



Universities Scotland’s submission to the Education, Children and Young People Committee on Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill

Universities Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide written evidence to the committee, ahead of the evidence session of Wednesday 8 February 2023. Our evidence is based on input we have received from AMOSHE Scotland (the Student Services Organisation), the Heads of Scottish Disability Services and other feedback from institutions.

We endorse the intention and principle of the Bill, to support and improve transitions for disabled children and young people. We recognise that the current system requires young people to repeatedly disclose their disability as they transition between stages and providers of study, with their needs assessed and reassessed to suit different institutions and funding providers. This places a frustrating and repetitive burden on the individual. It would be preferable from the perspective of the person with a disability if there was a single, transferrable document that detailed their support needs or at least greater consistency in the information required by all bodies.

The context to our evidence

In recent years, universities have been looking at how to improve the transition experience for all students, recognising that it can be daunting and that a successful transition experience supports a successful university experience. In addition, Universities Scotland is currently running a project looking at how universities can improve the experience of disabled applicants. We are hopeful that this work will support disabled students’ transitions into university from school, college or the workplace.

Universities work to support disabled students throughout their time at university and are always seeking feedback on how we can better support students. However, resources are a constraint. Arrangements need to be tailored to the individual, as well as sometimes to the institution, or degree programme or module within. Not all adjustments are academic, some may relate to, for example, accommodation.

The demand for support to all students have risen, unsurprisingly, in recent years. In addition to the pandemic, we know the cost-of-living crisis is difficult for students and will likely put disproportionately more pressure on disabled students. In addition, there has been an increased demand for mental health support in recent years from students. The additional funding for counsellors has been very welcome, but that funding is due to end shortly with no sign of reduced demands for university support services.

It is worth stating that this Bill would not include all disabled students at Scottish universities due to the upper age limit of 26. 38.3% of Scottish students with a known disability in 2020/21 were 25 or older¹. Scottish universities welcome students of all ages from both Scotland and around the world.

¹ HESA Student FPE records; Calculation based on first year undergraduate entries to Scottish providers from Scottish domiciled students, known to have declared a disability.



Even if the proposed Bill were to become legislation, universities would need to continue an additional system that works for disabled students beyond the scope of the Bill and so do not have transition plans as well as those who do.

Finally, we note that the Scottish Government intends to progress work in this area. Universities Scotland was contacted in January to join a working group to develop a national strategy on transitions for disabled young people.

Questions

The Committee posed a series of questions across two broad areas. We have answered the questions of relevance to the higher education sector.

Current experiences

What are the key issues that disabled young people face as they move out of school/children's services and access adult services?

We have focused on a number of key issues.

The transition itself. Our members' support teams for disabled students work predominantly with students with a specific learning difficulty, long-standing mental or physical health condition. They will also work with smaller numbers of students with a sensory impairment or physical disability. For most of those disabled students, there are no formal designated adult services.

The level of support will vary hugely depending on the school/college the student is coming from. Typically, most moving to higher education will get very little additional pro-active support with the onward transition from their previous institution.

The support required for a student starting university is likely to take a different form to support they have received in previous stages of study. Since university level study is more independent, with less structure, so different strategies and tools may be appropriate. For some students, this can mean that rather than a person supporting, there is a technological aid or strategy. Students may not expect these changes. At the same time, students at this stage are often making the adaptation to more independent living, which can present challenges to all learners, not just disabled students.

Timings. There is also an issue around the timing of transitions due to the short window between SQA results day and the start of the university term, which can create an issue around making transitions work optimally. It can be difficult to share information to assist with transitions. If an applicant has a conditional offer, it will be confirmed in early August on SQA results day. Schools will be closed and teachers on leave and the university term starts early in September, leaving limited time to plan transitions. Both new and returning disabled students may need support at the start of the academic year, which leads to a high level of demand on disability support offices. This can mean longer waiting times for support, which can be frustrating for students, especially new students who may not anticipate this level of demand for services.

