Disabled Students' Experience Survey

May 2022

Hertfordshire Students' Union

Research process

Hertfordshire Students' Union ran 2 focus groups across the academic year 2021/2022 looking at the experiences of disabled students at the University of Hertfordshire.

The focus groups were accompanied by a Disabled Students' Experience Survey gaining responses from 227 students.

The survey questions focused on four areas relating to disabled students: 1) obtaining a Study Needs Agreement (SNA); 2) accessibility of campus facilities and online learning; 3) discrimination at university; and 4) community and representation.

The findings and recommendations from the research were discussed with Emma Diston, head of Student Wellbeing, and Elise Martin De-La-Torre, a master's student in the school of Education who leads the Disabled Students' Network.

Key findings – focus groups

Study Needs Agreements

- Many students mentioned that staff had to be reminded about the existence of Study Needs Agreements, indicating a complacent attitude towards disabled students.

- Many postgraduate students felt that SNAs were not implemented effectively, which could be a result of the fact that the university is prohibited from releasing information on student characteristics to external lecturers contracted in to teach masters programmes.

Accessibility on campus/online

- Personal tutors are a useful source of support for students (particularly in terms of signposting and academic support), however there is an awareness gap that needs to be addressed for this means of support to benefit all students in need.

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- Many students feel that the pandemic has created an opportunity for more inclusive and accessible online learning platforms with the addition of increased online resources.

Key findings - survey

Study Needs Agreements

- Many students do not know where to get a Study Needs Agreement and/or have not been signposted or offered support in getting a SNA while at university.

- A significant number of students feel that teaching staff do not respect and implement accommodations in their SNA, and a similar number of students feel that adjustments in their SNA are not made appropriately online.

- A significant number of students do not feel comfortable undertaking a SNA assessment at the Wellbeing service.

Accessibility on campus/online

- Campus accessibility is an issue for a large number of disabled students for several reasons, including problems with disabled parking, wheelchair access, disabled toilets, accessing campus during the pandemic (particularly for immunosuppressed students) and unsuitable study rooms.

- Many students said that online learning can be challenging, attributing issues primarily to the design of StudyNet and Canvas, a lack of support and understanding from teachers, difficulty engaging and concentrating during online lessons and a lack of consistent and/or vital information shared across different learning platforms.

Discrimination at university

- A concerning number of students with a disability experienced discrimination at university, with common forms of discrimination including: a lack of respect and understanding regarding disabilities, an overly complicated process for evidencing disabilities and poor access to facilities on campus.

Community and representation

- Many students with a disability do not feel represented by the university or the Students' Union.

- A significant number of students with a disability do not feel part of the community on campus and a similar number feel that events and social activities are not accessible to them, which could explain why certain students feel excluded from community life.

- Some forms of engagement are quite popular among students, including attending freshers' events, going to Forum nightclub, taking part in research, and participating in a society. However, students rarely engage with some of the opportunities offered by the SU, including the SU buddy scheme, working for the SU, SU elections and serving as a School Community Organiser.

Analysis of findings

1. **Study Needs Agreements**

Students without a Study Needs Agreement

Out of the 227 people who took part in the survey, 137 reported that they have a Study Needs Agreement, and 83 people reported that they do not have a SNA.

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Although most students with a SNA said that the process of obtaining one was easy, many students do not have a SNA. In this group, most people would like a SNA, yet the majority (50) do not know where or how to get one. This indicates that improvements in the process should be made to benefit disabled students.

Based on the experiences of students who took part in the survey and the accompanying focus groups, some of the main issues that must be tackled to help students obtain a SNA are:

- A lack of consistent communication between students, the Wellbeing team, and the university

- Fees for medical letters and diagnostic tests (required to evidence disabilities) that not all students can afford

- A lack of consistent information provided by specific teams, e.g., the Wellbeing team, leading to confusion among students

- Widespread failure to signpost support services or offer students practical guidance to assist them with their study needs

Students with a Study Needs Agreement

Turning to students with a SNA, 72% said that the university respected their accommodations, with individuals in the focus group frequently describing teachers as "helpful", "understanding" and "easy to talk to."

However, students with a SNA still reported several issues, including the need to remind teachers to implement adjustments online, and disclosure requirements that cause delays in the reporting process, meaning that visiting lecturers may not be aware of students on their course with a SNA.

Students also reported issues relating to group work assignments, especially in groups involving students without SNAs. In this case, students felt reasonable adjustments were hard to implement and experienced

feelings of imposter syndrome, guilt, and anxiety, partly due to the fear of disclosing their disability or disabilities to peers.

