

# Equalities & Human Rights Committee –

Call for Evidence on Widening Access to Scottish Universities for Disabled People, November 2016

Response from Lead Scotland (Specialists in Linking Education and Disability)

## Policy Background

Lead Scotland is a charity that enables disabled adults and carers to access inclusive learning opportunities. At a local level, we do this by providing direct support to learners through flexible person-centred learning opportunities and individualised guidance and support to help them plan their learning journeys. At a national level, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-school learning and training opportunities, as well as influencing and informing policy development.

Disabled people account for a significant proportion of Scotland's population, and make a vital contribution to our economy, culture and public life. Yet, they experience considerable inequalities in relation to education, employment and overall life chances. In comparison with their non-disabled counterparts, disabled people are around twice as likely to be unemployed<sup>1</sup>, around three times as likely not to hold any qualifications<sup>2</sup> and twice as likely to live in poverty<sup>3</sup>.

Removing the barriers to inclusive learning and employment is therefore vital in terms of improving educational attainment and earning potential, reducing reliance on welfare benefits and facilitating access to life-enhancing experiences.

The Scottish Government's refreshed Employability Framework recognises the effect of recent developments on individuals' employability and life chances, including:

- The difficult economic conditions
- The ongoing effects of welfare reform
- The reform of public services and recent spending cuts
- Measures being introduced through the reform of post-16 education

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<sup>1</sup> The Annual Population Survey, March 2013

<sup>2</sup> Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Employers' Forum on Disability, 2012

Many of these developments disproportionately affect people with additional support needs, making it imperative to work towards improving employment outcomes for a group already facing significant barriers to the labour market.

## Context

Lead Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament's Equalities & Human Rights Committee call for evidence on Widening Access to Scottish Universities for Disabled People.

Historically the widening access agenda has been heavily focussed on increasing the number of people from deprived backgrounds going into university, to reduce the qualifications gap between those from the most and least deprived areas of Scotland. More recently the focus has started to shift to examine and encompass access and participation amongst protected characteristic groups and their intersectionality with social and economic deprivation. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) are asking universities to identify levels of under representation amongst protected characteristic groups as part of their outcome agreements, and to subsequently target programmes and initiatives to address these gaps.

The most recent statistics from the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) cite that in academic year 2013/14, 9.3% of all students attending universities in Scotland had self-disclosed as disabled<sup>4</sup>. This is comparable with universities in the rest of the UK and with disability prevalence rates amongst 16-24 year olds in Scotland, who make up the majority of the student population in Scotland. The 2013 ECU study on aligning widening participation with equality strategies reported that the universities taking part in the study did not have any widening access programmes specifically targeting disabled people, as there was no evidence of under representation, and their statistics were in line with sector benchmarks<sup>5</sup>.

However, there is potential for age and impairment type to be skewing these figures, as people with a specific learning difficulty (SpLD) make up almost half of the disabled university student population in Scotland<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, the overall percentage of all disabled people in Scotland is 25%<sup>7</sup> in comparison to the 9.3% university student population. Further analysis could therefore determine whether older disabled learners (aged over 25 years) and those with specific impairments are underrepresented in Scottish Universities. For example, attainment amongst young visually impaired pupils is significantly lower than their sighted peers, with 18.9% leaving school with no qualifications at Level 2 or above, in comparison to 1.2% of pupils with no additional support needs<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, only 19.9% of pupils with a mental health problem moved into higher education, in comparison to 43.6% of pupils with no additional support need. ECU's 2015 statistical report also shows

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<sup>4</sup> [Equality in HE: Statistical Report 2015, Part 2: Students, Equality Challenge Unit](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Access, Retention and Success: Aligning widening participation and equality strategies, ECU](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Equality in HE: Statistical Report 2015, Part 2: Students, Equality Challenge Unit](#)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Equality/Equalities/DataGrid/Disability>

<sup>8</sup> [Attainment and Leaver Destinations Supplementary Data 14/15, Scottish Government](#)

there has been a steady decline in the number of learners over the age of 21 attending university in recent years, dropping from 54.6% to 45.1% between 2003/4 to 2013/14. This decrease was particularly evident amongst the number of learners over 36, which dropped from 21.3% to 13.8%.

