

## Lead Scotland briefing for Scottish Government – Potential Impact of COVID-19 on Disabled Further and Higher Education Students

### Accessible Remote Learning – An Opportunity

We are seeing colleges and universities moving at breakneck speed to deliver learning online, affording disabled people a level of flexibility that would have been considered impossible by many education providers before the pandemic. We therefore see this as an opportunity for the sector to think about a cultural change which could improve access and flexibility, complementing traditional ways of offering education for the future. Disabled people contacting our helpline often tell us they are unable to take up traditional learning opportunities due to the fluctuating or chronic nature of their condition, meaning they cannot always commit to a regular timetable or be well enough to attend every lecture and seminar. While the OU and other distance learning courses play a very important role in bridging this gap, disabled people are still prevented from accessing the full range of learning opportunities non-disabled people can access. Some disabled students also tell us they are being penalised for the number of absences they have had from their course, despite it being connected to their impairment, and have been given limited or no options to study flexibly from home. Students ready to return to some level of study after interrupted study leave also tell us they have been given limited or no options to work on a flexible or reduced timetable. This 'new normal' therefore needs to be capitalised on to ensure disabled people can benefit from the crisis in the longer term.

However, while this advance in online remote learning will offer unprecedented flexibility for some learners, it is important to be mindful of the fact one in five people in Scotland lack basic digital skills. So whilst we might assume that some students may move seamlessly into the new online world, others are likely to lack basic digital skills, have the right assistive technology or access to the internet, and may also lack the confidence to engage. The move to remote learning, whilst great for many disabled people, may also disadvantage those with more complex or profound needs. Talking to students, families and agencies will help us to understand what people need to engage.

Input from stakeholders:

Learners:

One visually impaired learner contacting our helpline advised they had to withdraw from their course after their classes moved to being delivered via zoom, as they could not navigate the platform using a screen reader and iPad and felt they needed sighted assistance to do this.

Another learner got in touch to say that the transition to remote learning had been very difficult for them as they require a very structured routine due the nature of their impairment. They also required new ergonomic furniture in the transition to home

studying but have not yet received it as production of their specialist item has been frozen during the pandemic. They also commented that while their university's decision to ensure exam results would not affect their overall final marks unless they improved them was a positive move, it had also greatly impacted their motivation levels.

College:

Glasgow Kelvin College got in touch to raise awareness of assistive software they have already been using which provides learners with built in accessibility features across a range of platforms. They said:

“ReciteMe – is an incredibly useful assistive means of navigating websites and college systems, with text enlargement, subtitles, language options etc., with lots of utility for enabling users of it to engage in ways that may not be currently available.

There is a license cost, as discussed, but like all things ‘commercial’ there is likely to be a negotiation element to expanding use, adding to Cloud-based servers and so on. At this stage in the COVID-19 environment – with CLD and online learning at the forefront of Scottish Government (SG) thinking and action – now seems a great time to do two things:

- hear about the great work and the positive impact that the ReciteMe technology could (potentially) have for your target group and the new online audience in general (ESOL and non-ICT-literate users included)
- put a request to SG for consideration of funding, based upon the roll-out and expansion of its use within a live environment (like Glasgow Kelvin College), making use of impact assessments etc.”

Kelvin College advised they were very happy to engage further about this software.

Other college colleagues have raised concerns about the practicality of supporting students with additional support needs remotely, especially for those with profound and complex needs, and have also commented that they have seen a reduction in students' engagement with support services now they are operating remotely.

University: colleagues in the university sector have got in touch to comment on how quickly teaching and assessments have moved online and want to ensure that lecturers are kept engaged to keep some of these new benefits when they return to campuses. Another colleague has expressed concern with how sustainable it will be to maintain solely remote learning over a long period of time.

### Lower Qualifications Being Awarded

We have concerns that some disabled pupils may be disadvantaged by the process of awarding estimate grades. For example, pupils who may have had interrupted learning due to long term illness might not have strong records of progress and prior achievement but were hoping to compensate for this with their exam results. We know there will be an appeals system in place, but there is still a risk some pupils could fall between the cracks of this process and face additional barriers to

progressing into post-school education. Similar concerns have been raised by the [Higher Education Policy Institute](#) and the [University and College Union](#), arguing that research shows disadvantaged pupils are more likely to receive under-predicted grades. This quote from Seamus Searson of the Scottish Secondary Teacher's Union on [BBC news](#) also raises concerns about prejudice and bias in predicting grades,

"Within a week or two from starting with a new class the teacher will know who is going to be top and who is going to be bottom in terms of ability. The people who know the pupils best are the teachers and they know who the A-grade students are and who looks like they are on track for a C."

### [Anxiety around Remote Assessments](#)

Some students studying HN and degree level qualifications are being asked to undertake exams and assessments remotely. One helpline caller told us their son has extreme anxiety and autism and yet has been asked to perform a practical assessment via video conferencing. The parent is concerned about the impact this will have on their anxiety levels and therefore their ability to perform to their full capability.

### [Transitions affected by withdrawal of care packages](#)

We have heard reports of disabled people's social care packages being withdrawn due to the current crisis. We therefore have concerns about a potential bottleneck forming of disabled school leavers waiting to get social care and needs assessments before they can access post school destinations. This could lead to support not being in place in time for the start of the academic year or worse not being available at all due to a lack of resources.

One parent got in touch to say:

"Hi, my concerns for my daughter with downs. She already struggles with transitions and had just started to settle into her 5th year (transitioning into adulthood) I truly believe that the option should be for our children to repeat the year they were in. So for her to repeat 5th year and not lose out on the valuable transitioning life skills and college/work experience opportunities."

### [Admission decisions led by financial imperative, not by the widening access agenda](#)

We're concerned the coronavirus pandemic could derail the work of the widening access agenda, pushing fair access for disabled people even further down the list of priorities. The impact of COVID-19 has resulted in worldwide travel restrictions, meaning there is uncertainty about whether international students will be able to take up their places at UK universities in the autumn. This could lead to universities facing financial crisis, which in turn may result in difficult monetary-driven decisions. We've already outlined our concerns about disabled people being disadvantaged in getting the estimate grades they need, performing well in assessments, planning for transitions and getting the resources they need to access their courses, so prioritising them in the widening access agenda is vital to try and mitigate some of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The [Sutton Trust's COVID-19 paper](#) makes similar recommendations,

“Students from widening participation backgrounds who have missed out on their offer grades should be given additional consideration, to take into account the ways in which they may have been disadvantaged in the grade awarding process.”

### Graduate Employment Opportunities Shrink

Regrettably we will experience an economic recession when we emerge from this global pandemic. Disabled people are already almost twice as likely not to be in work as non-disabled people and we have heard people saying that they are extremely concerned that it will become even harder to find work now and for many years to come. One helpline caller got in touch to say their small business was no longer viable due to the pandemic and they now have limited options for work due to the progressive and fluctuating nature of their condition. They want to return to study to upskill and re-train however the interaction of the student funding and benefit system was making this very difficult for them. Policy decisions to kickstart the economy must place disabled graduates front and centre.