

**Exploring the experiences of students with disabilities and long-term health conditions
in their access to higher education in the UK.**

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Abstract

With the higher education sector anticipating a shortage of university spaces in the coming years¹, it is important to anticipate what will happen to those from groups with low representation rates at university. This is especially true for students with disabilities and long-term health conditions (DALTH), since they are not included in the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service's (UCAS) equality measures² unlike students of a particular gender or ethnicity who may also face barriers entering university in the coming years.

In order to determine whether DALTH students struggle to access higher education (HE), an anonymous survey was distributed online to students with disabilities and long-term health conditions to explore their personal experience and reaction to UCAS Q&A extracts. Significant barriers were faced by DALTH students in numerous areas, including declaring a health condition on university applications, applying for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), and accessing support from their schools. The findings identified gaps in existing university admissions structures and aims to complement consultations with UCAS and higher education providers in developing teacher training and admissions policies for DALTH students.

¹ UCAS, "What Happened to the COVID Cohort?," *2020 End of Cycle Report*, December 16, 2020, accessed June 30, 2021, <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report>.

² *ibid.*

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1.0 Introduction

In 2020, 13.4% of higher education (HE) applicants declared a disability or long-term health condition³ (DALTH) which significantly affected their day-to-day functioning⁴. Despite this, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the body in charge of university applications in the UK⁵, does not identify DALTH status as an indicator of disadvantage in university applications⁶. This is despite the fact that disability is in the same General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) category as ethnicity and gender identity⁷, which are used to calculate someone's advantage/disadvantage in university applications as part of the multiple equality measures (MEM) framework⁸.

This paper argues that disability should be identified as a potentially disadvantaged category in the UCAS Multiple Equality Measures (MEM). In theory, DALTH students already have structures in place such as university support plans and Disabled Students Allowance to negate some disadvantage brought around by their condition (see sections [2.2 Multiple Equality Measures](#) and [2.3 Disabled Students Allowance](#)). However, this is not always the case in practice due to accessibility issues and inconsistent support structures, which were partially addressed in the present study. For example, some students may not declare a condition in case it is not 'severe' enough to warrant help⁹. Others face barriers from student finance providers¹⁰ meaning that there can be barriers to accessing HE even after an offer is received. The survey also identified school support and the clearing process as other areas where a disadvantage may be found and are fully outlined in the [4.0 Analysis](#) section of the paper.

Conclusions drawn from this study will aid the author in developing comprehensive teacher training so that schools can achieve best practice (see [5.0 Suggestions for Improvement](#)). It is also hoped that a consultation with UCAS will take place so that official support structures can be implemented to improve HE prospects for DALTH students.

³ UCAS, "What Happened to the COVID Cohort?," *2020 End of Cycle Report*.

⁴ GOV.UK, "Equality Act 2010," *Legislation.gov.uk*, 2010, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/6>.

⁵ UCAS, "Who We Are," UCAS, October 7, 2014, <https://www.ucas.com/about-us/who-we-are>.

⁶ UCAS, "Equality and Entry Rates Data Explorers," UCAS, December 13, 2017, <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/equality-and-entry-rates-data-explorers>.

⁷ Department for Education, "Data Protection: How We Share Pupil and Workforce Data," GOV.UK, April 28, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/data-protection-how-we-collect-and-share-research-data#sharing-personal-data>.

⁸ UCAS, "What Happened to the COVID Cohort?," *2020 End of Cycle Report*.

⁹ Arinola Adefila et al., "Developing an Autonomous-Support Culture in Higher Education for Disabled Students," *Disability and Health Journal* 13, no. 3 (July 2020): 100890, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100890>.

¹⁰ Elisabet Weedon, "The Construction of Under-Representation in UK and Swedish Higher Education: Implications for Disabled Students," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 12, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197916683470>.

2.0 Background

According to the UK Government's 2010 Equality Act, a person is considered to have a disability if they have "a physical or mental impairment" and "the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities"¹¹. This includes physical conditions (eg. asthma or HIV), mental health conditions (eg. depression, anxiety, and PTSD) and learning difficulties (eg. dyslexia and ADHD). In the context of higher education, students are also counted as disabled "if they receive the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)"¹². Disabilities are protected characteristics by UK law¹³ and all institutions must make sure that reasonable adjustments are made to ensure that everyone is treated in a fair and equal manner¹⁴. This includes during the university application process, meaning that DALTH status should not affect an admission decision in any way (though students do not always believe this in practice (see [4.1 Declaring a Condition](#))).

2.1 Key Statistics

The body in charge of university applications in the UK is UCAS¹⁵. They are the primary university admissions facilitator, helping to get 'students [to] secure a full-time place at one of the 337 universities and colleges across the UK'¹⁶ in 2019. In the latest documented UCAS admissions cycle in the 2020-21 academic year, 570,475 students were accepted to start an undergraduate (UG) course at a UK university. Of these, 13.4% of accepted applicants declared a physical or mental health condition during the application process¹⁷, up 9% from the 2000-2001 admissions cycle¹⁸. Out of those who declared DALTH status, 26.9% labelled their condition to be mental-health related. These statistics were accurately mirrored in an NHS survey during 2020, where 27.2% of young people ages 17-22 'were identified with a probable mental health disorder'¹⁹.

However, the true mental health statistic is likely to be underplayed, especially among university applications. Past studies Vickerman and Blundell observed how 25% of student with mental health conditions did not declare a condition to UCAS or their university due to a perceived stigma or negative bias²⁰. This paper, paired with the author's colloquial findings

¹¹ GOV.UK, "Equality Act 2010," Legislation.gov.uk, 2010, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/6>.

