

How are Students with Special Educational Needs Supported in Accessing Higher Education?

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Abstract

In 2019/20, only 17.5% of students identified as having special educational needs (SEN) started higher education by age 19, compared to 47.5% of those without SEN. Students identified as having SEN, meaning they require extra support to access education due to their disability or condition, are underrepresented in higher education and face challenges in accessing university. Through surveying current undergraduate students identified as having SEN during their schooling and current educators working with post-16 students with SEN, and then exploring responses from follow-up interviews conducted with four students with varying needs and one specialist SEN teacher, this research aimed to identify what factors affect the continuation of these students to higher education and how schools and universities could adapt the application and transition processes to be more accessible. This gave an insight into what barriers and supports are in place for students with SEN from first-hand experience, insights which are generally missing from the existing discourse around widening participation in higher education. The research highlighted the importance of SEN-specific advice and support being provided throughout the process and the importance of schools and universities being proactive in addressing any issues arising. Furthermore, ideas around the implementation of a formal handover system were explored, including best practice in sharing information between schools and universities and how to address any possible difficulties in developing independent living, study and advocacy skills in students with SEN. These findings could be used to develop a more suitable and informed system for supporting the transition from school to higher education for students with SEN.

Introduction

Over the past few years, higher education has become increasingly accessible to students with disabilities; in 2020, 13.4% of UK domiciled accepted applicants had declared a disability on UCAS, compared to only 6.8% in 2011 (UCAS, 2022). However, there is still quite a way to go for this to be reflective of the 21% of working-age adults who identify as disabled (Department for Work & Pensions, 2022a). Improving the inclusion of disabled people in higher education is particularly important given its impacts on social mobility and outcomes in later life; the employment rate gap between disabled and non-disabled people decreases with increasing qualifications and is lowest for those educated to degree level (Department for Work & Pensions, 2022b). This research aims to identify some of the attitudes and structural barriers which influence a subset of the disabled population often most marginalised in education¹ – namely those with special educational needs – in their decision to continue to higher education, and what

¹ Whilst not all special educational needs would necessarily be considered disabilities in everyday life, in keeping with the UCAS definition of disability, where data is collected from a section marked 'Disability/Special Needs' explicitly including all long-term physical and mental health conditions and learning difficulties, here special educational needs are considered to be a subset of the disabled population.

universities and other higher education institutions can do to encourage and support these students.

The SEND Code of Practice defines a young person as having special educational needs (SEN) if “they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made”; a child has a learning difficulty or disability if “he or she has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions” (Department for Education and Department for Health, 2015). A medical condition or disability is only a special educational need if special provision is required for the student to be able to access the curriculum.

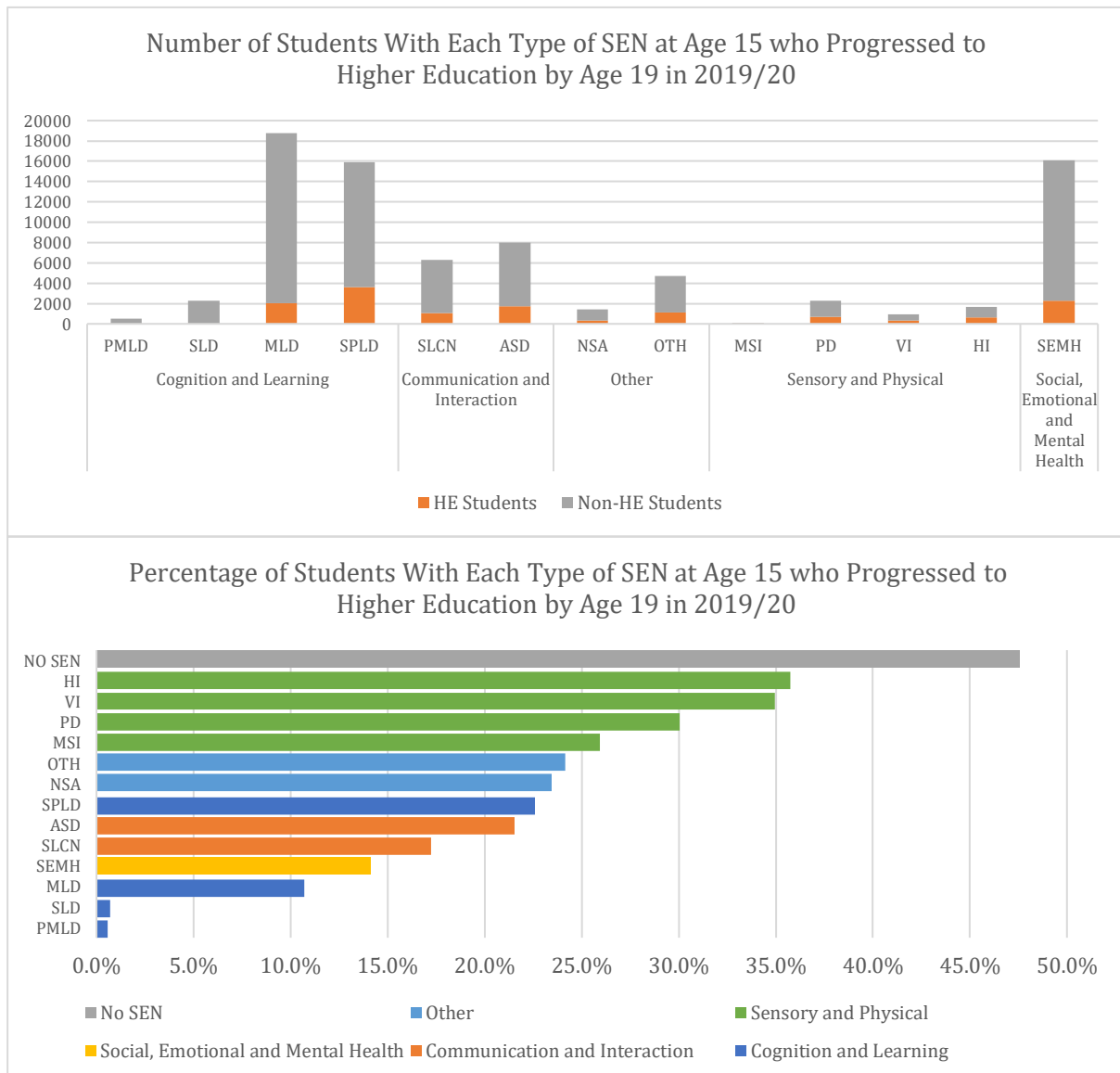


Figure 1: Statistics on progression to higher education by primary type of SEN (Higher Education Briefing Team, 2022).

Students with SEN are broadly categorised into four areas of need, where they are identified by what is seen as their primary type of need:

- **Communication and Interaction:** This includes children with conditions such as autism or speech, language and communication needs, who may struggle with understanding and using verbal language, non-verbal communication and social behaviours.

- *Cognition and Learning*: This includes children with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, who may struggle with one or more specific aspects of learning, as well as those with learning disabilities, who may need support in accessing all areas of the curriculum.²
- *Social, Emotional and Mental Health*: This includes children with mental health difficulties or conditions such as ADHD, who may have difficulties in regulating their emotions and behaviour or struggle to engage with education.
- *Sensory and Physical*: This includes children with physical disabilities and one or more sensory impairment, who may need specialist equipment and support to access the same opportunities in education as their able-bodied peers.

Considering the progression of those with SEN highlights that there is much still to be done in terms of inclusion in higher education: in 2019/20, only 17.5% of students identified as having SEN started higher education by age 19, compared to 47.5% of students with no SEN.³ For those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), typically those with the most complex needs, the progression rate was only 8.4% (GOV.UK, 2021). In particular, whilst those students whose primary needs are sensory or physical have the highest progression rate of students with SEN at 32.8%, students who have social, emotional and mental health needs or cognition and learning needs – particularly those with learning disabilities, who have a progression rate of just 10.4% – have significantly lower rates of progression to higher education (Higher Education Briefing Team, 2022). This correlates with findings in the existing body of research that students with invisible disabilities believe that their type of disability has affected them particularly negatively at university due to the attitudes of others in questioning the validity of their impairments, and that students with disabilities affecting academic and social adjustment are particularly challenged by the move to higher education (Moriña, 2016).

Furthermore, only 44.8% of students with SEN who took A-levels achieved CCC or better in 2019/20, compared to 58.7% of students with no identified SEN or unknown SEN status (Dodgson, 2022).⁴ This likely contributes to some of the gap between higher education progression rates in students with SEN and students with no SEN, as taking at least three A-levels is still the most popular and successful route to university (UCAS, 2022).⁵ Although achieving three A-levels is not the only route to university, as many students will take one or more vocational qualifications such as BTEC Nationals and these may be more popular for students with SEN, students entering university with three or more A-levels were found to be less likely to drop out or repeat a year of university and more likely to graduate with at least a 2:1 degree than students who entered university with mixed A-levels and BTECs, who in turn were more successful in these measures than students starting university with BTECs only; this pattern is

² Whilst the SEN codes use the terms ‘moderate learning difficulties’, ‘severe learning difficulties’ and ‘profound and multiple learning difficulties’, these are generally seen as interchangeable with the term ‘learning disability’, as used in social care (Hardie and Tilly, 2012). For the purposes of this research, ‘learning disability’ was used to prevent confusion for participants with specific learning difficulties, and due to very low sample sizes and the difficulty in participants self-identifying their category of learning disability, the single category of ‘learning disability’ (coded as LD) is generally used in place of these multiple categories.

³ The academic year 2019/20 was chosen as the most recent year where university applications were not majorly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as this may have been a factor for students with SEN when deciding to apply for university as many of them were more likely to be considered vulnerable. The changes to how grades were awarded for the 2020 exam series may have affected the proportions of students accepted into university; however, analysis showed that attainment gaps associated with SEN status neither widened nor contracted by a significant margin (GOV.UK, 2022a).

⁴ CCC, equivalent to 96 UCAS tariff points, is typically the lowest entry requirement for universities in the UK (Complete University Guide, 2022).

⁵ In the chart showing A-level achievement by primary type of SEN, students with ‘unknown SEN type’ were grouped under ‘SEN support but no specialist assessment of type of need’, even if they had an EHCP, for easier readability.

visible even when controlling for prior attainment and demographic variables (Dilnot, Macmillan and Wyness, 2022). This highlights the need to examine more the differences in qualification type alongside achieved grades between students with SEN and students with no SEN, and how this contributes to success at university.

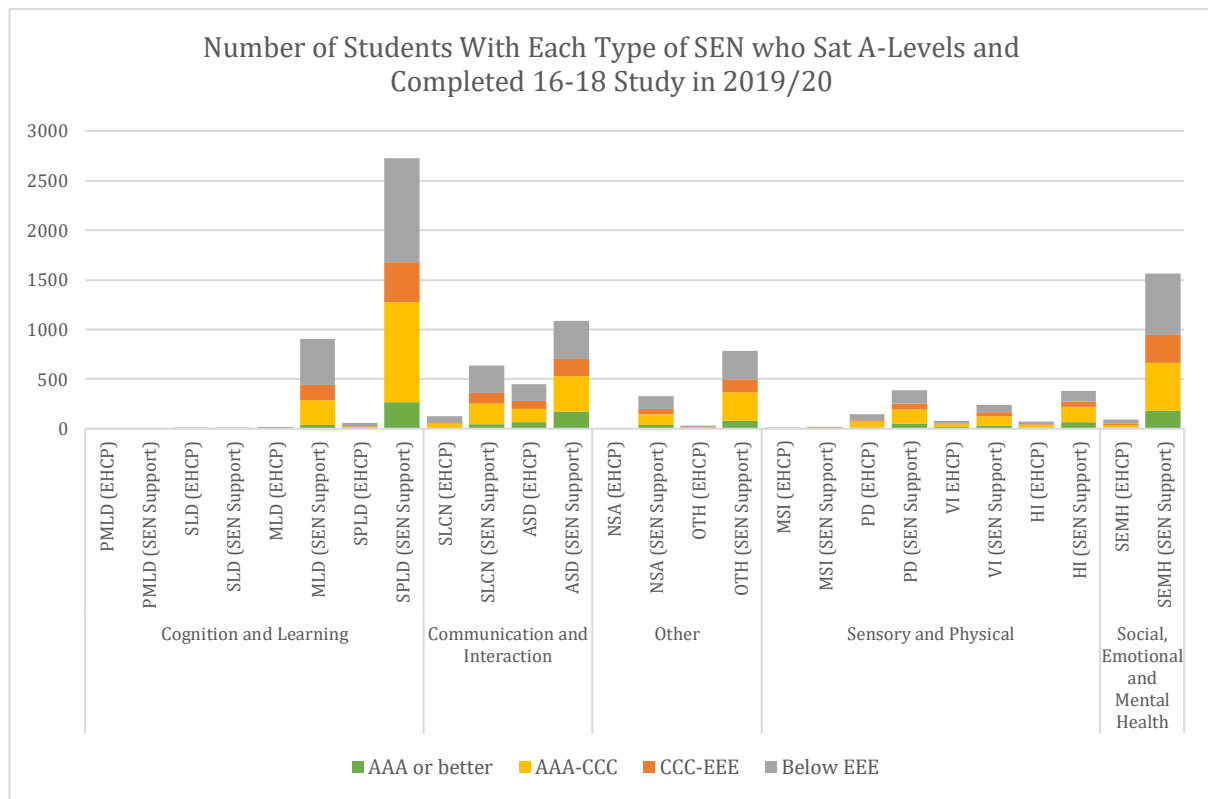


Figure 2: Statistics on A-level achievement by primary type of SEN (Dodgson, 2022).

