

UCAS

NEXT STEPS

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE
OF DISABLED STUDENTS
IN EDUCATION?

In collaboration with



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FOREWORD BY THE DISABLED STUDENTS' COMMISSION



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CHAIR OF THE DISABLED
STUDENTS COMMISSION

It is with great pleasure that, on behalf of the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC), I am able to introduce and commend this report to you. It is published during a really transformative year for disabled students, and we congratulate UCAS for focussing in this way.

It is the DSC's view that, as a higher education sector, we have been compiling data and reports for long enough and we now need a concerted and developed plan of action. This report sits alongside a considerable focus on listening to the disabled student voice, and then formulating specific and consistent recommendations.

UCAS has an excellent track record in producing key insights on student progression and, on this occasion, it has placed the focus on disabled students. The report demonstrates patterns of behaviour amongst disabled students, and looks at the trends in participation and decision making. Refreshingly, the report not only looks at both the range and numbers of disabled students applying to higher education but – most importantly – it does not treat disabled students as a holistic group as it recognises the differences by condition.

The report demonstrates a significant increase in the number of students sharing information about their conditions in the application process, and these increased numbers indicate they are comfortable in sharing those details. This is in itself a recognition of changing public attitudes – and the expectations applicants have of their universities to support them through their studies.

By focussing on data and analysis by condition we are able to see where the major increases in sharing information is to be found; interestingly, the analysis reveals very different links between social class and increased participation. We also see that, with some conditions, there is a far higher likelihood of a disabled student seeking to make an older entry into higher education. This may well be linked to physical fatigue, and so a need to ensure support is in place before starting university is crucial, leaving nothing to chance.

The recommendations in the report have synergy with those that the DSC has been advocating for some time, and this analysis adds weight to the argument. This report will play a key role in shaping change – we welcome this and feel sure it will provide an evidence base that facilitates change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the UK, approximately 19% of working-age adults identify as disabled¹, yet disabled people are almost half as likely to have an undergraduate degree than non-disabled people². In 2021, 83,220 disabled students applied to higher education (HE) – a record high – with 80% of these applicants gaining a place at university or college. The 105% increase in applicants sharing an impairment or condition in the UCAS application over the last decade means disabled students now represent 14% of all HE applicants in the UK, compared to just 7% in 2012.

However, beneath the headline figures there is significant variance by type of impairment or condition. Broadly speaking, the proportion of students sharing an impairment in each category has remained stable, with the exception of social, behavioural and communication impairments³ and mental health conditions, which have increased 249% and 453% respectively since 2012. The experience of students with mental health conditions was explored in our **Starting the Conversation report**, released June 2021.

UCAS believes that all applicants should feel entirely comfortable sharing their individual circumstances in the full knowledge of how this information is used. However, while the theme of this report is about students taking their next steps in education, our research finds that disabled students are not always able to take those steps at the same time as their non-disabled peers⁴.

¹ Department for Work and Pensions: Family Resources Survey: financial year 2019 to 2020, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020

² Office for National Statistics, Outcomes for disabled people in the UK 2021: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2021

³ See Annex C for a glossary of terms and definitions used throughout this report.

⁴ The terms 'disabled student/applicant' refers to those who share a disability in the UCAS application, and 'non-disabled student/applicant' refers to those who select 'no disability' or a mental health condition – see Annex A for more details.



As part of the UCAS application, students are invited to share an impairment or condition, and this information is used to connect them to support and to start an important conversation with the university or college about their needs. This data gives UCAS fresh insight into disabled students' progression, and we have used it alongside the survey results gathered from almost 5,000 applicants⁵ to examine their experiences in education to date, of making their application, and their expectations for HE. For the first time, we look at differences by impairment category and intersectionality with other personal characteristics to understand where there are particular patterns and preferences – and to understand where there may be hidden challenges. Key findings include:

- > **More applicants are sharing an impairment or condition:** 14% of all UK applicants shared an impairment or condition in 2021 – an increase of 105% (+42,650) since 2012.
- > **Disabled applicants are more likely to defer entry to HE:** before the pandemic, disabled students were 23% more likely to defer entry than non-disabled students, rising to 28% in 2021 – this disparity varies by impairment type.
- > **Students' decision making is influenced by the HE institution's support offer:** 56% research an institution's support for disabled students before applying, with its reputation for equality, diversity and inclusion being of particular importance.
- > **The intersectionality of impairment type and personal circumstance influences where students apply:** those with physical impairments or challenges with mobility are more likely to be mature and from less advantaged backgrounds; despite having a higher-than-average A level attainment⁶, they tend to be placed at lower tariff providers closer to home.
- > **Disabled applicants' experiences of support in education to date are mixed:** around half feel supported by their school or college – educational support is felt to be strongest (53%) and access to inclusive extra-curricular activities is weakest (17%).
- > **Applicants' expectations for support in HE exceed their satisfaction with support at school or college:** 61% expect the academic support will be good, and 65% expect the pastoral support will be good.
- > **Students are looking forward to the social aspects of university life:** only 17% of respondents felt satisfied with access to inclusive extra-curricular activities at school or college, whereas 44% expect the social opportunities at university or college to be good or excellent.
- > **Applicants with hidden disabilities⁷ are having a less positive experience:** they are less likely to be satisfied with their experiences in education to date, more likely to feel uncomfortable sharing an impairment, and less likely to have high expectations for HE.
- > **There is a wide socio-economic gap for students with learning differences:** nearly half (47%) of young applicants sharing a learning difference are from the most advantaged backgrounds (POLAR4 quintile 5) compared to 8% from the least advantaged backgrounds (quintile 1), and they are nearly three times more likely to come from an independent school.
- > **Men are more likely to share an impairment:** although women are more likely to apply to HE overall (a 1:1.4 ratio of men:women), the gender gap narrows for disabled applicants overall – and reverses for those with a social, behavioural or communication impairment (a 2:1 ratio of men:women) and with visual impairments (a 1.1:1 ratio).
- > **Disabled students are twice as likely to identify as LGBT+:** 15% of disabled applicants share an LGBT+ identity, compared to 8% of applicants not sharing a disability, rising to 22% for those sharing social, behavioural or communication impairments.
- > **Applicants are generally comfortable sharing a disability:** Two thirds (65%) reported feeling comfortable with this but 10% were uncomfortable – this is a particular issue for those with hidden disabilities. There is a disparity between the number of students sharing an impairment in the application and at the point of enrolment, possibly indicating that a proportion start their course without discussing support with their university or college.

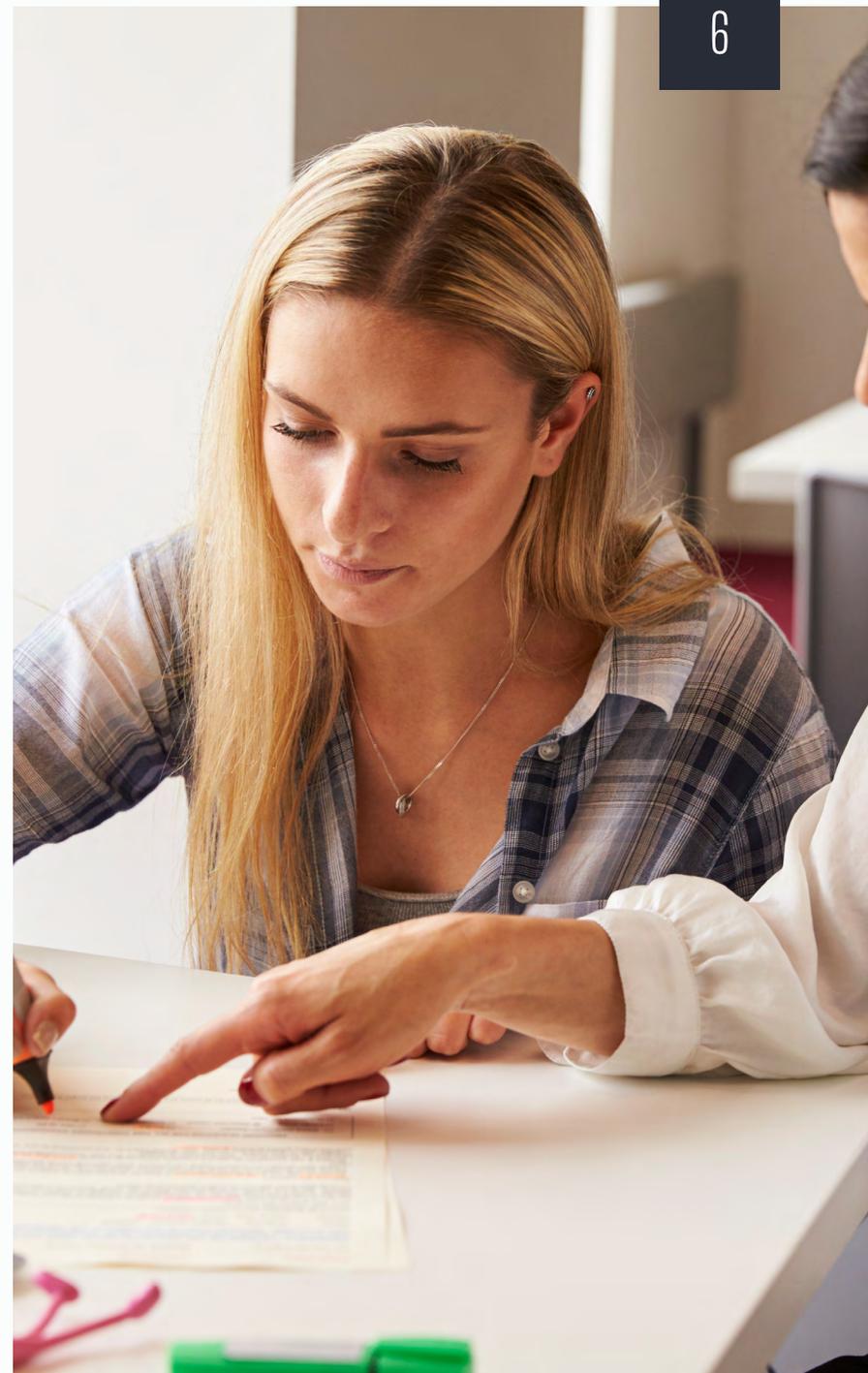
⁵ Survey population of UK-domiciled applicants applying in the 2022 application cycle, who shared a disability in their UCAS application.

⁶ A level grades are assigned points, such that A* is six points, A = five, B = four, C = three, D = two, and E = one. Achieved A level grade profiles of applicants are assigned the total number of points of their best three achieved grades. Only assigned to 18 year old UK applicants with at least three achieved A levels.

⁷ See Annex C for definitions and terminology used throughout this report, including categories of impairment.