¹² Weedon, "The Construction of Under-Representation in UK and Swedish Higher Education: Implications for Disabled Students"

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ UCAS, "Students with Physical or Mental Health Conditions and Learning Differences," UCAS, October 20, 2014, <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/disabled-students>.

¹⁵ UCAS, "Who We Are," UCAS

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ UCAS, "What Happened to the COVID Cohort?," *2020 End of Cycle Report*.

¹⁸ Mary Fuller, Andrew Bradley, and Mick Healey, "Incorporating Disabled Students within an Inclusive Higher Education Environment," *Disability & Society* 19, no. 5 (September 2004): 455–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759042000235307>.

¹⁹ Tim Vizard et al., "Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 Follow up to the 2017 Survey," *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 Follow up to the 2017 Survey* (NHS Digital, 2020), <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>.

²⁰ Philip Vickerman and Milly Blundell, "Hearing the Voices of Disabled Students in Higher Education," *Disability & Society* 25, no. 1 (January 2010): 21–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590903363290>.

when planning the present study leads the author to safely assume that not all students who are applying to university with a mental health condition are declaring it.

2.2 Multiple Equality Measures

When considering applications which may require extra support, UCAS have developed the Multiple Equality Measures (MEM)²¹ system to identify those who may be ‘disadvantaged’ during the university application process.

The five characteristics identified in MEM are:

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Secondary Education School Sector (state or private)
- Higher Education participation by postcode (POLAR)
- Index of multiple deprivation (IMD), which identifies relative deprivation by geographical location
- Free School Meal status (FSM), which is an income and means-based benefit.

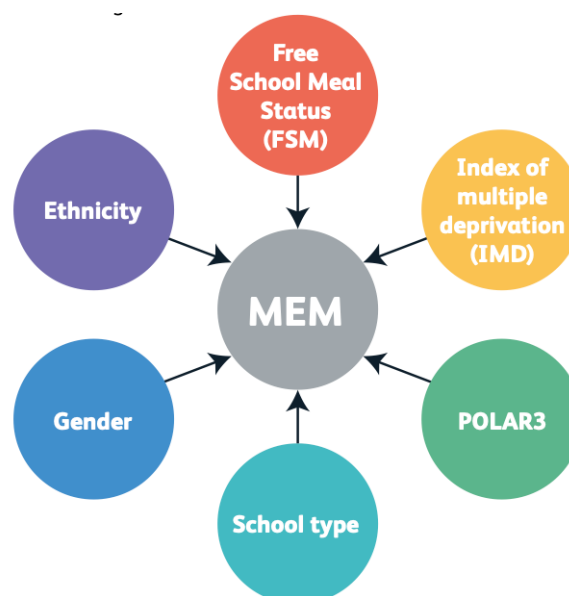


Figure 1 - The UCAS Multiple Equality Measures (MEM) categories²¹.

Once these characteristics are identified, UCAS uses the following methodology to determine levels of support:

“These equality dimensions are combined using statistical modelling techniques and a linked data set of pupils in English schools who were aged 18 between 2006 and 2010 [...] The probability of entry to higher education aged 18 is then calculated based on these equality characteristics and their combinations.”²²

These probabilities are then used to aggregate pupils into groups, where Group 1 contains those least likely to enter higher education/“most disadvantaged”, and Group 5 contains those most likely to enter higher education/ “most advantaged”²³

It should be noted that disability is not identified as a part of MEM. This means that while disabled students can be targeted for support such as student support plans (SSPs), having a disability will not inherently label a student as disadvantaged when the application is being processed. To this extent, disability is not currently framed as a barrier in HE. Instead, disability

²¹ UCAS, “What Happened to the COVID Cohort?,” *2020 End of Cycle Report*.

²² UCAS, “Equality and Entry Rates Data Explorers,” UCAS, December 13, 2017, <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/equality-and-entry-rates-data-explorers>.

²³ *Ibid.*

is a means by which students can access support once they have received an offer. When universities are making decisions, DALTH status can also be used to “show evidence of character or achievement,”²⁴ but it cannot count against the applicant in any way.

Reasons why DALTH status is not included in MEM could be due to government legislation, including British Data Protection and Equality Acts. Disability falls under category D of “Sensitive data captured as a special category under GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation]” according to the Department for Education (DfE)²⁵. This means that data “requires additional conditions of processing to be justified”²⁶ before it is shared. As a result, extra care must be taken when measuring disadvantage of students with disabilities and how the data is handled by UCAS and HE providers.

While this is one potential reason why disability is not a part of MEM, this does not provide the complete picture. Gender and ethnicity also fall under category D of GDPR laws and are included in the MEM criteria. Therefore, this paper wants to explore reasons separate to GDPR to determine why disability is not used when calculating ‘disadvantage’ in the UCAS admissions process. This will be accomplished by exploring lived student experience via a survey to identify if there are any barriers or any other reason as to why disability is not a part of the MEM categories (see [3.0 Methodology](#)).

2.3 Disabled Students Allowance

The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is a non-refundable bursary provided by the SLC and given to DALTH students who are ordinarily resident in the UK. It helps to help cover any additional study costs which are needed to produce equity in education. According to UCAS, a student can qualify for DSA “if you have a disability that affects your ability to study, such as a:

- learning difficulty, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or ADHD
- mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression
- physical disability, such as if you’re partially sighted or have to use crutches
- long-term health condition, such as cancer, chronic heart disease, or HIV

You must also:

- be an undergraduate or postgraduate student (including Open University or distance learning)
- qualify for student finance from Student Finance England
- be studying on a full-time or part-time course that lasts at least one year

Students must also be in receipt of a medical report or letter and go through a ‘needs assessment’ to work out what support they qualify for.”²⁷

²⁴ UCAS, “Support for Disabled Students – Frequently Asked Questions,” UCAS, August 31, 2017, <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/disabled-students/support-disabled-students-frequently-asked-questions>.

