

Disabled Students' Commission Report

Commissioned and Facilitated by the
University of Birmingham Guild of Students



**Disability
History
Month** Guild of
Students

Introduction from the Commissioners

The National Student Survey (NSS) 2020 demonstrated that the University of Birmingham's (University) disabled students felt that they were being unfairly treated in comparison to the rest of the student body. With considerable further declines in student satisfaction from NSS 2021, we are concerned that this represents a longer-term trend that will continue, without any positive action being taken. It is important to emphasise that these trends are not reflected in the data across other universities; these issues appear to be specific to the University of Birmingham.

The Guild of Students (Guild) Disabled Students' Commission was set up to understand the challenges disabled students face in detail, and to advocate for change. Between us, we are responsible for representing disabled students and lobbying for changes on education policy at the University. The findings from this report have been enlightening and have revealed a significant number of issues that have not been raised in recent years.

Our aim is to highlight the areas where improvements can be made to ensure all students are provided an equitable chance to achieve their potential. We have delved deeper into the areas that we felt were most significant arising from the data, to ensure proposed changes are actionable and effective.

It was particularly concerning to see issues spanning all five Colleges and all aspects of student life, but following both the qualitative and quantitative data we collected, we are optimistic that the changes we propose will produce a significant impact.

Through working on this commission, it has become clear that disabled students at the University want to speak out and be heard. It is vital that we create opportunities to hear what our students have to say, respect the issues they raise, and take action. Together, we can create an environment that welcomes disabled students and fully appreciates what they have to offer our community.

As we publish this report, we hope it is acknowledged as an important contribution to the development of our University. Collaboration between all parts of the University will be key to effective implementation of the suggested improvements. We also hope that this can be a catalyst for continued communication so that disabled students can feel listened to and central to the work of the University. Following the adaptations made in response to the pandemic, we are eager to ensure disabled students are not forgotten as we move back to campus.

Our thanks must go to Tom Snape in the Guild's Student Voice and Representation department for his contributions to this project.

Imogen Mann, Disabled Students' Officer 2020-2022



Jules Singh, Education Officer, 2020-2022



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Executive Summary

Disabled Student Experience measures at the University of Birmingham have been declining for a number of years and this trend requires an urgent, strategic intervention. This decline is not reflected in the sector average data for other Universities. We have also seen no evidence that these declines are entirely the cause of the COVID Pandemic, as many of these trends were first identified in the 2020 NSS – which the Office for Students had specifically stated had not been measurably impacted by COVID¹.

Summary of Recommendations

Across all areas listed, this report makes substantive recommendations which we believe require urgent implementation:

Welfare and Wellbeing

- All student facing staff should receive training on how to effectively support disabled students, including how and when to support them through a leave of absence.
- That the University and Guild engage in a formal review of the External Student process.
- In line with all of the changes recommended as part of this report and increasing student numbers, the appropriate scale and distribution of staffing resource of disability support staff is given due consideration.

Learning, Teaching and Assessment

- The review of Reasonable Adjustment Plans should consider disabled students as important stakeholders, and include processes and guidelines for implementation at School/ Departmental level, such as:
 - A clear, simple and timely process for students to raise concerns about the implementation of their RAP.
 - Building on the Student Voice Report recommendation, the Disabled Students' Commission asks that disabled students are involved in key decision making in this process through representation on the project board.
- That staff receive clear guidelines on what resources should be placed online, how to ensure they are easy to access and the level of quality expected. Due to Universities anticipatory duty under the Equality Act, this should not only be forthcoming when a disabled student asks for it – it should be the default.

¹ Office For Students, National Student Survey 2020: Analysis of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (2020)

Placement

- That all students with RAPs or disclosed disabilities are given the opportunity to discuss their placement ahead of time with an Occupational Health practitioner, in order to discuss the adjustments they need in the workplace.
 - Once these adjustments are agreed, the University should work to find a placement that can accommodate these needs.
- Placement vetting must ensure that all placements are aware of their requirements under the Equality Act and given guidance prior to the start of the placement regarding how best to support disabled students.
- Where possible, extended placements should be offered to disabled students; allowing one academic year to be completed over two.
- In instances where a placement provider cannot accommodate the needs of a disabled student, an alternative placement should be found for that student as a matter of priority.
- Disabled students should be made aware of their rights in the workplace and be given a clear point of contact to make any concerns they have regarding their placement.

Long COVID

- Long COVID is formally listed and recognised on relevant University web-pages and communications as a long term condition that warrants further support and Reasonable Adjustments

Careers

- That the Careers team conduct a review into their offer for disabled students, learning from the good practice present elsewhere in the sector. This has previously been raised in the Student Voice Report, and we further recommend that active engagement with disabled students should be fundamental to that review.
- That all academic staff receive training relating to disabled students and careers, highlighting the importance of sound advice and the support on offer.