This report is published at a time when government and policy makers across the education, training and employment sectors in the UK are re-examining what we mean by diversity and inclusion – and disabled people’s needs and ambitions are a key focus for improvement. In March 2022, the UK government **published the SEND green paper** which, along with the **Schools White Paper**, focuses on levelling-up opportunities for all children and young people, and outlines its vision for a single national system for special educational needs and disability (SEND). The document highlights “significant inconsistencies” in how individual needs are identified and assessed, and acknowledges that students need support for effective transitions into further and higher education and employment. Recently, the Institute for Apprentices and Technical Education (IfATE) **spoke** about the need for better representation and support for students on the autistic spectrum – an approach UCAS welcomes, particularly given the findings in this report that students with social, behavioural and communication impairments feel under-supported. Equally, the needs of disabled apprentices have been spotlighted in recent reports from **Disability Rights UK** and **The Open University** in order to ensure they have parity of access and success in apprenticeship opportunities. Furthermore, the inclusion of supported internships outlined in the **SEND green paper**, and the **Access to Work Adjustment Passports** being piloted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), are welcome additions to drive greater equity in career progression for all – but UCAS believes this should be extended across the lifecycle of education to ensure consistency and true inclusion. We have found that practical learning and assessments for some technical and vocational qualifications do not feel accessible to students with some impairments, so it is essential disabled people know early on that they are entitled to adjustments – and how to access them without stigma – otherwise students may be inadvertently excluded from progressing to higher level technical qualifications and apprenticeships. The recommendations within this report draw on UCAS’ insight and expertise in student progression to meet these ambitions.

This is the latest report in UCAS’ ‘Next Steps’ series, which examines the experiences of specific cohorts of students progressing through secondary and tertiary education, and forms part of our **broader range of insight reports**. Previous reports in this series looked at the experience of **LGBT+ students** (September 2021), followed by research into **nursing applicants** (January 2022) and **international applicants** (May 2022). Later this year we will focus on care-experienced students.



RECOMMENDATION

FOR

1. Extend the DWP's Access to Work Adjustment Passport scheme to ease the transition of students into HE and across their education lifecycle

DWP and DfE

In 2021, the DWP **committed** to piloting adjustment passports as part of its Access to Work initiative to ease the transition for disabled students progressing into employment. Disabled students will be offered passports that outline information about their disability and the adjustments they receive, avoiding the need to repeatedly share the same information or attend further health assessments when starting a new job. The findings of this report indicate that more could be done to support students moving from secondary to tertiary education and training so we recommend that the DWP collaborates with the Department for Education (DfE) to explore extending the adjustment passport scheme to include this important transition point. This would significantly enhance the experience of disabled students progressing to HE, making transition a smoother experience and ensuring they can explore all of their choices throughout the cycle.

Furthermore, as the introduction of the imminent lifelong loan entitlement (LLE) will require the education sector to adapt quickly to our changing learning and training needs, the method by which individuals can access support for any impairment or condition should be similarly high-paced and responsive. As such, we recommend that the adjustment passport scheme is extended further to encompass the ambitions of the LLE in order to ensure equal access to learning opportunities across the student's education lifecycle.

2. The progression journey for disabled students needs to start earlier

UCAS, SLC, universities and colleges, schools and colleges.

This report highlights that disabled students are 23% more likely to defer entry to HE due to delays with support. Subsequently, we recommend engagement with disabled students about their journey to HE and the support they can access happens much earlier to ensure they are able to take their next steps at the same time as their non-disabled peers, including:

- > Specific early outreach with disabled students included as a key component of institutions' widening access and participation plans (e.g. Access and Participation Plans in England, Outcome Agreements in Scotland), with earlier engagement at their heart.
- > Schools and colleges initiating conversations with disabled students about their next steps earlier, and involve parents/carers, as well as key support staff – including the learning support department and special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) – to ensure students are fully supported to achieve their ambitions.
- > UCAS to continue to improve the journey of disabled students to develop understanding of the information and resources they need along their journey to enhance personalisation in the Hub, and ensure all products are fit for purpose.
- > UCAS continuing to extend the scope of the student Hub to allow students to facilitate earlier engagement with students.
- > UCAS developing existing **guidance**, in collaboration with expert organisations, to support applicants to engage with student support teams at universities and college before they make their application.
- > As part of any revised process for Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs), students are encouraged to submit their applications as early as possible to allow subsequent arrangements for support to happen sooner and prevent **delays that may impede** entry to HE. UCAS will work with the Student Loans Company (SLC) to arrange an annual awareness raising campaign and to encourage applications.

RECOMMENDATION	FOR
<p>3. Greater transparency and detail about support in HE for disabled students, to ensure informed decision making</p> <p>Enhanced information and advice about the support disabled students can expect to receive in HE, apprenticeships and training – and clearer guidance about how they can access that support – is central to ensuring everyone can make an informed decision that is right for their needs and ambitions. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > An ‘at-a-glance’ indication of support for disabled students on each university and college page in UCAS search, linked to each institution’s own detailed guidance. > Accurate and up-to-date information about support for disabled students – including contact details of the disability team/adviser– immediately accessible on university and college websites. This information should be clearly outlined in widening access and participation plans, and reflected across each institution’s communication channels and social media, open days, outreach activities, and exhibitions. > A commitment across the HE sector to be fully transparent about how disability data is used in the admissions process, including fitness to practise requirements, to reduce misconceptions about sharing an impairment or condition in the UCAS application. 	<p>UCAS, Universities and colleges, HE sector bodies.</p>
<p>4. Equity of access for all children, regardless of background, to diagnostic assessment of learning differences and support</p> <p>The government’s SEND Green Paper highlights a key challenge that, “the system is not equally accessible: parents and carers with access to financial and social resources are often better placed to navigate the system and secure support for their child”, with funding being a particular barrier to equitable access to diagnostic testing and support. The paper sets out a proposal to create new national SEND standards to create greater consistency, including processes for “decision-making on how a child or young person’s needs are identified and recorded and instruct on how and when an assessment should take place”, and outlines ways in schools staff could be better trained to assist pupils.</p> <p>However, UCAS believes this could go further. This report evidences a stark disparity in progress to HE between the most and least advantaged students with learning differences. To redress this imbalance, we recommend there should be funding in all schools and colleges allowing every student up to the age of 14 to access diagnostic testing for a learning difference if they wish to have one, and the right support if a diagnosis is given. This recommendation echoes that of former Health Secretary Matt Hancock MP, whose call for a dyslexia screening bill to introduce testing in all primary schools references the lifelong impact of undiagnosed conditions and the importance of the right support.</p>	<p>Government</p>

UCAS FAIR ACCESS PROGRAMME – JUNE 2022

Analysis and insight reports are key components of UCAS' commitment to supporting widening access and participation. This work is developed within the UCAS Fair Access Programme, as outlined below.

Significant progress has been made in widening access and participation in the past fifteen years, with an increase of over 30,000 more students from the most disadvantaged areas applying in 2021 (a percentage increase of 66% applying since 2007), resulting in those students now being twice as likely to progress to higher education (HE). However, this progress has slowed in recent years: the MEM equality gap⁸ has narrowed by an average of 1.1% year on year since 2015 versus 4.4% across the previous five years. In 2021, for the first time in a decade, the MEM gap actually widened.

The journey to a million undergraduate applicants in 2026 – and increased demand across the full range of post-secondary pathways – presents further challenges, as increased competition risks disadvantaged students losing out. It is in this context, along with the reboot of the Access and Participation Plans in England, that UCAS has stepped up its widening access and participation work with its Fair Access Programme, established in 2021, with the aim of building on the valuable work already underway across the sector.

⁸ UCAS multiple equality measure – www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/equality-and-entry-rates-data-explorers





How does UCAS support disadvantaged students in taking their next step?

Sitting at the nexus between secondary and tertiary education, UCAS acts as a digital equaliser and supports students from all backgrounds to make informed choices about their next step, whether that be an undergraduate course, apprenticeship or lifelong learning opportunity.

The interests of disadvantaged students are at the heart of our charitable objects. Through the UCAS Hub, we tailor the individual student experience based on their context, preferences and desired pathway. A key element of the Hub is our personalised careers information, advice and guidance, and we work closely with expert organisations to ensure high quality content that both raises aspiration and increases awareness of available support.

The shared admissions service UCAS delivers promotes consistency and fairness. In addition, it enables students to share important information about their context through the personal statement, references and self-declared flags. The 2023 entry cycle represents a significant advancement in widening access, with seven new questions added to the application to identify:

- > Students estranged from their parents
- > Students with caring responsibilities
- > Students with parenting responsibilities
- > Refugees, asylum seekers and those with limited leave to remain in the UK
- > Students from UK Armed Forces families
- > UK Armed Forces veterans and Service leavers
- > A self-declared free school meals question

These questions aim to help a broader range of students to easily flag their circumstances so they can be connected to the right support for their needs. UCAS recognises the important role it plays in ensuring applicants are fully informed about why we ask for this information and how it is used, in order to meet our aim of creating a culture of positive disclosure, as first outlined in our 2021 [report on student mental health](#). This new data will also transform the insights we have into the progression of these students, which will be explored in future 'Next Steps' reports.

Each year, UCAS utilises its data science capabilities to publish analysis and insight reports on the progression of students to their next step, identifying potential barriers and providing a nuanced picture of students' circumstances through the MEM.

How can UCAS further support the efforts of the education and training sector in supporting fair access and levelling up?

As part of the Fair Access Programme, UCAS undertook a national consultation, engaging widely with schools, colleges, universities and third-sector charities across the UK, to understand how and where it could add additional value in widening access and participation. This consultation identified:

- > students don't always recognise themselves as disadvantaged, nor understand its relevance for progression or support;
- > schools and colleges can struggle to navigate the range of outreach opportunities and support, particularly for students with individual needs;
- > outreach providers lack clarity on how students engage with other support offers, and the impact on their progression; and
- > early engagement is vital – one in three students consider HE and training in primary school, with advantaged students 40% more likely to do so.

Using this insight, and as part of our commitment to fair access, UCAS is:

- > **Developing a new 'Outreach Connection Service' to raise awareness of support available, and enhance understanding of the impact of this:** This service is designed to make it easier for schools and students to navigate and connect to the range of support available from universities and third-sector charities, and significantly enhance the understanding of how students engage with these opportunities and then progress, transforming the sector's approach to evaluation.
- > **Continued reform of the application service.** As part of our commitment to **reimagining admissions**, and to ensure disadvantaged students are supported, UCAS continually reviews how we enable people to explore and connect to their post-secondary opportunities, such as:
 - **Clearing Plus** – a data-led system that matches courses to students based on their preferences, circumstances and achieved grades.
 - **Historic grades on entry tool** – to give greater transparency around the grades students held when accepted onto courses.

Future developments will introduce further structure and support for the personal statement, changes to the reference to support students' extenuating circumstances, and presenting the full range of post-secondary choices to students side by side, giving students parity of choice.

- > **Fully personalised student journeys.** Understanding the needs of specific cohorts of disadvantaged or under-represented students across their full decision-making journey will help raise aspiration and build confidence. We aim to present the information and advice students need – at the point of optimum impact – to make informed choices across the full range of post-secondary pathways.
- > **Leading insight on the barriers to progression.** Our 'Where next?' and 'Next steps' series offer fresh insights into the potential barriers students face when faced with the full range of post-secondary destinations, and aid policy considerations on how they can be overcome.
- > **Targeting support in schools and colleges.** We are working directly with the lowest progression schools and colleges across the UK to deliver bespoke professional development and resources that will allow them to support students to explore their options and make high quality applications that are right for them.

UCAS will release updates on the progress of these ambitious plans in future 'Next Steps' reports, starting with our insight into the progression of care-experienced students due late 2022.

SECTION ONE
HOW DO DISABLED
STUDENTS PROGRESS TO
THEIR NEXT STEP?



In 2021, 83,220 UK applicants shared an impairment, condition, or mental health condition in the UCAS application and almost 67,000 were accepted onto a higher education (HE) course (80%). Over the past ten years, there has been a 105% increase in the number of applicants sharing this information, signifying progress in building applicants' confidence. However, there remains a clear under-representation of disabled people in HE – one in five working-age adults in the UK are disabled, compared to one in seven HE students.

