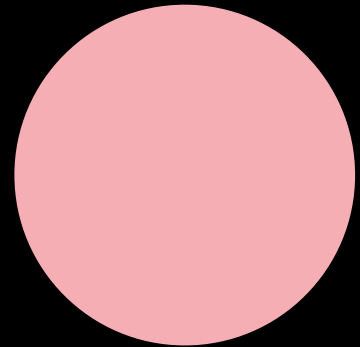
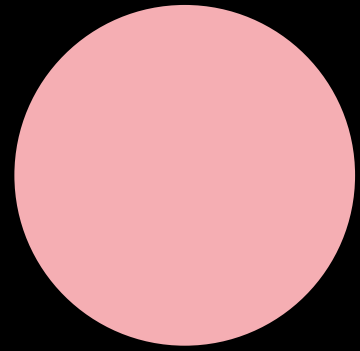


June 2023

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# **An independent high level evaluation of the Disabled Students' Commission**



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Savanta research for the  
Office for Students

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# 1. Executive summary

## 1.1 Key findings

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) was set up in 2019 as an independent group to develop and support the disabled student experience in higher education. The DSC was funded by the Office for Students for a three-year period (January 2020 to January 2023). Advance HE (AHE) run the DSC by providing secretariat support, research and communications.

This report presents the findings of the short-term, high-level external evaluation of the three convening years. The evaluation was commissioned to understand the perceptions of the DSC within the higher education sector. Research was carried out by conducting in-depth interviews with various stakeholders including students, and representatives from across the following organisation types: disability charities, higher education representative bodies and sector groups. Higher education disability practitioners also answered an online survey.

Overall, the DSC has shown progress against its stated criteria for evaluation. The Commission is seen as independent, authoritative and has a profile in the higher education sector. Similarly, there is awareness of the outputs and activities of the DSC, notably the guidance it publishes. The Commission was perceived by stakeholders of all types as a credible group to deliver on supporting the experience of disabled students for several reasons:

- The DSC is independent of the sector, including from higher education providers, sector agencies, and government (although the relationship with regulators, i.e. the Office for Students (OfS), is seen as less independent)
- The commissioners, including the Chair Geoff Layer are recognised as having expertise, credibility and experience. This is also reflected in the work of the DSC's predecessor (the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group).
- The DSC's credibility and independence enables strategic and collaborative engagement with relevant stakeholders to support disabled students in higher education.

There are some gaps in awareness of the DSC and some of its work. For example, progress against the Commission's stated aims was not immediately clear among some stakeholders interviewed as part of the research. This may stem from a few factors including the complex nature of the sector, and some lack of clarity around its organisation.

As a relatively new group, key stakeholder expectations of progress on visibility and impact are still developing at this stage; however, there is scope to further embed awareness of the DSC, particularly among disability practitioners (those who are involved in the management or delivery of services for disabled students). Awareness appears to drive perceptions of independence and authority which in turn is beneficial to the impact of the Commission through its stakeholder and sectoral relationships and standing. Whilst the DSC's initial strategic plan was impacted by the pandemic, there is evidence of progress towards the DSC's attributes and actions framework, in particular via its published guidance and work through the pandemic, including publications and engagement.

This could have a tangible impact against the DSC's stated aims; the research with stakeholders found that there was a degree of uncertainty as to how independent the DSC is of higher education sector and government bodies including the OfS, which may be hindering its

ability to influence and challenge the sector. Increasing awareness of the remit and independence of the DSC therefore is a key learning from the evaluation.

Ongoing and upcoming work that the Commission is involved in, such as the Disabled Student Commitment (which has been formally consulted on) and the Work Adjustment Passport scheme (Department for Work and Pensions – DWP), can be leveraged to demonstrate the influence and outputs of the DSC and embed perceptions of progress made by the DSC. Similarly, the Commission was seen as having responded well to the COVID-19 pandemic and some of its most accessed pieces of work and outputs relate to COVID; foregrounding this work may also provide evidence of impact and contribute to positive perceptions of the DSC.

*“My experience working with the DSC, as I’ve said before, has been hugely positive and very supportive and that’s very much down to the people that I’ve worked with. [...] But I do wonder if there is an issue of perception in the sector and the role of the DSC? And the issue of it, I do wonder if enough providers and enough people are aware of the work they’re doing? I know of them because we’ve worked [with them] directly.”*  
Stakeholder

Overall, there can be some clear conclusions drawn on the activity and impact of the DSC.

The Commission has visibility within the higher education sector, largely among sector stakeholders, with space to increase awareness among disability practitioners. This is evident through its association with particular pieces of work such as ‘Three months to make a difference’ report<sup>1</sup> and collaborations such as the Work Adjustment Passport scheme (DWP). Another portion of this visibility (and its convening power) is linked explicitly to the current chair, Geoff Layer, who is influential within the sector. However the evaluation data showed there is a limited awareness of the DSC within the student community, likely because of its positioning as a more high level group designed to influence the sector rather than individuals.

The DSC is seen as independent of Government and of the sector (including providers) but not seen as wholly independent of the OfS. Some stakeholders said that they appreciated that the DSC could give guidance to providers and other public sector bodies but were concerned that the link with the OfS would undermine the DSC’s ability to influence organisations such as the OfS.

The DSC’s activities that are most well-known are guidance (this is one of the main ways that disability practitioners know of them) and research (both commissioning and being a source of best practice). Other areas of work, such as events and networking, were recognised by stakeholders but were less likely to be recognised by practitioners.

Stakeholders spoke well of how the DSC responded to the pandemic, particularly with reference to the ‘Three months to make a difference’ report.

## 1.2 Future challenges

Stakeholders mentioned a variety of challenges for the sector. Key themes that emerged were most notably around blended learning and the accelerated use of technology in higher education as a result of the pandemic. This has shifted the higher education system in a significant manner, creating benefits but also drawbacks that should be studied among disabled students.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [Disabled Students' Commission | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](https://www.disabledstudents.com.uk/advance-he)

*“I think technology is a really big factor that we need more information on. The way that students with disabilities access technology, both in terms of how it can support them but more importantly, how they see themselves. This is a whole new world of reasonable adjustment, you know, our funding, our policy, our literature is based on a model of higher education that won’t exist in 5 years’ time.”*

Stakeholder

This shift in learning appears to have prompted reflections on student assessment and the opportunity to potentially move away from more traditional means of assessment. This was highlighted by the stakeholder quoted below.

*“There’s a lot of interest around assessment and making it a bit more flexible and inclusive, and moving away from traditional exams. [...] it opened up different ways of doing assessments that actually suited a lot of people better, and maybe provided more authentic forms of assessment.”*

Stakeholder

There was also a wider point made on the challenges caused by the increasing number of people applying to higher education and how that increased competition might impact access and services for disabled students. This happening at the same time as increasing need (mental health appeared consistently as an increasing challenge for the sector) was cited as an area for the sector to develop. For example, in the disability practitioner survey, 22% of respondents mentioned mental health as a growing challenge.

