with digital teaching and learning, and with a hope to streamline terminology used across the sector. Areas included within the taxonomy include the various digital learning experiences

(ie passive, augmented), as well as a glossary of umbrella terms in this topic area. The DSC will use this taxonomy within their own work to minimise confusion for both staff and students, and wider sector work on this topic.

A briefing note published by the Office for Students (OfS) in June 2020 on coronavirus and disabled students also included a significant section on teaching and learning. Like the NADP report, it highlighted the benefits for students who previously experienced barriers to accessing traditional face-to-face modes of delivery. It mentioned that in order for disabled students to continue to benefit from digital teaching and learning, then increased attention must be paid to digital accessibility to ensure that resources can be used by all students.

This recommendation was similar to those presented in a report on the role of online learning, teaching and assessment published by Jisc in November 2020. Their report 'Learning and teaching reimagined: A new dawn for higher education?' explored the 2020 experience as well as the changing aspirations of the nature and shape of learning and teaching for the future. The research involved engagement from more than 1,000 sector leaders, staff and students through webinars, roundtables, consultations, focus groups, surveys, interviews and case studies.

It highlighted the need to design courses with inclusivity in mind 'to avoid the potential for adverse impacts of online learning on disadvantaged groups' and to ensure students are closely involved in all aspects from design to delivery. The research noted an increase in lecturer confidence in using digital technology to deliver online learning and teaching between March 2020 and the start of the academic year 2020/21, from 49% to 74%, but recommended that ongoing training and staff development was required. The role of inclusive design and how this fits into the Social Model of disability was previously explored in the DSSLG Guidance published in 2017, Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence.

Finally, in October 2020 Policy Connect and the Higher Education Commission (HEC) published their report 'Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all'. The DSC welcomed the findings of the report, as the issues and challenges were consistent with its own work to date, and highlighted the need to improve access to higher education and the experience of disabled students. While the HEC's inquiry took place prior to the pandemic, the DSC will use the findings to progress with plans to inform and advise HEPs. To gather evidence for this inquiry, the HEC held two roundtable evidence sessions with small groups of disabled students, as well as running an online survey for disabled students in the UK, which received 513 responses. The DSC intend to take a similar approach by amplifying the voices of disabled students within future research.

As illustrated, there is a breadth of important published research relating to the impact of the pandemic on disabled students in key areas such as DSA funding, online teaching and learning and the student experience. As per the DSC's future ambitions, outlined in Section 4, evaluation and reflection on the experiences of disabled students following the first semester and following up on the recommendations made in our own report, Three Months to Make a Difference, will be key to understand the true extent of the pandemic's impact and

how best to support all disabled students in a post-Covid world. This includes focusing on the impact on the economy, which would indicate that graduate employment will be more difficult for the class graduating in 2020, and therefore investigating the barriers faced by disabled graduates as time progresses.

2. The response to Covid-19

2.1 Summary of DSC activity

Due to the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic that first affected England in early 2020, the application and student experience rapidly changed from predominantly face-to-face to remote interactions. While this may have been a benefit to some disabled students, the shift may have also compounded or brought new barriers to participation given the speed that the pandemic necessitated, which differed by impairment type.

The DSC agreed that there would likely be profound effects for disabled students as a result of the pandemic, as the delivery of teaching, learning and assessment would be heavily impacted. It was decided that rapid research was required to understand the challenges disabled students were facing as a result of the change in delivery, and that these challenges needed to be considered and acted upon in HEPs' longer-term response.

The Commissioners therefore anticipated some of the challenges disabled students may face as a result of the pandemic and consequent shift to remote interactions:

+ **Social isolation:** Peer and HEP support are key to ensuring all students feel a sense of belonging. Some disabled students may feel more connected with the move to online learning. However, isolation could be particularly prevalent for those who cannot participate or encounter barriers to online learning and social activities.

+ **Moving from face-to-face to remote learning:** With a rapid shift to online learning, digital accessibility and tools available to access learning materials may vary, especially if teaching staff are untrained.

+ **Blended learning 2020/21:** With HEPs planning to move to a blended-learning delivery model for the 2020/21 academic year, it will be essential that HEPs consider the inclusion of disabled students, and especially those who are shielding, within teaching, work placements and assessments.

+ **Remote and virtual student support:** The implementation of reasonable adjustments and 'learning agreements' need to be appropriate and effective in the current learning context, as there is a danger that the provision of student support at provider-level will become strained.

+ **IT/internet accessibility issues:** Concerns around internet access and 'digital poverty' will be particularly pertinent for disabled students (and especially those from lower income households), as they may not have the means to run the hardware required for assistive technology at home.

+ **Wellbeing support and hardship funds:** Mental health challenges may increase or be compounded as a result of the pandemic, particularly for students with pre-existing mental health conditions. Increased numbers of disabled students may also need access to hardship funds.

+ **Changes to assessment:** HEPs need to consider appropriate reasonable adjustments if making changes to their assessment methods, such as online examinations, and ensure these are applied consistently across different modules and courses.

+ **Applicant decision making during the Clearing process:** Disabled applicants, both undergraduate and postgraduate, may not have the opportunity to conduct physical visits to campuses and therefore will not have an opportunity to check whether it will meet their accessibility requirements and day-to-day needs. HEPs will need to consider how to best communicate sufficient information on accessibility and the range of facilities available to help inform a student's choice of university.

+ **Access to Disabled Students' Allowance:** DSA assessments may need to be conducted remotely, which may present barriers to ensuring the allocated allowance is correct, but also for ensuring support plans are implemented in advance of a course starting.

