



Considerations for disabled applicants to postgraduate study

Disabled Students' Commission

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1. Foreword

To go to university or college is a life-changing decision and choosing where and what to study is one of the biggest choices you will make. Higher education is an opportunity that should be available to all those who can benefit from it and no student should be disadvantaged. It is therefore the responsibility of all university or colleges to ensure that they are supportive and equitable so that all students can succeed in their study and prepare them for their long-term careers.

It is crucial that all students have the information that they need in choosing where and what to study, and it is particularly vital that disabled students are sufficiently informed so that they can make the choice that is right for them. This is why the Disabled Students' Commission has put together this guide for disabled students applying for postgraduate study; to help you through the process of asking the important questions of, and making sure you have the necessary support from, your prospective or selected university or college – *from the outset of your journey*.

As a disabled student, it is important that, prior to starting your programme, you have the assurance and confidence you need that your requirements will be met to ensure you have the best possible experience of, and outcomes from, your postgraduate study.

Geoff Layer, Chair, Disabled Students' Commission

Professor Geoff Layer, Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton

2. Introduction

As a disabled person applying to study a postgraduate course, you may feel unsure if your requirements will be met in relation to your research, learning, accommodation and socialising requirements. In addition, you may be expecting to teach while undertaking postgraduate study. Whether you are already in higher education, have secured a place for a postgraduate taught or research course or have secured a research stipend, this publication aims to help you by providing pointers and questions to ask to help ensure a smooth journey.

Adjustments and support will be provided by colleges and universities to enable you to complete your postgraduate study in line with the duty to make reasonable adjustments under the disability provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

Many of these adjustments are made through inclusive provision for all students. For instance, ensuring the library is accessible, installing assistive software on all student computers and providing records of lectures.

However, individual adjustments may also be provided and if implemented at the outset of your postgraduate study can reduce the likelihood of you encountering barriers during your course. Individual adjustments include the provision of equipment or support specific to your requirements.

This document contains a number of considerations that will help you to pre-empt any barriers that you could encounter and help to ensure that reasonable adjustments are implemented at the outset of your course.

The majority of questions can be asked of your college's or university's disability and wellbeing service. This is likely to sit within student services, although colleges and universities may have different names for their services.

If you are unsure of the person or service to approach, ask the student services or admissions team.

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At the outset, it is important to bear in mind that even if you have previously managed without reasonable adjustments, or if you know exactly what adjustments you require, the adjustments or support that you had during undergraduate study or in the workplace may not be appropriate in a postgraduate context. In comparison to undergraduate courses, postgraduate taught and research courses require more independent and in depth study or research, may require you to use a broader range of facilities and equipment, undertake different or longer forms of assessment, and present a longer and more detailed argument. Consequently, commencing a postgraduate course is considered a significant transition in a person's educational journey.

Some time may also have elapsed since you were last assessed for reasonable adjustments and technology, as well as what is considered reasonable, may have evolved during this time. Having different adjustments or having individual adjustments for the first time may be necessary to enable you to flourish.

All elements of your course will need to be considered when determining which reasonable adjustments are most appropriate, including the research environment, work placements, field trips, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies requirements, methods of teaching and learning and assessment.

You may not want to tell people that you are disabled as you may be worried that this could influence the outcome of your application, future employment or you may not view your impairment as a disability. Please keep an open mind and let university or colleges and research funders to which you are applying know that you are disabled. They all have processes in place to support disabled applicants and the earlier you tell them; the earlier reasonable adjustments can be implemented. You can also request that information about your impairment is not passed on. However, your university or college may then be limited in the reasonable adjustments it can make.

In the event a process does not work for you, do say something as it is likely that help can be provided and processes could be improved for others.

3. Guidance

3.1 Deciding where to undertake postgraduate study

If you are currently studying for a higher education course at college or university, you may feel that your requirements are being well met at your existing provider. It may have taken time to get reasonable adjustments implemented and consequently you may feel that you do not want to risk moving to a different provider to undertake your postgraduate study.

While this is completely understandable there has been quite significant changes in our equality law that have impacted on provision in higher education for disabled people over the past 15 years and we have seen increases in disabled students from 5.4% in 2003/04 to 13.9% in 2018/19 (Advance HE, 2020).