*“Providers are having to think very differently about how they support students with different needs. Especially when they have mental health needs which has exponentially increased over the last 3 years. And again, I don’t think we as a sector necessarily have enough support and guidance around how we support those students.”*

Stakeholder

*“This nation’s disabled graduates, 20% of those people are reporting having a mental health condition. So, surely that is going to have an impact, and the impact between mental health and physical health. I think intersectionality has been and will continue to be a big factor.”*

Stakeholder

Challenges for the DSC	Sector-wide challenges
Increasing awareness of the DSC amongst disability practitioners.	Mental health; exacerbated by the pandemic and other issues such as the cost-of-living crisis. This was cited across students, disability practitioners, and stakeholders.
Building on the goodwill about its role in the sector to deliver further and to communicate their activity with the sector (in line with an area for future activity referenced in the 2021/22 annual report)	Hybrid and digitally delivered teaching – again highlighted both at the stakeholder and the student level.
	Disability was described in the research several times as an intersectional issue and therefore requires a cross-sector, cross-organisational approach.

## 2. Introduction

The DSC was announced in 2019 to develop the work of the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group (DSSLG). In addition to the Chair and a representative from the OfS, six commissioners from diverse backgrounds were appointed (including student voice representation) to inform, influence and challenge approaches to supporting disabled students by operating on a sector level rather than for individual student issues.

In 2022 the Office for Students (OfS) commissioned Savanta to undertake an independent high-level evaluation of the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) to inform its next steps.

The purpose of the evaluation was to understand the emerging impact of the DSC against several attributes (provided in the evaluation framework below).

For information, the main aims of the DSC as described in its initial purpose are:

1. To 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.
2. To identify and promote effective practice that helps those with disabilities have a positive and successful experience at university.

The specific aims laid out in the DSC's work plan are:

1. To promote improved and enhanced access and transition to higher education for disabled students.
2. To promote an inclusive student support and wellbeing approach.
3. To promote and improve inclusive learning and teaching.
4. To seek to increase the employability of disabled students.
5. To inform the sector of progress with enhancing the experience of disabled students.

These aims and purpose were established immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which affected the scope and tone of the DSC's work for the start of its operations as the pandemic forced the DSC to pivot and adapt as a result. Also taken into account are the aims outlined through the [annual reports](#) published by the DSC<sup>2</sup>, in particular relating to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> See [Disabled Students' Commission | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](#)

### 3. Evaluation criteria and methodology

#### 3.1 Evaluation criteria

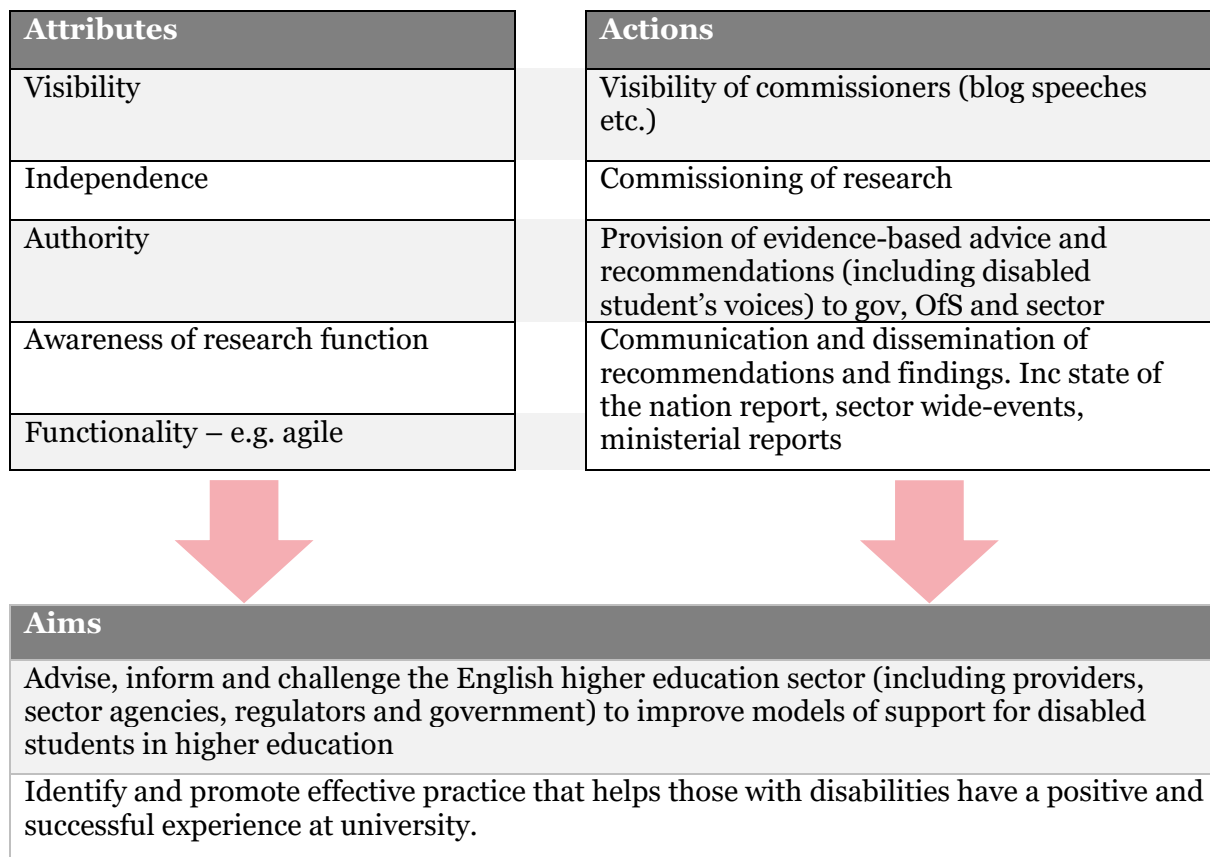
An evaluation framework was developed to guide the design of the evaluation as well as provide a means of establishing the work and impact of the DSC since its inception. The framework was developed in consultation with the OfS, Advance HE and other stakeholders to reflect both the aims of the Commission as a whole and identify core work areas.

The framework provides a breakdown of different aspects of the Commissions work since its inception:

- ‘Attributes’ encapsulates the perception of stakeholders and efforts made to establish the Commission’s place and identity within the HE and disability space
- ‘Actions’ includes formal outputs such as the publication and commissioning of research, as well as other engagements such as the visibility of commissioners
- ‘Aims’ covers big picture strategic aims, reflecting the aims of the Commission as set out in the Introduction

#### 3.2 Evaluation framework

The below diagram illustrates the role of aspects of the DSC’s work and organisation that the evaluation looked to understand progress against the overall organisation aims that they contribute to.



The report is structured to provide a short summary of findings against each aspect of the framework and provides conclusions.

