The intersection between disability and deprivation

Given the focus and sheer amount of work undertaken in Scotland on fair access to higher education for those from deprived communities, and the interest of the Committee in the recent Commission on Widening Access, it is vital to recognise the intersect between poverty and disability, and the implications this then has for university access for disabled students – whereby issues of deprivation, and the unequal chances of access this raises, are compounded by disability and the lower levels of access and outcomes we know this also brings.

As the Scottish Government’s Income and Poverty statistics show, poverty rates - both before and after housing costs - remain higher in households with at least one disabled adult than those without (around 7 percentage points higher, in each instance). And, despite a positive trend of poverty rates decreasing among both groups, the gap between households with a disabled adult and those without have not.

Equally, given the use of SIMD as the primary measure of higher education access, it is important to consider than there is a higher percentage of people in deprived areas reporting a disability or long-term health condition (27%) than those in non-deprived areas (18%). The number of people with long-term health problems or a disability then decreases as deprivation deciles go up, with those in the most deprived decile being twice as likely to report one compared to those in the least deprived decile (13%).

The Commission on Widening Access set a national framework to improve access for students from deprived backgrounds, with that work set and measured by institutions through outcome agreements. Given that not only will deprivation compound disability, but also that many of the additional support identified for students from deprived backgrounds also be of use for disabled students, there is a clear opportunity for universities and national agencies to use the report to also provide a framework to improve access and outcomes for disabled students.
Disabled students in university

As official SFC figures show, in 2014/15 (the most recently available year), 10.8% of undergraduate entrants declared a disability. This is significantly below the corresponding figure in our colleges, where 17.5% of students declare a disability. And indeed, even within this college figure, disabled students are far more likely be found on further education courses (19.5% of FE-level students in college) compared to higher education courses (12.3% of HE-level students in colleges). This could, however, be expected to decrease in coming years as a result of a shift towards more full-time provision in colleges (as discussed below) and raising serious concerns for access to tertiary education.

While the figure of disabled student’s studying at university has grown over the last few years – from 8.5% in 2009/10 – the figures for disabled students access to university still remains far below their representation in society as a whole. That is particularly pressing when we consider that 50% of disabled people are in employment. Moreover, within the headline access figure, there is significant variation at a subject-level, from lows of 7% of students declaring a disability up to 14.9%. Both interestingly and (perhaps) positively, the difference in proportion of students declaring a disability studying STEM and non-STEM subjects is relatively small. However, while on the surface this would imply that we are seeing many of the barriers that have previously existed for disabled students in accessing these courses taken down, there is no further breakdown of subject-level access and disability type, meaning it is difficult to know if we have truly broken those barriers down for all disabled students, not least given longstanding concerns around access to STEM subjects for those with specific learning conditions and physical impairments.

Retention and outcomes for disabled students

The success of our universities cannot simply be seen or measured by the number of students they admit. Ensuring those students are then supported throughout their studies, not least through to graduation, and seeing high quality outcomes is just as important as access. In Scotland, there remains a small gap in retention rates (of 0.5 percentage points) between disabled students and those who do not declare a disability. Moreover, given the

---

1 SFC, Learning for All, http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Statistical_publications_SFCST062016_LearningforAll/SFCST062016_Learning_for_All.pdf
intersection between disability and deprivation mentioned previously, there also persists a larger gap in retention between students from deprived backgrounds and all others of 3.2 percentage points.

Lower retention rates would indicate a need for greater, and more targeted, support – and the outcomes of disabled students and their peers would seem to bear this out. Among students in Scotland not declaring a disability, 74.8% achieve a 1st or 2:1 – the equivalent figure for all disabled students is 70.8%. This reflects a pattern across every UK nation whereby disabled students see lower attainment at graduation than their peers. Interestingly, however, the figures increase for those disabled students in receipt of DSA. In Scotland, 70% of disabled students not in receipt of DSA receive a 1st or 2:1; 72.2% of disabled students who are in receipt of DSA do so. Again, this increase in attainment among disabled students in receipt of DSA is reflected across the UK, indicating that where targeted support is provided to disabled students they have greater attainment levels.2

Ultimately, the lower levels of retention and attainment then follow disabled students post-graduation. Across the UK, 60.5% of non-disabled students go on to full-time employment after graduation, compared to 53.2% of disabled students, and 5.3% of non-disabled students are unemployed 6 months after graduation, compared to 7.7% of disabled students.