In addition, since 2017, the government has required all universities and colleges to reflect on their environment as a whole, not just their estates and ensure inclusive teaching and learning provision. In relation to research, research funders are increasingly requiring university or colleges to consider equality, diversity and inclusion in the research environment and the need to consider equality, diversity and inclusion have been integral to the UK's Research Excellence Framework in 2014 and 2021.

Given the increase in known disabled students today, universities and colleges are more likely to have experience of supporting students with similar requirements to you and they are seeking to provide inclusive provision in their teaching, learning and research environments. While you may feel your requirements are currently being met, have a look at a range of universities and colleges to find the course or supervisor that most aligns with your interests.

Factors you may want to explore when looking at different universities and colleges, provided in a checklist format:

The accessibility of transport including parking, the local area, your department, buildings, facilities and services – for a full list of questions to ask when visiting see page 20 of Disability Rights UK guidance Into Higher Education 2019	
Specific provision for disabled students and the experience of the disability and wellness staff of supporting students who have the same or similar impairments	
Whether there are disabled support groups and student societies that you are interested in that are accessible to you.	
Whether there is a medical centre and mental health advisers that are part of or linked to the university or college.	
If you require accommodation what types of adaptations are provided? Is there a list of adaptations (eg fridges to store medicine), is there wheel chair access and can you visit the rooms? Where is the accommodation located and do you need to liaise with the disability and wellbeing team or accommodation office to ensure that your requirements are met.	
If you are prioritised for centrally located accommodation, will this be the case for some or all years of study? In the event you are unable to leave your accommodation for more than a few days, who will be responsible for ensuring support – the accommodation office, provider or the disability and wellness team?	

<p>Is teaching and learning provided online and face to face or face to face only? Related to this, how frequently are you expected to attend teaching and learning activities?</p>	
<p>What facilities are available for your research? Do they all require physical presence or are some online?</p>	
<p>For masters level courses, what types of assessment method (eg examination only or course work) are commonly used? Does course work primarily comprise of written assignments or will you have the opportunity to submit your work in different formats such as videos and recordings? This may constitute a reasonable adjustment but some providers use a wide range of assessment methods for all students.</p>	
<p>What work placement and fieldtrip opportunities are provided?</p>	
<p>How will you be able to participate in your course in the event you cannot attend lectures, seminars, research facilities or meet deadlines because of your impairment?</p>	
<p>What systems or mechanisms are in place to facilitate dealing with issues, complaints, extenuating circumstances?</p>	
<p>Will your research supervisor and other people you will be working closely with have equality and disability awareness training?</p>	
<p>The careers support provided.</p>	
<p>The full-time and part-time study options available.</p>	

How will you be able to familiarise yourself with your surroundings and course prior to the commencement of your study?	
If you are eligible and require help, can the disability and wellness office support you with your Disabled Students' Allowances application?	

3.2 Funding for reasonable adjustments

While in higher education, personal care continues to be provided by your home local authority or the local authority in which you are studying in, depending on which is considered your main local authority. Ask your local authority as soon as possible about the support provided if you move area and how to access it.

University or colleges are required to fund inclusive provision in line with their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 but some adjustments related to learning are funded through Disabled Students Allowances' (DSAs) provided by Student Finance England.

If your PhD is funded by one of the seven UK Research Councils or the NHS, they have their own Disabled Students' Allowance schemes. For further information on the breadth of funding for postgraduate courses and the funding of reasonable adjustments see the [Disability Rights UK website](#).

You can apply for DSAs before you have an offer from a university or college and when looking into sponsors for your postgraduate studies can enquire about their provision for disabled students.

You are likely to be eligible for support if you have an impairment that affects your ability to study such as:

- + specific learning difference, for example dyslexia or ADHD
- + mental health condition, for example anxiety or depression
- + physical impairment, for example if you have to use crutches, a wheelchair or a special keyboard
- + sensory impairment, for example if you're visually impaired, deaf or have a hearing impairment
- + long-term health condition, for example cancer, chronic heart disease or HIV.

Further information on [eligibility for DSAs is available here](#). If you are experiencing financial hardship you may be able to [apply for help](#) to pay for a new diagnostic assessment.

If you are eligible for DSA, you will need to inform Student Finance England who will organise for an assessment of your requirements to be carried out. Further information on how to apply [can be found here](#). If you are concerned about the assessment or are not provided with information on how the assessment is currently conducted, you can ask [Student Finance England](#). If you have research council funding you are likely to need to apply for DSA via your institution.