### 3.3 Methodology

The evaluation drew on several evidence sources to assess progress against the factors set out in the framework above. The different part of the evidence base for the evaluation are:

#### **Qualitative fieldwork**

The qualitative fieldwork comprised two parts:

- 15 in-depth interviews with stakeholders of the DSC
- 10 in-depth interviews with disabled students

Fieldwork among students took place between 25/10/2022 and 28/10/2022. To ensure a wide range of opinions were heard, the students chosen to be interviewed had disclosed a range of impairment types and were selected from different fields and level of study. They were chosen by researchers without input from the DSC or other providers via an online panel dedicated to students where they completed a screening questionnaire in which they indicated their age, graduate status, field of study, and which (if any) disabilities they had. After this initial selection process, students were interviewed via telephone, or online teleconference technologies including Microsoft (MS) Teams.

Fieldwork with stakeholders was conducted via telephone, or online teleconference technologies including MS Teams; fieldwork took place between 04/10/2022 and 01/12/2022.

The stakeholders were selected to provide insight across the different organisations and institutional actors related to the DSC. Stakeholders included representatives from across the following organisation types:

- Disability charities
- University representative bodies
- Sector groups

Findings from the qualitative fieldwork were analysed using a series of analysis frameworks based on the discussion guides, which were used by moderators during the interviews (interviewees did not have access to these materials). They were analysed using an approach based on Grounded Theory, in order to control for interviewer biases.

#### **Quantitative fieldwork**

- A survey of members of the National Association of Disability Practitioners – sample size of 49
- A survey of members of AMOSSHE, the student services organisation – sample size of 3 (graphs containing AMOSSHE as an option should therefore be considered with this lower sample size in mind)

A survey was conducted online between 30/09/2022 to 12/10/2022 among the members of the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) and between 21/11/2022 to 03/01/2023 for AMOSSHE members, in order to provide statistical evidence against the measures set out in the evaluation framework. The survey was delivered to both organisations through their membership newsletters.



## **Quantitative metrics**

- Quantitative metrics on website engagement with outputs from the DSC, provided by the DSC's secretariat, Advance HE

As the secretariat to the DSC, Advance HE provided Savanta with metrics on engagement with some of the Commission's formal outputs, including page views and downloads of:

- Published reports
- Blogs and news stories

## **Limitations**

When considering the results of this evaluation, it is important to consider the limitations in the scope of this exercise. These include:

- The relatively low number of disability practitioners who participated in the online survey;
- That disabled students were not a focus for this evaluation (as the DSC is a more high-level actor within the higher education sector);
- The fieldwork was conducted in a relatively short timeframe, with under two months for each target.

# Evaluation findings

## 4. Attributes

### 4.1 Visibility

There is a nuanced picture when it comes to the visibility and awareness of the DSC among the different audiences surveyed and interviewed as part of the evaluation.

Visibility tended to be higher among the wider stakeholder base interviewed as part of the evaluation, suggesting a significant increase from the initial launch of the Commission. The blog post from [Advance HE announcing the DSC](#) in March 2020 had limited visibility with only 23 page views (this may have been affected by the concurrent announcement from OfS on the same subject which has had 793 unique page views from publication until November 2022.) , compared with a post made in late October announcing “Consultation launches to ensure disabled students in UK HE get better deal” which reached 266 views.

The extent of stakeholder knowledge tended to depend on their relationship with the body. Those who had worked with the DSC associated it strongly with representing and advocating for disabled students in higher education and reported positive experiences when interacting with the DSC on various topics.

*“Yes, so I think obviously the Disabled Students’ Commission, although it’s a fairly new body I think-, and although their remit is only England I think, as well, I think that the establishment of that body has been incredibly helpful for the sector.”*  
Stakeholder

*“I think we’ve established a really positive working relationship with them and this goes back a couple of years [...] they were very interested in that work, so we worked really closely with them on that, [...] 2 or 3 of the commissioners reviewed all of the statements and gave us really helpful, useful feedback.”*  
Stakeholder

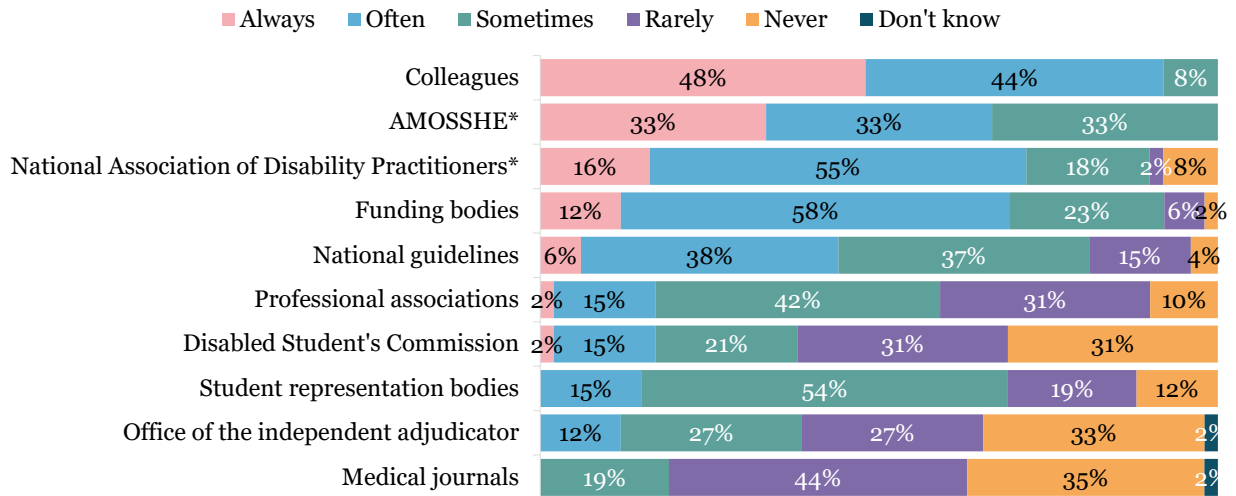
Geoff Layer, as chair of the DSC, is well known among the stakeholder base for the Commission and many spoke positively about his role in engaging other organisations and in raising the profile of the Commission.

While the DSC did not come up spontaneously as a resource used by disability practitioners, when prompted two in five (38%) say they use it at least sometimes. Overall, two-thirds (69%) had heard of the DSC.

Chart 1 below shows the frequency with which survey respondents used listed sources of information to support students with disabilities.