This inequality continues into later life, with disabled people being more likely to have lower or no qualifications and to be unemployed. The Labour Force Survey shows that people with disabilities in the UK are significantly more likely to have no qualifications than their non-disabled peers and, conversely, that they are more than twice as unlikely to have a degree or equivalent qualification3. Clearly, doing more to ensure we support disabled students to enter, and supporting them to remain there, is key to ensuring we boost the participation and outcomes of disabled people in our society. As part of that, and again identified more generally by the Commission on Widening Access, there are opportunities to reform the admissions process, to encourage more contextualised applications from students, and also to address the pastoral support provided for students once in education.

---

Support for disabled students

As part of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), the Equality Act requires colleges and universities to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. In addition to the PSED, the Equality Act requires all education providers to make reasonable adjustments so disabled people can access and participate in education.

Deciding on which institutions to apply for can come with extra complications for disabled students, who may need to check that an institution’s accommodation - if they are not staying at home - and local area suits their needs. Students may need to check university policy on installing equipment or adapting rooms, or whether a room will be provided if they have a personal assistant. Previous research undertaken by the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign\(^4\) highlighted accommodation – and the lack of clear information, or information that fails to cater to specific needs and circumstances – as a barrier for disabled students.

Disabled students should be free to choose where they study based on the same factors as everybody else, rather than where they can expect to have their needs best met. Support for disabled students’ support should be consistent across all institutions, between different faculties and courses, and available to everyone with a disability. It should not be a ‘one size fits all’ service, however, but tailored to the needs of the individual student. There must also be an appropriate framework in place to allow students to appeal any decisions that are made and hold public bodies to account for their actions, through processes that do not endanger their reputation or success while studying.

Key to that is ensuring there is a robust and transparent approach to providing reasonable adjustments, again a requirement of the Equality Act. Reasonable adjustments can include providing students with extensions to coursework deadlines, extra time or different facilities in exams or providing learning materials in a readable format such as braille. In terms of admissions, this may mean providing alternative formats for the application process but would not require institutions to offer a lower entry tariff for disabled applicants.

\(^4\) [http://www.musculardystrophyuk.org/assets/0004/4737/Trailblazers_-_University_Challenge_2013.pdf](http://www.musculardystrophyuk.org/assets/0004/4737/Trailblazers_-_University_Challenge_2013.pdf)
Finally, there is also the complex interaction between the student support system and the benefits system, which without personal advice and support could mean the most vulnerable and in-need students lose access to vital support or in extreme cases can even drop out of education (or simply not go in the first place) for fear of losing their access to benefits.

While not many full-time higher education students are eligible for benefits, those that are will be the most in-need of additional support, including disabled students. Disabled students in higher education can continue to claim Personal Independence Payments and, in certain circumstances, ESA and Housing Benefit. However, there are complex rules in place for these, not least what it means for receiving both benefits and student support. Any living cost bursaries or loans received and - most worryingly - DSA is counted in full against benefits eligibility, for the purposes of income disregard. This means many students, as a result of having student support, could see their benefits either stopped or reduced.

In higher education there is an additional worrying factor in that previous NUS Scotland research has shown that significant numbers of students do not take on a living cost loan, but that is particularly pronounced among those at lower household income levels – and again we have seen that disabled people are disproportionately likely to be in low income households. However, in higher education, even if a student chooses not to take out their full support, the maximum amount they are even entitled to counts as income. This means that some of the most in-need students are the same ones who are choosing not to take out a loan, but for benefits purposes they will be treated as having done so, facing a double loss. There could be additional concerns among disabled students about not taking on a student loan, and increased fears of debt, which may result in them not taking on a loan – but they still stand to lose benefits entitlement regardless of whether they actually take this on or not.