Although existing research into the factors influencing the continuation of students with SEN to university is limited, the resources and support available in the transition period has been identified as a particularly important factor for success in higher education. Moriña (2016) noted that “the transition process influences the beginning of the students’ experience within higher education and sets a tone for involvement which often continues until graduation” and identified the need for both schools and universities to be proactive in transition planning for these students, particularly in implementing interventions such as mentoring, communication with tutors and assistive technology. The first six weeks of a student’s time at university have been identified as imperative to increasing retention and success in general (Tinto, 1988), and particularly for students with mental health conditions or social and communication impairments, who overall are at a greater risk of non-continuation compared to non-disabled students (Hubble and Bolton, 2021), this transition period is likely to be especially impactful. Furthermore, the need for students with SEN to have strong self-advocacy skills is frequently identified in research as important for a successful transition and from this, the need for educators to prepare their students for the transition from the school environment, where SEN professionals, parents and other adults often speak on behalf of the student, to one where they must advocate for their own needs is clear (Kochhar-Bryant, Bassett and Webb, 2009).

However, there is very limited research covering the impact of interventions from schools in encouraging students with SEN to continue their education, despite the fact that positive student-teacher relationships are particularly beneficial for students with SEN both socially and academically, as identified by Baker, Grant and Morlock (2008) and Schwab and Rossmann (2020), and this would likely extend to teachers having a significant impact on students’ decisions on whether to apply to university. In light of this, this research is focused on the three-way

relationship between schools, universities and their students with SEN in order to identify the factors influencing students with SEN in their decision on whether to continue to higher education, and what interventions and strategies implemented by schools and universities before and during the application process and in the crucial transition period are most effective in encouraging and supporting these students.

Methods

The research consisted of two components. Firstly, an anonymous survey was sent out to current students at UK universities via societies and clubs dedicated to disabled students and Disability Services. This received 76 valid responses; responses which did not continue beyond the demographics questions were not included in the final total. Participants were asked a variety of questions surrounding their disability, health condition or learning difficulty, how it affected them in school and at university, and what support they received at school, during the university application process and transition period, and at university. This included a variety of multiple-choice questions, free-text questions and Likert scale questions investigating their experiences and attitudes towards their schooling, the transition period and their university experience.

As many students may not have been aware at the time of whether or not their school had classified them as having SEN, for the purposes of this survey, respondents were asked initially whether they had “any disability that impacted upon your education and which your school or college was aware of the diagnosis of at the time at which you attended.” Whilst this is a simplification of the formal definition of special educational needs, it was the most accurate method of identifying those students which were most likely to have been treated as having SEN during their schooling – in light of this, the category of ‘SEN support but no specialist assessment of type of need’ was excluded from the survey. When asking about participants’ category of SEN, the SEN codes were otherwise broadly used, with the exception of the single category of ‘learning disability’ being used in place of the three separate categories for varying degrees of severity and the addition of ‘chronic health condition’, a demographic which likely forms a significant proportion of the ‘other’ SEN code used in schools.

Secondly, an anonymous survey was distributed to a wide range of schools with sixth forms and colleges in the UK, aimed at teachers and other educators. This received 20 valid responses; again, responses which did not continue beyond the demographics questions were not included. Participants were asked about their experiences working with students with SEN, their school’s attitudes towards accessibility and inclusion, any specialist provision provided by their school and any specific support provided for students with SEN in applying and transitioning to university. This again consisted of a variety of multiple-choice questions, free-text questions and Likert scale questions.

At the end of each of the surveys, participants were asked whether they wished to leave their contact details to participate in a follow-up interview to develop case studies. For the student participants, this involved more in-depth questions surrounding their opinions and feelings around their special educational needs, the attitudes of their school or college in supporting them in accessing higher education, the attitudes of their university in supporting them through their studies, and their vision for improving the transition process from school to university. For the educators, this included questions about how they and their school encourage and prepare students with SEN for university, to what extent their needs are considered in advice about higher education and post-18 options, and their thoughts on both the current and their ideal transition process for students with SEN. This received 18 student responses and two educator responses, of which four students and one educator were chosen to be interviewed. Students were chosen on the basis of their diverse range of experiences, school backgrounds and special educational needs to attempt to represent as many areas as possible. These interviews each lasted between forty minutes and an hour, and they were conducted remotely.

Survey Results

Student Survey Responses

The proportion of student survey responses reporting each type of SEN was broadly in line with national proportions of each type of SEN entering higher education;⁶ however, students with learning disabilities and speech, language and communication needs were significantly under-represented. The discrepancy in the proportions reporting autism spectrum disorder or social, emotional and mental health needs is likely due to the significant proportion of respondents reporting one of those two categories alongside at least one other type of SEN (60.9% and 70.0% respectively, compared to only 31.6% of participants overall reporting more than one type of SEN), whereas the national data only records primary type of SEN, meaning that potentially a high number of participants who do not consider autism spectrum disorder or social, emotional and mental health needs as their primary type of SEN were included in the survey. Students with multi-sensory impairment were also overrepresented as a proportion of responses, but this is due to the relatively small sample size of the survey; there were two responses from students with multi-sensory impairment.

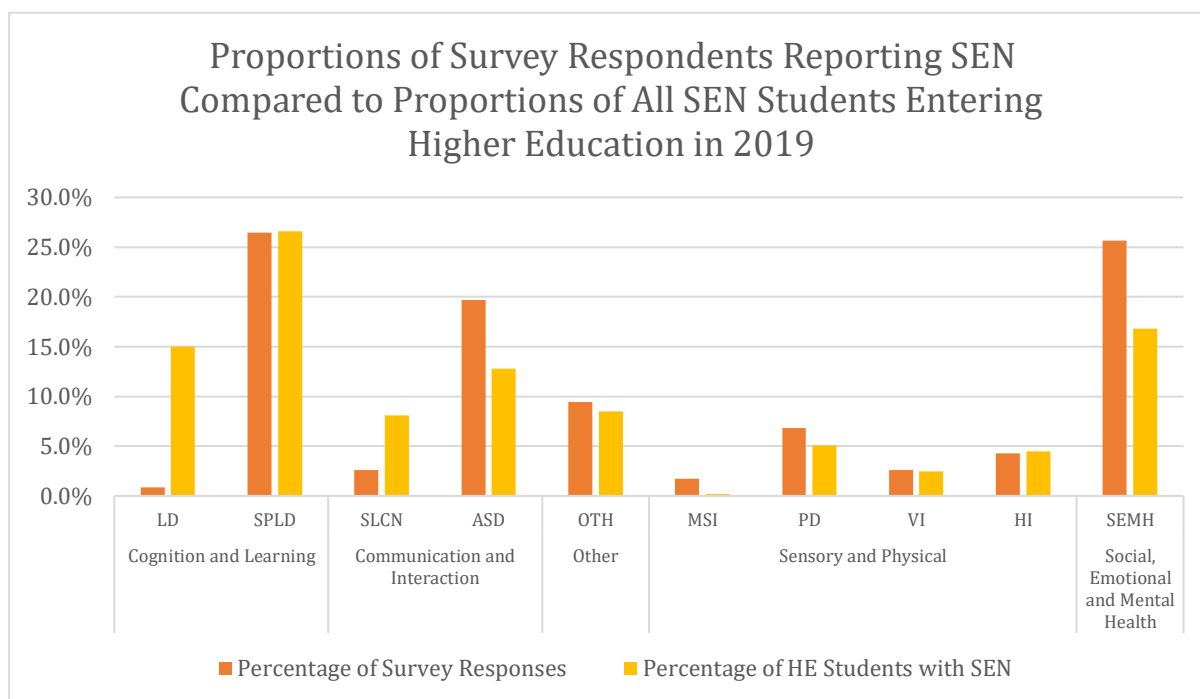


Figure 3: Comparison of the proportion of survey respondents reporting each type of SEN and the proportion of students with SEN with each type of SEN as their primary need entering higher education in 2019 (Higher Education Briefing Team, 2022).

Participant characteristics such as the educational stage of their first diagnosis and the type of school they attended for post-16 education were compared between the different types of SEN. Almost half (47.1%) of all participants received their first SEN diagnosis before starting secondary school, and 74.2% before starting their post-16 education. Participants reporting sensory and physical needs were most likely to be diagnosed with their disability or condition sooner, with 61.1% given their first diagnosis at the early years foundation stage or earlier and 72.2% diagnosed before starting secondary school, whereas participants who reported social,

⁶ For the purposes of this comparison, the category of 'chronic health condition' has been incorporated into 'other'.

emotional and mental health needs tended to receive their first diagnosis much later, with 42.9% diagnosed during their post-16 education.

Although only 6.5% of all students with SEN attend an independent school (GOV.UK, 2022b), 28.8% of participants reported attending an independent school for their post-16 education. Special schools were the least common type of school attended for post-16 education at 2.7%; this is broadly in line with the proportion of students who attended a special school who progressed to higher education at 1.4% (Higher Education Briefing Team, 2022), although comparisons are limited due to the small sample size of the survey.

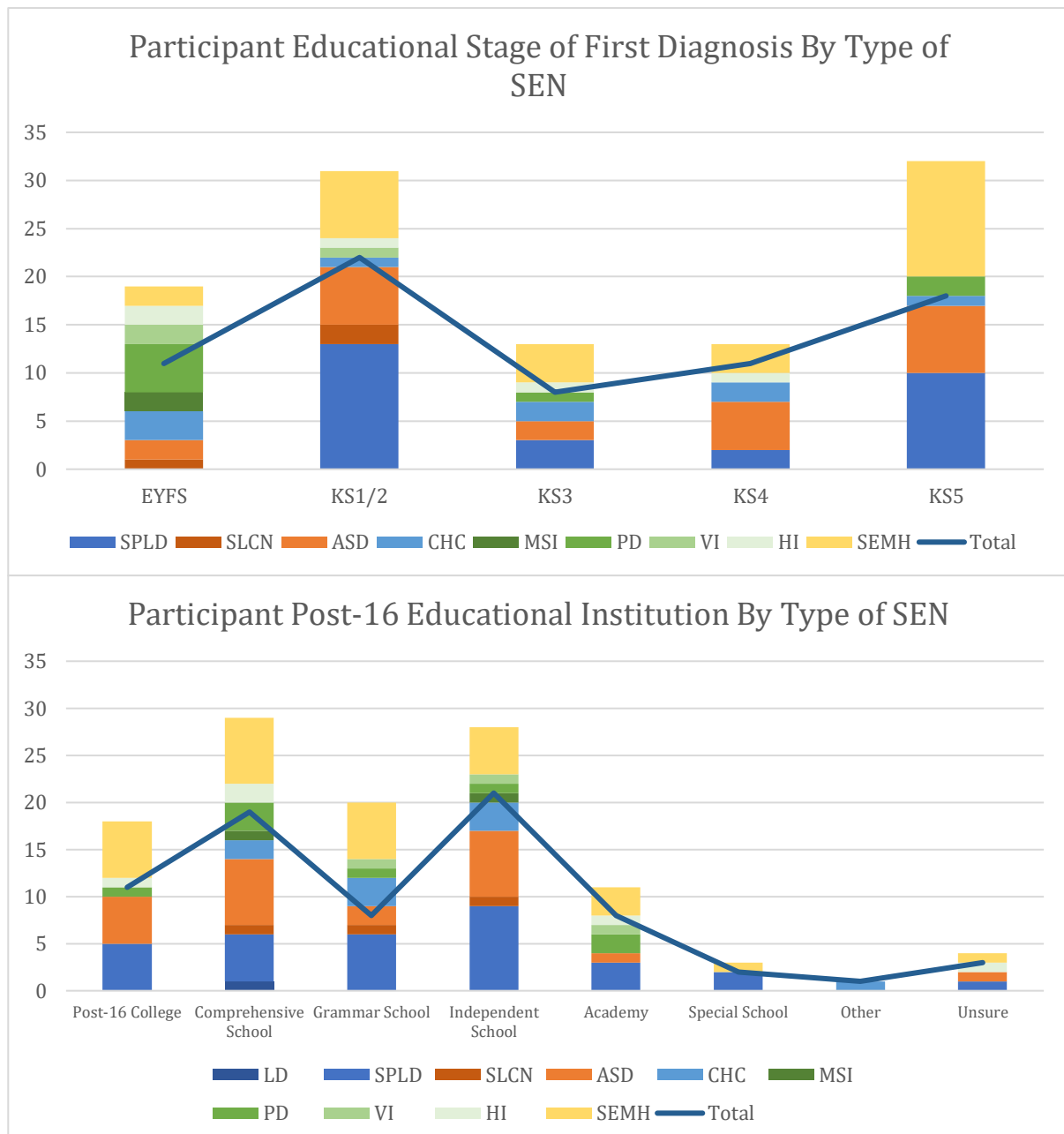


Figure 4: Visualisations of the breakdown by type of SEN of educational stage of first diagnosis and post-16 educational institution. Due to participants with multiple types of SEN being counted multiple times, the lines labelled 'Total' show the actual number of participants in each category.