**CHART 1**

**Use of information sources**

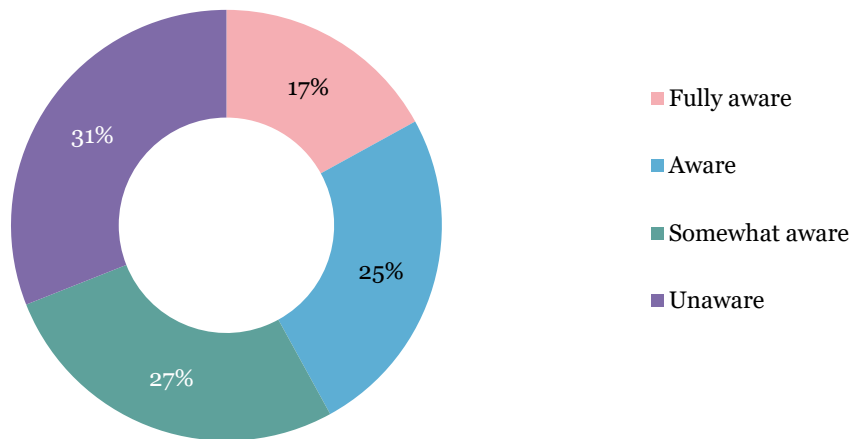


Q7. For each of the below information sources please rate how frequently you use each one to support students with disabilities. Base: All respondents (n=52); NADP respondents (n=49); AMOSSHE respondents (n=3)  
 \*Only asked to members of those bodies

Chart 2 below shows the extent of awareness survey respondents had towards the DSC, with respondents more likely to be unaware of the DSC than they are aware.

**CHART 2**

**Awareness of DSC**



Q9. To what extent are you aware of the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC)?  
 Base: All respondents (n=52)

Among students, however, 10 were interviewed for this evaluation but all were unaware of the DSC. Even those that felt otherwise engaged in the disabled students' community were all unaware of the DSC. This may be due to the higher level role the DSC has which makes it more relevant to organisations that support students with disabilities (like the NADP) than to the students themselves. Students have little to no direct interaction with the DSC, reflecting

the strategic nature of activities undertaken by the DSC as set out in their work plan in the annual report.

Overall, the DSC is more visible to its sector stakeholders who are more likely to work alongside it, than to disability practitioners who have more direct involvement with students.

## 4.2 Independence

While it was known that the DSC was funded by the OfS, a proportion of the respondents didn't say that this limited the DSC's ability to make its own decisions even if they may not be in line with the government. Likewise, the DSC was seen as independent of the higher education sector and providers as well as related organisations such as student unions.

*"I think they are robustly independent enough to be able to make decisions that's in the interests of disabled students even if that might not be necessarily what the regulator in England might want."*

*Stakeholder*

However, their link to the OfS does affect the scope of that independence for other stakeholders. Some stakeholders saw a need for more regulatory approaches to dealing with some of the challenges faced by students with disabilities and the link between the OfS and the DSC was seen as a limiting factor for the DSC in its ability to influence government directly.

*"They explicitly said that they would not be making recommendations to OfS, which to me seemed like they were saying that they are not entirely independent [...] if you are neither made up of disabled students so you are neither disabled student voice, nor do you have the authority to tell either universities really or OfS what to do then it's not as useful as it could have been."*

*Stakeholder*

*"...the dynamic of this Commission has been very much focused on government deciding who is on it, that has a very particular dynamic. Whereas if it was the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group, all of the stakeholders would have a say in who is a commissioner."*

*Stakeholder*

The research found a difference between stakeholder perception and the practical works of the DSC. For example, in the above two quotes from the research, the first suggests that the DSC wouldn't make recommendations to the OfS even though the commission can and does make such recommendations (e.g., 'Three months to make a difference'). The other quote similarly does not seem to understand that the commission membership was decided through a public appointments process led by the OfS. This reflects findings seen elsewhere in the evaluation that a lack of clarity and understanding of the remit of the DSC may influence the potential visibility of the DSC's outputs and impact what a relationship with the DSC looks like.

In summary, while stakeholders knew about the link between the DSC and the OfS, this was not seen as a problem except in cases where it was felt this would limit the DSC's ability to deliver feedback to government.

## 4.3 Authority

The DSC appears to be seen as authoritative among the stakeholder base, in part due to its independence.

*“DSC is certainly one of the organisations that we look to because they can say what we say with a bit more authority, because they are established, they do not look like activists.”*  
Stakeholder

*“Something like authoritative or respected. There’s definitely something in that area. [...] For example, ‘Arriving at Thriving’, that report<sup>3</sup>, to us, we read that carefully. We were so interested. Anything DSC said about us, we would be reading, we would be interested, we would be alerting our CEO, deputy CO, immediately.”*  
Stakeholder

However, perceptions of independence were questioned by a small minority of respondents who advised that some who may have limited awareness of the DSC could perceive it as simply being an extension of the OfS.

*“So, I think it is about having those wider conversations around are people really aware of what the DSC are actually doing and its value as an organisation? Or are they seeing just, kind of, an arm of the OfS?”*  
Stakeholder

As with the visibility of the Commission, the role of individuals within the Commission appears to be a contributing factor to the perception of its authority.

*“In terms of the people who are on the Commission who are themselves individually well respected and from diverse backgrounds, where they’ve come from, I think individually they’re very well respected and I think they are authority figures themselves in terms of knowledge and being able to influence how things move in the policy landscape.”*  
Stakeholder

Consistent with other findings and with challenges common to recently established organisations, there are significant differences between different stakeholder groups in perceptions of authority.

*“They do have that authority, that sway and the respect in the higher education sector but perhaps outside of that, outside of those [disability] practitioners and the people working in this space, I’m not sure how well known they are, or if they are seen as a central point for guidance and information.”*  
Stakeholder

Among disability practitioners, when asked ‘where do you go for help?’ The evaluation showed that they mainly rely on each other for help; nine in ten (88%) say their colleagues are among their three most impactful sources of information used to support disabled students. This highlights a potential gap in terms of references that these practitioners are either aware of or willing to refer to which causes them to find ad-hoc solutions offered by other individuals. Moving forward, this is something the DSC should be aware of when disseminating resources.

Funding bodies also feature prominently on this list (51%) and guidelines (such as from the OfS) also feature to a lesser extent (31%) but the DSC is not perceived as being as impactful yet as only 10% listed it as being in their top 3 most impactful sources of information. These disability practitioners were invited to complete the survey by the NADP so it is perhaps