2. Academic support for disabled students

Overall, students experienced greater academic support at Level 4/5 than they did at Level 6, however students in every academic year reported

several issues. Notably, the university's recording policy received serious criticism, with students pointing out that only some of their recorded classes (lectures and seminars) included notes and slides. It was also noted that some lecturers don't record and upload seminar discussions.

Alongside issues with the recording policy, many students claimed that they wouldn't know who to go to if they needed to file a complaint or seek academic support, revealing a significant awareness gap.

However, focus group participants tended to say that they would probably approach Student Wellbeing in the first instance, with one student providing an explanation that could reflect broader opinion:

"I would feel more comfortable emailing Student Wellbeing...rather than speaking to lecturers...because...I feel like they don't know that side of me. I just wouldn't feel that comfortable going to them."

3. Discrimination at university

Out of the entire survey sample, approximately 13% of disabled students said they experienced discrimination in some form, increasing to 20% of students with a physical disability. This is a seriously concerning statistic that calls for action on multiple fronts.

Common types of discrimination reported by students include:

- Lack of reasonable adjustments being made
- Teachers failing to respect and implement Study Needs Agreements

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- Poor access to campus facilities
- An overly complicated process for evidencing disabilities
- A lack of respect and understanding regarding disabilities, including mental and physical health issues. This is a particular issue for students with hidden disabilities.

At the heart of this problem seems to be a lack of understanding and respect regarding various disabilities and an unwilling attitude or inability

among certain stakeholders, including teachers and individuals in Student Wellbeing, to adapt their way of working to suit the needs of disabled students.

There is also the risk of students being verbally abused because of their disability, which could potentially be worsened by the failure of individuals and departments to recognise and support disabled students.

One student shared their experience of verbal abuse during the survey:

"I refused to speak to some men who were being verbally aggressive towards me while I was waiting to pick up a food delivery while it was dark, due to my anxiety and autism, and they shouted about me being disabled, using discriminatory terms."

4. Accessibility and safety on campus

In terms of safety on campus, many students said that they felt other people failed to respect Covid precautions and guidelines, which impacted how confident they felt about attending lectures and seminars on campus. Evidently, this remains an area of significant concern for immunocompromised students.

More broadly, students reported problems with campus accessibility combined with an unwilling attitude by the university to action their requests for support

Common problems reported by students include:

- Lifts across both campuses not working
- properly
- College Lane contains heavy doors which are not automatic
- Many bathrooms do not have disabled toilets
- Disabled parking spaces are limited across campus
- Many study rooms don't have the appropriate chairs and tables
- Certain pathways around campus are not well-lit at night (putting students in a vulnerable position)

Clearly, campus accessibility issues are not beyond solving. The university simply needs to commit to upgrading the campus to suit the needs of disabled students. The accessibility audit taking place currently is a promising step, however it needs to be followed by concrete action to fix the empirical problems identified by disabled students in this report.

It is also clear that immunocompromised students would benefit from a more effective and open online learning environment, instead of having to choose between putting themselves at risk on campus or studying online and potentially missing out on vital learning content. This seems like an impossible choice that no student should have to make.

5. Community and representation

Approximately a quarter of students said they do not feel like a part of the community at university, attributing this to a range of different factors. People with physical disabilities said it was difficult to make friends due to the extra time it takes to navigate around campus, a physical barrier created by their condition or discrimination from their peers (20% of people with a physical disability reported this issue, compared to approximately 13% of the overall survey sample).

It is also possible that many disabled students don't feel like a part of their community as events and social activities at university are not accessible

to them, given that approximately a quarter of participants identified this as an issue.

Moreover, it is important to note that people with a mental health related illness or visual impairment are *the least likely* to feel like a part of their community, according to the data.

In addition, focus group data revealed a few positive findings on community engagement:

- Introduction of the Disabled Students' Network in 2022 helped students to feel like a part of the community on campus.

- Participating in academic activities (e.g., becoming a student rep) or attending social events at the start of term builds stronger social ties.

- Interacting with peers through messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp or Discord) boosts students' sense of community, however people who are excluded from these groups can find it difficult to gain access, potentially leading to even worse social isolation.

Looking at representation, approximately a third of disabled students said that they do not feel represented by the university or the SU. This is a major issue that calls for a coordinated response from key stakeholders.

Physical disabilities

In line with the results on community engagement, people with a physical disability reported the lowest level of representation, indicating a particular area of concern for the university to consider.

Among other reasons, students with a physical disability don't feel represented at university because of:

- Problems accessing campus facilities (53%),

- Problems with online learning (51%),
- Inaccessible events/social activities (24%)
- Low engagement in key events and social activities offered by the SU, although this link is only indicated by the data.