Feedback and Student Voice

- Guidance and the previously recommended staff training, should highlight the importance of listening to, and acting upon, the concerns of disabled students when they raise them.
- We reiterate the recommendation from the Student Voice Report that the Guild and University should partner on a Disabled Students participation action research project, with agreed actions and progress reported via a Student Academic Engagement Committee.

The Guild of Students

- Guild Advice are listed among the key services that disabled students can access in communications and induction for those students.
- That the Guild publish this report in full, and pledge to elevate the voices of disabled students to ensure its recommendations are implemented.
- That the Guild ensures that, moving forward, disabled students remain an important constituency, and regularly engages in two way dialogue to ensure their needs are being effectively represented.

Background

Historic student satisfaction data sources, such as the National Student Survey (NSS)², had indicated that disabled students had broadly similar levels of satisfaction with their experience as students with no known disability. This changed in June 2020, when the NSS 2020 showed concerning declines among the satisfaction of disabled students across a range of areas – with the most dramatic declines being among questions regarding Organisation and Management, Student Voice, Welfare Resources and Facilities, and Workload.

The most notable decline was with the question “There is sufficient provision of welfare and student services to meet my needs” – 18.95% fewer students with Specific Learning Difficulties³ (SLDs) agreed with that statement compared to previous years, the largest decline for any demographic group and for any question. In many instances, questions or areas where disabled students had previously reported being more satisfied than students with no known disability gaps are beginning to emerge between the two groups.

The Guild produced its annual Student Voice Report (SVR) 2020; a report highlighting the experience of students at the University. The SVR dedicated a section to the responses of disabled students, highlighting that these trends were specific to the University of Birmingham, and made a number of recommendations which it was believed could help address these emerging problems. The report also pledged that the Guild would produce a “student-led research project that will investigate in greater depth the disabled student experience”. This report is the outcome of that process.

While the research was being conducted, the NSS 2021 was published, which showed an acceleration of the trends initially identified in 2020, with comparative declines of how disabled students rate their experience being visible across a much broader range of issues. While other universities have seen gaps emerging between disabled students and those with no known disability, these remain more pronounced at the University of Birmingham.

Methodology and Approach

The Disabled Students’ Commission was instigated by the Guild Officer Group 2020/21 as a Fact Finding Commission in line with the Guild’s Byelaws. The Commission Steering Group was led by Jules Singh, Education Officer 2020-2022, and Imogen Mann, 2020-2022, and supported operationally by the Guild’s Student Voice department.

The Commission Steering Group examined a range of existing national and local data sets, along with developing a new survey and series of focus groups. The key data sets reviewed included:

- The National Student Survey, 2019 – 2021
- Guild Disabled Students’ Commission Survey
- Guild Disabled Students’ Commission Focus Groups
- Guild Advice Case Data and Case Studies

² The National Student Survey (NSS) is an annual survey undertaken by all undergraduate finalists across the country. Students are asked to rate how satisfied they are with a range of aspects of their university experience. Data from it is published and used for a number of league tables and rankings.

³ Specific Learning Difficulties are a difference or difficulty with some particular aspect of learning. The most common examples are dyslexia, dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyscalculia, and Dysgraphia.

The defined lines of inquiry for the Guild Disabled Students' Commission Survey and Focus Groups were:

- Learning and Assessment
- Reasonable Adjustment Plans
- The Guild and Student Voice
- Placements
- Labs and Practically Assessed Elements
- COVID-19

The Survey collected quantitative and qualitative data about the Disabled Student Experience across these six areas, with further focus groups and interviews scheduled to provide deeper context on respondent feedback. 138 disabled students responded.

A demographic breakdown of survey respondents can be found in Appendix 1.

Based on the qualitative and quantitative responses of the survey, respondents were asked to attend a focus group and interviews to discuss their lived experience. One focus group was conducted, which five students were invited to, and three interviews were held.

Following the focus groups, a brief follow up survey with a small number of questions focused specifically with respect to the Leave of Absence process was produced. It was completed by 30 students.

A note on the presentation of student cases and data:

Where individual case studies or qualitative responses are quoted, identifying information is removed. In instances where identifying information is redacted or context is required, text that is not from the subject of the quote will be marked with [square brackets].

The NSS, by far the largest and most recognised data set in student satisfaction monitoring, places disabled students into two broad categories for the purposes of monitoring:

- Specific Learning Difficulties, which “refers to a difference/difficulty people have with particular aspects of learning. The most common SpLDs are dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyscalculia and dysgraphia.”⁴
- Other Disabilities, which includes all other disabilities including mobility and sensory disabilities, chronic pain, and a huge diversity of other needs.

Whilst these categories may not be representative of individual experiences of disabled students, we believe comparability between primary research and the NSS is important.

