

Going to University and Accessing Disabled Student's Allowance

Hello, my name is Helen and I used to be a student supported by the Berkshire Sensory Consortium Service, specifically the Teachers of the Deaf. Firstly, a little bit about me: I am passionate about all things disability, inclusion and equity! Since finishing further education last summer, I have been studying Occupational Therapy at university and have now completed my first year. I would like to share a bit about my experience and give some advice to anyone who is considering going to university or is going through the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) process. I hope this helps you understand more about what is involved.

Exploring Different universities

In the lead up to going to university, I knew I wanted to be an occupational therapist, so when I was looking at different universities, I focused on the ones which provided the course. However, it is okay not to know what career you want to do at that stage or what specific course you would like to study. Lots of people go to university to study a subject they enjoyed at school or have an interest in, and then find a career out of it, or even study a subject they love and end up doing a completely different career. All of which is perfectly okay!

Initially I looked at different universities online. I explored their websites and found out where they were, how close they were to home, and what disability support they provided. I looked at the courses they offered such as what modules they do and how the course was organised, for example, did the course have exams or was it mainly assignments and did they have options as to how to complete an assignment such as a poster or an essay. I explored how they taught the content, was it mainly through lectures or did they do seminars, workshops and practical classes too. I also looked at if the courses were only full time or if there was an option to study part time or flexibly, for example over three, four, five, or six years. This research really helped me get an idea of the course and the university, prior to going to an open day.

If you do not know what you want to study, exploring the universities which appeal to you and also your local universities could help you gain ideas about what you might like to study and what you are looking for in a university. There is a lot to consider: Is your priority being close to home or Is it the subject? Is it the social life or is it the disability support? Are there any things you would rule out such as the distance to the university, if you are commuting each day?

Attending Open Days

Next, I really recommend going to university open days for the universities you are considering. I found visiting the different universities helpful as it enabled me to not only get a feel of the university but to also meet the lecturers I would be taught by and the support staff, such as from the disability and wellbeing teams. I was also able to talk to students and hear from them personally about their experiences. It was also a bonus when

I was able to talk to a disabled student at the university about their support whilst studying there!

Open days are also helpful as you can visit the university's different student accommodation. If you want to see an accessible room, talk to the accommodation team at the university, either in advance by contacting them or on the day, and they should be able to take you separately to show you an example. During an open day you can also assess the accessibility of the campus and if you would manage if you studied there. Things to consider, such as: Is it easy to navigate? Are there accessible entrances to the buildings? Are the acoustics in the classrooms okay? What is the lighting like and is it accessible to your needs? Are there quiet spaces you can access if needed?

When planning to visit a university open day I recommend contacting the university you want to visit in advance to ask for any reasonable adjustments you may need. For example, asking to have a copy of the slides from talks or having a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter present at all the talks you wish to attend. In addition you could contact the university disability team to arrange to meet them during the open day, to discuss your needs and the support they can provide. If the university you want to visit is willing to, and does provide the adjustments you request, shows you a lot about how accommodating it is for disabled students before you start!

Applying to University

Once I had shortlisted my choice of universities I drafted my personal statement in a word document, which I would later submit in my Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application. I asked other people to proofread my drafts to make sure it made sense and was grammatical correct, for example a family member or a teacher. I wrote my personal statement in the months prior to starting my application, as it takes time. I would also recommend making sure your personal statement is universal meaning it is relevant to all the universities you apply to.

Once I was happy with my personal statement, I started my UCAS application form including my personal details, finance and funding information, optional diversity and inclusion information and additional information about me regarding my disabilities. It is important to know that information about your disabilities is not used to decide if you have a place at the university, rather it is to make sure everyone is aware of any additional support you may need. I also filled out information about my education, extra activities I had done to boost my application, such as a pre-university course, I copied and pasted my personal statement into the appropriate section and added the details of my referee. I made sure to confirm with my referee first that they were happy to do my reference and the necessary time. Lastly, I input all the unnecessary details about my five university choices. Once completed, I submitted and paid for my application; some people are able to get their application fees waived so it is worth checking the criteria in case you are eligible.

Interviews

Following my UCAS application I was offered interviews. Some courses may not require you to do an interview and instead may ask to see a piece of writing or a portfolio. Each university has a different process regarding interviews however, as an example from one of my interviews, I was contacted by email and all the information about what was involved in the interview and what I would need to bring along with me was included. I made sure to respond and confirm that I could attend on the date they offered.