## Disabled People's Experiences of Accessing Scottish Universities

We are funded through The Children, Young People, Families, Early Intervention and Adult Learning and Empowering Communities Fund to provide a free helpline and email information service to disabled people and their carers for ten hours per week. Lead took over this service in 2012 from Skill Scotland, national bureau for disabled students when they lost their UK funding. We use the evidence gathered from people who contact our information service to help influence and inform policy developments and also undertake funded research and consultancy services.

Calls we receive to the helpline indicate that some disabled people experience multiple barriers when trying to access Scottish universities. We are concerned that the current policy focus on youth employability is leaving disabled learners, aged over 25 years behind. Disabled children may take longer to move through the school education system and into post-school learning for reasons related to their impairment. Going straight from school to college or university may be too quick a transition and it could take significantly longer for a disabled learner to be ready for these next steps. Some disabled people therefore have a non-linear learning journey and may require extra support to move back into learning. This could mean that by the time they are ready to move into post-school education or training, there are less ways to engage with relevant services and less targeted programmes, initiatives and funding streams to support them to achieve their learning and employability goals.

For example, we have supported one older disabled learner in their late twenties, via the information service to understand their rights under the Equality Act and to access legal advice, after they were refused admission onto a degree course. This course was only offered at one university in the city in which they lived, and due to the complex nature of their health condition, they could not re-locate to another city to study. This student could not complete secondary school due to the impact of a serious and chronic health condition they were diagnosed with when they were in 6<sup>th</sup> year. They were then hospitalised and subsequently restricted to bed rest at home for a number of years. During that time they managed to complete their secondary education and the equivalent of the first two years of a degree via distance learning. This was despite them facing extremely challenging circumstances, sometimes completing course work during hospital stays or lengthy outpatient appointments. Eventually, when they were unable to progress any further on their chosen vocational pathway via distance learning, they applied to complete their studies at a local campus based university, as their health had stabilised enough to allow physical attendance. During the application process they made several attempts to engage with the university's disability office to ascertain how to provide supplementary 'contextual information' about their background, learning journey and the limitations their impairment imposes on their ability to re-locate for study, but the university refused to allow any of this information to be included with their

application. Despite having more than the minimum entry requirements for the course and being referred to as 'academically talented' by the university, the individual was not offered a place. The student was informed they did not receive a place due to the high level of competition. Had this person triggered widening access markers as part of their application, then relevant contextual information would have been considered, however as it stands, the university's policy states they will treat disabled people's applications identically to other applications. The Equality Act states it is not unlawful for disabled people to be treated more favourably than non-disabled people, so special consideration could have been given to this individual's circumstances in this case and the multiple barriers they faced in accessing university.

This is just one example to illustrate the multiple barriers faced by disabled people in accessing Scottish universities. A common area of concern we regularly receive calls about is the impact of studying on benefit entitlement, the interaction of benefits with student funding and the perceived repercussions of studying. The potential learners making these enquiries are very anxious about whether they can stay in receipt of benefit and whether they will be forced to undergo medical re-assessments. These concerns are particularly echoed by callers with mental health problems and it is clear that anxiety about this issue is preventing some disabled people from attempting to access education. People in receipt of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) can only study full time education if they are also in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payment (PIP), otherwise they can only study part time or they will lose entitlement to ESA. Accessing learning opportunities can be a first step in rehabilitation for some people or it can be a necessity after acquiring an impairment or long term health condition when they can no longer do the same job. Having the safety net of social security benefits can provide just that – the security to test the water and see how they'll cope, without any permanent or long term repercussions. The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) rules and regulations state that entering education could trigger a re-assessment – both for ESA and for DLA/PIP. For some disabled people, the anxiety of having to undergo the stress of another assessment can be more than they can face, and they may choose not to pursue their learning goals.

Another DWP rule states that higher education students' income is assessed for income related ESA based on the maximum student loan they are entitled to – and their ESA is reduced roughly pound for pound. This means students are treated as having a student loan, regardless of whether they take it out, and their ESA payment gets reduced, and in some cases cancelled if their student loan income is higher than their ESA payments. This essentially forces disabled people to take out a student loan instead of being allowed to continue claiming ESA, so they are pushed into unnecessary debt.

