

Experiencing inclusive higher education:

Rising to the challenge
of widening participation
for disabled students

Dr Artemi Sakellariadis
Dr David Bainton



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"A Captive Audience?" by David Reekie, July 2000. Exhibited at the V&A Museum. 76cm(h)x50cm (w)x35(d).
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About the Authors

Dr Artemi Sakellariadis is the Director of The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education
www.csie.org.uk
Dr David Bainton is a Research Fellow within the School of Education, University of Bristol

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Executive Summary

This report is the outcome of a small-scale research commissioned by the Widening Participation Research Group at the University of Bristol. The research sought to understand disabled students' experiences of studying at the University of Bristol, shed light on any barriers to disabled students' presence, learning and participation at the University and put forward recommendations for developing a more inclusive environment.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Students were first invited to share their experiences through an online survey (22 participants) and later discuss these in greater detail during narrative interviews (12 participants). Participants came from a range of faculties, were engaged in undergraduate and postgraduate studies, included mature students and had a range of impairments. The sample may be relatively small, but the lived experience of these students is very real and worthy of rapt attention.

Prior to presenting findings, this report offers a summary of universities' statutory equality duties under the Equality Act 2010, including the legal definition of disability, the public sector equality duty and the reasonable adjustments duty, highlighting the fact that this is an anticipatory duty. The report also refers to Article 24 (Education) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which calls for an inclusive education at all levels, including in higher education, and presents the social model of disability.

The study engaged in two levels of analysis. In the first instance, disabled students' experiences at the University are represented, organised around themes which emerged from the data. These are:

- a. **Support for learning:** students mentioned the University's willingness to offer support but many experienced difficulties in setting this up; many expressed frustration that their disability support summary did not reach relevant staff, or that the recommendations were not implemented. Most said that they did not have an opportunity to discuss with Disability Services the effectiveness of the support offered. Some students expressed concern at the quality of the service, particularly when support is outsourced to an external agency. The effort to organise support while keeping up with academic work became too much for some students who gave up on trying to access support.
- b. **Support for personal needs related to students' impairments:** students with physical impairments spoke of considerable difficulties in attending to access needs, including physical access to University buildings. Students appreciated the University's willingness to help but in practice came up against multiple difficulties in negotiating access or other reasonable adjustments or in having their impairments fully understood and responded to.
- c. **Barriers to inclusion:** some students cited communication as a key factor that can make or break support; others cited organisational reasons, such as the way that teaching is structured; resistance to change was also cited, and two students emphasised that people without personal experience of disability may find it hard to embrace the rationale for inclusion.
- d. **Impact on studies:** some students said that the support they received had a positive impact on their studies; others gave a mixed response, while some students said that the struggle to negotiate support, or the frustration at the ineffectiveness of the support offered, had a negative impact on their academic progress.

Finally, the report puts forward reflections on these students' experiences, attempting to open up possibilities for reconceptualising support for disabled students and improving student experience and outcomes.

- a. **Seeing the whole person:** Insufficient acknowledgement of impairments or reasonable adjustments offered in a range of specific contexts gave rise to distress and frustration. At times there was evidence of broader disjunctions – between an individual disabled student, their impairment(s) and often complex and dynamic identity, and the systemic response of the University that was not able to acknowledge or respond to them. For some students, this disjunction might be characterised as existential – that they as a whole, multifaceted, embodied learners and their specific support needs were invisible to those people and systems within the University that they had dealings with. The dynamic, often evolving nature of people's impairments posed a particular challenge to the encounter with the University. Review processes were sometimes absent or slow to respond effectively to changing needs. The intersectionality of impairments was a further area of concern – particularly the intersection between mental health and other impairments.
- b. **Creating parity of experience:** Disabled students' impairments often make their experience at university more challenging than it is for other students. Difficulties in communication and inflexible systems end up compounding disabled students' difficulties, where University systems and interpretations of what is reasonable – often through no fault of any individual – ended up worsening them. Personal tutors, and course tutors played a central role in mediating experience, rather than Disability Services. Disabled students may experience increased vulnerability, as negotiating reasonable adjustments involves them sharing more of their personal lives than other students have

to. There was a potentially damaging interplay between the lack of recognition of disabled identities, an insensitive or flippant response to an expression of these identities, and the ways that these can have a negative effect on students' mental or physical well-being.

- c. **Transformative problem solving:** While we were often hearing stories of encounters that had not gone well for disabled students, these stories lacked the usual narrative resolution. The final part of the plot, where issues become resolved largely, was simply missing. Courses ended before support needs were met, outcomes of complaints were not communicated and, more generally, encounters that had caused hurt were not aired; navigating the complexities of university life can become a journey that, as one student put it, is "survived". One of the themes that emerged was the reactive, rather than proactive nature of support. Disability Services were perceived to take a role of "signposting", to use one students' term, rather than attempt to engage in dynamic interactions with disabled students. This absence was felt by many students, as a perceived lack of 'care' by the University. A far greater level of responsibility and response from University staff and systems was requested – where staff are proactive, thoughtful, engage in an effort to understand student support needs, and take responsibility for supporting students – rather than shifting responsibility for responding to students' impairments between different elements of the University.

1. Background to the research

This research took place in response to a call for expressions of interest from the University of Bristol Widening Participation Research Group. This research group commissions small-scale pieces of research that increase understanding of Widening Participation across the University, with the aim to improve student experience and achievement. On this occasion, the call was for research on widening participation for disabled students. The content of this report, as well as every aspect of disability equality, apply just as much to disabled staff as they do to disabled students. This report only refers to disabled students solely because of the call that gave rise to it.

Dr Artemi Sakellariadis is the director of the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education – a national charity that works to promote equality and eliminate discrimination in education, and Dr Dave Bainton is a research fellow in the School of Education, University of Bristol. Both of us have a background in using narrative research approaches to better understand the experiences of marginalised groups, and proposed to explore how the experiences of disabled students whilst at the University impacted on their achievement.

During initial discussions with University staff, including staff from Disability Services, one of the key issues that was felt to be worthy of investigation was the relatively low level of student satisfaction declared by disabled students in the National Student Survey, compared to that of non-disabled students at the University. In trying to understand this trend in the context of the University's efforts to respond to disabled students' impairments, we decided to take a broad approach and, without limiting our investigation to any particular aspect of disability, set out to explore the lived experience of disabled students at the University, through the lens of the forms of support that were made available to them – how this support was managed and mediated. In other words, how the relationship between student and University was mediated by support systems and the people who operated them.

2. Aims of the research

This research has sought to foreground disabled students' voices, represent their experiences of studying at the University of Bristol, understand barriers to disabled students' presence, learning and participation at the University and put forward recommendations for developing a more inclusive environment. University life has its challenges for all students – all the more so for disabled students. The research aimed to better understand the additional challenges that disabled students face whilst navigating their way through their time at University, and to offer some recommendations for areas where the University might facilitate a better student experience. Inevitably in a small-scale piece of research like this, a focus needs to be taken – and we chose to focus efforts on offering insights into a student perspective on what is, after all, a complex series of encounters. This is then one part of a bigger picture – albeit one that we feel is central to fully acknowledging and responding to the impairments of current and prospective disabled students.

3. Research methodology

In choosing to focus on generating in-depth insights into the experience of disabled students, a qualitative research approach was adopted. The data collection had two phases – an online survey and narrative interviews.

- **Phase I – online questionnaire.** A survey was developed and was available online for students to respond to for a period of four weeks. This invited responses to open questions across four key areas – academic studies, accommodation, communication and overall well-being. For each area, students were invited to provide information on both what went well and what could have been improved. An email invitation was sent out to School Disability Coordinators, requesting that they forward the link to disabled students in their department. Additional requests were made to Disability Services and to disabled students involved in the Getting Things Changed Project, to invite disabled students to engage with our project. A total of 22 students completed the survey and submitted their responses online. The survey can be found in Appendix 1.
- **Phase II – narrative interviews.** We invited everyone who completed the online survey to include their email address, if they would be willing to be contacted about an interview. 12 people were subsequently interviewed. Responses to the online survey were used as starting points for semi structured discussions. A narrative approach was taken, which elicited stories of particular situations or encounters and how these encounters had impacted on their student lives. Students who expressed concerns or dissatisfaction with particular experiences were also invited to articulate how they make sense of their experiences and what recommendations they might want to make to the University, to ensure future students have a more inclusive experience. Their responses are presented in section 5 of this report. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix 2.

Data analysis

Data from interviews was fully transcribed, and both sets of data were then transferred into a qualitative data analysis tool (Nvivo). This allowed for careful analysis of the data and for emergent thematic coding to take place – looking across the various data to analyse common areas of concern to allow common themes to emerge. As noted above, the initial online survey was structured around areas of student life – academic studies, accommodation, communication and overall well-being. The interviews took responses on the surveys as a starting point, for going into greater depth on those experiences. The themes presented within this report were not pre-established by the researchers, but rather emerged through coding and analysis of the data.

Section 5 presents an analysis that remains close to the data and presents findings around the following themes: support for learning; support for personal needs; barriers to inclusion; and impact on studies. These themes emerged from the experiences of student life that were shared, and offer an initial analysis, with data categorised in a meaningful way.

Section 6 takes the analysis to a deeper level. It presents reflections on these students' experiences, attempting to open up possibilities for reconceptualising support for disabled students in ways that can improve student experience and outcomes. We understand section 6 as therefore both an analysis of the data as well as an outline for the reframing of disability support at the University.

Participants

Participants were self-selected both for the online survey and the subsequent interviews. Participants who were interviewed were given a book token as a gesture of thanks for giving up their time to share their experiences. Participants came from all levels of study from Undergraduate, Masters and Doctorate levels, and included mature students. Students also studied a range of subjects and had a range of impairments. The characteristics of the students who took part in this study were as follows:

Characteristic	Category	No of participants (survey)	No of participants (interview)
Level of Study	Undergraduate	10	5
	Masters	7	4
	Doctorate	1	2
	Not known	4	1
Age	18-22	9	4
	22-30	5	3
	31-40	3	3
	41+	1	1
	Not known	4	1
Course area	Science/engineering	7	2
	Arts	4	1
	Social sciences and Law	7	7
	Not known	4	2
Impairment (non exclusive)	Physical impairment	4	3
	Sensory impairment	1	
	Specific learning difficulty	4	2
	Autistic spectrum	1	1
	Medical condition	6	3
	Mental health	8	5
Mode of Study	Full – time	16	10
	Part-time	2	1
	Not known	4	1
Gender	Female	13	10
	Male	5	2
	Not known	4	
Fee status	Home	17	10
	Overseas	1	1
	Not known	4	1

The sample size for each characteristic was not sufficient to be able to draw conclusions as to the extent to which findings are more prevalent within specific groups of students. That said, one of the clear findings was the extent to which the intersectionality of issues was important – i.e that participants often presented with more than one area of impairment. The implication of this being that there is a clear need to listen to individuals’ experiences and address their specific needs – rather than taking a categorical approach to improving students’ experiences.

Scope and limitation of the study

Findings from this small-scale, qualitative piece of research make no claim of being representative of all disabled students’ experiences at the University of Bristol, not least because the research is based on a relatively small and self-selecting sample. This is not to say that our findings are not valid because our sample is small. Far from it, the lived experience of our research participants – their joys and frustrations as disabled students at the University of Bristol – is very real and worthy of rapt attention.

Our participants came from a range of departments and levels of study, and they have impairments of different type and severity. And yet there are common themes in their stories, such that can call into question some of the established processes which have gradually evolved as the diversity of students at the University has gradually increased. The experiences of our research participants are consistent with the relatively low levels of satisfaction reported in the National Student Survey, therefore it would be reasonable to understand this research as offering an authentic understanding of a range of experiences that are taking place across the University. As such it offers keen insights into some of the challenges and solutions, good practices and less so that exist in this complex area. Further research would need to be undertaken to get a stronger sense of how widespread these findings are and to better understand existing University policies and practices, before firm recommendations for institutional change can be made. For now, these students’ contributions provide a clear indication of where some barriers to inclusion currently lie.

The research findings are presented in sections 5 and 6 of this report.

- In section 5 we represent students’ experiences along initial thematic lines framed by the type of support being offered – i. support for academic studies and ii. support for personal needs linked to students’ impairments, medical conditions or mental health issues.
- In section 6 we take a slightly more abstracted level of analysis to draw out some of the deeper themes that we feel are framing the relationship between student and institution, as well as the support that is being offered.

Throughout this report we have chosen to bring student voice to the foreground and intentionally make extensive use of extracts from survey responses and interview transcripts, first representing students’ words as these were written or uttered, and later in a more distilled stanza form. This is because we believe that the words of disabled students carry a raw energy of their own and can convey their joys and frustrations more powerfully than any second-hand abstracted representation ever can. This is, after all, a project about understanding student

experience and we believe that the closer we stay to the authentic experience, the more powerful its impact can be. We hope that such a multi-voiced text helps to bring the stories to life – as far as this is possible – and that this, in turn, affords a useful opportunity for the University to better understand disabled students' experiences.

4. Perceptions of disability

The current official definition of disability comes from the Equality Act 2010, which states that a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out ordinary day-to-day activities.

The Equality Act, through its public sector equality duty, places a legal duty on all public service providers to have due regard to the need to: a) eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation; b) advance equality of opportunity for everyone who has one of the 'protected characteristics' defined by the Act (disability being among them); and c) foster good relations between people who have a protected characteristic and those who do not. For higher education institutions, this applies to current as well as prospective students (and also to current and prospective members of staff).

The Act also places upon organisations the reasonable adjustments duty, the intention of which is to avoid, as much as possible, any disadvantage which disabled people face because of their impairments. In other words, it is a measure seeking to create a level playing field. In the case of higher education institutions, it stipulates that positive steps must be taken to ensure that disabled people can fully participate in the education and other aspects of University life. Failure to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people is among the examples of unlawful discrimination specified in the Act. It is important to understand that the reasonable adjustments duty is an anticipatory duty, i.e. one owed to disabled students in general – rather than solely a call to make particular arrangements for individual students. This means that there is a need for provisions, criteria and practices to be reviewed and adjusted in ways which remove barriers to the presence, learning and participation of disabled students.

All of this means that disabled students, or prospective students, have their entitlement to a University education enshrined in law. Offering the entitlement, however, without developing capacity in higher education to respond to the full diversity of students, is like issuing a ticket and keeping the door locked.

Disabled People's Organisations in the UK have articulated clearly a need to distinguish between notions of impairment (a loss or limitation of physical, sensory or mental function) and disability (the experience of oppression and discrimination when inflexible social structures do not offer adjustments in response to people's impairments). A conventional way of understanding disability is that people are disabled by their impairments and, therefore, need cure or management; this has become known as the medical model of disability. An alternative is to understand that people who have impairments are dis-abled by inflexible societal structures and, instead, should be treated with respect and assistance; this has become known as the social model of disability. In other words the medical model sees the person as having a problem, while the social model sees inflexible social structures as being the problem. This is explained in greater detail by Richard Rieser in the World of Inclusion website: www.worldofinclusion.com/medical-model-social-model-r-rieser.

The imperative to develop an inclusive education system at all levels, including in higher education, is also stipulated in Article 24 (Education) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the UK has ratified. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities published a damning report in September 2017, which includes more than 60 recommendations (the highest ever number of recommendations to the UK), following its recent Review of the UK government's compliance with the Convention. One member of the Committee called this a "human catastrophe".

Closer to home, the Equality and Human Rights Commission in its 2017 report 'Being disabled in Britain' describes as "a badge of shame on our society" the fact that millions of disabled people continue to be denied everyday rights which non-disabled people take for granted, such as access to transport or benefit from education or employment, and calls for a new national focus on disability rights, so that disabled people are no longer treated as 'second-class citizens'.