²⁵ Department for Education, “Data Protection: How We Share Pupil and Workforce Data”.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ UCAS, “Disabled Students’ Allowances,” UCAS, January 10, 2018, <https://www.ucas.com/student-finance-england/disabled-students-allowances>.

Receiving DSA is not an automatic process, and DALTH students must submit a separate funding application and set of medical evidence in order to be considered for the DSA grant. As a result, not all DALTH students will receive DSA during their studies. However, being in receipt of DSA has been closely linked to continuation of study within higher education- figure 2 visualises the vast difference between the non-continuation rates of students with disabilities without DSA and students with disabilities who are in receipt of DSA over the course of seven years.

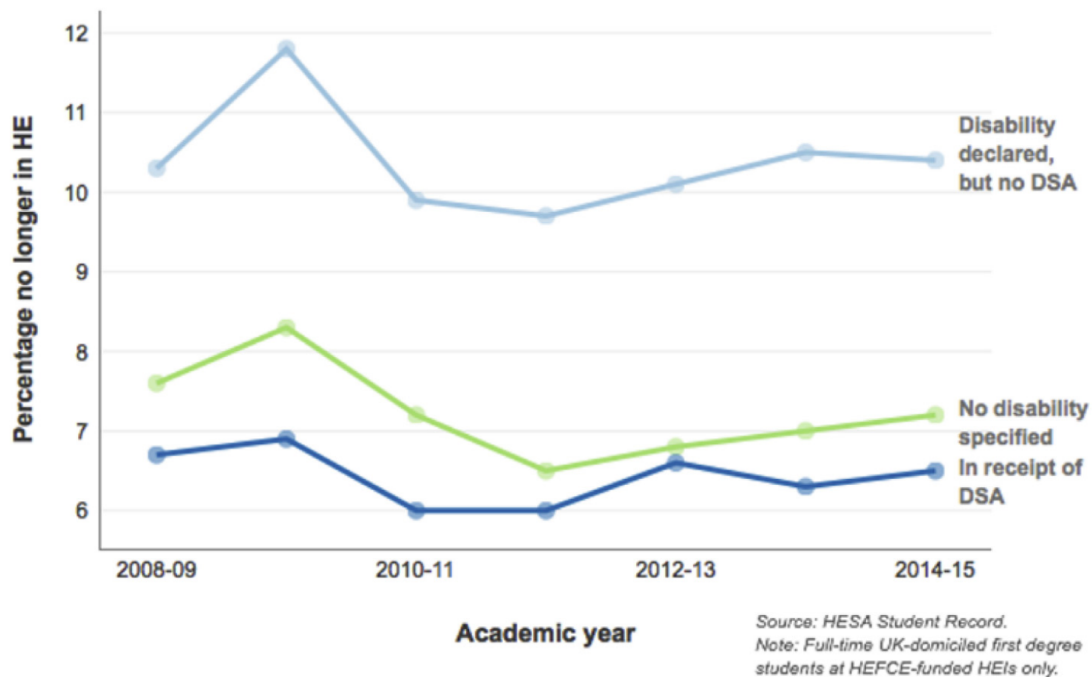


Figure 2- Non-continuation rates of students by disability and receipt of DSA²⁸

This table seems to suggest that DALTH students who are not in receipt of DSA are 4-5% more likely to drop out of university compared to eligible DALTH students who receive the funding. Additionally, it seems that those in the ‘No disability specified’ category are also more likely to discontinue HE than those who receive DSA. Though the impact of the application process for those without medical conditions is beyond the scope of this paper, it is a useful way of conversely representing the impact that DSA can have on eligible students.

There is no easily accessible information for how the data relating to the DSA is specifically handled, though it is very unlikely that being in receipt of DSA affects the decisions of universities due to the UK equality act 2010²⁹. The present study explored whether this lack of transparency affected student’s DSA applications in any way, as well if there were any barriers faced by students in the process of applying (see [3.0 methodology](#)).

²⁸ HESA, 2015 in Arinola Adefila et al., “Developing an Autonomous-Support Culture in Higher Education for Disabled Students,” *Disability and Health Journal* 13, no. 3 (July 2020): 100890, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100890>.

²⁹ GOV.UK, “Equality Act 2010,” [Legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk).

3.0 Methodology

When identifying an appropriate sample for the study, it was determined that current UG students and recent (2021) graduates with disabilities and long-term health conditions would be an ideal sample. While a sample of DALTH students currently applying to university was also identified as a potential sample, they were not chosen because of the cross-over between further education exams and the release of this survey. Using current students also allowed for a snapshot of university admissions experiences pre-COVID-19, which is especially useful as the UK transitions out of the pandemic in the 2021-22 academic year.

The following participation criteria was determined:

- Only current undergraduate, integrated masters or recently graduated (class of 2021) students
- Must have applied for a UK university via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) for their current degree programme
- Must have a disability **or** long-term health condition, though it did not have to be declared on their initial UCAS application
- Participants were required to be 18+ for ethical reasons.

When deciding on a methodology, a survey was chosen due to its ability to be completed at a time that was convenient for the participant (especially for those who may have needed extra processing time for certain questions). Surveys also allowed for a larger potential sample than interviews and prevented the alienation of DALTH students who could have conditions such as social anxiety by removing the human element inherently present in interviews. They are also one of the easiest data collection methods to anonymise, which was tantamount to this study where potentially private information was disclosed.

Primary data was collected over a two-week period via an anonymous survey on Qualtrics. The survey was open to participation from anyone who met the study criteria.

The first section gathered information about personal experience in various categories:

- Nature of the disability or long-term health condition
- Declaring a disability/long-term health condition on the UCAS application
- Universities making first contact, and the suitability of the support provided
- Accessing DSA or other DALTH-related funding
- Support received from schools and external organisations.