One parent called the helpline asking for clarification of this rule as they had previously been unaware of it, and so their disabled son had been claiming ESA as well as taking out a student loan to cover the substantial extra costs they incurred when accessing university, due to the complex nature of their impairment. Specialised equipment, accommodation adaptations and personal assistants were

all required to support this young person into university, the costs of which were only partly funded by social services. The DWP contacted the student to advise them they had been overpaid by £3,000 and were required to re-pay the money back.

While we appreciate most benefits are a reserved matter for the UK Government, DLA and PIP will soon be devolved to the Scottish Government, so we have raised some of these issues in the recent Scottish Social Security Consultation. However the Scottish Government do have the power to provide an improved offer of student funding for disabled people with alternative options to them accruing thousands of pounds of debt before their career even begins, especially as they are statistically more likely to be living in poverty in comparison to non-disabled people<sup>9</sup>.

In addition, disabled people could be supported to overcome some of these barriers by having access to timely, accurate and readily available information, advice and guidance on accessing learning opportunities and how their benefits will be affected. While there are multiple opportunities for school pupils and young people to engage in careers services and a wide variety of programmes and initiatives aimed at getting them into education or training, older learners in the community, no longer engaged in the education system can find it harder to get the advice and support they need to move forward. Understandably, this government's focus prioritises children and young people with funding and programmes, but the consequence of this policy focus often excludes learners over the age of 24 or 29. Widening access initiatives on the whole tend to focus on school pupils or articulation routes via college. The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) is one of the few programmes specifically aimed at supporting adults into university, however it can be an intense course, with learners cycling through three years of secondary school condensed into one year. It therefore may not be suitable for all learners, especially those who have been out of formal education for a long time and have additional support needs requiring more flexibility.

We have delivered a number of ad-hoc group information and advice sessions in community settings for disabled adults of all ages and recently responded to a call from the Lothian Centre for Inclusive Living to speak to one of their groups about accessing learning opportunities. There was a huge appetite for information and advice during the session and inevitably individuals wanted to ask complex questions about their own situation in reference to benefits, student funding, what support is available at college/university and what rights they were entitled to. We had to refer most of them to our telephone and email information service as we don't have the capacity to deliver one to one face to face sessions – we're a small charity with only one person operating the helpline for 10 hours per week. While we received a few follow up calls, which was very positive, we expect there would have been more engagement had a face to face service been available. We've also received multiple requests on the helpline for referrals to specialist careers advice services, specifically for disabled adults. One individual came to our offices, looking and hoping to get that service after they had failed to receive the specialist advice and support they needed from Skills Development Scotland. It was difficult to find an

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<sup>9</sup> [Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2015, Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#)

appropriate service to refer them to, as although there are multiple employability support services for disabled people, most of these services will only work with people on the premise they are looking to move immediately into paid employment, as many of those initiatives are funded by job outcome payments.

We would therefore like to see universities deliver a lot more community outreach programmes and initiatives which enable and empower disabled adults to see a clear learning and support pathway to higher education. We would also like to see this complemented by free and readily available face to face expert advice about benefits and student funding options, what disability related support is available, how to manage a chronic or long term health condition with studying and what rights disabled people can expect under Equality Act legislation. We would like to see an improved offer of funding to make it easier for disabled people to make the transition into learning to avoid them getting into unnecessary debt or be forced to only study part time in order to remain in receipt of benefits. We would like to see universities allowing relevant contextual information to be submitted to complement disabled people's applications, and as long as they meet the minimum competence standards and where appropriate, to treat them more favourably than non-disabled people in the same way students with widening access markers are treated.