After this I contacted the people who were arranging the interviews by email and copied in the university's disability team, informing them that I would benefit from some reasonable adjustments where possible at the interview, explaining briefly about my disabilities. Depending on your disability some reasonable adjustments you could request include: having your interview one-to-one in a separate room, having extra time to clarify what was said and possibly having the questions provided ahead of the interview. There are lots of different reasonable adjustments so it is worth discussing them with your Teacher of the Deaf, however It is up to the university to decide if they will provide them. Some people may prefer not to disclose their disability, however I have found through asking for reasonable adjustments, I was able to assess how supportive they were and how good their communication was in relation to supporting disabled students. I was also able to successfully complete my interviews without worrying that they would be inaccessible.

University Offers

Once I received all my offers and completed my interviews, I considered which university would be my first choice, and which would be my insurance choice. I ensured my first choice was the university I most wanted to study at should all the conditions I was given be accepted. When considering my insurance choice, I made sure to choose a university with lower grade requirements than my first choice in case I didn't get the grades; I made sure to have a back-up option to study my chosen course.

Accommodation

When applying to the university accommodation, it is helpful to be clear about your disability so you can get the room allocated to you which is most suited to your needs. For example, if you are deaf, making the accommodation team aware if you will not wake up to a fire alarm in the night is crucial. A vibrating fire alarm for your bed and flashing fire alarm should be provided as a reasonable adjustment to keep you safe. If you have an assistance dog, the accommodation team must be made aware so they can place you in suitable accommodation, such as a room which is big enough and has outside areas. If you have a visual impairment, you can ask to be provided with an enlarged copy of any important signs in your accommodation for example, fire evacuation plans and fire notices, and making your door number clear to read or tactile. If you are a wheelchair user, you need to inform the accommodation team that you need a wheelchair accessible room that is able to fit your wheelchair inside and any other adaptations you may need. If you struggle to do steps but do not require an adapted room, you can still ask for a room on the ground floor or in a building which has lifts. Discussing with family, your Teacher of the

Deaf or any other support you have, could help you to work out if you need any adaptations and if so, what they are.

Accommodation teams will try hard to meet your needs, but sometimes you may need to make compromises for example not being in your top choice of accommodation but having a room which is most accessible to your needs. Once you have your accommodation agreed, you must approach them regarding creating a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP). This is a document which lays out details of your accommodation and the evacuation procedures such as accessible exits or if security needs to come and assist you in an emergency.

Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

Whilst researching different universities, I went through the process of applying for DSA. I did this alongside applying for a student loan, which helps cover my tuition fees and then after graduating, once I have a job with a certain amount of pay, I will pay the loan back. DSA support however, you do not have to pay back. The amount of DSA support you receive is dependent on your needs, not household income.

Once I applied online for DSA and it was confirmed I was eligible for support, I had a needs assessment. This can be done in an accessible way for you, whether that is an online call or an in-person assessment. It is an informal discussion with an assessor about your needs and their impact and what support you could benefit from. Do not worry, it is not a test! The assessors for DSA want to support you the best they can. I came out of the assessment with more support than I thought was possible!

For a DSA assessment you need to provide evidence of how your disability impacts your studies and any support which has helped you in the past. This is where my Teacher of the Deaf was really helpful; they wrote a detailed report about my deafness and hearing technology, and how all my disabilities impacted my learning. The report included what support helped me and what I would benefit from at university, including what technology works with my hearing devices and other provisions to support my access to lectures. This report was submitted alongside other evidence of my disabilities. It is important to know that Educational, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), if you have one, cease when you go to university although they can be used as evidence when applying to DSA.

Following my needs assessment, a report was written up regarding what they would fund. DSA can fund lots of different types of support depending how your disability impacts your access to the course. Things they can provide include a computer which supports the software you will use at university for your disability, a radio aid, text to speech software and notetaking software with live captions, specialist notetakers, study skill support, BSL interpreters, specialist support professionals for visual impairment, ergonomic equipment and more. What you get depends on your needs and your discussion with the needs assessor.

Once you have received your report, you will be provided with the contact details of the companies which will provide your support and you will need to contact them to arrange it.

The companies will not contact you. I recommend applying for DSA early on so you have enough time to arrange your support prior to starting university; if not you will start the first few weeks at university without the support you require. If you have any difficulties with the companies providing your DSA support and you wish to change, you can contact your needs assessor and they will help you swap if it is possible to do so.

Disability Team

Disability support at university is helpful! This was one of the main reasons I chose the university I am attending. I highly recommend that you get in contact with them as soon as you apply to the university or have your place confirmed. Each university has a different amount of disability support they can provide. For new students starting at my university, who were known to the disability team, were able to move into their accommodation early to do a week of settling in activities prior to fresher's week. Fresher's is a week where new students arrive at the university and lots of different things happen!