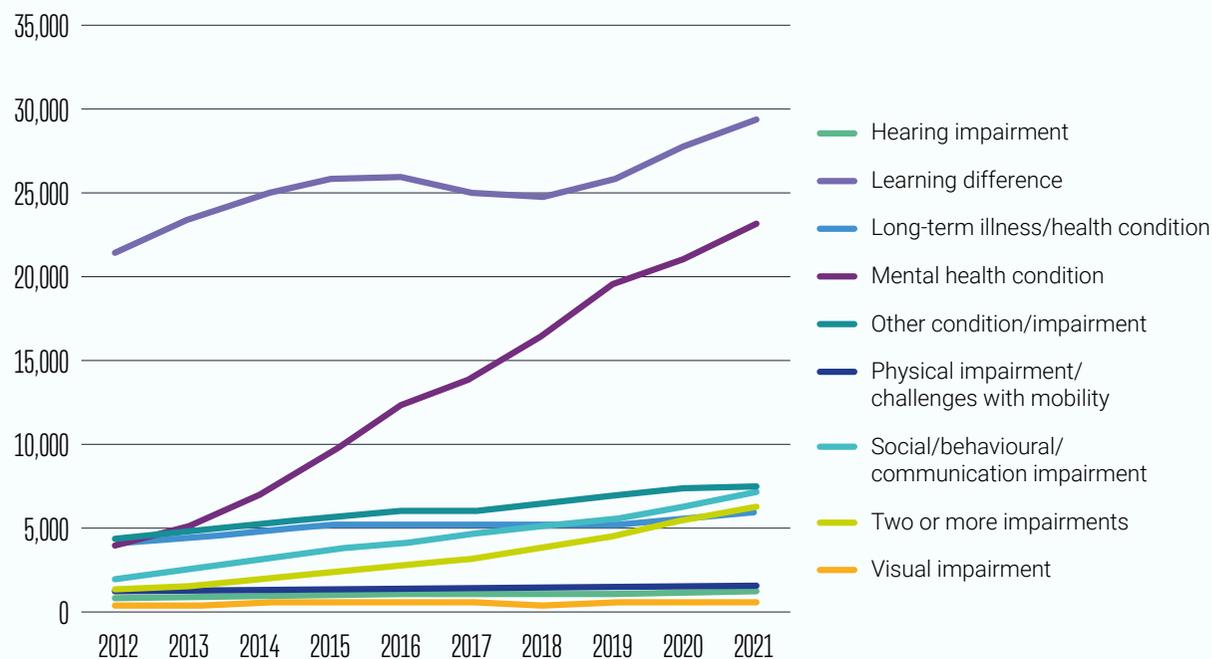


Figure 1: UK applicants sharing a impairment, condition, or mental health condition in the UCAS application 2012-2021

In the 2021 cycle, more than a third (35%) of disabled applicants shared a learning difference (e.g. dyslexia or dyscalculia) – the most commonly shared category, representing 5% of all UK applicants. Since 2012, the greatest increases in people feeling able to share have been seen for mental health conditions (+453%) and social, behavioural or communication impairments (+249%).

There has also been a rise of 339% in applicants sharing two or more impairments. Our analysis shows that those who select this category are most likely to have a mental health condition in combination with either a learning difference or a social, behavioural or communication impairment⁹.

National statistics show that mental ill health is the most commonly reported condition for working-age adults in the UK (42% of disabled people), followed by mobility impairments (41%). Compared to UCAS statistics, we can see a huge under-representation of physical impairments or challenges with mobility (9% of disabled applicants) and an over-representation of mental health conditions (56% of disabled applicants)¹⁰.

⁹ Applicants cannot currently select multiple categories so must select the category 'You have two or more impairments and/or disabling medical conditions' if they have more than one impairment. See Annex A for methodology regarding impairment detection

¹⁰ Survey respondents were asked to select all conditions and impairments that best described them, creating a more in-depth picture than that gained from the application data – see note above.

WHO ARE THE DISABLED STUDENTS THAT APPLY TO HE?

In comparison to non-disabled applicants, those who share an impairment are overall:

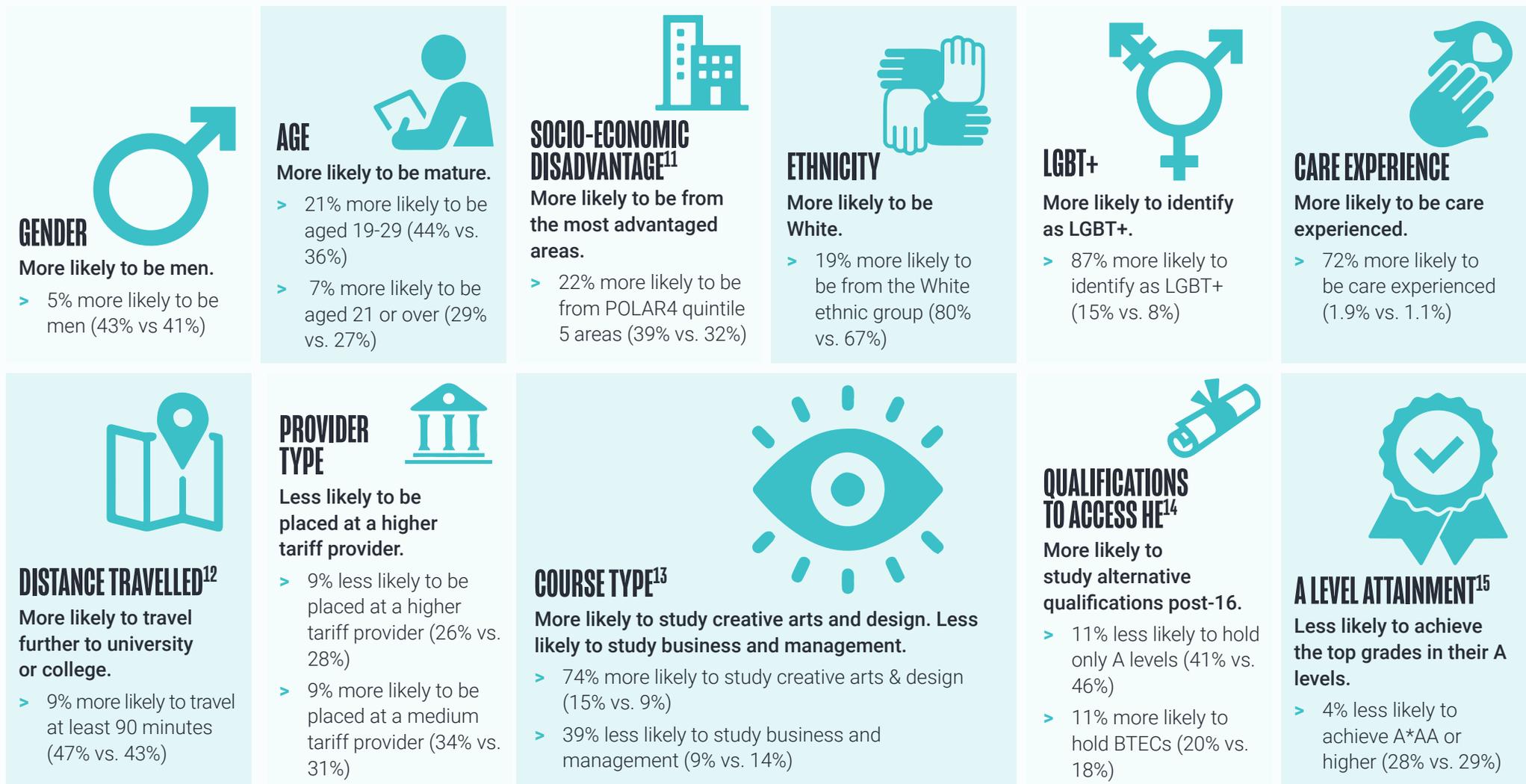


Figure 2: Key figures for disabled applicants overall, with comparisons to non-disabled applicants overall, 2021 cycle

¹¹Using the POLAR4 measure: UK 18 year old applicants only.

¹²18 year old UK placed applicants.

¹³Note: differences at course level may be indicative of lower disclosure rates rather than preferences.

¹⁴18 year old UK applicants.

¹⁵A level grades are assigned points, such that A* is six points, A is five, B is four, C is three, D is two, and E is one. Achieved A level grade profiles of applicants are assigned the total number of points of their best three achieved grades. Only assigned to 18 year old applicants with at least three achieved A levels.

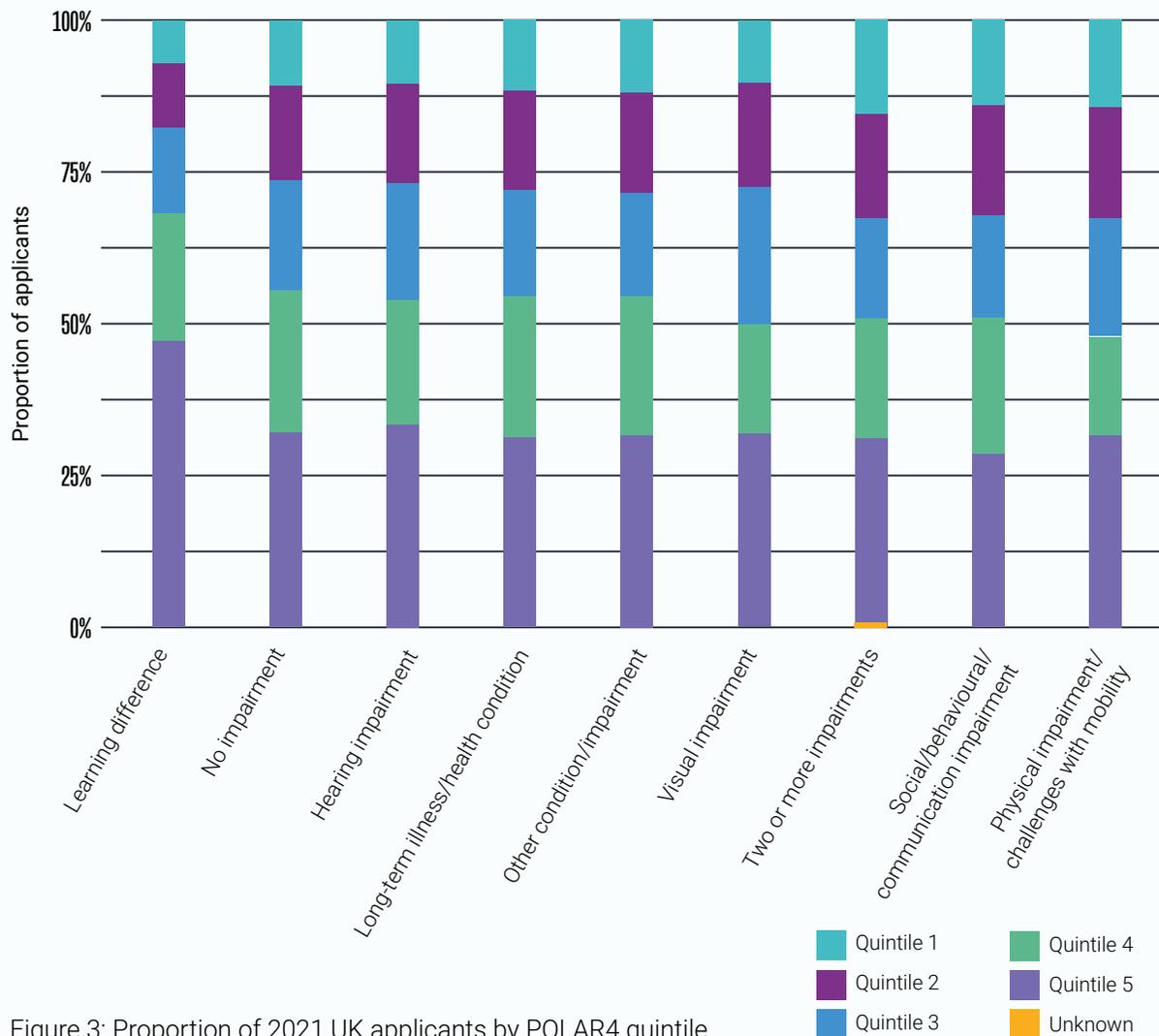


Figure 3: Proportion of 2021 UK applicants by POLAR4 quintile

By looking at disabled students¹⁶ as one homogenous group, however, we miss critical nuances. So, in this section, we examine the data presented above more closely, looking at each impairment category to better understand the additional challenges students may encounter

Learning differences

- > Significantly more likely to come from the most advantaged backgrounds (47% POLAR4 quintile 5) than the most disadvantaged areas (8% quintile 1).
- > Nearly three times more likely to come from an independent school.