Despite the progress that has been made in the UK over the last ten years around awareness and understanding of disability, equal opportunities and equalities legislation, disabled people can still face challenges when trying to get their needs met. Two different parents contacted the helpline earlier this year, looking for help and advice to engage with two different Scottish universities over their admissions procedures. Both parents had children either sitting an entry exam for a university course, or attending a pre-entry interview in the next week. The young person sitting the exam has dyslexia and had been refused extra time and a calculator as a reasonable adjustment request, despite this being standard practice when there is an evidenced need for it. The young person attending the pre-entry interview has autism and required a communication support worker to prompt an appropriate response when questioned, as this would be their first ever interview experience. The university refused on the grounds they needed to have a 'dynamic conversation' with the young person. In both cases, it is likely that the genuine competence standards required for admission onto the courses would not have been compromised by providing the adjustments. The Equality Act states that education providers do not need to make reasonable adjustments to genuine competence standards, but they are required to make adjustments to the way they are assessed. In both cases, the students were capable of meeting those competence standards, provided the appropriate support for them to do so was in place. We advocated in both of these cases as the parents had failed to achieve a positive outcome. Although we didn't provide any new information the parents hadn't already provided, we framed the discussion around this aspect of the legislation, and both universities quickly agreed to put the requested support in place. These examples obviously raise concerns about young disabled people facing the same barriers, who perhaps don't have parents capable of advocating for them in the same way.

Another common issue we hear about via the helpline is insufficient and untimely transitional support, especially for young people who have autism. Many Scottish universities deliver a disability service when a person presents themselves to the disability office at the start of term, but this can be too late for some disabled students. Parents often phone the helpline, anxious to find out what social support will be available for their children when they go to university. While some young students with autism may cope well with the academic requirements of attending university, adapting to living on their own in a completely new environment can be hugely anxiety provoking, both for those individuals and for their parents. Some disability staff at Scottish universities have told us that mentors will be available on campus but daily living and social support is out with their remit as it's not an educational requirement. Conversely, Social Services may not assess the individual as having high enough needs to warrant a support worker during this transitional phase. The anxiety and lack of advance planning and social support can all prevent some young people with autism from accessing university, or it can be a factor in contributing to poor retention rates. Glasgow Caledonian University offers a range of pre-entry support in partnership with the National Autistic Society, including a transitional summer programme, which allows students time to familiarise themselves with their new surroundings and workshops to prepare for what upcoming changes they can expect to face. We would like to see all Scottish universities offer earlier and targeted transitional interventions before students start term, taking into consideration a range of support needs and potential barriers to accessing university.

In addition to the evidence we have provided here about disabled people's access to university, the Equality and Humans Rights Committee may also find it useful to read our ECU commissioned research, which reports that disabled learners are not progressing through the SCQF levels at college as well as their non-disabled peers<sup>10</sup>.

### Disabled People's Experiences at Scottish Universities

While it's clear some disabled people face multiple barriers in accessing university, it is also important to examine their retention and attainment rates. ECU's 2015 Equality in HE report examines the progress of entrants at all UK higher education institutions who were studying in 2012/13. Their research shows 8.3% of disabled students were no longer in higher education by 2013/14, in comparison to 6.9% of non-disabled students<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, their study reports that non-disabled students at Scottish universities are more likely to achieve either a first class or 2:1 degree in comparison to disabled students, with a 4% degree attainment gap. In addition, disabled students in receipt of Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA), a Scottish Government grant for disability related equipment and support, were more likely to achieve a first or 2:1 in comparison to disabled students not receiving DSA, with a 2.2% degree attainment gap. These figures are significant considering how common

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<sup>10</sup> [Supporting Disabled Learners to Realise their Potential, 2015, Lead Scotland](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Equality in HE: Statistical Report 2015, Part 2: Students, Equality Challenge Unit](#)

it is for employers to require a minimum 2:1 pass for many graduate level jobs. The follow up Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE) showed that 60.5% of non-disabled leavers were in full time employment six months later in comparison to 53.2% of disabled leavers.

We receive multiple calls to our helpline from disabled students attending Scottish universities, looking for advice about how to deal with a lack of appropriate disability related support or perceived disability discrimination. Issues can vary widely, but with a lot of the cases, there appears to be a lack of understanding and awareness of specific support needs by subject lecturers and a lack of communication between lecturers and disability support staff.