Staff at the University of Bristol operate within a national context which regularly denies disabled people their rights and treats them as second-class citizens. This, against the backdrop of national and international equality monitoring bodies consistently stressing that this has to change. The opportunity to work towards becoming a trail-blazing institution, which recognises and removes institutional barriers to disabled students' presence, learning and participation, is there for the taking.

A photograph of a person wearing a bright green t-shirt, sitting at a white desk. Their arms are resting on the desk, and a laptop is visible in front of them. The right side of the image is covered by a semi-transparent teal overlay. On this overlay, the text '5. Students' experiences and recommendations' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font. The background shows a blurred indoor setting with a potted plant.

5. Students' experiences and recommendations

Section 4 provided a framework for understanding the experiences that were shared by disabled students during this research. This context places responsibility on the University to create a level playing field, so that students who have physical, sensory or mental impairments, including mental health issues, can access lectures and learning materials, as well as have opportunities to participate in all aspects of student life in ways that non-disabled students take for granted. The Equality Act refers to this as “reasonable adjustments” that public service providers are required to make, so that disabled people are not treated unfairly because of their impairments. This framework provides a standpoint from which experiences of students can be considered.

A note on representing students’ experiences

In the course of our interviews we asked students to tell us about some of their experiences of setting up, receiving and reviewing support that was helpful or not helpful, as well as tell us what further support they would have welcomed which was not offered or made available to them. In addition, we asked students to tell us how they made sense of their experiences: what they understood to be the barriers to accessing support that would have been more helpful to them and how they believe such barriers could be reduced or removed.

This section re-presents disabled student narratives of their experiences of accessing support, as well as their understanding of barriers to this and their recommendations for the University. All names appearing below are pseudonyms.

These research findings emerge from analysis of the online survey data and the subsequent interview data. It is worth noting that what is presented here is an analysis of disabled students’ own perceptions of (some of) their experiences of engaging with different parts of the University.

As with all experiences these are coloured by the emotions that framed these encounters. We have deliberately attempted to keep alive these whole, embodied perceptions within the text and, as far as possible, not only give weight to the transcribed words of the disabled students who responded, but the lived and felt experiences that the words were carried along by.

This is, then, not always comfortable reading. The research was framed to give a sense of how disabled students experienced the workings of person-to-institution relationships, and we feel that this research has achieved this. Representing other voices – for example the voice of staff or those involved in developing policy at the University – is beyond the remit of this research.

A note on recommendations

This research sheds light on some of the reasons why disabled students give consistently low satisfaction scores on the National Student Survey (NSS). Indeed, the research clearly indicates that the low satisfaction rates of disabled students are real, and grounded in experiences of life at the University. Much can be built from such honesty, and alongside representing student experiences, we present a number of recommendations that we hope the University will find useful. The recommendations listed in this section are those that were put forward by disabled students when they were being interviewed for this research. Those which appear in the next section have arisen from our engagement with all the stories that have become part of this research. In addition, given that exploring existing policies and practices was beyond the remit of this research and, therefore, it could appear inappropriate for us to make recommendations for change, in the next section we have also included a number of questions which arise from our analysis and which the University may wish to consider.

We are also very mindful of the fact that improving the experiences of disabled students needs to be founded on an

authentic conversation between University staff and disabled students themselves – a conversation that is much bigger than any single research project. We hope that this research and this report might contribute to that bigger conversation.

A. SUPPORT FOR LEARNING

Setting up support

Four of the students that we spoke to spoke freely of their appreciation for the University’s willingness and readiness to organise appropriate support for them.

Pat, a mature student who has mental health issues, expressed unreserved appreciation of Disability Services and other sources of support:

Disability Services were great from the first person I spoke to up until the person who saw me, and who was just... It was brilliant. It was absolutely brilliant. It was nice to talk to somebody who just got it. And who kind of realised, I didn’t feel as if it was like just me. So... they were great, they were really great. And they kind of set things in motion and they told my school what I should expect and what their obligation is. And what my obligation is as well. But really set it out clearly. So it wasn’t kind of me negotiating trying to see what I could get. (...) And there has been people who have kind of picked me up in terms of Disability Services in my first year, student counselling have been amazing, my GP is great. So in terms of you know the health care and the mental health care it’s all there, you

know, and if you know how to access it then it’s great.

Tom, a student with a physical impairment, spoke of the warm welcome he received:

I felt like I was welcomed very nicely by, like, everyone. So my department was very accommodating, they said yeah we’ll sort everything out that you need, please have a look around, here is what we have, that sort of thing. Library support, very very welcoming and they described many things that they had. Disability Services were very very welcoming and they said these are all the different things that we can offer. The people that did the assessment before I even started at Bristol, she was very friendly and said look at all this amazing stuff we can give you, basically.

Will, who has autism, was very pleased that his support was organised swiftly by Disability Services, even though he does not get Disabled Students’ Allowance which would ordinarily cover the cost.

But I was quite surprised with how straightforward it was actually, because I just met with the disability advisor and she said she’d have to go and sort it. But it seemed quite straightforward for her to get the money, it wasn’t like a really complicated thing. ‘Cause within a few days she told me that it was fine.

Matt, a mature student who has diabetes, described the support he was offered after his initial assessment:

And so he authorised two things. One was a laptop and the other was a learning mentor.

At the same time, these students as well as most of the other students who we spoke to, had found that in practice they encountered numerous difficulties in setting up the support that they needed.

Pat who expressed her appreciation of Disability Services, went on to say that she had been the architect of her own support. She said that she sought support after having felt deeply frustrated by the comments of a tutor who, unaware of her mental health issues and panic attacks, had casually told her that what she needs to do is to take a deep breath before going into an exam.

So I mean I kind of failed my exams, three exams in a row. And with horrendous marks compared to my summative course essay work. And so when I went to see her [personal tutor] I kind of explained the situation, how it is for me in the exams. And I hadn't got a disability support summary or anything and her first response was like: "what you need to do is take a deep breath before you go into the exam". And that was her response to it. And it was kind of like you know there was kind of at the time I just didn't know what to say, but I think: Really don't you get it? So when I got my disability support summary and when I got extra, additional support in terms of a specialist mentor from I guess student finance fund it, I went to my personal tutor and I sat her down and I said, what, you know,

what what they, what do I do with my mentor. Even like my disability support summary. I instigated the whole thing. There was no kind of... nobody said: Have you thought about this? Nobody from the students' union, none of my lecturers, not a personal tutor, nobody. And I just I'm fairly resourceful like that and also because I think I'm a bit older and so I know how to navigate the system a bit better. And maybe newcomers, when you are 18, and you kind of take whatever is said at face value.

Tim, who was diagnosed with dyspraxia as a student at the University, spoke of practical difficulties to access assessment centres outside of the University and suggested that it would be easier if this was in-house rather than outsourced, a suggestion made by other students that we spoke to as well.

OK, so, one of the things you need to do if you want to get tested for dyslexia or dyspraxia when you come to the University, is to go to an external psychologist who will then carry out the tests to see if you are diagnosed with anything. And one of the things I believe University could do is to have this as an internal thing, so have the psychologist on site rather than making students go and find their own contacts, and the second thing is that if then you are diagnosed with any of those two, the Disability Services suggest that you should also get checked for visual stress and to get checked you have to travel to Cheltenham because there is

only one person nearby who can determine the colour of the lenses that you will need IF you get diagnosed (laughs) Yes, so I think you could also have someone on site to do this, so that not everyone is able to travel. And because I had exams, and I don't have a car so I had to you know make sure everything was in place before I could just leave Bristol and go to Cheltenham and it's not a very swift and easy process, for most people, so I think a lot can be done to just, you know, Because this is such a huge organisation and there are a lot of people in need of such things, I think yeah it would be a lot more convenient if we had someone on site, able to do that.

Tim also suggested that Disability Services could be more proactive in engaging with students.

I would have liked them to contact people just like they contact everyone in terms of registering with a GP and giving information about the health centre, I think they should do that for to the disability centre as well and not just ask if you have a learning difficulty because most people don't even know that they do! Rather say if you suspect, you know, you have these symptoms and if you suspect that you may be, then it would be worth coming over and speaking to us and we can help throughout your studies.

This was echoed by a number of students, for example Jon who has diabetes:

And then also, perhaps telling schools to mention it when they give you the welcome talk. And if you identify as a disabled student maybe contact Disability Services as soon as you can if you want. Because we had a lot of talks saying like: register with the GP and things like that. And I feel like they could quite easily tag on at the end: contact Disability Services if you need to.

Sam also echoed the suggestion for clearer information about Disability Services:

I don't really remember being given any information when I first started so I don't know if we were given booklets or anything like that. It was more kind of administration stuff. So this is what you need to do for essays, this is what you need to do for this. (...) So I realised that there was support there but it was at a point when I didn't really need it because I was finishing. If I'd realised sooner I would have asked for more help from somebody. (...) So I know we got it all in our first year, but I don't know if reinforcing it in the second and third years when things actually get more stressful as well. (...) Well social media I think. Because I know that any University has facebook groups and stuff but I personally never bothered with them because notifications were annoying.

But things like twitter, and like promoting more adverts, they make such a difference because they pop up. I mean email is a bit of a... I don't know if that would work. Because so many people hate getting so many emails all the time.

Tom pointed out that students might be overwhelmed by too much information when they arrive at University, or they may not be aware what support they may need in the future:

I feel like I had that initial contact with Library Services and with Disability Services, but then... there wasn't much, you know it would have been nice for example if every year there was a reminder of services, or an invitation to come in and speak with them again or something like that. (...) You don't want to overwhelm everyone with continuous mailing lists, but this would be a nice thing to remind students of because I have certainly not been reminded of it by Disability Services in my 5 years. So maybe it happened once in the beginning, I can't say for sure if it happened again when I started my masters course. But it certainly is not every year or every term which I think might be quite nice.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Consider carrying out assessments for specific learning difficulties (for example dyslexia or dyspraxia) within the University, rather than commissioning external bodies to do this.

Ensure all students are told about Disability Services on arrival to University in a way that will be noticed, explaining how the service may be useful for students who experience difficulties even if they have no diagnosis of a particular condition. Remind annually.

Joe, a mature student who has a physical impairment, spoke of his experience of engaging with Disability Services at this and the other two universities, suggesting that it is more helpful if each disabled student has a named member of staff to work with. Joe also gave an example of the frustration students can experience when communication between Disability Services and departments breaks down.

Yeah, I think if Disability Services is properly resourced then Disability Services can help other students! And I've experienced in two different universities, you know it works in other universities. If it's resourced with enough staff to be able to help so that each disabled student can have a named member of staff that they work with, and then the member of staff can sort out things. Again, just a repeat scenario was when I needed to have an extension for a disability-related issue. At the beginning of my studies I had to give all the medical information to Disability

Services, so that they could work out a support plan that I needed that I might need to have the odd extension at times. When I came to be needing an extension I contacted the disability rep within the school and asked her how I go about it. And the school required me to send to them that same medical evidence that I'd sent to Disability Services. Just to be able to get an extension that I was entitled to. It was just absolutely ridiculous.

RECOMMENDATION:

Ensure that Disability Services are adequately resourced to enable each disabled student to have an allocated member of staff who, over time, gets to know the student and their support needs.

Breakdown in communication between Disability Services and departments was also experienced by other students. Tim, a student who has dyslexia, expressed frustration that the onus was on him to let his department know of his condition, and even then it transpired that relevant people were unaware.

So when I joined I had to get a report from the Disability Services about my condition and bring that over to my department, find the right person who was responsible for arranging extra time, which you know was chasing up a lot of people, that was just unnecessary and could be eliminated by just assigning someone who is responsible

for doing this and making everyone aware of it. So I had to bring that report over, then they had to upload this to an online file store and then, even though it was uploaded and online and my tutors had access to that file store, none of them would look at it. They didn't even know that I had difficulties unless I approached them and told them about it. And I think what could be done is instead of making me do all the work, they should have a system in place between the Disability Services and all the different faculties, whereby I go and have my evaluation done at the Disability Services and automatically this report gets sent to the relevant person in my department, who then makes my tutors aware of it and puts in place the alternative arrangements that I need for example for exams or for course work and you know that would save me time and effort and it also it would make people actually understand what is going on. Rather than, you know, there is a report that I have to get, that no one knows about...

Tim also shared Pat's experience of taking the initiative to request support from Disability Services

There was no contact on their behalf, it was all you know me initiating everything from the beginning.

Jon, a student who has diabetes, felt that he missed out on a term of support because he was not aware that it was up to him

to request it from Disability Services. He was also surprised that key staff in his department had not received the information and did not know he has diabetes, which he flagged up as a Health and Safety issue.

So, basically I had spoken to them right when I registered, because obviously I registered as a disabled student. And there had been mention of an appointment and I think from then I never heard from them. And so I, I guess, then didn't chase it because I thought it was connected to Disabled Students' Allowance. Which it wasn't, so then when I phoned them in probably what would have been like October, they only had appointments at the end of December. (...) I initially contacted Disability Services in September, and it took a while for my disability to be passed on to... like my tutor for example didn't know I was diabetic. Until I told him. Which wasn't great. Because I don't mind telling people but just in terms of Health and Safety, I assumed he knew and he didn't. And also I didn't have my appointment with Disability Services until the last day of term, December. Which meant that I didn't get extended library loans or access to the private study rooms and things. And I thought maybe if I had been engaged with them earlier or contacted them earlier. Because I wasn't really aware that that was how I got access to the library and things, no one really told me, as far as I know, that I can set that up. I thought it was

DSA with student finance and that was the disability bit. And then I didn't really hear from them until December which was a bit long, considering.

Dan, a student who has a serious medical condition and mental health issues, spoke at length about his frustration with poor communication when trying to access support from Disability Services; he kept being offered times he had already said he could not make:

Within the disability support summary they said I could have access to the mentoring. And they sent some time-slots and I responded and sent a screenshot of my timetable and said you know I've got lectures at these times so I can't do it, I am free on these times. And they just sent me another reply and said well how about these then? But again they completely clashed with my lectures so I felt: you haven't even looked at what my timetable was and I'd replied and I'd said no again, I can't do that and they kept offering me the same time slot but for a week later. As if it was the date that I couldn't do, rather than the time. And in the end it just made me feel so unheard, so worthless, they hadn't even... It felt like I was a tick-box to be ticked: we've offered him mentoring sessions, he chose not to take them, well we can tick it as done now. Rather than, I'm an individual, and it's got to be an individual support. And it just didn't happen. So in the end I just didn't take it. And even during this year, disability

support have kept saying to me well you are not accessing the mentoring. But for me it was like... I would be in tears because it would really distress me and now it's like a barrier that I don't want to engage with them. Because why would I want to engage with a service that doesn't recognise the individual that doesn't take into account that actually I have to attend these lectures, if I don't attend these lectures I get into trouble for attendance.

In response to being asked if he had explained to Disability Services why he was not accessing the support, Dan said:

Yeah I did and they just said oh I am sorry that's your experience but maybe now would be a good time to try again. As if I was the one who felt, you know maybe it's time for you to try again, rather than: you know, these are the changes we've made, or, OK that's really difficult, let me specifically sort out a time slot that is good for you. No one did that, it was kind of: this is what we offer, you fit in around us.

In summary, with regard to setting up support for learning, a number of students mentioned the willingness of the University to offer support to disabled students, but most of them experienced difficulties in setting this up. In many cases the information was not available to them when they needed it, and they had to use their initiative, and devote time and energy, to find out what support was available and how they could access it. A number of students found that, having set up appropriate support with Disability Services, the information was not

communicated to the relevant people within their department. And some of them endured flippant remarks by representatives of the University who did not seem to understand the challenges facing disabled students, or the requirement to provide reasonable adjustments in order to make sure that disabled students are not disadvantaged because of their impairments. These issues are further discussed in Section 6.

