



## **Universities Scotland submission to Equalities and Human Rights Committee as part of its pre-budget 2017/18 scrutiny**

### **We welcome the committee's inquiry**

Universities Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee as part of its pre-budget scrutiny. Our submission seeks to provide context from a sector-wide perspective.

### **Key messages**

- The values of fairness, inclusion and accessibility are core values for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland. Universities want a fully diverse and inclusive student population; one that reflects every aspect of the communities, country and world that they are part of. This is for everyone's benefit. Access for students with disabilities is important to universities, as with other protected characteristics and widening access based on socio-economic deprivation.
- There has been positive growth in the numbers and proportion of students with known disability studying in higher education. In 2009-10 there were 13,900 students with a disability studying in Scotland. This has increased to 19,200 in 2014-15. As a proportion this has risen from 9.2% in 2009-10 to 10.5% in 2014-15<sup>1</sup>.
- There have been positive improvements in the retention rate of students with known disabilities, rising from 88.9% in 2009-10 to 90.9% in 2014-15<sup>2</sup>.
- The proportion of students with known disability going into positive destinations within six months of graduation is high, at 86.9 per cent. Of those in employment, 71 per cent are in professional level occupations.<sup>3</sup>

All universities encourage applicants with disabilities to declare this in their UCAS application and to consider disclosure positively. No applicant should worry that it will harm their application. It will not. Disclosure will give the university more time to put any necessary support in place.

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<sup>1</sup> HESA data

<sup>2</sup> HESA data

<sup>3</sup> HESA Destinations of leavers survey 2014/15. Taken six months after graduation. Sample size for students of known disability was over 3,500. These figures compare to 91.4% positive destinations amongst students with no known disability and 77% of students with no known disability in employment working in professional occupations.

## Participation of disabled students in Higher Education

- There has been a 38 per cent increase in the number of students with a known disability in Scotland's higher education sector since 2009/10. The total number of students studying in Scotland with a known disability in 2014/15 was 19,200.<sup>4</sup>
- We have to speculate, but this increase is likely to be partly driven by increased accessibility and inclusive practice of institutions and partly by an increased willingness, on the part of applicants and students, to disclose their disability. Both developments are very positive.

The HESA student record uses a version of the coding frame introduced by the Disability Rights Commission and captures disability using ten types:

- Students with a specific learning disability account for the largest type of disability within the disabled student population. In 2014/15 8,590 students disclosed a learning difficulty which accounted for 44.7 per cent of all those disclosing a disability. Student numbers with a learning difficulty have increased by over a third from 2009/10 to 2014/15.
- Students disclosing mental health issues are the second biggest group of students disclosing a disability. Students suffering from mental health conditions now accounts for 15 per cent of all students disclosing a disability, at 2,910, up from 7.7 per cent in 2009/10. There has been a 170 per cent increase in the number of students disclosing a mental health condition over this period. This is likely to be an underrepresentation of the actual numbers suffering. Many students will choose not to formally disclose a condition of this kind but seek help from their university, and other sources of care. Sadly, many students do not seek help of any kind so recorded numbers will always be an underrepresentation.
- 390 students disclosed they were deaf or had a serious hearing impairment in 2014/15. This accounts for only two per cent of all known disabled students.
- Other categories of disability showing significant increases, in percentage terms, over the period include students disclosing a social communication disorder such as autism or Asperger's (an increase of 136 per cent), students disclosing a physical impairment or mobility issue (an increase of 47 per cent) and students disclosing two or more conditions (57 per cent).

Statistical data are likely to underreport the presence of disabled students in the student population as disclosure is voluntary. The admissions body, UCAS, and universities actively encourage disclosure but not every student will want or need to disclose this information.

It is difficult to find a single figure with which to reliably compare the number of disabled students in Scottish higher education. Students are disproportionately 'young' relative to the proportion of the 'working age' population in Scotland disclosing a disability, which the 2011 census records at 15 per cent. Given that this definition of disability includes chronic illness, which is likely to increase with age (and account for only 11 per cent of students disclosing a disability), the comparison is not that helpful. The Scottish Household survey records 8 per cent of 20-29 year olds as registered disabled.

Universities are focused on ensuring student retention and success in terms of academic attainment and positive destinations post-graduation, as well as access. There have been positive improvements in the retention rate of students disclosing a disability. The retention rate for this group of students has improved from 88.9% in 2009-10 to 90.9% in 2014-15<sup>5</sup>. Positive destinations data for students disclosing a disability shows that 86.9 per cent are in positive destinations within six months of graduation. Within the number going straight into positive destinations, a slightly higher proportion

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<sup>4</sup> HESA Student 2014/15.

<sup>5</sup> Table 7 in annex, data from HESA

of students disclosing a disability are in further study at 20.7 per cent (full or part-time, with work or not) than students not known to be disabled at 17.2 per cent.