A note on recommendations:

Recommendations will be listed at the end of each section. Due to the overlapping nature of this report and the recently published Student Voice Report, there are a number of recommendations listed that are inspired by (or taken verbatim from) that report. Where this is the case, it will be made clear.

⁴ <https://www.soas.ac.uk/studentadviceandwellbeing/information-for-staff/disabledstudents/learningdifficulties/>

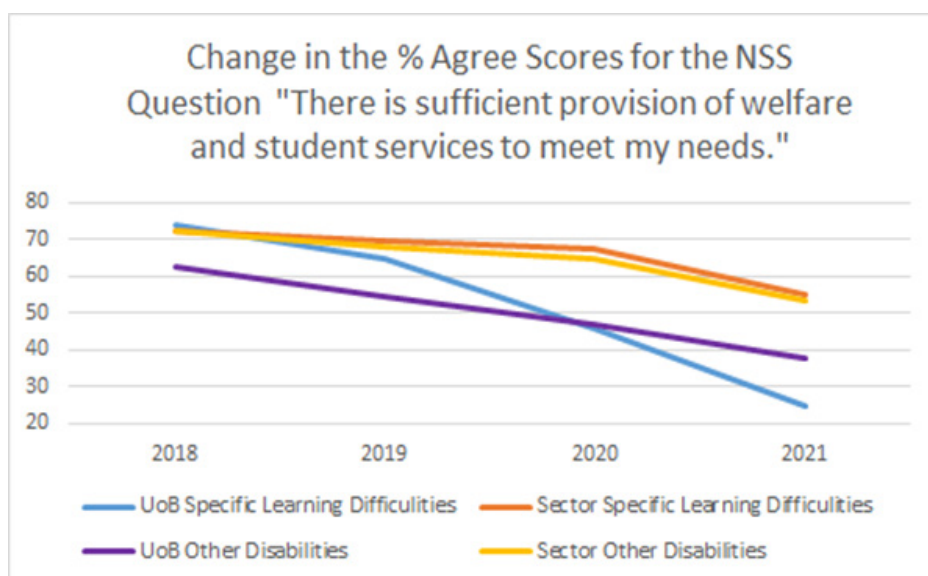
Findings

The Commission's findings are organised thematically based on trends emerging from the Commission's research. Each theme will contain recommendations based on the issues outlined. As noted above, all responses have been anonymised and any language which might identify a student has been removed.

Welfare and Wellbeing Support

The NSS 2020 saw significant and dramatic declines in satisfaction with welfare support for disabled students – this decline was among the catalysts for the formation of this Commission. Unfortunately the NSS 2021 sees a continuation of these trends, as figure 1 demonstrates.

Figure 1



Crucially, figure 1 also demonstrates that this is a trend specific to UoB, rather than a generalised trend visible across the sector. The way in which disabled students' define 'welfare and student services' extends beyond the specialised services. This was borne out through our research. A theme in many of the responses, was the feeling that students must constantly chase up their own support. One focus group attendee said:

“The fact we have to keep chasing things and making sure that the people who are supposed to be supporting us are doing their jobs, is ridiculous. I don't know how anyone can say the system we have at the moment, works. The only reason I'm able to get the things I get is because I know people who have gone through it before.”

There also seems to be a particular problem with staff who are not directly responsible for welfare being poorly equipped to effectively signpost or provide even basic support. A focus group attendee stated:

“The people who aren’t directly responsible for welfare, who actually get my extension applications don’t offer me anything... A lecturer said to me ‘You seem very stressed, you should try taking a warm bath’. When I email you saying I’m struggling due to my disability and you say I need to come up with better ways of managing my time, that’s not useful to me. If they do try to support you, they just send you that same link to the intranet mental health support services that is not helpful.”

Leave of Absence

A trend that emerged in both our survey and focus groups was students reporting that staff would often recommend they take a leave of absence when they are struggling, with one student stating:

“They tried to manipulate me into taking a leave of absence or finishing with a reduced level of qualification.”

Another said:

“I was told I should take a leave of absence....I was told while it was optional, if I didn’t take it there would be a board meeting to consider whether I was fit for final placement and that I would fail and be kicked off the course”

The student in the first example was able to resist the push to a leave of absence with the support of a Disability Advisor and, after getting the support they needed, graduated with a good degree. The student in the second example took the leave of absence but now says they regret it.

Our initial research highlighted a number of examples in this area, so we circulated a supplemental survey to those who had consented to further communications, asking about their experiences. **48% of our respondents reported that it had been suggested that they take a leave of absence at some point, of that 57% disagreed that steps had been taken beforehand to try and support them to stay in their studies**, with only 13% agreeing. While there are many instances where a leave of absence is the appropriate step to benefit students, it is important that this is not seen as a quick fix or the only immediate solution. Disabled students will still need support when they return, and in many instances will need additional support to facilitate their transition to study. When asked why they didn’t take a leave of absence, one student stated:

“I have take [sic] one leave of absence [sic] previously. I have declined further leave of absences as it is really difficult to return to university after taking a leave of absence due to health reasons moreso [sic] when there has been no improvement or change in your health needs.”