The second section of the survey contained two Q&A ‘clips’ from UCAS, with participants providing answers on what decisions and reactions they had to the information. They were asked to answer as if they were a current university applicant- relevant questions in this section were prefaced with “as a university applicant, would you...” to gauge whether they would have reacted differently as an applicant with the information from the Clip in mind.

As a result of background research and conversational experiences in the author’s everyday life, it is predicted that the stigma of having a condition will affect the rate of declaring a condition on UCAS applications among participants, especially those with mental health struggles. A low number of positive responses to clearing is also expected due to the inherently

quick turn-around required by most students going through the process, which is likely to be exacerbated by any conditions that a person may have. While the responses to the DSA and UCAS Q&As may be difficult to predict outright, it would be surprising if the majority of participants did not experience some kind of barrier while accessing higher education.

Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, all declarations around disability and long-term health conditions were self-imposed by the participant. It is not anticipated that this would be an issue or that it would affect the validity of the sample in any way, since the experiences from those students are still deemed to be legitimate by the author of this paper.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of York's Department of Language and Linguistic Science.

4.0 Analysis

Fifteen valid responses were received in total. Responses came from current UG students and recent (2021) graduates from four UK universities. In this sample:

- Eight applied for university in the 2018-19 university admissions cycle, six applied in the 2017-18 cycle, and one applied before 2017. This means that none of the sample were in an admissions cycle during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Only one person did not report being in the 18-24 age range, instead being in the 35-44 category.
- Two people were in year one of their degree, seven in year two, five in year three, and one in year four. Of these, five identified themselves as recent graduates.
- There were two mature students in total though it was not explicitly asked about and instead uncovered through qualitative responses.
- Fourteen people self-identified as having a disability. Out of this group, all but three also identified as having a long-term health condition (two did not identify as having an LTH condition and one was uncertain).
- One person declared only a long-term health condition and no disability.

Data on the nature of disability was collected according to criteria from the Higher Education Funding Council found in Fuller et. al.³⁰. This criteria was used since because it had already been used in past statistical analysis, allowing for an ease of comparison.

The breakdown is as follows:

- Twelve participants reported a mental health issue.
 - o Four participants had mental health (MH) listed as their sole disability/LTH, eight reported MH in conjunction with another health condition.
- One person reported a hearing impairment
- Three reported dyslexia
- One reported being a wheelchair user or having another mobility difficulty
- Six people said that they had an unseen disability/LTH
- Five people declared other conditions.

While the responses to the survey were very insightful into the application process, the relatively small sample size of fifteen must be noted when discussing the results of this survey. Therefore, the author advises that the results should be used as a diagnostic tool to identify scope for future studies and consultation instead of an ultimatum of the student experience. However, this does not make the ordeals of this sample any less valid, and they should still be seriously considered when identifying gaps in the current applications system.

³⁰ Mary Fuller et al., "Barriers to Learning: A Systematic Study of the Experience of Disabled Students in One University".

4.1 Declaring a condition

The stigma surrounding declaring DALTH status on a UCAS application appears to still be a prominent issue, over thirteen years since it was identified by other studies^{31,32}. Out of the three people (20%) who did not declare a disability or long-term health condition on their application, all three selected “I did not want a university to treat my application negatively (ie. rejection) because I declared a disability or long-term health condition when applying.”. Two also mentioned that they were not sure whether their condition was severe enough for them to declare it on their application. This is remarkably similar to some of the responses seen by Vickerman and Blundell, where 25% of their sample did not disclose a condition on their university application ‘due to a perceived fear that they may not be offered a place on their course of choice’³³. It is worth noting at Vickerman and Blundell is an older study and had a much larger sample than the present study at a sample size of 504, meaning that declaring a condition is probably a persisting issue for a significant portion of the DALTH population. See [5.1 Declaration](#) for the author’s suggestions.

On the other hand, the majority (60%) of respondents did choose to initially declare a condition on their UCAS application. When questioned, all of them believed that it impacted their transition to university in a positive way or had little effect. One response provided an apt summary of this sentiment:

“In terms of the application itself, it didn't make a difference. Things that came after the application were more noticeable”.

This is reflected in the responses to a later question, where most participants who declared a condition on their UCAS application received support from their university prior to arrival, though two were not sure or did not remember. Realistically, there is a good chance that all of students were offered support after declaring a condition and accepting a place, with fourteen out of fifteen saying that their university provided adequate support for their needs (though one person was not sure or did not remember).

The decisions around students originally declaring their condition also set some useful context around the first ‘clip’ from the UCAS FAQ sections which focused on whether students should use their personal statement to declare and add context to any medical conditions that they may have. The full Clip is as follows:

Clip 1

Question: Should I use my personal statement or interview to disclose information about my disability?

Answer: Both are ideal opportunities to describe your disability or health condition in a positive way. You can mention your impairment

³¹ Philip Vickerman and Milly Blundell, “Hearing the Voices of Disabled Students in Higher Education,” *Disability & Society* 25, no. 1 (January 2010): 21–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590903363290>.

³² Mary Fuller et al., “Barriers to Learning: A Systematic Study of the Experience of Disabled Students in One University”.

³³ Philip Vickerman and Milly Blundell, “Hearing the Voices of Disabled Students in Higher Education”.

in your personal statement should you choose to do so, and you may want to explain how it shows evidence of character and achievement. When writing your personal statement, think about the skills, qualities, and motivation that have helped you succeed so far, and link these experiences to the course or subject area you're interested in. Consider how your disability has given you insight, or developed aspects of your character which make you stand out from other applicants. The personal details section on your UCAS application also gives you the option of choosing a disability category, and describing any additional study support needs.