## How do institutions support disabled students?

### Pre-entry support

Prospective students are strongly advised by institutions, UCAS and others to disclose their disability at the application stage and to follow this up with a direct approach to the university. This is necessary because disclosure on the application form does not capture information about the student's support needs which the university will require. Universities want to encourage students to view disclosure positively. It will not affect their application. It will help universities deliver the right support to applicants at the right time throughout the application and enrolment stages.

Every institution has readily accessible information about student disability on their website. It is quick and easy for prospective students to identify who they should contact and where to get advice and guidance.

Most universities would encourage disabled applicants to attend an open day prior to application. This can be particularly helpful for students with sensory or mobility issues but is good advice for anyone. It is a good opportunity for the prospective student to meet with disability support officers at the university, assess the accessibility of the institution from the perspective of their own needs and ask about resources and forms of support.

Most commonly, and irrespective of the size of the university, students declaring a disability are assigned a disability adviser/academic disabled student coordinator or similar. That person will help the student to identify additional support needs specific to them and to the particular course they wish to study/are studying.

### Examples:

- **Glasgow Caledonian University** runs a [Summer Transition Programme](#) for applicants with social communication disorders like autism and Asperger's. The programme, run in partnership with the National Autistic Society Scotland, provides specific and tailored support in recognition of the fact that the transition into university life can be additionally challenging and stressful and worrying for those on the spectrum. The programme aims to support students and improve uptake on courses. All students disclosing a social communication disorder are invited to take part.
- The **University of Dundee** has undertaken work to test underlying attributes of dyslexia to support students with learning difficulties into higher education. As the institute tells an Equality Challenge Unit report: *"We've found loads of candidates, probably about one in ten, who have struggled with words or numbers when at school or college and have always just thought 'I'm better than this but I can't do it.' And the sense of relief for those who discover they have an issue beyond their control for which they can get help is really another delight of the job ... 90 per cent of the people then have gone on to the full test and a good number have been found to have underlying conditions of which they'd no previous knowledge ... they'd got to the age of 25 without anyone picking up they were dyslexic."*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Equality Challenge Unit: [Access, retention and success: Aligning widening participation and equality strategies](#)

Further information, advice and guidance about disabled student support at university is also available via student associations, NUS Scotland, Lead Scotland, UCAS, the Disability Alliance and the Scottish Government. Student funding information for Scottish-domiciled students and information on the Disabled Students Allowance, can be found at the Student Awards Agency for Scotland.

### **Support for matriculated students**

Support for matriculated students with disabilities will come in a variety of forms depending on the particular needs of individuals. It is often helpful to think of institutions designing packages of support for individual students, which deal with every aspect of their student experience from learning and teaching and assessment to the physical environments under institutional control, facilities, services and the provision of key information to contact staff (e.g. to raise awareness of a student's need to lip read).

Every university encourages applicants and students with disabilities to proactively contact the disability service to initiate a conversation about support needs. Support that a student has received at school or college does not automatically transfer over to the university, nor are a student's needs clear from disclosure on the UCAS application. Once this initial contact has been made, every disabled student will have a designated disability adviser who is responsible for coordinating her/his overall package of support in conjunction with academic and other departments within the institution. Any disabled student's support package will not necessarily remain the same throughout their programme of studies, but will change over time in response to changes to their personal/study needs and/or to the nature of their course delivery. Disability advisers build close relationships with their students so that they can understand when and how support packages might need to change over time.

In terms of academic and related support, disabled students may be able to have reasonable adjustments made to their course delivery and assessment. Examples of adjustments could include receiving lecture notes at least 24 hours in advance or receiving 25 per cent extra time in examinations, the use of specialist equipment for assessments, alternative methods of assessment, the removal of penalties for errors in spelling and grammar, alternative physical assessment environments and so on. Disabled students may also be allocated private study space in libraries and be given double loan time of library books to accommodate their learning needs.

Institutions also provide a range of assistive technology in computer laboratories, which might include large screen monitors, scanners, screen readers/magnifiers, mobile phones, tablets, ergonomic mice and keyboards, digital recorders, infra-red hearing helpers, vibrating pagers (for fire alarms), software to help with reading/writing, mind mapping, planning, note taking, information organisation software, to do lists/reminders and so on. These will be available in accessible locations to all disabled students either as a matter of course, regardless of whether or not they receive Disabled Students' Allowance, or as part of an equipment loan scheme.

### 'Universal' services

In addition to specialist disability services, institutions also provide a range of other 'universal' services, which disabled students can access along with everyone else. These services are provided free-of-charge, and are confidential and impartial. They include accommodation services, chaplaincy services, sport/exercise services (often with special provision in place to support disabled students to access sport/exercise opportunities), careers services, counselling services, welfare advice services, childcare services and immigration advice (for international students).