+ **Transition and induction processes at the beginning of a new academic year:** As induction will likely be delivered remotely, HEPs need to ensure that reasonable adjustments are put in place. With regards to the transition, the provision in disability support is also likely to differ between a school-setting and university-setting.

In order to create an evidence-base, and to provide advice and recommendations on the above topic areas, the DSC decided to run a number of online roundtable events to engage a variety of key participants. Disabled students, practitioners, experts, sector bodies and stakeholders, as well as those leading and implementing their HEP's response to Covid-19, were all invited to share their views and to identify the most significant challenges.

2.1.1   Roundtable methodology

The roundtables were facilitated over Zoom by Advance HE in June 2020. Each session lasted two hours and covered the following topic areas:

+ **clearing and disabled students:** Disabled students' applicant decision-making and support through the Clearing process, including adjustments to be made, information, advice and guidance and Clearing open days

+ **blended learning and disabled students:** The implications of the shift to blended learning, and what this means for inclusive learning and assessment

+ **disabled student transition and induction 2020/21:** The implications of transitioning both into HE from a school/FE environment and between the different years of study, as well as changes to the induction experience

+ **disabled student voice:** To centre the student voice on the topics of Clearing, blended learning, and transition and induction.

A maximum of 40 people participated in each of the roundtables, to ensure everyone could contribute and a range of views could be captured. To support and encourage inclusive participation, a Speech to Text Reporter was available for d/Deaf and lip-reading participants, as well as a sign-language interpreter whose video was pinned to the main screen. The overall session was moderated by a Commissioner who took the role of Chair. Participants were invited to contribute to an initial plenary discussion, followed by 'breakout rooms' of up to ten people, to allow participants to share their viewpoints in a smaller, more manageable environment, with an additional facilitating Commissioner.

The DSC has taken into account the potential limitations with the roundtable methodology, most notably the generalisability and representativeness of the views presented. Although the short time frame in which the roundtables were organised meant that we could not present a balanced and representative account of all disabled students, we strived to recruit students from across all levels of study and with a range of impairment types. Ultimately, the methodology was suitable to meet the urgency of response required in light of the pandemic and provided a useful and timely starting point to help understand the challenges created by the pandemic.

A broad set of questions were asked in each roundtable, made specific to the relevant theme:

+ What are the key lessons learned since the onset of the pandemic?

+ What measures and adjustments have been introduced and/or planned by your organisation to support disabled students, and have these measures been effective?

+ What is your organisations longer-term response?

Findings that emerged from the roundtables and any notable quotes were captured by note-takers (supported by Advance HE). The notes were inductively analysed, and formed the DSC's response for their subsequent publications in July and August 2020: Three Months to Make a Difference and Considerations for disabled students when applying to university in light of COVID-19.

2.2   Findings from the roundtables

Findings that emerged from the roundtables closely aligned with the original challenges explored by the DSC. One of the key arguments raised during the roundtable discussions was that changes that some disabled students have been requesting for years, had since been introduced within weeks. They felt positive about the level of flexibility shown by their providers during this time (despite previously being told flexibility was not possible), and hoped that this good practice would be sustainable beyond the end of the pandemic.

However, while the initiatives introduced in response to the pandemic proved to be a benefit to some disabled students, it created a significant barrier to others. For example, there were some unintended consequences as a result of making campuses Covid-19 secure without due risk and equality impact assessments, such as the barriers to communication for d/Deaf students when using face-coverings. This highlighted a need for the DSC to consult on and investigate any other unintended consequences that need to be mitigated against in relation to future policy changes.

The following two topic areas, DSA and Blended Learning, gathered the most notable findings from the roundtables:

2.2.1   Disabled Students Allowance

Across all four roundtables, disabled students noted existing frustrations with their experience of the delay in DSA assessments and payments being made, which they feared would worsen as a result of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, delays were often incurred due to the need to apply for DSA and undergo a DSA assessment, which meant that reasonable adjustments and support plans were not being implemented following the commencement of a course, at times well into the start of an academic year.

Disabled students also explained that they were compelled to complain to their HEP about this delay, but that in turn the complaints process was complicated and burdensome. It highlighted a need for providers to clearly communicate and agree a timeline of when reasonable adjustments were going to be implemented, and to be transparent if there were potential delays to ensure temporary support measures could be put in place.

2.2.2   Blended learning

The second roundtable focused on the topic of blended learning. Advance HE provided a definition for the term:

"Blended approaches use multiple methods to deliver learning by combining face-to-face interactions with online activities. The balance between the classroom elements and digitally enabled activity varies depending on the design and implementation of the learning. The flexibility inherent in this form of delivery enables staff with responsibility for teaching to rethink where and how they focus learning activity and students to develop self-directed learning skills and digital literacies"[4].

Feedback provided during this roundtable highlighted the advantages and disadvantages experienced by disabled students using blended learning, as well as the differences disabled students experienced depending on their impairment type. It was recommended by students and practitioners alike that the inclusion of both synchronous and asynchronous learning may offer disabled students the flexibility they require during Covid-19 and beyond, by empowering self-direction and giving students more control over the pace and the spaces in which they learn.

Disabled students also discussed the inconsistencies they had experienced in the quality of online learning provision across different modules and courses. As the blended learning approach is strongly based on the capability of staff to deliver it, staff who were lacking in training or awareness of the most appropriate platforms to use were less able to deliver an inclusive online experience for disabled students. The number of different platforms adopted by individual course leaders also meant disabled students were at risk of becoming overwhelmed and/or fatigued.

