

# Disabled students: what are their drivers and barriers to accessing Higher Education?

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## Background

Disabled people face disadvantages in the workplace, with many struggling to find and maintain employment – such as only 52.1% of autistic adults in the United Kingdom in employment, compared to the UK national average of 81.3%. Disabled people also face disadvantages accessing and succeeding at Higher Education (HE), with only 23% of disabled people in the UK having a degree compared to 39.7% of non-disabled people (Putz et al., 2021).

Research shows that higher level qualifications can unlock better-paid jobs and make candidates more employable (Bynner et al., 2003, Brunello and Comi, 2004, Walker and Zhu, 2003). Considering this, it is reasonable to assume that increasing the number of disabled people accessing and succeeding at HE can help address the disabled employment gap.

Widening Participation programmes have already identified disabled students as a group to target with strategic outreach; but it's possible that these students are receiving less targeted outreach than non-disabled peers as well. At HeppSY, we found that disabled students were less likely to participate in campus visits than non-disabled students. This is a problem when research shows campus tours are effective at raising aspirations and creating a sense of belonging (Fleming and Grace, 2015).

It is important that these programmes understand the barriers – things that inhibit – that exist for disabled students, so that they can begin to tackle them. It's also important to understand the drivers – the things that aid – that can be made for disabled students wanting to access HE; so that they can be amplified.

## Methodology

HeppSY had already conducted a Learner Survey in 2022/23 which collected responses from 4969 students in Years 10-13 and College Levels 2-3 across the South Yorkshire region. 4025 students provided their disability status as part of their response.

The Learner Survey identified five outcomes. These were Future Plans, HE Knowledge, HE Benefits, Sense of Belonging and Self-Efficacy. Questions also asked students' intention to apply to HE and their belief in whether an application would be successful. A selection of questions were also included which focused on disability, in particular knowledge of support for disability at Higher Education.

We were able to analyse this in relation to disabled and non-disabled students to identify these barriers. Specifically, the analysis asked two questions:

1. What barriers to Higher Education exist among disabled students?
2. What support can Widening Participation programmes offer to alleviate these barriers?

Descriptive statistics such as crosstabulations were used to identify and explore data of interest, with Pearson's Chi-squared calculated to indicate statistical significance.

## Results

### Disability Support Knowledge

Two sets of questions were asked to measure knowledge of the disabled student support at HE. The first was a set of true or false statements, while the second was a multiple-choice question asking which from a list of disabilities (paraplegia, anxiety, dyslexia, autism, long-term chronic illness, deafness, and all the above) would qualify for disability support at HE.

The first set of questions saw a difference between pre- and post-16 students, but not between disabled and non-disabled students. Post-16 students were more likely to answer the fourth question, with 45.4% answering correctly, suggesting that at post-16 students are more knowledgeable of requirements to access DSA.

Answer	Financial support	Non-financial support	Mental health support	DSA proof to access
Correct	2428 (60.3%)	1831 (45.5%)	2435 (60.5%)	684 (17.0%)
Incorrect	161 (4.0%)	413 (10.3%)	155 (3.9%)	169 (4.2%)
Don't know	1436 (35.7%)	1781 (44.2%)	1435 (35.7%)	3172 (78.8%)
Total	4025 (100%)	4025 (100%)	4025 (100%)	4025 (100%)

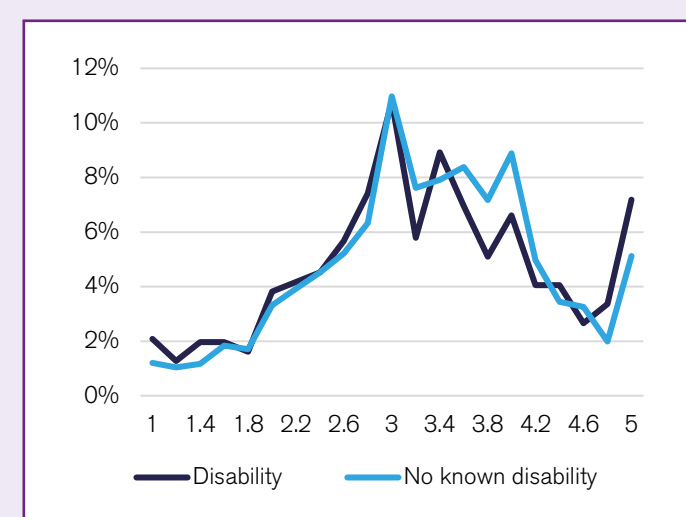
Figure 1: Overall knowledge of disability support among all students

The final question saw 27.9% of students correctly select all of the above, with a higher percentage among disabled students (32.3%) compared to non-disabled (26.7%). Most students however chose the incorrect answer, indicating this is still a knowledge gap even among disabled students. Anxiety was the least likely to be selected, indicating a specific gap in knowledge that mental illnesses are eligible for disability support.