The majority of participants (74.63%) believed that they had received additional support at school or college; 62.5% of those participants who did not feel they had received any additional support had only had their SEN identified in Key Stage 4 or above. Similarly, 76.6% of participants

believed that they receive additional support at university, with 63.8% of those who answered both questions having received additional support for their disability in both settings.

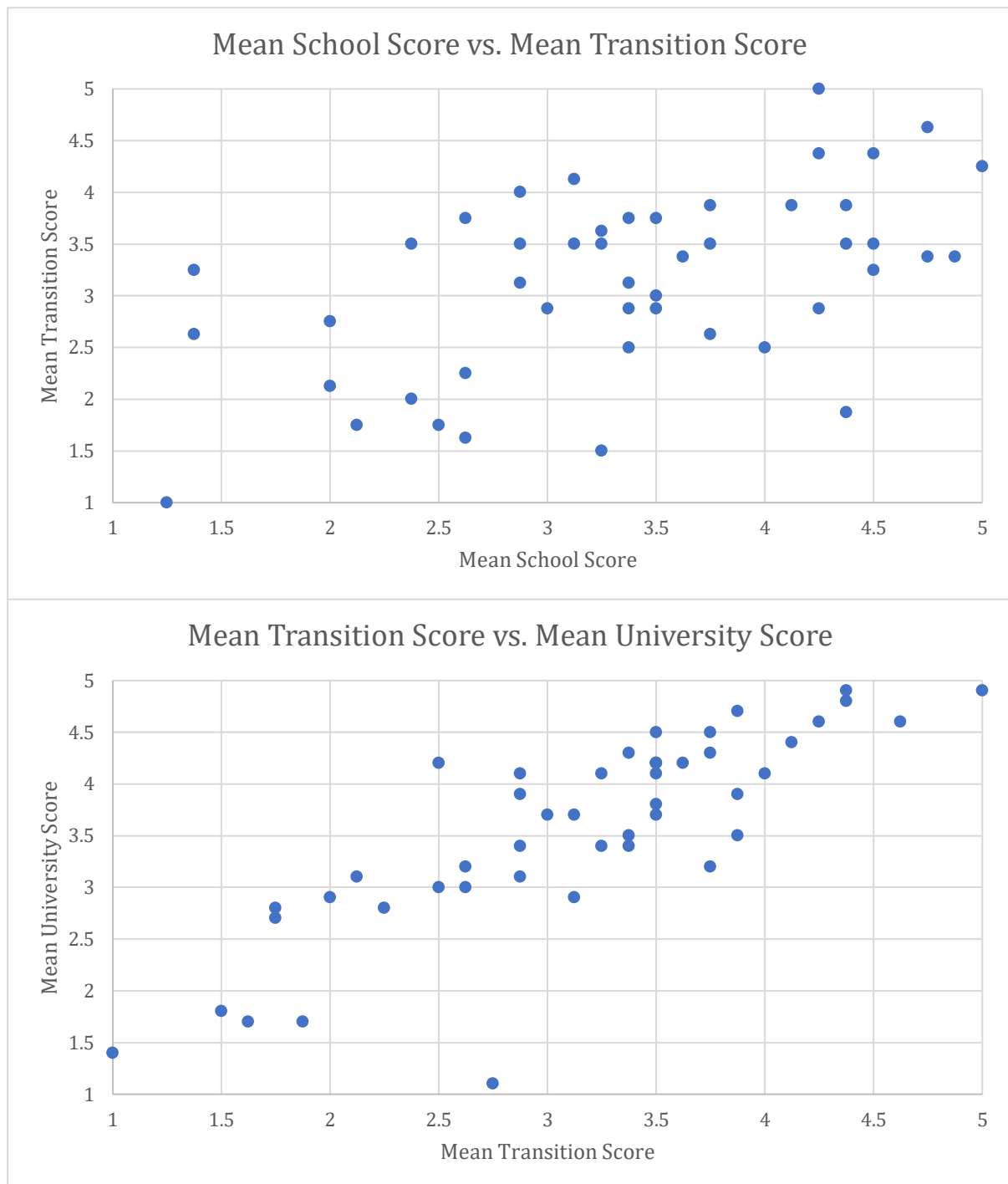


Figure 5: Scatter plots showing the correlation between the mean scores for school and transition and transition and university, as calculated from the Likert scale questions.

Participants were asked Likert scale questions on their school experience, transition to university and university experience, which were then assigned a value from one to five, with one being most negative and five being most positive, and the mean taken over all questions in that section to quantify their satisfaction with each aspect. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationships between the scores, finding a moderate positive correlation between the school score and transition score ($r = .534, n = 47, p < .001$) and a strong positive correlation between the transition score and university score ($r = .827, n = 47,$

$p < .001$). However, no statistically significant correlation was found between any of the scores and stage of education of diagnosis, type of school or type of SEN.

Participants were also asked about any specific support provided to them by their school, such as contacting the university and by their university for the transition to higher education. Although almost half (46.0%) of participants felt that their university had provided them with some form of specific support for the transition period, only 11.1% felt that their school or college had provided this and of those who answered both questions, only 8.0% felt that specific support had been provided by both their school and their university for the transition to higher education. Additionally, participants were asked about their awareness of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA); this found that the vast majority (92.6%) of participants were aware of it, but only 13.0%

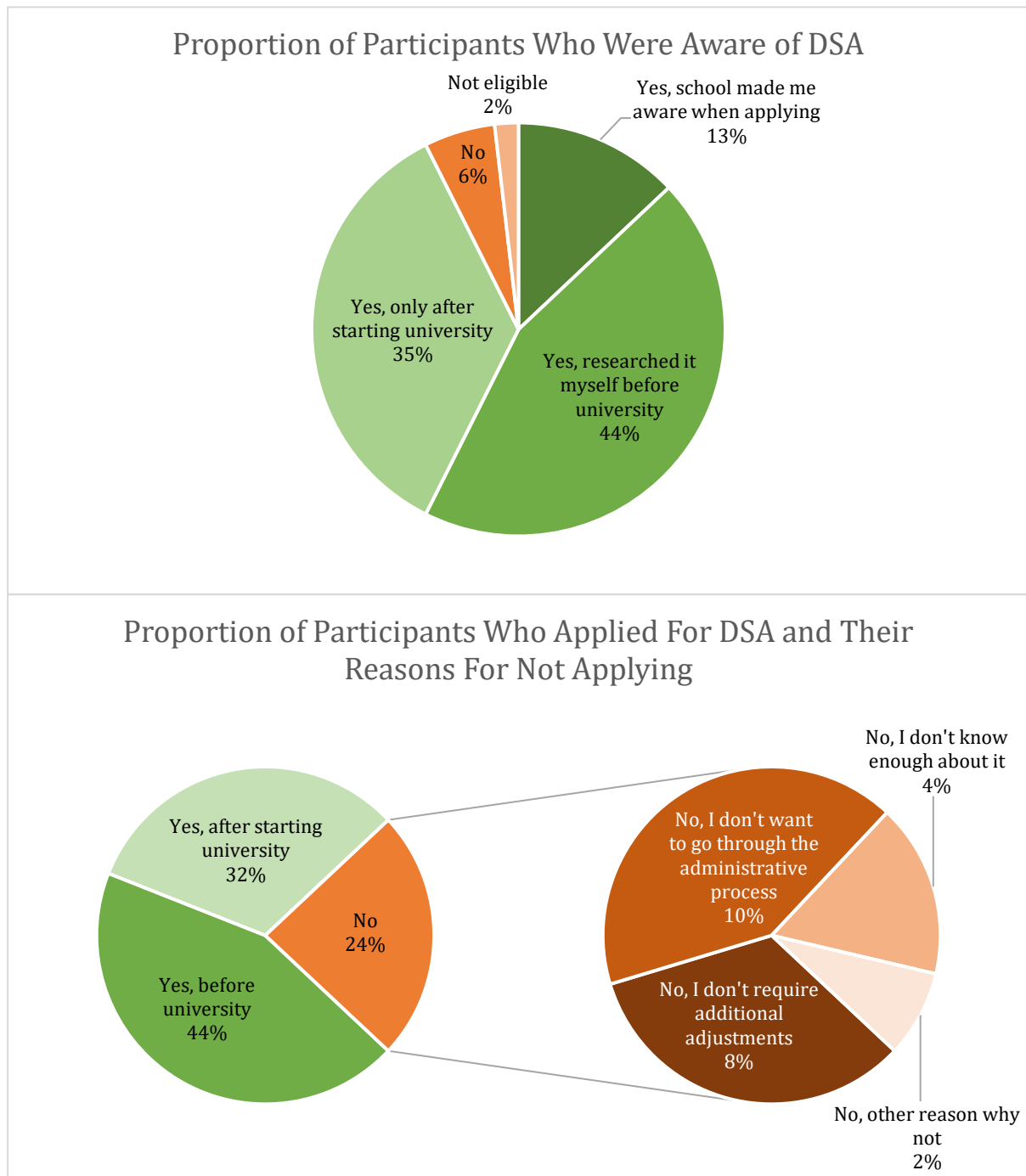


Figure 6: Pie charts showing responses to the questions about awareness of and applications for DSA.

were told about it by their school or college when applying to university. Half of the participants who had been provided with specific support by their school or college for their transition to university had attended an independent school; similarly, 57.1% of participants whose school had informed them about DSA when applying to university had attended an independent school.

Participants were also asked a variety of free-text questions to explore their experiences in accessing support at school, during the transition to higher education, and at university. Initially, participants were asked about how their special educational needs impacted upon their ability to access and participate in school to provide context for their responses. Responses were very varied, depending on the nature of participants' disabilities, mental health conditions or learning difficulties, but themes were identified amongst participants with the same area of need:

- Students with cognitive and learning needs identified more issues with adhering to deadlines, reading and processing information in lessons, and falling behind in classes.
- Students with communication and interaction needs identified more difficulties with the social aspects of school such as connecting with peers, as well as with sensory processing issues in the classroom environment, which are commonly found in autism.
- Students with sensory and physical needs frequently identified issues with physical access to the curriculum, such as difficulties in accessing audio-visual resources, inaccessibility in school buildings, struggling with physical tasks and having to take time off school due to medical needs.
- Students with social, emotional and mental health needs reported having had more difficulties with concentration, attendance, and other behavioural struggles, such as being impulsive and disruptive in lessons.

Participants were later asked the same question about their ability to access and participate in university. There was a very high correlation between the difficulties reported at the two educational stages; however, at university, participants additionally identified much more frequently struggling with the demands of their courses, organisational skills and the reliance on independent learning at university compared to school or college.

The survey also asked about the support provided in everyday life at the two educational stages. For support provided during their schooling, the responses were very varied again, both based on needs and the extent to which participants felt that their school had supported them. Many students received exam arrangements such as extra time, access to a laptop or a separate room for exams; for a significant number of respondents, exam arrangements was the only support provided. Other supports identified included assistive technology, changes to resource formats, such as being provided with large print, Braille, coloured paper or overlays, additional time out of lessons for study skills, counselling or mentoring specific to their disability (for one participant, this involved a visiting teacher of the deaf providing support once per academic year), and staff assisting in mainstream environments, such as sighted guides and teaching assistants. There were few differences to the support provided to them at university, with many students again identifying exam arrangements as the only support provided. Although fewer students had access to the one-to-one or small group support they may have had at school through teaching assistants and additional SEN-focused lessons, more students were provided with assistive technology, such as computers, notetaking software, speech-to-text and recording software for lectures through DSA, showing the move at university to more independent study. Furthermore, the main difference in provision was that some students were provided with extensions and flexibility for coursework, reflecting the more coursework-oriented nature of many degrees compared to earlier qualifications that are mostly exam-based. Some students were also provided with support for daily living, such as quieter accommodation, en-suite rooms and support with navigating and accessing campus.

When asked about what additional support they would have benefitted from at school or college, almost all participants that responded identified an urgent need for staff to be more educated in

special educational needs, more willing to provide reasonable adjustments, and more understanding and empathetic towards students who needed additional support; very few responses identified anything more practical that students felt was not provided.

I had to work hard to be believed and to have my reasonable adjustments approved etc. Would have appreciated more kindness and understanding and less resistance.

I was largely left alone for most of my years because I was high functioning but when I needed support it was hard to find.

When asked the same question about additional support they would benefit from at university, most responses identified a need for study skills support to be subject-specific and more support within their academic department, such as one-to-one sessions with lecturers.