Receiving support

Most students that we spoke to expressed mixed feelings, with some appreciation of the effective support they received, alongside grievances at support that was ineffective or agreed but not implemented.

Ben, a student who has dyslexia, was very appreciative of his amended exam arrangements.

And some days I have really good days, and some days and it might just be in exams but reading smaller font would not help me and so they blew up the text only about size 14 in a certain italics and fonting [sic] for me and that was brilliant. (...) And they put me in a small room there, I don't get any more than up to 5 people, they said: Do you get distracted? And I said well I do a bit and they took that as, oh well she can't be in with lots of people. So I'm now with only about 5-6 people... So: I'm in a small room, computer, and if I want to write I can write, but normally I'm typing. So that is what they did for me which is absolutely brilliant and I now have no worry that I'm not going to have to... I always finish.

Tim, who has dyspraxia, expressed concern that some issues are not being addressed consistently throughout the University.

I think the service first of all needs to be standardised across the faculties. For example, with the visual stress that I was talking about, I know the medical faculty provide coloured overlays in exam rooms and anyone can take them and make use of them. Whereas for example my faculty, the engineering faculty, doesn't do that and they don't even ask whether, you know, whether you need anything...

Sam, a student who is being treated for anxiety and depression, spoke of the understanding and support from a particular tutor:

She was just... she was very very encouraging... She was just very... she was always interested in what you had to say. It wasn't something that was relevant. She liked that people had opinions, she liked that people... She was just so passionate about my subject, that she just loved to be there and it was just great. It was just really inspiring. Like she was the reason that I... because I got to a point of not wanting to be at University in my second year.

Pat, who has mental health issues, said that some staff were really supportive but others far from it and outlined some of the communication difficulties within her department, where there seemed to be little clarity about roles and responsibilities.

In terms of staff awareness of mental health issues I think there is a real mixture. I mean, I've had some amazing kind of fantastic support with people who have been very supportive or who just kind of get it. Whereas I've had some where it has been really hard work. (...) If it wasn't working out with my personal tutor I would go to the Disability Coordinator in my department. And my experience with that person has been... I had real issues. Because she has always said: oh I don't deal with that, your personal tutor deals with that. Or, no you need to go to this person. And I never kind of got anything done or completed by her. And so I've had like arguments, you know, email exchanges, copying in my head of school, copying in my personal tutor, and Disability Coordinator, and my specialist mentor, saying that I just need to know what the process is. Who will I go to if I'm thinking about, or struggling with my work. And what if it's kind of affecting not just one essay but a lot of the deadlines. And they didn't know. And I think they worked it out between themselves and they apologised because they didn't know who you need to go to.

Dan spoke of how one tutor's checking-in, flexibility, and choice to meet in a relaxed environment, demonstrated understanding and enabled him to achieve better academically:

So at the moment, my tutor has been my lifesaver throughout the past five years. She is just... She has fought my corner on so many sides. (...) She has been really flexible, which has been really helpful. She checked in a lot, which was really helpful. (...) And then I was getting into trouble for my attendance being poor at the University. And she said Dan this has been flagged with the course director, are you OK for me to say: this is what is going on for Dan, his attendance is not going to meet this, this does not matter. So she acted as the mediator going back and forth. And I think that what has been so good is that she will check in and go: Do you want a coffee? And we'd just go for a coffee and just chat. And how are things going for you? And I think

it's that that really makes the difference, rather than being: you know, you've had this feedback on your essay, let's meet to talk about the essay. She is actually meeting you as a person, to find out how University is working for you, what the University can do to support you. And that just made a massive difference. (...) Oddly enough in her modules I've had my highest marks in. And I... You know, what came first, the chicken or the egg? I feel more able to engage in her lectures because she gets it. (...) Because she knows me and I know her, and it's that kind of two-way relationship and I think because she puts effort into looking after me as an individual, and my well-being, I achieve academically because of it.



Will praised the support he got from Disability Services mentors but expressed disappointment at the quality of the service when it was outsourced to an outside company.

.....

In terms of the academic studies, something that did work well was the support from Disability Services mentors. (...) At the time I was also struggling with, like, having a conversation on Skype like right now. So I asked if we could have it in writing but the person who did the session was the slowest typist in the entire world. Like, it would take her so long... Because they knew in advance that it was going to be like that, so they could have got you know someone who types fast and be like, OK, who types fast around here? So the person I was seeing before, he knew about my disability and he had some knowledge and I thought he was very validating. But the new person that I got, she was very... oh, I don't need to know which disabilities you have, because you know labels don't matter, and things like that. Which, I was a bit like... Well, you need to know which difficulties I have, and... But she was very... I felt that the way she spoke suggested to me that maybe she was used to dealing with students who needed like a little bit of pastoral support, or have some, you know, regular anxiety and stress.

.....

Ben, who has dyslexia, also reported mixed feelings with regard to receiving one-to-one

help which was outsourced to another company, and spoke of a time when he had not been informed that the company had closed down.

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Through my dyslexia as well, I got one-to-one study, I qualified from DSA for one-to-one study, 30 hours across the year. Unfortunately I didn't get funding for that until the April time, a little bit before that because, you know how long all those... (...) And I went to those and they were quite helpful. But because I was so late on funding, and late on timing, what happened was they couldn't ever give me the same person. So every time I saw someone it was nearly someone new, so I'd always have to explain what was either my problem or what I'd done with the last person and what has worked. And even if I saw the same person again... I'd obviously always had a session before with someone different. So I was always backtracking. And they always were like: Oh what is your weakness? And I was like oh I don't really want to talk about my weakness, how about my strengths, please, and what might make them stronger? (...) So I had to use an external company, which was fine, not a problem, got them all set up, didn't really get on with the guy that I was using at all, wasn't very helpful, uhm... I didn't get on well with them. And then he quit, like, he got a new job. And I was like: perfect, you know, I'm going to get someone new! And then the company closed

down! They didn't tell me two weeks before I was about to start my course so I'm phoning them up and they were like: but that company closed, and I'm like but, no one told me!

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Joe expressed disappointment that his disability support summary did not reach, or was not read by, his tutors. Joe has mobility difficulties and felt aggrieved that this was not acknowledged by tutors who asked students to get up and move around the room.

.....

And so there were times when I struggled. Examples of times would be when, for instance, in a seminar we might get told to get up and walk around the room and, you know, regroup (...) and that was very difficult for me. And so it seems as though that hadn't been thought through at all and that happened repeatedly. (...) I was forced into a situation where having to ask for help from other students which didn't... it wasn't... It made me feel very uncomfortable at times to be honest. I guess I became used to that which isn't the way it should be.

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Other students also shared Joe's frustration that the content of their disability support summary was not being implemented.

Ben attended a unit in another School expecting that his disability support summary would be passed on to the relevant tutors, but found that this had not happened.

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I kind of just assumed, just switching courses between schools, that it would be a normal bureaucratic process.

I shouldn't have assumed that the lecturers and the seminar tutors would have been given my disability support summary, I just assumed they would. So when I was having issues with my anxiety or if I wasn't... you know if I didn't turn up for a lecture, or if I was getting late behind work, it seemed as if I was continuously explaining my situation again and again. So at a time when things weren't going so well it kind of exacerbated the situation. And it was only by the end of my unit in the other School that I queried it with my department. Because things had kind of escalated. And it transpired that they hadn't passed it on.

.....

Will, who has autism and mental health issues, expressed disappointment that he was not involved in finalising his disability support summary and even greater disappointment that the recommendations in it were not followed up by his tutors.

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And for example when I first got a disability support summary I was really disappointed because the summary was sent to the school to review, and then my supervisors didn't tell me that they had gotten it. So... then I was like: well, if you did get it, why didn't we discuss the adjustments that are discussed in it and things like that. And the Disability Services did meet with my supervisors once to try and explain things to them, but then there's not much accountability. So for example, out of my

disability support summary, my supervisors and I, we devised some adjustments that they should be doing. Except they still don't do them. For example, for meetings to happen online if needed, rather than face to face. Every time I've tried to say Oh can we talk about this via email, which was a suggestion- like, yeah, to discuss progress or things like that via email rather than in a meeting... Never really got done. Because by supervisor would say Oh yes OK we can discuss it by email. And then after a couple of emails would be like: So when are we meeting? But the whole point of the emails was to avoid meeting. So yeah, that is one thing that I've never really managed, to get more support via email rather than face-to-face. Because meetings for me are really hard, because I mean I do have permission for example to record the meetings, so that I can, I take some notes during the meetings and then I can complete them. But even that I find really really difficult to listen to it afterwards and things like that because I have audio processing issues. So it takes me a very very long time. Like, for example, like a one-hour meeting can take me like 8 or 9 hours of work to try and have an idea of what has actually happened in the meeting. Whereas if I've already got it written in an email, that's a lot easier for me.

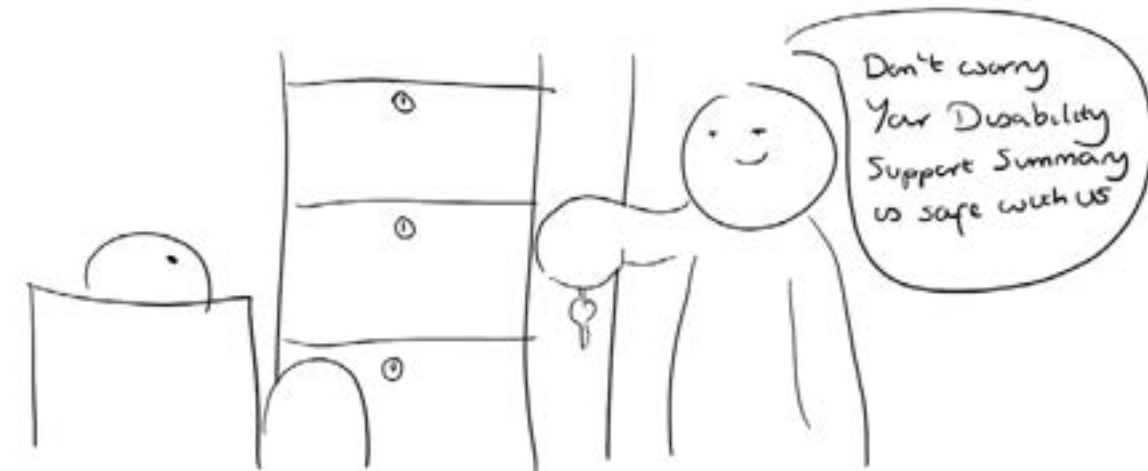
Dan said that his disability support summary

specified that he was supposed to be given handouts in larger font and see lecture slides in advance, neither of which happened in practice. As a result he missed his lectures and was then reprimanded for doing so.

So one of the recommendations they put in it, or the advisory things for the school was that all handouts are done in a much larger font for me to be able to see it. It never happened throughout this year, it hasn't happened at all. (...) And I think it was the same last year in that I was meant to have the lecture slides in advance because my anxiety should be, if I don't know what is coming up in a lecture, I get so stressed. And it never happened because my disability support summary wasn't shared with the unit convenors, because the person in charge for the department felt it was confidential so he took it, placed it in my file, never shared it. (...) There is just no communication at all. I just think departments and unit convenors aren't talking to each other. (...) So I would constantly be getting an email from a tutor saying you haven't been turning up for the lectures and this is going to affect you and there was no: what is going on for you Dan, is there anything we can do to help you attend the lectures? It was just: you are not meeting our attendance criteria, this then reflects badly on us as the course director, this needs to change. And they didn't

accept that actually I wasn't turning up to the lectures because I wasn't given the lecture notes in advance, so I didn't feel prepared, and I didn't want to go to a lecture that could be a trigger. And there was just none of that acknowledgement it was just: this is our policy, you need to attend 75% or whatever it is, you are not doing it.

Unit Director and I was open about it, which is a really big deal for me to have done so, and she decided to advise me that maybe it would be good for me to push myself, that I can't spend the rest of my life adhering to these feed times, shouldn't I then try to make these changes and that would be a good opportunity to do it. And I left in tears because I thought it



Asked whether there was any reasonable adjustment to the attendance requirement or if this was applied to him just as it did to other students, Dan said:

I had to really fight for it. Really really fight for it. And then it just, so I think one of the lectures it was scheduled I think 5:30-7:30 last year and I went and saw, had really strict eating times because I've got an eating disorder and the OCD can be really strong with it: I eat at 6 o'clock. So for me it was like, it was a no-go, I couldn't attend that lecture. And I spoke to the

just wasn't her place to make suggestions like that. You know I'm under the hospital team and they can make suggestions, but not her. And it was a real barrier and I then had to go: I can't, I am not meeting your attendance criteria but actually if I meet your attendance criteria my eating disorder will just get so much worse because at least I'm eating if I stay at home at that time, but if I come I won't it. And they'd lost sight of that actually I needed to look after myself. So I had to go to my tutor and she was off for

quite a long time and I had to go to another course director and ask for her advice, and I was just fighting so many battles, to try to look after my own health whilst also trying to meet all these academic deadlines that were pushed on me. (...) So it felt, the whole year felt like a struggle because I felt like I was having to fight the department to have my needs heard, as well as trying to meet all the academic deadlines. And it was draining. It was really really draining.

Dan also spoke of the potentially different perspectives of those who have personal experience of mental health issues and those who do not, and the benefit of creating opportunities for students to share their experiences with staff.

It's obviously a good university, so it's got the resources. And I think, I don't know whether... It's really difficult I think if people haven't had an experience of mental health difficulties, how hard attendance can be. It's the little things can actually... I don't think lecturers necessarily realise that actually being forewarned is forearmed. From the lecturers' side they might think oh all right I didn't get it up but it will be all right, there's nothing triggering in it. But they don't know what's triggering for you. So I don't know, I don't know how you do prevent that at staff training. (...) I guess if students felt able to do it, it would be incredible to have students involved in a training

day, so that they can talk about their experience and what they would have found helpful or if it's a case study, whatever. So if you break the day up into separate sections you can have the professional training people talking about what is helpful. But also I think you need to hear from the students otherwise it kind of loses their voice of what they need for it to be included. But then there also needs to be mechanisms in place to support that student to feel able to share that.

RECOMMENDATION:

Encourage current and previous students to become involved in staff disability equality training.

Joe also commented on some of the drawbacks of contracting services out to third parties: the support is not as flexible or responsive as in-house support could be and is sometimes of poor quality; he mentioned a note-taker who was engaged on social media instead of taking notes.

The other two universities I've had experience with, they have in-house support. So they use students, usually from the University... to be much more flexible. So if the lecture got cancelled, then they'd get actual notice and they would be understanding. At the University of Bristol, even if the lecturer changed the room at the wrong moment, you know, at the last moment, which happened to me. The support worker

turned up to the wrong room and then went home because their contract said they can do that. Then I get charged for the support work when the message hasn't got through. I've had many experiences like that, so even though I had a very comprehensive package and care awarded to me by Student Finance England, in the end it was about halfway through at Christmas time, I completely gave up on their support workers because I was not using them at all. Which actually didn't help my studies. You know, I had all these hours that I could have used and I stopped using them. (...) And also the support workers were meant to be taking really good notes. I had an exam coming up. And they were on social networks in the lectures instead of taking notes. In the end I didn't have the right notes that I needed for my exams so it was just very poor. They were in the room on their laptop but on social network sites looking at hats.