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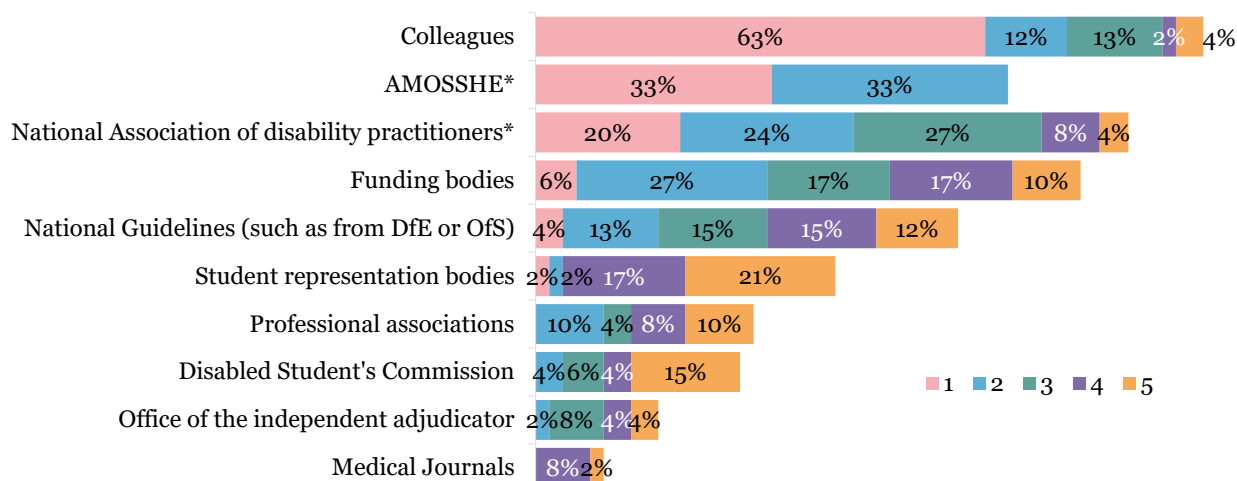
<sup>3</sup> The ‘Arriving at Thriving’ report was published by Policy Connect, not the DSC. The report is available at: [Arriving At Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all | Policy Connect](#)

unsurprising that the organisation should also feature among the most useful sources of information, this presents an opportunity for the DSC to expand its reach to practitioners though by improving its collaboration with partners such as the NADP.

Chart 3 below shows the perceived impact by survey respondents of the listed sources of information they used to support students with disabilities.

**CHART 3**

**Most impactful sources of information**



Q8. Please rate the 5 most impactful information sources you use to support students with disabilities?

Base: All respondents (n=52); NADP respondents (n=49) ; AMOSSHE respondents (n=3)

\*Only asked to members of those bodies

As mentioned earlier (4.2), the DSC is seen as mostly independent despite awareness of its link to the OfS. This connection presents an opportunity and may benefit the DSC’s reputation as being authoritative. As seen in the above chart 3, guidelines from the DfE and OfS are seen as more impactful than those of the DSC alone. Although this presents a challenge to the DSC’s authority, it also presents an opportunity to use the perception of authority among these bodies to reach wider audiences and further entrench its perception as being authoritative.

In summary, stakeholders (interviews) and disability practitioners (survey results) differed in the perceived authority of the DSC. The former saw the DSC as an authority figure, while the latter saw other sources of information as more authoritative. Stakeholder feedback shows potential ways to improve this via its OfS link, but this may come at the expense of its perceived independence.

#### 4.4 Awareness of research functions

##### Website visibility

As part of the evaluation, Advance HE provided quantitative metrics on webpage view numbers and traffic on their website for work done by the DSC (21 blog posts and 14 publications). While some pieces like the two annual reports generate a lot of traffic (over 900 page views each), the median number of views for webpages is just over 300 and 8 of these posts have under 200 views. However, this could be impacted by the fact that the OfS

webpage dedicated to the DSC<sup>4</sup> appears at the top of searches. The OfS webpage announcing the launch of the DSC<sup>5</sup> attracted 793 unique page views from publication until November 2022.

This is consistent with the fact that the chronology had no apparent effect on the number of views a post received, with older ones just as likely to be viewed as more recent posts.

When comparing the views of blog posts with downloads of publications (see Table 1) the median number of downloads of DSC reports is much higher than it is for blog post views, (581 for downloads vs 389 for blog posts).

Another finding shows that the number of downloads is decreasing over time. For example, the two blog posts mentioning the DSC annual reports both received similar attention but the documents themselves have a much bigger disparity with the earlier 2020-2021 report being downloaded 82% more often than the 2021-2022 one.

This does not seem to be caused by any loss of interest on behalf of stakeholders, however, as there wasn't a similar trend observed among the blog posts. As such, further analysis of the user journey on the website and click throughs is needed. It may be that the placement of the reports on the website, and signposting to it, may support further engagement

Chart 4 below shows the number of downloads of all documents uploaded by the DSC to the Advance HE website over time.

**CHART 4**

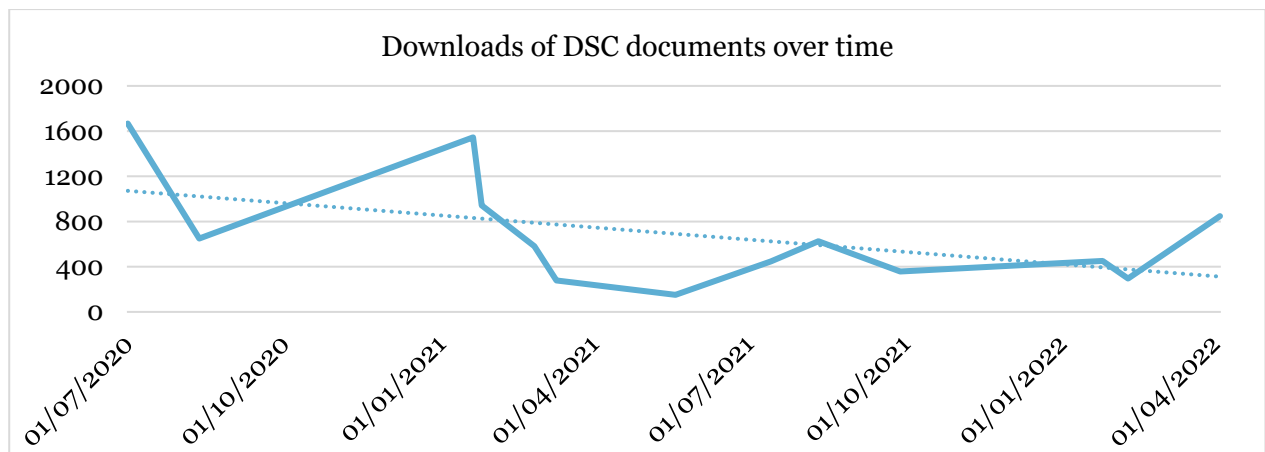


Table 1 below shows the number of views for each blog post from the DSC on Advance HE's website (sorted by highest to lowest amount of views).

<sup>4</sup> See [Disabled Students' Commission - Office for Students](#).

<sup>5</sup> See [The Disabled Students' Commission: transforming disabled students' experience - Office for Students](#).