There remains some stigma around disclosing disability, and there are challenges if young people declare a disability close to the start of term or after the start of term because this may result in a



delay to the provision of support. The recent SAAS [Review of Disability Related Student Support in Further and Higher Education](#) also references these issues.

We note that SAAS is making some changes to its services as a result, including developing an online application process for the disabled students' allowance, which we hope will increase its accessibility and speed the process up.

Changes in assessment of disability. A difficulty that faces disabled students when transitioning to university centres around assessment and diagnosis. The Students Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) requires evidence of a diagnosis from e.g. a doctor or educational psychologist as part of the application for [Disabled Students' Allowance](#). This is different to schools and SQA where, for example, a learning support teacher can diagnose dyslexia. This can lead to delays in accessing funding and students do not realise that this will be the case. Universities can help students get a diagnosis, but it is not immediate. This difference is a result of different approaches to support. For schools, the Additional Support for Learning Act guides support based on need without an emphasis on evidence or diagnosis. In universities, although we base support on need, there is a need for evidence/information and diagnosis is needed (particularly to access the Disabled Students' Allowance, which funds the support).

Students must apply for funding and organise support themselves, with support from the university. This transition to advocating for the support oneself can be difficult for students to manage.

The agreed learning adjustment arrangements need to be communicated appropriately to those who can action them (e.g., to module leaders, tutors, those with responsibility for examination arrangements). This can take some time, with resultant delays in actioning adjustments.

Location. Progression to university can mean a relocation from one part of Scotland to another which adds another dimension to the need to coordinate transitions. As well as supporting transitions between stages of learning, between services designed for children and adults, there can be a geographic change too, requiring coordination across local authority areas. This is likely to be particularly challenging for a young person and their family to navigate. The transition between child and adult services is particularly an issue in relation to mental health services due to the pressure on these services. Whilst universities do have counselling services, some students will need more specialised/clinical mental health services beyond what the university can offer.

It should be noted that international students with disabilities are not eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance, which is challenging for institutions.

How are young people and (where appropriate) their families views' taken account during the transitions process?

University students are usually adults (aged 18 years and above) and the contractual agreement for study is between the institution and the student. As a consequence there is little direct engagement between the institution and the student's parents or family. However, it is entirely at the student's discretion to involve their family in decision-making about their needs. Students' views are key to planning their support.



How do schools, colleges and universities identify students with disabilities currently?

There are multiple opportunities throughout the admissions process for university entry for a student to disclose a disability. This must be done voluntarily.

Application forms (including UCAS) have a specific question on disability. However, students can declare a disability at any point and to any member of staff. Students will also be able to disclose via amending their personal data in the university online system.

From a university perspective, earlier disclosure can help with transition arrangements, but we recognise that some applicants have concerns about how universities will use this information. Our disabled applicants work has identified that there may be more for universities to do to explain how disclosing disability status will help the applicant and providing reassurance that this information will only be used to their benefit.

Some students will choose not to engage with disability services at the start of their course but may ask for adjustments at a later date. Universities will respond to a request for support at any stage during a student's journey.

How do schools, colleges and universities ensure that reasonable adjustments are made?

As disclosure is a pre-requisite, the students themselves are central to the process of making reasonable adjustments. Their input is vital to ensuring their support and development as autonomous, independent learners.

Specific arrangements will vary between institutions, but typically all will undertake outreach work with applicants and aim to work with as many new students as possible, although experience suggests that some students will not prioritise re-establishing support arrangements or will not want to and their support will only be confirmed later during their course.

When students alert the university through the application process about their disability the information is passed to the Student Disability Service who will contact the students. As adults, it is up to the student to respond to / request support from Disability Teams. Not all disabled students feel that they need or want support. Those that do are assessed by specialist staff for reasonable adjustments. This happens throughout the year but there is an undeniable – and often unmanageable – peak at the start of term.

Universities use Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding to fund the support put in place for the students. As mentioned previously, international students and part time students do not qualify for DSA payments which is challenging and inequitable for these students as universities struggle to cover the costs for adaptations and support for non-qualifying students.