Owing to the high proportion of applicants from the most advantaged areas in this group, the behaviour of those with learning differences mirrors that of students from POLAR4 quintile 5 more generally, including: choice of provider (28% accepted at higher tariff providers), A level attainment (63% achieve at least ABB), and ethnic group (82% from the White ethnic group). Conversely, applicants in this category are more likely to study BTEC qualifications, bucking the trend for quintile 5 applicants who are more likely to study A levels.

As seen in Figure 3, applicants in all other impairment categories are more likely to come from less advantaged backgrounds (POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2). The stark under-representation of the most disadvantaged students sharing a learning difference reinforces findings from a **2019 APPG report** regarding the inequity of access to diagnostic testing and assessment and the subsequent lifelong impact – including lower progression to HE. It is likely that the over-representation of the most advantaged students in this category masks the challenges faced by those from low-income families. As such, we welcome the commitment set out in the government’s Schools White Paper (March 2022) to “ensure children with SEND... have the same opportunities for success as their peers. Whether improving the early identification of need and the quality of mainstream support, or providing effective and timely specialist support, we have a moral duty to do better by these children.”

¹⁶UCAS recognises that not everyone considers their impairment or condition to be a disability, so the term ‘disabled student’ is used throughout this report with an appreciation that it is an imperfect term.

Physical impairment or challenges with mobility

- > More likely to be placed at lower tariff providers (35% compared to 30% non-disabled students) closer to home (61% travel less than 90 minutes compared to 55% of non-disabled students).

Despite being more likely to be placed at lower tariff providers, applicants with physical impairments or challenges with mobility tend to achieve above-average A level grades (31% of 18 year olds achieve A*AA or above, the most likely group to do so). This may be due to students restricting their choices to local providers to live at home during their studies to avoid any disruption to ongoing medical support structures. Conversely, **government data** shows that Level 3 students with SEN in England achieved a lower average point score for both A levels (30.7 compared to 33.0 for students with no identified SEN) and Applied Generals (26.8 compared to 29.1) in 2019.

Physical impairments or challenges with mobility is the second most likely category to be from more disadvantaged backgrounds (15% from POLAR4 quintile 1) – a factor which may have contributed to these students choosing to study closer to home.

Social, behavioural and communication impairments

- > Although HE applicants are more likely to be women overall (59:41 ratio of women to men), applicants with social, behavioural and communication impairments are twice as likely (33:67) to be men.

The over-representation of men in this category may be due to the higher proportion of men historically diagnosed with autistic spectrum conditions. Understanding how autistic characteristics manifest differently in women is still developing¹⁷ so it will be interesting to monitor this data as current and future assessments take account of these developments, and to reassess how the education sector supports autistic women.

This is the least ethnically diverse impairment category, with 84% of applicants from the White ethnic group (compared to 68% of non-disabled applicants), and the category with the youngest applicants: 77% apply under the age of 21 (compared to 73% of non-disabled applicants).

While disabled applicants are more likely to be care experienced overall (see Figure 2), students with social, behavioural and communication impairments are 2.3 times more likely to have been in care. **NECL research** shows that nearly two thirds (63%) of care leavers have a special educational need (SEN) – an intersectionality leading to a much lower level of progression to HE. UCAS will explore the experiences of care-experienced students in a report to be published later this year.

Similarly, disabled students are more likely to identify as LGBT+ (see Figure 2), but a much higher proportion is seen for this impairment category: 22% compared to 8% of non-disabled applicants. Our 2021 report, **Next steps: what is the experience of LGBT+ students in education?**, examines the intersectionality of LGBT+ identity and disability in more depth.

Hearing impairments

- > More likely to study alternative qualifications to A levels (37% A levels only compared to 46% non-disabled applicants, 4% SQAs only compared to 6%).
- > More likely to study BTECs compared to non-disabled applicants (21% compared to 18%), Cambridge Technicals (5% compared to 3%), Extended Projects (12% compared to 10%).

Hearing-impaired applicants are more likely to study a wider range of Level 3 qualifications. This focus on vocational subjects continues into HE, as they are 79% more likely to study health and social care, 42% more likely to study veterinary sciences, and 24% more likely to study education and teaching than non-disabled applicants.

¹⁷National Autistic Society, Autistic women and girls: www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/autistic-women-and-girls

Conversely, visually impaired applicants are much more likely to hold only A level (46%) or SQA (7%) qualifications and less likely to hold alternative qualifications (17% BTECs, 10% Extended Project Qualification, <1% Welsh Baccalaureate). This is possibly because students with visual impairments (or those advising them) perceive the practical elements and assessment formats for technical and vocational courses to be a barrier, despite them being legally entitled to reasonable adjustments. We should consider the longer-term implications of this: anyone who feels excluded from post-16 technical or vocational qualifications may take that sense of exclusion through to their post-18 choices, thus lessening their likelihood to consider higher level technical qualifications and apprenticeships later on – and associated career paths.

Applicants with hearing impairments are also more likely to be placed at lower tariff providers (45% compared to 40% of non-disabled applicants), possibly due to their mixed qualification profile – **UCAS research** shows that HE choices can be limited by a student's post-16 qualification choices, particularly for vocational subjects.

Visual impairments

- > More likely to apply to providers within a half-hour radius of their home address (41% vs 35%).
- > More likely to apply to lower tariff providers (47% vs 40%).

Similar to those with physical impairments or challenges with mobility, many visually impaired applicants apply to lower tariff providers, possibly because they also tend to study closer to home.

While disabled students overall are much more likely to be from the White ethnic group, a higher proportion in this category are from the Asian ethnic group (18% compared to 14% of non-disabled applicants). In fact, UCAS data indicates that applicants from the Asian and Black ethnic groups are more likely to share a visible or physical impairment (including visual and hearing impairments and long-term illnesses or health conditions), whereas those from the White and Mixed ethnic groups are more likely to share hidden disabilities (social, behavioural or communication impairments and learning differences).

There is a slighter higher ratio of men to women in this category (1.1:1) – the only category other than social, behavioural and communication impairments where we see a reversal of the overall trend for more women than men applying to HE.

Long-term illnesses or health conditions

- > More likely to apply as mature students (35% aged 21 and over).
- > More likely to be women (62% compared to 59% of non-disabled applicants).
- > More likely to study nursing – 39% more likely than non-disabled applicants (and five times more likely than those with a social, behavioural or communication impairment).

Due to the high proportion of mature applicants in this category, the behaviour of those with long-term illnesses or health conditions echoes that of mature students more generally. The higher likelihood of applicants in this category to choose nursing is examined in our January 2022 report, **Next Steps: Who are the future nurses?**, which finds a connection between the branch of nursing studied and applicants' life experiences. Applicants with long-term illnesses and health conditions are more likely to study subjects allied to medicine (8%) than any other category, and the only category where applicants have a similar chance of studying medicine as non-disabled applicants (2.5%), further supporting the findings of the nursing research.

The impact of COVID-19 on deferrals for disabled applicants

The deferral rate for disabled applicants is consistently higher than for non-disabled applicants; in 2019 (the last cycle unaffected by the pandemic), they were 1.2 times more likely to defer their application by one year (7.0% compared to 5.7%). Applicants with learning differences are consistently around 1.5 times more likely to defer (see Figure 4).

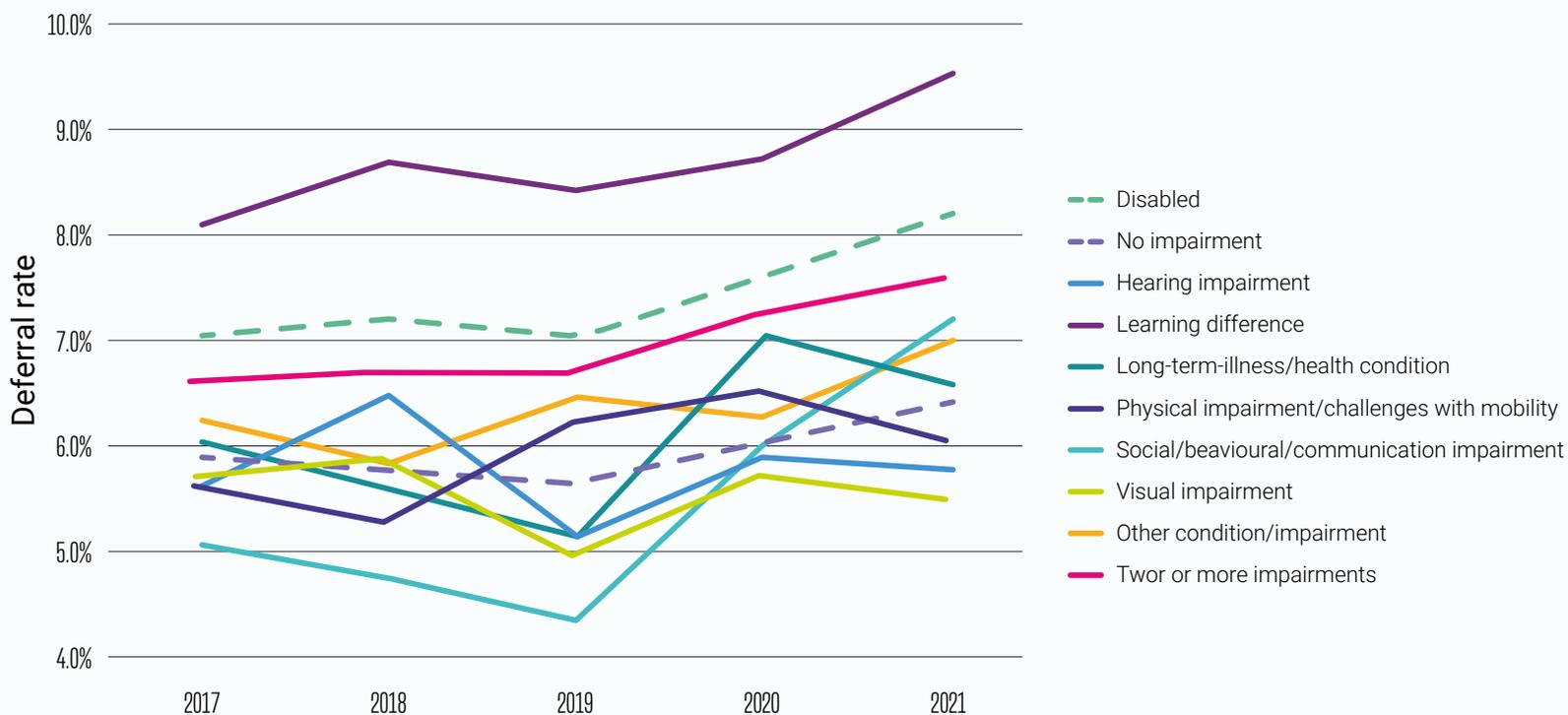


Figure 4: The deferral rate for each placed applicant group and the non-disabled group

During the 2020 cycle, the deferral rate for disabled applicants rose to 7.6%, with the largest increases seen for those with long-term illnesses or health conditions (7.1%), and those with social, behavioural or communication impairments (6.0%). In 2021, the deferral rate rose again, to 8.2% (compared to 6.4% for non-disabled applicants), with the steepest increase seen for those with social, behavioural or communication impairments (7.2%), making them 11% more likely to defer than non-disabled applicants in this cycle – and, for the first time, more likely to defer than non-disabled applicants overall.