**TABLE 1**

<b>Post headline</b>	<b>Date of post</b>	<b>Page views</b>
Disabled students have their say on impact of COVID-19 and their experience of higher education	12-Aug-21	<b>1639</b>
Disabled Students' Commission publishes annual report	21-Jan-21	<b>992</b>
Enhancing the disabled student experience – DSC annual report published	05-Apr-22	<b>906</b>
A new guide to support students who stammer	22-Jun-21	<b>745</b>
New guidance on disabled graduate employment from the Disabled Students' Commission	29-Sep-21	<b>677</b>
Addressing barriers for STEM students and staff with disabilities	12-Apr-21	<b>654</b>
New guidance for disabled applicants to degree apprenticeships	14-Jul-21	<b>596</b>
Qualitative report on impact of COVID-19 on the experiences of disabled students published	01-Feb-22	<b>543</b>
New guide poses questions for universities to support disabled students during pandemic	12-Aug-20	<b>479</b>
How can the HE sector achieve authentic change for disabled students?	12-Aug-21	<b>380</b>
New guide to ensure equity for disabled applicants in post-qualification admissions system	24-May-21	<b>321</b>
Consultation launches to ensure disabled students in UK HE get better deal	31-Oct-22	<b>266</b>
New guidance for disabled applicants applying to undergraduate courses	27-Jan-21	<b>246</b>
Ensuring equity for disabled applicants in a new post-qualification admissions system	17-Jun-21	<b>170</b>
Call to take part in new survey exploring the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students in higher education	28-May-21	<b>159</b>
DSC welcomes new report from the Higher Education Commission on 'ensuring access for all'	07-Oct-20	<b>146</b>
DSC guidance on disabled apprenticeships at LSBU helping to provide the best possible experience	24-Sep-21	<b>132</b>
Disabled Students' Commission welcomes John Blake	03-Mar-22	<b>125</b>
The next steps for disabled students	01-Jul-22	<b>60</b>
Disabled Students' Commission and Advance HE mark International Day of Disabled People	03-Dec-21	<b>58</b>
New independent commission aims to boost support for disabled students	09-Mar-20	<b>23</b>

Table 2 below shows number of downloads for publication from the DSC on Advance HE's website (sorted by highest to lowest number of downloads).

**TABLE 2**

<b>Publication title</b>	<b>Date of publication</b>	<b>No. of downloads</b>
Three months to make a difference	01-Jul-20	<b>1667</b>
Annual report 2020-21	20-Jan-21	<b>1544</b>
Considerations for disabled applicants applying to undergraduate courses	25-Jan-21	<b>942</b>
Annual report 2021-22	04-Apr-22	<b>848</b>



<b>Publication title</b>	<b>Date of publication</b>	<b>No. of downloads</b>
Considerations for disabled students when applying to university in light of COVID-19	12-Aug-20	<b>650</b>
Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on disabled students' experiences	11-Aug-21	<b>625</b>
Guidance for captioning rich media	25-Feb-21	<b>581</b>
Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on disabled students' experiences: in-depth qualitative report	25-Jan-22	<b>451</b>
Considerations for disabled applicants to higher or degree apprenticeships	14-Jul-21	<b>447</b>
Disabled Graduate Employment 2021	28-Sep-21	<b>357</b>
Exploring the use of automated captioning and its impact on disabled students in higher education	09-Feb-22	<b>295</b>
Considerations for disabled applicants applying to postgraduate courses	10-Mar-21	<b>278</b>
Post Qualification Admission Principles	19-May-21	<b>151</b>

## **Stakeholder awareness**

Among stakeholders, awareness of the research function was higher than among disability practitioners with almost all stakeholders aware of the DSC's work in this area. The extent of that awareness varies depending on the level of engagement that the stakeholders tended to have with the DSC. There was also a trend of stakeholders who would have liked to have been made more aware of research carried out by the DSC. For example:

*"I am aware of it, and I synthesize it for members in our policy updates when they come out. But I wouldn't say that I have any pre-awareness of it, [...] this is one of those things where I have very little or no engagement in any of their work before it gets published."*

*Stakeholder*

## **Disability practitioner awareness**

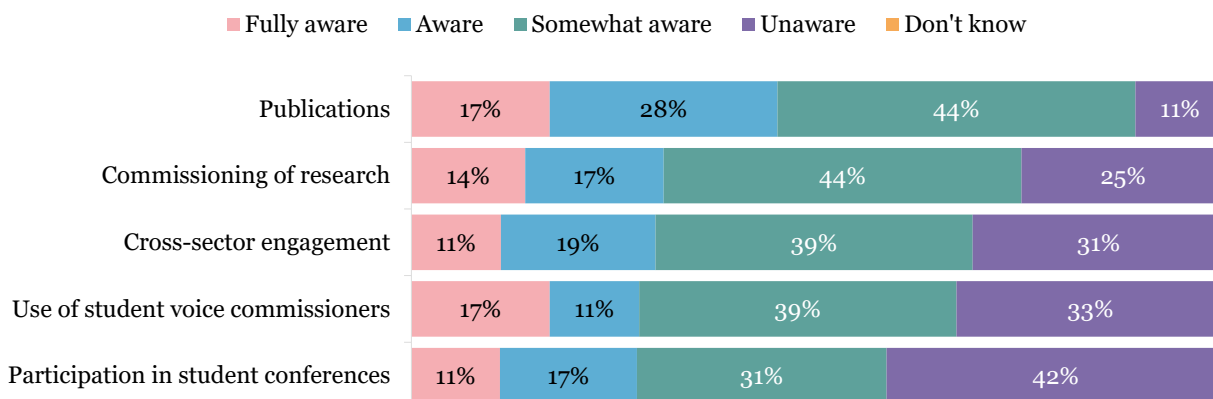
When asked in the survey 'are you aware of the DSC?' 69% of disability practitioners reported being 'somewhat aware' of the DSC. Of this group, three quarters (75%) had awareness (from 'somewhat aware' through to 'fully aware') of the commissioning of research by the DSC. This is second to awareness of publications (89% who are aware), with cross sector engagements awareness such as events and engagement activities at 69% (see Chart 5).

The majority of this figure were only somewhat aware of these publications though (44 %) and only a third (31 %) claim to have a greater level of awareness than this, suggesting that awareness of this area of output for the DSC still has potential to grow.

The below chart (Chart 5) shows the extent of awareness from surveyed respondents for listed areas of work undertaken by the DSC.

## CHART 5

### Awareness of work undertaken by the DSC



Q11. Please indicate how aware you are regarding each of the following areas of work undertaken by the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC).

Base: Those at least somewhat aware of the DSC (n=36)

### Research impact

As the DSC has only been running for three years, it is important to note that the expected impact at this stage is still developing and expectations should account for the fact that the DSC is not yet fully embedded in the sector as a result. Awareness and perceptions of impact appear to be driven by knowledge of specific areas of work or outputs.