### Examples:

- Jonathan, 4th year, MA European Studies at the University of Aberdeen who has a hearing impairment: *“If you want to come to university, then there is absolutely no reason why you shouldn’t...I’ve done everything that any other student does, and have achieved things which, as someone with a hearing impairment, I felt I had no right to expect. It took time to settle in but, even before I arrived here, there was support being put into place to make sure that the transition from classes of four to lecture theatres of five hundred plus was incredibly easy. Under the guidance of the disability advisers, all departments are willing to be a bit innovative in finding the best solutions to individual circumstances. I’ve never been stopped from doing any part of my degree just because I have a hearing impairment.”*
- Emily, 3rd year, MA Latin and Ancient History at the University of Edinburgh who has a visual impairment and a mental health disability: *“The Student Services team are really helpful. On my learning profile they’ve made it so that all of my work for lectures have to be pre-pared and sent to me ahead so I can read it all and I’ve also got extra time in exams and additional help with coursework deadlines. It has made a massive difference, cos it makes everything a lot more chilled. It makes life a lot easier knowing that you’ve got a little bit more time to do things. And especially with the reading, with visual impairment, it’s a nightmare when you get to third year! So it’s really helpful having everything a little bit further in advance.”*

## **Inclusive practice**

### Supporting the professional development of staff in regards to disability

Universities have responsibilities to ensure their academic and non-academic staff are informed and trained in inclusive practice. Training and support is available to staff as part of their continuous professional development, often run by the disability services department. This might focus on bespoke training for certain schools within the university, advice on how to make learning materials available in other formats, raising awareness of staff responsibilities under the equalities act and broader understanding of inclusive practice, which includes curriculum design as well as teaching methods and assessment.

### The quality of teaching and learning in universities

The approach that higher education institutions take to quality enhancement of their education is tested through the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) a process in which students are a key partner. A critical part of the process involves assessing institutional strategy and operations in relation to a set of threshold standards specified in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, including around generic and specific student support. Institutions must demonstrate how they meet the key expectation around ‘enabling student development and achievement’, which includes support for disabled students, in order to secure a positive judgement from the overall review process.<sup>7</sup>

### Examples:

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<sup>7</sup> Further information about the Quality Code is available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ASSURINGSTANDARDSANDQUALITY/QUALITY-CODE/Pages/default.aspx>. Further information about Chapter B4 of the Quality Code (Enabling student development and achievement) is available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B4.aspx>.

- **The University of Edinburgh's [Institute for Academic Development](#)** provides significant resources to staff on how to mainstream learning adjustments as part of the University's anticipatory duty under the 2010 Equality Act. The resources are very positive about the benefits this approach offers to all teaching staff.
- **The University of Dundee** runs an annual award for inclusive practice. Staff are recognised for their actions and initiatives to make the University an inclusive place to learn and to work.

### **Support for students with mental health problems**

Certain surveys suggest that up to as many as 80% of students suffer some form of mental health concern at some point (NUS UK). This group is particularly vulnerable given their age and the transition into adulthood they face in addition to geographical and societal change, leaving home and leaving established networks of friends, and experiencing new money worries and academic pressures etc. Disclosure data on mental health issues significantly underplays the extent of the problem. Some universities have recorded increased demand for their mental health support services that far exceed the increase in formal disclosures.

#### Examples:

- **Robert Gordon University** has had a mental health agreement in place for a few years. It aims to raise awareness, positive outcomes, and improve student experience. A group including students, academic and support staff lead the work.
- **Queen Margaret University** has a specialist mentoring service in place for students that suffer with long-term mental health problems. Mentors have appropriate qualifications and training in mental health.
- **Glasgow University** runs a programme of courses and training for students and staff throughout the year including stress reduction, mindfulness, compassionate mind training and managing perfectionism. It also offers special sessions for international students to help them understand Scottish culture to support the adjustment and possible culture shock.

### **Support for disability issues at sector level**

Developmental support is available to the sector via the work of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), which is a sector-owned organisation with the remit to further and support equality and diversity for students and staff in higher education. ECU's work in Scotland is driven by a Scottish Liaison Group, mostly made up of E&D practitioners from across the sector, which identifies issues of critical concern to institutions, enables sharing of best practice and commissions work to develop solutions.

In relation to disability, recent work has included the development of practical guidance and policy recommendations in relation to supporting students with mental health difficulties, supporting international students with disabilities, the digitisation and reformatting of electronic texts for disabled students and (non-) disclosure.

The Scottish Government also convenes a Disabled Students' Advisory Group, which is made up of disabled student support workers from across the HEI and college sectors, as well as representatives from Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council, Colleges Scotland, the College Development Network, Lead Scotland and others.

This group exists to discuss policy and technical issues about disabled student funding and support, in order to develop advice for the Scottish Government. Currently the group is advising the Scottish Government on technical elements of the review of Disabled Students' Allowance.

Also represented on this group is the Heads of Disability Services Group, who chairs a group made up of the Heads of Disability Services from all Scottish institutions. This is a self-supporting group which meets to discuss issues of individual and collective concern to institutions about disabled student support, and the group has also provided expert advice to Universities Scotland and the Scottish Government to facilitate coordinated, sector-wide improvements to disabled student support.

**ENDS**

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