A number of students articulated similar frustrations during a focus group:

“I was not supported to transition back into University...Nobody has got in touch to check how I’m doing.”

It is vital that staff are equipped to support students who are struggling to make the right decision for them. This requires that staff understand how to effectively signpost support services and to understand the range of support available, rather than rushing immediately to a leave of absence. The Commission appreciates that these conversations can be difficult, and that many staff will feel this is far outside their area of expertise.

Recommendations:

- All student facing staff should receive training on how to effectively support disabled students, including how and when to support them through a leave of absence.

External Students

A number of disabled students have also expressed frustration about feeling forced to become 'external students', as a result of their disability. This can limit or remove the amount of academic and wellbeing support they are able to access while completing their degree, with experiences of support whilst an external student, being inconsistent across the University. One student said:

"I am an external student because of my mental health condition and feel completely left out and not engaged as a student anymore at all."

Disabled students are at more risk of becoming external students, by virtue of their additional needs; we remain concerned that we do not have full information on this issue, and further research may be needed on practices and experiences.

Recommendation:

- That the University and Guild engage in a formal review of the external student process that includes:
 - The impact of the process for disabled students
 - Comparing the process with that of similar universities
 - Whether the support external students receive, is adequate
 - Whether steps could be taken to prevent an excessive number of students becoming externally registered

Support Staff

This report notes that both the Commission's research and the NSS 2021 featured a strong core of positive comments about the central Disability Services Team and the support they offer. One student reported that, when they were struggling to have their Reasonable Adjustments implemented, being able to have a Disability Advisor in the room changed the dynamics in support of the student, stating:

"My disability advisor was the only one who I felt had my back and gave me sound advice."

However we have also seen examples of the limited capacity of this core team, which sometimes means that students do not receive a universally high level of service. Another student stated that when they applied:

"[When I registered my disability with the University] I wasn't given a Disability Advisor or told that this was an option for me. I wasn't told I was entitled to DSA or what it was... I happened to make friends with someone on my cohort who told me about DSA and Disability Advisors."

They were later told that this was due to limited staff capacity at the time they registered, however this was only after significant chasing.

Being able to access timely, appropriate support is critical for disabled students to engage fully with their studies. Universities have a duty to facilitate this.

Recommendation:

- In line with all of the changes recommended as part of this report and increasing student numbers, the appropriate scale and distribution of staffing resource of disability support staff is given due consideration.

Learning, Assessment and Reasonable Adjustments

Although learning and assessment was not a major area of concern in the NSS data, there were two main factors that led to this being a key area of inquiry. Firstly, the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a move to online or hybrid teaching throughout the academic year was of concern to the commissioners, who felt that access needs could easily be forgotten. Secondly, it was clear from NSS free text comments and our conversations with disabled students, that their interpretation of the NSS “Welfare” questions was broad, and included the support and communications they received from academic staff around the implementation of reasonable adjustments in teaching and learning.

Table 1: Disabled Students’ Commission Survey Learning, Assessment and Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) Questions, Compared By Access Needs

	Specific Learning Difficulties % Agree	Other Disabilities % Agree
My access needs have been fairly accounted for in my learning	21%	35%
My access needs have been fairly accounted for in my assessments	44%	45%
Academics generally understand what they are supposed to do to accommodate access needs	21%	35%
The process of getting a RAP was easy	58%	56%
My RAP reflects my needs	67%	72%
My School or College implement my RAP	58%	61%
Academics understand what a RAP is	36%	53%

Note: Respondents to the questions relating directly to RAPs, had confirmed that they have a RAP.

Table 1 illustrates the nuances between the views of disabled students about these issues. RAPs were, by a significant margin, the most discussed area in qualitative survey feedback and discussions as part of this research. From our qualitative data, it was clear there was a trend of disabled students feeling forced to chase and remind academics of their needs, as outlined in their RAPs. Whilst students feel generally positive about the contents of their RAPs, the implementation of such requires significant, routine effort by the student. In response to a survey question, one student said:

*“Someone with a RAP should not be expected to **have to come back and ask again and again for adjustments that should be included**”*

Another said:

*“Even when adjustments are on a RAP, **there are often disputes over their actual implementation.**”*

A number of focus group attendees expressed frustration regarding RAPs. One stated:

*“I felt like ‘why did I have the RAP in the first place if I was going to **need to chase it up all the time**’.”*

Another said:

*“It feels like the **staff in my department feel like it’s not their responsibility**”*

Guild Advice frequently support students who struggle to have their RAPs implemented:

Guild Advice Case Study 1:

*“Due to having several disabilities and a RAP not being adhered to, **this student has utilised multiple extensions and required 2 extensions to the maximum period of registration.** Despite this, the student still faced issues with the school not adhering to their Reasonable Adjustments Plan.*

This student ended up submitting an academic appeal which was upheld on the grounds that the student had clear evidence that their RAP was not being adhered to.”