Illustrative examples of the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning by impairment type are presented in Table 1. The table highlights what has been working with the approach so far, what hasn't been working, and recommendations on what needs to be done differently in order to make meaningful progress.

The '*' symbol denotes supplementary information gathered from NADP's Report: Covid-19: Disabled Students in Higher Education: Student Concerns and Institutional Challenges – Wilson, Conway, Martin and Turner (2020).

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[4] www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/blended-learning

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of blended by impairment type

Impairment type (Higher Education Statistics Agency categories[5])	What is working?	What isn't working?	What needs to change beyond ensuring a consistent departmental approach, streamlining of learning tools and provision of materials in advance?
A social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder	+ no requirement to read body language in the same way as a classroom/physical setting + can take a break from the screen + it allows students to deliver a recorded presentation, rather than live.	+ risk of losing engagement. + requirement to use cameras + *the need to multitask ie Whiteboard, Q&A, chat function etc.	+ offer choice whether camera is on or off + provide information on what to expect at the beginning of the session, and how to interact when different learning tools are used + consider how students can be supported in contributing to group work.
A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety	+ suitable for those who do not feel equipped for physical interaction.	+ often rely on a structural framework for their day. Difficulty when a sense of routine no longer exists, and increased isolation + *high levels of anxiety are being reported.	+ monitor student engagement + additional pastoral support + liaising with Students' Union to provide structured social opportunities.

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[5] www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/student/datafutures/a/disability_disability

A specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D	+ able to alter font, size and colour of text to meet needs of students with dyslexia + provision of voice to text/text to voice technologies.	+ difficult to comment on 'live' information, as learning materials often require an immediate response + unable to be in dialogue with classmates and to speak ideas aloud to tutors.	+ provide materials in advance to ensure information isn't offered 'live', and offer more space for dialogue + consider providing key learning materials in a range of formats ie journals, videos + consider supporting students in using voice to text/text to voice technologies within assessment.
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	+ use of Speech to Text Reporter, sometimes easier than physical spaces with limited provision of hearing loops etc.	+ automated captions often inaccurate, with students left to decipher on top of accessing lectures and seminars + delay between delivery of session and follow up captions + students unaware of how to best use the platforms, ie to pin interpreter's video to the main screen + *difficulties reported with note-takers and BSL interpreters accessing the online learning platforms, with lecturers unaware to admit them to the webinar.	+ for Deaf students, material needs to be made accessible in sign language and not just captions + provide materials in advance to the captioners and BSL interpreters + if using automated captioning, make sure this is accurate and verified – requiring input from lecturers after delivery. This is particularly relevant for courses/modules that contain a lot of jargon and technical language + as the quality is inconsistent, providers should not move wholescale to relying on ASR captions + *consider bandwidth, microphone quality, acoustics of the room the session is being recorded in, as well as accents.

Blind and visually impaired	+ able to alter font, size and colour text to meet needs to students with a visual impairment + use of voice to text/text to voice technologies + use of screen readers and magnifiers.	+ screen readers are not compatible with all online digital tools + *late supply of learning materials means students do not have time to familiarise before session starts.	+ ensure you are being descriptive and specific about the content being presented + support students in using voice to text and text to voice technologies in assessment.

2.2.3   Publications

Informed by the findings from the roundtables, the DSC's first report - Three Months to Make a Difference - was published in July 2020. The publication was accompanied by a video, in which Geoff Layer (Chair) introduced the booklet with a sign-language interpreter. The video can be viewed here.

The booklet, which highlighted seven key areas for institutions and policy makers to address in regard to disabled student inclusion, was intended to assist in the response to Covid-19 with just three months until the start of the new academic year. Calls for improvements included within the booklet could also be considered outside the context of the pandemic.

The seven key areas of action were as follows:

+ provide disabled applicants with support and guidance that is reflective of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Clearing process

+ ensure ease of access to funding for individual level reasonable adjustment

+ ensure student support meets and considers the requirements of disabled students during the pandemic

+ consider disabled students when making university campuses and accommodation Covid-19 secure

+ facilitate disabled students' participation in welcome and induction weeks and ongoing social activities

+ ensure blended learning is delivered inclusively and its benefits are considered in long-term planning

+ embed accessibility as standard across all learning platforms and technologies.

Other longer-term considerations, such as the quantity and complexity of information that disabled students are required to provide for reasonable adjustments and provision of DSA emerged during the roundtables. The DSC outlined in the report that these would be fed into their work plan, and would identify further areas where it can support the sector in improving these issues.

A complementary publication to *Three Months to Make a Difference* was published in August 2020; Considerations for disabled students when applying to university in light of Covid-19, prepared by the DSC's Student Commissioners. The booklet was similarly informed by the roundtables run by the DSC in July 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As the pandemic meant that challenges faced by some disabled students were even more pronounced, the DSC felt it was essential that they continued to feel sufficiently informed to be able make choices about their prospective or selected higher education provider. By understanding the right questions to ask of your disability and/or wellbeing service, it helps a student to pre-empt any of the barriers they may encounter. The questions

are designed to align with individual level adjustments disabled students require, rather than the provider's duty to offer inclusive provision and reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.

As such, the booklet was designed as a practical toolkit and provided a number of important considerations for disabled applicants to help ensure a smooth start to their higher education journey.