Universities will welcome early notification because it helps them ensure everything can be in place for you when you start your studies.

Remember, disclosing information about your disability in this way is entirely your choice, and you are not expected to talk about it if you don't want to.³⁴

At this point, one issue which should be kept in mind is that there is an important distinction between declaring a condition on a personal statement and declaring a condition on the UCAS application. The UCAS admission forms³⁵ have a separate process to determine whether a student has DALTH and what the nature of their condition may be. Therefore, a condition does not necessarily need to be mentioned on the personal statement to be identified by providers and used in their decision-making processes. Consequently, the responses to the Clip may not be 100% indicative of whether someone would declare their condition on the UCAS application, though the personal statement is a very important element of the application process.

In response to the clip, around half of the sample (seven out of 15) would have made a different decision about disclosing their condition as a hypothetical applicant compared to how they declared a condition on their personal university application. Of these, over half (four) would have been less likely to declare a condition in their personal statement if they were an applicant today, saying that:

“I also find it somewhat insulting and patronising that a disability is viewed as 'evidence of character or achievement’”

“I found it very hard to make positives from my needs”.

“inspiration porn”.

Though opinions are limited given the sample size, the issue seems to lie with the glorification of what are often chronic conditions when candidates are asked to “consider how your disability has given you insight, or developed aspects of your character which make you stand

³⁴ UCAS, “Support for Disabled Students – Frequently Asked Questions”.

³⁵ UCAS, “UCAS UNDERGRADUATE APPLICATION FORM a PRINTED GUIDE”
, <https://www.ucas.com/file/131431/download?token=LLf-qD0M>.

out from other applicants”³⁶. This is not only reflected in the feedback above (‘inspiration porn’ directly opposes glorifying a condition for a university place), but even in some of the few relatively positive responses to the Clip respondents are apprehensive: “I feel that the use of describing how it shapes your character, implies that your impairment needs to be described positively? I know that may be the case for some people, but from personal experience my mental health has negatively affected me and my character”.

UCAS may want to consider revisiting the FAQ section with a wider consultation in mind, and providers should be prepared to be transparent to students about what happens to their applications during the decision-making process. See [5.1 Declaration](#) for full suggestions.

4.2 Accessing funding

When students were asked if they knew about the financial opportunities available to them as DALTH students (including DSA):

- Ten respondents knew about the financial opportunities available to them
- Four did not know about any support
- One was unsure or could not remember if they know about the funding opportunities prior to university.

In the group which did not know about any support, three out of four solely reported mental health conditions, with none of them declaring their condition on their UCAS application. This closely mirrors findings by Fuller et. al.³⁷, where no students with unseen disabilities came forward to claim DSA. They reference Olney and Kim who “point out that people with hidden disabilities often neither see themselves, nor are seen as ‘properly’ disabled and are, therefore, less likely to seek assistance as they do not feel they are deserving of such support.”³⁸ One person from this group did go on to apply for DSA after arriving at university. On the other hand, one person who did know about the DSA prior to university chose not to apply because they did not think they would be eligible for the funding.

Even if students did know about the DSA and their eligibility to receive it, there were other potential barriers that could be faced. Four respondents outlined the need for a formal diagnosis/proof as an issue, with one outlining a potentially prohibitive cost:

“getting [a] formal diagnosis [was an issue] as the one I had from my previous school wasn't accepted, so I had to save -£300 until I could book the appointment”.

“I needed to get an official diagnosis letter”.

“I sent proof of my PIP [Personal Independence Payment] (I'm on the higher rate both physical and care) the DSA/SFE then asked for a breakdown of my award - I had been

³⁶ UCAS, “Support for Disabled Students – Frequently Asked Questions”.

³⁷ Mary Fuller et al., “Barriers to Learning: A Systematic Study of the Experience of Disabled Students in One University”.

³⁸ Marjorie F. Olney and Amanda Kim, “Beyond Adjustment: Integration of Cognitive Disability into Identity,” in Mary Fuller et al., “Barriers to Learning: A Systematic Study of the Experience of Disabled Students in One University”.

through a DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] face-to-face assessment only the year before for my PIP and therefore, do not understand why the DSA wanted to know my issues in GREAT detail. [...] I supplied DSA with the breakdown sheet from PIP face-2-face BUT felt very uncomfortable in doing so, as it mentions my bladder and bowel issues in great detail. The proof of my PIP awards should have been enough information for DSA as I do not require assistance with using the toilet at Uni.”

“I wasn't aware of it till just before I started university as my school weren't aware of this as a source of support so I ended up having to wait for most of my first year without the support and assistive technology. I also had to pay for medical letters to prove my diagnoses which was challenging when I was already struggling financially at university”

Even if respondents had an official diagnosis, there were other issues that arose from accessing the support post-assessment:

“It took a year to get it through because of covid and involved a man coming to my house to fit a chair during covid which was terrifying to me as a disabled woman”.

“There were a number of training sessions run by the private companies contracted to the DSA, which I found overwhelming and difficult to fit in with a schedule. It would have been better if it was remote, and with online tutorials rather than face-to-face calls. As a result, it made accessing some software difficult”.

“I had a lot of support when acquiring funding for equipment prior to starting university, however during university it did not seem clear what I could claim for”.

Some of these accounts outline clear and obvious distress in their responses. While it may be difficult to negotiate issues around the impact of COVID-19 (such as installing equipment) and proving of disability due to the nature of the evidence that one is required to provide, there is almost certainly scope for future study around accessing diagnosis letters and making the process of what students can apply for clearer. See section [5.2 Accessing Funding](#) for further details.