Guild Advice Case Study 2:

“This student felt forced into a voluntary withdrawal from the University.

This student was so badly affected by the University they chose not to appeal the withdrawal and left without completing the degree.

*The student shared that their **RAP was regularly disregarded throughout the several years they were at UoB.***

The student voiced that the Admin processes around maximum period of registration amongst others were detrimental to their health.”

Guild Advice Case Study 3:

*“A Second Year student with a RAP, **was not given extra time for an online assessment and only found this out whilst sitting the assessment.***

*This student has been proactive in ensuring RAP adjustments are in place however they **often received replies to queries in relation to the RAP after the date they needed a response by.***

*This student has been left increasingly frustrated by also hearing that **students in other schools have been given the extra time as requested in RAPs.***

Experiences such as these do not appear to be particularly uncommon, but they also seem to be unevenly distributed between the colleges, as table 2 reiterates.

Table 2 Disabled Students' Commission Survey Learning, Assessment and Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) Questions, compared by College

	Arts and Law	Engineering & Physical Sciences	Life & Environmental Sciences	Medical & Dental Sciences	Social Sciences
My access needs have been fairly accounted for in my learning (% Agree)	33%	38%	41%	12%	25%
My access needs have been fairly accounted for in my assessments (% Agree)	37%	58%	55%	35%	46%
Academics generally understand what they are supposed to do to accommodate access needs (% Agree)	38%	23%	27%	12%	39%
My School or College implement my RAP (% Agree)	61%	60%	70%	47%	60%

A student's area of study should not have such a significant impact on the implementation of their Reasonable Adjustments. The Equality Act makes no such distinctions, and neither should processes at the University. It could easily be possible that a disabled student on joint honours degree could have quite significantly different experiences between the two Schools they are based in; a situation that would be highly problematic.

The Commission notes that the University recently reviewed the RAP application process in line with the STARs project plan. However, we note that a key barrier to disabled student satisfaction and success, is the local implementation of the RAP and the communication between University departments. It appears that there is significant improvement needed here.

Recommendations:

- The review of Reasonable Adjustment Plans should consider disabled students as important stakeholders, and include processes and guidelines for implementation at School/ Departmental level, such as:
 - A clear, simple and timely process for students to raise concerns about the implementation of their RAP.
 - Building on the Student Voice Report recommendation, the Disabled Students' Commission asks that disabled students are involved in key decision making in this process through representation on the project board.

Accessibility of Resources

Access to appropriate resources for disabled students to be able to fully engage with their studies has been a constant struggle for many students we spoke with. Despite being included on RAPs, students had trouble securing resources before COVID-19. One student in our focus group said:

*"My main issue isn't that the **RAP won't be implemented.... I ask every year for lectures to be recorded and it's refused.** I'm told that it's because we're studying social work and it's confidential – but we have to sign a confidentiality agreement at the start of the year..... I email a lecturer to say that I've missed the lecture or seminar [due to my disability] and **I'm pointed to slides with a few sentences on, or I'm told to catch up with course mates. I've had to re-do a year and am with a new cohort I haven't had chance to get to know them so I can't ask them.**"*

Another student spoke of the experience of their disabled housemate, saying:

*"I know that my housemate asks for lectures to be recorded and they're told that they use examples from industry and they're confidential. **I don't understand why they can't pause the recording or make other adjustments.**"*

Many of the students who responded to our survey or spoke to the Commission, talked about how COVID-19 necessitated online learning that had led to some quite rapid improvements in this area. There were some students who expressed frustration at this dynamic:

*"Before COVID we were told that notes and recordings were impossible, suddenly everything is. **If disabled people are struggling we won't do anything, but when other people are struggling we'll do all we can.**"*

Universities have an anticipatory duty to ensure that resources are accessible for all courses – meaning they should not have to wait for disabled students to ask for such adjustments for them to be made.

Recommendation:

We recommend that staff receive clear guidelines on what resources should be placed online, how to ensure they are easy to access and the level of quality expected. Due to Universities anticipatory duty under the Equality Act, this should not only be forthcoming when a disabled student asks for it – it should be the default.

Placements

The experiences of disabled students on placements had been raised a number of times with the Guild's Disabled Students' Officer prior to the launch of the commission, and therefore was included as a line of enquiry in both the survey and the qualitative follow up.