Other students also echoed Joe's experience of giving up on support because it is not working:

And it just gets to the point where I don't have the energy to be fighting the system as well as the energy required to be attending lectures so I just kind of stopped bothering now really. (Dan)

And then because it had been so difficult to sort her out in the first place, I ended up giving up the support. I didn't... after a couple of meetings, I just felt like I wasn't getting anywhere with her, I ended up not making a new appointment basically. (Will)

A student with a degenerative medical condition who responded anonymously to the online survey said:

I wish there was more than one disability advisor to the department, the one for [my department] made a rude comment about how I was being 'difficult' once when I asked for an adjustment to a lab, as a result I now don't go to her when I need something and because she is the only one I can go to, I don't go to anyone. I also think that notetakers should be appointed by the university, not an outside company. The outside company (e.g. Ranstad), the disability department and the uni department don't talk to each other, this makes communication difficult. The disability support summary is also not overly helpful to the department who don't really understand it.

In summary, with regard to receiving support for learning, a number of students listed positive experiences with regard to amended exam arrangements, understanding and support from a particular tutor, or the quality of support offered by learning mentors from within the University. Many students expressed concern at the quality of the

service when such support was outsourced to an external company. Further, most of the students that we spoke to expressed frustration and disappointment that their disability support summary did not reach relevant staff in their department, or that the recommendations within it were not implemented. In the face of such difficulties, a number of students said that the effort to organise appropriate support while trying to keep up with academic work became too much, and they gave up on trying to access support. These issues are further discussed in Section 6.

Reviewing support

A number of the students that we spoke to said that they had not been given an opportunity to discuss with Disability Services the effectiveness of the support they were being offered.

Pat spoke of the way her disability support summary gets reviewed in a way which feels superficial, and later explained what she meant by “a meaningful review”.

The support summary is updated once a year, whereas it goes to my school, my personal tutor meets with me, asks me if there is anything different or any changes that need to be made, and it's usually a fairly rushed job. I guess a tick-box exercise, so I don't think it has evolved with me. I think that is one problem. (...) I used to be a care home manager for a group. So care plans, this was for elderly people, so we had care plans, we had care assessments. A non-meaningful review would be filling out the care plan, assuming you know what they need, or just assuming there is no change. A meaningful review which I think applies

across the board, is a conversation. I think it's a conversation to see, yes, OK, things like academic progress and you know things like that but in terms of finding out: are there issues at home, non-University things. I think that would be useful.

Joe also said that he missed opportunities to discuss the support he was offered, all the more so because in his experience such conversations happen in other universities.

One other thing about Disability Services is that, again, compared to the other University services, they weren't asking for feedback from students. So, they didn't ask for feedback about, you know, how is it working with the support that we're giving you, etc etc. Again I had to be the one that said actually this isn't working. I think they've improved somewhat since then, they did eventually start sending round a survey. But again, for a University that is very research orientated there is little feedback on Disability Services and how the University provides services for disabled students. Obviously this is changing now, which is great.

Dan described a monitoring process which seems to be missing:

So I think that would be the change I think, kind of recognising... Or even if it was once a term, just sending another email to students, saying: how is this going for

you? And then they [Disability Services] can also email the department saying: Are these recommendations being put into place? Because I just don't know if that is happening.

RECOMMENDATION:

Ensure that there is a meaningful dialogue between students and Disability Services about the effectiveness of the support received.

Dan also spoke of the time when he told his department about a complication in his medical condition and the absence of a meaningful dialogue on the effectiveness of the support allocated to him.

And so I told them and they've gone: OK, we've written it into your disability support summary. They've never once checked back to go: Are our recommendations happening? How is this working for you Dan? Is this in line with what you need? No one has done that. (...) And I've gone back and said it's not happening and they just haven't really changed the [inaudible]. So I think the change that would be really good is checking-in. Checking in with the person to see how is it working for me? (...) So they haven't done it at all throughout the whole five years now that I've been at Bristol University. They've never said: how is this working? And they just don't seem to liaise with the

department, either, to make sure it's working.

Will, in response to a question on whether anyone from Disability Services ever asked how the support that has been outsourced to an external company was working out in practice, said:

No, they didn't. I think at some point because of students complaining about the way the support was now working, I think they sent out sort of a... all service users survey to ask people if we had complaints or things like that. But no, no one contacted me individually to ask how the support was going.

RECOMMENDATION:

Ensure that there are systems in place for Disability Services to ask individual students and their departments if the recommendations in the disability support summary are being implemented and if this is helpful for the student.

B. SUPPORT FOR PERSONAL NEEDS

Students who shared their experiences with us spoke of a range of reasonable adjustments that needed to be in place, if they were to engage with University life in the way most students take for granted: for example to be able to get in to their lecture theatres and seminar rooms, or to get books out of the library. We applaud the University's willingness to respond to disabled students' impairments and for putting structures in place to do so. What seems to be missing is a mechanism for having transformative conversations with students to determine the effectiveness of these structures for them. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective for a large number of students who have a vast range of type and severity of impairments.

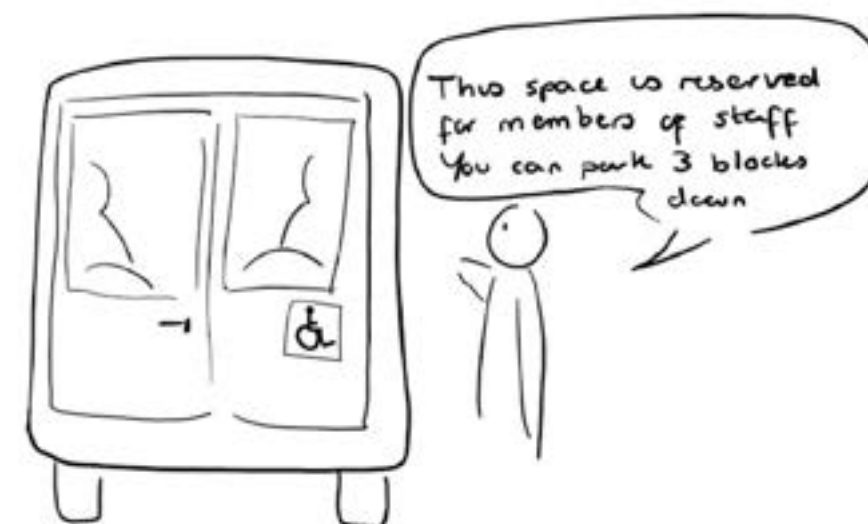
Students with physical impairments spoke of the difficulties they encountered in the process of sorting out their access needs, including physical access to University buildings.

Tom shared his surprise and frustration at how some small adjustments that he requested, for example in relation to the accessible accommodation which he was offered or to making accessible parking arrangements, became disproportionately difficult to arrange.



So, on the one hand I feel that I have had many things that were offered to me and were put in place that were very helpful, but then, sometimes there are just small things that either fall through or you just think well why can't this be done in this way?

He went on to describe the sense of resistance he experienced when trying to set up such "reasonable adjustments", for example being asked to justify why he needed different equipment in the bathroom when the existing equipment had served the previous occupant perfectly well. This could be understood as a simple mindless comment from someone with little or no experience in disability, who did not consider that someone who has a different body and different impairment is likely to have different needs but, as it came from someone whose remit was to offer help on behalf of the University, Tom felt considerably upset by the comment. In a similar vein, Tom experienced multiple obstacles when attempting to get permission to use a parking space outside his department. This was initially refused, on the grounds that the few parking spaces that exist are in high demand and are needed by staff and others who have permission to use them. He was also advised not to use the designated disabled parking space available, as this was reserved for a member of staff. Instead, Tom was offered a parking space a few blocks away which, for someone with a physical impairment, was of no use.



So I went to Estates and I said I am a disabled student, I have a blue badge and I would like to park in front of my department, can I get a permit? And they said, oh well, there aren't any spaces available at [this department], is there anywhere else you could use, like we've got some spaces in [a nearby location]. And I said, well, I don't really need to use that department any more, can I just use [my department]? And they were just kind of saying No in this kind of... Like when you go into an office and ask for something and they sort of want to get rid of you? And it was, I just felt like it would have been better if they had tried to come up with a solution. (...) Another thing that they said was that oh, what time do you need it for? And I said well, you know, whenever I come in, I don't really mind, sometimes I might be there early, sometimes I might be there late in the evening. And they said Oh, well, you know, usually 9 to 5 is quite busy and you can't... they are all going to be full.

Tom went on to speak of the need for a shared sense of responsibility for arranging support;

I think there needs to be an attitude on the part of everyone, that it is all of our responsibilities to try and find a solution and to do so caringly. And to not think: I have done my duty, but: What can I possibly do to make something better for someone? Not just I've done the process, x-y-z and I haven't found a solution, go to someone else.

RECOMMENDATION:

Encourage and empower individual members of staff to work with disabled students to identify appropriate reasonable adjustments for them.

Joe, a mature student who has a physical impairment, expressed similar surprise and frustration that at this University he had to arrange accessible parking himself, unlike the other two universities he has personal experience of.

Things like car parking, even again before I started at the University, I had to ring car parking services myself to arrange car parking. Whereas again the other two universities, one call to Disability Services and they sorted it out for me. You know, that's how it should be.

Joe also spoke of his frustration at his difficulty accessing the information he needed prior to deciding to come to this University and said he would not have come if the course he had chosen was offered elsewhere.

It was interesting that before I went to the University I did look at the accommodation there because I was interested, and again there was no information about accessible accommodation. And there is no information upfront on the website about buildings. So I needed to know how [inaudible] buildings, how long corridors were, and there was [inaudible]. Even Disability Services didn't have that information. I suspect that a lot of students with disability are put off from coming to the University of Bristol because had it not been for the fact that I did... was the only one that did the course that I wanted to do within the local area, and I had the ability to be able to do it there, then I would have looked elsewhere. (...) So for instance things like library support, the fact that there are lifts to use in the libraries, things like that, I had to find all that information out myself. It's just such poor

communication which again it could be Disability Services that fills that gap there. Other Disability Services will provide a welcome pack which can have all that information in there. You know, that's about accessibility, that's about this... Why should a student have to go around all the different departments at the University, you know for parking services, library services, why should we have to do that just to be able to get access to the building or so that we can use... It's just not...

A student who has chronic fatigue syndrome made a similar suggestion when responding to the online survey:

If I had mobility issues, it would have helped if the computer system could be programmed to automatically advise me of the number of steps at particular venues. Even just being low on energy means that knowing how difficult some of the optional but enriching lunchtime lectures in the physics department needs foreknowledge.

RECOMMENDATION:

Consider creating an information pack for prospective students with physical impairments, with clear accessibility information on University buildings (for example which buildings have an accessible entrance, lifts or accessible toilets) and how to find out more specific information if needed.

At the time when we spoke to him, Joe was very disappointed that as 'bookends' to his experience at the University of Bristol were the moment of registering at the University (described here) and graduating from it (described in Section 6), both marred by difficulties which could have easily been avoided with a bit of foresight and minor adjustments.

So even from the very beginning, the welcome at the University, there was no welcome. For disabled students there was no welcome. I couldn't find out the information about induction week, even when I contacted Disability Services at the University of Bristol, they couldn't give me any information about things like access to things like Freshers' Fair or even registration. So on the first day at University I couldn't register. Because I couldn't access the registration sessions. I couldn't stand in a queue for long periods of time, due to my disability, so that hadn't been thought about. So in the end a member of staff from my School had to go and register for me. Which again is humiliating, it is unnecessary, why can I not go along and register myself?

Joe went on to contrast this with his experience at another university.

So, for instance I have just started at another university and the welcome I received there from Disability Services is: how can we help you, can we help you in induction week? So they've arranged for

support workers to help me in induction week, and I've never had that with the University of Bristol. (...) And so in my new University I have a disability advisor and she, to begin with, had a long, an hour-long phone call, went through everything, immediately the next day sent me a summary of the phone call which talks about everything from car parking, through to examinations and, you know, access needs for exams...

RECOMMENDATION:

Consider enabling Disability Services to become more proactive in arranging support.

Tom explained some of the difficulties that he encountered with additional support systems offered to him. He appreciated having a small budget to pay for someone to bring library books or return them for him, but found that having to pay for this service in 15-minute increments would be wasteful as he lives very close to the library. He thought that it would be preferable if it could be fellow students, rather than an external agency, being paid to provide this help. This would bring additional social benefits, considering that his transport arrangements – solitary by necessity – deprived him of opportunities to get to know his fellow students by walking to or from lectures together.

This wasn't like a confrontational thing or anything, but just in the... I didn't use to drive, so I said that I would find it difficult to carry books to and from the library. And so they said Yeah so we have someone that can carry books for you,

you have to just arrange it with them, tell the books and they will go and bring it to your house and then return it when you need. But... they are through an external company and they give me like a budget of how much money I would have for the year and the person is paid in 15-minute slots. And now it takes like 5 minutes to get to the library from my house, so it would never take the whole 15 minutes for them, but they would always have to count it as 15 minutes. Which I thought OK, fine, but then you sort of think... oh, maybe I shouldn't send them to go and get this book right now, I should wait until I need a few more books because I don't know if later in the year if I run out and then I might need it closer to my essays and then I end up not using it when I should, and it's just this whole other layer of complication that you have to organise around someone else to go and do it. And I just sort of thought this would be so much easier if they could have just other students, in particular students from my school, who maybe they are working on the same things as me and we can discuss things and there would be another way to also make friends which was something that I kind of felt a little bit isolated from at the beginning when I couldn't drive because the DSA money covers taxis to get to campus buildings but not to get to social events. And also you're kind of limited like you can't stay long afterwards, if

you have to book the taxi or if you have to get to another lecture on your own without walking with other people.

RECOMMENDATION:

Explore opportunities to enlist support from fellow students instead of, or as well as, external agencies.

Students with other types of impairments spoke of the difficulties they encountered in negotiating reasonable adjustments, or the impact on them of the absence of reasonable adjustments.

Will, who has autism and mental health issues, had mixed feelings about the reasonable adjustments made for him, albeit for different reasons. He spoke of his appreciation at the opportunity to suspend his studies and the flexibility of the rules in response to his request. At the same time, he felt frustrated at the absence of any indication of which rules could be flexible and how to understand what possibilities were open to him. So while he welcomed the flexibility, he found the rigidity of the written rules difficult, and the discrepancy between the written rules and the flexible practice confusing. He also suggested that any reasonable adjustments agreed should be reflected online. In this instance what he needed most – clarity – was provided by an understanding and insightful administrator.

I think one thing that was good was that I have been given several second chances. I mean I suspended my studies twice, I got a number of extensions and they were fairly straightforward to get. So that aspect was good... ..but I do think that, you know... yeah, like, I was able to continue because

the administration let it... The problem... the bad thing at the same time is that the processes were so unclear. Where... so for example I was supposed to upgrade my PhD after a year, but a month before that year ran out, that's when I suspended my studies the first time. But then it was very unclear in the rules because they said... it would say Oh, you have one year to upgrade, including any suspension of studies. So then I was very... it was always a bit of a conf- Because my feeling, was that the rules said one thing... but the administration was much more flexible. (...) I'm still a little bit confused about my final date of studies for example. (...) Because it's nice to have the human side, where you know once you go to a human in terms of admin, they help. But I wish it was also reflected in the automatic systems. So for example if I log on to my student information, I know, you know, how many times have I suspended? How many times – like, when are my deadlines? When is my final... when is my completion date and things like that. Which it seemed that these weren't being automatically updated after I returned to studies, for example. So I had to contact someone and be like- Because at some point a very nice helpful admin person... Because I was like: I just don't understand how many more months I am allowed to study, because you know you've got the maximum

period of study thing. So I was just like: Can you help me? And she did make me like a nice table where she put you know everything for me. Because also after I returned I then went to part time so that made things even more confusing to know... Because I was just like: yeah, when is my deadline now? I am so confused...

RECOMMENDATION:

Ensure that the flexibility and discretion arranged through personal negotiation is consistently reflected on digital systems.