4.3 External Support

In the final section of questions focusing on individual experience, participants were asked whether they felt supported by their school when applying through UCAS as a DALTH student. Around half the sample (seven) struggled with the lack of support available to them at school when it came to adding their condition to the application. Another two did not respond to the question, and five felt that they had adequate support (though two of these were support from out-of-school medical professionals). While it is impossible to determine whether these issues stemmed from schools not providing reasonable adjustments to DALTH students or whether the structures in place were relatively poor for all students at the school, the inconsistency of student experience should still be addressed. Ideas to do this can be found in section [5.3 External Support](#).

4.4 Clearing

Though it is not an area with a significant amount of background research, the author decided to explore how the clearing process (explanation in Clip 2) may have been responded to by DALTH students. This is due to the lack of past literature in this area. The impact of clearing was explored via another UCAS FAQ, with Clip 2 shown below:

Clip 2

Definition: *Clearing and adjustment both involve applying to a university that was neither your firm or insurance choice late in the UCAS admissions cycle (eg. results day).*

Question: *If I go through Clearing/Adjustment, how will I know which university or college will be able to cater for my needs?*

Answer: *Universities and colleges are experienced in supporting students with a wide range of disabilities. However, if you have complex specialist needs, going through Clearing may result in a slight delay in getting all the support and adjustments you need arranged for the start of term. So, when you begin deciding where to study, it's worth having a contingency plan. Before exam results day, list suitable alternative providers you are confident can support you, so you'll be fully prepared either way.³⁹*

Clip 2 was broken down into three key subsections. First, participants were asked whether they would consider applying to another HE institution through clearing if they did not have time to learn about the disability support structures in place. This was asked because clearing is the option for people who do not secure the grades for their firm (first choice) or insurance (second choice) university, and decisions about a clearing university need to be made quickly due to the limited number of spaces available at HE institutions. This could prove to be an issue for those who require extra processing time or are unsure about the accessibility provisions at a given institution.

When asked if they would consider clearing as a university applicant given the inherent time constraints it brings, the responses were very mixed. Five said that they would consider clearing, though some of the responses did raise concerns about how students would deal with any medical conditions in the transition, with one saying that “I wouldn’t declare my disability,” and others who are ‘not reliant’ on university provisions “would be fine not knowing” what support and adjustments they would get before starting university. Others who were likely to consider clearing would “trust that all universities have adequate support” or ‘would attempt to access support once there’. There is no single definitive response to this question.

On the other hand, eight members of the sample (53%) would not have considered clearing as an option with Clip 2 in mind. Many of them cite a lack of transparency in what similar support other universities can provide as one of the main reasons:

³⁹ UCAS, “Support for Disabled Students – Frequently Asked Questions”.

“Knowing about the universities stance on mental health and services they offer is incredibly important to me and I wouldn't want to apply without knowing, especially as if I had gone through clearing I would have probably been upset”

“I would want to ensure the Uni could provide the support I need.”

There were also concerns raised about whether universities would be able to get people the support that they needed in time:

“I wouldn't be confident that I'd get support in a timely manner.”

“I only managed to get through university because of the support I had from my university and I know that other institutions don't offer the same support so I wouldn't feel that I would have completed university necessarily at another institution”

A third group did not feel confident with UCAS' wording in the Clip 2 FAQ (see above). The primary concern with this group seemed to be that UCAS were not offering any tangible support when students were advised to “list suitable providers you are confident can support you,” with responses as follows:

“The information they give is so weak, it doesn't say anything. If my uni can't give me support, I can't be there.”

“Part of my disability is that I need processing time, and need to know what is happening. So, going through clearing was never an option for me, and this statement makes me feel even less confident.”

“It sounds like they [UCAS] just want me to sort it out and AREN'T taking responsibility or really offering support.”

While these responses are reasonable to an extent, it also indicates that UCAS needs to work on establishing their position as a facilitator of university applications rather than a support provider. It is not in place to replace the actions of schools and universities, which are present to facilitate the highly individualised experience that a student needs. On the other hand, there are a number of suggestions by the author which could streamline a DALTH student's clearing experience from UCAS' end. See [5.4 Clearing](#) for these ideas.

Another question asked in relation to Clip 2 was about whether the participants would feel like they have enough time to make an informed decision about the support structures at their clearing/adjustment university if it was required. In response, most participants (eleven) said they would not feel like they would have enough time to decide. Only three said they would, with one uncertain. Even those who felt like they had enough time identified the aspects of the clearing process as an issue:

“For me personally, it wouldn't make too much difference. However, for someone with more complex needs I could see why it'd be problematic to go through clearing.”

“This is in line with the responses from others who did not feel that they would have enough time to make a decision, citing the speed of the process and the communication that may consequently fall through.

“Clearing is a stressful process and you can feel rushed through by your school or UCAS”

“Part of my disability is that I need processing time, and need to know what is happening. So, this statement makes me feel as if I would either be rushed in preparing a decision or lacking in knowledge when making the decision.”

“I believe, anyone entering clearing must make a fast decision (especially with the high-ranking Uni's - as they have very limited places on offer - if any)”

“Because these are decisions you have to make quickly and it's hard to tell whether you'd be able to speak to someone from disability services, and you also won't be able to visit the university”

“It makes me feel like I'd have to pick fast so they have longed to arrange my support.”

“I don't have complex needs that I need external resources for but if I did I would be terrified I wouldn't get them in time and the already overwhelming move to uni would feel unachievable”

Besides the communication issues that could arise in clearing, the second concern is the transfer, re-development, or loss of student support plans (SSPs). Since they require a needs assessment and can help with aspects of university life from extra time to accommodation type. It is surprising that there is no formal timeframe outlined for ensuring that students get the support provided in an effective and timely manner⁴⁰.