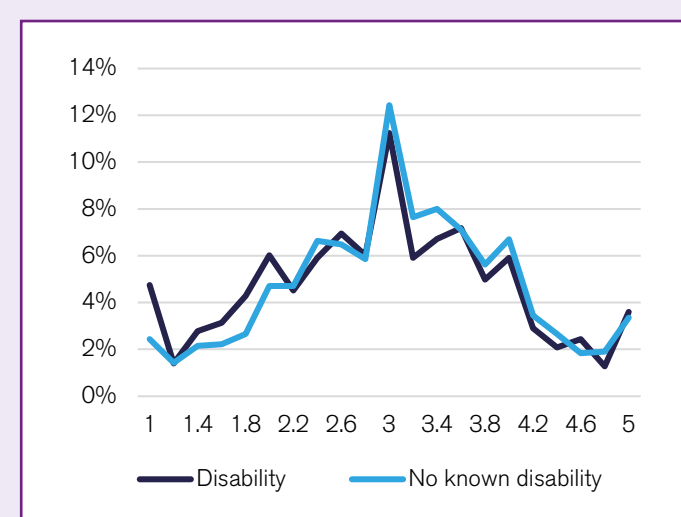
### HE Knowledge

Two sets of questions (using a 5-point scale from 1 being "nothing at all" to 5 being "a lot") focused on students' knowledge of HE. The first set measured knowledge of applying to HE, while the second measured knowledge of life at HE. Taken as a single measure for each category and as individual groups, there was a statistically significant difference on both measures and all questions.

On knowledge of applying, non-disabled students were more likely to answer in the upper range, with 69.7% scoring between 3 and 5, compared to 65.4% of disabled students.



Left – Figure 2: Student average HE knowledge of applying



Right – Figure 3: Student average HE knowledge of life at HE

On knowledge of life at HE, there was a similar disparity, with 60.7% non-disabled students scoring between 3 and 5 compared to only 54.2% of disabled students. A higher proportion of disabled students (16.3%) had an average of answers below 2, compared to 10.8% of their non-disabled peers.

### Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy was measured on a five-point strongly agree to strongly disagree scale, based on answers to three questions. There was a statistically significant difference between disabled and non-disabled students, but despite this gap, both still reported high levels of self-efficacy.

### HE Benefits

Six questions focused on students' knowledge of HE benefits, on a five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A majority of students regardless of disability status responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with all statements.

There was a clear significant difference between disabled and non-disabled students, with different levels of agreement between the statements. The largest difference was in terms of social life benefits, where there was a staggering difference between disabled and non-disabled students, but there were also smaller differences such as the benefit of Higher Education on earning potential.

Statement	Disabled	Non-disabled
It will enable me to get a better job.	64.1%	68.8%
It will improve my social life.	64.4%	72.1%
It will enable me to earn more.	74.7%	79.8%
It will give me valuable life skills.	75.0%	78.5%
It will challenge me intellectually.	75.2%	80.5%
It will broaden my horizons.	76.6%	82.4%

Figure 4: Overall percentage of agree and strongly agree responses to HE benefit statements, broken down by disabled and non-disabled students

Year Group moderated the effect in this area, with pre-16 students less likely to agree and with a wider divide between disabled and non-disabled students. For example, in response to the highest-rated statement overall ("It will broaden my horizons"), 52.8% of pre-16 disabled students agreed, compared to 65.7% of non-disabled pre-16 students; this is compared to the post-16 sample, where 78.6% of disabled students agreed compared to 79.5% of non-disabled students. This pattern is repeated across the other statements and shows that younger disabled students face some of the highest barriers in terms of understanding benefits from HE.

### Sense of Belonging

Four questions on a five-point strongly agree to strongly disagree scale were asked in relation to sense of belonging at HE. These were two sets, the first focusing on social fit, the second on academic fit. Overall, all questions showed disabled students reporting a lower sense of belonging.