Will did not once utter the word “unsupported”, yet the way he described his experience very much implied that this was how he felt. In this part of the interview he spoke about a time when he had a significant bout of depression and how he felt that he had nobody to turn to, fearing that if the extent of his depression became known he would not be allowed to continue his studies.

I found it difficult to say that it was because of depression, so sometimes when I couldn't do something I would say it was because of autism. (...) Because I'd already suspended my studies twice by that time, I was kind of hiding how severe things were... So that they wouldn't make me suspend again, which I couldn't really do. Like I think I had sort of already used up my chances basically. So, yeah. I wasn't telling my supervisors or the

University, because I mean it didn't... It lasted for about a month. It wasn't a very long term thing, but yeah, so during that time... Obviously I didn't know how long it was going to last... But I was pretending that I was OK. I don't have a very good relationship with my supervisors so, yeah. So I don't really have... I don't really have anyone at the University... In terms of for example in my department, or things like that, I don't really have anyone that I trust and that I could talk to.

Adela is an overseas student who sought help to navigate the University systems around examinations, when she begun to experience emotional difficulties as a consequence of her physical impairment. She was referred to the counselling service but found the process forbidding: she filled in one online form, was then asked for further information to establish the severity of need and time was ticking on. In pain, anxious about looming deadlines, unable to get an answer from her department about the possibility of an extension, she gave up trying to seek help.

And at the end I never received that kind of help. So I never went to the counselling service and basically all the help that I received was from my classmates.

Sam spoke of a particular tutor whose comments had sounded offensive.

He was... I ended up putting a complaint about him. And I spoke to another tutor about him that I felt I could confide in kind of thing. He was just very... I don't want to say old

fashioned, but I do because he was... he was old. And he'd been there a while and he was very much of the opinion of... a woman shouldn't answer back to him and that kind of thing and he made it very very clear that that's what he thought. Yeah, and he kept explaining to me that I was incapable of doing my degree, and I should... I am not worthy to be on his course, all that sort of stuff. And then he came and he said to me maybe you should get some help from counselling or something [inaudible] my problems. And I was like OK. So yeah, so then like that kind of... completely knocks your confidence. I feel like, as well, if a tutor can speak to you like that, and nothing gets done about it... So I didn't hear back about that complaint either. They just said we will deal with it and we'll let you know if anything is done. So it's like... yeah... It kind of felt that University weren't very bothered about things that can affect you personally.

Jon, who has diabetes, spoke of a time when he was ill shortly before the end-of-year exams and was advised to sit them in August instead, without any reasonable adjustments being offered. He felt that this was unfair, as it robbed him of the opportunity to resit, which he felt he was entitled to even though he was not expecting to need it.

Basically, because of the impact on my diabetes, they said that they wouldn't be able to accommodate what I then needed and that my best chance was to sit them

[exams] in the summer, in August, and if I didn't want to do that I would sort of be waiving my rights to extenuating circumstances, if you like. Because I had food poisoning for a few days in the revision period, so I don't know a week or so before exams, and it sort of messed up my blood sugars in that my recovery time for a hypo increased. So usually it would be around 15 minutes, it was more like half an hour, something like that. And I emailed this to them saying would that sort of be OK because obviously should I go low I would need it more open-ended, and they said it might be better if you sort of do it in August instead. Which would mean that I wouldn't be able to resit if I failed, because that is the resit period. (...) So if I failed I would be held back a year. And I don't think that's an equal opportunity and that's, you know, not fair. That is not what a normal candidate would have as an experience. So I don't think that's really good enough. (...) 'Cause for me it was mostly just unfair missing out on the opportunity to resit, is what bothered me the most. You know, even if you said come back in September and take them again. It was just the fact that even though it's not my fault, if I failed I would have to retake the year and spend another 9 grand. And you know that's not fair.

Jon also spoke of the practical difficulties of having to change his sharps bin after leaving

University accommodation and wondered if the University might be able to help find a solution that serves all students who have diabetes.

Basically, obviously as a diabetic I have sharps. Of that I was never told how to dispose of that or get a new one. It was all right in halls because it was provided for me, but I found that when I moved out in second year... 'cause at home you bring it in to the hospital, or your GP. But actually, where I live, you have to book an appointment with the Council? To order a new one and it has to be sort of 7 am to 7 pm. And it was quite complicated? And I thought... while I'm not the only diabetic, it would have been quite useful to have more guidance on stuff like that because I found that quite inconvenient, I had to find a day that I was in sort of all day and stuff. And if it is going to be like that, either can the University organise an internal thing when you're not in halls, and if not, just sort of some advice on, sort of: by the way, be prepared that you have to sort of take a day off to organise your sharps bin. (...) It was just a bit annoying because I had to take day off uni to do it, which just if there is any way to do it internally... I don't know.

RECOMMENDATION:

Consider ways in which the University might be able to help students who are not in University accommodation to organise disposal of sharps.

Last but not least, a number of students spoke of School Disability Coordinators. One student suggested that such a role should be introduced(!) Tim seemed unaware that this role exists:



Well you say that [that each School has a Disability Coordinator] , but I don't know that, even though I had to contact those people. I don't know that there is a person responsible. I know that there is a school manager for each school, and that was the person that I had to end up contacting about alternative arrangements. And that person changes every year...



Most students seemed aware of the existing role and commented on how this could be improved or strengthened. Pat echoed many of these comments and suggested that Disability Coordinators could be advocates for disability equality. She also had some interesting reflections on how the role currently looks in practice.



It would be really useful to either have a Disability Coordinator or somebody as an advocate for people with disabilities or mental health issues. Because at the moment it's either personal tutor or students' union. I thought the Disability Coordinator would do that

but it seems to be more of an administrative function.

I think... the person who whose responsibility is to be Disability Coordinator I think is also the student administration manager, so it's a dual role, it is part of a role. I think it needs to be a full-time job and the reason is not only that I'm sure there's enough that could be done but there is going to be an increase of people who are coming. (...) So I think there needs to be better co-ordination between Disability Coordinator and school, and other services, there is not that co-ordination at the moment.

But I think what is more important is having a single point of contact whose sole job or main job is that function. Because it's kind of, you know how in any workplace you get somebody who is designated the health & safety person and it's one of those jobs that nobody really wants or doesn't really do full time. It feels like that at the moment.

I think it needs to be really refined and I think it needs to be really catered to all students of what that person does. I just searched through documents on the University website for ages trying to find out what the Co-ordinator does. And when I went through, I managed to, for some reason it was put down as communication, maybe a couple of years

ago, I managed to get a list of the jobs that the Disability Coordinator is supposed to do and I wasn't getting half of those things. And I know there's some flexibility but- you know, I was doing a lot of those things.



RECOMMENDATION:

Clarify the role of School Disability Coordinators and strengthen it, so that they can become advocates for disability equality.

Joe echoed this view and flagged up an additional issue when the role rotates as an add-on:



So, again, the disability rep didn't have the power to be able to, or time to be able to phone up the people who deal with the swipe card access, she tried to but it didn't work, and then I was stuck and then I stopped trying to follow it up. I think disability reps will change, I don't know if they leave or if they change every one or two years, they don't have the information [that they need] or they don't have the power all the time. It doesn't work, it really should be Disability Services that does it University wide.



RECOMMENDATION:

Ensure that there is good communication between School Disability Coordinators and Disability Services, so that support is available when it is needed.

In summary, in addition to support for learning, students referred to additional support for personal needs related to their impairments. While students appreciated the University's willingness to help, in practice they repeatedly came up against difficulties in securing physical access to buildings, in negotiating reasonable adjustments, or in having their impairments fully understood and responded to.

C. BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

During the course of our interviews with disabled students about their experiences at the University, we sought their views of what, in their mind, might be getting in the way of the appropriate support being offered at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner. We present here the students' perceptions of barriers to inclusion. Opportunities for removing such barriers are discussed in Section 6 of this report.

Some students said that communication is at the core of why support is timely and appropriate on some occasions and lacking in others, and took the view that with better communication things will improve.

Well everyone that I've met at Disability Services has been really nice and once I've actually contacted them it has been really good. I would say there is a lack of communication between sort of talking to the receptionist about your needs and then that getting through to whoever it is that actions it. (...) So I guess the organisational side of things. (Jon)

I think it's maybe communication. And I think just not being able to sort things out on a simple local level so, in terms of using our own students for things and putting things in place like that. Although I do think that the library is working towards that because I get the impression that they have been able to, maybe they've

got more staff or something now, and they've been able to offer more things directly here. (Tom)

At other times students cited organisational reasons, such as the way that teaching is structured, but took a more pessimistic view about capacity for further change.

I think the University is getting so big, well the student base is getting so big now, that you cannot have a personal relationship with everybody. (...) And some tutors, like some of my seminar tutors were doing PhDs at the University and they were teaching. And it felt as though they weren't there to teach, they were there to complete their work. And some people really liked that they could come and speak to students when they were doing their PhD and other people... it felt like they didn't want to be there, they just had to do it. (Sam)

One student spoke of resistance to change, all the more important if there is no strong impetus for change.

I think it's just, there is a system and they have been using it for a very long time. And it's comfortable. It's difficult to change, you know, that is the only reason because the infrastructure is in place. All you need is access to the internet and the university portal where you have all the information about the students. Everything is in place already it's just whether

they make use of these tools or not. (...) Nobody really pushes for change. Because you see with the... especially with disabled students. I think that's the nature of disabled students, they don't want to be telling everyone about it and pushing for change and things like that. And also I think the students' union is very weak in pushing through change. It is starting to pick up lately, but it's still, it plays a very insignificant role within the University, compared to other universities that I know of. Our students' union could do a lot more. (Tim)

Two students suggested that people who have little or no personal experience of disability find it hard to embrace the rationale for inclusion.

I don't think that the University doesn't care about disabled students. I haven't had that experience. There was once when I gave feedback to the library about an issue to do with the lift and they were very responsive. Then people often have been responsive, for instance library, or car parking. It's just I don't think that the University has thought through a lot of the things that they need to think through. So it is just a lack of thought, really, that has been given to this area as opposed to not caring. But I do genuinely think that the University is just missing out on some really bright students with disabilities, who could otherwise be really successful at the University with the

support and thought that the University needs to put in. (Joe)

I think recognising the individual, and that is not really happening. It feels that it's very much a tick-box exercise. (...) You know I did childhood studies as an undergrad and there is such a big push about the child's voice and the UN CRC [Convention on the Rights of the Child] and centralising the child. And yet when it comes to the student, it's just not there at all. And that I really battled with, because it's all well and good standing up and lecturing to us about listening to the child's voice and centralising it, but I think the same needs to go for the students as well, just because we've turned 18 doesn't mean that the same principles for person centred approach doesn't apply any more... (...) I think you get it because you know about inclusive education and the importance of inclusivity. I just think these people are in their academic bubble and they are full of journal writing and all this stuff and they just don't know what it's like to live like that and have to have all these rules and deadlines around your well-being. I think they don't have any experience of it and so it's really hard for them to understand it because I guess they've got pressures on them. (Dan)

The following recommendations were made by students responding to the online survey:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Improve training for all academic and administrative staff in mental health awareness and [have] clear processes in place to enable academic and administrative staff to know when to refer or escalate student issues to the appropriate department or professional.

Improve the process of booking rooms (maybe allowing disabled students to see when [accessible] rooms are available and book time with tutors accordingly?)

Talk with students more, ask what they need in terms of support, do the things they say they need.

Split exams between January and June in all departments. (Almost all of my modules were exams in June that were over 3 hours and accounted for 100% of the module, meaning most of my degree came down to a three week period in June 2016 and a three week period in June 2017. If the exams were split between January and June (as happens in most departments) this would be far more beneficial and provide results that are accurate of my knowledge and ability, not my body's stamina to work at maximum capacity for three weeks.)

Offer, where needed, supplemental therapy sessions to students suffering mental health issues where NHS coverage is inadequate.

Publish lists of university recommended accommodation, stating whether they are likely to be friendly/social houses or quiet/study based houses.

Make labs more accessible/comfortable for taking the large amount of notes expected or to have a sheet with the notes already written given at the beginning. (I have had note takers in my lectures which is helpful however, in my labs I have no help and there is often a lot of standing up (which I find hard) and lots of writing on my lap or perched on the edge of a table which given writing is difficult at the best of times, 3 hours of trying to keep up in labs can often lead to a very stressful lab and me missing out on essential points for coursework.)

Supervision should be offered to medical students the way it is offered to other healthcare professionals in the NHS. (Medical school is very taxing and draining and I think we don't get to communicate our difficulties enough to someone who understands.)

Offer a personal tutor to medical students. Periodically review emails sent by members of staff to ensure their communications with students are kind and not abrupt or rude.

Have more non-drinking events in halls. Drinking events can be detrimental to some students and people can't forge genuine friendships whilst intoxicated.

More awareness and engagement about the struggles and strengths of dyslexic students by the schools. A better communication line between disability support workers and lecturers. Readdressing the way work is graded and marked with an awareness of disabilities—more verbal presentations as grading.

D. IMPACT ON STUDIES

The online survey invited disabled students to say how they think that their experiences of receiving, or not receiving, support have impacted on their academic progress.

Some students said that the support they received has had a positive impact; for example:

My personal tutor is EXCELLENT and always happy to intervene on my behalf. I do sometimes wonder how much more difficult things would be without her.

The University’s Health Service, Counselling Service, Disability Service, and Finance Department have been amazing and without their patience and support, I don’t think I would still be on my course.

Student Counselling Services went beyond the call of duty to enable me to finish my studies when I found misdiagnosis and subsequent adjustment psychologically impossible. They arranged for me to have a Learning Mentor in the last couple of years, which was a tremendous help.

Term 1 I struggled a lot due to lack of help. When I got the help it was better.

Being given time off when needed has really helped as it has allowed me to rest and recover a bit and then work harder when I return.

The adaptations made to my exams setting have been really helpful, my ability to function in exams has significantly improved and this has had a resulting effect on my exam marks.

The above [contact with occupational health] could have been stressful to my mental health as my academic progression depended on a satisfactory resolution, however tutors for the university were sympathetic and sought to ensure I was in the right frame of mind.

Vijay Chandy, the Disability Coordinator in the Law faculty has been incredible and really impacted and helped support me through university. The link in communication

between Student Disability Services, the Law school and between the Disability Coordinator in the law school, Vijay, and other staff in the law school was most helpful. It was discrete, useful and informative, meaning provisions were continually made without me having to always ask different people for the same thing (as is often the case in life). This communication has been most helpful to me and really impacted positively upon my experience.

Disability Services are very friendly and useful, easy to email and prompt to reply.

Lectures are recorded so I can access them whenever I like (although this applies to all students, not just those who are disabled). I have got extra time and rest breaks in exams and have always been granted any extensions that I have requested. Further, tutors and the undergraduate office were always accommodating when I could not make a tutorial or requested to change groups (my school has a very strict policy on this) in order that I could attend as many sessions as possible.

The university accommodation was very inclusive.

Bristol Pole Fitness Society are fantastic and have changed my life. Uni societies are wonderful and should be given more investment as they can really make a person’s uni experience.

Academic mentor to meet with twice a year has been helpful. Having a student advisor for the faculty is VERY helpful.

The Disability Services gave me extra time in exams which has helped reduce my anxiety about exams. Some tutors at the hospitals I have been placed at have been very understanding and allowed me to go home early when I have been particularly stressed or had a lot of anxiety on a certain day. The university has also been good in granting me extenuating circumstances for being late for deadlines/for examinations.

They considered my needs for exams and ensured that I had personal tutoring sessions to ensure I was up together with work and that I was ok. When I was unable to go to lectures for personal reasons they were understanding.