The support sessions need to be more subject specific, much of the support I have received has been completely irrelevant to my degree.

The administrative load for disabled students in arranging support and applying for DSA was also highlighted as a barrier for many students, particularly the need for specific learning difficulties to be evidenced by a post-16 diagnostic assessment and the additional forms that have to be filled out by those accessing DSA support, such as timesheets and reviews.

Further questions focused on the attitudes towards students with SEN continuing to university in their school and transition support provided by both schools and universities, including what participants felt they would have benefitted from. When considering the attitudes of their school or college, a key theme identified was participants feeling that their schools or colleges were indifferent towards them and their needs in the university consideration and application process; overwhelmingly, they did not feel that their schools had treated them in a particularly negative way about their aspirations to go to university, but felt that their schools or colleges did not provide them with any tailored support accounting for their additional needs or any SEN-specific information. This was often viewed as detrimental, as participants expressed that they felt this placed an additional administrative burden on them compared to their non-disabled peers and that they were not clear on how university may be more difficult for them as students with SEN or how these potential difficulties could be addressed.

My health was never a consideration when applying to university. This was good because I was treated equally to others, however this was inequitable and there was [no] support or advice pertaining to studying at university with a disability.

The school never discussed university for specifically disabled students, we had to seek out ways of gaining support at university ourselves.

I think [the support provided by the university] was sufficient, I just feel that my school could have done more to meet in the middle.

A significant proportion of respondents also noted that whilst they were not given SEN-specific support, they believed that their school was generally poor at advising students on post-18 options.

School did not aid anyone regardless of ability to access higher education.

They didn't do anything specifically disability related and harmful, just were generally poorly informed, bad at communicating and hideously disorganised. This affected all students, but particularly worried students with anxiety or other mental health-affecting conditions who needed that greater support.

The majority of respondents who had identified a difference in how they were treated compared to their non-disabled peers felt that this was negative, with some students feeling that they were

strongly discouraged from applying to university or that staff did not believe they were capable, that staff encouraged them to take a gap year against their wishes, and that they were not helped with accessing talks and events about university. One participant identified that their college was shocked that their application for university was accepted and could not believe that they had achieved a scholarship, and another participant believed that they were devalued when assessed via centre assessed grades because of their SEN status, as they then surpassed these grades when they sat the exams, which caused a year delay to them starting university.⁷

I was constantly told that my behaviour would take me nowhere in life and was not encouraged to apply for top [Russell] Group Universities by most teachers. The school also made it more difficult for me to participate in extracurricular activities because they didn't want me representing the school, which made it difficult for me to write a personal statement. Whenever I suggested that the school run things differently to cater for my ADHD, they would simply tell me that perhaps I didn't belong at the school and should go somewhere else.

Only three respondents expressed wholly positive views on the attitudes and actions of their school or college in relation to them accessing higher education, one of whom had attended a special school for their post-16 education.

Overall very encouraging towards me chasing my dreams, reminding me to take things one step at a time and that I can do it if I wanted to.

Only four participants noted actions that their school or college had taken to support them with the transition to university; two mentioned that this was regarding informing the university of reasonable adjustments and one stated that they supported them with booking a formal assessment for their dyslexia, with one participant mentioning that their school continues to provide ongoing contact with them. When asked what transition support they would have benefitted from, the key themes identified included wanting a joined-up and ongoing dialogue between the school and the university to ensure a smoother handover of support, wanting more disability-specific and particularly condition-specific information to be provided by the school about what support is available at university (including about DSA), and wanting them to help facilitate contact with disabled university students to provide a student perspective on life at university with special educational needs.

A joined-up dialogue between the school and the university would have been nice, but I managed to do it all myself with the support of my family.

Acknowledgement of the additional/specific support I may have needed in this transition to higher education, and information about possible challenges that come with this transition and higher education in general, specifically as a disabled person.

One participant also identified that they wished their school had informed them of the need to have an official diagnosis of their dyslexia to access similar support at university to what they received at school.

Significantly more participants noted that their university had provided transition support. Supportive actions reported included disability-centric open day sessions and information, a specific early arrivals programme at the university for autistic students to settle in and get into contact with other autistic students, universities' disability services getting into contact with students quickly to arrange reasonable adjustments and signpost to student-run societies for

⁷ In 2020 and 2021, students were assessed by centre assessed grades for GCSE and A-levels, which involved teachers using their professional judgement alongside evidence from classwork to predict what grades students would most likely have achieved had exams not been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who were unhappy with their centre assessed grades had the opportunity to resit one or more subjects in the autumn of each year, or in the following summer exam period as usual.

students with SEN, and arranging promptly psychological support for those with mental health conditions. When asked what additional transition support they would have benefitted from, the key themes identified in responses were that students felt that universities were not as proactive as needed and were poor at communicating both with students to arrange support and with academic departments to implement agreed arrangements.

I signed up to the service but I had to get in touch to arrange things and initially I didn't know how to do that.

It would have been good if my tutors could have been told about my [disability] (they are meant to be but it never happened).

It was also identified that universities often would leave arranging support until late into the summer before starting at the university, due to uncertainty around whether a student would be attending before results were available to confirm this, which created additional stress for students with SEN. One participant also highlighted issues with the intersectionality between being a student with SEN and being the first in their family to go to university, stating that they did not feel knowledgeable and supported and that this was increased by their disability.

Educator Survey Responses

The educator survey predominantly reached teachers who were special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) or in another SEN-focused role, with 50.0% of responses identifying this as their primary role. A quarter (25.0%) identified themselves as having a post-16 focused role, as either a head of year, form tutor or teacher of post-16 students. Other respondents included teaching assistants or educational support staff, and pastoral leads or other senior leadership team members. One participant identified multiple primary roles, reporting both having an SEN-focused role and being a teacher of post-16 students. Responses came from a mixture of mainstream and special schools, with 30.0% of responses coming from participants who teach in special schools.

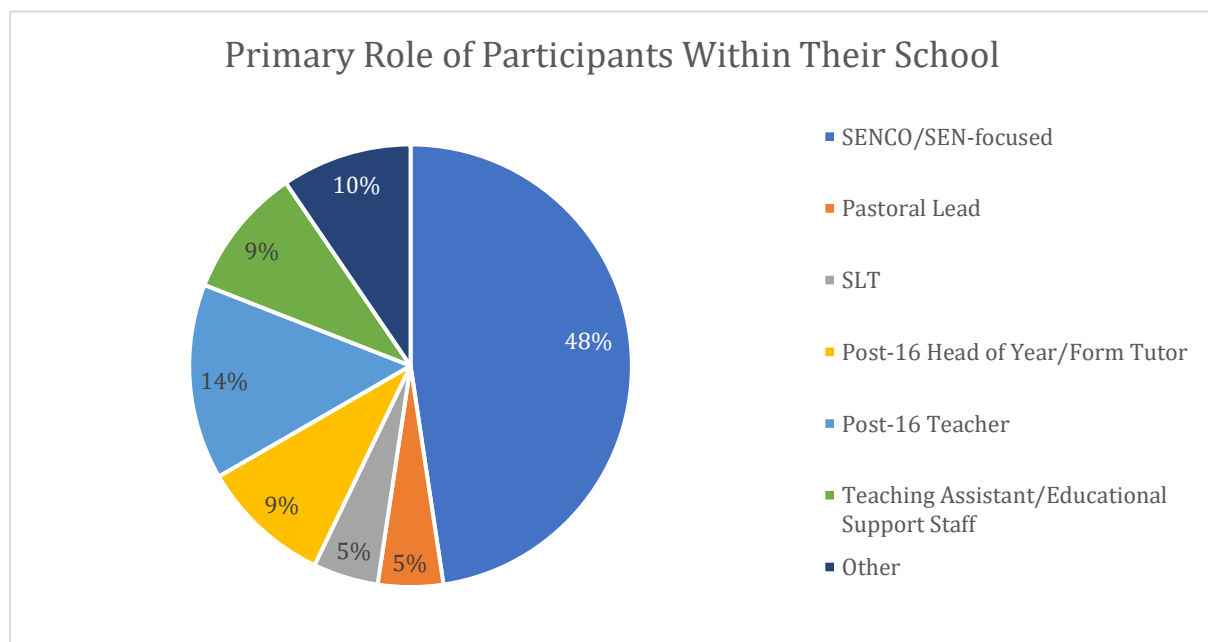


Figure 7: Pie chart showing the breakdown of participants by primary role within their school.

The vast majority of respondents (85.0%) felt that they were experienced with working with students with SEN, but only 45.0% of responses came from teachers with professional qualifications for working with students with SEN, meaning that only 40.0% of respondents felt they were both experienced with and professionally qualified to work with students with SEN. The professional qualifications participants had in the area of SEN included the national qualification for SEN coordination, an MA in SEN and level 7 and postgraduate certificates in specific areas of SEN, such as autism, dyslexia, ADHD, visual impairments, hearing impairments, and access arrangements. The majority (55.6%) of participants who responded saw themselves as experienced in advising students on applying for higher education; 50.0% of respondents who answered both questions felt they were experienced in both SEN and higher education.

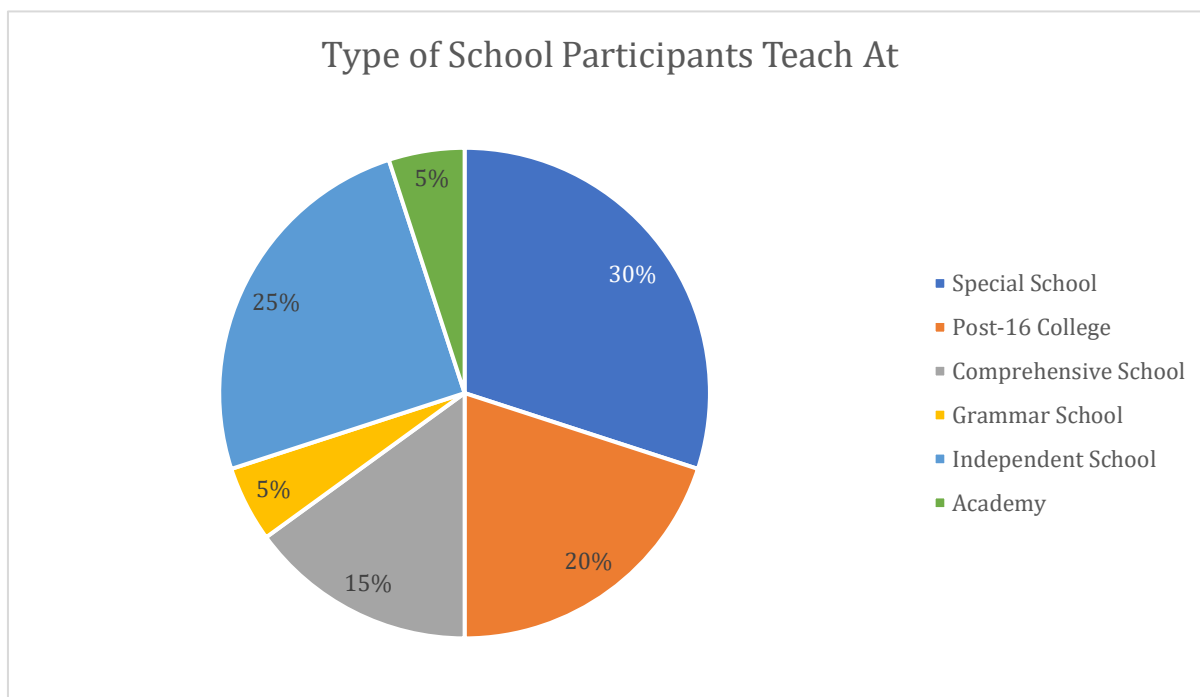


Figure 8: Pie chart showing the breakdown of participants by type of school.

Participants were asked Likert scale questions on their school's attitudes towards supporting students with SEN, their personal attitudes on their preparedness to teach and support students with SEN, and both their personal and their school's attitudes towards students with SEN continuing to higher education, which were then assigned a value from one to five, with one being most negative and five being most positive, and the mean taken over all questions in that section to quantify their beliefs about each aspect. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationships between the scores, finding a strong positive correlation between the school attitude score and personal attitude score ($r = .878, n = 13, p < .001$) and a moderate positive correlation between the school attitude and university score ($r = .616, n = 13, p = .025$) and personal attitude score and university score ($r = .681, n = 13, p = .010$). The scores were clustered in a range indicating reasonable to strong positive feelings on all three measures; excluding one participant with respective mean scores of 1.1 and 2.5 to one decimal place, the school attitude and personal attitude scores were all between four and five, and the university scores for all participants were between 3.7 and five. However, there was no statistically significant correlation between school type and school attitude; this may be due to the small sample size for each type of school.