OUR SURVEY ASKED DISABLED APPLICANTS WHETHER COVID-19 HAD LED THEM TO DEFER ENTRY IN 2022:



The majority (87%) said the pandemic would not affect their decision to start their course in 2022

8% deferred entry or delayed applying due to unavailability of support



7% delayed or deferred due to health concerns related to COVID-19

As the threat of the pandemic lessens, disabled applicants seem more confident about starting their course this year, but a significant minority are still experiencing challenges, either due to health concerns or of a lack of support. But the pandemic has had a positive impact for some: one respondent told us, “Pre-COVID I would never have dreamed of applying!”

Some respondents used the free text to tell us more about their decision to defer due to COVID-19:

- “ Online learning is made very difficult by my disability, so I deferred.
- “ I deferred entry because I believed that the disruption caused by the pandemic has harmed my social development, and I need more time to mature before I feel safe going to a university.
- “ I’m planning changing my entry to deferred due to how my independence was affected by the pandemic.

The higher deferral rate, the impact of COVID-19 notwithstanding, may be linked to the additional challenges for those needing support and adjustments to progress to HE. **The recent House of Lords report** on Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSAs) highlighted the length of time between application and award, and the difficulties students encounter when making arrangements as common reasons for deferral. As such, UCAS supports the recommendations made by Lord Holmes MBE, particularly that which suggests UCAS, with other stakeholders, should improve take-up of DSAs through an awareness campaign.

No student should feel pressure to defer entry to HE due to delays in support or adjustments, and the onus on students to manage these arrangements, “creates an extra layer of difficulty, stress and bureaucracy” – particularly when they are often unaware that they will be expected to organise much of the provision themselves¹⁸. The DWP’s **Access to Work Adjustment Passport** aims to ease the process between HE to employment or further study, so to ensure true parity of access to the full range of opportunities, any such scheme should be fully inclusive across the student’s educational lifecycle – not only the critical transition from secondary and tertiary education, but also to align with the government’s **lifelong loan entitlement** (LLE) plans.

Additionally, students’ free text comments about social engagement and development, especially when considered together with their experiences of social opportunities offered by schools and colleges (outlined in Section 2), pinpoint where more could be done to create a sense of community for disabled students and encourage social interactions – particularly for those who might find this more challenging due to the nature of their impairment.

¹⁸Policy Connect (2020), Arriving at Thriving: www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/arriving-thriving-learning-disabled-students-ensure-access-all



SECTION TWO
HOW DO DISABLED
STUDENTS FEEL ABOUT
THEIR EDUCATIONAL
EXPERIENCES?



Disabled applicants who have applied to start university or college in 2022 were invited to tell us more about their experiences in education to date, of making their UCAS application, and their expectations for HE, including what they are concerned and excited about. We received almost 5,000 responses – approximately 6% of all applicants sharing an impairment or condition in the UCAS application this cycle.

What have disabled students' experiences been in school or college?

Applicants who are currently in secondary education were asked how supported they felt by different aspects of their time at their school or college. We found a mixed picture, with most feeling supported academically (53%)¹⁹, but fewer (17%) having access to extra-curricular societies and clubs for disabled students.²⁰

“ It is a long time since I have been in education and my experiences with hidden disabilities and mental health issues at that time were appalling. I know times have changed immensely for the better which is why I am going back to try to obtain my degree now after 40 years – it wasn't possible at the time due to all the barriers in place.



Almost half (49%) felt 'very' or 'mostly' supported by the general and pastoral support they had received²¹.



Almost half (47%) felt supported by the facilities and environment at their school or college²².



More than half (53%) felt supported by the educational support they had received²³.



Only 17% had access to extra-curricular activities or clubs for disabled students at their school or college²⁴.



30% had experienced disability rights and issues being mentioned in lessons²⁵.



Most students were aware of anti-bullying policies (70%), equality, inclusion and acceptance policies (66%), and SEN or disability policies (56%) at their school or college.

¹⁹Students who selected 'Very supported' or 'Mostly supported' as a proportion of the total excluding those who selected 'Not applicable'.

²⁰Proportion of applicants who said they were aware of their school or college offering inclusive extra-curricular activities or clubs for disabled students.

²¹This might include guidance and help with managing your impairment or condition, or someone to talk to about your support needs (e.g. special educational needs (SEN) department, tutor, learning support services).

²²This might include physical adjustments to the building or classrooms (e.g. adjustable desks, ramps) or spaces where students can go to feel safe.

²³This might include adjustments to classroom materials and assessments (e.g. accessible formats), or access to a learning support assistant.

²⁴This might include inclusive clubs and extra-curricular activities, or a supportive community of disabled students and those with learning differences.

²⁵This might include lessons about being inclusive of disabled people (e.g. in PSHE), or disabled people's achievements and experiences reflected in what you learn.



We received many very positive comments about the support and adjustments students had received in school or college, showing the power of helping young people reach their potential and feel confident:

- “ All equipment and arrangements I’ve needed have been arranged by the school. The school contacted the exam board with any questions that I’ve had and told me the answer as soon as possible. I couldn’t have asked for more.
- “ I am so grateful for the support I’ve been given in school. They gave me extra help and revision materials. I wouldn’t have the grades I achieved if it wasn’t for them.

Looking at responses by category of impairment, we can see that some groups are more likely to feel supported than others – applicants with physical and/or visible impairments are more likely to feel supported than those with ‘hidden’ disabilities:



Categories feeling most supported by their school or college²⁶:

- > Physical impairments or challenges with mobility (58%)
- > Visual impairments (54%)



Categories feeling least supported by their school or college:

- > Two or more impairments (34%)
- > Social, behavioural or communication impairments (41%)

²⁶ Proportion of respondents in each impairment category feeling ‘very’ or ‘mostly’ supported across all five metrics, excluding those who selected ‘Not applicable’.

The case study from the University of Warwick illustrates how residential outreach activities can be used to build confidence, understand the challenges they may face, and help familiarise them with university life.

Case study:

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK – EASTER RESIDENTIAL FOR AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE

The University of Warwick’s Easter residential experience aims to build confidence and enable autistic students, and their parents, to see the opportunities available in HE – and understand challenges they may face.

The programme is aimed at Year 12 students who are considering HE and was designed with support from the Disability Services team, the Students Union Autism Group and the local CAMHS team. Autistic people find unfamiliar environments and situations challenging, so a range of activities are offered to help prospective students become more familiar with the self-initiated, self-motivated tasks they might struggle with. These included staying in halls of residence, academic taster sessions, shopping, cooking, and group social activities such as esports, a climbing wall and film night.

The young people who attended the residential said the experience had made them feel more confident about applying, and that the supportive environment had helped them understand more about university life.

The free text responses showed some students experienced a lack of understanding about their impairment or condition, even though the school or college had tried to be supportive:

“ I believe schools genuinely want to help and support all of their students the best they can, however, I feel the issue is more in understanding how to.

“ Aside from in the SEN department, staff have limited or no understanding about disabled people, the accommodations we might need, or why we might struggle with certain things. I've found that staff are aware of the names of my diagnoses but continue to apply standards suited to abled pupils.

Respondents also used the free text to explain that the environment or curriculum at school or college did not always feel inclusive – a particular issue for those with hidden disabilities:

“ I feel as though things aren't always autism/ neurodivergent friendly, e.g. bright lights.

“ Disability is only ever taught as a physical and visible impairment and therefore does not feel inclusive.

“ I think more could be done to help peers have a greater understanding of other people's difficulties and barriers, to reduce stigma and promote inclusivity.

What students are looking forward to – expectations of HE

Many respondents shared positive expectations for HE, and felt a clear sense of hopefulness for this new chapter in their lives. Universities and colleges are seen as diverse and inclusive environments, and applicants expect them to have established policies and procedures in place to support disabled students. In fact, their expectations for support in HE exceed their satisfaction with their experiences in school or college so far:



Nearly two thirds (65%) believe the general support will be 'excellent' or 'good'



Over three in five (61%) expect the educational support to be 'excellent' or 'good'



Over half (53%) expect the facilities to be 'excellent' or 'good'



44% expect the social aspects to be 'excellent' or 'good'



43% are looking forward to the curriculum

Looking at category of impairment, we see that students who are more likely to report a positive experience in school or college are also more likely to have higher expectations for HE – and more likely to feel comfortable sharing an impairment (see below). Positive early experiences seem to build confidence that is carried throughout a student’s educational career, and this may lead to a greater inclination to seek out support.



Categories with the highest expectations for support in HE²⁷:

- > Physical impairments or challenges with mobility (68%)
- > Visual impairments (65%)

Categories with the lowest expectations for support in HE:

- > Two or more impairments (50%)
- > Social, behavioural or communication impairments (50%)



Despite the higher expectations for HE, it’s clear that some applicants still lack confidence in, and knowledge about, the type and quality of support they will receive. Respondents used the free text to tell us they were unclear about what support was available, whether it would materialise as promised, and if it would be sustained throughout their studies:

“ I feel like I will be left alone and not checked up on. I worry that if things go wrong/break in my accommodation that negatively impact my disability, they won’t be fixed.

“ I am incredibly worried at the prospect of going to university, I have a constant fear I will miss out and have to fight for my rights. I hope I am proved wrong.

“ Going to university worries me as I am not yet certain of the support I may or may not receive in order to successfully access the course.

Better information about support for disabled students at institution level could help applicants make informed choices that are right for them. Equally, a more consistent, proactive approach that encourages prospective applicants to contact student services to discuss their requirements would help build confidence and set the right expectations.