The booklet also provided some additional considerations for those students who were applying to university via Clearing, as there would have been limited time available to understand whether the provider was able to support their requirements, especially as students were unable to attend physical open days and to experience the level of accessibility around campus.

Questions covered the following themes:

+ funding for reasonable adjustments

+ campus and accommodation

+ mental health and wellbeing

+ learning and assessment

+ welcome week, induction and ongoing social activities

+ learning platforms and technologies.

As per the DSC's work plan, outlined in appendix one, this publication will be adapted into a more general document not specific to Covid-19, which any disabled student could use to consider their university choice more broadly. It will also be a booklet supporting disabled students to ask questions about assessments and other relevant topics not explored in the first version of the publication, including undergraduate students transitioning to postgraduate level study (postgraduate taught and postgraduate research).

3. Impact of the Disabled Students' Commission's Work

Within *Three Months to Make a Difference*, the DSC included a number of recommendations for sector agencies to consider ahead of the new academic year. The DSC stated that they would work closely with the OfS, as well as checking in with the respective sector agencies to take account of their response. Each of the Commissioners has now been assigned as a 'link' to the individual sector agencies, as well as a number of interest groups, to consolidate progress made and to influence sector wide change.

The qualitative impact of the pandemic on disabled students, and how providers have supported them during this time, is something that will be explored by the DSC through primary research in 2021. This in turn will help the DSC to understand the full impact of its guidance published during Covid-19, but also uncover any additional challenges that may have emerged.

As explained in Section 1.1, each Commissioner has been assigned as a link between individual sector agencies in order to progress the aims of the DSC. To date, bilateral meetings have been held with the following sector agencies:

+ Department of Education (DfE)

+ Disabled Students UK

+ Jisc

+ National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP)

+ National Union of Students (NUS)

+ Office for Students (OfS)

+ Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)

+ Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

+ Student Loans Company (SLC)

+ UCAS.

Table 2 presents a more in-depth overview of the work already conducted with some of the above sector agencies, including the impact this work has made so far on the wider sector in supporting disabled students.

Table 2

DSC Activity/Area of work	Impact
Publication of *Three Months to Make a Difference* and complementary guide for disabled students when applying to university in light of Covid-19	Both publications received considerable interest from the sector. The guidance was promoted via a number of channels: + webinar for Independent HE members, focusing on the guidance + promotion of the publications among UUK and GuildHE members + Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a blogpost outlined the seven key challenges from *Three Months to Make a Difference*, with some additional considerations for providers.
Working with disabled students interest groups, ie NAPD, Disability Rights UK and Disabled Students UK	Geoff Layer, Chair of the DSC, presented a video for NADP's virtual conference in July 2020: *Supporting Disabled Students: Supporting Ourselves*. The video, titled 'Many Rivers to Cross' explored topics such as the social model of disability, as well as challenges for the sector and its regulators. The video and transcript are available here. The DSC will continue to consult with interest groups, and to amplify the voices of both disability practitioners and grassroots organisations.

The OfS's review led by Sir Michael Barber: digital teaching and learning in English higher education during the coronavirus pandemic	The call for evidence focused on the DSC's findings from the roundtables conducted in June 2020, including the challenges of remote delivery that differed by impairment type. It also focused on the disabled student voice, and spoke to the more specific challenges disabled students expressed during the roundtables. The review also highlighted issues with digital poverty, and the DSC committed to recommending actions on the provision of IT equipment, technical support, bandwidth and technological developments in its future work.
Working with the QAA on seeking to influence Professional and Statutory Regulatory Bodies' (PSRBs) approach to recognising disabled students	The DSC were invited to present at a PSRB forum in December 2020, to raise awareness of the DSC, as well as advising how PSRBs can better engage with disabled students. The DSC discussed the potential for discrimination within fitness to practice regulations, and to gauge PSRB's awareness of their existing support in place. The DSC will also seek to consult on how PSRBs can influence more flexibility in assessment methods.
Working with UCAS on issues relating to the 2021 admissions cycle, including updated disability question wording used to collect data	The DSC consulted with UCAS on work that was in development, which included updating disability question on application forms to better reflect the social model of disability. UCAS have since updated their information, advice and guidance to include information on DSA, to make the process easier for prospective disabled students. As a result of updating disability question wording on UCAS forms student disability disclosure rates have increased by 10% overall from the previous year.

4. Looking forward: longer-term ambitions for the DSC

Over the coming two years, the DSC plans to revert back to its original student life cycle model to structure its work, while applying a lens of the pandemic's ongoing impact on disabled students.

Each of the DSC's strands of work will fall into one or several of the following thematic areas, that all have an equivalent overarching aim of creating more positive outcomes for disabled students:

+ to promote improved and enhanced access and transition to higher education for disabled students

+ to promote an inclusive student support and wellbeing approach

+ to promote the enhancement of inclusive learning and teaching

+ to seek to enhance the employability of disabled students

+ to inform the sector of progress with enhancing the experience of disabled students.

Beyond the key issues previously highlighted by the DSC related to Covid-19 and presented in Section 2.1, a number of additional considerations were identified within the roundtables that will inform the DSC's ongoing work, and tie into the thematic areas presented above:

+ **Identification of disability:** Within the roundtables, disabled students discussed the number of repeated occasions in their educational life that they were required to evidence their disability. The need to submit evidence, and essentially begin the process from scratch, creates delays and additional burden.