We received a number of calls in the first few months of this academic year from disabled students asking what their rights were after they'd been asked to leave their courses early due to their absence levels. Despite the fact these students had declared a long term or chronic fluctuating health condition to the universities, the lecturers in these cases were applying standard absence policies and asking them to leave the course due to missing too many classes. While we agree frequent and long term absences will not necessarily be conducive to a student trying to manage their course work or sustain their place at university, there are support mechanisms and processes that could be discussed and implemented before getting to the stage where a student is asked to leave. When a student declares they are disabled, the disability support staff should discuss their needs and suggest ways they can try to overcome some of the potential barriers they can face. These support mechanisms could vary from the student receiving assistive technology and an educational support worker, to an agreed change in processes, policies and practices – or at least a more flexible approach to them. For example, an agreement could be put in place whereby a student accesses audio/visual recordings of a lecture/seminar on a Virtual Learning Environment when they are too unwell to physically attend. This in itself relies on how inclusive a university is and whether they automatically record all lectures and make any related presentations/handouts available online. This is not always done as standard and a student might have to request lectures be recorded or handouts be made available in advance, and inevitably, those requests are not always filled and the student misses out on part of their course curriculum. The Equality Act requires education providers to be anticipating the needs of disabled learners with a range of impairments and implementing an array of support mechanisms in advance, rather than just responding to each individual student's support needs. We would like Scottish universities to have the funding, IT infrastructure and staffing levels required to ensure all course materials are made available in advance and all lectures/seminars are streamed live, as appropriate, as well as recorded and made available later. This would also support students who may not have declared themselves as disabled to their university, or do not self-identify as disabled but who may benefit from accessing course information in this way. We carried out some research on behalf of ECU last year around disability disclosure, and it was clear disabled people's preferences vary widely in the language they identify with. The way a disability disclosure question is framed, and an individual's perceptions about why they are being asked and the benefits of

disclosing, can all have an impact on disclosure rates. These students may still have additional support for learning needs, and would benefit from being able to access their classes in a variety of formats without having to declare as disabled.

If students are too unwell to physically attend a lecture, then a 'non-medical personal helper', normally funded by DSA, could attend the lecture for them and take notes to the student. While this is not always going to be practical, and virtual learning cannot be a replacement for experiential in-class learning, it can offer a disabled student some support and flexibility if they have a fluctuating health condition like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME, MS or depression. However, we are aware that some lecturers just ask the student to leave, without exploring any other options. This happened to the daughter of a parent who contacted the helpline recently. We provided information and advice about their rights under the Equality Act and how to proceed. They advised us in a follow up call that the lecturer then reluctantly agreed to provide a more flexible arrangement for their daughter, however the student felt like she was causing so much inconvenience both to the tutor and to her fellow classmates, that she felt forced to drop down to part time study instead. This had repercussions on her access to student funding, her confidence to study and her career pathway. Education providers are responsible for ensuring disabled learners are not disadvantaged by existing policies and procedures, even if they do not intentionally discriminate against disabled people, so consideration needs to be given to how they can be adapted to be more inclusive.

The Disabled Student's Allowance, administered by the Student Awards Agency For Scotland (SAAS), is an excellent source of funding and fundamentally effective in covering the extra education related costs a disabled student may incur in higher education. However, there are some issues with it, which we have raised with the SAAS policy team and the Scottish Government. We received a number of calls this year from students who had started their course, but were still waiting to receive their DSA award and thus for the relevant support to be put in place. Lead Scotland and NUS Scotland carried out some research in 2013 when there was a proposal by the Scottish Government to devolve the administration of DSA to the institutions themselves. We surveyed 193 students about their experience of DSA, and the majority of responses were positive in every area apart from timescales. Students cannot apply for DSA until they have a confirmed and accepted place on a course, which they usually won't know until the first week in August, unless they received an unconditional offer. This therefore generally gives students a period of 6 to 8 weeks to apply for DSA. The whole process is quite lengthy and involves making an appointment with the university's disability office to complete the form together, gathering evidence, waiting for a referral to be assessed, having an assessment, waiting for a report to go to SAAS and then for an award letter back from SAAS. Assessment centres can often have a large backlog due to the influx of referrals they receive, which gets bigger the closer they get to the start of term. Some students are unaware of DSA, so they don't apply until after they start, which compounds the problem. Many universities try to engage with students over the summer via email and in writing to invite them to apply, but response rates can be understandably low. As a result, students may not have the appropriate support they need in place when

the term starts, and some callers have reported difficulties getting an appointment with a disability officer to resolve the issue due to the high demand for their services. Students may receive a loan of equipment or funding from the university, but this does not always happen. We've heard reports of students being forced to apply for interrupted study breaks from their course until they receive their DSA award and appropriate equipment.