The final question concerning Clip 2 was based on whether students would consider deferring⁴¹ their UCAS application if it meant they would avoid the clearing process. While two would not have deferred and five were uncertain, the remaining eight participants would consider deferring an application when faced with the prospect of clearing:

“If it meant I would go to a preferred university I would do so also my disability would improve in a year”

“It would be more important for me to feel secure and comfortable and have processing time than to go to university that year.”

“I would want to ensure the Uni could provide the support I need.”

“Financially I would have struggled to defer but for my health definitely because that way I would have had time for arrangements and support to be put in place”

“I would feel more comfortable deferring.”

⁴⁰ UCAS, “What Is Clearing Plus?,” UCAS, July 6, 2020, <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/results-confirmation-and-clearing/what-clearing/what-clearing-plus>.

⁴¹ The word ‘deferring’ was used erroneously in the survey, since deferring does not imply that a student has create a new UCAS application for the following academic year. The word ‘reapply’ should have been used instead. However, it is doubtful whether the semantics of the question affected the outcome.

“I would want more time to think about it/an opportunity to re-sit some of my exams”

Given the previous responses to Clip 2, it is unsurprising that two participants cited the creation of new support plans when considering deferral. Time to think was also frequently mentioned, especially for those who needed processing time when going through the application process. However, some of these reactions are likely reasons for deferral for non-DALTH students to a lesser extent too, since having time to think, for example, is typically an inherent perk of anything that would otherwise need to be a quick decision.

In the group that was not sure about deferral, there was no concrete consensus as to why. One acknowledged it as an ‘incredibly challenging situation’, with another mentioning the concern about the transfer of SSPs in a clearing/adjustment situation mentioned previously. A third cited money: “I can’t work so I wouldn’t be able to take a year without student loans” and concluded that “I shouldn’t have to delay my life for a year because others won’t accommodate me.”

It is the authors hope that with correct consultation with DALTH students and advisors, UCAS can create a more streamlined clearing process to more effectively support students within this group. As mentioned previously, the author’s suggestions will be in [5.4 Clearing](#).

5.0 Suggestions for Improvement

5.1 Declaration

One way which UCAS may help to reduce the stigma that students are concerned about is by giving DALTH students the freedom of choice as to when their condition is disclosed. In the current UCAS application forms⁴², students must disclose any medical conditions prior to a university deciding on the outcome of an application. This is probably so that universities can “meet your needs wherever possible”⁴³ prior to enrolment and ensure that all accommodations can be met at interview etc. While this system did work for some of the sample, it does not help those who were concerned about stigma and how their condition may affect universities’ decision processes. For this group, a different approach should be considered where DALTH students can ‘delay disclosure’. In this model, students can choose for UCAS to provide information on any health conditions after a decision has been reached on their application. In theory, this would help to minimise stigma and reduce any anxiety felt by students who were uncertain about declaring in their application (according to the survey data above). A similar practice is currently fulfilled with ethnicity in the ‘Equality Monitoring’ section of the UCAS application⁴⁴, which is in the same GDPR category as disability. While some students would likely not have the option to disclose later (ie. if they would need accommodations at interviews or have complex needs), it may help UCAS capture DALTH students who were concerned about the stigma surrounding their condition. This is especially true for those with mental health, as can be seen in the survey results above.

5.2 Accessing Funding

The author also advises the UCAS referees of any DALTH university applicants to let their students know about DSA and ensure that their students start pursuing a diagnosis for their condition as soon as they think about applying for university or claiming for DSA. If referees did this practice consistently, a significant portion of students would be able to access the support that they needed- in this study, four out of six significant barriers identified when applying for the DSA could have likely been resolved by receiving an early diagnosis or having more support from a school or UCAS referee. UCAS should also considering their web resources on DSA, since there was significant feedback where people “wish I had known what was available”, the “specific examples” of what can be claimed and the “range of support available” from the DSA.

A slightly different approach must be taken when accessing funding at university, since the Student Loans Company (SLC) is UK “government-owned organisation that administers loans and grants to students in colleges and universities in the UK”⁴⁵. This means that while UCAS and HE institutions can encourage students to apply for DSA, the onus falls on the student to

⁴² UCAS, “UCAS UNDERGRADUATE APPLICATION FORM a PRINTED GUIDE”, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.ucas.com/file/131431/download?token=LLf-qD0M>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ GOV.UK, “Student Loans Company,” GOV.UK, December 19, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/student-loans-company>.

provide information and proof of disability to the SLC. Though there is no available research into this area specifically, the author speculates that this onus and responsibility is likely why students (a third of a sample in this case) do not find out about the DSA from their school or elsewhere when applying to university, as they must assess for themselves which loans they should apply for. However, as the HESA data (see figure 2) showed that students with a health condition but no DSA are 4-5% more likely to discontinue their studies. As a result, the DSA needs to be advertised more openly by teachers, UCAS, and universities to make sure that students know what support is available to them prior to starting university, in addition to the standard student loans. This can be achieved through simple additional training and awareness of the process, which is one of the final aims of this study.

Another issue to accessing funding is attaining a diagnosis. In the survey, some DALTH students struggled to get a diagnosis without paying (in one case over £300) or waiting for an extended period. There is not much that HE-structures can do in relation to attaining a diagnosis (SLC simply tells students to access hardship funding via their university)⁴⁶, so it is essential that students without a diagnosis can start the process of acquiring one before applying for a DSA. Since getting a medical diagnosis can be a lengthy process in depending on the condition (for example, some ADHD diagnoses taking between two to five years to complete an assessment⁴⁷), teachers should be trained to encourage students to work towards the diagnosis of any conditions that they are aware of and would like assistance with when they reach university. This should be done before DALTH students begin the UCAS and DSA application processes to allow the most time possible to receive a diagnosis.