+ **Language and vocabulary:** The terminology around disability used in schools and colleges differs greatly to higher education. In schools and colleges, language and vocabulary focuses on education, health and care (EHC) plans, whereas in higher education the language focuses on disabled students. There is a need to make language and vocabulary choices more seamless between the different settings, to remove ambiguity.

+ **Needs assessments:** There is a need to consider why a student with specific support requirements identified in an EHC plan who then progresses to higher education requires a second needs assessment.

+ **Inclusive curriculum and assessment:** The issue of inclusive learning frequently arose, which highlighted a number of advantages and disadvantages for disabled students with the shift to a blended learning approach. The DSC will consider how inclusive curriculum and assessment design feeds into this.

+ **Employability:**

  – The impact of Covid-19 on the economy would indicate that graduate employment will be more difficult for the class graduating in 2020 (and most likely 2021). Based on HESA data on graduate outcomes, it is evident that graduates with a disability do less well in securing employment, and therefore any impact they experience in a post-Covid world may be even more pronounced.

  – Consideration also needs to be given to placements and work-experience during study. The DSC have noted that there are issues with workplaces' ability to meet technical requirements, and that the transition to an Access to Work Agreement (rather than DSA) is not streamlined.

As previously mentioned, each of the Commissioners has now been assigned as a link to relevant sector agencies and interest groups, to progress each of the individual work strands outlined in this section. The Commissioners will have an individual responsibility to coordinate ongoing bilateral meetings and to progress actions. This includes holding a multi-party meeting with Student Loans Company (SLC), UCAS, OfS, DfE and HESA to discuss the issue of disability identification and to set out an agenda for change which will ultimately improve the experiences for disabled students.

The DSC recognises that there are also several limitations with work conducted thus far that need to be addressed. These will be factored in to the longer-term ambitions of the DSC:

+ The DSC should consider how disability intersects with students' other identify characteristics, such as race (including nationality and ethnicity) and gender. As the Equality Act makes explicit reference to the duty of authorities to take regard of inequalities of outcome that result from socio-economic disadvantage, the DSC will also consider evidence and data related to social background.

+ Increased participation and engagement from students across all levels of study is required in primary research conducted by the DSC, including consulting with undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD students. The DSC must also consider those entering higher education from non-traditional routes, such as apprenticeships and skills-based programmes.

+ Further primary research is required to bring to life the lived dimension of barriers to disabled students, and to identify knowledge gaps. The DSC will encourage and support the involvement of disabled students in research activities, to centre their voice in the findings.

The longer-term ambitions of the DSC, and associated actions are presented in more detail in a work plan provided in appendix one.

5. Conclusion

The urgent and unprecedented response required to address the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the DSC's original work-plan was temporarily halted. The inevitable impact on disabled students caused by a shift from predominantly face-to-face interactions to remote ones meant that a vast array of provisions and processes needed to adapt. The DSC's work plan therefore focused on ensuring disabled students were best supported during this time.

After holding a series of roundtables in June 2020 with the sector and disabled students, the DSC uncovered some of the key challenges disabled students were facing as a result of the providers' responses to Covid-19 and subsequent changes to policy and processes, as well as a lack of sufficient information, advice and guidance.

Changes impacted all aspects of the student lifecycle, including the admissions process and those transitioning to higher education from school and further education settings. An absence of physical open days meant that disabled students were unable to check whether the campus was accessible, and needs assessments for DSA were being conducted on a remote basis. The student experience changed vastly too, with induction and social activities taking place online. All providers adopted a blended approach to continue to deliver teaching and learning remotely.

All of the above changes represented a wider cultural shift for disabled students. In some cases, Covid-19 helped to accelerate necessary progress and flexibility that disabled students have been requesting for years. Adjustments that had been previously deemed impossible were now possible. However, progress did not always meet the needs of every student, and the DSC discovered that the advantages experienced by blended learning differed by impairment type. There were also unintended consequences as a result of making campuses Covid-19 secure, such as the mandatory use of face-masks and the barriers this created for Deaf students.

As the DSC enters its second year, it will continue to work closely with the OfS, government, bodies, academics, the voluntary sector and other organisations to better understand the emerging impact of the pandemic on disabled students. Primary research will be conducted with disabled students across all levels of study, to plug knowledge gaps and to amplify their lived experience during this time. The DSC will relay these findings to the relevant sector agencies and, alongside an ambitious work plan, will continue to influence public policy and create longer-term policy change that improves and enhances the experience of disabled students.

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Appendix 1 – Work Plan

The following work plan sets out the DSC's work for the remaining two years. The final column on 'impact' helps to conceptualise and map the DSC's activities against the Terms of Reference to challenge, inform and influence effective practice. Given the nature of the pandemic and the challenges that the sector faces, we have set commencement dates for activities where possible.

Action	Objective / subject	Actions	Sector agencies involved	Commencement date	Output	Impact
1	To promote improved and enhanced access and transition to higher education for disabled students.	1.1. To help shape IAG guidance through UCAS forums and begin to address issues for non-UCAS applicants.	UCAS, HESA, Uniconnect and Discover Uni	January 2021	Create a sector standard for the presentation of IAG for disabled students.	Effective Practice at sector agency or organisation level.
		1.2. To promote comprehensive IAG for disabled students in institutional processes, including information on DSA.	UCAS, NADP, HELOA, Uniconnect, Discover Uni	January 2021	Clearer information base and HEP ownership of providing IAG.	Effective Practice at provider level.
		1.3. Ensure disability question wording in HE is reflective of the social model of disability and matches up with language used in school and FE contexts. Work to make language and vocabulary used in the HE sector around disability as transparent as possible.	UCAS, HESA, SLC, OfS, Uni Connect and Discover Uni	April 2021	Updated question wording for UCAS, HESA, OfS, SLC, HEPs.	Influence and guidance for sector agencies and providers.

