

Student Voice Tracking Study: Experiences of disabled students in accessing learning support options – Summary report

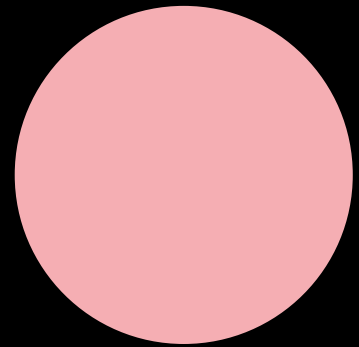
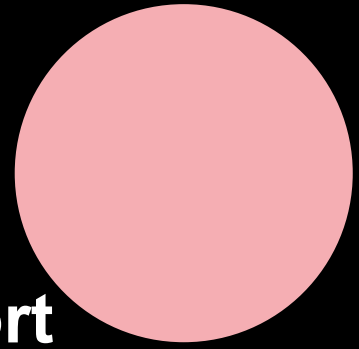


Table of Contents

Background and Key Findings	2
Background	2
Key Findings	2
Research Limitations	3
Notes for Interpretation	3
Methodology.....	4
Eligibility Criteria for Participation	4
Qualitative Phase	4
Quantitative Phase	4
Sample Profile	5
Overall Experience	6
The Application and Implementation Process	6
Awareness and Information about Learning Support Options	6
Application Process	7
Student Interactions and Waiting Times During Application.....	7
Implementation Waiting Times	8
Challenges During Implementation	8
Unsuccessful Applications and Appeal Process.....	8
Internal Processes and Inclusive Practices.....	9
Outcomes and Suggested Improvements	9

Background and Key Findings

Background

This research was commissioned from Savanta by the Office for Students (OfS) to explore how disabled students experience the process of applying for, accessing, and benefitting from learning support plans and reasonable adjustments. The research specifically examined students' awareness of and access to support options, the application process, their experiences with support delivery, the impact of adjustments, and any inclusive practices already in place. The research also aimed to highlight areas for improvement and inform higher education providers about what was working well for students in terms of inclusive approaches.

A mixed-methods approach was used. Qualitative research came first, conducting nine in-depth interviews to uncover detailed insights and emerging themes. These insights then informed the design of a follow-up quantitative survey (of 150 respondents), which measured how widespread key experiences and perceptions were among a larger sample of disabled students.

Key Findings

Awareness and access to support options

The timing and sources of students' awareness of learning support options varied widely; 39% first heard about support through friends or family, 33% from university staff, and 30% via medical professionals. Notably, 55% learned about reasonable adjustments after starting their course.

Application process

73% of students felt well informed about the application requirements, and 70% found the process easy to navigate. Positive experiences were linked to clear guidelines, prompt staff responses, and step-by-step instructions. However, 17% faced issues, mostly due to documentation delays or lack of guidance. Of those whose applications were rejected, nearly eight in ten (78%) did not receive an explanation or reason for why some elements of their application were unsuccessful.

Experience of the support process

76% of those whose support was implemented said support met or exceeded their expectations. Satisfaction was driven by good communication, timely adjustments, and feeling supported. While 15% found the process unclear, overall satisfaction remained high. Of those with unmet needs, 91% took further action, such as seeking advice or appealing assessment outcomes.

Impact of adjustments

The majority of students reported a positive impact of the adjustments when implemented: 77% reported improved academic performance, and 75% noted a better understanding of course material. This was echoed in qualitative feedback, where many students also described reduced stress, improved workload management, and increased confidence. On the other hand, a minority of students expressed dissatisfaction with their adjustments, most

commonly citing that the support felt too general, was not sufficiently tailored to their needs, or was affected by delays and communication challenges.

Inclusive practices and connection with other institutional processes

Support was most commonly provided through university services including counselling and mental health support (45%), exam adjustments (38%), and academic advising (35%). Broader inclusive practices like staff training or awareness campaigns were less recognised, suggesting a need for universities to better define and promote the full range of inclusive initiatives.

