

Briefing: Arriving at Thriving Report

October 2021

Introduction

In October 2020, cross-party think tank Policy Connect and the Higher Education Commission launched a report entitled 'Arriving At Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all'.¹ The report considers the experiences of disabled people in Higher Education, and follows a six-month inquiry which gathered evidence from various sources including over 500 disabled students, senior figures at a number of higher education providers, and charity representatives across the country.

The report aims to set out lessons for the government and university leaders, and proposes 12 recommendations for the government and the sector to ensure the experiences of disabled students can be improved.

Key Findings

1. Many disabled students are not fully able to access teaching and learning

- » Many disabled students face a lack of accessibility, such regularly being physically unable to get to or sit in lecture theatres or other academic space. Accessibility issues go beyond physical spaces, and also include students being unable to access learning materials, not receiving lecture capture where it has been promised, and not receiving other reasonable adjustments set out in their support plans.
- » Support services professionals report difficulties in trying to get academic staff to provide the reasonable adjustments set out in students' support plans, with levels of support varying greatly across different institutions, departments and staff members.
- » Some students reporting feeling that there was no accountability at their institution for ensuring they are able to access teaching and learning.

2. Disabled students face heavy bureaucratic and financial burdens

- » Disabled students face a number of additional pressures in comparison to non-disabled students, especially in having to apply for, be assessed for, organise and chase up the support they need.
- » The report received evidence regarding problems with the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), including a lengthy and complex application process, slow processing of applications, poor quality of equipment and support allocated, and equipment provided extremely late or not at all.
- » Many disabled students struggle with the financial burden of extra costs relating to their disability, including the cost of accessible accommodation, medical evidence, prescriptions, and the DSA charge.
- » Disabled students often interrupt their studies because of the financial burden, a lack of support, and struggling to fully access their teaching and learning.

¹ <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/arriving-thriving-learning-disabled-students-ensure-access-all>

- » Complaints processes often inhibit disabled students from complaining, including because of a lack of support to cope with the bureaucracy of the process.

3. Awareness and accessibility are needed to facilitate better social inclusion

- » Students reported a complete lack of accessibility of social activities, clubs and societies. This includes a lack of accessibility information on adverts for events, a failure to provide accessibility adjustments when requested, and a lack of consideration of accessibility when planning events or activities.
- » Over a quarter of respondents to the student survey said they always or often feel excluded from social activities, societies and clubs because of a lack of disability awareness. Less than half of respondents said they never feel excluded.
- » The report found that there is a widespread lack of awareness or care among the wider student cohort for the existence of disabled students and their needs.

4. Information and advice are key to successful transitions

- » Many HE providers reported having difficulty encouraging students to disclose their disability pre-enrolment, and thus found it hard to put support into place before the start of term.
- » According to the report, many students arrive to higher education without knowing about the DSA, and thus without having applied for support. Practitioners noted that many school and college careers advisers seem to know little about disabled students in higher education, and/or the DSA.
- » Confidence around disclosure and 'disabled' status was also identified as a challenge for students during work placements, and for disabled graduates' entry into employment.

UCL Context

The report included a written submission from the Disabled Students' Network (DSN), with quotes included covering the following areas:

- » **Willingness of disabled students to make complaints:** "Despite having an awareness of many situations in which students have been discriminated against, and many situations in which students have dropped out due to lack of reasonable adjustments, the DSN has only heard of a single student who has made a formal complaint."
- » **Dysfunction within internal complaints processes:** "The connection between students not being given support and students not complaining is not accidental. There is a vicious cycle. A lack of university support is keeping students from raising issues about a lack of university support, which in turn leads to a further lack of university support."

The report also references the January 2020 DSN report, which highlighted that a number of students who requested that the university cover the additional cost of their accessible accommodation were refused, or had to fight for a long time to be provided with this funding.²

² <https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/disability-discrimination-faced-by-ucl-students-and-recommended-measures>