

Applying to Higher Education

A guide for students with a physical/mental health
condition or learning disability

Introduction

Supporting a young person whose life is impacted by a physical or mental health condition or a learning difficulty is extremely difficult, even when they are living with a caring family and attending a supportive school. Knowing how best to help them to achieve their aspirations and move into adulthood, often starting with their application to university, is a terrain that feels even more challenging and uncertain.



I have written this guide because working as the GDST Consultant for Higher Education has given me more time to research an area of interest; an area that has developed partly through trying to support the students at Sheffield Girls' but also due to my experience with my own daughter who has OCD.

At the point my daughter was applying to university she (and we) had had many years of coping with her OCD but she was actually managing it better than she ever had. She was extremely reluctant to mention her condition to the highly competitive universities she was applying to as she felt strongly that this could be a reason to reject her. I admit that, at the time, I was worried about this too so we supported her decision to keep quiet about it.

Looking back, although we did manage to get some vital support in place when a crisis point was inevitably reached, it would have been so much better if we had involved the university from the outset. When we finally turned to her university's Disability Resource Centre, it did not magically make all the problems go away, but the help she received was crucial in helping her through her degree and successfully out the other side.

I have tried to make this guide as clear and concise as possible so that the people who read it can find their way through what feels like a complex system of support. In reality, I hope you will see from Tia's experience that she only had to reach out for help through her conversations with university support staff at open days and then through her UCAS application and everything else started to fall into place.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing but I know that if we had followed Tia's advice when my daughter was in Year 13, we would have avoided her getting to a confidence shattering crisis point before help was offered.

Part of any battle is knowing what you can ask for. I have tried to be comprehensive about the sorts of support that can be put in place but this is actually very individual to each student so please think carefully about what would make a difference, and don't be afraid to ask for more support once you get to university and experience a problem that never even occurred to you.

Finally, I would like to thank the following people for supporting and encouraging my research: Dr Gray Foster Felton, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo) at Notting Hill & Ealing High School and Trust Consultant Teacher for SEND; Tia Hardcastle a student at Sheffield Girls' whose own journey through the system helped to ground this guide in reality and Pippa Stacey, a former Sheffield Girls' student, whose generous and timely sharing of her own experience of studying while coping with chronic illness steered me towards writing what I hope will be a relatively simple self-help guide, rather than a research paper about university responses to equal opportunities legislation.

Carole Hall

Head of Careers, Sheffield Girls' and Trust Consultant for Progression to Higher Education

Getting Started

Choosing a degree that matches your interests, abilities and (possibly) your future career plans requires careful thought and considerable research for anyone.

If you have barriers arising from a physical or mental health condition or a learning difficulty it can feel like you have a mountain to climb.

However, it should be reassuring to know that many students before you have succeeded in gaining a place at their preferred university and have received the necessary level of support to achieve highly in their chosen course and have a good time along the way!

Here's how you do it.

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Making Choices

Going to university is a big financial investment but it is also life changing (in a good way) if you make the right choices and ensure you can access the support you will need.

Things to consider when choosing a course

- **Style of study:** you will need to think about how the balance of lectures, small group seminars and, potentially, practical sessions would work for you.
- **Contact hours:** these vary significantly between degrees and even between course modules. Consider whether it would help you to be able to choose when you want to do the majority of your studies and whether you can access elements of the course online if you are having a difficult week.
- **Course assessment:** A Levels have no flexibility as to when you take them, although where you take them should be discussed with your school's SEND Co-ordinator. Degree courses, though, have a great deal of variation in how they are assessed, with fewer universities relying on exams and many courses now being assessed on coursework alone.

To investigate all these factors, start by checking university websites and using the Unistats data on www.ucas.com. You can ask more detailed questions at university open days by talking to staff from the Disability Service or Admissions team. If you are unable to attend open days you can make contact by phone or email.