Finally, UCAS and the SLC need to be transparent with students, schools, and HE institutions regarding how the sensitive data in the DSA is distributed to universities during the decision process. There was no accessible paperwork that the author could find regarding how data is managed, though it is believed that, due to GDPR regulations, SLC cannot disclose which students are receipt in DSA to HE providers. This confusion about how data is managed prevented two participants in the survey from applying to DSA, under the pretence that it may introduce stigma to the application in a similar way to the stigma on UCAS applications mentioned above. Resources and training must be updated to accommodate how DSA data is managed in relation to the UCAS application and university decision-making processes.

5.3 External Support

The author has identified a gap in the market for an external organisation to provide support and resources for DALTH students who need individualised support outside of school, especially if the institution is based in an area with little funding or low progression to university and may not have the facilities to provide for DALTH students (though reasonable adjustments should be made wherever possible in line with the 2010 Equality Act⁴⁸). This 'external institution' structure has proved to be impactful in class structures- the Sutton Trust has identified that 93% as "The percentage of our students who moved from the lowest to the

⁴⁶ GOV.UK, "Help If You're a Student with a Learning Difficulty, Health Problem or Disability," GOV.UK, n.d., <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa/eligibility>.

⁴⁷ Martin Lindsay, "ADHD Assessment System 'Broken' with Five-Year Waiting Times," *BBC News*, July 28, 2020, sec. England, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-53526174>.

⁴⁸ GOV.UK, "Equality Act 2010," *Legislation.gov.uk*, 2010, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/6>.

highest socio-economic groups after leaving university”⁴⁹. This is a monumental achievement and could help a significant amount of DALTH students if something similar became available to them. The sample were receptive to this idea; no participant refused the idea of receiving external help (if available) during their UCAS application process. While further evaluating the impact of external organisations is beyond the scope of this study, it should be considered as scope for potential future research and social action.

5.4 Clearing

Although both UCAS clips used in the survey were criticised by respondents, this was especially true for Clip 2, which related to Clearing. The author suggests that UCAS consult with DALTH students to re-write the FAQ sections into something which does not introduce extra pressure or confusion. Specifically, the wording of the Clip could be clearer in reflecting who the onus falls on to find clearing universities and get additional support during the clearing/adjustment process, as this was a matter of confusion in the survey. Students raised concerns around arranging support, being ‘rushed through’ the process, and finding information about disability and mental health services in a short space of time.

Another potentially problematic aspect of the wording is that the original Q&A did not have any mention of Adjustment unlike the (slightly modified) Clip 2. The author chose to include Adjustment in the clip, since it involves the same fast-paced decision making (ie. decisions about a new university are made on Results Day) that is seen in the Clearing process. UCAS should reflect on whether it is worth adding Adjustment to their Q&A, since just mentioning Clearing may carry the connotation that DALTH students are not capable of Adjustment.

Further consultation with UCAS, HE providers, and schools will be required to fully optimise the clearing process for students which will have to be addressed in a further study. In the meantime, the author suggests three ideas which UCAS and universities may be able to implement while the clearing process is being refined for DALTH students.

- 1) Partnership with a company such as AccessAble⁵⁰ which provides accessibility information for venues such as shops, cinemas, and hotels. By adding HE institutions on a website such as this (or having another centralised location where students can quickly find accessibility information). Many universities already use it, and it would allow students to search up information about universities quickly and efficiently without an excessive use of time or energy locating and reading pages on individual university websites. Links to disability support services could also be provided as part of UCAS’ Clearing Plus⁵¹ personalised search results for all students, though this would require significantly modifying UCAS websites.
- 2) Provide a concrete deadline for universities to begin implementing student support plans for clearing students. In the Q&A, students are only told “if you have complex specialist needs, going through Clearing may result in a slight delay in getting all the

⁴⁹ Sutton Trust, “About Us - Sutton Trust,” Sutton Trust, 2017, <https://www.suttontrust.com/about-us/>.

⁵⁰ AccessAble, “Home | AccessAble,” Home | AccessAble, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.accessable.co.uk>.

⁵¹ UCAS, “What Is Clearing Plus?”.

support and adjustments you need arranged for the start of term”⁵². Some clarity as to when students would get their support would likely help to alleviate stress about accessing a new university through clearing.

- 3) Schools and teachers should help to prepare DALTH students for the potential eventuality of Clearing or Adjustment to help them feel prepared ahead of Results Day. Colloquially, students who have more time to process a decision will have less to think about on Results Day itself, again reducing stress levels. Additional training on these processes may be needed from UCAS or other providers, to equip teachers with this specialist knowledge.

It is hoped that these suggestions may help DALTH students in the short-to-medium term, but further studies and consultations in the long-term will be required to maximise the potential of DALTH students.

⁵² UCAS, “Support for Disabled Students – Frequently Asked Questions”.

6.0 Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has identified and explored the clear barriers faced by DALTH students when accessing HE. By analysing the lived experiences of anonymous participants and their responses to UCAS Q&As in an anonymous survey, the author has made suggestions for UCAS, teachers, and HE institutions to seek improvement in four key areas. These were:

- Declaring a condition
- Accessing funding
- External Support
- Clearing.

The author believes that, by identifying clear struggles faced by DALTH students in these areas, a convincing case has been made to add disability to UCAS' MEM categories. Though the study sample was small, the responses consistently showcase that there are barriers faced by DALTH students when entering HE. Further study will be required on a larger sample, but the precedent to do so has been set by this paper. Though the implementation into MEM would take a lot of nuance and consideration, the output would be consistently impacting around 13.4% of UCAS applicants each year. A brief consultation with SLC would also not go amiss to identify any issues that have been raised surrounding the DSA, such as getting clarity around what students are entitled for.

The author hopes that further consultation with UCAS, HE providers and schools after the release of this paper will help DALTH students to manage their university applications in an effective and supportive manner.

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