DSA funding is not available for all disabled students, and there are a set of criteria in place to determine eligibility. One of the criteria is that part time students must be studying for at least 50% of the full time equivalent of the course, or at least 60 credits if doing a course with the Open University. This rule seems particularly counterproductive in supporting disabled students who have more severe or complex impairments or conditions, and can only study on a very part time and flexible basis. We have received calls from students studying very part time distance learning higher education courses, desperate to find alternative funding to support their learning. While it is the responsibility of the institution to pay for any reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act, this does not always happen, and the student can often have a lengthy and exhausting battle to face in securing funding and support from them. This means that some students face the additional stress of fighting for funding and support, and complaint procedures can be arduous and difficult to access, understand, and follow. As a result, some disabled students not receiving DSA can struggle to maintain their studies. We have raised this with SAAS and the Scottish Government, as there does not seem to be a clear policy rationale for penalising students who can only manage very part time study.

We have heard from multiple partners across the sector that Deaf students are at a particular disadvantage at university. The National Deaf Children's Society Scotland's 2014 report, *Close the Gap*, highlighted the attainment gap amongst Deaf young people and their hearing peers<sup>12</sup>. There is a general shortage of British Sign Language (BSL) Interpreters across Scotland and the costs involved can be very prohibitive. We have heard anecdotal reports of inappropriate or ineffective communication support being implemented, and one college told us they've had to refuse entry to Deaf students due to the shortage of BSL interpreters. While the non-medical personal help (NMPH) allowance of DSA can pay for a BSL Interpreter, the annual £20,500 budget can soon be stretched to beyond its limit when factoring in a minimum of two interpreters for any sessions over one hour for class room time, study skills sessions and assistive technology training, as well note takers and travel expenses. The implementation of the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 will undoubtedly drive forward much needed change for BSL users across all aspects of civic and public life in Scotland, but it will not necessarily make provisions for extra funding.

Funding for travel to and from college or university has been raised as an issue by disabled students a number of times via our helpline. SFC bursary policy states that DLA or PIP should be used in the first instance to cover travel costs, and after that it is down to the discretion of the college to top up any shortfall in travel expenses. However if students have exchanged their mobility element for a Motability car, then

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<sup>12</sup> [Close the Gap, 2014, National Deaf Children's Society Scotland](#)

they still may need extra financial help towards the cost of petrol. Other students argue that their mobility element is not enough to cover their travel expenses, especially if they have a longer commute due to the availability of course provision, and that they need the mobility element to cover extra travel expenses they incur outside of commuting for study. SAAS DSA policy states they will only pay for students' travel expenses if they cannot take any form of public transport for reasons relating to their impairment. However there could be more complex reasons why disabled students incur extra travel expenses. We have heard of multiple cases where students cannot re-locate for study due to reasons related to their impairment or health condition, but have not been accepted onto their chosen courses in their home town. As a result they may face a longer and more expensive commute to the closest university they have been accepted onto, but they can still travel on public transport. This falls out with SAAS' policy rules for funding travel expenses, but ultimately these students are still incurring extra costs as a result of their impairment. Some of the students we have spoken to said they would be forced to drop out of their course if they could not get help towards the cost of travel.