*"There's definitely been some changes in and around admissions, and I certainly think their intervention around post-qualification admissions made a substantial contribution to government dropping that policy area."*

Stakeholder

*"They're very much leading in terms of placing disabled students at the centre of considerations and thinking about how different policy decisions could potentially impact on students. I think they fed back to, we recently had the admissions reviews going on, about whether we should do post qualification applications and I know that they were quite vocal about what some of the challenges could be for that as well."*

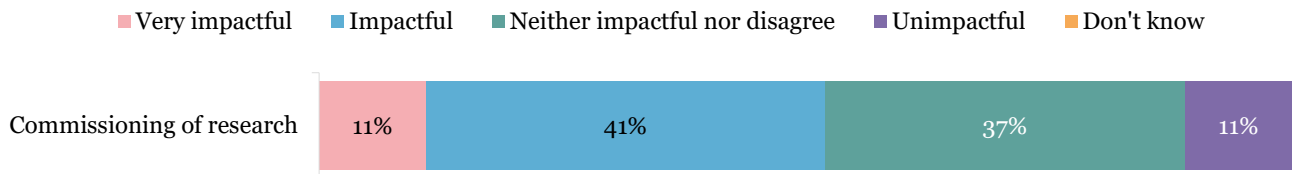
Stakeholder

While over half (52%) of disability practitioners aware of the DSC did find the research impactful, only 11% say it was very impactful and this leaves a substantial minority (48%) who do not find it impactful. This may be due to a lack of deeper awareness of the research though, as is highlighted by the 44% of practitioners who were only "somewhat aware" of the commissioning of research (see chart 5), and by some stakeholders who talk about the need to have research that is more widely disseminated. This would explain the levels of awareness seen previously and the lack of resulting impact as a result of the research.

Chart 6 shows the perceived impact by surveyed respondents of the commissioning of research by the DSC on their ability to support students with disabilities.

## CHART 6

### Perceived impact of DSC commissioning of research



Q12. Of the DSC work you are aware of, please how impactful you feel this work has been on your ability to support students with disabilities.

Base: Those at least somewhat aware of the DSC's commissioning of research (n=27)

In summary, while the DSC had strong awareness levels for its publications and commissioning of research, awareness could be improved by disseminating the work of the DSC more widely and reviewing how the work of the DSC is navigated on the Advance HE website.

## 4.5 Functionality

Stakeholders were very clear about the role of the DSC during the pandemic, with several of them citing work that the DSC carried out in response to the pandemic, including bringing forward publications and work such as the 'Three months to make a difference' report. This was also reflected in viewership and download figures, as 'Three months to make a difference' was the most downloaded item by the DSC (1667 downloads), outpacing even the annual reports (1544 and 848 downloads for 2020/21 and 2021/22 respectively). Similarly, the blog post 'Disabled students have their say on impact of COVID-19 and their experience of higher education' also garnered the most traffic from any DSC-related blog post with 1639 views, the only such post by the DSC to pass 1000 views.

*"...particularly the experience of students being able to access their learning in a hybrid context, access materials when they needed them and some of the barriers to that I think they explored within those particular documents were really interesting."*  
Stakeholder

Several stakeholders, however, identify the challenges the DSC has in terms of resources, which were exacerbated during the pandemic in terms of engaging with other organisations.

*"I think that is definitely an issue [lack of resources], but I do think there could be a bit more informal engagement with the representative bodies and mission groups of institutions that can help with some of this stuff. And we would do it for free because it's the right thing to do and is part of our roles."*  
Stakeholder

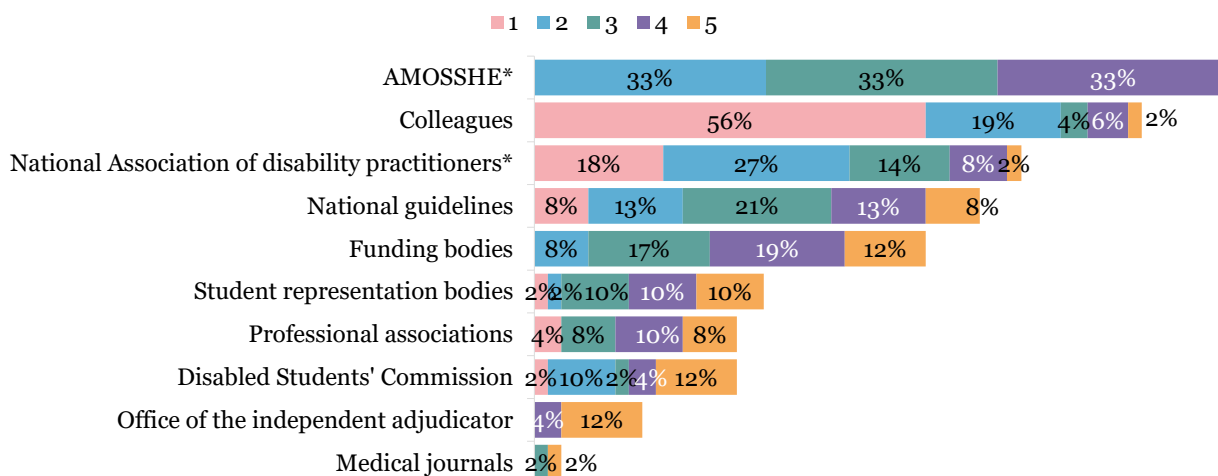
Disability practitioners were also more engaged with the DSC during the pandemic as they were slightly more likely to view the DSC as an important source of information in that time (14% vs 10% overall); it was even chosen by one respondent as their most useful source. Stakeholders also shared positive feedback about the DSC for that time; a majority of them specifically cited the pandemic as an instance where the DSC demonstrated leadership. This expressed itself in many ways: some stakeholders lauded the speed with which the DSC put out recommendations, particularly with the '[Three months to make a difference](#)' report. Given that the pandemic was a new challenge, uncertainty was high, and this may have made other bodies more willing to listen or seek out help than usual. Some stakeholders also mentioned

the strength of the wording in the booklet as an asset, along with the fact that in this instance the DSC was focused on one particular issue.

Chart 7 below shows the perceived impact by survey respondents of the listed sources of information they used to support students with disabilities during the pandemic.

**CHART 7**

**Most useful sources of information during the pandemic**



Q14. Which of the following sources of information were most useful to you during or as a result of the pandemic in supporting students with disabilities?