Research Limitations

A key limitation of this research is the difficulty in ensuring a fully representative sample of disabled students. Disabled students represent a significant minority of the student population, yet within this group there is a wide range of experiences, needs, and types of impairments. This makes it challenging to collect a sample that is both large enough and diverse enough to allow for meaningful conclusions to be drawn in a quantitative study.

There are several additional factors within the data that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Within the sample there is a high proportion of students who were successful in their applications for reasonable adjustments or learning support plans, which appears to be higher than estimates from other research.¹ This could have affected the proportion of respondents who rated their experience positively. There is also a skew toward female disabled students within the sample, which should be considered in interpretation.

Finally, it is possible that respondents may have conflated or confused the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and university support, potentially treating both in their responses; there is no data in the quantitative research to clarify this but some of the qualitative research backs up this assertion.

As a result, findings should be interpreted with some caution, particularly when considering how well they might generalise to all disabled students and all forms of support.

Notes for Interpretation

The quantitative results in this report are shown as percentages, and any differences noted between sub-groups are statistically significant at the 95% level unless stated otherwise. In some cases, differences that appear in the data may not be statistically significant due to sample size limitations. These data are excluded from the analysis. Questions with base sizes lower than 50 are marked with an asterisk (*) and should be treated as indicative findings. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding, the exclusion of 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' responses, or because respondents were able to select more than one answer.

'Nets' (or 'netted answers') refer to multiple response options combined into a single summary category. This is done to provide a clearer overview of how many respondents selected similar answers and to help highlight broader patterns within grouped responses, rather than reporting each option separately. In addition, nets may overlap, meaning respondents can be allocated to more than one net category if they selected multiple relevant answers. This overlap should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings, as the totals for nets may exceed 100% and individuals may be represented in more than one group.

¹ <https://disabledstudents.co.uk/research/access-insights-2023-report/>.

In this report, individual health conditions were grouped into the following net categories:

- **Sensory, medical, or physical impairment:** Includes chronic conditions, long-term pain, dexterity issues, deafness or partial hearing, long Covid, mobility or physical impairments, stamina/breathing/fatigue issues, and vision impairments (blindness or partial sight).
- **Social or communication impairment:** Combines communication impairments and neurodiversity (autism, social or behavioural differences, ADHD).
- **Cognitive or learning difficulties:** Includes memory or learning difficulties, and difficulty understanding or concentrating.

In addition, 'learning support options' refers to a range of provisions including the following groups:

- **Plans:** Personalised or comprehensive learning plans such as strategies and resources tailored to individual educational, health, and social care needs.
- **Reasonable adjustments:** Course, exam or assessment adjustments, for example, access to course materials in alternative formats, assistive technology, personal assistants, exam modifications like extra time or alternative formats, and flexible assessment methods.
- **Additional support services:** Such as one-to-one or small group tutoring, mental health support, or assistance from a dedicated disability support team, which may include specialist note takers, interpreters, or help with travel arrangements.

Methodology

Eligibility Criteria for Participation

- Participants were required to be currently studying at a university or college in England regulated by the Office for Students.
- They needed to have either successfully or unsuccessfully applied for at least one form of learning support. This included support plans, reasonable adjustments, or other additional support services.
- The research included students with a wide range of physical and non-physical disabilities, learning difficulties, and social or communication impairments.
- For both the qualitative and quantitative phase, these criteria were the same, and interviews aimed to reflect this range of experiences and backgrounds.

Qualitative Phase

In-depth interviews were chosen for the qualitative phase instead of focus groups due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Savanta conducted nine 40-minute interviews between 9th and 16th December 2024.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, using a discussion guide to steer the conversation while allowing participants to shape the discussion based on what they felt comfortable sharing. This approach ensured that the findings reflect both the topics of interest to the research and the areas participants were most comfortable discussing.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase was based on a 12-minute online survey completed by 150 disabled students. The data collection took place online between 23rd December 2024 and 6th January 2025.