Once you have received your assessment report, request a timetable from your chosen university or college's disability adviser that outlines when reasonable adjustments will be implemented. Ask for a response over email/in writing, in case of any delays before the start of the academic year.

Similarly, to schools and colleges, many universities and colleges use student support plans. Ask for a copy of your support plan and check for accuracy. You should be asked permission, in line with data protection regulations, for the plan to be shared with relevant staff members and departments so that they can implement support. If you are unsure of who it will be sent to or if you feel that it is being shared too narrowly or too widely, speak to the disability adviser.

3.3 Providing information about your impairment or condition

You are likely to be asked on a number of different occasions by different organisations and by different parts of organisations if you consider yourself to meet the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability e.g. when applying for research stipends, on your accommodation request forms and on registration.

This does not mean that they are not communicating. It is to ensure at every possible opportunity that your requirements are met and to enable universities, colleges and funders of research to monitor and evaluate their processes to ensure they are being inclusive of disabled people. If you are in doubt as to why you need to provide information, do ask as there should always be a purpose for asking questions about disability.

In addition, under data protection regulations, universities, colleges and research funders are required to store information securely, confidentially and ask for your consent to pass it on.

When you apply to study at postgraduate level you are likely to want to be assessed on your academic merit alone. However, if your impairment has impacted on your learning, providing information in application forms may be good evidence of perseverance, forward planning, time management and other attributes that university or colleges are looking for. If a university or college knows that you have an impairment and they require you to undertake an entrance examination or to have an interview, they will be able to contact you in advance of examinations and interviews to ensure that reasonable adjustments are provided.

Even if you feel that there is no reason for a university, college or funder to know that you have an impairment because you have not had any issues at undergraduate level or at work, you may have been benefiting from inclusive provision, be moving away from your usual support networks or your impairment could change. While university or colleges do offer inclusive teaching and learning and many are making their research environments more inclusive, you may require individual level adjustments in a postgraduate context or may simply require initial support.

Based on previous experiences, you may be worried about telling your university or college, tutor or supervisor about your impairment but the earlier you provide information on your impairment, the earlier support can be provided.

You can also specify who is informed about your impairment and any reasonable adjustments you require but in doing so could limit the support available. For example, if lecturers are unaware of the need to face you when speaking, you may struggle to follow your lecturers. At postgraduate level, particularly if you are undertaking a PhD you are likely to attend a lot of lectures on a range of areas related to your subject area so people outside of your department may need to be informed of your requirements.

3.4 Learning and assessment

On accepting a place, if you have not already done so, ask the head of department or your supervisor about the planned learning and assessment methods for your course and make sure that they are accessible to you and whether methods are the same across all elements of your course. If you do not feel that your university or college's inclusive provision, nor your needs assessment, adequately took into consideration the planned learning and assessment methods then speak to the disability and wellbeing office who will be able to organise a review.

In the event you are unable to study or research due to your impairment or another circumstance during the course e.g. pregnancy or death of a close family member, you can ask for an extension and mitigating/extenuating circumstance procedures are likely to apply. Details of the mitigating/extenuating circumstances policy should be provided by student services. Some universities and colleges or their students unions have support services for completing extenuating circumstances applications.

3.5 Study skills

People undertake postgraduate study at different points in their life and have a vast range of backgrounds. All university or colleges give study skills support which is likely to cover the IT facilities and programmes available, library facilities as well as essay and thesis writing, research and revision skills. Even if you have recently studied at undergraduate level, find out about the breadth of support available at postgraduate level and potentially in your new university or college.

3.6 Studentships

Studentships provide funding for postgraduate research students working on specific projects. Studentships are funded by universities, colleges or research funders. Universities and colleges will often advertise their studentships alongside jobs in newspapers or on their websites.

If you are applying for or have secured a studentship do take time to familiarise yourself with the terms and conditions as they will outline policies for continuation of payments if you are absent for any reason or your research is disrupted. Universities' and college's studentship terms and conditions will differ but those provided by UKRI via the seven Research Councils all have the same terms and conditions.

The [UKRI 2020 terms and conditions](#) state that research organisations in receipt of UKRI training grants, which include studentships are:

“expected to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion is considered and supported at all stages throughout the performance of the Training Grant, in alignment with Our [UKRI] policies and principles at: www.ukri.org/about-us/policiesstandards-and-data/good-research-resource-hub/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/ for equality, diversity and inclusion. Your [the research organisation] approach to supporting equality, diversity and inclusion is expected to exceed all relevant legal obligations, including but not limited to those of the Equality Act 2010.”