Base: All respondents (n=52); NADP respondents (n=49); AMOSSHE respondents (n=3)

\*Only asked to members of those bodies

*“The Covid situation is where it's really led the way and actually it's been helpful beyond the disability and inclusion team [...] Having that guidance really quickly and having them turn it around so quickly was invaluable.”*  
Stakeholder

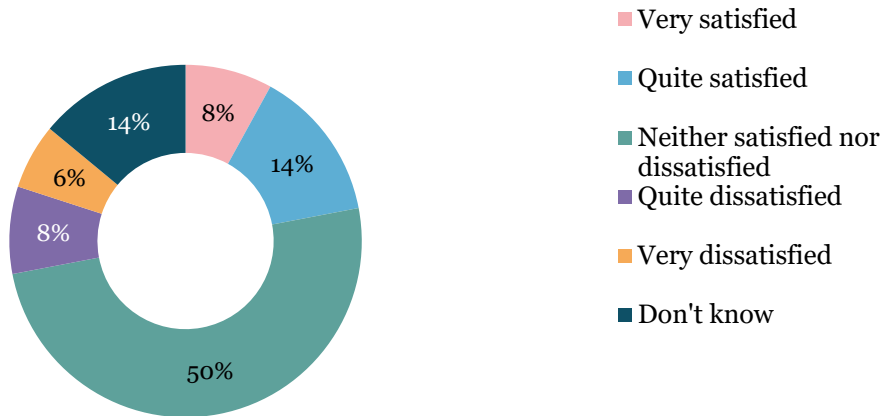
*“...there was a pandemic, there was a situation, everything was up in the air, and they kind of came forward and said, ‘Look, we’ve got three months to make a difference. These are the things that we need to concentrate on.’”*  
Stakeholder

As mentioned previously, there seemed to be less general awareness of the DSC’s work from disability practitioners as half of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that the support from the DSC helped overcome problems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chart 8 below shows satisfaction levels from surveyed respondents for support from the DSC to help them overcome problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CHART 8

### Satisfaction with the DSC's support of practitioners during COVID-19



Q13. How satisfied are you with the support from the DSC to people in roles like yours in overcoming problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?  
Base: Those at least somewhat aware of the DSC (n=36)

Overall, both stakeholders and disability practitioners agreed that the DSC performed well during the pandemic. Through its ‘Three months to make a difference’ report, the DSC provided guidance that was widely used and seen as impactful in helping support students with disabilities.

## 5. Actions

### 5.1 Visibility of commissioners

Commissioners were quite visible to stakeholders, mainly through their collaboration with them and also through roles that commissioners held outside the DSC which also interacted with stakeholders. This highlights the DSC’s potential to improve the informal engagement mentioned above to help disseminate its work more broadly.

*“Yes, so it's [commissioner] that we worked most frequently with actually and she's the one that's been our main point of contact for all of our work.”*  
Stakeholder

*“We had a relationship with him [commissioner ] because he used to be the NUS disability rep. Generally, he's been a helpful person in terms of giving us feedback on things.”*  
Stakeholder

This visibility is not reflected among disability practitioners and students, and this again reflects the DSC’s strategic focus; only 28% of practitioners who responded to the survey and who were aware of the DSC said they were aware of the use of student voice commissioners. Interviews with students also demonstrated no awareness of the commissioners.

Commissioners had stronger visibility with stakeholders than disability practitioners and not at all to students.

## 5.2 Provision of evidence-based advice and recommendations

Disability practitioners were most likely to have found out about the DSC via its guidance publications (39% say this). They were also more aware of the publications by the DSC than any other aspect of the Commission (89% were somewhat aware). However, this dropped to just 17% for those saying they were fully aware, suggesting there is further work to be done on this front.

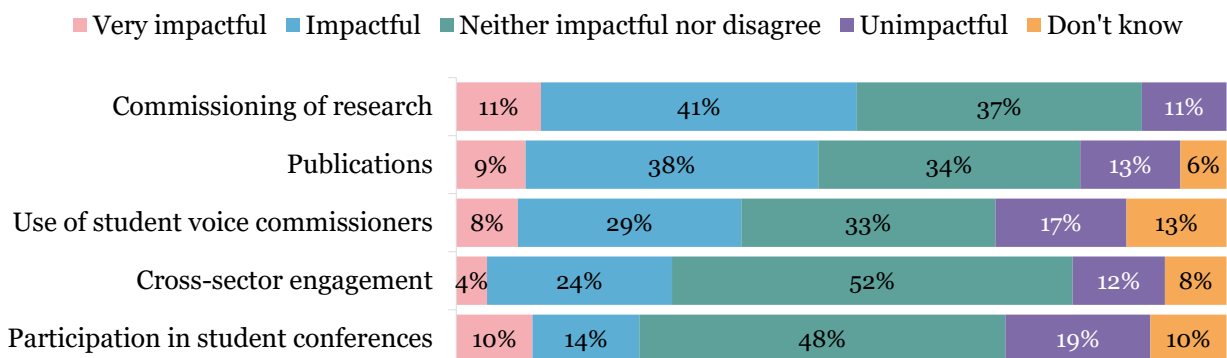
*“Particularly, the experience of students being able to access their learning in a hybrid context, access materials when they needed them and some of the barriers to that I think they explored within those particular documents were really interesting.”*  
Stakeholder

In contrast to the DSC’s other functions, the impact of publications was seen as slightly lower than the commissioning of research (52% vs 47%).

Chart 9 shows the perceived impact by surveyed respondents of listed areas of work undertaken by the DSC on their ability to support students with disabilities.

**CHART 9**

**Perceived impact of each DSC area of work**



Q12. Of the DSC work you are aware of, please indicate how impactful you feel this work has been on your ability to support students with disabilities.  
Base: Those aware of each DSC area of work

## 5.3 Communication and dissemination of recommendations and findings

As with the research activities of the DSC, the Commission’s advice and recommendations also face the challenge of achieving relevance to the day-to-day activities of those working in the area of disability in higher education such as disability practitioners, disability charities, university representative bodies and other higher education sector groups.

*“It’s quite a crowded regulatory space and, therefore, I think cutting through that as a non-regulatory body with punchy advice and guidance that is accepted by the sector can be challenging.”*  
Stakeholder

The complexity of issues that the DSC published on could also impact the ability of stakeholders to disseminate information.

*“I know the collection of things that we've submitted to our members have taken a huge amount of translation to get them to support the students they support, to trickle down those pieces of advice into something that can be delivered by the practitioner at the institution.”*  
Stakeholder

## 6. Aims

### 6.1 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

There is evidence of the DSC’s work to advise, inform and challenge the higher education sector (in particular providers) which can be seen clearly in the prominence of the guidance it has published as well the work conducted by the Commission around COVID-19 and other areas. This includes initiating collaborative projects such as the Work Adjustment Passport (DWP), Framework for Advisory Groups on Disabled Student Inclusion with the QAA, and the ‘Three months to make a difference’ report.

As a new group and one that faced a significant challenge for a significant part of its existence (in the shape of the pandemic), limited early evidence of impact at a wider strategic level is not unusual. However, the evaluation clearly demonstrated that the work of the DSC has had impact and that there is progress against this aim.

### 6.2 Identify and promote effective practice that helps those with disabilities have a positive and successful experience at university

Compared with the other stated strategic aim, identifying and promoting effective practice had clearer evidence found in the research. Among the outputs from the DSC, its guidance was most recognised by disability practitioners and stakeholders, a trend reflected in the views and downloads of publications.

There are also other efforts the DSC is leading or supporting, such as the Disabled Student Commitment and the Work Adjustment Passport, which were noted in the research with stakeholders, suggesting a good level of visibility of this work and therefore visibility of the DSC’s impact.

*“Now with the commitment that they are advocating for universities as well as oversight bodies to sign, obviously they are going above the university level.”*  
Stakeholder