Other students gave a mixed response; for example:

It has given me less choice in terms of modules, but my exam arrangements have enabled me to achieve well academically.

I think most things have been sorted eventually, but it sometimes takes some chasing!

The inappropriate exam arrangements affected my grade in the January exams of second year.

The exams have been easier to take, letting me focus on achieving good marks. The struggle with reading means I can only really cover the basics of the course that we do in the lectures and hope that is enough to get a good mark.

Very little impact, so neither helped me, but at the same time hasn't hindered me too much.

I feel that the lack of diversity in my classes and lectures leads to a lack of different voices and perspectives and sometimes the content of my units has been built on the premise that history and human progress was and is created by old, white men of the Occident. It's difficult to measure its effect on my academic progress but I can say that it has affected the quality of my academic experience.

Rose Crosby has been my main contact but the Disability Services have been hard to contact and bad with sorting things quickly. Rose Crosby has been good help and dealt with extra time in exams, i recently got a note taker however i seem to write more notes than him despite me not being able to see the board, he is also foreign and can't write proper English and also has unreadable handwriting, considering i am partially sighted this is a massive problem that no one seems to have thought about prior to assigning him to me.

I needed someone who understood disabilities that I could talk to who also knew a bit about my course or how the department worked.

Disability Services provides good support for my needs however the school of geographical sciences lacks any dyslexic support. There is a lack of awareness about the struggles of people with disabilities where it is regarded as a lack of intelligence. Additionally essays are marked on spelling and grammar and use of complicated vocabulary which puts people with dyslexia at a disadvantage. Despite having weekly support from Disability Services there proof reading of essays they provide is still not deemed a high enough standard by the school.

Knowing that somebody (e.g. academic mentors and student advisors) are there to help and on my side encourage me to work harder. Having rude/abrupt/mean interactions with some staff have caused issues with mental health and therefore made it harder to focus/learn following the event.

Academic mentor has been very invested in my personal well-being (despite it not being a pastoral position) which is great. Student advisors have been wonderful, helped find information for me and kept everything confidential which is a great means of communication with the university. But I have received emails and had in-person meetings with staff members that were rude or downright mean which has unfortunately triggered anxiety attacks etc.

Finally, some students said that these arrangements had a negative impact on their academic progress; for example:

It has had a large negative impact on my studies. I have felt as if I have had to fight the University for support as well as managing my studies which has had a massive negative impact on my mental health as I am utterly drained and exhausted.

I think they [little attention and delayed response from tutor] affect negatively my academic progress resulting in low marks and lack of support to improve.

It [difficulties with disability advisor, with note-takers from external company and disability support summary not being implemented] has hindered it.

I definitely did not get the grades I would have gotten had I not been disabled or even if my exams were half in January and half in June.

I didn't feel motivated. Being told I'm not very good at the subject I love made me do what I could to scrape by in my 3rd year. Because if I'm told by an academic that I won't do well, who I am trying to impress?

I requested a counselling meeting and the process is a red tape to students having problems. Now, it seems to me that professors are more preoccupied for their own careers instead of the act of sharing knowledge. As an overseas student, the university should take care much more concern about the support in this regard.

During the time that I've been studying here my feeling is more or less the loss of momentum or 'potential' due to the lack of support and real advice from my tutor and some professors.

I have been extremely stressed and feel I didn't meet my full potential due to all the extra effort I have had to put into useless tasks like copying someone's notes or trying to teach myself as I couldn't see what had been taught.

It [being bullied in halls of residence] nearly made me leave Uni in first year.

Caused stress and unhappiness felt like I haven't done as well as I could have.

I feel that my academic strengths have not been particularly recognised at the university neither my intellect. I think my dyslexia provides me with very strengths however these are not recognised by the university which is disappointing. Additionally the

attitude that unless you get a 2:1 you will be unemployed which is bred by lecturers is very disheartening for students who work extremely hard but cannot achieve a 2:1.

No notes ever printed for me prior to the lectures, despite the set powerpoints were already made (student with visual impairment).

Felt swept under the carpet and felt like no one was willing to help me, have been stressed and unhappy.



A young woman with voluminous curly hair is seated in a wheelchair, positioned in a library aisle. She is wearing a blue floral-patterned top and light blue jeans. She is looking towards the right side of the frame with a slight smile. The background consists of tall wooden bookshelves filled with books. The right half of the image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange rectangle containing white text.

6. Experiencing inclusive higher education

Section 5 suggests where support services are making a positive difference to disabled students' lives and learning, and identifies some of the gaps in providing the joined-up support that is needed. In this final section, we draw out a number of themes that we feel speak to a deeper understanding of the frustrations that many disabled students experience during their time at the University. These themes cut across specific services or departments, and are our attempt to outline some of the challenges that an organisation as complex as the University must engage with, in order to create an inclusive experience for disabled students.

A. SEEING THE WHOLE PERSON

Universities could, in the past, function effectively on an assumption of considerable homogeneity among the student population. The expectation that students would be able to get to lecture theatres and seminar rooms, use the seating provided for as long as instructed, see and hear their lecturers, engage with written texts, and demonstrate learning through written assignments or examinations, may have seemed unproblematic. Nowadays such assumptions seem out of place and universities are increasingly called upon to engage with aspects of students' identities which they may previously not have expected to be involved in.

One of the most notable disjunctions between students' telling of the encounters between their lives and the University is the perception that the ways in which they were seen by the University is not how they wanted to be seen. In other words, there was no agreement of the terms of their encounter. While they felt that they were acknowledged as students and as people with support needs, they were often not recognised as people in either an individual or a holistic sense.

There is such a push for academic levels.
And it completely loses sight of:
you'll only achieve well academically
if you are supported,
emotionally,
and around your well-being.
They lose sight of the individual.
It's like there's black and white policies
that they adhere to.
It was just "you are not meeting
our attendance criteria"
There was no:
"what is going on for you Dan?
Is there anything I can help with?"

There is no room for flexibility
or tailoring it to that individual.
So I would get emails from a tutor
saying
'you haven't been turning up for lectures
and
this is going to affect you
and
this reflects badly on us as course director,
this needs to change'.

And they didn't accept
that I wasn't turning up to the lectures
because I wasn't given notes in advance
so I didn't feel prepared
and I didn't want
to go to a lecture that could be a trigger.
There was none of that acknowledgement.

The absence that was felt was the absence of acknowledgement of impairment in specific contexts. There have been many examples given in section 5 of this report – that attending a lecture at 6pm is detrimental to well-being or that specific access arrangements have to be made for a student to reach a lecture theatre, for instance.

Some of these encounters are moments when University services did not run as smoothly as they might have done – moments that disproportionately disadvantage disabled students. Some of these encounters are examples of where 'reasonable adjustments' could and should have taken place. All of these encounters were moments of friction between student impairments and

University systems, which cumulatively have, for many students, led to University being a place to survive, rather than thrive.

We do however want to go beyond an analysis that points to places of minor organisational failures – however much an improvement in these would be helpful. There is a broader disjunction – between an individual disabled student, their impairment(s) and often complex and dynamic identity, and the systemic response of the University that is not able to acknowledge or respond to their impairment(s). For some students, this disjunction might be characterised as existential – that they as a whole, multifaceted, embodied learners and their specific support needs were invisible to those people and systems within the University that they had dealings with

This issue of responding to people's impairments is at the heart of the social model of disability, discussed in section 4 of this report. As a non-disabled person, the size of the toilet seat or the doors to my lecture theatre have been already created with people like me in mind. For a disabled person this may not be so.

But it feels as if sometimes
it is a balance.
If I can have my needs met.
But at the same time,
I don't want to feel as if I am
that person with the anxiety
or labelled as that person.
So it's a no win situation,
it's a kind of balancing. (Pat)

For people's impairments to be recognised and responded to, the whole embodied dynamic, particular and peculiar complex person needs to become visible and this report has highlighted moments of understanding and humanity where individual staff members have taken the time to see, to acknowledge and to respond sensitively. The difference between being invited to take time out as needed and have

a cup of tea, and being asked to wait in the corridor might not seem, from a practical perspective, much of a difference – at a human, existential level there is a gulf between recognition and understanding on the one hand and denial and making invisible on the other. This research has highlighted on the one hand just how empowering moments of acknowledgement or understanding are, and on the other hand, just how impactful those moments of non-recognition can be to student achievement.

The research also highlighted the tensions over the need for individual recognition. While it was essential for obtaining appropriate support, a very common theme was the frustration with the failure of disability support summaries to be shared with teaching staff. The failure of this information to be shared put disabled students in the position of having to be responsible for making personal information of their own fuller self visible to staff – which was clearly both frustrating for many and deeply discomforting for some. As one student put it, "I don't want to have to continuously explain what I cannot do". Pat expresses the tension between knowing that she must express her vulnerability to get the support she needs, while at the same time being aware of the cost of doing so. Improving communication between staff will take away some of the tensions that disabled students have to put up with.

But the other problem is:
once I got my support summary
and had alternative arrangements,
and a bit of flexibility for deadlines
and a bit of understanding.
I got this impression
that my school thought:
these measures have been put in place,
therefore that will deal with problem.
And I learnt over the last year
that even with that measure in place
which makes my life a bit easier
it doesn't necessarily mean
that I'm not going to have issues in exams
or that everything will be
hunky dory.

A meaningful review which applies across the board, is a conversation to see things like academic progress and things like that but in terms of finding out: are there issues at home, non University things. I think that would be useful – more of a holistic approach. (Pat)

Disabled students felt that they had explained their support needs multiple times to Disability Services and that the responsibility for recognising and responding to their impairments lay with University staff. It is clearly much easier for busy lecturers and admin staff to see only what is visible of the 'learner' in front of them, rather than seeing the full spectrum of a disabled student's existence. The issue of responsibility is something that will be addressed specifically later in this section, but this research has shown not only that this time-consuming and difficult task is what is required, but that it is also possible.

Turning analysis away from the extent to which systemic responses to specific support needs are effective and towards the recognition of the individual highlighted two key challenges: the dynamic nature of student need and the issue of intersectionality.

One of the biggest challenges to the provision of effective support for disabled students lay in the dynamic nature of disabled identities. On the one hand, many students interviewed arrived at University without a specific diagnosis or were in the process of getting assessed, meaning that their own understanding of their impairment and support needs were evolving. For others, their conditions were such that their support needs varied considerably across time. Both scenarios pose extra challenges for a system to respond to – a challenge that many students found the University systems of review unable to capture.

In many ways what Pat is calling for can be understood as embedding recognition of the whole person into a review process to make it meaningful – what is important here is the quality of the interactions. A large number of interviews described aspects of the University systems as being 'tick box' exercises – as a contrast to the form of meaningful recognition that is being sought.

We are aware of the difficulty of constituting services that are able to create a meaningful review process, but the research does highlight the limitations of responsive provision as a way to respond to people's impairments. While processes can be mandated and made more effective, the research clearly highlights that positive experiences are created by attentive individuals who put the time in to get to know individual students, acknowledge their impairments and negotiate an appropriate response to them. Critically, this suggests that improvements in student experiences will come about through a change of culture, a greater awareness of disability equality, and the sharing of good practice – rather than, or at least alongside, the constitution of delivery and review processes.

The second challenge that became visible through a holistic view was the extent to which different aspects of one's identity intersected – particularly the intersectionality between mental health and physical health (not to mention the fact that one's experiences at University become the context in which mental health issues can flourish or abate).

Matt expresses clearly how his diabetes impacts on his emotional state and on a range of everyday activities, which in turn impact on his achievement.

I could say I'm lucky that I have a physical condition, but I think it is very short sighted to assume that that will not affect my mental health. I've been told that I'm never going to recover from Type I diabetes, it's something which puts an additional self-doubt on anything I might choose to do. Anything! Going for a walk! You know! It's invisible but that doesn't mean to say that I won't suddenly be lying on the pavement without, you know, without... consciousness (Matt)

Likewise for Will, his anxiety about disclosing mental health issues for fear of losing his place at University meant that some of his support needs remained unknown and unacknowledged – masked from view, in effect by his autism.

My disability is autism. So that makes certain things difficult but at the time what was really causing the problem was my mental health. (Will)

For Adela the compounding of multiple issues was exacerbated by difficulties in resolving issues with the University. As Adela puts it:

What seems unfortunate or sad is that the emotional problems came up because the administrative problems were not sorted.

If the University had been understanding, had been flexible, and you felt you could cope with this, then this would not have been, emotionally, too much. (Adela)

The role of the university of potentially producing negative emotional states in students is something that needs more careful investigation.

This discussion on visibility of the whole person is, we feel, the most critical orientation for improving the experiences of disabled students at the University. By making visible a holistic view of disabled people highlights its dynamic and intersected nature. This poses immense challenges for the University.

Intersectionality does not only apply to the compounding effects of multiple impairments; it also applies to the intersectionality of multiple aspects of diversity such as ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation. While the exploration of this is beyond the scope of this study, we feel that this is something that would be valuable to investigate further.

QUESTIONS:

Where can flexibility be brought into University systems?

What mechanisms would allow disabled students to share their particular support needs?

What would enable review processes to become more meaningful?

How can intersectionality be more readily recognised by University staff?

What are the barriers to all staff modelling the creativity and sensitivity of the best?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Ensure that disability equality training, delivered by disabled people, is available and accessed by all staff at the University, including non-teaching staff eg porters or estates personnel.

Invite disabled students who recently left the University to share their experiences directly with relevant University staff.

Work with current and previous disabled students to create an online resource available to all staff.

B. CREATING PARITY OF EXPERIENCE

Disabled students' impairments often make their experience at university more challenging than it is for other students. The goal of an inclusive higher education for disabled students is the ambition to achieve a parity of experience. While the right to reasonable adjustments should serve to make these experiences more manageable, what sometimes happens is that difficulties in communication and inflexible systems end up compounding disabled students' difficulties. Instead of helping to improve students' experiences, University systems and interpretations of what is reasonable – often through no fault of any individual – end up worsening them.

A big problem was that I couldn't get swipe card access to a door which I needed to use. I couldn't walk all the way round the building so I had to go through a particular door to get to my lecture theatre. Which students aren't allowed to use but staff can use. Now in the whole time that I was at the University no one was able to give me this swipe card access to be able to access this one door. And so it's ridiculous. Whereas at the other University Disability Services contacted the card people who activated my card and I could get access to every door that I needed and every car park. (Joe)

At the simplest level, section 5 tells of stories of inadequate organisational responses. Two experiences that Joe tells of his struggles with the physical challenges of negotiating the University campus highlight the gap in parity of experience that disabled students can face. Where parity of experience rests on things as minor as an access code, this is something that the University should strive to achieve.

At my graduation, I needed to use a lift in the Wills Memorial Building. Of course at graduation it's absolutely packed, and even though I had been in contact with the access team arranging the ceremony, lifts hadn't been thought through at all. So at the end of the day, even at the end trying to get my certificate, I ended up not being able to get the access code for the lift to be able to get up in time to my graduation ceremony. (Joe)



Most interventions to achieve parity offer greater challenges. If acknowledging disabled people's impairments is seen as being at the heart of creating a positive experience for disabled students, then this recognition takes place by individual staff members who mediate both support and University expectations. This central role of the quality of staff engagement on student well-being was described by all research participants. Encouragingly, there were numerous examples of positive encounters with staff – often told in the context of staff rescuing a particular situation. Pat's joy at being seen and heard is almost palpable.

It was brilliant.
It was absolutely brilliant.
It was nice to talk to somebody who just got it.
And who realised,
I didn't feel
as if it was like just me.
(Pat)

In such cases, staff were appreciated for their recognition and for their mediation. Slightly surprisingly perhaps, although some students, like Pat, did mention Disability Services, on the most part, staff from Disability Services did not appear as key people who mediated the quality of their experiences. Rather it was personal tutors, and course tutors who played a central role – Sam talking about a course tutor was typical.