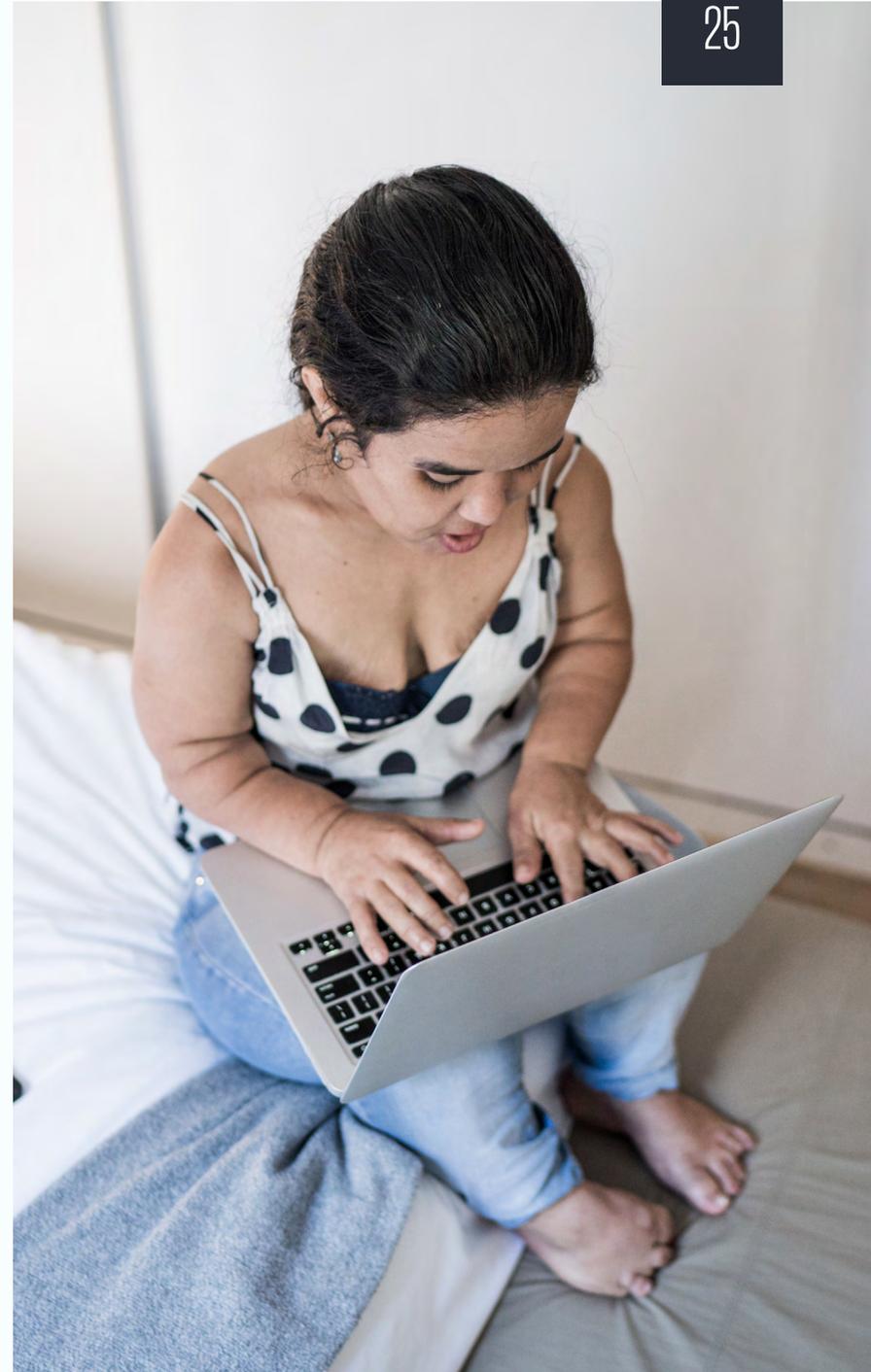
²⁷ Proportion of respondents in each impairment category with ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ expectations of support across all five metrics.

Student expectation about support in HE is a complex issue; young people moving from secondary to tertiary education may not always be fully aware of the various mechanisms that have been working to support them, meaning they may be unable to fully articulate their support requirements. Similarly, teachers and advisers in secondary education may lack knowledge about support in universities and colleges, so may not be able to fully support disabled applicants in this aspect of their decision making. So, while the proportion of students expecting support in HE to be ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ appears to be reassuring, it may not take account of individuals’ understanding of what they will receive, which could be unrealistic. Indeed, applicants may find the difference between the type and level of support offered in HE is very different to that received in secondary education, and not fully understand that a greater degree of independence is expected.

Compounding these challenges is the difference in terminology used in secondary education (typically referring to ‘SEND’ – see Annex C) and HE (typically referring to ‘disability’), adding an additional point of confusion for applicants (and those supporting them) trying to research support. This is highlighted as a key challenge in Policy Connect’s [Arriving at Thriving](#) report (2020) – particularly for people who don’t identify as ‘disabled’ who may miss vital information about support and Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs), and feel less comfortable identifying as ‘disabled’ in the UCAS application.

This variance within the education sector needs to be addressed, either through policy change or enhanced information and advice that makes these differences transparent to a non-specialist audience. We have seen the impact of aligning terminology across the secondary and tertiary sector previously when looking at socio-economic disadvantage – typically measured by eligibility for free school meals (FSM) in secondary education but by POLAR in HE. In 2021, UCAS provided admissions teams with individual level FSM data²⁸, thus encouraging colleagues in the HE sector to consider FSM as a key measure of disadvantage in addition to POLAR. That year saw a [record 20.9% entry rate](#) for FSM applicants, demonstrating the power of a common understanding across the secondary and higher education sectors regarding the circumstances of students.

²⁸ National Pupil Database – 18 year old applicants, England only.



Information and advice – do disabled students research support for their individual needs before making an application?

While the majority of disabled applicants (56%) research support before making an application, a significant number do not. There are many reasons applicants do not consider this to be an important part of their research and decision making – some will not require support, and for others, the type or level of support they need will not affect their choice of university or college. For some applicants, their individual support needs may be a far more significant consideration.

Of those who researched support for disabled students before making their application:



Almost half (45%) looked at **general support**.

- > highest for those with two or more impairments (62%)
- > lowest for those with long-term illnesses or health conditions (37%)



Over a third (36%) researched **educational support**.

- > highest for those with visual impairments (51%)
- > lowest for those with long-term illnesses or health conditions (20%)



16% researched **facilities** and **physical adjustments** to campus.

- > highest for those with physical impairments or challenges with mobility (34%)
- > lowest for those with learning differences (10%)

“ I’d love to see more education around disability, especially invisible disabilities, as this may reduce bullying.

The likelihood of an applicant to research support before applying to HE varies by impairment category, and the type of support they consider also varies. Encouragingly, although applicants with two or more impairments feel less confident about the support they will receive, they are still likely to research what’s available.

Information and advice – what is important to students?

Applicants were invited to tell us which factors they had considered in their research, and how this influenced their decision making. Of those who had researched support, nearly a third (30%) took this into account as a main factor, with a further 36% saying it had ‘some influence’. 8% applied only to the universities and colleges that specifically offered their preferred levels of support, indicating that, for some students, certain types of support or adjustments are integral to their choice.

“ Despite teachers being accommodating to my needs, there is little willingness to open conversations about any requirements I may need and the difficulties in accessing certain places or classes.

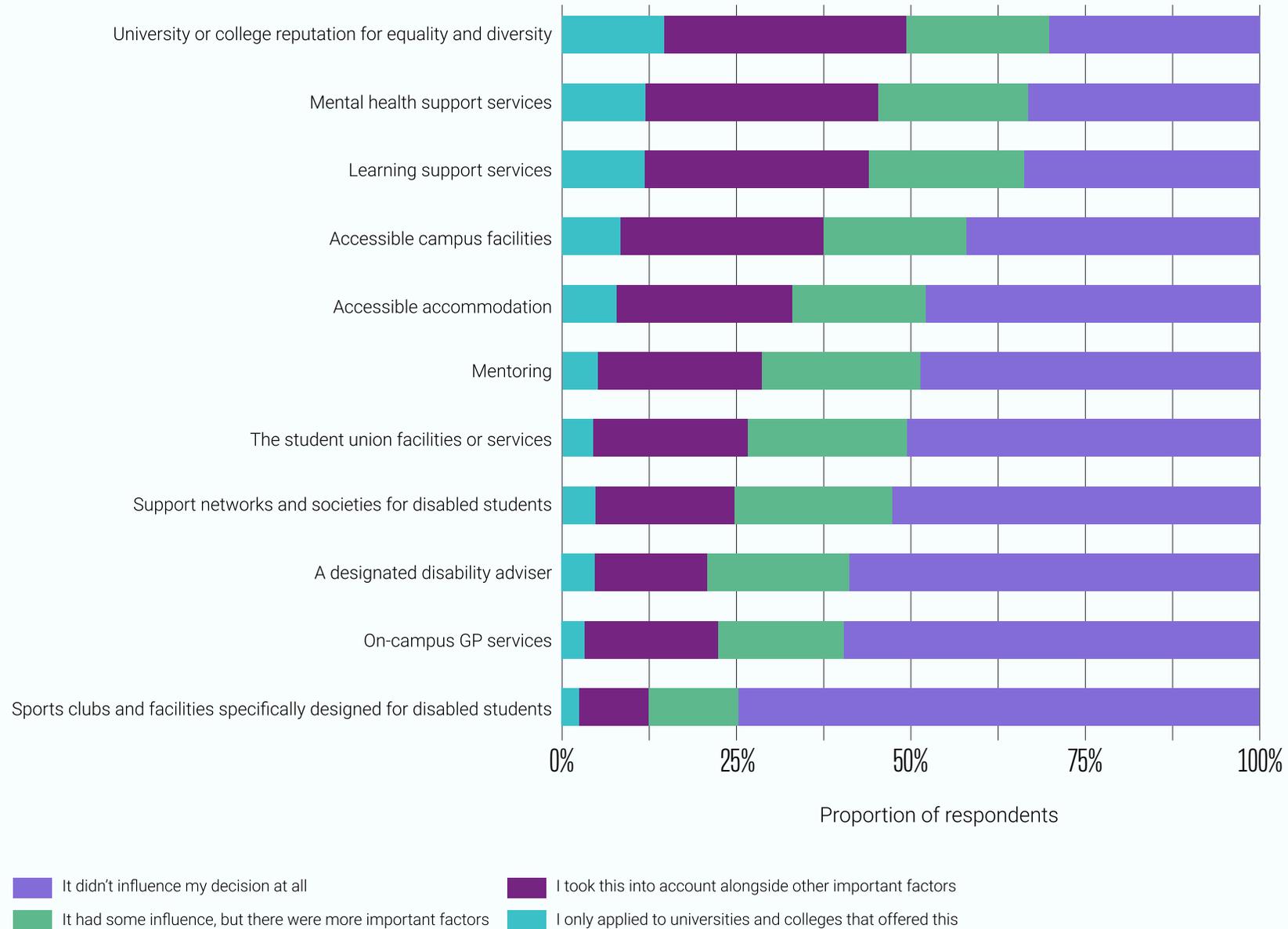


Figure 5: The importance rating of a number of factors considered while researching university or college options (weighted proportions of survey respondents, excluding responses of 'Not applicable')

Overall, applicants were most influenced by the university or college's reputation for equality and diversity. Of those who considered this factor, 70% took it into account in their decision making²⁹, with 15% of these respondents only applying to institutions with a good reputation in this area. Some applicants even used the free text to underline their expectation that their university or college should demonstrate a clear commitment:

“ I expect any educational setting to at least be fair and inclusive to students who have additional needs or a disability, any place that doesn't provide that is not a place I'd want to be.