The online respondents represented a range of health conditions, which are outlined in the following section. While sampling quotas were set to support representation across sex, age, and type of disability, these were applied flexibly and monitored throughout fieldwork to achieve as broad a range of experiences as possible.

Sample Profile

The most commonly reported health categories were sensory, medical or physical impairments (59%), closely followed by having a mental health condition (57%). A third of students (30%) reported experiencing social or communication impairments. The detailed breakdown of disabilities is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Health conditions and overlap (column percentages shown)

	Total	Mental health condition	NET: Sensory, medical or physical impairment	NET: Social or communication impairment	NET: Cognitive or learning difficulties*
Mental health condition	57%	100%	46%	67%	60%
NET: Sensory, medical or physical impairment	59%	48%	100%	47%	77%
NET: Social or communication impairment	30%	35%	24%	100%	37%
NET: Cognitive or learning difficulties	23%	25%	30%	29%	100%
Other impairment(s) or condition(s)	3%	0%	0%	2%	0%

Source: OfS, Student Voice Tracking: Experiences of disabled students in accessing learning support options, DETAILED HEALTH CONDITION. What type of impairments or long-term health conditions would you describe yourself as having? Please tick all that apply. Base: All respondents (150). *Low base size (35) should be treated with caution.

Almost half of respondents (45%) reported having a single type of health condition, while nearly a third (27%) had two. One in ten students (11%) reported three health conditions, and 17% indicated they had four or more.

In terms of demographics, seven in ten students (72%) were female, while nearly a third (27%) were male. Across age groups, the biggest age category was 20 or younger (35%), with approximately even proportions falling into 21-24 years, 25-29 years, and 30 or older (23%, 21% and 20% respectively).

In addition, seven in ten respondents (70%) were undergraduates and three in ten (30%) were studying for a postgraduate degree. Postgraduate students were typically 21 years old or older, whereas undergraduates were usually 20 years old or younger.

In order to qualify for the research study, respondents had to have applied for at least one learning support option. The detailed breakdown of the application outcome is included in Table 2.

Table 2 Experience of applicants across learning support options

	Applied for at least one learning support option (qualifying criteria)	Successful application for at least one learning support option	At least one learning support application is successful and implemented	At least one learning support application is successful but not yet implemented	Unsuccessful application for at least one learning support option	Unsuccessful in all applications
All learning support options	100%	99%	95%	64%	57%	1%
Personalised and comprehensive plans	75%	69%	56%	27%	23%	5%
Reasonable adjustments	92%	90%	84%	51%	38%	2%

Source: OfS, Student Voice Tracking: Experiences of disabled students in accessing learning support options, LEARNING_SUPPORT: Have you applied for or used any of these learning support options since you started your studies? Please select all that apply. Base: All respondents (150). NB: Percentages as a share of all applicants (150).

Overall Experience

Most students found the process of applying for and implementing learning support to be straightforward. Overall, 70% of students agreed that the application process was easy to follow, and 73% agreed that the implementation process was straightforward. Only a minority expressed concerns, with 17% disagreeing that the application process was simple and 15% expressing similar views about the implementation process.

Interactions with university staff were generally positive, and most students reported being treated with respect throughout both processes. Nevertheless, 10% did not feel respected, and a small proportion found it unclear who to contact if they had questions or issues during application (16%) or implementation (15%).

When asked for suggestions, many students highlighted a desire for even greater clarity of communication and simpler procedures, reinforcing the importance of accessible and student-friendly support systems.

The Application and Implementation Process

Awareness and Information about Learning Support Options

Students were more likely to first hear about learning support options from friends and family (42%) than from university staff (34%) or from official university communication channels such as emails, newsletters, or websites (29%). Three in ten (30%) learned about these options from medical services such as a GP or the NHS, while 28% cited social media. DSA was a source of information for 17% of respondents.

'Before I joined university, **my mum was quite scared**. I'd be going off to uni by myself for the first time and I was also scared of the amount of work I'd be given. I didn't know if I'd be able to do it or not, **so we applied for the [DSA]**.'