As noted above, applications for DSA require documentary evidence from medical professionals in order to progress a claim. As this level of evidence is not required by schools it may not exist for the student which can cause unnecessary delays. Universities are able to help with diagnostic assessments for specific learning disabilities either via external providers or in-house expertise, but requests to GPs for medical evidence can put pressure on NHS services. Moreover, there are lengthy weighting lists of 18+ months for diagnosing some disabilities such as autism and ADHD. While universities can



implement reasonable adjustments internally, students may miss out on critical support provided by the DSA.

Unfortunately, there is no data sharing arrangement between SAAS, as the body responsible for processing DSA, and universities and so universities are only made aware of the outcome of a student's application via the student themselves. Not only does this puts the burden on the student, it can lead to delays in the implementation of a full support package where a student may struggle to understand or set up the support awarded. Currently, other funding bodies including Student Finance England, Student Finance Wales and Student Finance Northern Ireland do notify Disability Advisers of awards directly, suggesting there is no obstacle, based in data protection legislation, preventing this from happening in Scotland. It would be very beneficial to disabled people and universities if SAAS could align with the process as run elsewhere in the UK.

Universities will have contacts in each department to ensure that the adjustments are understood and implemented as required in programmes and modules.

How is retention of disabled students at colleges and universities monitored?

Retention is monitored for all students and is ultimately recorded in HESA data. Universities monitor engagement and planned attendance of all students. This data can be disaggregated and analysed by student demographics including all protected characteristics, including disability.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) review and publish data on disabled students as part of their [Widening Access Report](#).

How do colleges and universities collaborate with other services, (e.g. health or social work) to support individuals?

Our members have said this tends to be on a case by case basis and is infrequent. Typically, it happens where the level of support the student requires is significant and the other agencies will remain actively involved during the new course, when collaboration is instigated by the other service or where the student is at significant risk.

Universities may engage with health services in regard to referrals to services, support for students etc. However, universities are unable to make direct referrals from university to most Health Services (including mental health) which can be problematic.

There are two pilot projects exploring referrals from universities to NHS mental health services in local health bodies. There has been some wider work to attempt to better join up mental health services and universities, but progress has been slow.

Some local authorities do not contact universities in advance and can misunderstand the support a university will be able to provide or should provide for a higher education level course. There is limited understanding of HE level support and how it can/should dovetail with other support packages.

How successful has the work of the Scottish Transitions Forum been in improving transitions processes for students?

Our members do not feel they have sufficient experience of the forum to offer a comment.



How are disabled students supported if they complete a course or leave a course early?

Disabled students have access to the full range of careers and employability support from their institution. There are also careers services for graduates.

Support for disabled graduates, whatever point they left their course, is becoming a higher priority for university disability and careers services, with external specialist agencies such as EmployAbility also active in this area.

How would you measure success of a transition at an individual level? How might you measure the success of outcomes for disabled young people at a national level?

Retention, progression and attainment rates are already measured and reported in universities' mainstreaming reports. Softer measures around student satisfaction (e.g., from the National Student Survey) might be a valuable addition.

Other measurements could include:

- Graduate outcomes data would also be useful and is available.
- National progression data could be significant, especially for groups that continue to be under-represented, such as students with a sensory impairment.
- HESA statistics measure attainment gaps between disabled / non-disabled students (which the SFC currently publish at a sector level).

We would suggest asking disabled young people what they consider 'success' to look like in relation to transition to higher education. Grades will only tell you a limited story.

The Bill

Would a national transitions strategy support more consistent approaches and better outcomes? If so, how?

An alternative approach, which the committee might wish to give consideration to, is a universal design for learning. This model, which gives all individuals equal opportunities to learn, already exists in Ireland with disabled student support integrated and mainstreamed as far as possible so most needs for most students are met by design. This would build on work by universities, including Glasgow Caledonian and Edinburgh Napier.

This approach would support a large number of disabled students, but more complex cases would still need to be managed via Disability Teams.