Other important considerations³⁰ were mental health support services (67%), learning support services (66%), accessible campus facilities (58%), accessible accommodation (52%), mentoring (51%) and student union facilities or services (50%). Again, there are clear divergences in applicants' priorities depending on their impairment category:



Applicants with physical impairments or challenges with mobility were most likely to prioritise **accessible campus facilities** (69%) and **accessible accommodation** (67%)



Mentoring was prioritised most by those with two or more impairments (59%) and learning differences (52%)



Applicants with two or more impairments, and those with social, behavioural or communication impairments, were most likely to **prioritise mental health support services** (80%)



Applicants with visual impairments were the most likely to prioritise **sports clubs and facilities** for disabled students (48%)



Learning support services were more likely to be prioritised by those with visual impairments (80%), two or more impairments (76%), and learning differences (69%)



Applicants with long-term illnesses or health conditions were the most likely to prioritise **on-campus GP facilities** (54%).

²⁹ Proportion of respondents who did not select 'It didn't influence my decision at all'. Respondents who selected 'Not applicable' were excluded from the overall total.

³⁰ Proportion of respondents who took the relevant factor into consideration and did not select 'It didn't influence my decision at all'. Respondents who selected 'Not applicable' were excluded from the overall total.



Information and advice – where do disabled students find information about support?

The information universities and colleges provide about support for disabled students is an influential factor when applicants are choosing where to study, so it is important this is clearly signposted to assist prospective students to make informed decisions aligned to their individual needs. It is also useful for universities and colleges to know how students conduct research to ensure they reach them in the ways they find most effective.

How and where applicants research support for disabled students:³¹



73% of research was conducted via the **institution's website or prospectus**.

- > Most likely for applicants with two or more impairments (81%)



Nearly a quarter of those who researched (24%) **directly contacted the university or college** for more information.

- > Most likely for applicants with visual impairments (41%)



28% of applicants who researched used peer reviews from **social media or online forums**.

- > Most likely for applicants with two or more impairments (36%)



22% of those who researched considered the institution's **disability policies and awards**.

- > Most likely for applicants with visual impairments (29%)

³¹ Proportions relate to the number of students who had done some research using this information source.

Applicants' experiences of researching support for disabled students:



More than three in five of those who researched support (61%) **encountered no issues** in finding the information they needed.³²

- > Applicants with long-term illnesses or health conditions (70%) were most likely to encounter no issues.
- > Applicants with visual impairments (33%), with two or more impairments (29%) and with physical impairments or challenges with mobility (28%) were most likely to report they had encountered issues.³³



Nearly half of those who had researched support (47%) **found it 'easy' or 'extremely easy'** to find the information they needed.³⁴

- > Most likely for applicants with long-term illnesses or health conditions (58%) and with visual impairments (54%)
- > Applicants with two or more impairments (39%) were least likely to report that it was easy.



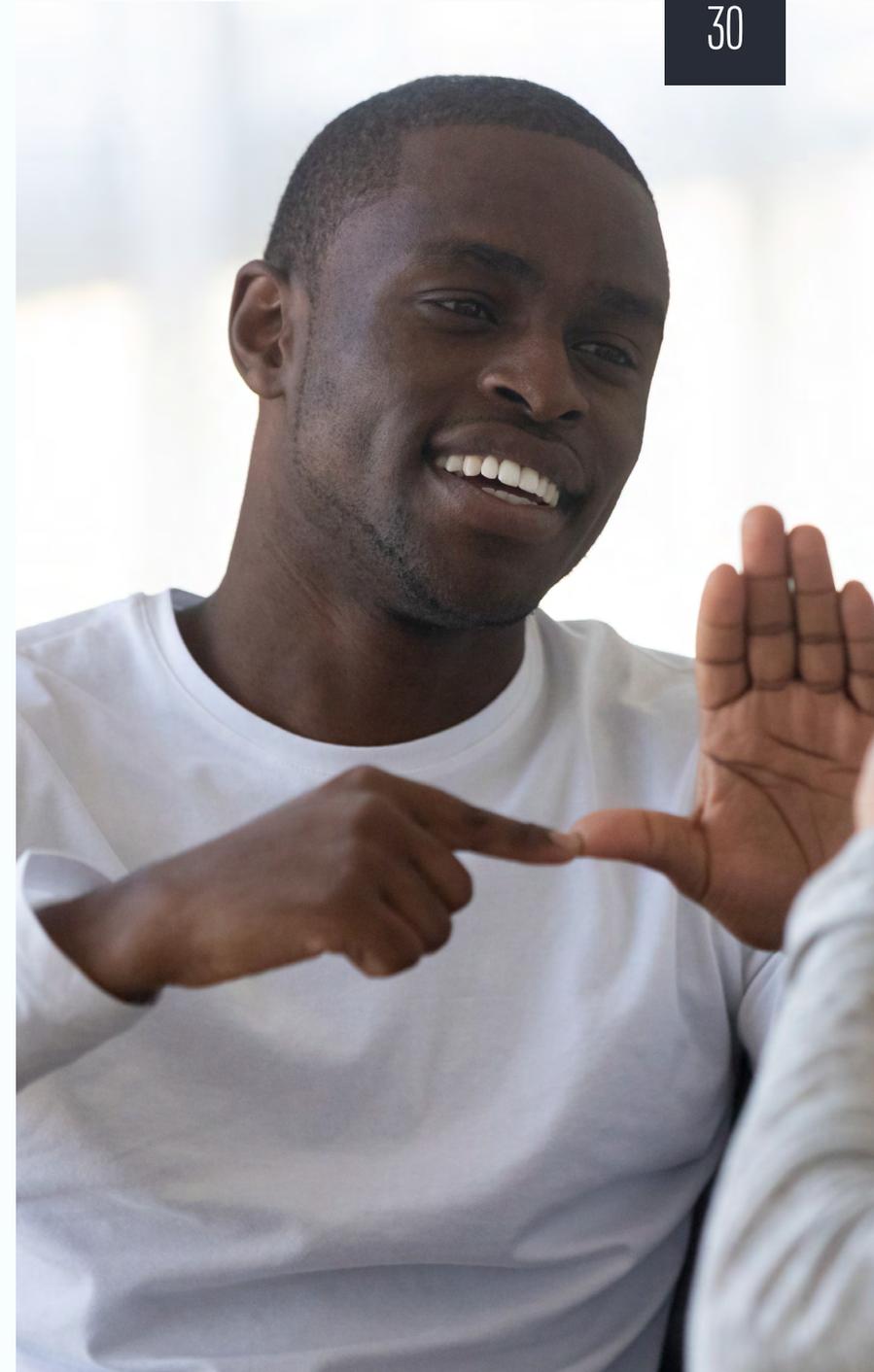
- > More than three in five of those who researched (61%) felt the information they found was either **'excellent' or 'good'**.³⁵
- > Most likely for applicants with long-term illnesses or health conditions (73%)
- > Only 4% felt the information to be 'poor' or 'awful' – most commonly selected by applicants with learning differences (6%).

³² Proportion of applicants who had conducted research answering 'No' when asked if they had encountered any issues when trying to find information about the support services at university or college.

³³ Proportion of applicants who had conducted research answering 'Yes' when asked if they had encountered any issues when trying to find information about the support services at university or college.

³⁴ Proportion of applicants who had conducted research answering 'Extremely easy' or 'Easy' when asked how easy or difficult it was to find the information they needed about available support.

³⁵ Proportion of applicants who had conducted research selecting 'Excellent' or 'Good' when asked how they would rate the information they found about support offered by universities or colleges.





The level of detail applicants require will vary according to their individual needs, and student support teams will need to discuss this with applicants on a case-by-case basis. UCAS aims to ensure universities and colleges receive early information about student's circumstances and support needs. In support of this, we would like to see greater encouragement for applicants to contact support services directly to discuss their requirements, with better guidance on how to approach this conversation, mindful that many students, particularly those applying straight from school or college, may never have had this conversation previously, or feel overwhelmed. Furthermore, we feel it would be beneficial for universities and colleges to contact all disabled applicants upon sharing an impairment in the application, to start building a trusted relationship. The case study from Swansea University is an example of early intervention and sustained relationship building.

Case study:

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY STUDENT SUPPORT TEAM

A range of services for early and continuing engagement with disabled students ensures inclusivity, early engagement, and a whole-institution approach – right from the moment pupils first consider HE. The team actively reaches out with information, advice and support as early as possible in the applicant's journey – and at each step – starting with outreach activities, open days, and transition support, including events with pupils in Years 9 and 11 (and their parents/carers).

When an applicant shares a disability via UCAS, they automatically receive a support guide and are invited to share further details about their support needs to ensure arrangements are made ahead of arrival – particularly invaluable for those with complex support needs.

The team collaborates across the institution, including academic and professional support staff within the faculties, Residential Services, Academic Services, Marketing Recruitment and International (including Admissions), the Exams Office and the Students' Union. This means that, whoever students speak to, they will be linked to the most appropriate support.

For many students, open days can be a key source of information during the decision-making process – seeing the facilities, accommodation, and environment in person can help individuals understand where they will feel most comfortable. For those unable to visit every campus, virtual events can be a useful alternative, and they proved invaluable during the pandemic. However, for disabled students, in-person visits are particularly useful with more than two thirds preferring them to virtual events (68% compared to 64% of non-disabled students)³⁶.

“ Support from my college has been exceptional and I have never felt disadvantaged or excluded.

The importance of building trusted relationships – applicants’ experiences of sharing an impairment

All individuals should feel comfortable when sharing information in the UCAS application, whether related to disability, mental health, or other personal circumstances – and everyone should know how their data will be used. We are pleased that two thirds (65%) of applicants felt ‘comfortable’ or ‘very comfortable’ sharing their impairment or condition in the UCAS application, and a further quarter (25%) felt neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. However, despite ultimately opting to share, 10% of respondents reported feeling uncomfortable with this process. Looking at this data by impairment category (see Figure 6), we again see applicants with physical impairments and conditions are more likely to feel comfortable, and those with hidden disabilities more likely to feel uncomfortable:

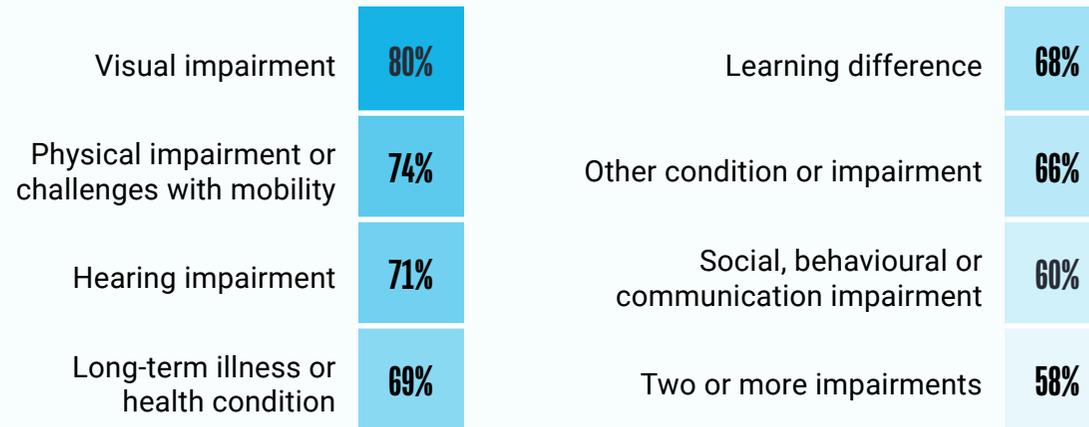


Figure 6: How comfortable applicants felt about sharing an impairment or condition by category, in the order of most to least comfortable



³⁶ UCAS End of Cycle Placed Applicants Survey 2021 – students who had attended both virtual and in-person open days were asked which type of open day they had found the most useful.