Student with multiple impairments

Students were generally more likely to find out about learning support during their course than before starting their studies, but there are some variations across the adjustments. A higher number of respondents heard about course or exam adjustments after starting their course (55% and 53% respectively) rather than before their course began (42% for each). Notably, students with four or more health conditions were more likely to learn about exam adjustments before starting their course than those with fewer conditions (55% vs 38%). When it comes to comprehensive or personalised learning plans, a similar proportion of students learned about them before (48%) or during their studies (47%).

In the qualitative interviews, some participants also expressed surprise at the range of support options available, many of which they had only discovered after beginning their course.

Most students found the information about learning support options to be helpful. However, interview participants noted some areas for improvement, such as providing more personalised and detailed information, particularly about available support for specific health conditions, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Some also mentioned the need for clearer details about the application process, including waiting times and deadlines.

'Information was easy to find, [university] gave us a newsletter format e-mail that had a big list of the different services available, but **for me specifically with ADHD, the information was very sparse**. I think there is only about a paragraph about ADHD on the disabilities part of the university website. It isn't really support. It just tells you to contact the disability service.'

Student with multiple impairments

Over a third of students (37%) stated that the information available about learning support options had a significant impact on their choice of university or college, while half of respondents (51%) felt it had little impact. In particular, mature students aged 25 or older (51%) were significantly more likely than those aged 17 to 24 (26%) to say that the available information influenced their university or college choice.

Application Process

In general, around half of respondents applied for learning support before starting their studies (52%), with the remaining students stating they applied after their course began (48%). The typical steps taken by students during their application process included discussing the available learning support options or how to access them with support services (66%), providing information about their health conditions (35%), submitting relevant documents and evidence (34%). Students with two or more health conditions were generally more likely to have taken most of these steps than those with a single condition.

Student Interactions and Waiting Times During Application

Respondents mainly interacted with their institutions rather than third parties during the application process. Students typically reported contacting academic staff (34%), student support (33%) or university disability support services (29%) during application. One in four (24%) contacted medical services, such as a GP or the NHS, often to obtain evidence. Long

waiting times for obtaining documentation from the NHS were a frequent source of frustration mentioned in the qualitative interviews.

In general, students waited around two weeks for the outcome of an application with similar proportions waiting two weeks or longer for comprehensive and personalised plans (49%), course (46%) and exam adjustments (44%). However, up to a third of students had to wait five weeks or longer, with 33% waiting this long for course adjustments and 32% for plans.

Over a third of students (37%) strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the time taken to confirm the outcome of their application, and a similar proportion (36%) somewhat agreed with this statement. However, 5% strongly disagreed with this and 9% somewhat disagreed.

Implementation Waiting Times

Students who received a positive outcome from their application typically waited five weeks or longer for the support to be implemented – 55% for course adjustments, 53% for exam adjustments, and 50% for learning plans. Respondents with cognitive or learning difficulties were generally the most likely to report waiting five weeks or more for support implementation. Additionally, respondents with three or more health conditions were much more likely than those with fewer conditions to wait five weeks or longer for exam adjustments (73% vs 45%) and learning plans (58% vs 46%) to be implemented.

Delays and difficulty in communicating with external services were the main problems with implementation mentioned in the qualitative interviews.

'If someone was in a more like vulnerable state [than me] or needed that support quicker, those **months where they have no support could be really detrimental**, especially because everything's so far fast-paced in uni.'

Student with a physical impairment

Challenges During Implementation

While the in-depth interviews generally revealed satisfaction with the experience and highlighted the positive impact of receiving support, a few key examples of dissatisfaction emerged:

- Some students experienced significant delays in receiving equipment through DSA, forcing them to purchase this themselves or go without for the first weeks of their course.
- Others found the DSA application process overwhelming and bureaucratic, with minimal communication from university administrative staff, making them feel that student needs were not the focus.
- One student felt there was a lack of specific support for ADHD and was disappointed that their university was unable to assist with their ADHD diagnosis. They noted that this was different from the support provided at their university for conditions like dyslexia.