She was always interested
In what you had to say.
It wasn't something that was relevant.
She liked that people had opinions.
She was so passionate about my subject,
that she just loved to be there
and it was just great.
It was just really inspiring.
Like she was the reason that I...
because I got to a point
of not wanting to be at University.
It was because of her that I stayed.
She was very good.
(Sam)

Or, Dan, talking about the sensitive way that his personal tutor supported him, and mediated his support needs with University expectations.

And she said
Dan this has been flagged
with the course director,
are you OK for me to say:
this is what is going on for Dan,
his attendance is not going to meet this,
this does not matter.
So she acted as the mediator
going back and forth.
(Dan)

In contrast, while these positive experiences were hard won, and time intensive, disabled students frequently experienced encounters that had a negative impact on their wellbeing. These were often short episodes often with flippant remarks that shocked or hurt disabled students. Just as for the positive experiences, these were most often course tutors and personal tutors:

I don't really understand
what the point of my personal tutor was.
I didn't really have any contact with them.
So, in my first year
I met my tutor first
and then
I had a family problem
so I went to speak to her
and I sat down
and she was like:
Can I just stop you a minute?
Am I even your tutor?
(Sam)

What is noteworthy here is the flippant or thoughtless character of these staff responses. For the most part these were situations where hurt was accidental, as a consequence of insensitivity or lack of awareness of staff to the hurt that they may cause. This talks again to the central issues raised in part A – of the need to reconfigure the wider culture of understanding and expectations around disabled students.

The increased personal exposure that disabled students inevitably must exhibit as a consequence of needing to make their whole self visible to the University can bring with it increased risks and increased level of vulnerability, particularly when the intersection of physical and mental well-being is taken into account. At times, therefore, this flippant and insensitive approach crossed into areas with far greater potential for harm.

Group work
makes me really anxious.
And there is no continuity
in the way they've handled that.
So one unit convenor said:
Group work makes you anxious.
Don't stress,
go and get a cup of tea,
come back when you are ready.
Another unit convenor said:
Go and wait outside
at the corridor
while the others do group work.
Which was really distressing
because that unit
was about inclusive education
and disabled children.
I thought we'd moved on
from corridor learning.
But obviously not. (Dan)

What we would like to draw out in this discussion is the potentially damaging interplay between the lack of recognition of disabled identities highlighted in section A, an insensitive or flippant response to an expression of these identities, and the ways that these can have a negative effect on mental or physical well-being.

And this tutor
kept explaining to me
that I was incapable of doing my degree,
I am not worthy to be on his course –
all that sort of stuff.
And then he came and said to me:
"Maybe you should get some help
from counselling
about your problems".

So that knocks your confidence.
It felt that University
weren't very bothered about
things that can affect you personally.
It felt very much that
unless
you found the right tutor to speak to,
you were chucked in the deep end
and you had to deal with it
alone. (Sam)

As staff engage with requests from students, one of the themes that emerges is the variability in the extent to which individual staff feel able to open up spaces of discretion or flexibility. Dan's tutor is a good example of where an individual member of staff takes responsibility for ensuring that reasonable adjustments are being put in place. However it is often the case that staff comply with University rules, without consideration of the fact that providing "reasonable adjustments" may mean bending or breaking these 'rules'.

The tendency to not open up those flexible spaces that might enhance student experience was evident in Tom's encounter with Disability Services over sharing information about accessible sport. Rather than Tom's attempts to enhance his and others' well-being through organising a University taster session being supported, he was told that Disability Services could not easily share this information, for reasons of confidentiality – possibly because of rules for use of mass email. While this rule may exist, Tom did not come away with any sense of support for his efforts – no advice or alternative solutions were offered. This discussion points to issues around the provision of reasonable adjustments – that elements of how these adjustments are constituted inevitably must take place in multiple and distributed ways by a range of staff, and that this places responsibility on all staff to take their share in the creation of these adjustments. Indeed, rather than seeing this as breaking rules, this could be more appropriately understood as taking responsibility for adjustments to usual practices – something that is not only allowed but mandated.

I was playing
in an accessible sport group
and I asked Disability Services
if we set up a taster session,
could they advertise it?
And they said,
Well, confidentiality, maybe not,
And it was like,
why is this a difficult thing?
But that hesitant first response
is off-putting
if you want to run anything
in the future. (Tom)

A second implication of this discussion is that there is an element of interpretation of what reasonable adjustments might be in specific circumstances, and that University staff need both empowering to embrace this flexibility and the training to fully consider whether proposed adjustments achieve parity of experience.

How these issues can play out in the moment, are well examined by considering Jon's situation. Jon, a student with diabetes, got food poisoning shortly before his examination period, thereby messing up his recovery time. The proposed 'reasonable adjustment' was to not sit exams, but rather postpone them to August – meaning that he would lose the right to resit exams, should he fail. In this case parity of experience was not achieved, as Jon either needed to waive his rights to extenuating circumstances, or waive his rights to examinations resit.

And I emailed this to them saying
should I go low
I would need it more open-ended,
and they said
it might be better if you do it in August.
Basically,
because of the impact on my diabetes,
they said
they wouldn't be able to accommodate
what I needed
and that my best chance
was to sit [the exams] in the summer,
and if I didn't do that
I would be waiving my rights
to extenuating circumstances.
And if I did as they suggested,
I wouldn't be able to resit
if I failed,
because that is the resit period.
(Jon)

What is clear from this discussion is that procedural compliance will not enable adjustments that are able to achieve parity of experience – rather creative solutions are needed that enable this parity to be achieved.

Many of the stories shared in section 5 are of this form. Reasonable adjustments need to be negotiated and agreed, and a lack of flexibility, cooperation and creative solution-finding leads to less than ideal experiences for students.

Take the story of Dan needing to eat at 6pm – at a time which clashes with a scheduled lecture. Compliance with attendance was being sought by the course tutor, at the expense of Dan's well-being, while it would surely have been an easy solution to allow Dan to excuse himself from the lecture for a short period, to allow him to eat. Once again there seems to be an instinct to aim for compliance, rather than an instinct to aim for parity of experience, recognising the disabled student's support needs and wellbeing.

I've got an eating disorder,
OCD can be really strong:
I eat at 6 o' clock.
So I couldn't attend that lecture.
And I spoke to the Unit Director
and she advised me to push myself,
not to adhere to these feed times.
And I left in tears
because it wasn't her place
to make suggestions like that.
I'm under the hospital team
and they can make suggestions,
but not her.
And they'd lost sight of the fact
that I needed to look after myself.
I was fighting so many battles,
to try to look after my own health
whilst also trying to meet
all these academic deadlines.
And it was draining.
It was really really draining. (Dan)

QUESTIONS:

Who interprets what "reasonable adjustments" means?

How, where and by whom are decisions over reasonable adjustment made?

How might disabled students themselves be involved in discussions about reasonable adjustments?

What is limiting staff from taking responsibility for negotiating creative reasonable adjustments in response to students' impairments?

How can a culture of flexibility and responsiveness be brought in?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Create a compulsory disability awareness raising online course.

Initiate some awareness raising activities – posters, news items etc in departments.

Develop and share good practice guidance across the University.

Improve internal communication of the support needs of individual disabled students.

Operate a centralised customer service system for logging support requests for disabled students.

Improve quality and consistency of personal tutor support to disabled students, taking into consideration the sensitivity of individual tutors.

Keep asking “how can we?” to encourage creative problem-solving.

Create or improve online support pages to enable students to navigate administrative and support services.

Create mentoring opportunities for new disabled students.

Increase the personal contact between Disability Services and disabled students.

Maintain a bank of ideas that have been successfully applied as reasonable adjustments across the University.

C. TRANSFORMATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

We all have multi-faceted identities, some aspects of which may change over time. Historically, University systems only needed to engage with a small aspect of students’ identities – their minds – and perhaps provide some pastoral support as necessary. How individual students organised their personal lives in order to attend lectures, engage with coursework or prepare for and sit exams was, ordinarily, of little concern to a University. Such systems were established at a time when social structures determined that students were a largely homogenous group, in that it did not include disabled people. In 21st century Britain, when disabled people’s rights are enshrined in national and international law, alongside the rights of other people with unusual identities, such a narrow engagement with individuals is no longer fit for purpose.

Looking through all the rich research data, we became increasingly aware that while we were often hearing stories of encounters that had not gone well for disabled students, these stories lacked the usual narrative resolution. The final part of the plot, where issues become resolved largely, was simply missing. Courses ended before support needs were met, outcomes of complaints were not communicated and, more generally, encounters that had caused hurt were not aired. The dynamic and cyclical nature of courses and exams, means that the issues of navigating the complexities of university life can become things that, as one student put it that are “survived”. Eventually, if the University is unable to grant you an access code to a door you need to attend a lecture, the year and course ends, and that particular problem simply stops being a problem. The nature of these day-to-day challenges make student experience much harder than it need be, and many students felt that they did not make as good progress as they could as a consequence. Many issues were simply problems, that just stayed as problems; the need to tell the story of these frustrations

was something that was partially driving participation in this research.

There were times when I raised other issues. I didn’t get a good response and so I just felt I was going to be punished for being difficult. And so, I didn’t. I just gave up. (Joe)

These stories then draw a picture not only of what is, but also what is absent – the negative space that is outlined by this data is the space where transformative problem-solving could take place, but does not. In this final section therefore, we look at the quality of interactions between disabled students and University staff who may be able to make a positive change to student experience, and where these might take place.

One of the themes that emerged was the reactive, rather than proactive nature of support, including support by Disability Services. Disability Services were perceived to take a role of “signposting”, to use one students’ term, rather than attempt to engage in dynamic interactions with disabled students.

The support summary is updated once a year. It goes to my school, my personal tutor meets with me, asks me if there is anything different or any changes that need to be made, and it’s usually a fairly rushed job. I guess a tick-box exercise, so I don’t think it has evolved with me. I think that is one problem. (Pat)

This absence was felt by many students as a perceived lack of ‘care’ by the University. In many ways this talks to the difference in perception of the nature of the relationship

between disabled students and University, described in part A of this section – to the clash of culture between disabled students who want to be fully recognised, heard as individuals and supported, and the University systems which are set up as signposting particular forms of support reacting to student requests, rather than acting to smooth and facilitate student experiences. Disabled students' support needs are met as and when students ask, and then in a variable way. Even when students do attempt to initiate conversations, these are not always taken up.

Even for the constituted forms of dialogue around student support needs – the annual review of the support summary could become a 'tick-box' exercise, rather than a meaningful conversation about support needs, as Pat notes.

During my time at University I had real issues. The Disability Coordinator would say: Oh I don't deal with that, your personal tutor deals with that. Or: No you need to go to this person. And I never got anything completed by her. I've had arguments, email exchanges, copying in my Head of School, copying in my personal tutor, and Disability Coordinator, and my specialist mentor, saying I just need to know what the process is. Who will I go to If I'm struggling with my work? And what if it's affecting not just one essay but a lot of the deadlines? And they didn't know. (Pat)

The same appears to be the case for internal communication around student impairments – between Disability Services and departments, where students felt that there was no internal monitoring or evaluation of delivery of support, as Dan tells here.

They sent the form to the Department and there is no checking whether it's actually happening. And I think it was the same last year. I was meant to have the lecture slides in advance because of my anxiety. If I don't know what is coming up in a lecture, I get so stressed. And it never happened because my disability support summary wasn't shared with the unit convenors, because the person in charge felt it was confidential so he placed it in my file, never shared it. And it did come to a head where one of the lecturers showed a video of a teacher I had at secondary school, and they were using him as a prime example of inclusive education and he had told me that I was a failure, I was never going to succeed in life, there was no point to my future. And because I hadn't had the lecture slides in advance I wasn't prepared for that. And my anxiety and depression rocketed. (Dan)

As a student I was falling between Disability Services and a Disability Coordinator. So I would ask how long is the corridor in your school? Disability Services would palm me off to the Disability Rep within the school. The Disability Rep wouldn't know the answer and send me back. And it's not the Disability Rep's fault because they are doing their best, but it feels like that system doesn't work. (Joe)

These stories highlight the absence of quality conversations which would enable reasonable adjustments to be developed in response to students' impairments. Except on the rare occasion where a personal tutor might initiate conversations with course tutors, there were no documented conversations taking place either internally within a department, between students and personal tutors or between departments and Disability Services.

It is difficult to analyse this absence further without a greater understanding of internal University processes – something that was outside of the scope of this research. That said, there are clear questions that are raised around how quality conversations might be constituted within the University. In this context it is also worth noting that the majority of student encounters are at a departmental level, and improving communication within departments would therefore be a priority. What are the fora that exist for discussing provision for disabled students? What are the forms of representation that disabled students have within departments? What are the mechanisms of review and quality assurance of support?

At the heart of this is not simply the need to constitute new forms of interaction, although this is necessary. It is also a reconfiguration of the nature of the relationship that forms through these fora. From the perspective of disabled students, what is being expressed



Often students are caught in the middle – or rather fall through the cracks – of miscommunication between departments and Disability Services, such as Pat above, where students' support needs and queries are shuffled from person to person. Even for small queries such as the length of a corridor, as Joe notes below.

is the request for a far greater level of responsibility and response from University staff and systems – where staff are proactive, thoughtful, engage in understanding student support needs, and take responsibility for supporting students – rather than shifting responsibility for responding to students’ impairments between different elements of the University.

Perhaps the most sobering of comments came from Joe who, having experienced three universities, was able to offer a comparison of the different approaches that universities have to organising support for disabled students.

I have experienced three universities now and I would say Bristol is the lowest. The worst experience in terms of Disability Services. Disability Services within other universities – they seem to be... they’re more equipped to be supportive. Whereas at the University of Bristol, it’s much more about signposting. (Joe)

While much of this research has highlighted weaknesses in how disabled students are supported, there is much that is optimistic about the possibility of positive change. There are many instances of good practice going on within the University, and most students felt that it was the system, rather than the individuals within it, that was leading to areas where support was not working. While this final comment from Joe is sobering, it does highlight the examples of good practice that are out there in the wider higher education sector, available to learn from.

This section is not a simple call to improve the quality of interactions, but a red flare which questions the dynamics of existing interactions, and calls for a radical reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities. The challenge is to move away from notions of a supreme Goliath-like structure providing things for students and, instead, to cultivate a sense of collaborative problem-solving in order to create a level playing field. What will help higher education settings to move forward on their journey towards disability equality is not clearer information or stronger arguments, but rather a commitment to start having different kinds of conversations altogether. We need to find ways of addressing the unique contingencies of today, without remaining constrained by power relations rooted in social values of previous eras.

QUESTIONS

What forum can be established within the University to allow transformative problem-solving to take place?

How can disabled students become part of the design of more inclusive University systems?

What are the best mechanisms of disabled student representation?

How can wider conversations that raise awareness of disabled identities and people’s impairments take place?

What is an appropriate level of proactiveness for University staff to have?

What are the best ways to learn from the best practice of other institutions?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide assurance to disabled students that disclosing support needs will not be detrimental.

Develop improved systems in collaboration with disabled students, after listening to their experiences and concerns.

Develop departmental and faculty level mechanisms for formalising disabled student voice in departmental committees and processes.

Establish open regular focus groups with students within departments to hear disabled students’ experiences.

Look to other universities for models of best practice.

students' lives and learning, and identifies some of the gaps in providing the joined-up support

7. Conclusions

There is a shared goal of the University being a place where disabled students are able to experience an inclusive higher education. As this research has shown, such an ambition offers multiple challenges. The legal framework requires that reasonable adjustments are made to provisions, criteria and practices, so that disabled students can be included in every aspect of University life, in the way non-disabled students take for granted.