We have received a number of calls to the helpline from students with mental health problems, experiencing difficulty in sustaining their place at university. These students reported that they had taken authorised interrupted study breaks from their courses when they became too unwell to continue studying. The students reported that they had received limited or no contact from the university during their interrupted periods of study and that they had been too anxious to instigate contact themselves. They then received notification from their universities that if they did not return at the start of the next term, they would forfeit their place, lose the credits/modules they had already previously achieved and be forced to leave before completion. One student in particular was extremely distressed by this, as their recovery was moving positively and they were engaging with services and making progress, but a premature return to university may have likely triggered a deterioration in their mental health. Universities can have confusing and sometimes arbitrary policies on authorised absences or interruptions of study. It can be difficult to understand the relevance of different rules on individual circumstances, yet students asking for clarification are often just referred to the relevant policy document on the university's website. Disabled students, especially students experiencing mental health difficulties who may find dealing with authority and rules particularly anxiety provoking, would benefit from extra support and communication to fully understand the implications and rules surrounding authorised absences. Too often we have witnessed university staff signposting students to policy documents without any further support to access or understand them. While students can access support from their student's association, this is not always an appropriate or accessible option for them. We would like to see improved communication from universities to students on interrupted study leave, with supported meetings to ensure students are fully aware of the related policy rules. Additionally, we would like to see improved flexibility to the authorised interrupted study policies. Some courses warrant a return to study after a certain duration to ensure the teaching is up to date with the related industry, but not all subjects require this. Again, a blanket approach

to interrupted study breaks could be inadvertently discriminating against disabled students.

Similarly, we have received calls about inflexible deadline extension policies. While universities will allow small extensions in extenuating circumstances, there are again set policies in place that do not always necessarily take account of disabled people's needs, especially those with very complex or fluctuating and debilitating health conditions. Based on calls we have received to our helpline, the default response from tutors to students not meeting their deadlines, is to ask them to defer until they 'recover'. Students can find it very difficult to get tutors to understand the nature of a chronic or fluctuating condition and the fact recovery may not be achievable. Again while we appreciate the necessity of imposing set deadlines and timeframes for completing some assessments, the ability to complete a time bound task is not always reflective of a person's competence or skill in a specific subject area. We supported one student on the helpline who was achieving 'A' grade passes on a distance learning course until they were diagnosed with a long term and very debilitating condition in their final year. They dropped down to one module after they were failing to meet their deadlines and repeatedly having to defer. They were also not entitled to any DSA funding as they were not doing the minimum amount of credits required. However even doing one module entailed 5 different written and practical assessments and the student was constantly struggling to keep up with the workload without having the right support or enough time to recover in-between assessments. They asked to spread the module out over a longer period in order to take full consideration of the complex needs of their health condition, but the university refused, and the student now only has one more attempt left to complete the module – and their degree. This student has proven they have the academic competence to undertake the course, so it is disappointing that even a flexible option like distance learning has not enabled them to reach their full potential.

Along with the evidence we have provided here, we are also including three testimonies from visually impaired people about their experience of applying for and attending Scottish universities. These testimonies reflect the impact having the confidence to speak up and ask for the right help can have on a disabled student's experience at university. This is also a common pattern we pick up from engaging with students and partners across the sector. Despite the evidence we have included here, we believe Scottish universities have a strong track record of supporting disabled students to reach their full potential at university. However, many students can feel too embarrassed to speak up, to single themselves out and to ask for their needs to be met in a better way. In addition, some students can have such a negative experience of speaking up, as seen in one of the testimonies, that it can prevent them from doing it again. The testimonies along with the evidence we have provided here, indicate more work is needed to raise awareness and understanding of disability equality, especially amongst academic staff. While we recognise the time and resource limitations that academic staff can face, their attitude and behaviour towards disabled students can be a gateway to a positive experience at Scottish universities.

## Student Testimonies/Responses

### Graduate

Question 1: Tell us about your experience of applying to a Scottish university, whether you gained a place or not? What could be changed about the applications process to ensure equality of opportunity?

Due to my sight only starting to decline when I was 16-years-old, the application process didn't really present any barriers to me. Although I applied for university when I was 18, I still had enough sight to access a computer without magnification software and didn't have too much difficulty with paper either.

I can't think of many negatives with applying. As long as the universities ensure that their websites are accessible and include details of support. From memory, I can't recall ever having information about Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), but yet in SAAS applications there was a box to tick if you wanted to apply for it. I think DSA is a real lifeline for young people with sight-loss and making them aware of what it entitles them to should be a priority.