Participants were also asked about any specific support their school provided for students with SEN, both generally and with regards to university applications and the transition. Of the

educators from mainstream schools who answered, 61.5% reported that their school provided specialist provision for students with SEN; this included one-to-one support from teaching assistants, adapted curriculums, progression and access courses, entry level qualifications, specialist staff, and speech and language therapy. Of all respondents that answered, 69.2% reported that their school provided some disability-specific support for students considering or applying to university; all participants who answered reported that they make students aware of the wellbeing support on offer at university and of DSA and how to apply for it. Free-text questions were then used to ask participants what specific support they provided and what they felt should be implemented. General themes in the support already in place included liaising with universities on behalf of students, advising students with SEN on the support available for them, and helping with open day visits.

Transition programmes, visits, funding applications, EHCP transfers, careers choices, occupational and mobility training.

1:1 support meetings to identify needs and to support in applications. If the student requests, sharing of information with universities.

Only one respondent identified any additional disability-specific support they believe should be provided.

SEND specific alternative advice and guidance to university e.g. traineeships, foundation degrees, apprenticeships offered by specialist providers.

Furthermore, 69.2% felt that their school provided transition support for students with SEN that are moving to university. In the free-text responses, the key themes identified included providing support for developing independent living skills and continuing support for the end of their time at school and start of their time at university. Many participants noted that they left it to students to request this support and that it was dependent on what was asked for.

Support to discuss and develop independent living skills. Offer support in the few months leading up to starting uni and for the first few months at uni.

Support with preparing for the different aspects of living at or away from home. Essential life skills.

This depends on what support the student asks for.

Only one participant identified any additional transition support they believe should be provided.

More explicit support to access or attend open events, more communication between college and local university student support services to provide adequate transition.

Finally, participants were asked how they believed, as educators, that universities could better support students with SEN with the transition from school to higher education. Key themes identified ranged from disability-focused open days or additional support for open days, better communication from the university to the school and students with SEN, and more contact between universities and local schools to encourage students with SEN and provide a link to support the transition. Most participants identified the need for universities to provide more individualised and personalised transition support.

Easier accessibility to relevant university staff and increased individualised transition support. Greater liaison between subject areas and well-being services. Improved access to accommodation services.

Working closer with more focus groups on how they can have more individualised support so they build earlier relationships.

Make the support easier to find on their websites. Have a specific section of the open day information to support students in accessing open days.

It was particularly noted that SENCOs and other relevant staff would appreciate updates on students who have progressed to university.

More explicit communication between university student support services and local colleges, updates on students who have progressed from local colleges to their university to college SENCOs or other relevant staff.

Furthermore, some responses highlighted frustrations from participants that they felt limited on the school side of the transition due to their workload and a lack of funding.

Case Studies

Student A

Student A is an autistic student who has just finished their first year at university, having previously attended a mainstream state boarding school. They were diagnosed with autism by an educational psychologist whilst in Year 9, but was not made fully aware of their diagnosis by their family until Year 11. Whilst at school, they found that their autism made it harder for them to attend and concentrate in classes at school due to sensory issues, which led to them being given a separate smaller room to sit exams in, as well as impacting upon them socially.

Definitely in forming relationships with other people, like friendship wise, I always found I had difficulty concentrating in class when it was a quite loud class and lots of people. What else? They're the two main ones but it's also things like queuing, I really couldn't stand like in the lunch queue, the queue, the queue was so noisy and I couldn't deal, so I had to do that, like, three times every day because I was a boarder.

Student A initially did not particularly take into account their special educational needs when deciding whether to go to university and when choosing what universities to apply to, but put more emphasis on the support available for them when choosing their firm and insurance choices.

I think I did, it wasn't a priority for me but I did briefly look at support that different universities offered, but I think that was like after I applied to them. But then when I was making my choices for like the final two, I think, I remember [current university]'s one was quite good and I think that does play in favour to me selecting it as my firm choice.

Similarly, they felt that their school had not taken into account their special educational needs at all when advising them; whilst they felt positive about the general help provided in writing their personal statement and in the encouragement given, they found the process of applying for university very stressful, believing this was significantly more so than their non-autistic peers, and felt that their school could have tailored more support to their needs to address this.

I feel like they could have maybe taken a bit more time with me to look through the process and, and they could've advised me to look at more of what they offer for disabilities and disabled people I guess, because, well, I was treated like a neurotypical person pretty much. They didn't really factor it in their encouragement for me.

This extended to their transition to university, where they noted that their school did not provide any additional transition support for them. Conversely, they spoke at length about the support provided by their university during the transition period, which included an autism-specific transition programme for new students involving talks about the university's systems and

support, a chance to meet current autistic students and ask questions, and overall a more gentle introduction to university life.

When I was doing the transition programme, I met like quite a few friends in there and I'm still friends with them now. And that was a very positive impact ... it felt like they really cared about us when they did the transition programme.

However, they did not find the transition period outside of the transition programme to be easy; there were some issues that arose due to their diagnosis having been made by an educational psychologist, meaning it was not accepted as evidence for DSA or for further support from the university. This caused a delay in them being assigned a specialist autism mentor, who is there to support autistic students one-to-one with academic or pastoral issues with frequent meetings, and they felt that this had a negative impact on their first term at university. This was particularly stressful as they felt that the university was not explaining the problem coherently enough, and this left a negative impact as the first interaction they had with the university.

I don't think I had a mentor at that point because of the problems with the DSA that I had ... so maybe having more importance on having a mentor from the beginning will help because I guess those experiences can sometimes define it in the long term.

This was heightened by the fact that they felt that they were struggling with this transition due to the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic meaning that their first term was online. They felt that this particularly impacted upon them as a student with SEN as it added barriers to accessing any additional academic support, such as communicating with lecturers.

It was online for the first term so I was just constantly stuck in my room throughout and I cannot even deal with it for a day and I did that for a whole term ... it was quite hard to deal with the very impersonal approach from lecturers, I guess is the word for it, like you can't really communicate 'oh, sorry sir/madam, I'm having problems understanding this, could you explain it to me?'

Since those initial interactions and after sorting out the medical evidence needed, Student A felt much more positive about the support they have received from the university. However, they also felt that it could be quite difficult having a mentor, who is there in part to support with academic concerns, who was not a specialist in their subject area. This meant that it was difficult to convey what they were struggling with initially, which was largely related to the move from the school style of learning to the university style.

But for example, my mentor is amazing, but she's not a math person so I wouldn't be able to say in detail what I'm struggling with and things like that, where I think if at the beginning I had a mentor ... whose area was maths ... because there have, there were times when I was really struggling with getting used to the new layout of maths and, and the very new, very big workload.

When asked about how they felt about their preparedness to advocate for themselves at university, initially they did not consider the impact their autism would have and they didn't feel prepared by their school to advocate for themselves, but they felt that the initial difficulties regarding the medical evidence empowered them to advocate more for their needs and to get the support they needed in place.

Definitely not my school. I think it was because of the difficulty that I had with them, like the person at the beginning from [current university], I was like okay, I know that all the systems are there but I know that I really need to, like, keep working with the papers and stuff if I want to get what I need.

When discussing what support would benefit autistic students and other students with SEN in the transition to university, they felt that having some kind of buddy system where current students could talk to those applying about their experiences as university students with SEN

would be beneficial. Furthermore, they felt that whilst there was not much the school could have done to help once they had left, that it would have been useful for the school to stay in touch to provide any further advice or support. They also identified the benefits of there being contact between the school and the university to pass on information about a student's difficulties, particularly additional information about a student that would be useful to know when reaching out with support, such as if a student is shy or struggling to advocate for themselves to know to keep an eye on them.

The school has all of that information, the handover information. I can see it being something like a phone call between teachers, maybe a teacher from their school and from, someone from the disability services to maybe understand more of, like, their difficulties with learning and what they struggled with ... I guess the things that are harder to formally say ... like the in-between-the-line things.

Overall, Student A felt that their university is welcoming for students with SEN, but recognised that some students they know have had more negative experiences. They suggested that a reason for this is that information about support for students with SEN is difficult to find and that it can be hard to establish the contact necessary to have support put in place.

In [current university], yeah, they're definitely initially welcoming to disabled students. I'm not, I'm not entirely sure about other students besides autistic, but as far as I know ... they could help make it more easier to find that information and have the means to be able to contact them ... you just don't hear about the systems that they have in place, it's not well known or, well, I was completely clueless about it. I had to have my own means to find out about the support.

Student B

Student B is registered partially sighted and has cerebral palsy, and has just finished their second year at university, having attended an academy previously. They felt that their disabilities had minimal impact on their schooling, once reasonable adjustments were made, and particularly emphasised their positive relationship with their school's SENCO. They felt that their disabilities also had a minimal impact on their consideration of university as an option, as the attitude of themselves and those around them had always been oriented towards finding solutions and workarounds rather than discounting it as an option.

Of course, I considered it because then, you know, I'm not as independent as, I wasn't as independent as your average sixteen year old or whatever ... as it got closer and closer, the discussion was never 'could I be able to manage?', it was 'we'll find a way around it', which, you know, which is what I've done throughout my life.

They felt that their school did not start discussing post-18 options with students early enough, with this only starting at the start of sixth form, meaning that students had already made significant decisions that would affect their path to university without being fully knowledgeable. Furthermore, although they felt that they had a very strong positive relationship with their SENCO, they did not feel that their school provided any additional support during the application process for students with SEN beyond the standard support given to all students; this was primarily viewed as stemming from a lack of knowledge about supporting students with SEN to continue to university because very few would do so.

This sounds really blunt and really harsh and it's not meant to be because I've got great respect for my school, but no, not really, because there wasn't that many talking about that, there wasn't that many disabled students that went to university and so the SENCO, who I got on very, very well with, he didn't know what to do to help me.

When choosing a university, Student B felt that they did have to factor their disabilities into the decision, primarily surrounding the physical accessibility of the university and the distance from home. However, they noted that wanting to be closer to home may have been the same for them regardless of disability.

I knew I had to be within two hours of home just in case there was something that I couldn't come up, that came up that I couldn't deal with or I couldn't get one of my friends to deal with or I couldn't get someone at university to deal with ... I think the disability had made me realise I need to reinforce the fact that I think I, that I should have everything on campus.

They expressed that the transition to university was challenging in a number of ways; although they found it straightforward to arrange support through DSA, which they had been informed about at university open days, they felt that they were not prepared to advocate for their needs during the application process and only now felt more comfortable doing so. This was seen as primarily stemming from their personal difficulties with asking for help, particularly as their reasonable adjustments at school had been in place for many years, often since first starting the early years foundation stage, so they had no experience prior to moving to university with having to advocate for themselves. They also felt that parents often play a greater role in supporting their children with SEN due to the additional help needed above what a child without SEN would need, meaning that they let their parents take on some of the role of arranging support at university.

Going to university, my parents didn't do it all but obviously, they wanted to know what I was doing and what help I was gonna get and other, you know, what, what I would need and what have you, so I didn't do it independently as such, but I think I could do it independently now.

Furthermore, they felt that their transition to university was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, to a greater extent than for a non-disabled student. This meant that they could not plan the transition, such as visiting the campus to learn their way around, and when support for the transition was arranged with the university, social distancing limited the extent of it. They also saw this as one of the limiting factors of the transition support provided by their school, as they left school very abruptly at the start of the first national lockdown and so resources were focused on supporting students who were unsure of what they were going to do after school and those who were struggling with the move to remote learning.

I wasn't really a priority, because I'd made it quite clear I was going to go and so, so by the time we'd left, because again we left in March 2020, I don't know, God knows what would have happened if I'd have actually gone and sat the A levels. Would I have got more support? Probably. But again, everyone was all over the place because, again, I wasn't a priority as such, because I knew I wanted to go to university. I didn't need, the staff were all trying to sort out people that you didn't know what they were gonna do.

When asked about what transition support they would have benefitted from, Student B felt that their school would not have been able to provide the necessary support as they felt that their struggles were more linked to independent living rather than academics.

The transition, for me, to university was something that I, I needed to do and it's not something that I think school could have helped with particularly ... the biggest part of the transition for me wasn't necessarily the academic side, it was the personal side, going and living independently and things like that.

Similarly, whilst they believed that generally schools should be better informed on how to support students with SEN throughout the transition to university, they did not feel it was holding students back from applying for university as students with SEN are often used to schools being

poorly informed about their needs. They felt that the transition period was ignored on a structural level, particularly in state schools.

There is that problem of, of probably in comprehensive schools across the country, that they're not, there aren't structures in place to help students transition from school to university; there are structures in place to help them get to university, but not to help them transition ... not in my experience do I think that disabled students are being put off because school is unaware, because schools have often been unaware on how to deal with disabled students right from the very beginning. So that's, you get used to it.

They expressed that the university was forthcoming with additional support when asked. However, they felt that the university could have been significantly more proactive in reaching out to disabled students and offering support, as they found it difficult to reach out themselves even when they needed more support. They often found themselves relying more on assistance from their friends and housemates due to the difficulty of asking the university, and only received additional support after being encouraged and supported by their parents to ask for help.

If you don't ask for help at university, you don't get ... I think that's the main thing of just being more proactive and understanding that we're all going to need a bit of help. From my perspective, it was never gonna be a straightforward ride, I was going to need help and I think a better understanding of that would be good.