Table 3: % Disagree scores for students on placements

	% Disagree
My access needs were considered by the University when organising my placement	60%
My placement provider was able to meet my access needs	55%
I feel confident that if I needed adjustments to be made to my placement based on my access needs, they would be accommodated	65%

As Table 3 demonstrates, the students we spoke to faced significant challenges on placements - with a many students feeling as though their needs are not accommodated and that they are unable to raise issues. Several students were unsure how their RAP would be communicated to their placement providers and whether all their access needs would be met – in an interview, one student said:

*“My RAP was not forwarded by [my school] to my placements, **nor did they listen to my concern regarding distance, navigating campus nor deadlines.**”*

Another felt that their School *“do not know how to handle industrial placements.”*

Guild Advice have also supported a number of students who have dealt with issues relating to their placement, and provided the following case study:

Guild Advice Case Study 4:

“PhD student with several disabilities and a Reasonable Adjustments Plan. This student had difficulties on a placement were they did not cater for their disabilities and disregarded the RAP. This student consequently had to move between several different locations with a lot of equipment and travel distances around the campus, this had a significant impact on their academic performance.

This student was left feeling that they had to ‘just endure it’ or quit”.
The University held meetings regarding the students’ needs without inviting the student.

The student raised concerns with the University and was given the option of taking a leave of absence or withdraw with a lower qualification.

Student raised a concern with placement about lack of support and unprofessional behaviour of placement mentor.

Student was withdrawn from placement after student raised the complaint.”

Another student reported having issues with even quite basic access needs being accounted for by their School:

*“I have had problems with being told my placement locations far enough in advance to access my taxis that are funded by student finance. **[My School] would not tell me any sooner than everyone else and as a result I did not have my taxis in place for the start of term. I gave them 3 months’ notice”***

It is vital that Schools understand that their duties to provide adjustments does not stop when students go on placements. **Reasonable Adjustments are required by law in both education and the workplace**, and we have spoken to a number of students who have simply been told that this is just ‘how things are in the workplace’. This is not the case. Workplaces are legally required to make adjustments for employees. **Most of the experiences raised as part of these discussions are too specific to discuss in this report whilst ensuring anonymity is maintained, but we were concerned by how many of them included examples of what appear to be basic employment rights being poorly understood, or ignored.**

Whilst we acknowledge the importance of assessing a student’s ability to meet competencies on professionally accredited courses, many of the issues faced by disabled students on their placements, such as manual labour, are not included on lists of required competencies for such courses.

Outside of our formal line of inquiry, Commissioners have also spoken to students who have experienced:

- Not allowed to join early seminars that are based in the placement provider via Zoom, when this is the time the student struggles with their disability the most; rooms are set up for virtual consultations so this should be easily accommodated – the explanation given was that those are the hours the student should be in placement anyway.
- Scheduled to evening / night shifts despite Occupational Health excusing them on health grounds.
- School sending RAPs to placement coordinators, but no formal acknowledgement of receipt or action, so these often get missed.
- Assumptions that the student should solve the problems caused by inaccessibility; often asked what support they need, but these are new situations and environments so it is really difficult for students to know what help is available or what to ask for.
- No ability to extend placement years (complete one year over the course of two) despite the ability to do this once qualified.
- Solutions often involve suggesting a leave of absence is the most appropriate route, but no support offered whilst on leave and no support when students return. This combined with the fact that in most cases a student retains their disability when they return, means the problems remain.
- RAPs being too generic to be properly implemented and monitored, requires much more effort for the student each time they change placement.
- Student with a disability asked, by a practitioner, to be the patient so that the other students could learn and benefit from the student’s condition.
- Frequent responses of ‘just don’t do that’ when asked for support to access opportunities, for example going to surgeries, on-call shifts (12 hours), specific skills.
- Stigma from other students around disabled students getting extra support; generally thinking they are not getting treated equally.

We note that Reasonable Adjustment Plans are developed primarily with learning and teaching in mind. **We therefore make the following recommendations for all placements at the University of Birmingham:**

- That all students with RAPs or disclosed disabilities are given the opportunity to discuss their placement ahead of time with an Occupational Health practitioner, in order to discuss the adjustments they need in the workplace.
- Once these adjustments are agreed, the University should work to find a placement that can accommodate these needs.
- Placement vetting must ensure that all placements are aware of their requirements under the Equality Act and given guidance prior to the start of the placement regarding how best to support disabled students.
- Where possible, extended placements should be offered to disabled students; allowing one academic year to be completed over two.
- In instances where a placement provider cannot accommodate the needs of a disabled student, an alternative placement should be found for that student as a matter of priority.
- Disabled students should be made aware of their rights in the workplace and be given a clear point of contact to make any concerns they have regarding their placement.