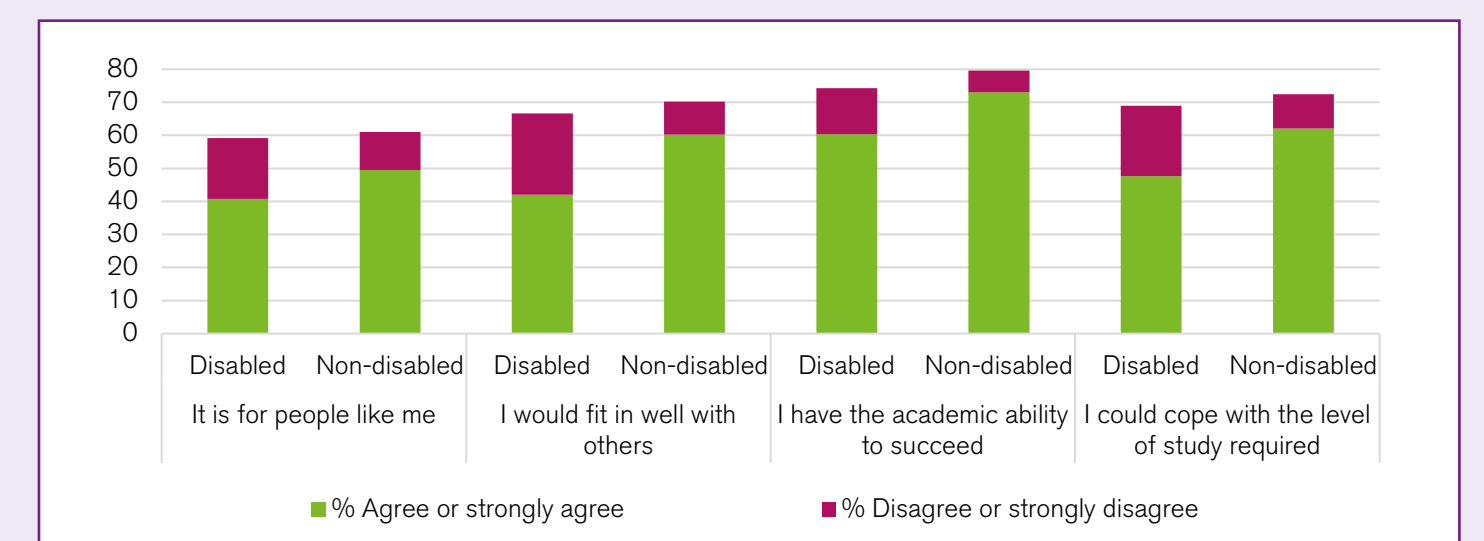


Figure 5: Comparison of sense of belonging between disabled and non-disabled students

The questions measuring social fit found that disabled students were less confident they would fit in at HE compared to non-disabled peers. Only 40.8% of disabled students agreed that HE is "for people like them", compared 49.5% of non-disabled peers, while 49.5% of disabled students agreed that they "would fit in well with others" compared to 60.2% of non-disabled peers.

The questions measured academic fit found that disabled students again were behind non-disabled peers, with 60.3% of disabled students compared to 73.0% of non-disabled students agreeing that they had the "academic ability to succeed", while 47.6% of disabled students agreed that they could "cope with the level of study required" compared to 62.1% of non-disabled students.

This shows a stark divide between disabled and non-disabled students when it comes to sense of belonging, with disabled students far less confident that they would fit in at HE academically and socially compared to their non-disabled peers.

## Seven Barriers

1. A knowledge gap in disability support at HE.
2. A knowledge gap in what counts as a disability.
3. A knowledge gap in mental health as a disability.
4. A knowledge gap in overall HE knowledge.
5. A knowledge gap in benefits of HE.
6. A gap in sense of belonging.
7. A gap in self-efficacy.

## Recommendations

1. Work to close the sense of belonging gap by increasing the proportion of disabled students taking part in high-level interventions and activities such as campus visits.
2. Work to increase knowledge of HE and the benefits of HE among disabled students.
3. Work to increase knowledge of the support available for disabled students at HE.
4. Collect information on type of disability for each student in future surveys, to allow for comparison to identify differing needs between different impairments.
5. Future research should explore whether mental illnesses such as anxiety are less likely to be recognised as disabling impairments by students.

## References

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