Student B also strongly believed in the idea of some kind of formal handover system for students with SEN to be supported moving from school to university; however, they also acknowledged that such a system would be very difficult to implement due to the format of university applications and the differences in systems between universities.

I don't know how, because the problem you've got is you apply to five different universities, a lot of people don't know their choice 'til the very last minute, then they don't get in because of the grades. So it's difficult and because different universities have different policies, so unless you standardise all universities, which I don't think is a desirable outcome because I think it's positive that they're all slightly different.

Overall, Student B felt their university is welcoming for students with SEN, although felt that often this was from the perspective of wanting to look to outsiders as though they were supportive for students from a wide variety of backgrounds to attract more students. They expressed that individual tutors were generally supportive when approached with adjustments or accommodations, and that they felt they could approach any of their seminar tutors if they were struggling.

I'm sorry to be really cynical, I think one of the reasons why they are so welcoming is because it looks good for them ... if they've got, if they can say we've got so many disabled students that are prospering, it looks good for them ... and also for good reasons as well, I think, you know, I think they want people from all different backgrounds to come to university.

However, they felt that often on a wider level, disabled students' needs are not always considered and that universities are slow to implement universal design in their curriculums. The move to hybrid learning, facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has gone some way to changing this, but they felt that progress in this area was slow.

I do find it quite irritating that a lot of the feedback I get given is in sort of small font and things like that, which I appreciate it is because it's anonymous, but if they could just make it a bit bigger, that would be desirable, and things like that ... because most stuff is going online, which is inevitable, that means you can make it more accessible. If I can't read a print book, I've got nowhere else to go. If I can't read an e-book, I just

zoom in. So, yeah, I think, I think they are, I think they are [improving], but again, it's a slow process.

Student C

Student C has social, emotional and mental health needs, including ADHD and complex mental health issues, and specific learning difficulties in the form of dyspraxia and ideational apraxia. They are a mature student who has just finished their first year at university, but who wishes to change degree courses for the next academic year as they found their current course was not compatible with their areas of difficulty related to their SEN. They initially attended a state secondary school until Year 10, at which point they were struggling greatly with mental health problems induced by disability-related discrimination they suffered at their school, which led to their parents taking legal action against the school, and so they were then educated through an NHS multi-agency service, before receiving an EHCP that gave them a place at an independent special school. This school provides provision primarily for students with complex social, emotional and mental health needs.

I got into one of the most amazing miracle working schools called [special school name]. So it's a private one-to-one SEN school, so you're taught in one-to-one, it's based on years, but they put you into your year based on your academics, not your age, basically. And so it completely turned me around.

Initially, Student C did not believe they had any chance of going to university, due to the great difficulties they had had in mainstream education. However, the support they had received at their special school led them to achieve high grades in academic qualifications, including GCSEs, A-levels and an Open University course, and they were greatly encouraged by the staff at their school to look into university as an option.

Before [special school], my parents never thought I could get to uni, I didn't really even think about it as an option because I didn't realise I was quite so academic. And basically [special school] put me on a fast track for pretty much Oxbridge, I just didn't like any of the degrees there so I didn't choose to go there. So yeah, I didn't think I could go to uni, but pretty much my special needs school changed that idea.

When choosing a university, they took into account their special educational needs when considering the course intensity, as well as the support available and the reputation of the university regarding disabled students. They felt that their slower processing skills would have made it difficult for them to attend a university with shorter terms as reviewing the content takes them significantly longer than it does for a student without SEN.

I didn't think with my ADHD and with my slow processing and my dyspraxia, basically, it would take me far longer to get through the content and I wouldn't be able to keep up with the eight week terms and the high intensity ... we as a unit, as the school and my parents, knew that [current university] was exceptional with their disability services. They're very, very, very good.

Their school provided extensive support throughout the application process, including advice tailored to their needs on what universities and what courses would be appropriate and school trips to open days and career fairs. They were also given classes teaching them the skills they would need for independent living once at university, including cooking lessons, money management and leadership. Furthermore, they were given teaching on study skills, particularly to facilitate their transition from the one-to-one environment they were in at school to the very independent style of learning required at university. The only area where they felt these preparations were lacking was needing more guidance on organisation and sticking to a self-imposed schedule, and they felt that despite the money management guidance, they still struggled with this due to impulsivity stemming from their ADHD.

They gave me cooking lessons to teach me to learn how to cook independently, did money management lessons, although that hasn't seemed to flipping work! They've, well, they've taught me how to lead in situations, how to consider other people's perspectives ... they taught me how to learn independently because obviously, until I got to uni, I was blessed with one-to-one teaching and pretty much no homework because of how much we covered, so they taught me study skills. Yeah, pretty much everything to help me get into uni.

They felt strongly that those kind of life skills should be offered to every student with SEN as they apply for university, and suggested some kind of either online or in person government funded course to identify the skills that students with SEN may be lacking compared to their peers, and help them develop these life skills to improve the transition to university.

It would work to do it through UCAS. I feel like it could be like either a course, or like, yeah, like a course or maybe like a couple day camp or something ... they would have different centres around the UK, where they basically teach you all the skills that you're lacking because of your disabilities. Or you identify, or your parents, obviously, I guess, because we're a lot more dependent on our parents in the younger years, would identify what you need help with. And then you would feed that back to this organisation, and they would come in and do that and teach you those skills.

Student C also expressed that they struggled as a student with SEN with the transition to university, particularly with the move towards a more independent style of learning. This was heightened by the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time, as their course was taught wholly online for the first two terms, meaning that they could not access additional academic support from module tutors, as well as the social and mental health impacts of being confined to their room to study.

I was pretty much, for the first two terms, completely stuck indoors all day studying on my own. So that impacted quite a lot because I need, as I've always had, I've needed people to be there to go through an explanation with me, etc. And I found it a bit more difficult to work out how to reach out for help from the academic staff because for a module leader, they're looking after three, four hundred people in a single module ... and then they give you like ten minute booking slots; I need like a good hour to go through like, since basically what I got stuck with was basically understanding the simple stuff, I could understand the very complex stuff but not the simpler stuff and I needed to pretty much go through it as if they're teaching me and I wasn't able to get that.

However, they were also keen to acknowledge that for many students with SEN, online learning could be much more accessible and so they advocated a hybrid approach to learning as a possible way forward for universities after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Obviously there's the disabled students that may not like the social aspect, having hundreds of people in the lecture hall and may not like it there or may not be able to study with lots of people, they may not even be able to focus so I want, I want our students to have the opportunity to study online as well as in person.

Their school again provided significant support with the transition to university. This included support from subject teachers to look into module content before starting their course to get an idea of what they would be like and how they would cope with them, supplying the evidence needed for DSA and other reasonable adjustments, and having an ongoing dialogue and support from the school from starting university onwards. They felt strongly that any support they had asked for was provided and that this individualistic approach provided by their school had made a great difference in their success at university.

With my individual teachers we, we went through the modules and they helped me get an idea of what the modules would be and if I'd be able to cope with them. Because, well, they all went to uni, they also helped, they told me about university life ... they supplied me with the evidence I needed for the Disabled Students' Allowance fund and they gave me evidence that I needed to get all of my exam help and then the possibility for deadline extensions whenever I request as well. So there's, there's been an ongoing liaison.

Student C generally felt quite positive about the support they had received throughout the transition period and beyond by the university, although had heard from other students at the same university that they had not had such positive experiences. They had some issues receiving confirmation of the funding for DSA, but the university implemented the recommendations, which included two hours a week of mental health mentoring, before the funding was guaranteed. They also felt well supported when their mental health conditions deteriorated during that time, including wellbeing checks by resident tutors, meetings with wellbeing services to determine their needs and meetings with their department's undergraduate support to support them academically at the same time. They raised the complaint that they were not granted the notetaker support they needed at any point in their first year, but otherwise found that exam arrangements and reasonable adjustments were implemented quickly and accurately based on the evidence from their EHCP.

I was having meetings all the time and I was having multiple hours a week of mental health mentoring. Yeah, I was really looked after well actually, very, very well. I mean, I've heard bad stories of students not getting enough help at [current university], but listen, for me I've had phenomenal support really ... maybe at the start, they were quite slow but that was only because they had such a big queue of freshers needing their support and that's understandable.

The main issue they highlighted within their transition to university was social integration and a lack of support from the university in this area; coming from a special school, they felt that they had not had any friends of their own age for a long time and that they hadn't been able to build relationships with non-disabled people. They felt that this was heightened when they arrived at university, as their flat in student accommodation consisted of only other disabled people and they felt that this limited their opportunities to integrate into the general population at the university. They also felt that this was impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place as they started university, as courses did not run in-person classes and so students could only meet others at nightclubs or bars, which are inaccessible to many students with SEN.

It was like as if we'd been pushed into a corner basically, like thrown, 'oh, put those weird people there' basically. It, like, you know, it could have been spread out, like the five or six of us could have been spread out one in each flat for example, where we could have, we would have learned how to socialise with non-disabled people, you know what I mean?

They felt that this perceived social isolation was further impacted by the fact that they are a mature student, meaning that the other first year students were a few years younger than them. This also made them feel awkward when taking part in the university's buddy scheme for new students, as they were older than their assigned mentor.

I had the buddy system but I didn't really, I spoke to him a few times but didn't really, there wasn't much help. I mean, I was literally older than him. When he was a, he was a third, second or third year, and I was literally older than him, because I'm now a mature student.

Furthermore, they felt strongly that they and other students with SEN would benefit from a more hands-on approach from the university, particularly in the first few weeks of their time there. They believed that coming from a school environment, particularly a special school, where

significant support is often provided for students with SEN to help them manage their workload and social lives, starting university can be very difficult without some additional monitoring to help transition to independent studying and living.

I definitely feel there should be more hand holding at the start and maybe even like a checklist to work out whether they can de-latch from you, you know. So like, for example, they would check that you've not being going behind on your assignments, they're checking you're, you're managing your money properly, they're checking that you're getting out enough, you've got enough friends, that you're organising your schedule properly, you're doing enough outside of studying ... there should definitely be more hand holding when it comes to uni, or at least that's what I would have needed.

Student C had very mixed views about whether universities in the UK are welcoming to students with SEN. Whilst they had expressed the fact that their current university had been fairly supportive throughout their first year, they also believed that some universities were prejudiced against students with SEN in the application process and had experienced this first-hand, with them and an autistic friend both having been rejected by the same university for the same course at the last minute, despite both exceeding the entry requirements. This experience had made them feel that there is still some discrimination against students with SEN in the application process, and that not all universities are equally as open to increasing their numbers of students with SEN due to perceptions of what they need and their abilities.

Obviously, they knew we were special needs, and we both met and were above the entry requirements, and we both got declined at the last minute ... on paper, everything was a yes, yes, yes. I mean, I was two grades above them [the entry requirements] ... there's definitely prejudice on the university level, I believe.

Student D

Student D is a student with multi-sensory impairment, being completely blind and partially deaf due to high frequency hearing loss; however, they do not personally consider themselves as partially deaf as it affects their life minimally, and primarily identify as blind. They attended an independent school throughout their secondary schooling and have just completed their second year at university. They spoke very positively about the support provided by their school throughout their education and felt that they were very supportive of them and their ambitions. They also felt that their disabilities had a minimal impact on their consideration of university as an option, and particularly having seen friends who were partially sighted or blind continue to university successfully provided the reassurance they needed that it was a possibility.

I guess it was always kind of a given, you know, I wanted to go to university, and I wanted to take my education in certain fields further. So I guess, I never really thought of it, you know, being a barrier ... The fact that someone like my best friend, and you know, my then girlfriend, who were also blind, in the same capacity that I was, people that were partially sighted or fully blind like me, and they were getting on with it ... I was able to talk to them a lot about it and get a lot of information about what it was like. Were there any, were there any pitfalls? If so, how did you deal with them? Did you deal with them? ... It was just good to know that there were people with the same setbacks that were managing to make it work.

They felt that their disability factored into their choice of university quite significantly, as they did not consider any universities too far away from home due to the logistical issues of transport to and from the university. They also narrowed down the universities they chose from by considering how they had reacted to hearing what adaptations and support they needed, to see

how helpful they would be; however, they felt that ultimately, their final decision was based on standard factors such as the quality of teaching provided.

I stuck to local places or fairly local places ... ultimately it came down to how accessible, I guess, or how sort of flexible the teams were, like, what were the people like? When you told them about all the things that were going to have to be adapted or what software you couldn't, couldn't access, how did they respond to that? ... But I guess the majority of my judgement, because both universities that I looked at were very positive, I guess my ultimate judgement was just normal stuff, like how interesting are the lecturers ... but you then could argue that the whole accessibility in terms of getting there was a pretty big deciding factor, at least narrowing down the choices.

During the application process, they felt that overall their school had been very supportive in providing information, references and help with their personal statement, both generally and in encouraging them as a student with SEN. Their only criticism was that they could have used more support in classes where students would be researching universities, as the teacher often would not realise that they could not read the webpages as quickly as a sighted student and would move on too quickly; they felt they would have benefitted from one-to-one support in accessing these sessions.