Long COVID

A number of students are returning to their studies while experiencing what is known as 'Long COVID'. Symptoms vary, but include 'brain fog', fatigue, and issues with memory. This was not included in the initial NSS data, or our final lines of inquiry – but students did raise it as an issue with us that we believe required addressing. A student responded to the commission saying Long COVID has:

“made my studying experience harder, and means I have had to change the way I work, and unlearn ways of working that I have been used to. This is difficult at such a high level of education, and has proved extremely challenging. This adaptation of working is also alongside the difficulties and struggles of having long covid day-to-day. I have also had to **continue to have lengthy clinical appointments and physiotherapy to monitor my symptoms and my wellbeing, which is also extremely time consuming.**”

The Commission recognises that Long COVID likely fits into existing categories of disability and long term illness under the University's existing regulations, but recommends that:

- Long COVID is formally listed and recognised on relevant University web-pages and communications as a long term condition that warrants further support and Reasonable Adjustments.
- That any known student cases are offered Reasonable Adjustments and support.

Wider Student Experience Careers

From the National Student Survey 2021, we received valuable new data outlining how disabled students feel about their careers and the support they have received in this area. The primary area of concern for students with Specific Learning Difficulties relates to the advice on offer, as illustrated by table 4.

	UoB Specific Learning Difficulties % Agree	UoB Difference from No Known Disabilities	Sector Specific Learning Difficulties % Agree	Sector difference from No Known Disabilities
Good advice is available for making career choices.	40	-19.15	62.95	-1.11
Good advice is available on further study opportunities.	34.92	-26.5	59.86	-3.59

As table 4 demonstrates, there are significant gaps between students with specific learning difficulties and those with no known disabilities regarding the advice they receive relating to careers and further study. These gaps are minimal in the wider sector.

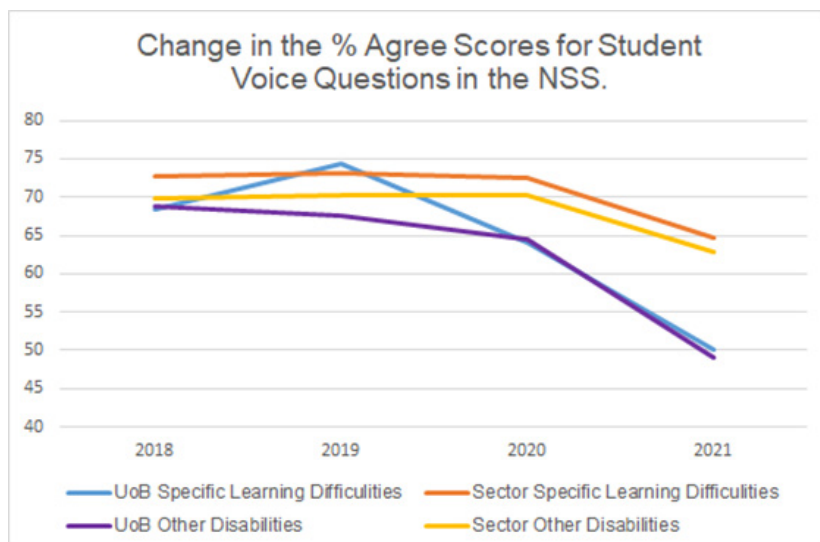
Recommendation:

- We recommend that the Careers team conduct a review into their offer for disabled students, learning from the good practice present elsewhere in the sector. This has previously been raised in the Student Voice Report, and we further recommend that active engagement with disabled students should be fundamental to that review.
- We also recommend that all academic staff receive training relating to disabled students and careers, highlighting the importance of sound advice and the support on offer.

Feedback and Student Voice

Student Voice as a category for disabled students refers to more than just how their feedback about course content is responded to. For many, it includes whether concerns about their basic needs are responded to appropriately.

Figure 2: % Agree Scores for the Student Voice Questions over time in the NSS



As figure 2 demonstrates, there has been a considerable decline in aggregated Student Voice scores in the NSS for disabled students at the University. A decline that has not been borne out across the sector as a whole. This reflects the feedback received by the Commission, which found that many students felt their feedback would not be acted upon. For example, one student stated in their survey response:

*“I have contacted the school on numerous occasions when **they haven’t done simple things such as providing notes before lectures but they didn’t do anything**. I had to fight to get extra time for an online test to the point where I had to get student reps to raise it as the lecturers weren’t listening to me.”*

Table 5: Student Voice Related Questions from the Disabled Students’ Commissions

	% Agree
I am confident that if I raised a concern about my access needs with my school or college they would respond appropriately	38%
I am confident that if I required further adjustments relating to practical learning and assessment, they would respond appropriately (including only those who had practical elements to their course)	35%
I feel confident that if I needed adjustments to be made to my placement based on my access needs, they would be accommodated (including only those who had placements)	15%

Student Voice is fundamental to many issues experienced by disabled students. Despite repeatedly raising possible solutions to help them fully engage with their studies, students have been told these are not possible and given no alternatives. This repetitive lack of support cycle can be exhausting and frustrating for students, leading to a high dropout rate (as previously highlighted in Guild Advice case studies). This also reflects a culture where disabled students are not viewed as equal partners in discourse about their own experiences. There are limited resources of specialised staff and so little expert support available, leading to fewer options for resolution.