**Financial support: Disabled students allowance**

For disabled students, the main form of additional support (over and above the mainstream system of grants and loans) is Disabled Students Allowance, DSA. DSA is made up of three main components: the basic allowance, for ‘consumables’, e.g. braille paper, worth up to £1,725 per year; the large items allowance, which is to cover things that students use
during the entire duration of your studies, e.g. specialist laptops, worth up to £5,160; and, the non-medical personal help allowance, which is for personal support – e.g. employing a scribe – worth up to £20,250. SAAS will also occasionally pay for travel expenses for students who are unable to take public transport and require specialist transport, taxis, etc.

The amount paid out in DSA is demand led and dependent on individual students’ needs and circumstances in any given year. As SAAS figures show,\(^5\) in 2015-16, £7.73m was provided through DSA to 4,355 students – an average of around £1,780 per student. Table A12 in the referenced statistics shows a detailed breakdown of students receiving DSA by disability, and shows that dyslexia remains the largest disability type accounting for DSA payments, at around 40% of the total budget.

The definition of disability used for Disabled Students’ Allowance has been narrowed to a medical model under the Equality Act 2010. This is problematic for students with certain conditions (such as fluctuating conditions, or mental health conditions) who will need to produce more medical evidence in order to become eligible for DSA.

A move to a rights-based model based on empowerment and accountability may be beneficial to students. This would focus on what students’ human rights such as a right to education and would frame the discourse around a student’s disability in more positive terms, with the onus being placed on what is acting as a barrier to a student’s right to education, as opposed to negative assumptions being made about a student’s abilities, especially for students with hidden disabilities, under the medical model.

Worryingly there is evidence that accessing benefits is already becoming more challenging, with research from the Equality Challenge Unit finding the proportion of disabled HE students studying in colleges and receiving Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) fell from 20.5% in 2012/13 to 17.2% in 2013/14\(^6\). ECU data also found Scotland had the lowest proportion of disabled HE students receiving DSA support in the UK – at just 30% compared to the national figure of 54.9%\(^7\). The uptake figures do increase in later years of a disabled student’s course, however, indicating that awareness of DSA only increases as a

---

student progresses through first year, meaning that they potentially miss out on vital funding in their first year, when it is especially important to ensure they feel supported and encouraged to stay in higher education.

Disabled students are often in particular need of their own equipment since they may be unable to go to the university to use any equipment on campus. Owning a laptop gives students the flexibility to work from home which can be the difference between completing a degree and not. While part-time work is an option for many students, disabled students may be unable to work and have to rely solely on others sources of many for basics such as food and rent, making DSA essential for equipment.

In research undertaken by NUS’ Disabled Students Campaign,\(^8\) DSA was cited by the majority of disabled students as being vital funding they relied on to complete their degree. 45 per cent of disabled students acquired their laptop through funding they received compared to only eight per cent of non-disabled students. Half (50 per cent) of disabled respondents have software installed on their device designed to help them with their disability. In most cases, they acquired it directly or indirectly via DSA which was mentioned by 98 per cent of disabled student’s respondents as the source of funding for their software.

However, research undertaken by the Snowden Trust – a charity that provides grants to disabled students – in 2013 suggested that the current DSA limits may leave too many students facing a shortfall. While it should be noted that this research applied only to England, we do not know whether a similar situation would exist in Scotland. However, as the Snowden Trust rightly ask: why, if a student has their additional disability related needs individually assessed, are the necessary adjustments identified not then made available.

We would welcome greater research being undertaken in Scotland to determine whether students here face a similar shortfall in funding.

More generally on the issue of DSA, in 2013 the Scottish Government undertook a small scale review of the system, to determine if any reforms were needed in the system. In

---

\(^8\) https://nusdigital.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/10467/ffffa84b36928cdca71b3d4968ff79e8/Degreesofdiscrimination-researchbrief.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIJAJEAS56ZWKFU6MHNO&Expires=1479834413&Signature=nOn8huCDSLdt7RJe%2F1Z6zursLjg%3D
preparation for the review we undertook, in conjunction with Lead Scotland, a survey of students currently in receipt of DSA, to gauge their views on the current system, and ways they believe it could be improved. It was apparent from the responses that a very clear majority of students are satisfied with disabled students allowance, and clearly view it as an important, if not vital, contribution to their ability to access higher education. Where concerns or issues did exist, they tended to be primarily around communication and timescales, all of which we believe could be readily solved. On the main issues noted was that SAAS is responsible for the budget and payments, which can often make it quite complex and bureaucratic for students. As part of our response to the Scottish Government’s consultation, NUS Scotland recommended devolving budgets down to the institutional level, to allow for more personalised processes.