		1.4. To seek to influence Admissions Review proposals to ensure recognition of disabled students.	UCAS, DfE, OfS, UUK	Spring 2021	Recognition of disabled students' needs.	
		1.5. Address issue of multiple identification of disabled students and follow-up support given through DSA.	OfS, SLC, DfE, UUK/Guild HE	September 2021	Seamless system that recognises an individual's disability.	Influence at sector level. This is an established policy problem and is reflected in the NSfDP.
		1.6. Work with the SLC and DfE to ease the DSA process.	SLC, DfE, NADP, OFS	May 2021	Disabled students have DSA adjustment in place at the start of their course.	Influence sector level. This is an established policy problem.
2	To promote an inclusive student support and wellbeing approach	2.1. Determine what existing data is held on disabled students' complaints and work with OIA on understanding trends and issues. Consider ways to improve the complaints procedure process for disabled students in respect of implementation of the DSA award.	Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)	June 2021	Separate complaints procedures from access to support issues.	Developing high quality evidence to challenge and inform sector and provider practice- New data or presentation of data to inform the sector and providers
		2.2. Tie in with work on Student Space and other allied mental health support. Seek to promote the revision of inclusive mental health support – ie counselling using video chat function.	OfS, Student Minds, UUK/ GuildHE	April 2021	Promote fully inclusive access to student mental health support for disabled students.	Effective practice at provider level.

3	To promote the enhancement of inclusive learning and teaching	3.1. Recommend actions around digital poverty relating to access to IT equipment, technical support, bandwidth and technological developments.	JISC/ Advance HE/OfS	April 2021	Comprehensive guidance on technological options.	Effective practice at provider level.
		3.2. Promote the principles on digital teaching and learning presented to Barber review.	OfS, Advance HE, QAA	On going	Create document.	Evidence to inform effective practice recommendations at provider level.
		3.3. Investigate elements of QAA work that interact with the work of the DSC, ie online proctoring and the issues this may cause for disabled students.	QAA	January 2021	Greater recognition of disability in QAA guidance.	Challenge and influence sector agency.
		3.4 Ensure that the context of disabled students is recognised in the regulatory quality assessment proposals	OfS, QAA	January 2021	Discussion and response to the OfS consultation.	Contextual impact in quality assessment.
		3.5. Explore future joint work with Jisc which could encompass short term (functionality of platforms), medium term (issues with captioning) and long-term (AI, R&D).	Jisc	February 2021	Reports, staff training and development.	Challenge and influence sector agency.
		3.6. Promote the development of guidance to improve HE staff development on the use and accessibility of online platforms.	Advance HE/JISC	April 2021	Greater awareness of accessibility issues.	Effective practice at provider level.

		3.7. Investigate HEA fellowship criteria (professional standards framework) to embed disability awareness consistency across modules. Potential to tie in with NADP work on accreditation of specialist disability staff.	Advance HE, NADP	February 2021	Secure amended accreditation criteria to specifically include disability within inclusive learning.	Effective practice at provider level.
		3.8. Option to produce guidance to complement the Quality Code to include information on inclusivity and reasonable adjustments, as well as Subject Benchmark Statements.	QAA, Advance HE	April 2021	HEPs signing up to revised quality code with impact on the curriculum.	Challenge and influence sector agency.
		3.9. Influence the SLC through membership of the DSSG.	SLC	November 2020	Agreed with SLC.	Influence sector agency.
		3.10. Design, conduct and disseminate a primary research project addressing learnings from the pandemic, with a disabled student experience focus.	Advance HE, OfS	March 2021	Robust and systematic data collection of disabled student experience across the sector and provider types.	Developing high quality evidence to influence and inform effective practice at provider and sector agency level.
4	To seek to enhance the employability of disabled students	4.1. Promote the development of disability employability guidance for class of 2020/21 graduates – similar to 'Three Months to Make a Difference' report.	AGCAS, Advance HE	April 2021	Guidance materials for the sector.	Effective practice for providers and employers.

		4.2. Work with PSRBs, and elicit feedback on how they can implement more flexibility and choice in assessment.	QAA	December 2020	Change in approach by PSRBs to understand the need for greater flexibility.	Challenge and influence sector agencies (PSRBs).
		4.3. To ensure that disability issues and the student experience are addressed in the skills agenda.	AoC, UUK, OfS	July 2021	Guidance materials for the sector.	Effective practice for providers and employers.
5	To inform the sector of progress with enhancing the experience of disabled students	5.1. Liaise with OfS over APP monitoring	OfS	April 2021	Combined HEP progress with embedding disability strategy.	Influence and challenge sector agency (OfS).
		5.2. Revisit recommendations made in Three Months to Make a Difference and student-facing document over next three years, possibly picking up elements in series of tweets or poster campaign through social media.	OfS, Advance HE Comms	April 2021	Poster campaign at the start of each academic year, increase student-facing visibility of issues.	Challenge, inform and advise the sector. Develop further evidence of effective practice as required.

Appendix 2 – Pen portraits of the Commission

Geoff Layer – Vice Chancellor, University of Wolverhampton

Geoff Layer has been Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton since August 2011. Previously the Chair of Department for Education's Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group, he is now the Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission.