There is no simple way to transform large complex institutions in such ways, therefore this statutory duty presents a significant challenge to rise to. As a first step we suggest inviting current or past disabled students to present their perspectives to key staff at the University and begin charting a way forward together, clarifying how change will be orchestrated and managed.

We have highlighted the importance of recognising and responding to the full range of student diversity. The wish from students to be acknowledged in this way was clearly articulated within this research. And although achieving this is made harder by recognising the complex, intersected and dynamic nature of disabled identities, this remains the only option for achieving real equality.

While the University has put systems in place to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students and offer support as appropriate, there was little evidence of monitoring or evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of these systems. This leaves some students frustrated when 'reasonable adjustments' are not implemented, not offered or offered begrudgingly, or when disabled students are repeatedly called upon to prove that they need them.

The question is how the University community can come together to begin to recognise and then to respond to people's impairments. Students have been critical of the 'reactive', 'signposting' nature of disability support across departments and the wider University – an approach that has often left students feeling that they have to take on far too much

of the responsibility for arranging the support they need. This approach will inevitably differentiate between those more able to do so, and those less able to do so.

Perhaps most critically, the absence of a supportive proactive approach to disability has created anxiety in some students. Some students expressed reluctance to disclose mental health issues out of concern that doing so might create problems for them; some students became frustrated at feeling that they were the ones who had to continuously share their support needs with each and every teacher – something that was at times embarrassing, discomforting and tiring for them.

One is left with the sense of insecurity in some students' relationships with the University. While there are many examples of very supportive and positive relationships, disabled students cannot universally be assured that University procedures (or indeed individual staff members) will acknowledge and respond to their impairments in a respectful and constructive manner. For disabled students, who have to frequently negotiate the support that they need, this is an ongoing strain.

We have argued therefore that, while there is clearly a need to make certain administrative and support services more effective, we are suggesting a reconceptualisation of the ways that support to disabled students is thought of – both in terms of how staff see their role and practices as well as the systems that they operate within.

In terms of staff, we feel that there is a deeper need for a shift in the ways that the range of university staff engage with disabled students. A disability equality campaign would help raise awareness of the essence of individual differences: that no matter how visible or even striking an impairment might be, it is only one aspect of someone's identity and we need to work on losing culturally inherited assumptions of inferiority or pity. We have argued for University staff to adopt a greater sense of responsibility, and demonstrate a more proactive and flexible

approach. This requires course tutors and personal tutors to spend more time to get to know their students and a willingness to be respectful and adaptive, in response to disabled students' impairments.

In terms of systems and a transformation towards a more inclusive University, we have highlighted the absence of transformative problem-solving or the structures that would enable this within the University. The Equality Act requires the University to make reasonable adjustments in relation to provisions, criteria and practices. It is important to remember that this is an anticipatory duty: as well as being relevant to specific students who already are at the University, the reasonable adjustments duty is owed to disabled students in general, current and prospective. This means that systems and procedures must anticipate disabled students' needs and adapt in a way that disabled students' experiences of university are equivalent to those of non-disabled students. This goes beyond the requirement to respond to particular requests made by specific disabled students, to take a far more proactive position.

While this framework is legally constituted, we find it more helpful to think of such requirements as moral, over and above legal, obligations, in order to highlight that there are decisions to be made as to what level of priority these considerations should be given.

While it is clear that change is needed, and the outline of the what this might be is glimpsed here, the exact nature of the change is not visible from our conversations with students alone. A follow-up project, exploring existing policies and practices as well as staff perspectives, would be needed before more specific recommendations can be generated towards the University becoming a more inclusive organisation. For the time being, we have argued that what is needed is the establishment of the mechanisms for embracing disabled students' identities, for involving disabled students themselves in redesigning the forms of institutional support, and for ensuring that awareness and respect for disability equality

are embraced by all teaching, support and administrative staff at the University.

While we do not believe that there is any reason why a standards agenda should be in conflict with an inclusion agenda, it seems clear that enabling disabled students to achieve at their full potential will require an increased amount of time and resources, in order to negotiate and apply the reasonable adjustments necessary.

The content of this report notwithstanding, the University of Bristol remains a highly successful institution, as measured by its overall teaching and research outputs. The question it is now called upon to consider is the extent to which it will engage with the voice of disabled students, learn from their experience and take steps to ensure that it offers real equality of opportunity in the future.



Recommendations

8.

Recommendations



In the words of students



Our recommendations

INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS:

1. Ensure all students are told about Disability Services on arrival to University in a way that will be noticed, explaining how the service may be useful for students who experience difficulties even if they have no diagnosis of a particular condition. Remind annually.

2. Consider creating an information pack for prospective students with physical impairments, with clear accessibility information on University buildings (for example which buildings have an accessible entrance, lifts or accessible toilets) and how to find out more specific information if needed.

3. Publish lists of university recommended accommodation, stating whether they are likely to be friendly/social houses or quiet/study based houses.

4. Ensure that the flexibility and discretion arranged through personal negotiation is consistently reflected on digital systems.

5. Create or improve online support pages to enable students to navigate administrative and support services.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS:

Carrying out assessments

6. Consider carrying out assessments for specific learning difficulties (for example dyslexia or dyspraxia) within the University, rather than commissioning external bodies to do this.

Organising learning support

7. Ensure that Disability Services are adequately resourced to enable each disabled student to have an allocated member of staff who, over time, gets to know the student and their support needs.

8. Ensure that there are systems in place for Disability Services to ask individual students and their departments if the recommendations in the disability support service are being implemented and if this is helpful for the student.

9. Ensure that there is a meaningful dialogue between students and Disability Services about the effectiveness of the support received.

10. Encourage and empower individual members of staff to work with disabled students to identify appropriate reasonable adjustments for them.

11. Consider enabling Disability Services to become more proactive in arranging support.

12. Explore opportunities to enlist support from fellow students instead of, or as well as, external agencies.

13. Talk with students more, ask what they need in terms of support, do the things they say they need.

14. Operate a centralised customer service system for logging support requests for disabled students.

Restructuring the learning environment

15. Make labs more accessible/comfortable for taking the large amount of notes expected or to have a sheet with the notes already written given at the beginning.

(I have had note takers in my lectures which is helpful however, in my labs I have no help and there is often a lot of standing up (which I find hard) and lots of writing on my lap or perched on the edge of a table which given writing is difficult at the best of times, 3 hours of trying to keep up in labs can often lead to a very stressful lab and me missing out on essential points for coursework.)

16. Split exams between January and June in all departments.

(Almost all of my modules were exams in June that were over 3 hours and accounted for 100% of the module, meaning most of my degree came down to a three week period in June 2016 and a three week period in June 2017. If the exams were split between January and June (as happens in most departments) this would be far more beneficial and provide results that are accurate of my knowledge and ability, not my body's stamina to work at maximum capacity for three weeks.)

17. Readdressing the way work is graded and marked with an awareness of disabilities- more verbal presentations as grading.

Enabling an ordinary life while at University

18. Consider ways in which the University might be able to help students who are not in University accommodation to organise disposal of sharps.

19. Improve training for all academic and administrative staff in mental health awareness and [have] clear processes in place to enable academic and administrative staff to know when to refer or escalate student issues to the appropriate department or professional.

20. Offer, where needed, supplemental therapy sessions to students suffering mental health issues where NHS coverage is inadequate.

21. Improve the process of booking rooms

(maybe allowing disabled students to see when [accessible] rooms are available and book time with tutors accordingly?)

22. Have more non-drinking events in halls. Drinking events can be detrimental to some students and people can't forge genuine friendships whilst intoxicated.

23. More awareness and engagement about the struggles and strengths of dyslexic students by the schools.

24. Create mentoring opportunities for new disabled students.

BECOMING A MORE INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITY:

Professional development of staff

25. Encourage current and previous students to become involved in staff disability equality training.

26. Work with current and previous disabled students to create an online resource available to all staff.

27. Invite disabled students who recently left the University to share their experiences directly with relevant University staff.

28. Ensure that disability equality training, delivered by disabled people, is available and accessed by all staff at the University, including non-teaching staff eg porters or estates personnel.

29. Create a compulsory disability awareness raising online course.

Strengthen support for disabled students

30. Clarify the role of School Disability Coordinators and strengthen it, so that they can become advocates for disability equality.

31. Ensure that there is good communication between School Disability Coordinators and Disability Services, so that support is available when it is needed.

32. A better communication line between disability support workers and lecturers.

33. Supervision should be offered to medical students the way it is offered to other healthcare professionals in the NHS.

(Medical school is very taxing and draining and I think we don't get to communicate our difficulties enough to someone who understands.)

34. Offer a personal tutor to medical students. Periodically review emails sent by members of staff to ensure their communications with students are kind and not abrupt or rude.

35. Improve internal communication of the support needs of individual disabled students.

36. Improve quality and consistency of personal tutor support to disabled students, taking into consideration the sensitivity of individual tutors.

37. Increase the personal contact between Disability Services and disabled students.

Inclusive practices across the University

38. Initiate some awareness raising activities - posters, news items etc in departments.

39. Keep asking "how can we?" to encourage creative problem-solving.

40. Maintain a bank of ideas that have been successfully applied as reasonable adjustments across the University.

41. Develop and share good practice guidance across the University.

9. Appendices

Appendix A – Online Survey

Experiencing inclusive higher education?

1. Introduction

Welcome!

This is a short survey on experiences of students at the University of Bristol who identify as being disabled or who experience mental health issues – thank you for engaging with it. This research is undertaken by Dave Bainton (d.bainton@bristol.ac.uk), researcher at the University of Bristol, and Artemi Sakellariadis (artemi@csie.org.uk), director at the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (www.csie.org.uk). It has been commissioned by the University of Bristol, under the Widening Participation programme, and we anticipate that outcomes will shape policy and practice across all disciplines and departments of the University.

This study aims to provide the University of Bristol with: a) feedback on current policies and practices which are effective in ensuring that disabled students are included in every aspect of University life; and b) practical recommendations for improving current procedures for welcoming and adequately supporting disabled students. As a result, the University will be further enabled to operate in line with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and Article 24 (Education) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The study adopts the definition of disability as this appears in the Equality Act 2010 and, therefore, invites responses from students who identify as disabled according to this definition (i.e. students who have a physical or mental impairment, including mental health issues, which has a substantial and long-term negative effect on their ability to do ordinary daily activities).

We are interested in hearing stories of what has helped or hindered students' learning and participation at the University of Bristol. In presenting the outcomes of the survey, every effort will be made to ensure that no story can be linked to a particular student. We may change identifying characteristics, for example course details, and are offering respondents an opportunity to review their stories and comment on whether the anonymised story still feels their own. In order to do this, participants are invited to give an email address for correspondence at the end of the survey.

We are also interested in discussing some of your experiences in Skype or face-to-face interviews and at focus group meetings. Interviews and focus group meetings will last no more than half an hour each. Participants who are willing to talk to us in one of these ways are invited to give their name and contact details at the end of the survey.

Participation in this survey is voluntary. You can tell us as much or as little as you like, in response to some or all of the following questions. Please note that an answer to question 22 is required.

This survey will remain open until 12 noon on Monday 31 July 2017. Thank you for taking part, we look forward to receiving your responses!

2. Academic studies

In this part of the survey we invite you to think about your academic studies. We are interested to hear about any planned Reasonable Adjustments by the University of Bristol, by its Disability Services or by any individual member of staff. We are also interested to hear about your whole University experience, from considering applying to arriving and being here.

1. How has the University of Bristol supported or enabled you to engage in all relevant learning activities?
2. Still thinking about your academic studies, what more could the University have done to enable your learning and participation?
3. Please use the space below to give us specific examples of when things have gone well and/or things have not gone well, with regard to your academic studies.
4. How do you think the experiences mentioned above have impacted on your academic progress?

3. Accommodation

In this part of the survey we invite you to think about your accommodation. We are interested to hear about any planned Reasonable Adjustments by the University of Bristol, by its Disability Services or by any individual member of staff. We are also interested to hear about your whole University experience, from considering applying to arriving and being here.

5. Thinking about your accommodation, how has the University of Bristol supported or enabled you to feel included in the student community?
6. Still thinking about your accommodation, what more could the University have done to enable your active participation?
7. Please use the space below to give us specific examples of when things have gone well and/or things have not gone well, with regard to your accommodation.
8. How do you think the experiences mentioned in this section have impacted on your academic progress?

4. Communication

In this part of the survey we invite you to think about your communication with the University, i.e. the way you exchange information and interact with relevant departments. We are interested to hear about your whole University experience, from considering applying to arriving and being here.

9. Thinking about your communication with the University, i.e. the way you exchange information and interact with relevant departments, how has the University of Bristol supported or enabled you to have a positive student experience?
10. Still thinking about your communication with the University, what more could the University have done to enable you to have a better student experience?
11. Please use the space below to give us specific examples of when things have gone well and/or things have not gone well, with regard to your communication with the University.
12. How do you think the experiences mentioned in this section have impacted on your academic progress?

5. Overall well-being

In this section we invite you to think about your overall personal well-being during your time at the University of Bristol. We are interested to hear about your whole University experience, from considering applying to arriving and being here.

13. Thinking about your overall student experience, how has the University of Bristol supported or enabled your personal well-being?
14. Thinking about your overall student experience, what more could the University have done to support your personal well-being?
15. Please use the space below to give us specific examples of when things have gone well and/or things have not gone well, with regard to your overall well-being.
16. How do you think the experiences mentioned in this section have impacted on your academic progress?

6. Personal details

Finally, please tell us a bit more about yourself. Please remember that when reporting the outcomes of this survey the information you have given will be anonymised.

17. What are you studying at the University of Bristol and at what degree level? (e.g. BA in French or PhD in Engineering Department)
18. Are you studying full-time or part-time?
19. What is your age?
20. What is your gender?
21. Are you registered at the University as a Home/EU or an overseas student?
22. In your own words, please tell us in what way you are disabled.
23. We are keen to hear more of your experiences in Skype or face-to-face interviews and focus group meetings. Interviews and focus group meetings will last no more than half an hour each. If you would like to be invited to share your stories in one of these ways, without committing to anything at this stage, please enter your name and email address or telephone number below. This will also enter you into a draw for one of five £20 book tokens. When entering your email please double-check that you have typed this information correctly; thank you.
24. If you would like to see how we plan to represent your stories, and have a chance to comment on how we have anonymised them, please enter your email address below and we will get in touch before publishing the results of this survey. Please double-check that you have typed this information correctly; thank you.
25. Finally, is there anything else you wish to tell us with regard to your student experience at the University of Bristol?

You have completed this survey!

Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey.

Appendix B – Interview schedule

Area of focus	Examples of questions or probes
1. Introduction	Welcome, personal introductions and introduction to research
2. Consent	Reminder that participation is voluntary; seek consent to record the interview
3. Clarification on personal experiences	You said in the survey that... Could you tell me a bit more about that? So [this happened] – have I got this right? Can I ask you to say a little bit about your impairment?
4. Understanding barriers to support	We are keen to understand what might be getting in the way of support being available in the way you would have preferred. From your perspective, what are the barriers to the support being how you would have liked it? So, we’ve talked about [this] and about [that]. Is there anything else that you think might be getting in the way of support being how you would have liked it?
5. Student recommendations	What would it take to change that? How would we go about ensuring this happened in practice? If we had a magic wand and we could change things, how would you shape this, what would you like to happen instead? If we had the VC with us in this room, looking for ways to improve disabled students’ experiences at the University, what might we say to them? Further prompts – eg and how would we make that happen?
6. Thanks and finish	Thank students for their time and contribution; give book token, or ask for an address for it to be posted to.

