

Exploring the experiences of students with disabilities and long-term health conditions in their access to higher education in the UK.

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Background

The number of students with a known disability or long-term health condition (DALTH students) has increased by 9% in the past 20 years, with 13.4% of accepted UCAS applicants in 2019-20 being DALTH students. However, there is a significant lack of post-2010 literature evaluating their transition into university.

Aim: Investigate modern barriers that DALTH students may experience when applying to HE in 4 key areas:

Declaring a condition: The UCAS Undergraduate admissions form asks applicants if they have a disability/special needs. If they say that they do on this form, they are 'declaring' their condition.

- Olney and Kim (2001) - Students with 'hidden disabilities' (eg. depression, ASD, and epilepsy) are less likely to see themselves as 'properly' disabled.

Accessing funding: Home-funded DALTH students with a formally diagnosed health condition can apply for the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) via the Student Loans Company. The DSA helps cover any additional study costs which are needed to produce equity in education, including access to assistive technology, specialist mentoring, etc.

- HESA (2015) - DALTH students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) were twice as likely to finish their studies compared to DALTH students with no DSA.

Accessing Support: Universities should reach out to DALTH student prior to the commencement of their course to develop support plans, allocate mentoring, etc. Schools should also provide extra support during the transition into HE.

- Vickerman and Blundell (2010) - Only 47.6% of students who declared a condition on their UCAS application were contacted by their HE provider prior to starting their course.

Clearing: If a student does not have a confirmed university place on Results Day, UCAS Clearing can be used to help them get a place on a course at a HE institution. It is conversationally a very fast-paced process which involves researching, communicating, and confirming a place with a university in a relatively brief time window (normally a day or so).

- There is currently no research into the interactions between clearing and DALTH students.

Methodology

Procedure

An anonymous survey on Qualtrics was used for primary data collection. The survey was presented in two parts:

Part 1 asked about the participant's personal experience in:

- Declaring a condition
- School support/ HE outreach
- Accessing funding

Part 2 presented two extracts of UCAS' Q+A for DALTH students, known as 'clips'. Participants asked to react to the clips as if they were a current HE applicant.

- **Clip 1:** How to use personal statement to disclose a health condition (not analysed here).

- **Clip 2:** Asked whether an institution found via clearing could meet a DALTH students' needs.

Sample

Participants had to be a current UG student at a HE institution in the UK and applied through UCAS for their current institution. All participants had to be 18+ for ethical reasons. Information about general nature of their health condition(s) was collected as part of the demographic data.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Language and Linguistic Science, University of York.

Results

15 valid responses were received from DALTH students at 4 UK universities. Of these 14 self-identified as having a disability and 1 as having a long-term health condition.

11 participants identified multiple health conditions. The other 4 listed mental health as their only disability.

Mental Health conditions were also the common among participants (43% of the total conditions disclosed).



If the total responses for a question is below 15, the remaining participants were either unsure how they would respond or did not remember parts of their application process. Qualitative responses are in **"bold"**.

Declaring a condition When applying to university...



9 originally declared their health condition (s) on their UCAS application. Declaring helped students to access support post-application:

"In terms of the application itself, it didn't make a difference. Things that came after the application were more noticeable"



3 chose not to declare. All of them disclosed mental health conditions at the start of the survey. They mentioned a fear of stigma affecting the candidate selection process. Two were also not sure if they were 'disabled enough' to declare.

Accessing Funding Before entering HE...



10 knew about what financial opportunities were available to them



4 did not know about the DSA or other funding opportunities.

Even if students knew about the DSA, accessing it was still prohibitively difficult for those without an 'official' diagnosis:

"the [diagnosis] I had from my previous school wasn't accepted, so I had to save -£300 until I could book the [reassessment] appointment."

"I wasn't aware of [the DSA] till just before I started university. I [waited] for most of my first year without the support and assistive technology. I also had to pay for medical letters to prove my diagnoses."

Clearing If you were applying today...



5 would consider clearing



8 would not consider clearing

"I wouldn't be confident that I'd get support in a timely manner." **"Part of my disability is that I need a processing time, and need to know what is happening. [G]oing through clearing was never an option for me"**

"Knowing about the universities stance on mental health and services they offer is incredibly important to me and I wouldn't want to apply without knowing"

11/15 would not have enough time to decide what to do in a clearing scenario:

"these are decisions you have to make quickly and it's hard to tell whether you'd be able to speak to someone from disability services, you also won't be able to visit the university"

Accessing Support



Only **5** people felt like they were adequately supported during the UCAS application process (3 by a school, 2 by medical professionals).



However, **13** were contacted by universities prior to arrival, with the other two uncertain. There is a good chance that all students in this sample were contacted by their HE institution!

Conclusions

While the broadness of this study/small sample size makes any conclusions tentative, it can be argued that further research is needed in the following areas:

- How more students with invisible disabilities can be persuaded to declare a condition
- How to advertise the DSA to those who did not declare a condition
- Discovering methods that can help DALTH students who need DSA support get an expedited diagnosis without the need for private healthcare
- Experimenting with how a time-sensitive process such as clearing can be adapted for DALTH students
- Developing consistent, accessible support for DALTH student during the UCAS application process

Application – Developing Guidance

The results of this study are being used to develop guidance booklets for DALTH students and their teachers. Some headway has also been accomplished with UCAS through collaboration with one of their policy executives.

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