Geoff joined the Sheffield Business School in 1983 as a Lecturer in Law. Whilst there, he established a suite of access and student support initiatives leading to the establishment of a national reputation for inclusive learning. This included establishing the Disabled Student Support service at Sheffield Hallam University promoting the social model of disability as the focus of the support structures and curriculum innovation. He joined the University of Bradford in 1999 and became Pro Vice-Chancellor and then Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) where he reconfigured disability support and inclusive learning.

Between 2000 and 2006 he was the Director of Action on Access, an agency established to advise HEFCE on its Widening Participation Strategy. He has been a consultant to Universities UK, Higher Education Quality Council and many universities in Widening Participation and Learning and Teaching Strategies. He was also Director of the HEFCE Innovations Co-ordination Team from 2000-2002 and has researched and published widely on Inclusive Education.

Geoff is also currently Chair of the Student Loans Company Stakeholder Forum, a Trustee of the Worker's Educational Association (WEA), a Director of Advance HE, Vice President of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce, Board member of the Black Country LEP, and Chair of the Universities West Midlands (UWM) Association among other membership roles.

Geoff believes that higher education is an opportunity that should be available for all those who can benefit from it and no student should be disadvantaged. The Disabled Students' Commission has been established to drive improvements in the approach of higher education providers and the wider sector to ensure that disabled students can access higher education, have an excellent quality of experience, and succeed both during their studies and then onwards throughout their careers. We will challenge higher education providers, key sector agencies and the third sector to accelerate the pace of change in creating inclusive learning and living environments for disabled students.

Sean Cullen – Disability Officer, Brunel University

In the summer of 2013, Sean's world came crashing down as he was involved in a motorcycle accident. This was his first experience of living with a physical disability, and made him realise that the world is not as accessible as it seems. With the help from friends, family, and the University disability service Sean felt empowered to overcome challenges and make the most of his time at university. He was enabled to embrace his disabilities through the wheelchair basketball club as well as through learning about dyslexia and the strengths it comes with.

Sean wanted to help others have a similar journey, so he ran for the post of Disabled Students Officer (DSO) for his student's union and has held the post consecutively since. During his time as DSO he has managed to raise awareness and helped the university to make some incredible changes to improve the lives of disabled students, such as flattening the campus bridge, building accessible studio flats, and overhauling the way blue badge parking is managed.

As a Student Voice Commissioner on the Disabled Students' Commission, Sean hopes to bring his experience and passion for improving the lives of disabled students to make positive change on a national scale. Creating not only accessible campuses and courses but inclusive environments where the barriers faced by disabled students are as reduced as practicable. He hopes to achieve this through collaborative working and highlighting the positives of putting accessibility first, helping institutions across the UK be the best they can be.

Susan Daniels – Chief Executive, National Deaf Children's Society

Susan has been Chief Executive of the National Deaf Children's Society since 1992, and has seen the charity grow from an income of £1 million in 1992 to over £24 million in 2018/19. Before joining the National Deaf Children's Society, Susan was Head of Education, Employment and Training and then Head of Policy and Research at the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, (now Action on Hearing Loss). In 2006, she was awarded an OBE for services to deaf children and their families.

Susan was a Commissioner of the Disability Rights Commission from 2003 until its merger with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights at the end of September 2007. Until November 2010 she was Chair of the UK Council on Deafness, the umbrella body for all organisations working in the field of deafness, which provides information, advice and support to member organisations and represents the views of the sector to government and policy makers.

Susan is also currently Chair of the NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme Quality Assurance Advisory Group, which monitors the delivery of the programme across hospitals in England, among other membership roles.

Drawing on her understanding of the needs and aspirations of disabled students and her experience of developing policy and improving practice in this field, Susan hopes to be able to positively impact on disabled students' experience of accessing and progressing through higher education and tackling the attainment gap between disabled and non-disabled students.

Professor Sarah Greer, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost, University of Worcester

Professor Sarah Greer is the Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost of the University of Worcester. She is responsible for academic strategy, planning and delivery across the University, and chairs the University's Academic Board.

After qualifying as a Chartered Accountant, Sarah retrained and practised as a barrister, completing pupillage with the Treasury Solicitor. She has held a range of academic and leadership positions and has taught undergraduate and postgraduate law students for many years. She has seen at first hand the challenges that disabled students can encounter in higher education. In 2011 she was appointed a National Teaching Fellow for her inspirational teaching.

Sarah has held public appointments in England and Wales. She has been an independent legal panel member for the Solicitors Regulation Authority and a voluntary chair and panel member for England Netball disciplinary and appeals panels.

Sarah believes that the Disabled Students' Commission, working across boundaries with providers, regulators and government, will bring a new and independent approach to ensuring that disabled students succeed and flourish in higher education. She hopes that the Commissioners can identify the excellent practice that already exists in the sector and share and develop it to embed it more consistently and effectively across all higher education providers. She hopes that the Disabled Students' Commission will challenge the sector in a very constructive way to use its creativity and commitment to its students to ensure that disabled students aspire to and succeed in reaching their highest potential.

Patrick Johnson, Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Law

Patrick became Director of EDI at the University of Law in January 2021. He was previously Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Manchester for 13 years.

His role includes the development of EDI strategy, and ensuring that the EDI agenda is inherently considered at the university in everything that they do.

Patrick is currently a member of several national and local committees where diversity and inclusion are important. These include:

+ Trustee, Chatsworth Multi-Academy Trust – a specialist school and organisation for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities

+ Deputy Chair, Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP), Research Excellence Framework 2021 – Research England

+ Advisor, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group, Wellcome Trust – an independent global charitable foundation.