Things to consider when choosing a university

- Doing a full-time degree is not your only option. It is possible to study at your own pace through the Open University or study part-time or online at some traditional universities.
- Although going away from home to university is often seen as a rite of passage, there are many reasons why staying nearer home under the care of trusted medical professionals and supportive family or friends could be a key consideration.
- If you have problems with your mobility or a condition that can affect your breathing it is important to consider the location and amenities of potential university choices. A modern campus university, where everything is provided in one place, may work better for you. It's certainly worth thinking about whether a city full of hills or traffic fumes is your best choice.
- Explore university websites to check their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and ask more about this when you visit your preferred universities. A crucial part of making the best choices for you will be to seek out the disability support services teams at open days. Once they are aware of your situation they will be able to advise specifically on your condition there and then and will add your details into their system so they can keep you informed as to the tailored support they can offer.

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Disclosing Your Condition

You may have perfectly understandable concerns that universities will reject you if you tell them about your health problems or learning difficulties. However, the reality is that UK universities are committed to fair access so are keen to respond to and accommodate the support needs of their students. Disclosure is particularly important where your difficulties have affected, or are likely to affect, your academic achievement as admissions staff may be willing to make you a lower grade offer or encourage you to contact them on results day if you don't achieve their standard offer and be able to accept you with less.

Disclosure during the application process

1. The Personal Details part of UCAS Apply includes a Disability/Special Needs section. The drop down box allows students to indicate that they have a particular issue and the free text box allows them to describe their support needs. Using this will prompt the university's Student Support/Disability Service to make early contact with you to discuss the support that will need to be put in place while you are at university.

2. UCAS Reference. Universities encourage schools to use their references to highlight any issues a student has faced that might have impacted on their academic performance. This makes it really important that you make sure your school is fully aware of your individual circumstances. As there isn't room in the reference for much detail, it is often necessary for the school (usually the Headteacher or Head of Sixth Form) to follow this up with a letter to the admissions tutors at the student's chosen universities.

3. Letter from a medical professional. If you have an ongoing health problems and are intending to claim Disabled Students Allowance (commonly known as DSA – more on this later) you should also obtain a letter from a medical/mental health professional who has been working with you. You will need to send this to the disability services team at your Firm and Insurance choice universities. The easiest way to do this is to scan the letter into your preferred device and attach it to an email stating your name, UCAS ID number and the course you have applied for. The letter should be on headed paper, dated and signed and include:

- What your condition is
- When it was first diagnosed
- Whether it is likely to last for at least 12 months
- The impact (or potential impact) on your day-to-day activities/studies
- Whether your prescribed medications have side effects which may impact on your learning
- Any other information the medical professional thinks might help you access appropriate support while at university

4. Evidence of Assessment for Learning Difficulties. In the case of learning difficulties, universities will usually require evidence from your school and relevant external organisations (e.g. in the case of a diagnostic assessment for Dyslexia) that your needs have been assessed together with details of the measures that have been put in place to support you.

TOP TIP Ask your SEND Co-ordinator to give you copies of all the documentation the school has accumulated about your condition and support needs. Having all the relevant information in one place will really help you while at university and also when you are starting out in your chosen career.

5. Some universities (e.g. Sheffield and Liverpool) have a specific Disrupted Studies procedure which allows you and your school to jointly complete a form explaining the issues you have faced. Others will use their Access procedures to facilitate entry for students with specific difficulties.

You should be able to find details of these schemes on the Student Support/Disability Services sections of each university's website. It is a little confusing that this can be called different things at different institutions but the relevant sections should be obvious to you when you start doing your research. If not, you can contact Undergraduate Admissions so they can point you in the right direction or you can ask disability support workers at open days where they will be staffing a stand.

What Kind of Support is Available?

Universities have a very wide range of support they can offer as appropriate to individual needs. These include:

- Providing laptops, recording devices, printers, scanners, assistive software and ensuring course materials are in accessible formats
- Making sure buildings, facilities and accommodation are accessible and suitable for your learning
- Prioritising the need to live in a particular type of accommodation (e.g. with ensuite facilities) and help with covering the extra cost of different room types
- Arranging regular meetings with a mental health support worker or counsellor
- Providing additional support and extra time during exams
- Providing a note-taker for lectures
- Providing a mentor to help with general organisation and lifestyle
- Allowing additional time to complete courses

Disabled Students Allowance

Some universities (e.g. Cambridge) have developed their own student support funding stream which requires students to register and undergo an assessment of need with the university's Disability Resource Centre.