Payment of a Studentship must continue for absences covered by a medical certificate for up to 13 weeks within any 12-month period. If the illness lasts for more than 13 weeks, you must suspend the Studentship for the period beyond the 13 weeks.

3.7 Careers and work experience support

As some postgraduate courses are short, do consider finding out about the services offered by the careers service prior to or at the outset of your course. The careers service should have relationships with both local and national employers and they may organise careers fairs aimed at postgraduates. They can also help organise work experience and provide advice on how to market yourself to potential employers. University or colleges are also employers themselves whether you are looking to explore an academic or non-academic career.

Employers providing work experience are covered by the Equality Act and if a work placement is provided as part of your course, your university or college and the work experience provider will need to work together to ensure that your requirements are met.

3.8 Employment with your university or college during your postgraduate course

Some postgraduate students will undertake paid work for their university or college during their studies, PhD students, in particular are likely to teach alongside their research and others may work in administrative services, alumni relations or support events. If you undertake work for your university or college you will be protected by the employment provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

If you have reasonable adjustments in place for your postgraduate study you may also require them in employment but you may need new or different adjustments. If you have informed your university or college that you have an impairment in relation to your postgraduate course, you may assume that you should not have to tell them when you undertake employment. However, you will be dealing with different teams as in the majority of universities and colleges disability support for students is provided by the disability and wellbeing service and for staff, it is provided within human resources, often with the support of occupational therapy services which are either in house or external.

It is likely that the support you receive as a student will simply be continued but you may need to go through a different process and where you require reasonable adjustments such as specialist equipment, a support worker, sign language interpretation, or a taxi to or from your place of work, you may need to apply for [Access to Work](#). Access to work also covers employment after graduation and part-time roles while studying.

Access to work may also be used to cover the costs of reasonable adjustments should you undertake a work placement as part of your course.

Many universities and colleges are [Disability Confident employers](#) and a few have the [Disability Standard](#). Both of these initiatives relate to the support provided to disabled jobseekers and employees. They may also have networks specifically for disabled staff.

3.9 Mental health and wellbeing

Universities and colleges have a range of support available to all students focusing on wellbeing in higher education. Mental health support is key to this.

Starting postgraduate study should be exciting and liberating, especially commencing a course of study you have always wanted to pursue. But it can also be a daunting experience as you are meeting new people, in unfamiliar situations, you may be living away from your usual networks and will be required to undertake a lot of independent study.

Knowing what to expect can help reduce negative experiences.

Student Minds has found that the more a person knows what to expect from their course and the more familiar they are with their surroundings the likelihood of mental health issues occurring is reduced. Being familiar is also likely to reduce the likelihood of existing mental health issues being triggered or exacerbated. Student Minds offers [peer support and a range of resources](#).

Many universities and colleges offer postgraduate open days and even if you intend to study at your current or previous university or college it is still worth attending as the support provided to postgraduate students will be different to that provided to undergraduate students. You are likely to be provided with detailed information about your course and expectations prior to it starting and you can always ask when this will be provided and if it is not, if you could be referred to general information in terms of general reading and expectations of students.

If you currently receive mental health support you can talk to your chosen university or college's mental health service provider about the support that they provide and the methods, they use. Many universities and colleges have self-referral and walk in mental wellbeing services and others will operate an appointments based system for which there can be a waiting list. Some universities and colleges are also working in strategic partnerships with the NHS to provide support and treatment to students.

If you are moving away from your permanent residence you should talk to your current GP about accessing NHS mental health services while in higher education. Will you need to travel back to your permanent residence or will you be able to access your usual support via a different health trust and what are the current waiting times for support? Your chosen university or college's mental health service, may be able to support you while you transition between health trusts and it is advised that you check what support is available.

3.10 Complaints

If you do not feel that your application to study at the postgraduate level has been handled fairly or you do not feel that your requirements have been met, then you can complain both informally and formally.

You can contact student services or disability and wellbeing staff in writing or in person and request that they review your situation.

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If there is not a satisfactory outcome to an informal complaint you can complain formally. All universities and colleges have formal complaints procedures and you will be able to find them on their websites or request to be sent links to the process. If you are an existing student, your students' union may be able to advise you.

If you registered as a student and were not happy with the resolution [you can complain](#) within 12 months to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education

More information on complaints can be found at:

+ [Student Finance England](#)

+ [Office for Students](#)

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