Notably, only 6 people said they have competed in SU elections, and only 5 people said they have been/are a School Community Organiser, which does indicate that the SU has work to do in terms of effectively engaging with disabled students.

Hidden disabilities

Many students with a hidden disability reported feeling judged for taking certain actions, indicating a stigma surrounding disabilities that can't be seen.

A number of students also reported that they do not discuss their disability as they feel that there isn't a specific place to receive support. Naturally, these students feel that the university doesn't treat their problems as a priority.

Demographic data

KEY POINTS

- Survey data mainly represents the experiences of disabled students who fall into at least one of three categories: Home/UK student (175 people/77.1%), undergraduate (168 people/74%) and woman - inc trans women (151 people/66.5%).

- Majority of students who have experienced discrimination (25/30 people/83%) are female. Even if you consider that women represent 66.5% of the survey sample, this is a significant finding.

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- Answers provided by participants from different schools are consistently proportionate to the total number of participants from such schools. This indicates that the key findings relate to participants from every school of study, rather than being confined to one or two schools.

- Approximately 50% of international and EU students do not know what a study needs agreement is/do not have one, compared with 16%-33% of UK/home students. This suggests that int/EU students find it harder than domestic students to get a Study Needs Agreement (although further research is needed).

Table one reveals students' answers across the eight different schools of study, looking specifically at Study Needs Agreements, accessibility, discrimination, and community and representation.

Table 1

School of study	Has a SNA	Agree the campus is accessible	Agree online learning is accessible	Have experienced discrimination	Agree they feel part of a community	Agree they feel represented by the University	Agree they feel represented by the SU
HBS	55%	97%	91%	17%	81%	65%	76%
Creative Arts	61%	90%	79%	7%	74%	54%	38%
LMS	68%	86%	89%	19%	55%	44%	48%
Humanities	72%	92%	75%	18%	65%	47%	53%
H&SW	65%	95%	82%	14%	64%	39%	35%
Education	57%	92%	92%	33%	67%	80%	56%

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Law	57%	100%	91%	15%	77%	62%	55%
Engineering	63%	100%	96%	8%	86%	61%	68%

Community and representation

In terms of community engagement, only 55% of students from Life and Medical Sciences feel that they are a part of the community. H&SW and Humanities also scored quite low here: only 64% and 65% of students respectively said that they feel a part of the community.

In terms of representation, only 39% of students in Health and Social Work feel represented by the university, and only 35% feel represented by the SU. This is a significant area of university concern that fits into a bigger picture: students in H&SW are generally more difficult to engage with than students from any of the other schools, which can cause or exacerbate various problems.

Humanities and Life and Medical Sciences follow H&SW, with only 47% and 44% of students respectively reporting that they feel represented by the university, increasing marginally to 53% and 48% respectively who feel represented by the SU.

Creative Arts also scored low in terms of representation: only 54% of students said they feel represented by the university, dropping to 38% who feel represented by the SU. This gap (-16%) is important to note, as it indicates that the SU is significantly underrepresenting disabled students in this school compared to the university. It would be useful to conduct further research to understand the reasons for this gap.

Study Needs Agreements

Only 55% of Business school students have a SNA, closely followed by 57% in the schools of Law and Education and 61% in Creative Arts. This is particularly concerning given that almost the entire survey sample (190/227 participants) said that they do have a disability, and most people without a SNA (61/83 people) feel that they would benefit from having one.

Evidently, disabled students in these schools require the highest level of support and guidance from academic staff, Student Wellbeing, the SU and others to ensure they know what a SNA is and understand where/how to obtain one.

Table two reveals students' answers across the eight different schools of study, looking specifically at the experiences of students with a Study Needs Agreement.

Table 2

School of study	Found obtaining an SNA easy	Agree their SNA is right for them	Agree that academic staff respect their SNA
HBS	82%	96%	74%
Creative Arts	89%	89%	58%
LMS	89%	75%	64%
Humanities	92%	77%	85%
H&SW	90%	90%	63%
Education	88%	88%	100%
Law	88%	88%	88%
Engineering	88%	82%	75%

Notably, there is significant room for improvement in terms of the role that academic staff play: in the school of Creative Arts, only 58% of students feel that academic staff respect accommodations in their SNA, followed by 63% in Health and Social Work and 64% in Life and Medical Sciences.

This is a serious cause for concern that can be linked to various issues highlighted earlier in this report, including a stigma surrounding hidden disabilities, discrimination, a lack of support and understanding from

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teachers and disclosure requirements that make it difficult for external lecturers to know whether their students have a SNA.

Another significant reason for this issue, based on the focus groups, is a lack of clear and effective communication between academic staff and Student Wellbeing, which could potentially cause teachers to overlook or misinterpret Study Needs Agreements.