Additionally, if a disabled student is able to use public transport, they may be eligible for free bus travel across Scotland under the Scottish Government’s concessionary travel scheme if they meet the eligibility criteria. However, some may have additional transportation costs, such as needing to travel by taxi due to the unsuitability of public transport. The travel component of DSA may cover these costs but there are restrictions on the frequency of travel, with any travel outside of term-time needing to be signed off by a Disability Advisor. This may leave a student out of pocket if they want to travel to the institution’s library to study during holidays, for example. Institutions should work with local travel providers to maximise the accessibility of transportation to and from the institution.

**Student mental health**

Of growing concern among many students is the issue of mental health support, which can have a devastating effect on a student’s attainment and retention in a system where assessment often relies on how much you can remember at one particular point in time. Moreover, across the UK it is second only to specific learning difficulties as the most commonly disclosed disability type, and it is vital that students have access to the support they need to thrive in their courses and to enjoy their experience of college and university.
NUS UK undertook research (across the UK) to ascertain the level of mental ill health and wellbeing among students\(^9\), which can be paired with survey data from 2013 to discern a worrying trend in the severity of problems that students experience. Key findings from that survey included: 78% of respondents said they believe they have experienced mental health problems in the last year, (whether diagnosed or undiagnosed); 87% have felt stress; 77% have suffered anxiety; and, 69% have felt depressed in the last year.

Reinforcing the UK-wide research we have undertaken, NUS Scotland conducted research into mental health services, and the demand for it, at Scotland’s universities and colleges earlier this year. That research found:

- A 47% rise in the number of students enquiring about mental health support at universities and colleges in Scotland over the past five years
- An increase in resources available for mental health services over the past five years
- At institutions holding data on both enquiries and those receiving support, 1 in 9 students who enquired about receiving mental health support in 2014/15 did not go on to receive it

More needs to be done to make students feel safe enough to disclose their disability without fear that this information will be shared with third parties or negatively impact on the student’s academic career. Research from the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) into mental health at university found that just 0.8% of students in the UK have disclosed a mental health condition to their university\(^{10}\) - a figure far below the reality. One explanation for this could be the stigma that remains around mental ill health. However, of those students who did disclose and receive subsequent adjustments, 78% said it had a positive effect on their studies. Equally, moving to a new institution can prove a unique challenge for students.

Research carried out by NUS UK in November 2015\(^{11}\) found:

---


\(^{10}\) [http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/understanding-adjustments-mental-health/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/understanding-adjustments-mental-health/)

\(^{11}\) [https://nusdigital.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/23853/6a26ba206b6edb986abbeecf49b2f78e/Mental_Health_Poll_November_.pdf](https://nusdigital.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/23853/6a26ba206b6edb986abbeecf49b2f78e/Mental_Health_Poll_November_.pdf)
• 37% of respondents starting college or university in the next year were worried about what mental health support would be available at their new institution.

• 40% were nervous about receiving support from their new institution.

And, of the respondents who sought support:

• 67% sought it from their local GP
• Less than half (49%) sought it from their institution
• 39% sought it from their family.
• A third of students did not know where to go to get mental health support.

The survey highlights a clear need to signpost mental health services for all students – particularly new and transitioning students. The ways in which students’ access support, and the places that they rely on for their wellbeing, can also be impacted by the transition to a new institution. While we want to see mental health services available to all, special consideration should also be given to the groups most likely to suffer from mental health and who face additional barriers to accessing support such as post-graduate, mature, part-time, international and LGBT+ students. In addition, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and GP consultation data suggest that mental ill-health is more prevalent among those from more deprived communities\(^\text{12}\) - again raising serious issues for university access.

Young people in college or university between 16-18 years old are particularly vulnerable as they are in between youth and adult services and may face barriers in accessing support since they are no longer within the school system. These persistent concerns about the transition that young people make from children’s and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services (AMHS). The transition from CAMHS to AMHS risks a drop of provision, as adult services have different – often higher – eligibility thresholds, which mean that students who had previously received support may lose it. Creating a universal system of student support across Scotland, including access to counselling, would be welcomed to best support these students.

