

# Disabled Students' Commission

## Terms of Reference



### Background

1. The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) replaces the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group (DSSLG). DSSLG was chaired by Professor Geoff Layer (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton) and established in 2016 partly in response to changes to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) through which higher education providers were expected to provide some personal support for disabled students, which until then had been provided through DSAs.
2. The DSSLG prepared guidance on inclusive teaching which was published in 2017<sup>1</sup>. DSSLG has been largely inactive in the last 18 months due to sector changes emerging from the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and resource challenges.
3. The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) was announced by the Universities Minister on 28 June 2019 to take the DSSLG work forward. The Minister tasked the new Commission to inform, influence and challenge the sector to transform its approach to inclusive teaching and learning.

### Purpose

4. The DSC is an independent group that will:
  - a. advise, inform and challenge the English higher education sector (including providers, sector agencies, regulators and government) to improve models of support for disabled students in higher education
  - b. identify and promote effective practice that helps those with disabilities have a positive and successful experience at university.

### Membership

5. The Universities Minister appointed Professor Geoff Layer as Chair of the new Disabled Students' Commission (DSC). The Minister asked the OfS to nominate a commissioner: this will be Chris Millward, Director of Fair Access and Participation. The Minister has delegated the Chair the responsibility to work with the OfS to run a public appointments process for the rest of the commissioners.
  - a. In addition to the Chair and the OfS representative, a maximum of six commissioners will be appointed. One commissioner should represent the student voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-report-offers-guidance-to-support-disabled-students>

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- b. The commissioners will be selected through a fair and open recruitment process, using a person specification and a skills matrix to ensure the DSC balances skills across the whole student lifecycle.
- c. The membership should reflect the diversity of the English higher education sector and include leaders, practitioners and a representative of the student voice.
- d. The Commissioners will be appointed for terms of three years, in the first instance, with the possibility of reappointment.

## Responsibilities of the Disabled Students' Commission

6. The Commission should be a credible and influential source of advice and challenge to the sector.
7. The Commission will help the sector to achieve more positive outcomes for disabled students in relation to access, participation, success and progression by challenging higher education providers, the OfS, the DfE, and the third sector to accelerate the pace of change in creating inclusive learning and living environments for disabled students.
8. In order to fulfil its role, the Commission will:
  - a. take a strategic view of the sector, informed by commissioners' own knowledge, the student voice, and robust, independent research and evaluation
  - b. engage and influence the sector in developing high quality evidence and using this to implement effective practice
  - c. challenge the sector, the OfS and the DfE, where progress is not fast enough, by providing high quality evidence and guidance on effective practice
  - d. work collaboratively with each other to encourage and incentivise collaboration across the higher education sector
  - e. ensure its work is effectively promoted across the sector.

## Key activities

9. As a priority, the Commission will develop its priorities, targets and measures through stakeholder engagement. These priorities are to be shared with the OfS and the DfE on an annual basis. This will include reference to:
  - a. the OfS Key Performance Measure 5, which seeks to close the gap in attainment between disabled and non-disabled students within five years (2017-18 to 2021-22) and
  - b. where appropriate, OfS, sector and government work on student mental health.

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10. The DSC will commission research (either on its own, through members or Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)<sup>2</sup> and gather other intelligence and evidence to better understand disabled students' access to, experience of, and progression from higher education.
11. The Commission will provide evidence-based advice and recommendations, inclusive of disabled students' voices, to the government, the OfS and the sector.
12. The DSC will communicate and effectively disseminate its recommendations and findings appropriately, including, but not limited to:
  - a. an annual 'state of the nation' report about the picture of disability in higher education in England
  - b. sector-wide events
  - c. ministerial reports.

## Responsibilities of the Office for Students

13. The OfS commits to supporting the Commission for three years through:
  - a. providing a grant to a supporting, third party organisation to fund reasonable costs and expenses of the DSC to enable it to operate effectively. The OfS will place conditions on that grant to ensure value for public funds
  - b. active engagement with the Commission as required.

## Responsibilities of the organisation supporting the Disabled Students' Commission

14. The supporting organisation commits to providing:
  - a. a full secretariat and support function to the DSC, primarily working with the Chair but also supporting all the Commissioners to fulfil their roles and achieve the objectives of the DSC
  - b. a strategic view of the sector, informed by commissioners' own knowledge, the student voice, and robust, independent research and evaluation.
  - c. value for money through effective project management and compliance with the OfS conditions of grant
  - d. regular dialogue with the DfE and the OfS, including quarterly updates
  - e. appropriate resource to support the Commission with both research, policy development and communications

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about TASO, see [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/transforming-access-and-student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/transforming-access-and-student-outcomes/)

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- f. secretariat support for other ad hoc thematic working groups which could be convened by stakeholder organisations or commissioners to explore different themes or impairment issues, or different issues affecting the various points of the student lifecycle
- g. communications and dissemination of the work and outputs of the DSC, which may include reports, communications and events to highlight particular issues and effective practice for disabled students.

## **Responsibilities of the Department for Education**

- 15. The DfE commits to seeking strong Ministerial support to the Commission and engagement with the DSC's annual priorities.

## **Behaviours and values**

- 16. The OfS, the DfE, hosting agency and all commissioners commit to:
  - a. professional and respectful conduct always
  - b. robust and open discussion that results in taking shared responsibility for decisions reached
  - c. the declaration of any conflicts of interest whenever and wherever they arise
  - d. discretion and judiciousness in all public comment.