It takes me longer to read stuff because I've got to listen to the whole page, I can't just load a page up and look at it and close it again. And I found that was a bit tedious, because it's like, I should really be doing this with a bit of assistance or separately. Because everyone else is tearing through stuff, and the teacher is then tearing through stuff, changing the subject, changing what we should be looking at, stuff like that, and it's like, this is really disorientating because I can't focus on just looking at this.

Student D had mixed feelings about the transition period and the support provided. They expressed that they never felt explicitly excluded or discriminated against, but felt that they came across many accessibility issues in the process; for example, they noted that many of the processes involved in arranging support for university, including the Student Finance, involved inaccessible websites and they would often be asked to send letters or signatures. DSA often felt like it was not prioritised, meaning that there would often be long waits and difficulty arranging support.

It wasn't a big deal in the sense of 'you can't come in because you're disabled.' It wasn't necessarily that, but it was more kind of accessibility issues ... Student Finance and the like, you know, all those things that you have to kind of go through, you know, I found them to be, there were accessibility issues with that website ... When it came to DSA, you know, Disabled Students' Allowance and all of that, it was, it could be quite difficult then because they were quite, it felt like the DSA wasn't a high priority and they therefore were quite slow to respond, or there was also stuff with Student Finance where they were asking you to send letters and signatures and stuff. And it's like, I am blind, I can't do this.

They felt that their school had little input into the transition process and did not know of any communication between the school and the university. However, they did not feel that this had caused them any issues with the transition due to the strong support they had received throughout their education from their school, which had prepared them well for the university environment; their school had facilitated them reducing the support they received in lessons from Year 11 at their request, to help them prepare for life after school and the kind of support they would need and receive at university. This had included their school reducing the number of subjects they studied at GCSE to allow them more time and focus on growing their independence in the remaining subjects, and following their lead in terms of what support they wanted in which lessons.

Year 11 to a degree but definitely with sixth form, there were smaller groups, smaller classrooms, more like university sizes, you know, because you're all doing subjects that you want to do ... so then having phased that support out already, it was one less thing to get used to or one less thing to worry about, because I've already started phasing it out. And I was in a very fortunate position, because obviously not everybody gets to do maths a year early or whatever, and not everybody is fortunate enough to have physics and chemistry and Spanish and German taken off them two years in, you know, but that was a huge relief for me because it was just less stuff I needed support in so I could focus on being independent in the other ones.

They also felt that they were fortunate in the fact that they did not need any additional communication between the school and the university, due to the strong support they receive from their parents. They noted that as a family, they are very used to having to fight for accommodations and support, having had legal issues surrounding a secondary school before starting at the independent school they attended from Year 7 onwards. They acknowledged that many students with SEN do not have families that are either supportive or knowledgeable about how to advocate for them, and so for those students it would be much more important to have contact established between their school and their university through the transition period.

If I feel like I need more brunt to a situation as it were, I know that my parents will help me out and will say this isn't on. You see, normally, that normally tends to work, if you complain to the university and they don't do anything, once your parents start complaining, they really listen then ... I feel very lucky for that, I know a lot of people don't have that. You know, disabled or otherwise, I know a lot of people don't have that so it's a real help to have that.

They also had mixed feelings about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had had on their transition to university. In many ways, they felt that online learning had removed some of the barriers they faced in accessing higher education, such as transportation to and from the university, difficulties in meeting coursemates and difficulties in having additional support from tutors. However, they also noted that some of the online platforms used for teaching and learning remotely were inaccessible to blind people, as well as the difficulties as teaching has moved back in person of not having met lecturers and coursemates and being unable to recognise them.

I think it helped, you know, because it took a lot of the accessibility hurdles out of the situation, especially in terms of uni anyway, because it, you know, everybody, nobody would go into university first and foremost, so that issue was taken care of. It was a lot easier from a blind person's point of view to get to know your fellow students because we're all online ... in that sense, it was a good equaliser, but then equally you didn't have, you didn't meet any of your lecturers, I still haven't met most of the people that I was on the course with in 2020.

Student D expressed that although their university was generally quite accepting and willing to accommodate their additional needs, they had had significant issues with some of the support they are entitled to. When their original sighted guide, who also acted as a notetaker for them, left the university, they were not informed of alternative arrangements and due to staff shortages, the university was often unable to arrange for a sighted guide, meaning that they had to miss lectures and classes, cancel meetings with peers for group work, and cancel studio bookings. Whilst they recognised the difficulty in finding and retaining trained staff, they felt that the lack of communication from the university put them in a very difficult position as they would only find out last minute, and they are now worried about the coming academic year in case the issues continue.

Now I'm at that point again, where I'm trying to frantically sort out things for the coming year, going 'am I going to have a sighted guide? If so, who?' ... And they don't know. They don't know what they're going to do about it. And that worries me because I don't know either ... I don't feel like I've been discriminated against or

anything like that, you know, or been treated, you know, in any other respect, you know, differently or anything like that. I've got no other complaints about the university itself. It's just this, which is obviously quite a big thing. But I can't stress enough that university, other than this slightly big issue, have been fantastic. You know, and I've enjoyed it and it's been good. It's just this, which in a way, it's such a little thing, it should, it should be such a little detail but now it's bigger than it probably should be. And it kind of hangs over everything else.

They had had further issues with the taxis arranged to transport them to and from the university, as taxi drivers would often wave or shout out from the taxi, not understanding that they couldn't respond to that or get to the taxi without being guided, and would not understand that their guide dog has to come and sit in the front with them. On one occasion, the taxi ended up driving off without them, leaving them unsure of what was happening and reliant on their parents coming to find them. Whilst they understood that, as the taxi company is not part of the university, these issues are not the fault of the university, they felt that this was still a great barrier and that there could be more the university could do to support students in accessing such support, by helping them sort any issues or helping to educate the local providers on the needs of students receiving taxis through DSA.

I guess that's not the university's fault or problem or whatever. But it definitely was something that as a blind person I had to think about, because, it's like well, how am I going to get from home to uni? ... Not necessarily transitional, but it is a big, it's a big challenge that we face.

Student D felt that universities are welcoming to students with SEN, but that once they arrive, not enough attention is paid to them. In particular, they felt that the disability services at universities are often severely understaffed, making it very difficult to arrange support or speak to someone about any issues arising, and expressed that they continually get out of office notices when they try to contact their disability advisor at the university and that no one ever picks up the phone when they ring.

I think they are welcoming. I've never, you know, I never, I was never rejected or felt rejected by universities at all, you know, I was by secondary schools, but not, not by universities. You know, the universities have all been really accepting, I think it's just, I think more needs to be done. Because I think they welcome, you know, they're welcoming to people and, you know, they're happy to let them in and to adapt, you know, in my case, the equipment or the setups or whatever, so they're happy to do that. But I feel like they're not doing enough, I feel like not enough attention is being paid to the disabled students sort of department.

Furthermore, they felt that academic departments need to have more consideration for the needs of their students when designing courses and be more proactive in seeking solutions. On multiple occasions, they have had to produce work based around video or PowerPoint presentations, despite being on a music production degree and having no idea these were components when they enrolled. They felt that the tutors were often understanding when they had to submit work in alternative formats but were not particularly willing to find workarounds or adaptations to assignments where the principal idea, such as video-based work, was inaccessible. On one occasion, they received a very low mark for a video-based assignment as the tutors would not offer an alternative and would not accept any suggested alternatives. They felt that, for universities to be more accessible to students with SEN, they must be more willing to look at the content of degrees and adapt them, and not just leave it up to students to suggest alternatives all the time.

If you want me to have a go, I'll have a go, fine. So I did, and I got a really low mark on it. And I'm like, what for? What did I get a low mark for? I told you it wouldn't work. Honestly, it just drove me mad that they weren't thinking, right, if a blind

person comes on this course, what are we going to do with this module? ... Having a go and hoping things work isn't the answer. Look at the course, look at the module content, adapt it if need be, or at least have a backup plan ... that's not to say that, you know, I felt neglected, per se, it was more just this should have been looked at. I shouldn't have been having to frantically scramble around trying to think of alternatives. You know, I'm at the university, I'm paying just as much as everybody else, you know, no one else has had to do this, they just cracked on.

Teacher X

Teacher X is the assistant head of learning support at an independent school for student from Year 7 through to sixth form. They felt that their school is very good at supporting students with SEN, particularly in acknowledging and dealing with individual needs, due to the strong knowledge they and their colleague in the department have between them. They felt there could be better communication between the staff in other areas and the learning support department, to aid them in helping students by understanding the full context of their needs, and more acknowledgement from the senior leadership team of the extent of what they do, but overall felt that their school works well in supporting students with SEN.

I think we're very good at knowing the kids and therefore we are very good at sorting their, their individual needs out, and I'd like to think that we're quite patient enough to, to deal with whatever they need when they need it, rather than just push them back to where they need, other people think they need to go. I think we're good at that.

In terms of what help they and their school provides for students with SEN in considering and applying to university, they felt that they provide a significant amount of support for the practical elements, such as DSA applications and other paperwork, as well as on the academic side in terms of ensuring students get the grades they need. They felt that they also provide good advice for student with SEN, in terms of being committed to helping them get on to any course they want, whilst still acknowledging where they may face difficulties due to their additional needs, to allow students to make an informed decision and to consider what support would be necessary to enable to student to pursue that path.

So it doesn't [affect the advice given] in the fact that myself and my colleague believe you can go and do any course you want and we will help you get on to any course you want. It does in the fact that we will, we will help you get on any course that you want but there are some practical bits ... in terms of advising, we say you can do anything, but we will give an informed thing that says, we do know these are the sorts of problems that other students have had, let's see what we can do to help.

They felt that they and their school were particularly good at preparing students to advocate for themselves and their needs throughout their time at school, particularly for those with EHCPs where it will be a goal to promote independence. They see this as a very gradual process that cannot just start as university is beginning to be considered in sixth form, and so they work with students from Year 7 to encourage them to have a say in their support and what they feel they need. They also believed that their school promotes confidence in students by providing a wide range of extracurricular activities, which can often boost the self-esteem of students with SEN who may struggle sometimes academically but can excel in one of those areas, and then they can use that additional confidence to help them become more independent generally.

I think it's a very gradual process, you can't get to it in sixth form or Year 11 and expect them to do it. I think schools have to bring that in a lot earlier so that they can be independent, they can make some choices, and they can say what they do and don't want, so they can advocate for themselves a little bit more.

However, they acknowledged that both their own school and schools in general are not as good at helping students with the other aspects of the transition to university, such as general living skills like cooking and shopping, and they felt that schools could do more in that respect not just for students with SEN, but for all students as they move on from school to university.

I think sometimes we forget the other bit, that it's quite daunting, that they're, all sorts of things happen. That some of the practical, even for normal students, some of the practical things like being able to cook and clean and shop and manage that can be quite tricky, even more so when you're special needs and I think school can help with that a bit more than it does. That's across the board, not just our school.

They also felt that they are often encouraged to let students and parents deal with more practical elements of the transition, such as going on visits to universities, due to the time and staff it would take. They expressed that they felt that schools should do more for the transition period, but also that it is limited by factors outside of their control. Furthermore, they felt that the process is often needlessly difficult and so schools can often spend a lot of time trying to make contact with a university's disability services and organising adjustments, such as BSL interpreters, just to arrange a visit.

We're encouraged to let the parents do it because staffing and the time that it takes to go and do that, practically are quite hard ... I think all schools have that problem, all sixth forms have that problem, and I don't think there's enough done to help people transition in some ways because it's pushed on to the student and onto the parents, because you're seventeen, eighteen, nineteen now, you should be able to manage, which, which is wrong.

They felt that a significant part of the problem with a lack of support throughout the transition to university is that there is no overlap in support, due to students only knowing whether they are going to university and where they are going after the results day in late August. This is when both schools and colleges and universities are off for the summer and operating with minimal staff, meaning that the opportunity for the school or college to help the student with the transition has passed. Before they have confirmation that a student will be going there, they felt that universities can be reluctant to invest time into prospective students.

I can't help somebody transition when I don't know where they're going until after they've left me ... so universities are playing catch up, schools are trying to help while also trying to deal with all, with a whole raft of new students who they're helping to settle and transition, you know, the whole system is geared the wrong way ... a special needs department in a university is happy to help beforehand to a point, because you may or may not appear there so if they invest too much time and effort in you, then you don't appear, then there's a waste in that sense.

They also felt that support for students with SEN from the university was often limited by students not knowing where to find that support and their needs being forgotten as they move on from school. They expressed that universities should be more proactive in reaching out to students, particularly those with special educational needs, to offer the support rather than waiting for students to ask for it.

I think for lots of university students, the support just, you're just left to go and have the experience. But special educational needs students need support as well and don't always know where to find that. And I hear too many cases of university students who should have had the support, and it's not been there or there's not been enough and so they've either failed, dropped out or had a bad experience ... they get a bit forgotten.