Questions 2: If you have studied at a Scottish university as an undergraduate, were there any barriers which stopped you taking full advantage of your time at university, please tell us about them? (for example, access extracurricular activities, using all university facilities, joining student life etc.)

For me, having leaflets and information about extra-curricular activities on pin-boards around the university was no use. I tried my best to hide my sight-loss throughout university as it wasn't totally noticeable – and I know this is the case for many other young people who don't want to be “different” or singled-out – so, going right up to a board and trying to read from 3cm away wasn't something I was going to do.

I suppose in my case, because I didn't have any support at university, I could have asked the lecturers about what was on and I would like to think that anyone receiving additional support would be told, rather than expected to find out for themselves. Again, information online, which is accessible, is another good way around this.

Question 3: If you studied at a Scottish university did you achieve the qualification you wanted? If not, tell us why you think that was (for example, did any barriers hold you back from achieving your full potential etc.)

When I started university I did seek support, but was told by a lecturer that I “can't exaggerate to get additional time in exams”. Due to this, I didn't ask for support again, even though I really did need it. I managed to get through my first three years of my degree with peer-support where necessary, but dropped out in my honours

year due to the volume of reading involved (dissertation especially) and lack of support from the university in any way shape or form.

Although I am basing this answer on the sheer ignorance of one lecturer, it took a lot for me to actually ask for support. As I mentioned previously, I didn't feel comfortable with people knowing about my sight-loss and I feel lecturers should be more aware of hidden impairments and the effect they can have on young people., For this lecturer to pretty-much accuse me of exaggerating put a major dent in my confidence and ability to access materials electronically through support I would've had if he had handled it properly.

Question 4: Did studying at a Scottish university help to improve your chances of successfully gaining employment, please tell us about your experience?

My degree was in journalism, so there are a lot of transferable skills there. I've managed to use this to gain full-time employment, even though it isn't necessarily in that field. I'm sure I will go on to do journalism in some form in the future, but in an already competitive industry, I could have really benefited from having the support I needed to achieve my Honours degree.

### [Open University student with plans to apply to University of St Andrews](#)

I thought I would put the questions in an essay form as my experience so far is slightly different to a 'brick' university if you will. I am currently studying forensic psychology with the Open University. To go to open university all you need is the perseverance to learn and you can build up your studies from there.

Open University is a great fit for me so i can be flexible with studying and working. When it comes to my sight I need some support (although i don't actually like to admit it) which my tutors and the intuition itself has made extremely clear of what help there is and how to get it. The support i need the most is with the allocated time and my tutors have been more than helpful when it comes giving me extensions for assessments and checking up to see if I'm managing. I am also entitled to DLA (disability learning allowance) which is given yearly for technology to help study and achieve a degree.

Open University has given me the opportunity to complete my first year. But mostly given me confidence that i need, as i am applying for a university in St Andrews to complete my degree and be able to experience student life.

### [Stirling University student](#)

1. I applied to the University of Stirling and was pleased to get a conditional offer to study History, Politics and Professional Education. As a visually impaired young person I feel the application process was accessible and asked the important question of whether I have a disability or not. However, for some other young people who have a disability may be less inclined to declare this because they may feel judged and that by declaring their disability they somehow will have less of a chance of being successful. To address this, I think UCAS should make it clear in the form

that this is merely to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made at the university and that this aspect will not be taken into consideration when they make the decision.

2. I have had a great time so far in first year at university. The disability service are absolutely amazing and deal with any problems effectively and efficiently. I have been supported well and feel that the university is capable of accommodating a wide range of young people from different backgrounds.

3. I gained the qualifications I wanted as I had received the appropriate support at school (Rosshall Academy which has a visual impairment unit). The SQA made the appropriate adjustments to my exams. However, there has been a decrease of specialist staff such as VI trained teachers and other additional support for learning staff. As a local MSYP for Glasgow Pollok I am often told of young people not doing well as a result of specialist staff being cut. It is vital that local authorities ensure that all young people are being supported and that young people with additional support needs see a rise in attainment too.

4. As I am in first year I am not planning on entering employment as yet. However, my degree leads onto a probationary year in a secondary school. I will also be on placements in schools throughout Scotland.