Patrick also has over 16 years' experience in the field of careers information, advice and guidance. He has worked at the University of Manchester's Careers Service as Head of Pre-entry and Diversity. This role involved working with major graduate employers to develop 'Positive Action' initiatives such as mentoring and internships targeted at disabled and BAME students, to help increase their employability.

Patrick's hope is that the Commission will continually challenge the sector on how well they are supporting disabled students, into, through and beyond higher education. He says he will take his responsibility as a Commissioner seriously, with a key aim of seeking to achieve more positive outcomes for disabled students.

5.1   Professor Deborah Johnston, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) London South Bank University

Professor Deborah Johnston is a development economist. When appointed to the DSC, she was the Pro-Director (Learning and Teaching), SOAS University of London, a role she held for over four years. In April 2020, she was appointed as PVC Education at London South Bank University.

Deborah completed an undergraduate degree in Economics and an Mphil in the Economics and Politics of Development at Queens' College Cambridge. She completed a PhD in Economics in 1997 from SOAS University of London and has split her career across academia, charities and government.

Her academic work has focused on inequality and poverty. She is a person who stammers and has worked closely with both the 'British Stammering Association' and the 'Stammering Through University Consultancy' to ensure greater awareness of the needs of students who stammer. Her work at SOAS also involved a close partnership with the Students Union to eliminate the Racial Awarding Gap and she was the institutional champion for SOAS's work supporting access and success for all students. Deborah obtained Principal Fellowship in 2019.

She looks forward to supporting the DSC's agenda, helping to create an environment where all students are supported to flourish. The DSC provides the opportunity to look at the range of students that identify as disabled and supporting success for both undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Chris Millward – Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students (OfS)

Chris Millward is the Director for Fair Access and Participation in the Office for Students (OfS). His role is to help students and communities throughout England by ensuring that universities and colleges are doing all they can to support underrepresented groups to access and succeed in higher education, and to progress into successful careers. He is also an executive member of the OfS board.

Chris started his career at the universities of Warwick, Edinburgh and Durham, then joined the Arts and Humanities Research Council as Head of Research Programmes. Prior to the establishment of the Office for Students in 2018, he was Director of Policy at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

During its first year of work the Commission has provided invaluable insights on the experiences of disabled students through the pandemic. It has provided invaluable insights for universities and national bodies like OfS on the problems it needs to address and has also, importantly, sought to empower students to raise issues in their own places of study. For disabled students, it is perhaps more important than for any other group of students to understand the experience of higher education, not just the outcomes achieved, so Chris wants the Commission to shine a spotlight on this during 2021.

Piers Wilkinson, Digital Accessibility and Inclusion Consultant

Piers Wilkinson currently supports Diversity and Ability (D&A), a disabled led social enterprise, as their Higher Education Policy and Partnerships Lead and was the last NUS Disabled Students' Officer before the role was defunded in July of 2020. Piers has been deeply involved in representing disabled students for over 7 years, culminating in their election to national representative positions during the last 5 years.

Piers was appointed to the commission as a Student Voice Commissioner and previously studied an undergraduate MSci in Physical Oceanography at Bangor University. They also worked as an access consultant specialising in inclusive design within education, digital accessibility, user design learning, and inclusive campaigns.

Projects Piers has previously worked on includes the 2016 UNCRPD inquiry, the Arriving at Thriving report on disabled student experiences, and providing expert advice on collaborative projects such as Student Minds' Mental Health Charter, and the 2019 Phase-out of Plastic Pollution Bill.

 As a Student Voice Commissioner, ensuring the lived experience of disabled students shapes and supports the decisions made about disabled students is a key priority of Piers'. They are hoping the Disabled Students Commission increases the adoption and integration of the principles of the social model, champions the importance of lived experience, and creates an environment of progress towards holistic inclusion. Piers believes disabled students deserve equitable access to the entire experience of education and believes the commission will help achieve that equity - from quality provision of DSA, to extracurricular opportunities.

Dr Sam Parrett OBE, London and South East Education Group

As CEO and Principal of a large College Group in south east London, Dr Sam Parrett is focused on ensuring high quality education routes are accessible to all and that Further Education sits at the centre of the communities it serves. Sam was appointed principal of Bromley College in 2010, overseeing a merger with Orpington College the following year. Then in 2016, she led the country's first three-way College merger, bringing together Bromley College, Bexley College and Greenwich Community College to form London South East Colleges – which now has over 12,000 students and more than 1,200 staff.

Strong progression into college has been supported by Sam's successful establishment of a multi-academy trust – London & South East Education Group – which includes eight alternative, special and mainstream schools and an apprenticeship provider.

The College's Nido Volans centres in Bromley and Bexley offer outstanding SEND provision for young people across the region, where 16-24-year-olds with a range of needs are equipped with the skills they need for work and life, and are supported into internships and longer-term employment opportunities.

Awarded an OBE for services to Further Education in 2016, Sam has recently achieved a Doctoral Degree in FE Policy. She is a fellow of the CIPD, RSA and the Chartered Institution of Further Education.

Sam is passionate about ensuring disabled students can progress easily from FE to HE, and looks forward to advising the Commission on how this could translate into strong practical guidance for the wider HE sector.

AdvanceHE

Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201

enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk

🐦 in f @AdvanceHE

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500

communications@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

DSC enquiries

dsc@advance-he.ac.uk

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