A national transitions strategy would ensure disabled students are entitled to a good level of supported transition. However, there will inevitably be inconsistencies in how that support is applied because of different student needs and how that interacts with where in Scotland the student is studying, what degree they are undertaking and the physical built environment.



A particular feature of higher education sees students attending university who may be leaving their local authority area for the first time. We can see the benefits in having a consistent approach as our members have the potential to be interacting with 32 different local authorities, which has the potential to be bureaucratically burdensome if transition plans are different across local authorities.

This national strategy should not more administrative burden on disability support services. Ultimately, that could result in worse support for students. The committee should consider that resource constraints will mean that there are limits on what is possible.

Comments on the powers to create duties on colleges and universities.

Duties are a feature of the work that universities are involved in. Given the already numerous reporting mechanisms such as The Public Sector Equality Duty that apply to the sector. We would welcome the opportunity for any duties, should this legislation pass, to be combined in other reporting methods that the sector is obligated to respond to.

How would plans be managed while the pupil is at school?

Without sufficient detail at this stage, we are unable to comment.

Colleges and universities' views on how they would engage with the planning process or be able to respond to any plans already agreed.

The Bill envisages multi-agency collaboration to support implementation of a student's transition plan. This will be challenging for institutions receiving students across multiple local council and health regions.

The timing could also be challenging. Colleges and universities will focus their work on engagement with new students over the summer (when school staff are typically on leave) and then at the point of entry, when schools – and also colleges and universities - are at their busiest. Many young people will not have a confirmed next step until after the SQA results are released early August, meaning a lot of this work will have to fit into this three or four week gap if it is to be meaningful.

It might be helpful to review disabled student funding and trial providing funding to institutions to use for students, which would remove the burden (for students and staff) of individual applications and speed up the provision of support

Should local authorities take the lead on planning transitions? In all cases?

This would depend on the needs of the young person, but it is not clear to us that the local authority, at this juncture, would have the expertise to plan transition support into university. However, it may be appropriate in some complex cases. There is a need for joined up support across local authorities to ensure that care and support packages in place in one local authority are appropriately communicated and implemented by the local authority where the university is situated. It is challenging when universities are expected to fill that gap in local authority support.

It would need to be a joint effort between agencies linking in Local Authorities, Health and Education. Most Health and Social Care Partnerships do not link with the university sector in practice.



It is also important to recognise that not all disabled students will come directly from school and some that do will not come from a Scottish local authority school.

How should/can local authorities identify children and young people eligible for a transitions plan?

Currently students are asked to self-declare their disability to their university (either during the application cycle or any subsequent stage). There is not at present a national mechanism for schools/local authorities to do so and even then, there may be data protection issues in sharing this between organisations.

Teachers sometimes mention disability as a context for achievement in a student's academic reference. However, this can be missed, and any disability may not be mentioned. UCAS are reviewing and updating their application system, and this could change the academic reference for those students applying via UCAS (most full-time undergraduates and some other students).

To what degree does part two of the Bill replicate duties under ASL or social work (eg SDS) legislation? What are the reasons for the gap between implementation of policy and duties and experiences?

We do not believe we have the experience as a sector to offer an opinion on this question.

To what degree (and how) would a statutory planning process support better outcomes for disabled children and young people?

Only some disabled young people enter university and therefore we can only comment on the likely impact on these disabled young people.

The process would need to be well implemented, with all parties understanding their responsibilities. It would need to be workable for universities who will have students from many different local authorities, with different needs. The process would need to recognise that different support may be appropriate at different stages of education and that the financial support arrangements vary between schools, FE level and HE level courses.

It might be more helpful for schools to be better aware of the different process to receive support for disabled students should they apply for university. This would be helpful, particularly the need for a formal diagnosis to access disabled students' allowance. SAAS might be well placed to do this alongside any existing work with schools to promote applications to SAAS for students entering university or HE courses in college. It might also be helpful to have a specific named contact in the university/clear information about who to contact – this is something that our own project on disabled applicants will encourage.

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