Provision of both CAMHS and AMHS also varies across the country – and some students who move away find that they no longer have the mental health support they had at home. In addition, students transferring to a new NHS board area sometimes find they have to go to the back of the queue to get the support they need. And they can face a long wait. Current Scottish Government treatment targets are that 90% of young people on the waiting list for specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services should be treated within 18 weeks of referral and 90% of adult patients referred for Psychological Therapy based treatment should also be seen within 18 weeks of referral. During the quarter ending December 2015, both the CAMHS and the psychological therapy targets were met by only five of fourteen NHS boards. It is clear that across NHS Board Areas there are substantial variations in performance and we would want to see portability of mental health services, ensuring that no student finds themselves back on a waiting list with no support should they move from one area to another for university or college.

Currently, there is no national requirement for colleges and universities to provide support such as counselling, and no national standard for the minimum levels of support institutions should provide. This means that there is a great deal of variation in services available. While many institutions provide advice and guidance services which can include counselling, financial advice, careers advice and health centres, the levels, type and provision of support varies from institution to institution. Some colleges have no internal counsellor, while some universities have up to 12 counselling staff, meaning the support available to a student is dependent on where they study and the institution they attend. Equally, many colleges are reliant on student placements for their counselling provision. The successful pilot of a counselling service at Fife College is clear evidence that there is a desire for access to counselling among college students. NUS Scotland strongly believes there should be a national requirement for institutions to provide mental health support at or above a set level.

In the long run, we want to see better data sharing initiated by the Scottish Government – including statistical information – between educational institutions and the NHS to identify trends. We recognise that the response of institutions to students’ mental health needs faces a number of challenges, including financial circumstances that have seen the reduction in available services and the limited disclosure by students of issues they may be
experiencing. Sharing data and identifying trends would allow resources to be used more effectively. In the absence of a national set of standards for mental health support, best practice should be actively shared to encourage national continuity.

The role of colleges
While the committee has chosen to focus its pre-budget scrutiny on universities, NUS Scotland would encourage you to consider broadening this out to look at wider tertiary education, including colleges. That is particularly important when we consider that still too often disabled pupils will have lower levels of attainment than their peers, college will often provide a vital route into not just further education and training, but also through higher education and the opportunity to undertake a college course before then articulating onto a degree programme.

Scotland’s colleges play a vital role in providing an opportunity for students from all backgrounds to access further and higher education, and for people to return to education to retrain or upskill. For many of these students—due to their circumstances, responsibilities, and other factors—studying full time will simply not be an option. However, since the process of college regionalisation began, there has been a much greater focus on full-time courses, at the expense of part-time ones. As such, while we recognise the focus on full-time courses to boost youth employment, it’s clear that such a strategy runs the risk of excluding those who need a place most.

As the recent Audit Scotland report showed, there has been a 48% decrease in part-time student headcount in Scotland. As the SFC’s Baseline Report for Academic Year 2014-15 notes, headcount isn’t always the best measure of activity, as one student can be enrolled on multiple courses. As such, the below figures (accessed through the Scottish Funding Council’s infact database) show the numbers of disabled college students studying part-time, but measured as full-time equivalents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability - Year</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>2013-14*</th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No known disability</td>
<td>33278</td>
<td>33814</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37466</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known disability</td>
<td>6045</td>
<td>6119</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5553</td>
<td>-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data for 2013/14 was undefined*

Previous efforts have been made, through the SFC’s budget, to provide additional resource for disabled students and we believe this should be done again, ensuring that funding is used to maintain provision for a diverse range of learners and we do not risk undermining national ambitions on equalities and access. That is particularly important when we consider the previous showing how the highest proportion of disabled students are studying on college FE courses – as such, it is vital that this provision is protected so as to allow for greater access to tertiary education, but also recognising that FE courses can then provide a stepping to HE and undergraduate courses.

For more information, contact Philip Whyte, Policy and Public Affairs Manager

Philip.whyte@nus-scotland.org.uk