However, for the majority of students, access to the wide range of support on offer is dependent on the them applying for the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). This is non-means tested funding which pays for equipment, software, support or any additional study costs a student may incur as a result of a disability.

Key Steps to Receiving DSA

- Tick the relevant box in your online Student Finance application. You will be asked to provide evidence of your condition (usually by email).
- Once it is confirmed that you qualify you will be asked to book a Study Needs Assessment. You will be sent a link detailing all the assessment centres.
- Contact your chosen centre directly to book the assessment. Ideally this should be at the university you want to be your Firm choice. The cost of this assessment is covered by Student Finance England (SFE).
- Attend the Study Needs Assessment (travel costs can be reimbursed). This is essentially an informal chat to help the advisor understand a bit more about the impact of your disability and what adjustments can be made to help you. They will then talk through potential support options with you so you can reach agreement as to what would be most beneficial.
- After the assessment a report detailing the agreed recommendations is sent to Student Finance England. You will receive a copy of this.
- SFE will make a final decision as to what support they are willing to pay for and you will then be sent an Entitlement letter stating what your DSA will cover and giving further details about how to obtain the support/equipment.

What Next?

It is important to remember that universities can only act on what they know about you.

If you opt not to disclose personal information during the application process, you can report individual support needs directly to Student Support/Disability Services at any time during your studies. However, making sure your needs have been considered and that a support plan is in place on arrival will give you the best chance of settling well into university life.

It is possible that your condition may fluctuate during your time as a student so you will need to keep your university up-to-date with the difficulties you are experiencing at different stages of your course. This can be particularly difficult for students with mental health conditions as depression and anxiety can make it very difficult to reach out to sources of help or even attend appointments with counsellors or doctors. For this reason, some universities are starting to ask all students for permission to contact their parents or a trusted friend if there are signs that they are struggling.

Students often say that they chose a particular university because it 'felt right' when they visited. As a student with additional needs, feeling that a particular university offers the environment, flexible study options and easily accessible support that will help you to thrive is doubly important. Searching for the higher education options that fulfil all these criteria will take time and effort. Don't be afraid to ask your Head of Careers, Head of Sixth Form and, of course, your family to help you.

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Advice from Tia Hardcastle, a Y13 Student at Sheffield Girls'

"Knowing I wanted to apply to study Medicine with a bunch of ongoing physical health conditions requiring hospital care, as well as depression, made me a little apprehensive at first but as soon as I began the process I realised that being open and honest about my health issues was the best thing I could have done.

I was invited to interview at all four medical schools to which I applied and have secured offers to three of the four! All of the universities were very accommodating along the way, giving me extra-time/rest breaks where needed during my interviews. I also applied for a DSA which has supplied me with so much equipment to enable me to participate as much as I can in lectures and to use at my accommodation when I am too ill to travel to university.

I will also have a weekly contact with a specialist mentor to support my mental health. I would really encourage anyone to make early contact with the access/disability teams at all of the universities you are applying to as they have helped to arrange continuity of care in terms of therapy and have passed my details onto the relevant staff so I don't need to keep explaining my circumstances.

I guess my final advice would be please don't let any health conditions put you off applying to a course that you really want to do. Universities are so experienced in offering support and can find ways to alleviate and accommodate any issues or difficulties that you may face when studying. Disclosing my health information has in no way become a barrier to being accepted for my preferred course – in fact it has been quite the opposite!"

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Tia Hardcastle

And finally...

Here are some useful links to provide you with more detailed information about the sources of support that are available to you:

<https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/undergraduate-individual-needs>

<https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/wellbeing-physical-health/studying-and-mental-illness/>

<https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas>

I can also highly recommend a survival guide written by a former GDST student who lives with a chronic health condition. Pippa will take you further into your university journey and provide you with excellent advice about preparing yourself to make the most of your time as a student.

<https://www.lifeofpippa.co.uk/product/university-and-chronic-illness-a-survival-guide-by-pippa-stacey/>

I sincerely hope you will enjoy planning the future you really want and can now feel more confident about sourcing any help you might need along the way.

Onward and upward!

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