As a disabled student at my university, I was able to create a learning plan which had the information about my disabilities and any reasonable adjustments I should have during class and for exams. A learning plan can be read by any lecturers and other staff members who are supporting you. Some of the adjustments that my university provides for different students are extensions for assignments, extra time in assessments, rest breaks in exams and time between classes, presentations provided in advance, access to university library accessibility services and access to RNIB book share from the Royal National Institute of Blind People. In my experience a university disability team is able to provide more adjustments than what you may have thought was possible! However, it is worth being aware that lecturers may not automatically look at your learning plan; therefore, I recommend asking your lecturers to read it by either talking to them or sending an email. If you are not feeling confident to do this, it is possible that your disability team may be able to send an email on your behalf with your consent.

Unfortunately, I can not say that a university will always get things right with access arrangements, as I would be lying. It is for this reason I would recommend reaching out to the disability team for support if you have any problems at university. The disability team can advocate on your behalf for example, if you are having trouble with a lecturer not providing you with resources in an accessible format, or there is a broken lift you need to access. Similarly they can help contact your DSA provider regarding your support if it is not up to standard and support you with the communication. I recognise that it may be hard to find out that you may come across difficulties at university, however, I can say from my experience at least, that disability teams at university can be proactive at addressing any problems you experience and will very much try their hardest to support you. University disability teams would much rather you access support if a problem occurs than you struggle on your own with it. Disability teams are such a useful resource to have and

overall, I highly recommend you seek their support when you need it and if not, get to know them anyway as you may need their support at some point!

Life at University

Adapting to living and studying at university may be easy for some and for others may take longer. Both are okay! It is the same for making friends. Each course at every university is different but for mine, in the first week they used course related activities in our workshop classes to help us get to know others in our year and make friends, which really helped. You may have one or two friends by the end of the first or second week or you may have a group of friends – either is fine. Your friends do not just have to be from your course either, they could be others living in your accommodation or those you met at a society. I would like to let you know that you also do not have to feel obliged to be friends with everyone, even those you have been randomly placed to live with in accommodation. Sometimes being mutual peers is enough and that is perfectly okay.

Fresher's week is the first week at university and is often known to be when students go out partying in the evenings. Partying is not however the only thing that happens during fresher's week, and you do not have to go out to parties or clubbing. Events run in the daytime which can be helpful, such as a tour of the campus to familiarise where your classes are, participate in daytime creative events and go to a society fair. I really recommend going to a society fair and seeing what societies your university has on offer that appeal to you. You might even be able to sign up to a taster session for some of the societies. Societies are a great way to meet new people who have similar interests to you and make new friends! For example, your university might have sports societies such as netball, tennis, rowing, football and many more other sports. Your university might also have other societies such as crocheting, art and music societies, special interest societies such as dungeons and dragons, BSL and also course related societies like occupational therapy, history and business.

Everyone has different priorities whilst at university. Some people may go there for the regular partying, others to study the course they love and for some a chance to try new things whilst becoming independent. Whatever your motivation is for university, I would like to recommend that you ensure you have the right balance of the things you want and need to do. Such as going to classes, completing assignments, spending time with friends, attending societies, cooking and cleaning and importantly also giving yourself the downtime you need!

Lastly, throughout your time at university, I would like to let you know that it is up to you to choose whether you tell the people you meet and your friends about your disability or not. Some people may be curious and ask if they recognise you are deaf, visually impaired or disabled. It may be that they ask as they want to help you if they are in your classes, which can end up being a nice thing and a way of making friends. I understand it could feel uncomfortable if it is a random person who comes up to you and asks you personal questions about your disability, which is where I want to tell you this; not every stranger or student you see is entitled to know about your disability and it is perfectly okay to say 'no'

to talking about why you, for example, wear hearing aids, have a white cane or use a wheelchair. However, an exception to this is when lecturers and staff members who teach or support you end up approaching you about how they can support you. If this happens, I encourage you, if you feel comfortable at the moment, to explain about how they can support you. This way the lecturer knows directly from you how they can support you when they are teaching. If you do not feel comfortable explaining it to them, maybe you could email them and ask them to look at your learning plan or ask the disability team to contact them.

Finally, I understand all this information may seem like a lot to process however, if it is any reassurance, I have found the whole process of getting support and reasonable adjustments at university so easy and supportive. Universities and DSA really do seem like they want to help students to achieve their potential. I hope reading this has helped you understand more about what life at university can be like, tips to help you along the way and the DSA process. Please do remember though that everyone's experience and journey is unique, not a single person will experience university in the same way. I have shared a bit about what university has been like for me, hoping it gives you a better understanding of university life from my viewpoint and my lived experience as a disabled student. Your experience and journey as a disabled student may well be different and that is perfectly okay!

I hope if you decide to head off to university, that it goes great.

Good luck!

Helen.