Applicants who felt less supported at school and had lower expectations for support in HE were most likely to feel uncomfortable sharing an impairment – most notably for those with social, behavioural or communication impairments.

This survey only captured the feelings of those who ultimately chose to share an impairment; there will be some who chose not to because they felt uncomfortable. Comparing to [HESA data](#) for 2020/21 shows a disparity between the number of first year undergraduates sharing an impairment at enrolment (12% of students overall) and the number of placed applicants³⁷ sharing an impairment through UCAS in 2020 (10% of placed applicants overall) – representing around 14,000 individuals who may have chosen not to share an impairment at the application stage but later shared at enrolment at their university or college.

When asked how they felt about sharing their condition or impairment in the application, most respondents (63%) demonstrated that they understood why UCAS asks about an impairment or condition, and that this information is used to connect them to support. However, many still hold misconceptions: less than half (45%) knew that sharing an impairment or condition wouldn't affect their chances of getting an offer, and when asked how they thought the information was used, 16% thought it would be used to decide whether they would succeed on the course.

Applicants' reasons for sharing their impairment or condition in the application³⁸:



46% saw **no reason not to share**

- > Most likely for those with long-term illnesses or health conditions (51%) and visual impairments (48%)



41% said they **always share** their disability on forms, feeling it is **part of their identity**

- > Most likely for those with visual impairments (58%) and hearing impairments (54%)



44% shared in order to **discuss their needs** and find out about available support

- > Most likely for those with two or more impairments (64%) and social, behavioural or communication impairments (50%)



34% already knew they **required support or adjustments** to be put in place

- > Most likely for those with visual impairments (65%) and physical impairments or challenges with mobility (53%)



37% shared because their **teacher or adviser encouraged them** to do so.

- > Most likely for those with hearing impairments (43%), and two or more impairments (40%)

³⁷ Placed applicants with a planned year of entry in 2020.

³⁸ Applicants were asked their reasons for choosing to share a disability in the UCAS application.



We are pleased to see that teachers and advisers are encouraging students to share an impairment in the application – and that their advice is being taken. We **know** that, while they are keen to support their students with this aspect of their application, they sometimes lack the knowledge and resources to do so with confidence. UCAS is committed to creating resources to help, including a new **toolkit**.

While applicants' confidence in, and understanding of, the disclosure process is improving, much more work is needed to clarify why this question is asked and how the information is used – something UCAS has explored in the **student mental health report**. Indeed, these results offer further evidence that future admissions reform should never underestimate the important relationship built between the university or college and applicants seeking support³⁹.

Taking the next step is an important decision; for many it is life-changing – not only because HE can open doors to more opportunities, but also because of the people you meet when you are there, the challenges you learn to overcome, and the memories you create. With this in mind, we think it's vital that all applicants are able to consider their choices holistically, not only taking into account the course they want to study, but also the type of experience they want to have, alongside their personal circumstances and any support requirements. UCAS is committed to helping every student make the decision that is right for them. We recognise that enhanced information and advice, and improved personalisation will be central to supporting informed decisions and we are continually reviewing and expanding our understanding of different groups of students – and ensuring our products and services reflect their needs.

³⁹ UCAS' response to the consultation on post-qualification admissions (PQA) reform, May 2021: www.ucas.com/file/444771/download?token=g2bJplc3

ANNEX A: RESEARCH METHODS

This report uses a range of data sources to examine the experiences of disabled students and their expectations of higher education.

As part of the UCAS application form, applicants are asked to share if they have a disability. Section 1 uses data taken from the UCAS application to analyse the intersectionality of disability with other applicant characteristics. Unless otherwise specified, this analysis is performed on UK applicant data for the 2021 cycle.

Section 2 uses responses from a new UCAS survey entitled 'Next Steps: the experience of disabled students in education survey'. This survey was sent out in February 2022 to a sample of UK applicants who had applied during the 2022 cycle, and opted to share an impairment or condition in their UCAS application. In total, 4,905 applicants – representing 6% of all applicants who had applied by the January 2022 deadline who shared a disability – took the time to tell us about their experiences of support at school or college, their experiences of applying to university or college through UCAS, and their expectations for higher education. Their responses were weighted up to represent the entire population of UK applicants from the 2022 cycle who shared an impairment or condition in their UCAS application, accounting for differences in response rates observed in different characteristic groups, including gender, age, and ethnic group. Unless otherwise specified, the applicants who declared a mental health condition in the UCAS application have been removed from the analysis of both applicant data and survey responses, thereby categorising these applicants in the 'No impairment' category, or removing them from survey results altogether. However, applicants with two or more impairments have been detected, using the below methodology, as being likely to have a mental health condition, and these two groups often display similar characteristics, behaviours and opinions.

For the purposes of this report, the terms 'disabled students' and 'disabled applicants' are used to refer to students who have shared a disability in the UCAS application, and 'non-disabled applicants' and 'non-disabled students' refer to those who have selected 'no disability' or shared a mental health condition (as above). We recognise that some disabled applicants will have chosen not to share an impairment and they are included in the 'non-disabled' group.

Within the UCAS application, applicants can choose to give additional details of any individual needs they feel their chosen universities or colleges should be aware of. These details, referred to here as the 'disability free text', provide a wealth of detail that can be used to find common words and phrases associated with each impairment or condition.

1. The disability free text was tokenised into single word tokens, with common words removed, and the words with a threshold frequency of over 1% of this list for each disability or impairment (excluding 'Other condition or impairment', 'No impairment' and 'Two or more impairments') were selected.
2. Only common words unique to each disability or impairment were kept.
3. The process from step 1 and step 2 was repeated for double-word tokens (or bigrams), but with a threshold frequency of 0.1%.
4. Only bigrams containing words not in the corresponding common word list were kept.
5. The common, unique words and bigrams for each disability or impairment were used as flags when applied to the disability free text provided by those who had selected 'Other condition or impairment', 'No impairment' and 'Two or more impairments', in order to detect the impairment or condition being shared.

ANNEX B: THE UCAS QUESTION ABOUT DISABILITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Current UCAS question and categories of disability

All students (until the end of the 2022 entry cycle) are asked the following, mandatory question in the UCAS application:

Universities offer a wide range of support to students with disabilities. Please select any disability you have from the list below.

Select the option which you feel best describes any physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference you may live with. If you don't have a disability, select to confirm you don't have a disability. We've got more help [here](#). Read more about applying to university with a physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference. [Click here to know more](#). You can also read our [FAQs](#).

- > No disability.
- > You have a social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder.
- > You are blind or have a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses.
- > You are deaf or have a serious hearing impairment.
- > You have a long-standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy.
- > You have a mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder.
- > You have a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, or dyspraxia.

- > You have physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using your arms or using a wheelchair or crutches.
- > You have a disability impairment or medical condition that is not listed above.
- > You have two or more impairments and/or disabling medical conditions.

The coding of reference data for the disability categories aligns to that used by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) to assist universities and colleges in their student record return to HESA.

The optional free text box following this question allows applicants to provide more details about their disability and support needs, and has been used in this report to understand more about which impairments applicants with two or more disabilities are presenting – see Annex A.



Revised UCAS question and categories of disability

The revised question was introduced into the UCAS application in May 2022 for 2023 entry to HE:

Every year, over 60,000 students with a physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference apply through UCAS to study at a university or college in the UK, and access a range of support available to help with their studies, day-to-day activities, travel, or lifestyle.

Would you consider yourself as living with any of the following:

- > A learning difference (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, or AD(H)D)
- > A visual impairment uncorrected by glasses (e.g. blindness or partial sight)
- > A hearing impairment (e.g. D/deafness or partial hearing)
- > A physical impairment or challenges with mobility (e.g. climbing stairs or uneven surfaces), or dexterity (e.g. using a keyboard or laboratory equipment)
- > A mental health condition, challenge or disorder (e.g. anxiety or depression)
- > A social, behavioural or communication impairment (e.g. an autistic spectrum condition or Tourette's Syndrome)
- > A long-term illness or health condition which may involve pain or cause fatigue, loss of concentration or breathing difficulties – including any effects from taking associated medication.
- > A condition or impairment not listed above (please give details in the box below)
- > Two or more impairments or conditions (please give details in the box below)
- > None

Telling a course provider about a health condition or impairment early means they can work to make the arrangements or adjustments ready for your arrival. However, if you decide not to give this information now, you may do so after you have sent your application, by contacting them directly.

Select the option(s) which you feel **best describes** any physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference you may live with. If you have no impairment or condition, select **None**.

IMPORTANT: The information you provide here will not negatively impact the academic judgement of your application, or the decision about whether to offer you a place. Under the Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful for any information you provide about an impairment or condition to be used in making an academic decision about your application. This information will only be shared with those involved in supporting you, or making the arrangements for your support – contact the course provider's disability team to find out more about the support they can offer. The information you provide here may also be used (anonymously) for monitoring purposes to inform and improve support for future students.

Please be aware that some courses – particularly professional courses – may have additional requirements relating to 'fitness to practise' – **find out more about fitness to practise.**

For more information about answering this question **read our FAQs.**

ANNEX C: DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO DISABILITY

Terminology related to disability is constantly evolving. UCAS recognises this, both in the writing of this report and in our information and advice for students, so we are careful to take guidance from expert organisations including the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) and the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP). This list clarifies the terms used in the report:

Disabled student/applicant	As opposed to 'student with disabilities' in accordance, aligned to the social model of disability in the UK. Note: where this report refers to 'disabled students/applicants', it means those who have opted to share an impairment or condition in the UCAS application. Those who have selected 'no disability' are referred to as 'non-disabled students/applicants' – see Annex A for full details.
Hearing impairment	Such as D/deafness or partial hearing.
Hidden or non-visible disabilities	This includes learning differences, and social, behavioural or communication impairments.
Impairment or condition	Used in preference to 'disability' to be inclusive of anyone who does not identify as disabled.
Learning difference	An umbrella term that includes learning difficulties, learning disabilities, and specific learning difficulties (SpLD) such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and AD(H)D.
Long-term illness or health condition	A long-standing health condition which may involve pain or cause fatigue, loss of concentration or breathing difficulties – including the effects of associated medication. This can include diabetes, chronic heart disease, cancer, HIV, and epilepsy.
Mental health condition, challenge or disorder	Can include a range of conditions, challenges or disorders – diagnosed or otherwise, such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and personality disorders.
Physical impairment or challenges with mobility	Including difficulties climbing stairs or walking on uneven surfaces, use of a wheelchair, and challenges with dexterity, such as using a keyboard or laboratory equipment.
Social, behavioural or communication impairments	Including autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) and Tourette's syndrome.
Special educational needs and disability (SEND)	Sometimes referred to as SEN, this term is predominantly used in primary and secondary education to describe the needs of children with learning differences, impairments and disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than others of the same age.
Two or more conditions or impairments	Applicants with multiple conditions or impairments cannot currently select more than one, so must select this as a separate category.
Visible or physical impairments	Including physical impairments or challenges with mobility, hearing impairments, and visual impairments.
Visual impairment	An impairment uncorrected by glasses, such as blindness or partial sight.

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