Furthermore, they saw that this transition period is often ignored and not considered by schools and universities alike, and that university disability services could be very limited in their ability to help, due to underfunding and understaffing.

It's not something that I've, I don't know, that transition is difficult and it's not something that I've thought about, and I can see, I can see it from all sorts of different angles; in terms of the frustrations the special needs department has, particularly in universities, I don't think they have much money, they certainly don't have enough staff, and there's thousands of students to try and contend with so it's, I thought my job was difficult, I think theirs is probably harder again.

Teacher X had several ideas for improvements to the transition process for students with SEN. One point made was the idea of some kind of passport providing information about the student and their needs alongside their personality and abilities, which would then be passed on to a key person within the university to provide a human connection alongside an initial idea of what support a student will need. This could be in the format of a physical document, or it was suggested that this could be video-based, but involving the student giving their own thoughts and input.

When you come from a primary school to secondary school, you end up with a passport, and you get a passport of who you are and so the person going, so the person receiving you knows that and you're handed over to a key person. I think schools could do that. The problem is that universities don't do that ... If I envisage it, it would be something like a video that they, we could help them make themselves to be able to say, this is who I am, this is what I need, this is what I'm looking forward to, this is what I want, this is what I'm interested in, it's not just about what the need is. It's about I'm a footballer or I'm a, you know, a, a violinist, so that this, it's a more rounded thing as well. Maybe to help them do that, so that whoever sees it has a face, an idea, a personality and there's a human connection there.

They also appreciated that any kind of formal handover system would have to be able to be adjusted for students with higher or lower support needs.

I also appreciate some students come with a mild form of dyslexia, which is difficult and problematic and they need help with, but they don't need the same support as somebody with an educational health care plan who is profoundly deaf or in a wheelchair. So I think there needs to be something more formal, I think it needs to be adjustable to levels, not that one is any worth more than the other, just that it needs to adjust accordingly to suit the individual.

They emphasised the importance of there being some kind of key person for students with SEN, who would be obligated to contact their students to check in a certain number of times each term and provide contact details for parents or guardians to be able to contact them with any concerns. They also felt that universities should do more to connect students with other students who understand their personal situation and who have something in common, to allow people to build up a support system; they recognised this could be particularly beneficial for those with communication and interaction needs such as autism, who may struggle to build those connections alone.

I think sometimes it's about finding your tribe and I think you need help sometimes finding your tribe. Because Freshers' Week is lovely, but it has a particular focus that isn't always as practical and as helpful as it could be. You get thrown a load of information and you kind of believe you have to be out on a pub crawl somewhere. Whereas I think in some ways, other stuff would be just as helpful. Find your tribe. Find some of the people that that could be there for you, if you see what I mean, and, and that know what you're going through, you know, and that is that human connection.

Furthermore, they felt that university lecturers and tutors often do not have enough contact with their students to build up a relationship and so are not as invested in their students as teachers in schools or colleges are. This is part of the culture at university, which they saw as a particular issue for students with SEN who will often need that closer contact and investment from their tutors, and they felt that a more targeted approach from academic departments would be beneficial.

University lecturers aren't as necessarily invested in their students, they stand up, they teach you, they leave. You see what I mean? Some universities are great at it, in terms of that, looking after their students, others are not because the, the general ethos is teach it and move. I used to, I used to know, a couple of university lecturers at [a UK university] and they couldn't tell you any of the names of their students and I knew them for a couple of years and it was the same lecture each year at the same time each year, it's to the point they didn't even notice whether there was students in front of them or not, I swear ... I know other departments that there was far more contact and therefore far more invested in it, and I think a more targeted approach would help all students, but particularly special educational needs students.

When asked whether they felt universities are welcoming to students with SEN, Teacher X felt that it was very variable and dependent on the extent to which the people working within each university were welcoming and supportive. They often felt it came down to a tick-box exercise, where universities would show themselves off as being supportive, but in reality, often this would be lacking.

Some of them are just tick box, and I think the majority of them are just tick box, and that's the problem ... I think they think they're better than they are. It's when, you know, you look at a prospectus and you have all the boxes ticked in terms of different race, different disability, there's LGBTQ there, there's, you know, tick, tick, tick. And every school does it and every university does it and every institution does it. But the actual follow-up behind it is, is where it counts, and some are better than others, unfortunately.

Discussion

Conclusions

The results of both the surveys and the case studies showed that the transition period is seen as crucial for students with SEN and often sets the tone for the rest of their experiences in higher education. Both students and staff identified areas in which schools and universities could improve their support for helping students with SEN access higher education.

Often students expressed that both their school and university were well-intentioned and very few identified having been directly discriminated against in the process of applying to university, but they generally felt that their additional needs were not taken into consideration during the process, which indirectly put them at a disadvantage when compared to their peers without SEN. This continued into the transition process, where most participants felt that they had not received any tailored transition support from either their school or their university, and those who did receive transition support from their university often felt that it was implemented too late or did not continue for as long as they needed it. This was further expressed in the interviews, when students often acknowledged the good intentions of the school and university staff in their lives, but felt that their needs were often forgotten about or misunderstood. From those interviewed, only Student C expressed feeling mostly happy with the help and support they had received from both their school and their university throughout the process; having attended a special school, it is unsurprising that they received much more tailored support than students in mainstream schools due to the additional expertise of the staff and the more individual-focused environment,

and they felt that their school helping them to liaise with the university and arrange support was a key factor in their satisfaction with the support system in place. The other students interviewed on the whole felt that both schools and universities should be doing more to help their students with SEN with this transition, but acknowledged that this lack of support may come from a lack of funding or staffing rather than ill intentions from either party.

The educators surveyed generally had much more positive views about the support their schools provide compared to the support students with SEN felt they were provided with; however, it was noted in the interview with Teacher X that often staff do not consider the impact of the transition to university on students with SEN and the difficulties faced there, and this lack of knowledge on this area was also seen in the survey responses from teachers, with some admitting in free-text responses that they did not know what was on offer at their school. When this was explored in more depth in the interview with Teacher X, they expressed similar views to the surveyed and interviewed students, in terms of feeling that universities see themselves as welcoming and accommodating but that the reality does not always align with this and that levels of support can be very variable. As the students did, Teacher X was also keen to emphasise the pressures they felt that university disability services are under, and the systemic issues with the university application process impacting upon this.

The suggestions for improvements given by both the student and educator participants broadly can be grouped into five main themes, arranged chronologically through the application and transition process:

1. SEN-Specific Advice

Overwhelmingly, survey participants felt that their schools and colleges had not taken their special educational needs into account when advising them about applying for university. Whilst this may seem like treating students equally to those who do not have any additional needs, it is inequitable as one participant put it, because their additional needs do have an impact upon their university experience. Many respondents emphasised how they would have benefitted from SEN-specific advice from their schools and colleges when they were considering and applying for university, and those students who felt that their school had provided this consideration were significantly more positive about their application and transition experiences. Student A particularly expressed that they wished they had had more autism-specific support when applying for university, which would have alleviated a significant amount of stress, and conversely, Student C felt they had been extremely privileged in having attended a special school and received all information tailored to their additional needs. Teacher X also emphasised the importance of SEN-specific advice, feeling that it was a particular strength of their learning support department whilst also acknowledging that they had not considered the impact of special educational needs on higher education as much as they perhaps should in the future. Schools providing more SEN-specific advice about higher education for students, and ensuring that staff are sufficiently informed about special educational needs to support students with SEN with their applications, would likely increase the number of students with SEN who felt able to apply to university and ensure that they felt well-informed about what to expect when they arrive.

2. Independent Living and Study Skills Support

Participants felt that some kind of support for preparing students with SEN for independent living should be introduced, expressing that they often struggle more with developing independent living and study skills than students without SEN. Student C particularly felt that this was an intervention their school made that made a significant difference to their ability to access higher education, and felt that this kind of support should be introduced on a national level for students with SEN to opt in for. Teacher X also identified this as an area where schools could do more to

support their students with SEN and felt that it was often neglected. In terms of university support offered, Student A expressed having found the autism-specific transition programme offered by their university to be helpful in providing tailored support in some areas of independent living, but agreed with the survey respondents who felt that study skills support offered to students with SEN needs to be both disability-specific and subject-specific. Implementing some form of independent living and study skills support for students with SEN to access before and during their time at university would ensure students feel able to cope with the independence that necessarily comes with moving to higher education, additionally improving their confidence to enable them to better advocate for themselves.

3. Formal Handover

A significant proportion of participants identified the need for some kind of formal handover from the school to the university, to provide a joined-up dialogue and continuity of support. The format this would take varied slightly between participants: Student A suggested this could be in the form of a phone call between a key teacher at the school and the university, whilst Teacher X felt that the student's personal input is particularly important, and felt that either some kind of passport-style document or a video produced by students would be useful in helping to explain their needs and establish a human connection. Although ideas around the format of this varied, participants in both the student survey and the interviews felt that this should include detailed information about a student's specific needs and what is done to address that, as well as more personal details such as personality and interests. In particular, Student A and Student B both felt that universities needed to be more aware of students who would struggle to reach out for help when needed, which would be something schools could highlight to universities. Implementing some form of standardised formal handover document, where schools could work with students with SEN to identify the most crucial information universities need to support them, would be extremely beneficial, particularly given the structure of the UK university applications process, which limits the extent to which schools can support students with transitioning to a specific university.

4. Universities Being Proactive

Both students and staff identified that universities are not sufficiently proactive in reaching out to their students with SEN. Survey participants frequently felt that they were left alone to arrange the help they needed themselves, and that universities would not check up on students registered with their disability services to ensure they were receiving the support they are entitled to. Student B particularly emphasised that they struggled personally with seeking out support and that, whilst help was readily on offer once they asked, they only felt able to ask once they were having difficulties coping and believed that the university should have reached out more. This was also seen from the educator side by Teacher X, who felt that different universities had significantly different approaches and should provide more targeted support, including identifying a key person within the university for the student, their parents and the school to liaise with and who was obligated to check in on the student a certain number of times throughout the academic year. Student C also felt that universities should take on a more hands-on approach with students with SEN, particularly at the start of their courses, and Student D felt that in the current situation, whilst they supposedly have an assigned disability advisor, underfunding and understaffing have made it nearly impossible for them to provide any level of ongoing communication. Universities implementing a more proactive approach to students with SEN and ensuring that they have a key individual to monitor their progress would likely mean that any issues would be picked up quickly, ensuring a smoother transition to university and better retention of students with SEN.

5. *Universal Design for Learning*

Many respondents felt that the university learning environment was not designed with accessibility in mind, and that there are small changes that could be made that would benefit all students, but particularly those with additional needs. Survey participants gave the examples of implementing universal lecture capture, bringing together information on assignments and deadlines to one place, and being able to do more work online or using a hybrid model of minor changes to the learning environment that would increase accessibility. Student B and Student D also felt that more consideration for disabled students should be taken in the design of university systems, such as ensuring that anonymous feedback is still in an accessible format or that module assignments are designed to be accessible to all students or made easily adaptable if a student cannot access the current format, rather than universities simply relying on attempting to implement reasonable adjustments on an individual basis. Universities taking more consideration for the needs of all their students and implementing more accessible curriculums and teaching methods would likely mean that students with SEN would feel more accepted within the university community and more able to pursue higher education, in the knowledge that their course will be accessible to them.

Limitations

The extent to which the findings can be generalised are limited by the fact that, due to the sampling methods of distributing the student survey through university disability services and disabled student societies, there is a bias in those who responded towards those who have disclosed their special educational needs to the university and who feel comfortable being open about it. It is likely that the students who responded are those who are happier with the support they are receiving than the general population of students with SEN because of this. In addition, there was some evidence of courtesy bias in the student survey and interview responses to qualitative feedback, meaning that respondents may not have reported or may have understated negative experiences. Furthermore, the scope of the educator survey was relatively small, and responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, a common issue in self-report research methods.

This research also excluded students who have dropped out of university, did not manage to get in or felt that they could not apply to university because of their special educational needs, which are populations that are important to investigate further as they may have insights into what support would have changed their outcomes in pursuing higher education. Future research in this area should focus on investigating students with SEN who were unable to progress or continue in higher education, or students with SEN as they are considering and applying for higher education, to ensure that all viewpoints are represented. It would also be beneficial for future research to involve discussion with university disability services and other relevant individuals, to identify what they feel they are doing well for students with SEN and what they feel could be improved upon.

Appendix A – Pupil SEN Type Codes

Codes used for identifying the nature of a pupil’s special educational need in the school census (Department for Education, 2022).

CODE	DESCRIPTION
ASD	Autism spectrum disorder
SLCN	Speech, language and communication needs
SPLD	Specific learning difficulty
MLD	Moderate learning difficulty
SLD	Severe learning difficulty
PMLD	Profound and multiple learning difficulty
HI	Hearing impairment
VI	Visual impairment
MSI	Multi-sensory impairment
PD	Physical disability
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health
OTH	Other disability
NSA	SEN support but no specialist assessment of type of need

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