Table three shows students' answers across the eight different schools of study, looking specifically at students who do not have a Study Needs Agreement.

Table 3			
School of study	Agree they would know where to go to obtain a SNA	Agree they have been signposted or offered support in accessing a SNA	Feel comfortable going to Wellbeing to undertake a SNA assessment
HBS	29%	29%	53%
Creative Arts	38%	54%	77%
LMS	38%	15%	46%
Humanities	40%	60%	80%
H&SW	67%	56%	89%
Education	33%	50%	50%
Law	0%	0%	80%
Engineering	22%	22%	67%

Apart from Health & Social Work, less than 40% of students across all schools know where to obtain a SNA, which reflects a significant awareness gap. Law students are a particular demographic of concern: 0% of participants from this school said they know where to obtain a SNA.

Physics, Engineering and Computer Science students are also quite unlikely to know where to get a SNA (only 22% know), followed by students in the school of Education (only 33% know).

These results are largely explained by the results from the next question, showing that 0% of Law school students have been signposted or offered support in accessing a SNA, followed by 15% of Life and Medical Sciences, 22% of Physics, Engineering and Computer Science Students and 29% of Business school students.

In addition to a lack of signposting and support, it is clear that many students without a Study Needs Agreement don't feel comfortable undertaking an assessment at the Wellbeing service. In the school of Life and Medical Sciences, only 46% of students said they would be comfortable going to the Wellbeing service, closely followed by 50% of Education students and 53% of Business students.

Overall, these findings indicate failings by multiple stakeholders with a responsibility to support students, including teachers, faculty members and Student Wellbeing.

Students with a disability should be known to the university from the point of their enrolment at university and referred to key services based on their specific needs.

If this is not possible, teachers and other staff members should work with students to identify any needs for academic support, highlight the key services available, and help them to connect with the Wellbeing service. This evidently does not happen regularly enough.

At the same time, Student Wellbeing should consider making its assessment process more "student friendly", bearing in mind the main concerns mentioned in this report by disabled students: namely, an overly complicated process for evidencing disabilities, unaffordable costs for medical evidence, and a lack of consistent information shared different individuals within the team, which can confuse or alienate students.

Recommendations

Recommendations for academic staff

It is clear that many students with known disabilities are receiving the support they need and are entitled to, but it is equally clear that some are not. Where not already happening, it is recommended that academic staff:

- Coordinate and engage with Student Wellbeing to understand disabled students' academic requirements and ensure adjustments are achievable.

- Highlight support services available to all students to address the awareness gap.

- Provide all students with the option to discuss their academic needs in a safe and confidential manner as part of the personal tutoring framework.

- Proactively work with students to ensure that accommodations in their SNA are implemented effectively and respected by other class members.

Recommendations for Student Wellbeing

- Increase work to raise the profile of the Wellbeing service and ensure new and existing students understand the support it provides.

- Coordinate and engage with academic staff to ensure SNAs are developed in a realistic manner and adjustments are properly understood.

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- Consistently engage with lecturers to ensure that SNAs are respected and implemented effectively throughout the academic year, and to make sure reasonable adjustments are implemented appropriately online.
- Review the process for students applying for a SNA, particularly in terms of reducing the burden of evidence required and avoiding costs for medical fees where it is possible to do so.
- Maintain clear records on students with a SNA and update details accordingly (i.e., when/if adjustments are required).

Recommendations for senior stakeholders

- Improve access to buildings and facilities on campus for disabled students, bearing in mind the concerns detailed in this report.

- Ensure there is a zero-tolerance policy for abuse and discrimination across campus, backed up by strong enforcement powers and a safe environment on campus (e.g., adequate campus security personnel, CCTV, well-lit pathways etc).

- Respond proactively to the needs of students in different schools/subject areas by working with SCOs, student reps, teachers and other parties to understand and tackle pertinent issues (e.g. discrimination/access to campus) in a focused way.
- Evaluate funding for medical tests (required to evidence disabilities) to ensure it is available and accessible to all students in need, including international students.

Recommendations for the SU:

- Use activities and events, particularly ones that are popular among disabled students (e.g.), to raise awareness surrounding SNAs and the Wellbeing service.

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- Highlight and amplify accessibility issues faced by disabled students (on campus/online) through marketing and campaigns to encourage the university to invest in essential upgrades.

- Foster a culture of respect, inclusivity and diversity through hiring practices, representational work (the electoral process), and social events/activities (the SU should aim to set a positive example of diversity in the broadest possible sense).

- Improve the accessibility of events and activities for disabled students where possible (related to the above) to increase engagement.

- Utilize networks and channels, such as the Disabled Students' Network/PVC meetings, to lobby the university to take action on key issues.