Unsuccessful Applications and Appeal Process

More than two in five student applications (43%) were either fully or partially rejected. Of those affected, nearly eight in ten (78%) were not provided with any explanation for the rejection of parts of their application. Following these outcomes, three quarters (75%) of respondents sought some form of advice, while a third (34%) went on to lodge a complaint

with either their institution or the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA).

Of those students whose learning support was not fully implemented, the majority (84%) took at least one action to challenge the decision. Over half (56%) sought advice from university or external sources, including legal professionals. Two in five (40%) followed up with relevant university departments or escalated the issue internally. Mature students were more likely than younger students to be proactive in taking further steps such as following-up, requesting a meeting, or escalating concerns (53% vs. 31%).² One interviewee pointed to their use of existing relationships and confidence in navigating processes as beneficial in this regard, reflecting a trend that mature students were more likely to take further steps, such as following up, due to these relationships and confidence.

'I do have to say, **as a mature student, I probably get on with the [university] staff more,** also like the administrative staff.'

Student with multiple impairments

Internal Processes and Inclusive Practices

For most disabled students, support, such as access to counselling and mental health services (45%), special considerations for exams (38%), academic advising and support (35%) and disability support services coordination (31%), was typically provided through university or college services.

'There's the counselling line, but they also have regular, more traditional counselling sessions. Last year I did use that service for the disability stuff, but also there's a lot of stress in my life personally at that time as well.'

Student with a singular impairment

Although overall awareness of inclusive practices was limited, counselling and mental health services were the most frequently cited examples of broader inclusivity efforts at institutions.³ Around 52% of students primarily identified these services when asked about available support. Fewer students mentioned specific inclusion initiatives, and these were often only recognised after beginning their studies.

Outcomes and Suggested Improvements

Most disabled students found that the learning support they received met or exceeded their expectations, with 68% saying it matched what they anticipated and 18% reporting it surpassed expectations.

The most significant reported benefits were improvements in academic performance (77%) and understanding course materials (75%), with many also noting enhanced wellbeing due to reduced stress and better workload management.

² NB: Low base size (n38) and should be treated with caution.

³ 'Inclusive practices' are defined in the questionnaire as including Accessible campus facilities (e.g., ramps, lifts, accessible restrooms), Inclusive teaching methods (e.g., diverse learning materials, flexible teaching approaches), Availability of assistive technology (e.g., screen readers, speech-to-text software), Supportive peer networks (e.g., disability advocacy groups, peer mentoring programs), Counselling and mental health services available to all students, Accessible online learning platforms and resources, Dedicated Disability support services, and Accessible communication (e.g., sign language interpreters, captioned videos).

Qualitatively, some students reported positive outcomes, such as reduced anxiety, improved workload management, and a greater sense of confidence and support. However, others described negative experiences, often involving support that lacked personalisation, delays and poor communication (particularly with external providers), or complex processes that did not effectively address their specific needs.

“I suppose knowing that it's [extra time] there **cuts out the stress** quite a lot because I have had to miss a few days of university because of the pain and so knowing that I (...) have evidence of that and I'm not just skiving, it's quite good.”

Student with singular impairment

Suggestions for improvement focused on the need for clearer and more frequent communication across all areas of disability support, including clear guidelines, better explanation of each step in the process, and quicker responses to student enquiries. Students also emphasised the importance of simplifying application procedures and making support more timely and accessible. Many also suggested expanding support options, such as offering more in-person help, specialised advice for different conditions, workshops, and awareness initiatives. Additionally, students felt that support services should be promoted more effectively so that everyone is aware of the help available to them.

‘It would be nice to have **more support for disabilities that kind of fly under the radar** like people on the autism spectrum and [with] ADHD, because I've learned how (...) **little specific support there is.**’

Student with multiple impairments

‘I was not made aware upfront of specific services that could help me. It was **advertised more** vaguely as a **general disability service**, and **didn't have information on specific ways they can help** people with specific conditions. Without that information people usually don't know that their circumstances are serious enough to qualify for extra help.’

Student with multiple conditions