Recommendation:

- Guidance and the previously recommended staff training, should highlight the importance of listening to, and acting upon, the concerns of disabled students when they raise them.
- We reiterate the recommendation from the Student Voice Report that the Guild and University should partner on a Disabled Students participation action research project, with agreed actions and progress reported via a Student Academic Engagement Committee.

The Guild of Students

The Guild of Students has also seen declines in their NSS scores from disabled students. From 2019 to 2021, the response of disabled students to the question “The Students Union effectively represents students’ academic interests’ ” has declined from being nearly identical to those with No Known Disability to gaps of 4% points and 8% points for those with Specific Learning Difficulties and Other Disabilities respectively.

In responses to the Commission’s survey, some talked of feeling as though the Guild does not seek out their opinions. One student stated:

*“Disabled students are less visible in the student population, and the effort isn’t **made to seek us out.**”*

A number of responses talked about how the ongoing pandemic meant they had limited opportunities to engage with the Guild’s offer. Responses relating to the services offered were mixed and many seemed unaware of what support the Guild can offer – some praised services such as Guild Advice for their support, but others expressed frustration about feeling ignored. The most consistent message throughout was a **feeling that the Guild does not act as a voice for their concerns**, and a lack of confidence in it as an institution.

It is the Commission’s hope that the publication of this report, and the follow up efforts that the Guild will take to champion the issues raised within, will serve as the start of a step change in these attitudes. It also seems clear from the responses that many disabled students are not aware that Guild Advice are in a position to provide them with independent advice in instances where they wish to challenge actions taken by the University. We would therefore recommend that:

- Guild Advice are listed among the key services that disabled students can access in communications and induction for those students.
- That the Guild publish this report in full, and pledge to elevate the voices of disabled students to ensure its recommendations are implemented.
- That the Guild ensures that, moving forward, disabled students remain an important constituency, and regularly engages in two way dialogue to ensure their needs are being effectively represented.

Wider Conclusions and Next Steps

This report has aimed to provide a deep dive into the experience of disabled students at the University of Birmingham, and to unpack the trends that have caused the relative decline of the NSS scores in these areas.

Our research has demonstrated several areas of significant concern. We believe that there are a number of instances in which the spirit or letter of the Equality Act is not being implemented as it should be; in particular with reference to the rights of disabled students' to reasonable adjustments and the University's anticipatory obligation to ensure accessibility. We believe it is only a matter of time until some of these issues are escalated through the formal complaints process up to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

We have also set out recommendations that we believe could facilitate significant improvement. It is important that the approach to addressing this is not limited by the Medical Model of Disability, which views disability as the disabled students' 'problem' – and something that they simply must work to overcome themselves. Instead, we should adopt the Social Model of Disability⁵, which advocates for addressing the systemic failures of institutions, individuals, and wider society to build a society that disabled people can be fully part of.

In order to do this, academic staff, personal tutors, and all other student facing staff, must have a baseline understanding of how to build inclusive spaces and meet their obligations under the Equality Act, or this will, at best, be a half measure. This training must equip them to respond appropriately when disabled students articulate the issues they are having.

⁵ Further reading on the Medical and Social Model of Disability: <https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability/>

Appendix 1

Table 6: Comparing engagement with the Disabled Students' Commission Survey with University provided benchmark data

	Survey	Benchmark
White (White British, White Other)	88.89%	72.17%
Black African, Caribbean or Black British	1.01%	4.91%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	3.03%	6.33%
Asian (Including East and South Asian)	6.06%	8.45%
Arabic	0.00%	0.78%
Other ethnic group	1.01%	2.14%
Male	18.00%	34.65%
Female	69.00%	65.06%
Non-Binary ⁶	15.00%	0.29%
Arts & Law	38.38%	29.00%
Engineering & Physical Sciences	25.25%	16%
Life & Environmental Sciences	20.20%	18%
Medical & Dental Sciences	11.11%	12%
Social Sciences	6.06%	24.00%
Undergraduate	86.00%	67.60%
Postgraduate Taught	10.00%	21.56%
Postgraduate Research	5.00%	10.84%

⁶ It should be noted that many Non-Binary students do not formally request their record on the University system be updated as part of their transition but as it is hard to know for certain what an accurate benchmark would be, this report opted to keep the comparison in the interest of transparency